

Environment and Society

By Jean-Guy Vaillancourt

Mark J. Smith, ed.: *Thinking Through the Environment: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

R. Scott Frey, ed.: *The Environment and Society Reader*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.

These two readers have little in common, yet both teach us a lot about what has been written in recent years concerning the relationship between the environment and human society. Smith's reader is basically an anthology of contributions dealing with the politics and ethics of contemporary nature-society relations, written mostly by US and British authors. Fifty-five selections, culled mostly from books and divided into seven sections, treat the links between ecology, social and political thought, and environmental ethics. Frey's reader, on the other hand, is a collection of twenty-one social science articles, many of which were written by leading environmental sociologists, such as Dunlap, Dietz, Rosa and Frey himself. The book is organized in three sections and eleven chapters. Part I (chapters 1-4) examines the scope, character, and driving forces (or human causes) of local, national and global environmental problems. Part II (chapters 5-8) gives us an overview of the different human responses to environmental problems, at the level of beliefs, social action, eco-management, and scientific research. Finally, Part III focuses on solutions to these problems. It discusses the emerging sustainable development approach's usefulness for dealing with environmental problems in a fruitful theoretical and practical manner.

The readings in Smith's anthology are shorter and much more polemical and cover a longer historical span than those in Frey's book,

while Frey's selections are longer, more empirical contributions, and are mostly focused on US and global environmental issues. Both are rich and fascinating books that cover a lot of terrain in a very complementary fashion. Although few of the readings from both books are original pieces, I am sure that even those with a longstanding familiarity with the field will find many new gems in these two books, and that they will enjoy reading them as much as I did.

Frey's reader contains so many substantial essays that I cannot even hope to do justice to all of them here. Frey's opening chapter describes current environmental problems, and analyses their impact on humans and on the biosphere. After having presented three case studies of environmental degradation, including climate change, Frey presents a model for the study of interrelations between humans and the environment, at the level of causes and effects. Raymond Murphy then offers an ecological critique of the constructivist approach in environmental sociology, for which nature does not seem to matter much. Riley Dunlap goes on to describe the rise, decline and recent revitalization of US environmental sociology, which is characterized by its empirical orientation, its cautious constructivism (or moderate realism), its insularity and its atheoretical orientation. Its increasing internationalization, and the recent emergence of ecosociology, augur well for the recognition of the importance of the ecological dimension of human life and for the final demise of human exceptionalism in sociology. Foster's outstanding essay on Marx, Bullard's contribution on the environmental justice movement and environmental racism, and Frey's essay on waste dumping by core countries in peripheral countries are excellent preparations for the environmental justice manifesto reproduced at the end of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 closes Part I on environmental problems, with Dietz and Rosa's article on the environmental impacts of population, affluence, and technology (I = PAT) and with James O'Connor's seminal paper, "a neo-Marxian effort to link environmental problems (especially those of the periphery) to global capitalism." (p. *viii*)

In Part II, Dunlap shows that the social bases of concern for environmental quality have remained quite stable over an 18-year period, and that socio-economic status is a poor predictor of such a concern. In his essay co-authored by Angela Mertig, Dunlap further shows (using opinion surveys in various countries) that, contrary to conventional wisdom, citizens of poorer countries are not less environmentally concerned than those of wealthy nations. Robert J. Brulle's article on the development of US environmental discourse and social movement organization presents an illuminating typology (manifest destiny,

conservationism, preservationism, ecocentrism, political ecology, deep ecology and ecofeminism), that classifies 44 major US environmental organizations on the basis of their date of foundation. J. Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva discuss the nature, style and direction of the environmental movement in India, while P. J. Frank's paper looks at the rise of global environmental discourse and activities between 1870 and 1990. Other papers discuss risk evaluation and management, popular epidemiology and toxic waste contamination, and post-normal science and sociology's new ecological paradigm. The last two essays on sustainable development (one on indicators by Farrel and Hart, and the other on concrete strategies for attaining it by Paul Hawken) are among the best pieces in Frey's book, and should be viewed as minor classics, in my opinion.

The first five sections of Smith's book take us on a fascinating voyage into the unknown: they look at the way ecological thought has addressed the issue of human impacts on the environment, rather than at the physical impacts themselves. Smith indicates the importance of distinguishing between the ethical dimension (how we *should* live with nature) and the social and political dimension (how we *actually* live with nature). Section 1 on situating the environment contains, among others, two selections on technocentrism versus ecocentrism, and two extracts from Rachel Carson's famous best-seller *Silent Spring*. Section 2 focuses on the issues of inter-generational justice and of our obligations to future generations, while Section 3 is devoted to animal welfare and animal rights. Section 4 discusses values and obligations towards non-sentient forms of life and towards the non-living part of the ecosystem (wildness, streams, mountains, trees, land) and offers an overview of deep ecology and preservationism. Section 5 presents liberal and conservative perspectives of the environment which defend private property and free trade as means of conserving the environment for human benefit and interests.

I was particularly fascinated by Section 6 of Smith's reader, which focuses on the relationship between ecological thought and four progressive and critical social and political theories, namely socialism (Ann Taylor), Marxism (Carolyn Merchant), anarchism (Robyn Eckersley on Bookchin and Bahro), and feminism (Vandana Shiva, Ynestra King, and Joni Seager). Section 7, my favorite, addresses contemporary theoretical issues. Tim Hayward shows how ecologism challenges existing institutional arrangements, in contrast to environmentalism, which is more moderate in tone and practice. He also discusses the tension between movement and party in green politics, particularly in Germany. Marten A. Hajer describes ecological

modernization as an approach which tries to overcome ecological crisis through technological and procedural innovation as is the case with the 1987 Brundtland report and Rio 1992's Agenda 21. Is ecological modernization "mercantilism with a green twist," a new form of state managerialism, or is it the progressive politics of the risk society? Hajer prefers to show that ecological modernization is: 1) institutional learning and societal convergence, i.e., a moderate social project; 2) a technocratic project to counter a technology out of control by more coordination or more decentralization; 3) cultural politics that pits different knowledges against one another to yield a higher understanding of ecological problems and solutions.

David Goldblatt's essay presents Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society. This is a society predicated on the emergence of environmental hazards and degradation brought about by industrialization and reflexive modernization. The risk society of late modernity is being ushered in to replace the corpse of a decaying industrial society. Increasing risk and insecurity come with greater de-traditionalization and with more individualization in the spheres of work, family life, and self-identity. Risk is now spatially, temporally and socially without limits; it is global, catastrophic, and invisible. Goldblatt distinguishes between risks in preindustrial, industrial, and risk society, and shows that the way out of our present predicament is the emergence of differential politics as proposed by the Greens, i.e., ecological democracy.

The last three selections of Smith's book return to the issue of risk society and ecological democracy. Andrew Blowers discusses the merits of the theories of ecological modernization and of the risk society and opts for the latter; Mike Mills rejects both ecoauthoritarianism and ecoradicalism, and finally chooses green democracy as a "via media," because it better achieves the extension of moral community beyond anthropocentrism, and because it centers on process and means rather than on goals and ends. Peter Christoff, as well as Mark Smith in his epilogue, both argue for ecological democracy, ecocentrism and the extension of civil society in the direction of ecological citizenship.

Although Smith's book, in comparison to Frey's, is a little bit too philosophical and too biocentric for my liking, and gives too much importance to deep ecology in comparison with radical social and political ecology, it is a good anthology which deserves a place, along with Frey's book, in any respectable ecological library.