

**Contesting Environmental Transformation: Political Ecologies and Environmentalisms in
Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Beyond Sun and Sand: Caribbean Environmentalisms. Edited by Sherrie Baver and Barbara

Deutsch Lynch. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. Pp. vii + 210pp.

\$26.95 paper.

Environmental Justice in Latin America: Problems, Promise, and Practice. Edited by David

Carruthers. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. Pp. vii + 329. \$25.00 paper.

Greening Brazil: Environmental Activism in State and Society. Katherine Hochstetler and

Margaret E. Keck. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. xviii + 283. \$23.95

paper.

Natural Resources: Neither Curse nor Destiny. Edited by Daniel Lederman and William F.

Maloney. Washington DC: World Bank Publications; Palo Alto: Stanford University

Press, 2007. Pp. xx + 369. \$29.95 paper.

Changing Places: Environment, Development and Social Change in Rural Honduras. By

William Loker. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 227. \$28.00

paper.

The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938. By

Myrna L. Santiago. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 411. \$85.00

cloth.

No Stone Unturned: Building Blocks of Environmental Power versus Transnational

Industrial Forestry in Costa Rica. By Heleen van den Hombergh. Amsterdam: Dutch University Press, 2004. Pp. xvi + 313. \$38.00 paper.

Natural resources have long occupied a privileged position in the political economies of Latin America, **and** the consequences have often been less than positive. A “particularly virulent strain of dependency” (Lederman and Maloney 141) is how the co-editor of one of these books, William F. Maloney, characterizes this phenomenon, which has led to repeated underperformance in transforming the environment into human welfare and economic growth. This historical inability to use resources well is disturbing in light of the rapid expansion of the extractive frontier since the mid-1990s. The global search for minerals, hydrocarbons, and timber, a search that is at once market oriented and mercantilist in inspiration, has pushed natural resource concessions, exploration, and exploitation into new corners of the continent. The growing regional demand for energy (in part to supply these planned extractive industries) only intensifies this process, while also inducing renewed vigor into the search for new sites for the generation of hydroelectricity. Meanwhile, increasing international and domestic demand for recreation and relaxation has driven expansion of the tourist and second-home economies into new stretches of coastline, waterfront, protected areas, and other ecologies. Of course, at the time of writing the world is entering a global recession that will dull the intensity of these processes—and in that sense may give socioenvironmental movements and organizations time to catch their breath and get a clearer handle on what is going on. However, in the medium term, **it seems unlikely** that the expansion of these different extractive frontiers will go away.

Not only has the region largely failed to transform natural resource dependency into

sustained growth or welfare, but resource extraction has often had patently adverse effects. At an aggregate level it has been associated with a relative concentration of benefits (no hay “chorreo,” as is said in Peru) and with a failure to develop institutions to ensure transparent governance of the natural resource economy and the rents it generates. Meanwhile, in the localities affected by extraction, resources have all too often been removed and ecologies transformed at the expense of human well-being and environmental health—as demonstrated by several of the books reviewed here, in particular those of Myrna Santiago, William Loker, and Heleen van den Hombergh.

As a consequence of these adverse impacts—along with the many processes of resource dispossession that accompany the extractive economy—the environment has become an increasingly important domain of contention and social mobilization. This has been commented on before, of course: Lane Simonian traced the long history of conservation in Mexico, and David Goodman and Michael Redclift drew attention to the politics of sustainability.¹ However, interventions such as these remained cautious, expressing uncertainty as to the real depth to which the roots of these environmentalisms reached. Environmental conservation was generally seen to be the concern of a small segment of privileged classes, while the “environmentalism of the poor” was often understood, in the final instance, as a struggle for livelihood.²

¹ Lane Simonian, *Defending the Land of the Jaguar: A History of Conservation in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); David Goodman and Michael Redclift, eds., *Environment and Development in Latin America: Politics of Sustainability* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1991).

