

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

STEVEN YEARLEY, *Cultures of Environmentalism: Empirical Studies in Environmental Sociology*. Houndmills, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, vii + 205 p. Index.

Steven Yearley is one of the major figures of the sociology of environmental problems. During the last decade and a half, he has been an extremely productive researcher of environmental issues and debates. His accumulated scholarly experience is clearly reflected in this book. The author masters the theory and the empirical material so well that the two become seamlessly articulated in a coherent and captivating discourse.

Unlike other sociological treatments of the environmental problematique, *Cultures of Environmentalism* is not organized around specific sociological theories. Instead, the author chooses to devote most attention to the “thick” description of a number of case studies dealing with contemporary environmental disputes, campaigns, and movements. This approach earns the book a twofold merit. On one hand, it provides a vivid illustration of the complexity of contemporary environmental problems, at both local and global levels. For example, Yearley discusses the controversies surrounding the conservation of peat bogs in Northern Ireland, the problems of disposing of an oil-storage buoy in the North Sea and the long-standing debates over genetically-modified organisms and global climate change.

On the other hand, Yearley also problematizes the ways in which environmental problems and disputes came to be constructed as such. Moreover, the author reveals the processes through which he himself learned about the problems that he describes, thereby highlighting the subtleties involved in constructing environmental “cultures of knowing”. This exercise in the epistemology of environmental sociology adds much value to the originality of the book.

Thematically, the book is articulated around three topics: (1) environmentalism and environmental movements, (2) environmental problems in the context of public policy debates and (3) the role of science in understanding and debating environmental problem claims. Each of these topics is elaborated in a separate section of the book and is illustrated through case studies. By choosing these topics, Yearley implicitly points to the relevant contexts in which contemporary environmental problems are most clearly formulated and most intensely debated: in the discursive

spaces created by the environmental movement, in the legal forums of regulatory agencies and in the various arenas of scientific expertise.

Yearley's book is primarily empirical. Indeed, the author claims that he has tried to "keep the theory in the background". Does this mean that the book lacks a theoretical framework? The answer lies in the broader context of the environmental-sociological literature. Yearley's volume appears to be informed by the so-called "social construction of environmental problems" perspective. Initiated by Kitsuse and Spector in 1977, this approach posits that ecological problems exist only to the extent to which there are groups or institutions that define some condition as a "problem" and attempt to publicize and/or solve it (See John Hannigan's *Environmental Sociology: A Social Constructionist Perspective*; Steven Yearley's *The Green Case: A Sociology of Environmental Issues, Arguments and Politics*; Spector and Kitsuse's article in Rubington and Weinberg's *The Study of Social Problems*, 1995 edition). To a strict constructionist, the "objective" existence of the problem is irrelevant. However to claim that Yearley's volume is written in a purely constructionist vein is unjust. His position is more nuanced in that he acknowledges that our environmental problems are "real" even if our understanding of them is a matter of cultural definition. In other words, he endorses a *contextual constructionist* approach. This theoretical stance allows him to eschew the sterile debates between realists and constructionists, which have predominated in environmental sociology during the last two decades, and focus instead on the ways in which the "objectivity" of environmental problems becomes defined and debated in real-life settings. This represents one of the major strengths of the book.

Nonetheless, some shortcomings are worth noting. Given that the book is about *cultures* of environmentalism, one would expect a more comprehensive account of different ways of knowing and acting upon the environment. Conspicuously absent from the book is a more extended discussion of the environment, and its huge relevance for questions of human welfare, justice, development and sustainability in the context of Southern societies. Furthermore, a systematic cross-national comparison of environmental issues and debates would have made the book more attuned to the complexities of globalization.

Yearley's book is wonderfully written, thoroughly documented and exhibits a remarkable conceptual elegance. Therefore, the book would likely appeal to both an academic and non-academic audience. Students and scholars interested in environmental sociology, social movements or sustainable development would benefit greatly from reading these very well crafted empirical studies. At the same time, the book could help individuals from NGOs or the mass media enrich their hands-on experience with a broader socio-cultural understanding of the nature-society nexus.

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