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Book review: Greening the globe: world society and environmental change

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Greening the Globe: World Society and Environmental Change. By Ann Hironaka. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. x+195. \$95.00.

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The first UN conference on the environment, held in Stockholm in June 1972, is widely regarded as the watershed event that put environmental protection on the international agenda. Subsequent international negotiations led to the creation of a rapidly expanding network of environmental treaties, and new organizations such as the UN Environment Programme (1973) and the Commission on Sustainable Development (1992) established the institutional framework for global environmental policy. Today, virtually all countries have some form of domestic framework for environmental protection in place and participate in multilateral environmental negotiations. Debate continues on whether any of these innovations have actually helped to rein in rampant environmental degradation. It is clear, however, that the greening of the globe represents a profound social change on a global scale, with lasting consequences for the relationship between humanity and its natural environment.

What has brought about this global social change? Was it an inevitable response to the global spread of industrialism and capitalism, as modernization theory would have it? Was it the result of transnational campaigning by environmental activist groups, as the social movements literature suggests? Or was it the product of enlightened international leadership by powerful states, as international relations scholars would argue? In *Greening the Globe*, Ann Hironaka departs from these conventional explanations and develops a distinctive world society perspective that “explains global environmentalism as driven by the institutional structures and cultural meanings embedded within the international community” (p. 15). Her account, which is rooted in the Stanford school, reverses the usual bottom-up mode of explanation and focuses instead on the ways in which world society itself causes social change at the national level and below.

Hironaka was involved in some of the early formulations of the Stanford school’s perspective on global environmentalism (e.g., J. W. Meyer et al., “The Structuring of a World Environmental Regime, 1870–1990,” *International Organization* 51 (1997): 623–51). With this book, she presents a more fully developed account of how world society can be identified as the root cause of global social change. Her notion of world society differs from other uses in the social sciences. It is not only about the myriad of transnational actors and relations that make up the dizzying field of global environmentalism but also, and critically, about the treaties, intergovernmental

organizations, and national laws that make up international structures and the various discursive patterns and cultural frames that give rise to global cultural meanings. In this view, global environmentalism becomes the product of an institutionalized culture that seeps into the patchwork fabric of global politics. This has two important consequences for how we think about global change. Because global power derives from structures and culture, the agency of individuals inevitably takes a backseat role. It is not the charismatic leadership of environmental campaigners or progressive statesmen but the anonymous and rational processes of institutions that drive the greening of the globe. Furthermore, the world society perspective can offer only a contingent explanation. Insofar as “institutions empower agents” (p. 17), which in turn drive the environmental agenda, and institutional structures provide “workspaces” (p. 19) in which those agents search for appropriate solutions, the direction and outcome of this process is never certain. For Hironaka, these diffuse and often hidden processes suggest a “Bee Swarm model of social change,” which sees “the aggregation of causal factors pushing in the same direction” (p. 7), even if individual factors may seem inconsequential.

The book develops this model in six relatively short chapters that sketch the historical origins of the global environmental regime and then review the role of institutional structure, agents, and cultural meaning in producing global change. The core chapters draw on empirical cases—ozone layer depletion, hazardous waste, and climate change—that serve to illustrate, if not test, the theoretical argument. The penultimate chapter reverses the perspective and examines why in some cases (overconsumption, desertification, deforestation) the global environmental regime has failed to produce the expected greening effect. The conclusion offers a concise summary of the argument and hints at some of its limitations.

There is much to admire in this concise, focused, and thoughtful monograph. The author paints on a large canvass with a fine brushstroke, never losing sight of the bigger picture. But does the core argument convince? Is there a “global environmental regime” that allows world society to drive the greening of politics? In a sense, the idea of world society as a coherent set of international institutions and cultural meanings, which makes this book so original, is also its most problematic aspect. It takes a heroic form of sociological structuralism to reject various forms of political agency, which existing accounts of global environmental politics have identified, and to replace them with the anonymous workings of an institutional logic and a rational scientific culture. I doubt that the underlying causal logic of the world society model gives us much leverage in explaining the phenomenal growth in global environmentalism. It serves as a catchall model that focuses on structural and cultural explanations while retaining some sense of agency but without fully explicating how these logics work together. Most

critically, the model assumes that the global environmental regime—a vast and heterogeneous assemblage of international organizations, treaties, policies, and networks—operates as the driver of global change, but it does not seek to understand how this regime came about and what makes it hang together. Whose interests are represented, and privileged, by the global regime? To what extent are its norms and principles universally accepted, and what drives ongoing contestation of some of its elements? The world society perspective cannot arrive at a more comprehensive explanation of global environmentalism because it lacks a more nuanced understanding of how *international* society—the society of states—has come to accept global environmental responsibility and how *world* and *international* society interact to shape the global institutional and cultural context in which environmental solutions are being sought.

Sustainable Lifestyles and the Quest for Plenitude: Case Studies of the New Economy. Edited by Juliet B. Schor and Craig J. Thompson. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. x+264. \$25.00 (paper).

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This volume offers empirical case studies of the “plenitude economy.” A broad range of examples of the green economy are described and analyzed, offering “notes from the front” of real-world attempts to demonstrate that “another world is possible.” These range from the politicized communities of raw milk producers and consumers in New York and Lithuania (chap. 5), the experiences of time banking in Boston (chap. 3), new forms of interaction and pleasure in, through, and around Chicago’s Experimental Station (chap. 6), and communal, artisanal provisioning in Aude, France (chap. 1), to the application of the transition town idea in Alaska (chap. 2) and community-supported agriculture (chap. 4).

The plenitude economy is one of a growing set of narratives for analyzing, describing, and prescribing a green, sustainable, and human-scale economy and associated economics beyond the dominant business as usual (BAU) unsustainable capitalist-organized economy. It is distinguished by its focus on high-tech (p. 115) ecoentrepreneurialism and green lifestyle creation; its less critical attitude to the free market, suitably reembedded in local social relations (including familial self-provisioning; pp. 138, 163, 197); the embracing of a real materialism (p. 109); a less politically challenging conception of the consumer-citizen (p. 126) or producer-citizen (p. 149), engaged in “market mediated activism” (p. 236), rather than of the citizen activist; and a resolutely local rather than national or global focus.