² Joan Martínez-Alier, *El ecologismo de los pobres: conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de*

While there was, and still is, much to these interpretations, the last couple of decades have seen important changes in the nature and practice of different types of environmentalism in the region, as well as in the ways in which environmental concerns have been bundled with human rights, preservationist, socialist, deep ecological, and other discourses. “The environment” has become both a vehicle and objective of contentious politics, influencing the way in which this politics is organized and performed: new (socio)environmental movement organizations have emerged; new (if difficult) intersections between environmentalism and other discourses have been crafted; relationships among environmentalists have been built within the region as well as with groups beyond Latin America; new megaconservation, nongovernmental organizations have emerged; and so on.

The books reviewed here capture important elements of these changes and the ways in which they have interacted with, as well as helped to reshape, the contexts in which they have emerged. They provide important insights into the dynamics and organization of resource extraction, into discourses of the environment, into movement dynamics, into new domains in which environment becomes a language of contention, and into what happens in those places that for whatever reason fall through the cracks of (socio)environmentalist organizing.

At this intersection of environmental disruption and social protest, two of these books focus more on questions of disruption, while four say rather more about protest and mobilization. The most vivid account of ecological disruption is given by Myrna Santiago’s brilliant and award-winning *Ecology of Oil*. In this environmental history of oil extraction, Santiago gives a

valoración (Barcelona: Icaria, 2002); there is an English translation: *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cheltenham, England: Edward Elgar, 2002).

riveting account of the emergence of the oil economy in the Mexican Huasteca from the late nineteenth century onwards. Her clinical reconstruction of this process is especially valuable in describing and analyzing all the “work” that had to be done on the Huasteca landscape in order for the oil economy to become possible. This work involved shifts in land and resource tenure legislation, changes in actual patterns of landholding, and the slow insinuation of the practices of the oil economy into the life of the region. Santiago conveys a sense of how communities experienced the first geologists to arrive in the Huasteca, the land traders who came later, and the expanded and fully fledged operations that culminated in the fully fledged oil economy. She describes both the social and ecological consequences of this process, and the various senses in which relationships of race and gender were embedded in these changes. Oilmen’s masculinity informed the ways in which they sought to dominate and control the nature of oil, while their racisms produced landscapes that not only were segregated and unequal, but were ones in which race intersected with uneven exposure to the risks unleashed by these attempts to dominate the subsoil.

Santiago conveys an image of despoliation at once appalling and unequally experienced. In this regard, there is a clear continuity with the literature on environmental justice, and points of convergence with both Carruthers’ collection on contemporary environmental (in)justice in Latin America, and Baver and Lynch’s book on Caribbean environmentalisms. However, while many of the cases described by the contributors to *Environmental Justice in Latin America* and *Beyond Sun and Sand* feature populations mobilized against such injustices, Santiago conveys a different picture. In the Huasteca, it seems, those groups experiencing the bulk of the risk and disadvantage produced by the ecology of oil neither organized, nor systematically contested, the injustices and environmental transformations being visited on them. Rather, when mobilization

around oil finally did emerge, it came from workers more than residents, and occurred in the context of a post-revolutionary Mexico ripe for resource nationalism. This is discussed in the final part of *The Ecology of Oil*, where Santiago charts the instrumental roles played by oil workers' unions in the nationalization of this oil economy. While nationalization changed the social role of oil (as its extraction was reoriented toward domestic needs), the implications for its ecological effects are far less clear. This is a theme that Santiago's end date of 1938 puts beyond the domain of her analysis, yet it is a critical issue today as resource nationalism becomes stronger in the region, influencing how hydrocarbons (**and minerals**) are developed in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and elsewhere.

The environmental disruptions analyzed in William Loker's *Changing Places* derive, not from oil, but from hydroelectricity. Loker follows fifteen years of landscape transformations in El Cajón, the part of Honduras in which he initially conducted doctoral work and to which he has since returned on several occasions. These transformations derive from the building of a very large dam around the time of his doctoral research, and since the construction of the dam Loker has followed the ways in which residents have adapted to the displacement that this has implied. In the wake of a failed and bureaucratically incompetent (to put it generously) resettlement scheme for families who lost their land, people have had to reorient their livelihoods to cope with land loss and relocation. The primary effect has been increased pressure on the environment. Forest cover has declined dramatically, and agricultural systems have intensified and become more dependent on agrochemicals. Meanwhile the poorest social groups have been the most disadvantaged, and out-migration has increased. In short, Loker describes the progressive unfolding of the simple reproduction squeeze in rural Honduras, and draws particular attention to the environmental consequences of this squeeze. As he himself notes, his analysis resonates with

frameworks elaborated around the work of Alain de Janvry in the 1970s and 80s, and the arguments that William Durham, Michael Painter, and others made in the 1990s regarding the social causes of environmental destruction in Latin America.³

