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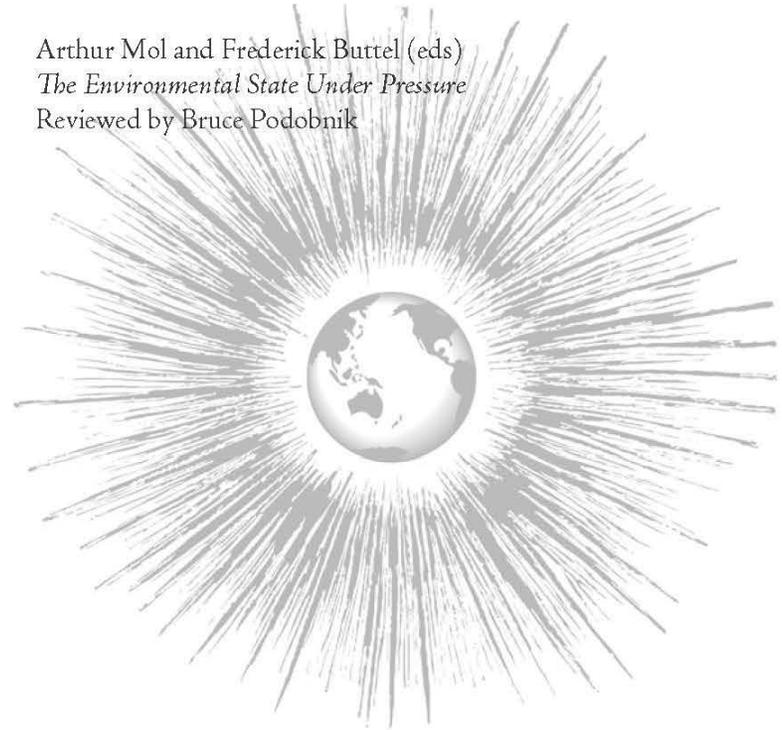
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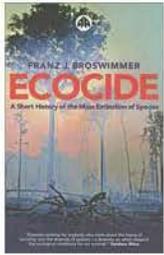
Franz J. Broswimmer
Ecocide: A Short History of Mass Extinction of Species
Reviewed by Florencio R. Riguera

Arthur Mol and Frederick Buttel (eds)
The Environmental State Under Pressure
Reviewed by Bruce Podobnik



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Brosimmer, Franz J. 2001. *Ecocide: A Short History of Mass Extinction of Species*. London: Pluto Press. 204 pages, ISBN 0-7453-1935-1 (cloth), ISBN 0-7453-1934-3 (paper). <http://www.plutobooks.com/>



Ecocide calls attention to the threat of unsustainable relationships between humans and the environment, and argues for the need to respect the limits the carrying capacity of the latter imposes. Humans depend on the environment; and degrading it is ultimately harmful to them. The book employs an interdisciplinary approach—utilizing materials from both the natural and the social sciences. It thus covers a broad range of mechanisms that have environmental degradation among their consequences. This brief story of mass extinction of species comes through with illustrative cases of societies in antiquity that ended up overshooting the carrying capacity of their environment.

However, Brosimmer correctly focuses on the fact that environmental conditions result from the actions of human populations in different areas of the globe in different periods. He shows that the current trend of accelerated mass extinction and loss of biodiversity is traceable to the capacity of humans for culture (that is, intelligence and language) along with the emergence of the system of capitalism. Intelligence and communication made learning feasible and enabled societies to solve their problems. But the experience also led to an attitude that held the environment as an unlimited resource. Under capitalism, resources would be utilized to realize profit, and the tendency was to externalize costs.

This drives the point that actions of human populations are socially organized. To understand the link between said actions and environmental degradation, one needs to look into the goals earlier societies pursued; the implements or technologies they employed; or the division of labor they followed. These can serve as the backdrop against which one may appraise the current environmental situation. The consequences of human actions in terms of environmental degradation may not be disregarded.

