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Book review: "Transforming the dream: ecologism and the shaping of an alternative American vision" and "Green states and social movements: environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway"

Journal Item

How to cite:

Reynolds, Martin (2004). Book review: "Transforming the dream: ecologism and the shaping of an alternative American vision" and "Green states and social movements: environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway". *Environmental Education Research*, 10(4) pp. 582–587.

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Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/1350462042000291065>

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Transforming the Dream: Ecologism and the Shaping of an Alternative American Vision

Charles Sokol Bednar. 2003.
State University of New York Press. Albany
218 pp

ISBN 0-7914-5716-8

Green States and Social Movements: Environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway.

John S. Dryzek, David Downes, Christian Hunold, David Schlosberg with Hans-Kristian Hernes. 2003.
Oxford University Press. Oxford and New York,
223pp

ISBN 0-19-924902-4

How might institutions and associated mindsets develop through the 21st century in response to the adverse environmental and social experiences in the latter half of the 20th century? This is the question addressed by the two books *Transforming the Dream* and *Green States and Social Movements*. Both acknowledge the unique and pivotal importance of the environmental movement amongst other ‘new’ social movements (feminist, gay rights, civil rights, indigenous rights, peace, youth, religious fundamentalism etc.) in shaping appropriate values for the new century. Both share an underlying critique of the ‘unlimited economic growth’ ethos underpinning the values of industrialized countries. Both assert the need for economics to be nested within wider arenas of ecological, as well as social, ethical and political discourse. Both signal the fundamental importance of developing active citizenship in the public sphere as a means of insuring against further environmental degradation. Finally, both books acknowledge that appropriate institutional transformation is contingent upon historic and cultural contexts. *Transforming the Dream* is explicit from the outset in drawing the boundaries of relevance to the USA context – transforming the ‘American dream’ - drawing on American authors and a rich array of North American experiences of environmental action. The cross-country comparative analysis of *Green States and Social Movements* makes clear throughout, the need to reflect on specific contingencies in attempting to understand institutional development or guide future action. The success of both books can be measured according to how well they contribute towards our understanding of the present situation, and guidance for future institutional development .

A distinguishing feature of Bednar’s *Transforming the Dream* is the polemic in advocating a ‘new social paradigm’ called *ecologism*. Ecologism “presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the natural world, and in our mode of social and political life” (p.8 quoting Andrew Dobson). Using the same Dobson reference, Bednar contrasts ecologism with ‘environmentalism’, wherein it is assumed that problems can be solved within existing institutional frameworks. (The distinction is a

useful one but ought not to be assumed in the use of the term with *Green States and Social Movements* wherein the ‘environmentalism’ of the book subtitle denotes a wide range of environmental and ecological value positions associated with ‘new social movements’). Bednar’s paradigm shift is reinforced through prefixing the term ‘ecological’ to each of the four substantive chapter headings denoting areas where this shift is happening and where it is further needed: economics; political economy; ethics; and pedagogy. Each of the chapters provides a clear exposition of the theme in question based on sometimes refreshing personal experiences coupled with accessible academic review of selected (predominantly American) key authors. Ecological economics is described in terms of a shift in recognizing the Earth, and by extension our economy, as a more or less bounded system, rather than the presumed open system of unlimited resources and unproblematic routes for removing wastes. Ecological political economy draws on the social ecology of Murray Bookchin and bioregionalism of Kirkpatrick Sale in legitimating community self-determination and decentralization. The focus here is on developing the Green Party Platform 2000 with additional ideas from political economists, James Robertson and Roy Morrison. Ecological ethics builds on Aldo Leopold’s ecocentric ideas, and focuses mainly on developing Paul Taylor’s biocentric ethic. Ecological pedagogy draws on David Orr’s principles of an ecological education envisioning education not as a ‘product’ but as a learning ‘process’ where practice and theory are co-joined, and where traditional subject boundaries are challenged. Overall, the book provides some useful and very readable insights to the development of ecological thinking in the institutional context of North America.

