



Local Environment

The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability

ISSN: 1354-9839 (Print) 1469-6711 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cloe20>

Environmental publics

Gerald Taylor Aiken

To cite this article: Gerald Taylor Aiken (2017): Environmental publics, Local Environment, DOI: [10.1080/13549839.2017.1360265](https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1360265)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1360265>



Published online: 23 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Environmental publics, by S. Eden, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, 206 pp., £32.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781138189416

Eden's book, published posthumously after her passing last year, cannot help but take more than a tinge of sadness as a result; even for those, like me, who never had the chance to meet her. *Environmental Publics* is a suitable and substantial cap to an academic career – overarching, drawing in a variety of themes and research projects; elegant, carefully and clearly setting out arguments and gathering this array of details; and accessible, well-written, engaging and simply gathering theory and empirical evidence to make her points.

Eden makes a strong claim from the first page, sustained throughout the book, that publics are not to be differentiated, aggregated, or parsed by their “sociodemographics” – their age, gender, income, education, ethnicity, or even general proclivities. She argues against these segments not only because “the public” is not one group, but a highly diverse and complex set of groups that vary by context in time and space (p. 1). What matters is how these publics form and act.

This way of thinking emerges from a background in the wider “practice turn”. Eden's book makes a case for the persistent value of thinking in terms of practices, rather than individuals. Each chapter takes a different “practice” – knowing, participating, consuming, enjoying, campaigning, voting, and, finally, working – and looks to the affects place and power have in constructing, differentiating between, and in the evolution of these practices. These practices are not held too distinctly though, and Eden discusses the spill-over, and also potential rebound, effects from one realm into another. For example, the links between doing outdoor sports and knowing about the environment, or studying environmental subjects and voting or consuming more environmentally.

The book is well nuanced, each concept or proposition contains many caveats and qualifiers. For instance, it avoids the term “environmental movement” as that suggests “too great a degree of coherence between groups over values and practices” (p. 118). And the book regularly returns to emphasise how necessary the plural is – there is no such a thing as an environmental public, but a many and varied, diverse and diffuse, environmental publics. Typically caveats are like the following: “again it is worth emphasizing that although I have separated types of practices for chapters of this book, in reality practices are far more mixed up and blurred” (p. 129). Such careful repetition shows how the book is helpful for those new to the field, looking for a balanced outline and fair summary of all viewpoints, even those the author does not take. A polemic this is not.

Nonetheless, Eden's justification in the introduction of why thinking about practices matter is neat, succinct, and about as good a starting place for any Local Environment reader interested in the range of writings on practices. Particularly, she mounts a strong case for taking seriously the roles of power and place in practices. While there is a growing bulwark of research on the *geographies of practice*, Eden's contribution marks a crisp outline of why this is a case that still needs to be made, and here it is made well.

Practice theorists and their acolytes have shown much value in what they can offer theorists of environmental issues in recent times. Many of Eden's categories, like *knowing publics*, seamlessly fit with a practice approach here. However for some publics, we need more than just an appreciation of practices. It seems to me that a more active, engaged public, like the kind Eden outlines in “campaigning publics, and “voting publics” would be better thought out by thinking through purposes as much as practices. These are groups that come together to deliberately intervene, upset the apple-cart, and pursue a set agenda. This is a vision of the public that is not an iterative cycle of individuals producing practices, in turn producing individuals. They are examples where “publics” seem to have a higher degree of agency that practice theory affords – even if this is only perceived, that the publics

seek to act and intervene seems to increase their capacity to act and achieve results. Or, conversely, this is not to say they do actually achieve results, but the act and way of purporting to achieve results can performatively shape and alter their cohesiveness as a public.

Other views of publics push this further. For Eden, publics seem opposed to the elite. The synonyms to her pattern of use feel like they could be everyday, low-level, or micro.

For Paterson (2014), the correlative of an environmental public is not tied up with the scale where the action takes place, but is rather opposed to the private character of many vested interests, demands, or agendas. Here “public” becomes a site of contestation, a power-laden product and not only a context. This has important consequences. For example, both Paterson (2014) and Bulkeley (2016) insist that publics do not simply engage with environmental issues, but that it is the engagement with environmental practices that constitutes any given public.

While theoretically informed, *Environmental Publics* as a whole is theoretically “light-touch”, where the descriptions of Foucault or practice theory are always outlined in relation to their applicability. Because of this, and due to the wide-ranging and fully fleshed-out examples throughout, this is a book that will both appeal to, and perhaps be more likely to be read and engaged with, by specialist undergraduate students; or, alternatively, as a very useful “levelling up” text for postgraduates cross-disciplines or training.

Another helpful aspect of this book is that Eden was clearly both an academic and part of an environmental public herself. In the book, she leans on her own experiences, reflects on her membership of various environmental organisations, and describes her involvement in various campaigns, such as an anti-incineration movements. Such vignettes give the book added depth, and serve a purpose as a case study to explore her points, but also give the feeling of a well-rounded academic, not content merely to describe scenarios, but to get involved with them herself.

The many examples and stories in this book, reflecting Eden’s research locations and experience, lean heavily on the UK. The chapter *voting publics* begins with, and regularly tacks back to, the fortunes of the Green political parties in the UK. However, these are far from the most successful or innovative of Europe’s Green parties. There are many examples and cases used. Sometimes these are global, for instance, the *campaigning publics* chapter uses examples of raising awareness of air pollution in China, the early US environmental movements, and various global south campaigns. However, both the majority of empirical examples and policy relevance here will find a snug home for scholars from, or working on, the UK. That theoretical reflections emerge from this island does not at all invalidate them. But, in these post-Brexit times, such (literal) insularity is perhaps now more noticeable. On many occasions, reading this I longed for the book to adopt a pan-European reflection or more internationalist perspective. Even holding this narrow frame, what will happen to environmental publics within the UK without EU regulations, examples, and collaboration would have made for a fascinating sequel. More’s the pity.

References

- Bulkeley, H., 2016. *Accomplishing Climate Governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paterson, M., 2014. Climate re-public: practicing public space in conditions of extreme complexity. In: J. Best and A. Gheciu, eds. *The return of the public in global governance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 149–172.

Gerald Taylor Aiken
*Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Luxembourg, 11, Porte des Sciences, L-4366
 Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg*

 gerald.aiken@uni.lu

© 2017 Gerald Taylor Aiken

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1360265>