While Santiago, the environmental historian, uses mostly historical and narrative techniques to analyze the nature and effects of ecological disruption in the Huasteca, Loker mobilizes a rather different set of instruments: those of a scholar working at the interface of cultural ecology and political ecology. His book combines maps of land use change, village surveys, in-depth qualitative research, and the analysis of farming and livelihood systems, all placed within the context of a narrative discussion of the deeply unfavorable political economy in which rural Hondurans are embedded. Yet, in the end, even though Loker's techniques differ substantially from Santiago's, he leaves the reader with a very similar sense of the nature of things. This is another fragile landscape experiencing a large-scale external intervention that is functional to the consumption and accumulation needs of distant others, while being thoroughly disruptive of the relationships between environment, landscape, and livelihood in the area in which it occurs. Loker insists, however, that the extent of this disruption should not be explained *only* in terms of the scale of the intervention itself. It is also, he argues, an effect of the complicity and incompetence of the nation-state and of the absence of local capacity to respond in any organized way. Loker speaks of this incapacity as a lack of social capital—a lack of mobilization potential from within, as well as of strategic national and international linkages and

³ Michael Painter and William Durham, eds., *The Social Causes of Environmental Destruction in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

networks through which such mobilization might be supported from without.

In this sense, it is interesting to read *No Stone Unturned*, Heleen van den Hombergh's dissertation turned book, alongside *Changing Places*. *No Stone Unturned* is a study of another large-scale disruption, an international forestry, pulp, and paper project promoted in the south-east of Costa Rica by the U.S.-based Stone Container Corporation and its local representation Ston Forestal. In this case, however, the investment did not go ahead precisely because activists and communities were able to mobilize the sorts of capacities and networks that Loker found so absent in El Cajón. Van den Hombergh endeavors to analyze precisely how it was that a sufficiently assertive and effective social mobilization emerged; in the process, she has produced a fascinating, detailed, and carefully presented piece of work. Indeed, while this book is a doctoral dissertation, it would be unwise to show it to budding graduate students because, if they were to see the depth of knowledge and insight suggested by the book, they would in all likelihood pack their bags and head home declaring themselves not up to the task.

As she researches the case, and writes the book, Van den Hombergh's allies herself quite self-consciously with the movement resisting the incursion of Stone Container Corporation. While this identification with the movement reflected her quite clear personal commitment, it was also inflected with the desire to tell the story from the point of view of movement actors. The result—once having gained the trust of these actors, no small achievement in itself—is a text that takes us inside the movement in a particularly insightful and nuanced way. The author tells this story through an analysis that moves steadily and deliberately from the local to broader scales of movement constitution and action. She explains—in considerable detail—the way in which Ston Forestal's actions and plans began to disturb livelihood-environment relationships in the region, and explores how this experience became a catalyst of resistance. Weaving in

different strands of social movement theory and political ecology, she **goes on to trace** the emergence of localized forms of mobilization, the interactions between framings and movement dynamics, and the steady constitution of local agency in the face of this threatened environmental disruption. She then details the links that were made between these local processes and national and international (socio)environmental networks, and the progressive construction of a campaign against Stone Container. She calls this process “grounded green campaigning,” insisting that much of its strength and success came from maintaining a clear link to local livelihood concerns, that is, from being *grounded*.

The final effect of this mobilization was to achieve what was not achieved in El Cajón: a web of relationships among environmentalists (and environmentalisms) operating at different scales that succeeded in blocking any serious disruption to environment-livelihood relations in the Osa Peninsula. The price, however, was high. The book’s contents page is preceded by photos of two activists burnt alive in their house shortly after Stone Container withdrew.

