



## Book Review

*Saving the Sacred Sea: The Power of Civil Society in an Age of Authoritarianism and Globalization.* Kate Pride Brown. 2018. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 246 pages, ISBN 978-0-1906-6094-9. Paper (\$34.95)

**Reviewed by Salvatore Babones**

*University of Sydney*

[salvatore.babones@sydney.edu.au](mailto:salvatore.babones@sydney.edu.au)

When the ancient Roman lawyer Pliny the Younger served as governor of the province of Bithynia, he wanted to create a volunteer fire brigade in his capital city of Nicomedia, modern-day Izmit in northwestern Turkey. He wrote to the emperor, Trajan, for permission—and was refused. Trajan replied that any form of civic organization, no matter how noble the purpose, could become a nucleus for political agitation. The emperor preferred that Nicomedia be allowed to burn rather than enabled to revolt.

Fast forward 1900 years, substitute Vladimir Putin for the emperor Trajan and environmental preservation for fire-fighting, and not much has changed in authoritarian regimes' aversion to civil society.

In *Saving the Sacred Sea: The Power of Civil Society in an Age of Authoritarianism and Globalization*, Kate Pride Brown uses a case study of environmental organizing in Siberia (of all places) to develop an innovative approach to theorizing the operation of civil society under authoritarian regimes. In a novel application of field theory, she models civil society as one among several major actors in the “meta-field” of power. In Brown's analysis, power is a meta-field because it is a generalized field in which “the stakes of activity are not confined to any particular outcome in any particular field” (11). Civil society contends in the meta-field of power with and against economic and state actors.



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Brown argues that each of the three contenders in the meta-field of power possesses its own “meta-power” or “generalizable power source” (11). The meta-power of the state is legal power; that of the corporate elite, money; and, that of civil society, variously “human beings,” “virtue,” “worthiness,” or “civil power” (12). Each of these powers is most effectively, though not exclusively, wielded by its particular class of actor. Brown makes this abstract theory concrete by examining the use of each of the three meta-powers by state, corporate, and civil society actors in the somewhat exotic arena of the battle for the environmental resources of Lake Baikal—the “Sacred Sea” of her book's title.

Lake Baikal is by far the largest reserve of unfrozen fresh water on Earth, and famous for its (almost) pristine environment. Brown reports that it holds a special place in the environmental imagination of Russia. It was declared the country's first state nature preserve in 1917, in the midst of the First World War, and was a focal point of the limited environmental activism permitted by the Soviet Union. The Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) campaign of the mid-1980s created an opening for environmental activism in civil society, and an early trigger for Russia's renewed environmental activism was a 1986 mass die-off of the *nerpa*, a freshwater seal that is unique to Lake Baikal.

Brown's fascinating fieldwork in Irkutsk (the regional capital) and the environs of Lake Baikal consisted mainly of participant observation with a variety of civil society environmental organizations, supplemented by archival research and interviews in Moscow and the United States. She mined her interviews, her observations, and her experiences to come to a better understanding of how the relationships among civil society actors, corporations, and the state evolved as Vladimir Putin consolidated his power, and the nature of the Russian economy shifted from an oligarchical “Wild East” to a state-capitalist new normalcy. Over this period, environmental civil society organizations used their virtue power sometimes in opposition to the state and sometimes in cooperation with it. And they have moved from being almost entirely opposed to the corporate sector to cooperating with corporations eager to establish their corporate social responsibility (CSR) bona fides.

But *Saving the Sacred Sea* is ultimately a book about field theory, not a book about Russian environmentalism or post-communist transition politics. As a book on field theory, it is provocative but messy. Brown's theoretical framework is striking and original, and well worth elaborating, but it does not find adequate elaboration in this book. Moreover, Brown repeatedly switches terminology. While she is relatively consistent in treating the power of the state, she ascribes “economic” or “financial” power variously to “corporations,” “oligarchs,” and the “corporate elite.” Similarly, the variability of the terms used by Brown to characterize the meta-power of civil society has been noted above. These terminological shifts are not explained in the book; indeed, they seem not to have been considered at all.

As a result, *Saving the Sacred Sea* is an almost-masterpiece: impressive in theoretical scope and empirical detail, it lacks the cohesion that could have made it a touchstone work at the intersection of field theory and civil society. It may be faint praise to say that a book ‘could have been an instant classic,’ but *Saving the Sacred Sea* falls only just short of that benchmark.

Eminently readable and well worth reading, it is still the kind of book that could be assigned to graduate students as an aspirational example of what thesis research can produce. By any standard, it is an extraordinarily effective first book.