In taking a prescriptive stance on advancing ecologism, the selective use of authors to support the ideas being presented is not surprising. Bednar does acknowledge ‘problematic issues’ associated with each of the domains addressed. He chooses to use chapter endnotes to elucidate these issues, and advises us to “read the endnotes concurrently with the text” (p.15). Notwithstanding the difficulty for the reader to undertake this task (a concurrent reading is much easier if footnotes rather than endnotes are used) I am not convinced that the content of the endnotes fulfills this critical ambition in expressing the diversity of opinion and challenges being faced. Ecological economics, for example, is presented more as an extension of traditional ‘environmental economics’ where concern is given to re-interpreting ‘efficiency’ of markets through appropriate monetizing of environmental stocks and services. This supports the observation that ecological economics in the USA has a less radical trajectory than that developed in Europe (Spash 1999). For example, whilst Bednar suggests that ecological economists *may* not concern themselves with ethics (p.15), Spash maintains that in Europe an ethical concern is central to the development of ecological economics. There is no reference (even in the endnotes) to the radical ethical critique (Sagoff 2000) of contingent valuation promoted by Bednar. Similar weaknesses can be found in other chapters. For ‘Ecological Political Economy’, there is very little commentary on the importance of Ralph Nader’s presidential campaign in addressing the overt ‘techno-industrial paradigm’ of George W. Bush (and of course similar values associated with Democratic candidates!). The tradition of American ecofeminism is not mentioned. For ‘Ecological Ethics’ the strongly anti-anthropocentric stance taken makes no reference to possible critiques from the increasingly strong tradition of environmental pragmatism. The risk here is that, along with other ‘isms’ not prefixed with the term ‘critical’, ecologism might easily be weighed down (and be dismissed) as being dogma. In short, the book might only

be appealing to the converted, which in itself by reinforcing fixed boundaries, may work against the type of institutional transformation being advocated.

Another uneasy feature in my view is in the use of the term 'paradigm'. Whilst appreciating that Bednar's account is peculiar to the context of the USA, it seems strange (almost imperialistic) to be using what I understand as a universal, trans-national concept to describe thinking peculiar to one country! My own sense is that the paradigm shift being referred to has a much wider boundary of relevance and influence than the borders of North America. In being culturally specific with respect to revising the 'American dream' on the basis of 'ecology', Bednar is at risk of flouting what Barry Commoner in 1972 popularized as the first law of ecology "everything is connected to everything else" (cited in *Green States and Social Movements* p.127); particularly apposite in our more globalized world.

For me, a better understanding of ecological thinking and action (past, present and potential) in the USA is provided through the comparative study offered in *Green States and Social Movements*. The study illustrates how the aspirations of Bednar for the USA, despite the country being an environmental pioneer in the early 1970s, might be over-ambitious compared with similar aspirations in the UK, Norway, and particularly Germany. *Green States and Social Movements* is an empirical analysis which puts flesh on the skeletal framework of analysis proposed in earlier writings from John Dryzek. The analytical landscape has two features. First, there are the three interacting agencies of 'the state' and 'social movements' (embodied by the environmental movement) in an environment of 'civil society'. The structure of the state is suggested as being pivotal to understanding the role of social movements and civil society. Drawing on established political science theory, five 'state imperatives' are acknowledged: domestic order; survival (through competition); taxation (revenue for financing order and survival); economic growth (in the wake of capitalist state); and legitimation (in the wake of the welfare state). For social movements to have effective inclusion (as against co-option) in the state apparatus, their interests must align with one or more of the core state imperatives.