These actions need not directly intend to destroy a human ecosystem—Brosimmer extends the understanding of “ecocide” so that it includes actions or arrangements that as much as allow or just facilitate environmental degradation. This broadened understanding is useful for identifying decision points as well as for constructing a discourse in dealing with the human-environment relationship. The task is to ensure a balance between resource utilization and sustainability. There is a trend of accelerated mass extinction of species and loss of biodiversity—*Ecocide* provides tables of data that illustrate likely trajectories

toward environmental degradation. Nevertheless, there is hope. The impending catastrophe can be averted if societies devise and implement measures that respect the environment. And these measures are very likely to impact current patterns of production and consumption. More importantly, the measures would also entail a revised understanding of interest between societies on the globe.

In the present global context, it is necessary to take into account the operations of large transnational corporations, which have the ability to influence policies or arrangements between nation-states. These have an effect on the trading of new products to other populations, or, on the dumping of toxic waste somewhere in the environment. Through policies traceable to nation-states, poorer nations can be pushed to exploit their resources—with costs to the environment—say, in efforts to repay their debt. Mechanized warfare is another factor that deserves attention. The use of toxic materials to pursue military objectives can jeopardize non-combatant populations in the long run. Of course, destruction of the environment on which the opposing side depends for its resources can be directly intended in warfare. In addition, because of the inherent competition between nation-states for dominance in the global arena, *Ecocide* contends that the system of nation-states ultimately have harmful effects on the environment.

However, when *Ecocide* offers the alternative of ecological democracy and visualizes an equitable global commons to avert human-induced ecocide one can raise questions on the feasibility of implementing the proposed vision. Under ecological democracy, individuals and communities must participate in the formulation of measures/policies that affect their lives, and their participatory rights must be safeguarded. Humans must also take into account the interest of other creatures—a view that opposes treating the environment simply as a resource. The book rightly recognizes the role of social movements in exposing otherwise invisible mechanisms that lead to environmental degradation. But social movements usually articulate their claims ultimately to nation-states. And when they succeed in persuading communities or publics, the latter are expected to influence the policies managed by nation-states. Hence, the system of nation-states is not willy-nilly harmful to the environment—it is a matter of crafting and implementing appropriate policies.

The project of an equitable global commons also needs the participation of nation-states—at least, in the interim. The current debate on the patenting of indigenous knowledge calls attention to differences in power between nation states. When an alternative system of governance is in place, there will still be the issue of whether or not developing nations must follow the path taken by the developed nations. Brosimmer sees some solution in less-damaging technologies going from the developed nations to developing nations. This apparently does not question the benefits of technological development. Nevertheless, one

can ask—what of ideas going the other direction? When the developing nations participate in ecological democratic processes, is there no possibility that views and values from the periphery could offer a critique of some of those in the core? Questions like these can put the ratchet-effect in relation to what levels of efficiency or comfort populations in the developed countries might not be willing to part with.

If a sustainable environment should have a role in the devising of ways to guide human populations in dealing with their immediate environment it is inevitable to have an understanding of how other populations would like to deal with their own immediate environment. The developed nations wield considerable power in the design of global arrangements. But it is important to ensure that the substance of these arrangements promote goals that take environmental linkages into account. The project is one of choosing what goals to pursue in a global context—and how to define these goals in a shared environment.

Ecocide organizes a huge body of current information and perspectives on the environment. It links various discourses to the problem of an impending ecocide—broadly understood. And it candidly drives home the point of a long-term perspective is imperative to arrest the trend toward ecocide. It brings to the foreground the underlying complex links through which societies end up degrading the environment. Its theme and its message are persuasive and easy to grasp. Brosimmer thus provides a useful educational tool in *Ecocide*.

