

Book Reviews

Oran R. Young. 2002. *The Institutional Dimensions of Environmental Change: Fit, Interplay, Scale*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

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Young's latest book begins with an impassioned plea: Those of us studying international environmental institutions need to model ourselves, to a greater extent than we have previously, after natural scientists. Not so much in how we approach our methodology (though despite his asides in this volume about norms and constructivism Young remains an unapologetic positivist so he might accept that claim as well) but in how we design projects and operationalize our variables. We need to rely much more on a common structure in our research, so that all the individual studies we do can add up to cumulative knowledge we have not yet managed to create, and allow us to make real progress in understanding international environmental institutions.

Presumably to that end, Young provides us with his current take on the state of the field relating to international environmental institutions, with a particular focus on how institutions interact with each other and with ecosystems. He begins by defining institutions, quite broadly, as "sets of rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that define social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and guide interactions among the occupants of individual roles (p. 5)." By this definition, institutions can include the United Nations, marriage, a city council, and global (or local) capitalism. While this broad definition can be potentially useful, especially for the comparison he does between local and global forms of institutions, for most of the book he implicitly focuses on the sorts of international regimes that most international relations scholars examine.

In an additional introductory chapter he examines the difference between collective action and social practice models for how institutions guide behavior. In this chapter he explores the different explanations that models based either on economics and public choice (with emphasis on utilitarian calculations by rational actors) or those based on anthropology and sociology (with emphasis on culture, norms and habits) give for the effects of institutions. He sees these two clusters of models as having different understandings of an array of relevant issues. Collective action models expect little compliance without enforcement, advocate policy instruments that use incentives, expect actors to behave consis-

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tently, and see regimes as fragile. Social choice models, on the other hand, suggest that enforcement is not a key attribute for compliance, focus on command-and-control regulatory approaches, do not expect consistency in the behavior of actors, but expect institutions to be persistent. This grouping of models is an interesting and perhaps useful intellectual exercise; Young suggests that though it is difficult to determine which set is more useful, we should work to determine critical tests to ascertain which models produce the most accurate predictions.

The bulk of the book is then devoted to ways in which institutions can conflict with each other or with ecosystems. Young categorizes these potential mismatches as those of fit (the interaction between institutional characteristics and ecosystem properties), interplay (intended or unintended relationships among institutions, either vertically—cross-scale—or horizontally—cross issue), and scale (the differences or similarities between institutions to respond to local and global environmental challenges). Though presented as one large conceptual approach, each of the chapters relating to these issues actually takes up separate intellectual questions, and provides separate ways to categorize knowledge in the field. The discussion of fit examines a variety of ways that ecosystems and institutions can work at cross-purposes, and suggests that we need to create a general theory of human-environment interactions so that we can determine how to create the right institutions for a given environmental problem. The discussions of interplay argue that national or international institutions are better at taking into account the dynamics of large scale ecosystems than are local institutions, but also are more likely to commodify nature. In addition, institutional interplay gives an incentive to manage the interaction between institutions to reap joint gains. The section on scale argues that on the one hand we cannot just simply “scale up” from what we know about local institutions to create ways to address global problems, but that we should also find ways to figure out what studies of the two levels (local and global; seen here as oddly distinct rather than as part of a continuum) can contribute to each other. Finally, in an effort to make sure that knowledge generated is usable in the real world, Young proposes the concept of “institutional diagnostics.” Under this approach scholars would identify the important elements of environmental issues and associate them with the design implications of each of these conditions, in the hopes of creating more functional institutions for addressing global environmental change.

The call for a common structure that begins the book is important but difficult; careers are made in the social sciences by defining the terms, frameworks, and even the categories we use to think about the social and ecological phenomena we study. This book gives us new sets of categories with which to think about broad conceptual issues in the field. It remains unclear whether future scholars will want to abandon their own categories for this set.