Western European environmental politics without explicitly accounting for the European Union? This book would have benefited from having a chapter or section devoted to such considerations. Much may happen in European Parliament elections—especially because the electoral rules may differ from national elections—that can set the stage for later events in national elections and governments. The omission of a significant discussion about the EU is particularly conspicuous in the face of many comments about the effects of sub-national elections and politics; clearly the authors are not oblivious to the importance and potential effects of actions and events in other political spheres.

These points notwithstanding, the book is an admirable and useful analysis of notable Western European green parties. This work is particularly important for its emphasis on the dynamic process of green parties shaping and being shaped by participation in national governments—a process that is likely to continue for some time to come. Those who study and teach topics related to Europe, environmental politics, political parties, and social movements will find the perspectives and details of this book a useful contribution to their work.


Reviewed by Anita Krajnc
Wilfrid Laurier University

Earth Summit 2002 is a must-read for those interested in reviewing the lack of progress in implementing Agenda 21 and the Rio conventions one decade later. A special feature of the book is its inclusion of 25 chapters by many of the major participants in the international environmental policy-making scene, including a chapter by Gro Harlem Brundlandt. Felix Dodds, the editor and co-chair of the NGO Steering Committee for the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, gives readers a glimpse into how key Rio commitments, such as the global bargain between North and South, unraveled. The book offers solid recommendations for changing course at Earth Summit 2, the high level ten-year review of Rio held in Johannesburg in September. Refreshingly, the cast of authors is from around the world—developed and developing countries, and the former Soviet Union—and from NGOs, unions, government, and business, though not academics (not a drawback in this case!).

The book serves as a useful follow-up to the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 report Our Common Future. Not only does it share a concern for sustainable development broadly defined, including its environmental, economic and social dimensions, it also has a deep concern for the injustices of the international economic order, and re-prioritizing environment and social equity issues on the international agenda. An obvious strength of book is its handling of North-South issues, such as financial aid, international trade and investment,
and overconsumption by the wealthy states, and its consistent treatment of these and other issues from sustainable development perspective.

The authors hold a clear consensus on one thing: the promises made at Rio were not kept. The flurry of activity at the international level in the 1990s should not be confused with effective action. Not only that, international economic policy moved in the wrong direction. For example, industrialized countries were supposed to provide US$125 billion per year in aid to help implement Agenda 21 in the South. This new and additional aid would have doubled 1992 aid levels and increased it to 0.7% of the GNP of industrialized countries, a target that was already agreed to in the 1970 report by the Pearson Commission. Instead, the five-year review of Rio at the UN General Assembly Special Session in 1997 was a dismal failure after OECD countries reduced their official development assistance (ODA) to 0.22% of GNP in 1997, falling from 0.33 in 1992 (pp. 138–9). Fortunately, many donors have begun to reverse their decline in ODA since then.

What is different from the Brundtland Commission though, is a heavy focus on the damaging effects of international trade and investment regimes which seem to entirely exclude environmental and social equity concerns. The book contains some of the best critiques of neo-liberal globalization I have seen. A particularly brilliant piece in the collection is an article on “The Titanic Transnationals” by Jagjit Kaur Plahe and Pieter van der Gaag. They point out the myths, flaws, and double standards in the free market/voluntary approach ideology. There is a dual international policy-making system in which WTO commitments are enforced but not the rights of people and the environment. There is a lack of international regulation of transnational corporations, even in the areas of anti-trust laws and competition policy as well as treaties to ensure corporate accountability and responsibility (thus creating a democratic deficit). They propose that, contrary to the less government mantra of neo-conservatives, “Governments have a role to play, and this role must be as far reaching as is needed to achieve sustainability. A truly inclusive participatory approach to decision-making will aid governments in setting those priorities highest that most benefits all members of society” (p. 240).

Barbara Bramble (an environmental lawyer who helped organized the International NGO Forum at Rio) argues that the liberalization of trade and investment and privatization occurred much too fast for the South, its workers and the environment, to benefit from the process. Financial aid should be provided to disadvantaged states to help them promote the necessary institution-building (that is, capacity-building of government and civil society) first, including ensuring the rule of law, safe working conditions and the enforcement of anti-pollution laws. Bramble would like to see the advocates of neo-liberal globalization in industrialized countries and Bretton Woods institutions “recognize how inappropriate is the tone of ideology, or theology if you will, that has characterized their belief in open trade and investment regimes to solve all ills”
and “admit to the downside of their ideology” (p. 151 and 145). Structural adjustment programs and the wildly fluctuating modern ‘global casino’ economy have only served to increase the gap between the richest and poorest fifth of the world’s population by from a ratio of 30:1 in 1960 to over 70:1 today.

Many of the articles in the volume suffer from the same anthropocentrism of the Brundtland Commission. For example, in the fish chapter, John Gummer treats us to a typical exclusionary moral oversight: “We are not saving the fish for them to die at a ripe old age” (the author also fails to mention the fact that other species depend on fish too) (p. 286). A wonderful exception is a chapter on the People’s Earth Charter, by Maximo Kalaw (the Executive Director of the Earth Council). The Earth Charter campaign, launched by the Earth Council and Green Cross International in 1994, has been working on a people’s treaty with shared values and global ethics founded on “respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace” (from the Preamble). It produced a second Benchmark Draft Earth Chapter in April 1999 [available at www.earthcharter.org] detailing 16 progressive main principles and dozens of supporting principles. For example: “Principle 15. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration. 15a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering. 15b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged or avoidable suffering” (p. 94). The Earth Charter campaign hopes to circulate the document worldwide and attain the UN General Assembly’s endorsement of the Earth Charter by 2002.

Several of the articles, particular in the first part of the book, are so general and full of platitudes that reading them is difficult and mind-numbing—it feels a bit like eating sawdust! The book however, quickly picks up steam, covering a great variety of issues, often creatively, including cross-sectoral issues, such as financial aid, institutional reform (proposals to create a new World Environment Organization), the role of government, cities, and multi-stakeholder cooperation, and a series of case studies on freshwater, energy, fish, tourism among other topics. The book would serve as an engaging course text for global environmental politics and, where it is really needed, global political economy.