

Review

IDLE PONDERING ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Paul R. Josephson, *Resources under Regimes: Technology, Environment, and the State* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 269 pp., ISBN: 0-674-01499-5, \$39.95

Even the most prestigious publishing houses are currently working under great financial stress. As a result, they are increasingly reaching out to that mysterious being, the ‘general reader’, in the hope of balancing their budget sheets. This can now and then generate remarkable academic works that stimulate important public and scholarly discussions. More often the result is the opposite, as *Resources under Regimes* illustrates.

Using historical and political analysis, Paul Josephson attempts to determine the strengths and weaknesses of resource management under democratic, authoritarian, and post-colonial regimes. However, rather than offering a stimulating argument on this important subject, he is content merely to ‘raise questions to set readers thinking’ and point out ‘where the reader can find his or her own answers’ to questions about environmental history, which he then ‘ask[s] readers to ponder’ (p. 2). One might have expected Josephson to do a bit more pondering himself. Admittedly, he is prepared to argue that ‘technology is inherently political’, ‘that large-scale development projects will usually be more costly and have more irreversible impacts than small’, and ‘that both authoritarian ... and postcolonial regimes are ill equipped to deal with the problems of sustainable development’ (pp. 21–22). These three unexceptional statements – there were no references to anyone disagreeing with them – serve as the chief theses of his book.

Josephson starts with examples of various environmental problems, such as chemical, nuclear, and agricultural pollution. He doubts whether research on pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers ‘benefit[s] the consumer, the small farmer, or the agribusiness’

(p. 14). He then footnotes Jim Hightower's book, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* from 1978, important when it first appeared, but hardly helpful today. Indeed, about a third of Josephson's references are to material published in the 1970s. 'Recent studies' include a book from 1994 (p. 78, note 75), despite an avalanche of publications during the next decade. Josephson's book is already out of date.

Josephson next discusses modern democratic regimes. He argues that pluralist governments regulate production and consumption for environmental outcomes more successfully than authoritarian and post-colonial regimes. Leaning heavily on the work of Samuel Hays and Donald Worster, Josephson discusses tensions between the USA's environmental managerial traditions and its democratic values. He cites as an example of successful management the St. Paul flood control project on the Mississippi River. His chief source for its environmental and democratic success is 'www.mvp.usace.army.mil/finder/display.asp?pageid=41', which turns out to be a propaganda website for the US Army Corps of Engineers (p. 40, note 16). Since the webpage no longer exists, I am unable to judge its relevance and reliability. Josephson's frequent use of often 'authorless' websites is, in fact, a major problem in what appears to be a poorly researched book.

Are authoritarian regimes more effective than democracies in allocating resources and taking advantage of scientific knowledge? Josephson considers environmental management in Nazi Germany, Communist China, the former USSR, and Brazil under dictatorship. This issue was especially relevant in the 1970s, when environmentalists like William Ophuls, Robert Heilbroner, Laura Westra, and Rudolf Bahro all harboured authoritarian longings. Today, however, it is hard to think of any leading environmental campaigners embracing undemocratic views. Once again, Josephson's discussion (based, as always, on secondary literature) seems dated. His conclusion – that authoritarian regimes are inefficient in dealing with environmental problems – is hardly novel.

Josephson also addresses the question of whether colonial rule is to blame for the persistent economic and environmental problems of 'the South'. In what is his best chapter, Josephson ably balances the culpabilities of colonial and post-colonial oligarchs. He advocates more aid to developing nations, as one remedy for their environmental challenges.

The last chapter deals with the hotly contested topics of biodiversity, sustainability, and technology. Its chief references include

Gerrett Hardin, the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972), Ernst Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973), the Soft-Technology literature of the 1970s and early 1980s, and the Brundtland Commission (1987). These scholars and studies were once of key importance, but Josephson fails to relate their concerns to current technological and environmental debates.

Writing for students and/or 'general readers' is always a daunting task. Student texts should offer a solid summary of key issues and current debates, along with informative and up-to-date references; while a wider audience deserves a clear message and some intelligent and challenging arguments. This book, although an easy read, serves neither market well. Fortunately, there are better works readily available to students, general readers, and scholars.¹

Peder Anker

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peder Anker received his Ph.D. in the history of science from Harvard University in 1999. He is now an historian at the Forum for University History at the University of Oslo, Norway. His publications include *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895–1945* (2001).

University of Oslo
Box 1008
Blindern
0317 Oslo
Norway
E-mail: anker@ffu.uio.no

¹ See, for example, Stephen Bocking's *Nature's Experts: Science, Politics and the Environment* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).