Uncle Sam’s Green Imperialism

This book makes a valuable contribution to the study of international relations and global governance by demonstrating how domestic policies give rise to agreements and actions at the international level. In the cases presented here, DeSombre shows how attempts at internationalizing a domestic regulation are strongly conditioned by domestic political forces, specifically the fortuitous coincidence of interest between industry and environmentalists on particular issues. Both the content of regulatory efforts and the likely success of internationalization are determined by domestic political coalitions.

The book asks: when will a state push for internationalization of a domestic regulation and when are such efforts more likely to succeed? The push for internationalization comes from coalitions of industry and environmentalists. These coalitions are neither as strange nor as rare as one might think. Before a domestic regulation is adopted, industry and environmentalists are likely to be at odds, with industry favouring no regulation. However, once industry has tried and failed to block a regulation, its interests converge with those of environmentalists, who would like to see the regulation apply everywhere. Industry, trying to prevent a competitive disadvantage, will wish to see domestic regulation applied to other countries. The internationalization of such measures imposes regulatory costs on others or creates a larger world market for substitutes for a banned substance.

Internationalization is most likely to occur when it is advantageous to domestic US business groups, as well as American environmentalists. Such seemingly unlikely coalitions have been dubbed “Baptists and bootleggers” coalitions: during Prohibition, both of these groups were in favour of Prohibition but for completely different reasons. DeSombre notes that some business interests might lobby for successful internationalization, while having more to gain from the failure of such efforts. For example, the domestic tuna industry might well have preferred a ban on imports of dolphin unsafe tuna, rather than international adoption of dolphin safe fishing practices. DeSombre concludes that such coalitions are necessary but probably not sufficient for internationalization (p. 245).

The analysis focuses on attempted internationalization in three major areas of US environmental regulation: endangered species, air quality and fisheries conservation. Environmentalists were most important to the endangered species cases; industry to the fisheries conservation cases. Specifically, she examines the success of the US in exporting its regulatory measures to eliminate
whaling and to prevent deaths of dolphins in tuna fishing and turtles in the shrimp fishery. With regard to air quality, she examines attempts regarding the Clean Air Act, automobile emissions regulation and ozone depleting substances. In the area of fisheries, the regulation of driftnets and the tuna and salmon fisheries are examined.

DeSombre’s conclusions will have some environmentalists squirming in their sandals. This is not a Win-Win story or a happy tale of social learning through persuasion. The spread of these particular environmental regulations, to other countries, was driven largely by US threats of restricted market access. But for US imperialism, many more dolphins would die every year: “[s]tates adopt environmental regulations the United States is pushing internationally when they fear retaliation if they do not do so. Economic threats often underpin efforts at internationalization” (p. 12). States over which the US had the greatest market power were those most likely to comply.

The reader senses that DeSombre had to reconsider her view of the role of power in international environmental agreements. She notes “[t]hreats play a surprisingly large role in the issue areas examined here, in light of the general perception that environmental issues are low politics concerns and that everyone gains from environmental protection” (p. 247). Credible threats by the US were indispensable in the process, helping to “... create international environmental agreements, and [ensuring] full participation in, implementation of and compliance with those agreements” (p. 248).

The book has implications for other literatures and suggests some directions for future research. The broader literature on sanctions has generally found economic sanctions to be ineffective. The argument here is that the threat of sanctions is less credible if sanctions would harm the sender, as trade embargoes tend to do. The threat of these trade sanctions is credible because there are identifiable domestic constituencies that would reap gains from limiting imports. DeSombre also speculates that environmental economic sanctions might be more effective because the costs they impose are much more narrowly targeted than usual economic sanctions. It would be interesting to expand the application of the book’s research question beyond the US domestic focus. How do most international standards arise? How many existing international measures resulted from the internationalization of domestic measures?

On the whole, the book makes a substantial contribution to the study of international environmental policy. One minor quibble is that, despite the importance of market power and market access to the argument, the book virtually ignores David Vogel’s Trading Up, the first major work to link environmental lobbying, access to major markets and the spread of regulations.

Concluding on a practical note, DeSombre has some advice for activists wishing to “think globally, act locally.” Activists must recognize the nature of these Baptist and bootlegger coalitions and this recognition should inform the strategies they pursue, particularly, the policy remedies they seek. For example, in the case of preservation of turtles, a proposal to protect turtle nesting areas in-
stead of limiting turtle kills in shrimp fishing, would not have received support from the domestic industry and would not have been successfully exported to other countries. Policy measures that would put an American industry out of business will rob environmentalists of important allies.


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Green Parties in National Governments is a significant and timely undertaking. The book is an ambitious cross-national survey of the “luminaries” of Western European green parties: national green parties in Finland, Italy, France, Germany, and Belgium that have served as members in a national coalition government.

The editors, two notable experts in the study of green parties and politics in Western Europe, present a needed accounting of both the paths to participation in national governments and the broad effects of such participation. Each chapter is written by country experts, serving to enhance the quality of the information and analysis therein.

The book begins with a nice layout of four hypotheses relating the age, experience, and electoral success of a green party to its chances for success in a national government. These hypotheses are then revisited in the concluding chapter in a critical examination of those that were and were not supported by the country-specific case studies.

In selecting which countries were to be studied, the editors present a clear case selection rationale. They utilize the party lifespan approach, noting that small parties often have discrete phases in their development: party formation and declaration; party satisfaction of the state’s legal participation requirements; party representation in national parliaments; and party influence on government formation and government policies. The editors select all those parties that are able to influence government formation and policy outputs by way of governmental membership. The strength of such a method is that it accurately captures the continuous nature of Western European green party development, grounding the high level of success of the parties profiled in the book. A further benefit of selecting all countries that have crossed the uppermost threshold of influence is that this assures the inclusion of the under-studied, non-classical cases in Western European environmental politics, such as Finland, alongside the more traditional cases.

Finland, Italy, France, Germany, and Belgium thus represent a group selected on the dependent variable, presence in national government. While an explanation about the differences among parties in the different phases of the lifespan would have added to the general analysis and arguments about green parties in government, it is important to note that the book does present a near-