The Minett: Dirty or Beautiful?

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Industrial regions often get a bad press. The German Ruhr, the Belgian Borinage or the Luxembourgish Minett: in the eyes of many outsiders, these places are synonymous with doom, gloom, dirt and ugliness, and should therefore be avoided at all costs. Of course, such clichés are grounded in historical realities. Certainly in relation to the environment, industrial regions have borne a heavy burden. It would be wrong to assume, however, that inhabitants of such regions have been completely insensitive towards the environmental problems surrounding them. In fact, people living in industrial towns have usually been quite aware of the detrimental impact of factories on their health, as well as on local natural resources (water, air and soil). This awareness is often as old as industrialisation itself, for many regions dating back to the second half of the 19th century. In other words, local environmental concerns were already on people's minds long before the advent of the present-day environmental movement.

Being aware of harmful environmental transformations did not necessarily imply, however, that factory workers or even members of the middle class were always prepared to actively *protest* against pollution. In the 19th century, as well as for much of the 20th century, criticising powerful interests of industry could be a risky affair indeed. Workers in particular were in a very weak socio-economic position to speak up against their bosses: after all, in factory towns, everyone's livelihood depended in some way on the omnipresent industry. When the working class *did* raise its voice, moreover, it usually had concerns that were more acute than the protection of the local environment. This resulted in the prioritisation of social struggles for wage increases, reduced working hours and occupational health and safety improvements.

Dirt

In the Minett too, pollution was part and parcel of life. In their heyday during the *Trente Glorieuses*, steel plants not only provided work for thousands of people; they also had a severe impact on the local environment. The history of air pollution provides a compelling case in point. The steel manufacturing process is a source of various pollutants, including the invisible and odourless carbon dioxide. While we know today that this greenhouse gas is at the root of the ongoing global climate crisis, the problem of global warming was not yet well understood before the last decades of the 20th century. Day in, day out, the people of the Minett nevertheless lived with a more tangible form of atmospheric pollution, namely dust, soot and smoke. A by-product of various steps in the iron and steel manufacturing process, this pollution was as omnipresent as the factories themselves. It could often be seen and smelled; some

inhabitants would half-jokingly remember that it could even be "tasted in the mouth". In many ways, smoke and dust were banal facts of life – and as such, people accepted their presence to a considerable degree. In her book *Für die Katz'* (1998), the writer Nelly Moia observed that inhabitants of the Minett were "rather hard-boiled with regard to air pollution". "How could this possibly be any different," she wondered, "when one is raised in a region where the skies take on a dark brown colour?"

Throughout the decades, municipal authorities actively encouraged this hard-boiled attitude by claiming that the people of the Minett were exceptionally strenuous workers who did not like to complain. In 1950, for instance, the deputy mayor of Esch stated that the stoic mentality of his citizens was a source of pride. As late as 1972, a local newspaper signalled that "the breath of the factories, which colours our skies and makes our cities dusty […], is the spice of our lives". Here, one might also invoke the words of an elderly woman whose granddaughter was interviewed some years ago: "All [was] well with the people of Dudelange, as long as the chimneys [smoked]."

Beauty

Hard work was not the only source of pride for the inhabitants of the Minett. Public discourses continually emphasised that Luxembourg's factory towns were *not* of the depressing and drab type that could be found in other countries. In tourist brochures, places like Esch-sur-Alzette were catalogued as "worth a visit" given the many marvels they had to offer: prestigious civic architecture, impressive state-of-the-art factories and, last but not least, lush urban parks and forested areas. Rather than being seen as in conflict with one another, the spheres of industry and nature were effectively believed to be complementary. A 1960s promotional film went so far as to claim that the factories of the Minett were located "in a park". Such discourses presented the Minett as a place in perfect harmony with nature: just next to the "forest of chimneys", one could find an abundance of both *real* forests and pastoral idyll. In this way, the Minett also appeared as a microcosm of Luxembourg itself, whose national identity was based on the idea that the country's uniqueness lay in the rare combination of beautiful landscapes and world-class industry.

Dirt again

Despite powerful feelings of civic pride on the one hand and official narratives promoting peaceful coexistence between people, industry and nature on the other, the environmental pollution of the Minett did not always go uncontested. In the interwar period, local newspapers regularly made mention of the "dust plague" that affected the lungs and eyes, soiled façades and drying laundry, and invaded living rooms. In this context, the notion of a "plague" carried almost biblical connotations, and seemed to refer

to an unavoidable fate. Yet even in the early 1930s, some politicians (such as the socialist member of parliament Adolphe Krieps) recognised that environmental pollution was not only a nuisance. Since the working class was hit harder by industrial emissions than other groups, pollution was also seen as a source of social injustice.

In the decades following the Second World War, pollution was increasingly considered as an object of *shame* for the people of the Minett. “Blackened roofs, blackened streets and blackened gardens: those are the sad symbols of Differdange!”, a local newspaper exclaimed in 1950. It continued: “Paris has its Eiffel Tower, […] Differdange has its dust.” The national government responded to this dissatisfaction by commissioning a first scientific investigation into the “dust plague” during the mid-1950s, even though the Minister of Health would emphasise in 1960 that the “pollution problem can only be tackled step by step, since we have to protect our national economic interests”. Later, the communist party would use air pollution as a political weapon, linking it to anti-capitalist criticism. In 1972, for instance, a communist newspaper noted: “Wherever ARBED chimneys smoke, huge profits […] fall from the sky, and so do dust and dirt – but it is clear that the first [...] go to the iron barons who live on the Riviera […], while the latter go to the working population.” By the time this article appeared, the Western world had begun to realise that environmental pollution was a problem of truly global proportions. Yet while most of the factories in the Minett have gradually disappeared since the 1970s (thus leading to a significant improvement in local air quality), the global environmental crisis has, unfortunately, all but dwindled.