Van den Hombergh’s emphasis on the steady weaving of relationships, broadening of networks, and elaboration of campaign arguments has considerable resonance with Kathryn Hochstetler and Margaret Keck’s *Greening Brazil*, which also tells the story of environmentalism and environmental movements from the inside. The difference lies in both the geographical scope of *Greening Brazil* (dealing with the whole of Brazil) and its historical sweep (running from the mid-1960s through to the present). Indeed, this book is a sort of political history of national environmentalisms into which an analysis of movements and activism is inserted. Hochstetler and Keck trace fifty years of environmentalisms as manifested both in distinct forms of activism and in processes of national institutional change. They insist, furthermore, that this environmental(ist) history can only be understood in the context of broader

and deeper political changes in modern Brazil—as part product, and part producer, of wider sociopolitical changes (echoes here of Santiago’s analysis). Drawing on their own personal histories as participants, they proceed to tell this other history, tacking between macro stories of institutional change and micro-stories of intramovement tension and strategizing. Indeed, in some way boundary transgression is the essence of their book. The authors’ own transgressions (as scholar-participants) have made the book possible; activist transgressions (moving from society to state and back again) have made possible many of the institutional changes that the book analyses; and scale transgressions (from the everyday of activism to the structural of legislative changes) are what has given permanence to the effects of activism.

One of the central messages of this book is that environmentalism in Brazil is in large measure a domestic construct, a product of political projects, social struggles, and scientific arguments within Brazil. This is an important claim—and one that is amply substantiated by the analysis—because it gives the lie to those arguments so often used by conservative elites that *ambientalistas* are externally manipulated dupes and/or money-grabbing opportunists crafting environmental arguments in order to access international NGO funding. It is also important as a counterpoint to the analytical tendency toward the “transnationalization of everything” in work on movements and mobility in the region. Hochstetler and Keck are, of course, clear that domestic-international linkages and exchanges *are* a critical part of the history of environmentalism in Brazil, but this is a far cry from suggesting that environmentalism has been an international project that has touched ground in Brazil. Indeed, there is plenty of material here to suggest that, if anything, the balance of influence runs in the other direction, from Brazilian environmentalism to international discourses of the environment. Even in the case of “environmental justice,” which Hochstetler and Keck note *was* imported (deliberately) from the

U.S., this import has itself been reworked and inflected with Brazilian *sócio-ambientalismo* and in some sense reexported back to the world.

While the theme of (in)justice in environment-society relationships informs each of the previous texts, it constitutes the leitmotiv of the texts edited by David Carruthers and by Sherrie Baver and Barbara Lynch already noted above. Indeed, the two books are somewhat similar in that each opens with panoramic and conceptual discussions of environmentalisms, justice, and movements, and then follows with a series of cases that both ground and nuance these general statements. That said, they would complement each other nicely in a course on environmental justice, for several reasons. The first is geographical: the cases explored in *Environmental Justice in Latin America* come mostly from mainland Latin America, while those in *Beyond Sun and Sand* focus on the Caribbean—the only overlap is Katherine T. McCaffrey’s work on Vieques, Puerto Rico, which appears in both. Secondly, while the essays in Carruthers’ collection are more academic and analytical in tone, *Beyond Sun and Sand* has a more engaged and activist feel—indeed a number of its authors straddle the worlds of the university and of civil society and public planning. Third, they each explore ways in which practices and discourses of environmental justice travel the Americas, albeit in different ways (here there is also continuity with Hochstetler and Keck’s attention to domestic-international activist linkages). Carruthers is interested in the way in which a language of environmental justice emerged in the U.S. and was then adopted, reworked, and resignified in Latin American struggles, and several of the contributors give more empirical insight into these processes. For their part, Baver and Lynch have put together a collection combining essays on environmental activism and injustice both in the Caribbean and in Caribbean communities in New York.

Taken together, these books give a sense of the many and varied forms of environmental

activism in the region, the differences among them, and the flows and networks that link them. The overall sense that they leave is of the significance of the environment, both as a terrain of mobilization and contention, and as an idiom that mediates other, larger discussions about the organization of Latin American societies and economies. Certainly, they leave no doubt that “the environment” should not only interest those who worry about natural resources. Furthermore, if this is the case for the historical periods to which these books speak (the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries), then it is going to be even more so during the coming decades. This will be a period in which yet greater environmental transformations unfold, and in the process challenge the integrity, sovereignty, and creativity of Latin American societies.

