

Reading Silent Spring as a Challenge for Contemporary Environmentalism

Author(s): Lawrence Culver

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Lawrence Culver

Reading *Silent Spring* as a Challenge for Contemporary Environmentalism

Jenny Price asks us why Rachel Carson—arguably the single most important figure in the history of the environmental movement—has been remembered and studied so uncritically. She argues that a more complete assessment of Carson and her work will help us better understand her, and her work. I concur, and wish to pose a related question about the environmental movement since Carson's death: Why, fifty years after *Silent Spring*, has there been no other book that has come even vaguely close to matching its impact? No other environmentally minded scientist, academic, or public intellectual has achieved a similarly successful intervention into US or global environmental issues since 1962. Why? More to the point, is this a question of the movement, or of the moment?

It is not as though there are no comparable issues to the use of DDT. The most successful similar effort to combat a chemical has been the effort to eliminate the use of chlorofluorocarbons in coolants, aerosols, and other products, and that effort has been largely successful. Yet efforts to combat the greatest environmental threat of our time, greenhouse-gas-induced climate change, have been largely unsuccessful. The United States, China, and the world as a whole have already surpassed all the worst-case predictions for carbon dioxide emissions. It is probably too late to prevent climate change, and instead now we must cope with an increasingly unpredictable world. Nine of the ten hottest years on record have occurred since 2000. In the United States, 2012 is the hottest year on record. More and more Arctic sea ice is disappearing in summer, and we may be on the brink of triggering natural feedbacks that will warm the climate further. It seems increasingly clear that if Carson warned us of a silent spring, we now all face a planetary hot summer.

In light of such grim facts, one has to ask why the environmental movement has not produced another figure such as Carson, and why it has thus far failed to successfully effect the political and economic changes necessary to make serious progress to combat climate change. Price offers several critiques of the environmental movement, at least in the United States, since Carson. According to Price, US environmentalism has centered on personal virtue, and much of that virtue was defined by consumption, from hybrid cars to organic food. This alienated poorer Americans, who could not

afford virtuous consumption. It also ignored production and labor, and environmental regulations, blamed for putting Americans out of work, most definitely played a large role in creating working-class hostility to environmentalism. Until recently, major environmental organizations paid scant attention to issues of environmental justice and environmental racism in urban areas and poor or nonwhite communities. On a global scale, this remains the case. Americans were horrified by the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, but very few Americans know about the ongoing dreadful ecological consequences of oil extraction in places such as Nigeria. At a more basic level, while the environmental movement has done a great deal to warn us of the dangers we face, it has not necessarily made a convincing argument that combating climate change is not merely a matter of avoiding disaster, but could in fact result in a better, more equitable, and potentially more prosperous world.



CBS reporter Eric Severeid interviews Carson for *CBS Reports* in 1963 (Source: CBS Photo Archive).

So, is it the movement itself that is the problem? Or is it instead the moment? Did Carson succeed in part because 1962 was a different world than 2012? Carson certainly operated in a much smaller and more civil media environment. With a frenetic 24-hour

news cycle, it seems unlikely that *Silent Spring* would receive the same sustained attention today. We can hope that Carson's gender would not be an issue in 2012, as it was in 1962. At the same time, however, our current media would have no compunction about delving into her personal life, or her role as a surrogate parent, and those, perhaps, might have been used against her. US politics were charged and polarized in the 1960s, as they are today. One ominous change, however, is the aggressive politicalization of science, especially climate science, in the United States. While Carson faced great hostility from the US chemical industry, their resources pale in comparison to the resources Exxon, BP, or Shell have at their disposal. Carson also had a more straightforward story to tell. A human-created poison aimed at mosquitoes had been unleashed into the world, with dire consequences. DDT was one pesticide, which could be banned, or at least used more judiciously. Climate change, in contrast, requires a reengineering of transportation, energy, agriculture, and other vast portions of the global economy. It is a far larger problem, and the science behind it is much more complex and uncertain. The fact that a single poison could kill and spread through an ecosystem was easier to accept, and harder to refute.

That prudence should prevail over recklessness seems such a plain truth that it goes without saying. Nevertheless, that plain truth, elegantly written in *Silent Spring*, galvanized the world.

Andy Jacoby, *New Orleans, USA*

Yet, to make these observations is emphatically not meant to lessen Carson's legacy. She wrought a vast transformation of the environmental movement, particularly in the United States. That movement had been dominated by men, from John Muir, to Theodore Roosevelt, to David Brower. It had also been focused on the preservation of romantic landscapes that were imbued with patriotic American sentiment, from the Grand Canyon to Yosemite. Carson forced Americans—and people around the world—to see the nature in their own cities and backyards, and to begin to understand that they, and the choices they made, were part of a larger ecological system. Nature is not “out there”—it is right here, and even inside us. The role she played in heightening global ecological awareness is incalculable.

The fact remains that Carson was a wonderfully gifted author who could write with remarkable clarity about complex issues. That gift, which she used to such effect, is her greatest legacy. Environmentally minded writers of our own era must follow her lead to achieve environmental change in the twenty-first century. The world we live in, and the problems we face, are far more complex than those of fifty years ago. We must recognize this not as a lament, but as a challenge. If twenty-first-century environmentalists can find ways to express their scientific knowledge and ecological values with the same lyrical clarity, and if they can make a compelling case to a global public despite the slowly grinding gears of politics, the public relations campaigns of energy companies, and the chatter of our media, we might yet discover an abundance of new *Silent Springs*, and a world led by a new generation of Rachel Carsons.