

Back to the origins

Interview with Thomas Hoerber, author of *The Origins of Energy and Environmental Policy in Europe – The beginning of a European environmental conscience*, published by Routledge.

Professor Hoerber, your book is a study of a specific period in the history of European integration. It analyses the time of the 1973 oil crisis from a French, British and German perspective. What was your motivation for this focus on 1973, and why did you choose these three countries?

1973 was in many respects a turning point in European integration. During the oil crisis the hope for a common European energy policy broke down. This is why 1973 is often referred to as a negative event for European integration. However, the second part of the book also shows that the oil crisis in 1973 was the founding event of European environmental policy. In the connection between energy and environmental issues which the oil crisis brought to the fore, the European environmental conscience found its reflection.

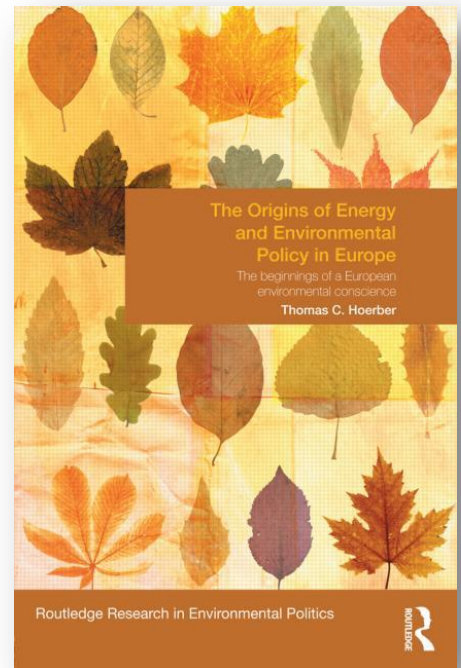
France, the UK and Germany were chosen because they were and still are the key movers and shakers in the EU. They are the biggest economies with huge energy sectors and corresponding environmental problems. They also found different answers to the oil crisis: nuclear power in France; North Sea oil in Britain; and austerity in Germany, which shows nicely the different and legitimate national interests at play at that time.

What were the sources you consulted? How long have you worked on this book?

The early part of this book is based on previous research on European integration in the 1950s in which I consulted French, German and British parliamentary speeches for the whole decade of the 1950s. The positive experience with these sources led me to use a similar approach for the analysis of the oil crisis. Parliamentary debates give a very broad picture of political opinion in a country. In a discourse analysis over a sufficiently long period one gets a comprehensive impression of all concerns on a given topic. For the oil crisis I considered parliamentary debates from 1971 to 1975 – which took me five years of regular archival work.

Did you find your initial hypotheses validated or did you stumble upon findings that you had not expected at all?

In a historical study such as this, often there are no initial hypotheses. Such a discourse analysis lends itself to creating a narrative. In this case, the narrative is about the oil crisis. The truth, or rather a certain way of understanding the period emerges out of the debates. A few things that emerged were however predictable, such as that for energy and environmental problems the European nation states were too small to solve them by themselves. However, that does not necessarily lead to European integration, as can be seen in the French nuclear answer and the British North Sea oil exploitation. When national interests pointed the other way, nation states were ready to take that route. The price for that national selfishness was however high. Today, Europe still does not have a properly functioning energy policy. Instead, the nation states concerned are stuck in their nation energy prerogatives, preventing more than they should a European energy policy badly needed for security of supply. This goes of course also for the environmental side of the argument. The book shows that the understanding of what environment changed throughout the early 1970s, from something stable and unmovable, or too big to be changed by man, into a fragile environment which needs protection. I call this the European environmental conscience, because this phenomenon that people



started to realise that their environment needed protection can be found in all three countries and could not be solved by any one of them alone. Consequently, one gets the demands for European solutions, turning to the European Commission.

Where would you say lies the added value of this book as compared to the existing literature? What is your original contribution to the field of studies?

The stress on the connection between energy and environmental policy. The importance of environmental policy today cannot be understood without the energy sector. Yet we often still consider them separately. When we look at both policy fields, this book has shown that they have been drivers within the European integration process, but could not have become that without the other.

Based on this argument the book makes the prediction that what failed in 1973, i.e. a common European energy policy, will have to be realised, if one wants to fulfil the European peoples' demands coming from a widely shared European environmental conscience.

What is the conclusion for today's European Union that you can draw from your historical study?

Energy and environmental policies have been drivers of European integration and will remain to fulfil that function in the future. We can see the spill-over from energy into environmental policy in the current struggle about the definition of the term "Sustainability".

The analysis of environmental policy in the 1970s also showed that the Commission had this entrepreneurial spirit in which they deliberately picked environmental policy as a European policy area. No serious national politician at the time gave it much credence. But the Commission betting on "dark horses" paid off again. Another such spill-over effect for the future may become the developing European space policy. In there one finds elements of spill-over from the Sustainability debate, such as earth observation satellites under Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES). At the same time, more importantly, it also reflects the European spirit of discovering the "New". This is a research area worthwhile looking at in the future.