How, and how effectively, these societies respond to these coming challenges will go a long way in determining future economic and political dynamics in the region. It is to this theme that the final book in this collection has something to say—something potentially worrying and certainly challenging to the other six texts. The book’s editors, Daniel Lederman and William Maloney, are World Bank economists with considerable expertise in Latin America and, although their *Natural Resources: Neither Curse nor Destiny* is not specifically about the region, it places Latin America’s particular forms of resource dependence in comparison and conversation with those of other regions. For Latin Americanists the book invites the question as to why the “20th century offered many opportunities for natural resource-based growth that Latin America systematically missed” (141). Given that the boat has been missed at the same time that certain other countries have had much more positive experiences, the question that must be answered is “what happened in Latin America?” Why did things go wrong and, looking forward, what is the chance that future experience will be more encouraging?

Maloney's essay in this collection suggests that Latin America's relative failure in transforming natural resource dependence into sustained growth with welfare has been due to the region's inability to innovate and be creative in the natural resources sector, or even to take advantage of and build on patterns of technological innovation coming from other parts of the world (with the experience in Chile from the 1960s being a particular exception). This failure is due, he argues, to the incentives created by protectionist policies, but also to more deeply seated institutional problems that have systematically frustrated innovation. This focus on institutional failures is very much in line with arguments around theories of "the resource curse," which have tended to converge on the centrality of institutional quality, governance, and politics in determining the extent to which resource dependence fosters or frustrates development.⁴ Maloney seems to conclude that, Chile aside, post-1970s political and governance arrangements in Latin America have been such that the contribution of resource extraction to human welfare and growth has been very disappointing.

This argument speaks back to and challenges the spirit underlying the other six books reviewed here. Furthermore, it does so in ways that are troubling and raise questions about the overall effects of the movement processes that these books describe. For while environmental movements may have succeeded in blocking specific private and public projects, or in demanding particular types of environmental cleanup, they have often failed to have significant impact on the wider institutional arrangements that govern the environment, resource extraction,

⁴ **Anthony Bebbington, Leonith Hinojosa, Denise Humphreys Bebbington, Maria Luisa Burneo, and Ximena Warnaars, "Contention and ambiguity: Mining and the possibilities of development" *Development and Change* 39,6 (2008): 887-914.**

and rent distribution. How else are we to interpret the continuing existence of the sorts of institutional arrangements bemoaned by the resource curse thesis? How else to explain the recurring, structural forms of environmental injustice that persist in the region? How else to explain that Santiago's description of the ecologies produced by oil a century ago in Mexico could almost as easily apply to what has occurred in Sucumbios, Ecuador, or to what is going on right now in Río Corrientes in Peru? How else to explain that three quarters of the Peruvian Amazon has been concessioned to hydrocarbons companies, or that between 30 and 40 percent of the watersheds feeding Lima have been concessioned to mining companies? Occasional movement victories aside, the rules of the game appear pretty resilient to change.

Lest one be too pessimistic about the institutional efficacy of movements and activism, Hochstetler and Keck's historical study does give some space for hope—for they suggest that, *over the long haul*, institutions in Brazil *have* changed, the country *has* greened, and part of the explanation for this is to be found in the steady growth and ant-like work of activist networks and movement organizations (as well as the work of scientific conservationists and party political greens). There is, though, still a ways to go and, in this regard, Brazilian movements and activists have much to teach their equals elsewhere in the region, as has been commented by other reviewers of this book.⁵ Who, though, would want to place a bet on the year of publication of the book that will be titled *Greening Latin America*?

A final comment. As will be clear by now, these books are, mostly, about activism. But at the same time they are themselves exercises in a particular type of environmental activism: that

⁵ Denise Humphreys Bebbington, review of *Greening Brazil: Environmental Activism in State and Society* in *Journal of Peasant Studies* (forthcoming).

of the engaged scholar. Of course, there is no shortage of committed scholarship on Latin America—this is a principle that, for many of its members, lies at the very core of LASA. But this collection of books is a particularly fine example of such commitment and it is not casual that several of the authors have previous or parallel lives as human rights and development activists. The result is a set of texts that speak clearly to the challenge of change in the region and constitute important contributions to the project of producing Latin American environments in which humans can flourish rather than merely get by.