

History and experience of public problems : a few reflections on the methods born of research into atmospheric pollution 1957-1965)

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The history of atmospheric pollution is a history with gaps. Its records are scattered in numerous collections and it does not correspond to history indexed to a well-classified source, as can be the case for the history of installations, in order to deal with pollution in general. Made up of very varied documents written by doctors, work inspectors, hygienists or councillors, the history of atmospheric pollution is of interest not only for what it highlights but for what it hides or leaves aside. From this point of view, the sociology of public problems can help to go beyond these single and often official voices of the preservation of records, by recourse to the category of trouble and its personal and social components.

History is an operation of re-contextualisation which does not really depend on such or such concern of the actors for chronology or historiography, or on the documentation of the proof as it is shown by victims of trouble. It draws its relevance from its capacity to step back from our modernity which is generated on the one hand by the precise knowledge of emissions of all sorts in the present day and on the other by the lack of knowledge of the emissions of 40 years ago or more. In doing so, it measures the gap in which the role of establishing networks and the rise in publicity of firstly local and then more general troubles can be shown.

Measurement and visibility of air pollution thus start with local history before becoming national ; this can be seen in Le Chambon-Feugerolles or in Toulouse between 1957 and 1965, over a period which saw the problem of air quality put on the public agenda with the 1961 law in France.

Compared to the political chronology of this appearance of air pollution on the agenda established by Lascoumes for example, a detour through history opens up several fronts at once. As Gusfield shows for the origin of the public problem of drinking and driving, the advantage of drawing up multi-site history over decades is to show the local, makeshift emergence of measurement techniques, dependent on their supporters and sponsors, the technology available, and the more or less receptive local, regional or national climate. As for drinking and driving, air pollution appears as an element of our daily lives. It is based on the availability of figures and arguments which can be called up very easily and apparently

without cost. Any part of the country can effortlessly be described in terms of degrees of emission and more or less polluted atmosphere. Mayors, citizens, engineers and administrators are all held to a state of being informed which comes not only from the ubiquitous nature of the air pollution phenomenon but also, and above all, from its 'public' nature. In fact, we have been able to show how the known distribution of the phenomenon is modelled on the public increase in its recognition. This apparently fluid information has a cost and Lascoumes clearly shows that a synthetic index such as the ATMO air quality index comes from the inter-network of air quality measurement associations which have themselves gradually created a grid over France since the 1970s. Recourse to history sidetracks by looking at the origins of the national grid of AASQAs (Certified air quality surveillance associations) and by plunging the apparently free and neutral nature of information about air quality into a web of contingencies and originally local makeshift operations which then became more general and erased their singular origins.

The point of joining a historiographic perspective to that of the appearance of the agenda of public policies is to discover how disputes or even lobbying are created according to circuits which at some point in history will be transformed and become visible through the media, administration and the air pollution policy. Initially, the attitude of people, those familiar with air pollution, residents living near power stations or waste collection centres causes us to reread the documents available to historians from another viewpoint, with the pre-requisite of the collective work of documentation of nuisances which forms the expression of troubles. But there is an important gap between realization of the attack, the discomfort or the dispute on one side and the complaint on the other, and the analysis of public policies makes it possible to cross this gap. We shall then also look at the 1957 to 1965 period because local centres of politicisation of the question of air pollution spring up in parallel with the national questioning. We shall be particularly receptive to the consequentiality of measuring air pollution when going from measuring emissions as they left factory chimneys in the 50s to measuring immissions, that is to say the ambient pollution in cities in the 60s. This will lead us to question the multiple effects of measures on the incentive or even the framework of the controversy which then led the public and industrial authorities to act, or not to act, on the sources of pollution.