

Interactive comment on “Rivers we can’t bring ourselves to clean – historical insights into the pollution of the Moselle River (France), 1850–2000” by R. J. Garcier

Anonymous Referee #3

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Referee Comments:

R.J. Garcier

“Rivers We Can’t Bring Ourselves to Clean - Historical Insights into the Pollution of the Moselle River (France), 1850-2000.”

“Rivers We Can’t Bring Ourselves to Clean,” presents a thought-provoking historical examination of pollution of the Moselle River (French section). The abstract offers an accurate summary, and the introduction clearly lays out Dr. Garcier’s analytical model, which provides a useful means of assessing and explaining the historical in-

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teraction between people and rivers. In constructing the model of analysis, the author draws upon the recent literature of environmental history published in Europe and the United States, especially as it applies to rivers, and the path-breaking working of various scholars of the French Annales School. Combining the international perspective of environmental historians with the scholarship of the Annales School offers unique insights and separates Garcier's article from the body of historical literature that examines the interplay between people and rivers over time.

Garcier's analytical model relies on the dialectical interaction between "structural" and "semiotic" factors. Rivers like the Moselle, the author argues, are physical products of the interplay of natural processes and human actions. Rivers are also social constructions, shaped and reshaped by human beings acting upon sets of attitudes and values embedded in their cultures. While these ideas are not "new," Garcier states them in a clear and forceful way and applies them to the historical study of the pollution of rivers. Dr. Garcier's article goes several steps beyond much of the river-related literature of environmental history by explicitly arguing that modern-day water quality managers would do well to understand the history of pollution control efforts. Garcier's careful linking of past and present - of history and management - represents important direction for environmental history and an interdisciplinary contribution to knowledge.

While Garcier's analytical model and case study of the French section of the Moselle, are worthy of praise, the piece would have been much stronger had the author fully developed the potential of the model. For example, it would have been useful to have one or two well developed examples that illustrate the dialectical interaction between "structural" and "semiotic" factors. It also would have been helpful had the author clearly stated how the case study of the Moselle illustrates the theoretical framework suggested by the model. As the case study unfolds, the model so carefully developed at the beginning of the article becomes a shadowy off-stage presence. One wonders, how for example, the case study of the Moselle would bring to life this general statement:

"Mental structures encompass struggle between interest groups: they provide a back-

ground and the lines along which issues are debated. In other words, mental structures frame social debate about issues, policies or objects. They will endow some objects with certain sets of values and rivers are no exception to the rule. This is why the anthroposystem concept does not capture all the complexity of the social representations of rivers. Rivers are not only material objects; they are also cultural entities which interact with the social system (p. 1704)”

Perhaps the following might be useful additions to the sources cited:

White, Richard, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995).

Scarpino, Philip V. "Large Floodplain Rivers as Human Artifacts: A Historical Perspective on Ecological Integrity," U.S. Geological Survey, Special Report, 1997.

Scarpino, Philip V. "Interpreting Environmental Themes in Exhibit Format," in Martin Melosi and Philip Scarpino, Editors, *Public and Environmental History* (Krieger Press, 2004), pp. 139-153.

White's book, in particular, offers a sophisticated assessment of human interaction with the Columbia River (U.S. Northwest).

Garcier's article draws some noteworthy conclusions. The model of analysis adds a useful dimension to our understanding of the historical relationship between people and rivers. The author's self-conscious and careful linking of past and present and history and management is significant, as is the attention to the value of history in interdisciplinary discourse. On balance, however, the article would be improved if the author strengthened and sharpened the conclusions. Based upon the careful stating of the analytical model and the development of the Moselle River case study, what is the contribution of this piece that adds to what we know about the historical relationship between people and rivers? This observation is less a criticism than a suggestion that the author "take more credit" for the article's contribution to scholarship.

It would have been interesting, and valuable, for the author to have offered some con-

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clusions about international similarities and differences in the pollution history of the Moselle – through the lens of the analytical model.

I found the organization of the article to be well-structured and clear. Perhaps a better map would be an improvement, but the map provided does work.

Garcier cites the appropriate published literature and mentions in the article the abundance of primary sources available that allow scholars to write histories of rivers like the Moselle. Unfortunately, the article does not cite those primary materials, so it is hard for a reader to assess their impact on the author's argument and conclusions. The present article seems to be based on the author's dissertation:

Garcier, R. J.: La pollution industrielle de la Moselle française: naissance, développement et gestion d'un problème environnemental, 1850-2000, Phd in geography, Université Lumière - Lyon 2, 2005.

That being the case, it would be reasonable to assume that the author has read and assessed and drawn conclusions from primary source materials relating to the history of the pollution of the Moselle.

From the perspective of a historian, the article would be stronger and more persuasive if the author cited the relevant primary sources. Citations are also links between evidence and argument; they are what makes history verifiable.

On balance, "Rivers We Can't Bring Ourselves to Clean," is a useful and informative article. It employs an effective analytical model, and it does a good job of linking past to present and history to modern management of rivers. This reviewer found the content and argument to be persuasive and significant and defers to the author and the press on revisions.

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