Our understanding of international relations is greatly enhanced by recognizing the power of words, ideas, norms, and discourse in determining outcomes in the global arena. While we have long recognized how interests change when economic factors change, we have only begun to understand how interests can be reshaped by the emergence of new ideas that do not rest upon economic calculations. If actors can recalculate interests to include non-material gains such as moral and ethical “right-doing,” there is much hope to coordinate actions in the global commons along common frames of understanding. The Power of Words in International Relations challenges mainstream IR theories and demonstrates how social power is redefining global politics. In this way, Epstein’s book breaks new ground and clears a path for further study of the ways in which ideational forces can overwhelm the power of material forces in the realm of international relations.


Reviewed by Kate J. Neville
University of British Columbia

Telling an “atypical story about environmental law in a developing country” (p. 2), Lesley McAllister details the process of institutional reform in Brazil through the 1980s and 1990s that led to the meaningful enforcement of environmental law and the strengthening of the rule of law. Grounded in a detailed and careful comparative study of environmental prosecution agencies in two Brazilian states, São Paulo and Pará, McAllister’s analysis speaks to a broad audience of legal and political scholars interested in better understanding the role of legal institutions in environmental protection.

The implications of McAllister’s analysis are not restricted to an understanding of the legal environment in Brazil. She suggests that other developing countries, particularly in Latin America, “with substantial but underenforced legal frameworks for environmental protection” should consider Brazilian prosecution agencies as models for their own institutional reform (p. 196). This account of environmental law enforcement has implications for understanding societal order more generally. McAllister contends that the rule of law is eroded when environmental law-breaking goes unpunished, and, similarly, that making environmental law more effective contributes to constructing the rule of law generally.

McAllister sketches the framework for her study in the first chapter, and delves into the central arguments, supported by rich detail from her fieldwork, in the subsequent chapters. Her arguments about the increased effectiveness of environmental law enforcement in Brazil are supported by evidence gathered from a range of sources, including archival research, interviews, and participant-observation from several months spent in internships in relevant legal agencies in Brazil.
Until the 1980s, Brazilian environmental agencies had little capacity to enforce and implement the environmental laws that were on the books; the presence of these strong laws and weak regulatory agencies provided space in which legal actors—judges and prosecutors—could take an active role in implementing environmental law. McAllister suggests that it is a puzzle that prosecutors act like environmental advocates and do well at it, and consequently traces out the process through which this became possible in Brazil. Specifically, the prosecutorial organization, the Ministério Público, was able to gain independence from the executive and from regulatory agencies, and develop a professional and capable staff by offering competitive salaries and prestigious status. Its independence allowed the agency to prosecute all violators of environmental law, reducing the ability of the wealthy and politically powerful, including the federal environmental agency, IBAMA, to get around the law. This equal application of the law contributed to increased credibility of environmental law, and to the perception of legal mechanisms as meaningful channels for challenging environmental degradation.

Rather than offering a simplified account of the organizational changes, McAllister is sensitive to multiple intersecting factors. The book's third chapter examines legislative and constitutional amendments, including the Public Civil Action Law, as well as the internal institution-building efforts of the Ministério Público, to account for its increased managerial and budgetary independence from the executive and the judiciary. Along with institutional changes, the explanation includes strong and organized leadership within the Ministério, as well as timing, particularly in terms of the emphasis on democratic and legal reform following the fall of the military dictatorship.

Well-placed excerpts from interviews help ground McAllister's explanations in concrete examples, and provide context for her assessment. She considers contradictory evidence, where prosecution agencies fail to act effectively in law enforcement; specifically, she assesses state and federal level divisions of the Ministério Público. She finds that the federal level agency in Pará has greater political independence and financial autonomy—and greater success—than its state level counterpart, and that it resembles the state agency in São Paulo, which also has had success in law enforcement. In these different social and political contexts across states, McAllister makes a convincing case that the institutional structures of the prosecution agencies influence their levels of effectiveness, while still recognizing the role of a supportive local government in facilitating (or hindering) that independence.

For readers interested in institutional reforms for legal effectiveness, McAllister's account of the prosecution's role is compelling; those more interested in environmental outcomes, however, may be left wondering whether increased enforcement leads to protection for the most vulnerable ecosystems. McAllister comments, for instance, that “prosecutors often filed public civil actions regarding relatively little harm” (p. 163), and paraphrases the frustration of one prosecutor, who, “unable to resolve the unsolvable problems and constantly dealing with insignificant problems . . . questioned the effectiveness of
his work” (p. 163). Nonetheless, McAllister suggests that prosecutors can promote more stringent enforcement of laws through oversight of environmental regulatory bodies, which might support the enforcement of environmental legislation for more pressing problems.

Countering the assertion that developing countries are not ready for rigorous environmental law, McAllister presents this study as a model for the establishment of meaningful environmental regulation and law. Brazil’s experiences show that legal enforcement can enhance regulatory effectiveness in a context where regulatory authority is historically weak. Although legalistic mechanisms have drawbacks, which McAllister carefully assesses, she suggests that prosecutorial institutions are a way to make justice accessible to citizens and, more importantly, for the law to be meaningful to them. A persuasive and highly original contribution to the field, *Making Law Matter* has analytic value for understanding a surprising case of legal effectiveness and institutional reform, and offers an optimistic perspective on the possibility for strengthening environmental protection through national law.


Reviewed by Steve Vanderheiden
University of Colorado

Speth is no stranger to the American environmental movement, and his 2004 *Red Sky at Morning* directed trenchant criticism at the recent ineffectiveness of that movement, reserving its harshest judgment for the United States’ abject failure to lead in developing policy responses to global issues like climate change and biodiversity protection. In this book he promises to “go beyond” the state-centric and institutional capacity-building focus of *Red Sky* and “take a deeper and harder look at underlying forces and needed corrections” (p. xvi). Recognizing that law and institutions are often the servants of the norms that shape environmental values and behavior rather than being their masters, Speth delivers on that promise in a work that embodies his wide-ranging knowledge and experience as a leading insider, critic, and scholar of contemporary environmentalism. Perhaps no one is better equipped to diagnose the ills plaguing the movement. And no book in recent memory better synthesizes critical assessments of the political and economic obstacles to a sustainable society. Speth provides a normative vision of a better world and blends the policy realism of a frustrated activist with the optimism of a utopian whose faith in the transformative potential of good ideas remains unshaken.

In contrast with his earlier book, the problem here is not so much the United States as it is *us*—those educated and well-meaning readers who are often uncomfortably cognizant of our environmental impacts and want to do better, but who remain stuck in an economic system that stymies these ambi-