

## Book Reviews

Low, Nicholas and Brendan Gleeson. 1998. *Justice, Society and Nature: An Exploration of Political Ecology*. London and New York: Routledge.

1999 Winner of the Harold and Margaret Sprout Award for the Best Book in the Area of International Environmental Affairs.

Reviewed by Karen T. Litfin.

This ambitious book tackles the big issues: the moral meaning of humanity's relationship with nature at the turn of the millennium; the prospects for a just sharing of the planet's resources in a world of inequity; and how global institutions should be reordered on the basis of those ethical insights. Though Nicholas Low and Brendan Gleeson have set their sights high, their work lives up to the reader's expectations. As they state at the outset, "For the first time since the beginning of modern science we are having to think morally about a relationship we had assumed was purely instrumental" (p. 1). *Justice, Society and Nature* represents a major contribution to this direly needed moral thinking.

Central to the argument is the distinction between environmental justice, or the just distribution of environmental goods among peoples, and ecological justice, or just relationships between humanity and the rest of the natural world. In articulating this distinction and refusing to ultimately privilege one over the other, Low and Gleeson move beyond the conventional (and by now tiresome) debates between social ecology and deep ecology. More important from a scholarly perspective, they root their analysis of environmental and ecological justice in the tradition of moral philosophy, drawing upon and critiquing the works of utilitarians, Kantians, contractarians, Marxists, feminist theorists, and post-modernists. One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is the authors' insistence upon an integral and synthetic approach. They are not primarily concerned with wrestling other theories to the ground; rather, they draw upon what is useful in each approach to their own formulation of a coherent understanding of environmental and ecological justice.

Following their synthetic approach, Low and Gleeson understand justice in fundamentally dialectical terms. Their conceptually rich notion of the "dialectic of justice" draws upon the creative tensions between nature and society, as well as between environmental and ecological justice. Moreover, they persistently reiterate that the achievement of justice is a continuing struggle, not a static accomplishment, and that the interplay of critique and debate is central to both the intellectual and the political formulation of justice.

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Despite the book's high level of philosophical abstraction, the authors' point of departure "is not the big picture of 'our common future', but examples of actual and public conflicts over the environment" (p. 3). Their theoretical claims are strongly grounded in real-world events. Throughout the book, they continually refer to three global environmental conflicts that occurred in 1995: the unsuccessful attempt by the Anglo-Dutch corporation, Shell, to sink one of its obsolete oil rigs in the North Atlantic; French underground nuclear testing in the Pacific atolls; and the mining of metallic ores in Papua New Guinea by an Australian transnational mining firm. These three cases demonstrate a number of important factors: the truly global nature of many environmental conflicts; the interplay of governments, corporations, NGOs, and indigenous communities; and the persistent impact of inequity on outcomes.

Perhaps the boldest and most controversial claim of the book is that real progress towards environmental and ecological justice will require some form of world government, not merely global governance. Given their clearly articulated concern for local communities throughout the book, the authors do not appear to be over-eager globalists. The primary justification for their position is that "as long as there is global capitalism—and a global market—there must be a countervailing power of similar scale to provide the aegis under which an environmentally and ecologically just society of societies . . . may gradually take shape" (p. 175). In other words, global governance already exists, but its effects are neither environmentally or ecologically just. While the authors are careful to address a range of potential criticisms, readers will need to assess for themselves the soundness of the defense. Whatever one's conclusion might be, one must admire both the willingness of Low and Gleeson to put forward such a visionary proposal as well as the intellectual appeal of their arguments.

Though the level of philosophical discourse is fairly sophisticated, the book is remarkably accessible even for those without a firm foundation in ethical philosophy. Having used the book successfully in two upper-level undergraduate courses, I have found that students can grasp the ideas with just a bit of explication. Indeed, they have been grateful for the opportunity to join Low and Gleeson in thinking big about big problems.

Lee, Yok-shiu F., and Alvin Y. So, eds. 1999. *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

2000 Winner of the Harold and Margaret Sprout Award for the Best Book in the Area of International Environmental Affairs.

Reviewed by Kate O'Neill and Stacy D. VanDeveer.

Lee & So's *Asia's Environmental Movements* is a valuable and welcome addition to the literature on international and comparative environmental politics.<sup>1</sup> This

1. This review draws on the deliberations of the 1999–2000 Sprout Prize Award Committee, whose members were Ken Conca, Philippe LePrestre, Kate O'Neill, Laura Strohm and Stacy VanDeveer.