

Documenting Catastrophe

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Patrick Hossay, *Unsustainable: A Primer for Global Environmental and Social Justice*, Zed Books, 2006.

Social movements need a transforming vision that can call others to it. This is not the same as a *counter*-vision produced after showing the failure of the existing one. Environmental transformative alternatives that project just and sustainable global relations of human beings, society, other creatures, and the biosphere are also needed.

Patrick Hossay's book is an excellent addition to this genre, and it begins with a lengthy litany of the horrible state of the earth. The first chapter, titled "The trouble we're in," runs to 34 pages of unrelenting bad news. Even the future-looking section is titled, "It's going to get (maybe a lot) worse." Yikes!

In fairness, the book's central theme is that of the title—that the present way is *Unsustainable*. *Hossay explains this better than most.*

The bad news continues through the book. The second chapter is titled "How did we get in this mess?" Other chapters include "Making the rules" (transnational trade organizations have created rules—backed by police enforcement—that everyone must follow), "There's got to be a limit" (how the present economic system perceives no limits), and "Everything's for sale" (the commodification of food, plants, animals, and water, but surprisingly no mention of the commodification of humans). The book concludes with a chapter that gives some hope. Titled "Resistance is fertile" (a pop culture reference), even this chapter keeps slipping back into yet more detail about how things are all so wrong. It is this unrelenting negative posture that made the book hard to read, even for a jaded social scientist.

For sheer detail, Hossay's research is impeccable. The book is an excellent reference text, very well documented, although this may put it out of date sooner than it deserves. "How we got into this mess" is as good and readable an overview of global environmental history from a world-systems approach as I've seen. For Americans, the repeatedly recalcitrant role of the United States pointed out in this chapter and throughout the book will be eye-opening. For example, much of the vaunted New Deal was catastrophic for the environment, and as early as the 1920s, over 50 percent of consumer goods were sold in chain stores.

Hossay is at his best when documenting the global complex of institutions and agreements that have put the earth's environment in such a state of calamitous degradation. A key theme is that the interests of transnational corporations have (always) had a key influence in defining policy. That the poor of the world are attempting to navigate "a world where winners and losers are already set" [p. 130] illuminates the need for global justice. Environmental organizations are also shown to be ineffective. In the chapter "Changing the rules," Hossay observes: "In the face of entrenched corporate resistance, major

environmental organizations have found it necessary to lower their sights and seriously soften their commitment to real change.” [p. 184.] In other words, the rules are *not* changing.

Given the extensive litany of environmental degradation, I was left wondering why so many institutions are so obstinate in the face of such obvious problems? Here’s where more theoretical explication would be beneficial. Key environmental sociological concepts like “treadmill of production” and “human exceptionalism,” are not included. Nor is there any engagement with social or sociological theory, such as world systems theory.

The book is a historical and materialist description, with typical lack of attention to such immaterial items as culture, norms, or worldviews. It left me more convinced of the value of social constructivism for environmental sociology and activism. Statements like, “The power of the wealthy to redefine the world in their favor” [p. 106] underscore the need to unpack the construction of social definitions, including their cultural dimensions, and the media and educational processes that support such defining. Most people—including all but the most ardent and least prone-to-despair students—need more intellectual support to move from critique to action. What has been previously constructed must be deconstructed and made into new formations that are more just and sustainable. A key question is whether this will be revolution, reformation, or simply catastrophe.

Hossay’s writing is engaging. The book could be profitably used in classes across many disciplines, although clearly supplemented with other material. The book would have benefited from a glossary of key terms and a list of acronyms. The index is relatively small, and key words like “neoliberalism” are not in it. These additions would also improve the book’s utility as a research resource.

In conclusion, this is a frustrating but worthwhile book. I agree wholeheartedly with its analysis of the conditions of global environmental and social inequity and am impressed by its documentation. I’ve also recommended it to others. When Hossay puts out the second edition, I hope responses to the environmental crisis can also be part of the book. If things are to change, we need more than dissection of the crisis.