The threefold agency interaction is understood in terms of a fourfold classification of states, which represents the second overriding landscape feature of the book. The fourfold classification is a matrix with two dimensions: firstly, an inclusive-exclusive dimension depending on the state's structural propensity for including specific interest representation; secondly, an active-passive dimension reflecting the state's propensity to affect (seek or allow) different interests in civil society. The four categories of state provides an ideal-type rationale for selecting the case-study countries. Norway represents an *actively inclusive* state where business, labour, and other interests deemed relevant at the time, have privileged access to policy making through being sought by the state. The USA represents a *passive inclusive* state where interests are allowed access to policy making through lobby groups etc. if such interests have the resource back-up and will-power to enable such representation. The UK, particularly under Thatcher years of the 1980s, represents an *active exclusive* state where any social movement interests are deemed threatening to the overall market performance of the country and therefore need to be suppressed. Finally, Germany represents a *passive exclusive* state where interests emerging in civil society are not interfered with but nevertheless are also kept well-removed from the mechanisms of policy making.

After detailing in the first chapter the landscape for analysis, and warning against confusing the ideal type categories with real-world types, the book engages with the substantive comparative analysis of the dynamics between the environmental movements and the state in the context of civil society through seven further chapters, each making reference to the four case studies. Compared with Bednar, *Green States and Social Movements* is a more academically-orientated book and therefore, at times, difficult to engage with, particularly if the reader is not conversant with established political science theory. As one such reader, I found the four categories less than immediately engaging, and had on occasion to refer back to the first chapter to refresh my understanding of the framework. Having said that, I did find the effort very rewarding. I find the analytical framework useful in contextualizing and furthering my understanding of the significance of more recent developments such as the anti-war movement and the European Water Framework Directive. Chapter 5, Dynamics of Democratization, where the agency of civil society came to the fore, is in my view particularly revealing (despite some annoyingly distracting typographical errors). Whilst acknowledging that ‘actively exclusive’ states (UK) damage democratic qualities of civil society, three other significantly more counter-intuitive propositions emerge from this research: firstly, that inclusiveness (USA and Norway) generates a lack of democracy in civil society; secondly, that passive exclusiveness (Germany) in the long-term might actually be beneficial to democratic civil society; and thirdly that *active* exclusion (UK) and inclusion (Norway) can have a detrimental effect on important diverse features of a social movement.

The penultimate chapter provides features of an ideal future ‘green’ state. Here, an environmental movement can assimilate interests with the third and fourth established state imperatives; economic growth and legitimation. The capitalist imperative of economic growth is addressed through interests of ‘ecological modernization’, and the legitimation crisis of what Ulrich Beck calls the risk society is addressed through attention to greater public deliberation on environmental issues (e.g., genetic engineering etc.) Such an assimilation, it is argued, would generate a seismic transformation in state apparatus of the same order of magnitude as when the bourgeoisie as a social movement transformed the aristocratic state to a capitalist (or liberal) state, and when the social movement of the working class transformed (though possibly ‘reformed’ is a better adjective!) a capitalist state into a welfare state. *Green States and Social Movements* suggest that a successful transformation along these lines would generate a sixth state imperative, namely ‘environmental conservation’. Whilst I enjoyed the arguments and narrative here, I did feel that a clearer exposition of this normative imperative from the viewpoint of the authors might have been more forthcoming.

Both these books might be subject to two general criticisms. First, it might be argued that they do not go far enough in challenging the existing capitalist political economy. Both books adopt more of a reformist than revolutionary perspective in terms of exploring a radical systemic overturn of our present capitalist economic system. Second, both books whilst privileging ‘ecology’ do not hint at the advances in the natural sciences over the past forty years in challenging the underlying values and science of ecology, and which lend critical support to the type of institutional transformation being advocated. In particular I would refer authors to some of the exciting ideas on ‘new ecology’ (Scoones 1999), and the application of Humberto Maturana’s ideas on autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela, 1992) in the context of

envisioning a wider science for sustainable living (Capra 2002). Notwithstanding the political science disciplinary background of the authors of *Transforming the Dream* and *Green States and Social Movements*, it seems imperative that appropriate institutional transformation (towards an 'ecological paradigm' or 'green state' or similar institutional configuration) requires at minimum some acknowledgement of the need for *interdisciplinary* research.

Martin Reynolds (Lecturer in Systems, Centre for Complexity and Change, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. E-mail: m.d.reynolds@open.ac.uk)

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