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Arthur Mol and Frederick Buttel (eds). *The Environmental State Under Pressure*. Amsterdam and Boston: JAI, 2002, viii + 267 pages, ISBN 0-7623-0854-0 (cloth). <http://www.elsevier.com>

The last thirty years have witnessed the rise and partial demise of state-based efforts to protect the environment at local, national, and international levels. As described in the useful collection of articles published in this volume, the 1960s witnessed the emergence of agencies within core nations as well as within some nations in non-core regions that were endowed with broad legal and regulatory authority to protect specific ecosystems from irreparable degradation. Since the 1980s, however, these 'environmental states' have come under sustained attack, first by individual governments that pushed deregulation and market-based

regulatory approaches, and then by pressures exerted by corporate forms of globalization. As demonstrated in *The Environmental State*, the result has been a general weakening of state-based efforts to protect ecosystems.

The volume examines the new challenges facing the environmental state by gathering together a diverse set of theoretically-driven or case-study analyses. In many respects, the strength of the volume lies in its theoretical and geographic heterogeneity. The volume begins with chapters that sketch out two different theoretical interpretations of the shifting fortunes of the environmental state: the treadmill of production approach (summarized in the book by Schnaiberg, Pellow, and Weinberg), and the ecological modernization perspective (summarized by Mol and Spaargaren). These chapters highlight the divergent lessons that can be drawn from recent changes in the efficacy of state-based approaches to environmental reform. Whereas the treadmill of production perspective argues that capitalist states have never sufficiently prioritized ecological sustainability, the ecological modernization maintains that possibilities exist to construct states that are supportive of both market accumulation and ecological protection. A number of the analyses that follow these opening essays touch, explicitly or implicitly, on this debate between more and less dire interpretations of the relationship between markets and ecological degradation. The subsequent chapters also find authors drawing on theoretical lessons from Habermas, Giddens, and Foucault to interpret the changing nature of the environmental state.

In addition to its theoretical diversity, the volume does an impressive job of presenting analyses from across the world. Chapters address the evolution of state-based environmental policies in the United States, Finland, Portugal, the Netherlands, Cameroon, Tanzania, China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Russia. Of particular interest is the chapter by Jokinen, which explores the emergence of the 'suprastate' of the European Union and its impact on environmental policy making in Finland. Here we have an opportunity to see how the consolidation of a regional political authority is influencing policies carried out within a specific nation. All of the case-studies are richly detailed, and raise intriguing questions about the viability of state-based environmental regulation in this era of advancing markets and corporate-driven forms of globalization. World-systems scholars will particularly appreciate this volume for its extensive treatment of events in the non-core world.

While *The Environmental State* provides an impressively diverse set of chapters, the editors make little attempt to draw general lessons from their broad collection of studies. The introductory chapter by Mol and Buttel highlights key dilemmas facing state-based approaches to environmental regulation, and briefly reviews the articles in the volume. The editors point out that the case studies do not try to verify or falsify the treadmill of production or ecological

modernization perspectives; instead, the authors in the volume show the partial relevance of each approach. There is no concluding essay either, which would certainly have been useful in placing the various cases into a broader perspective. The message that emerges from the volume by default is that complex dynamics are taking place in locales across the world, and that the environmental state is being undermined by a variety of different factors. Specific market dynamics are shown to have been partially reformed in certain areas, but market dynamics are also shown to be encouraging ecological degradation in other regions. A stronger concluding position should have been taken by the editors on the extent to which markets can be reformed, through state intervention, on local, regional, and global levels.

Readers schooled in the world-systems perspective are likely to be left with many unanswered questions after having read this collection of studies. Given that virtually every case study demonstrates the declining efficacy of national-level, state-based environmental regulation, what might be a potential alternative? Do the studies as a whole suggest we place our hope in something like a global environmental state that might implement more effective environmental regulation? Or do the studies suggest instead that the national environmental state will continue to wither, and capitalist dynamics will gain further freedom to disrupt ecosystems? Discussion of these large issues would have strengthened what is a still useful and diverse compendium of studies.

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