

Book Reviews

Agyeman, Julian, and Yelena Ogneva-Himmelberger, eds. 2009. *Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.

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In a recent special issue of *Slavic Review*, Zsuzsa Gille laments the paucity of social science and humanities scholarship on environmental issues in postsocialist eastern Europe. Not only are such studies few in number—by Gille’s count, the two major area-studies journals had between them published only five articles on “nature, environmental problems, or environmental politics”—but they are, with few exceptions, “untouched by the theoretical sophistication and methodological rigor that increasingly accrue to research on” other aspects of postsocialist society and politics, or to most environmental studies scholarship these days.¹ *Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union* beefs up the quantitative dimension of this reckoning, but it largely fails to break free from the pattern of theoretical weakness.

The editors—Julian Agyeman, a professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts, and Yelena Ogneva-Himmelberger, a GIS specialist at Clark University—are centrally concerned with the relationships between “brown” and “green” agendas in environmental activism. Drawing on Agyeman’s earlier work, they note that environmental movements can be mapped along a spectrum from environmental justice, with its anthropocentric focus on inequity in the distribution of environmental “bads,” at one end, to the more ecocentric sustainable development agenda at the other. Bridging these poles are two “middle way” agendas: “human security” and “just sustainability,” which integrate concerns for quality of life, intra- and intergenerational equity, and ecosystem limits. This volume aims to explore how these dynamics are playing out in the Soviet successor states following the collapse of communism. Specifically, the editors ask, “1. To what extent are increased popular environmental awareness and associated activism driving public policy and planning in the former Soviet republics? 2. Are there emergent, separate brown . . . and green . . . agendas or are these joining together in a single just sustainability or human security agenda?” (p. 4). More speculatively, the editors wonder “what shape, focus, and trajectory . . . activism and public policy and planning” might take in the region (p. 5).

The volume’s ten substantive chapters examine six post-Soviet countries: five chapters on Russia and one each on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Es-

1. Gille 2009, 1, 4.

tonia, and Latvia. The findings are unsurprising for observers of post-Soviet politics. Thanks to the weakness of civil society and democratization there is little public participation in policymaking, and environmental concerns are given short shrift. (The situation is somewhat more favorable in the two western-oriented Baltic states). Among environmental groups throughout the region, the green agenda overwhelmingly dominates over the brown, and “there seem to be very few organizations that deliberately meld the [two] . . . platforms into a middle-way just sustainability/human security approach” (p. 9). Given these negative findings, one wonders whether the book might have been more fruitfully framed around a different set of questions, tailored more specifically to the post-Soviet context. As it is, some of the authors seem to be straining to fit their material into the green/brown framework, and the editors’ speculative question about possible future trajectories gives rise to platitudinous musings at the conclusion of several chapters.

While all of the contributors address environmental sustainability in some form or another, six focus directly on environmental justice issues, which in the former Soviet Union largely “revolve around the industrial development and transportation of valuable natural resources—mainly fossil fuels, gold, diamonds, other mineral resources, and timber” (p. 22). Brian Donohoe demonstrates how indigenous people’s rights to land and resources in Russia have been violated through manipulations of the legal system in the Putin era. Several authors provide local case studies of resource extraction: oil drilling on Sakhalin Island in Russia’s far east and in Berezovka, Kazakhstan; the proposed construction of oil pipelines near Lake Baikal in Siberia; and diamond mining in the Sakha Republic in Russia’s far north. The chapter on Tajikistan focuses on human security; in this overwhelmingly poor and rural central Asian country, certain groups—cotton farmers, households headed by single women (a category enlarged by years of civil war), and residents of a remote, mountainous province—have especially limited access to natural capital.

The primary weakness of the volume is, as noted above, its undertheorization. There are a few notable exceptions: Donohoe makes effective use of John Comaroff’s notion of “lawfare” and of theories of indigeneity;² Laura Henry draws on Tarrow and on Keck and Sikkink³ in theorizing Russia’s environmental movements; and Jessica Graybill invokes a *mélange* of concepts—environmentality, the “politics of signification,” identity formation—to explore the construction and contestation of discourses of sustainability on Sakhalin Island. The remaining chapters, however, are largely descriptive. Even so, the volume makes a valuable contribution to the field of post-Soviet environmental studies by adding to the minimal stock of empirical knowledge, particularly on the less-studied regions of central Asia and the Russian peripheries. The book’s greatest strength is the impressive empirical richness, often derived from extensive quali-

2. Comaroff 2001.

3. Tarrow 1998; and Keck and Sikkink 1998.

tative field research, of most of the chapters. By shedding light on the interplay of extractive resources, authoritarian states, transnational corporations, and grassroots actors in a little-known region of the former “Second World,” this book will be of interest to students of environmental justice, environmental mobilization, and political ecology.

References

- Comaroff, John L. 2001. Colonialism, Culture, and the Law: A Forward. *Law and Social Inquiry* 26 (2): 305–314.
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- Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Henry, Laura A. 2010. *Red to Green: Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

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In *Red to Green: Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia*, Laura A. Henry has made a fine contribution to studies of the reciprocal influence of environmentalism and civil society. A number of previous studies have used environmental organizations and social movements as case studies for the formation of civil society and its influence on the political process. This approach is complemented by the widely held view among left-environmentalists that participatory democracy is an essential component of, or even a necessary condition for, a truly “green” society.

This interconnection is especially prevalent in accounts of environmentalism and the collapse of communism. The now-familiar narrative shows how the widespread environmental damage wrought by Soviet-style Communism helped mobilize mass protests and participation once Gorbachev’s *glasnost* had permitted such things. Calls for improved environmental conditions quickly merged with calls for transforming the system that had created such damage, ultimately leading to the collapse of communism across Europe. In the immediate aftermath of this collapse, environmental organizations received large amounts of western aid, both to battle environmental damage and to further strengthen civil society. Unfortunately, the subsequent economic collapse lessened both environmental concern and citizens’ political mobilization. Finally, a number of re-consolidating post-Communist states (especially Russia under Putin) increasingly viewed environmentalism as a threat to their economic policies and civil society as a challenge to their authority and made efforts to restrict both.