

Book Reviews

Steinberg, Paul. 2015. *Who Rules the Earth? How Social Rules Shape Our Planet and Our Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Heike Schroeder

University of East Anglia

With *Who Rules the Earth?* Paul Steinberg produces a highly readable and engaging narrative that evokes an urgent question: what would it take to move the world onto a more sustainable path? Quite simply, change the rules, he argues throughout his book. And to be able to change the rules, one must first become aware of them, and recognize their powerful force. The book is targeted at, as he puts it, “intelligent readers who are concerned about the environment and eager to learn what can be done” about it (p. 6). It is rich and colorful, minutely researched and practical, and inspiring in its tone. Through vivid storytelling Steinberg sharpens the reader’s perception of the immaterial and invisible, yet influential, web of rules that penetrate the surface of the Earth and determine relations of power among humans and their effects on the natural environment. Refreshingly, he leaves aside much of the institutional jargon that is endemic in academic conversation.

In 279 pages, Steinberg takes his reader on an insightful expedition across the planet. He traces the flight path of the endangered cerulean warbler from Peru to West Virginia to illustrate the power of property rights (to know who rules the earth, we must “understand who owns it,” 66). Property rights also play out in the lack of rules governing the market in many developing countries. Legal proof of property is so difficult to obtain that most businesses operate outside the law, making it impossible for them to secure loans or expand their businesses, and ultimately to “enjoy the fruits of economic growth” (103).

Early in the book, Steinberg leads the reader to the small town of Hudson, Quebec, Canada, where Doctor June Irwin discovered that many ailments of her patients (particularly children) could be traced to pesticide residue in their blood, leading her to convince local regulators to create rules banning non-essential pesticide use in urban spaces. Other local communities across Canada soon followed suit. Having lost the fight in Canada, pesticide manufacturers crossed the border to the United States to prevent the same outcome from taking shape there, and got most U.S. states to adopt preemption rules forbidding local control of pesticide use. This story illuminates the power of an individual to change the rules in such far-reaching and influential ways.

Another highlight of the book is traveling deep into the heart and soul of Europe and meeting a man, originally from Cognac on the French Atlantic

coast, who is today renowned for his role as one of the founding fathers of the European Union, Jean Monnet. An introspection into how he came to see the world the way he did provides a gripping account of how he came to believe so deeply in bringing European countries toward an “ever closer union.” Without his conviction—and without his failure to secure himself a ticket for the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*, in fact—life in Europe would likely be very different today. Of course, other important architects would deserve such vivid chronicling as well, in particular Robert Schuman, but the point that rules matter is made loud and clear.

After this tour de force on European integration, the reader is taken in the opposite direction—decentralization, a strengthening of local government, and a move to deliver power into the hands of local actors. In many cases, this comes in the form of tactical maneuvers on the part of national actors in response to systems in crisis. Multiple short stories illustrate the ways in which there is no magic bullet in the end, and decentralization merely increases the variability of local environmental outcomes. In any case, many examples illustrate that local decisions are never truly local; they are embedded in larger national and international structures, much like Chinese boxes, each fitting inside another.

Not all rules are created equal, however. Alongside rules designed to effect substantive outcomes in the world, such as the US Endangered Species Act, there are so-called “super rules.” They govern the rulemaking process itself. For example, to enact the Endangered Species Act, approval was needed from the president and a majority of each chamber of Congress. In the words of Steinberg, super rules are “rules that govern rulemaking” (247), and thereby “determine what methods we have at our disposal for bringing about change in the world” (246). Super rules determine, for example, whether green parties have a better chance to enter government in Germany or the United States. Different election laws in the two countries result in an outcome where in Germany proportional representation means that the numbers of parliamentary seats more or less represent the proportional voting turnout for any given party. In the United States, on the other hand, the winner-takes-all voting method pretty much enshrines a two-party system where a green party vote will be seen as a lost vote.

The book ends with eight principles for action to change the world (one rule at a time, of course). Briefly summarized, they include exhortations to be a rule challenger, even in the smallest of ways; forge collaborations that turn research into practice; build unconventional coalitions; create value by bringing opposing agendas closer together; learn from successes and failures elsewhere; cultivate process expertise, which is all about the “how”; think vertically; and finally, keep recycling (anyway). The take-home message Steinberg conveys is that, while recycling a can is good, individual action is most meaningful when it results in a change of rules.