

Macekura, Stephen J.: *Of Limits and Growth. The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015. ISBN: 978-1-107-07261-9; XIII, 333 S.

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„Of Limits and Growth“ will ring a bell with those interested in the history of the environmental movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. The title skillfully plays on the 1972 report to the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth*, that brought the debate of the earthly limits of resources, of pollution and of economic and population growth to public awareness.<sup>1</sup> The author tackles a less known side of the „predicament of mankind“. Stephen Macekura explores the rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the emerging field of international environmental politics. He focuses on NGO activities in the so-called developing countries after formal decolonization and NGO interactions with the development strategies of national governments and transnational organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank founded in the wake of World War II. The book directs the reader’s attention to the tremendous growth of the influence and power of NGOs while pointing to the salient limits of that very influence and power. Macekura provides a remarkable record of detailed first-hand research, digging deep into archival material of personal correspondence, institutional negotiations and policy documents to substantiate his rich account. As Assistant Professor at the International Studies Department at Indiana University, he is perfectly situated to study the intersections of global history, political science and international relations, and he also demonstrates a sophisticated grip on technological mega-projects and ecological complications.

Studied through the lens of NGO engagement, the concept of „global sustainable development“ that motivates international environmentalism since the 1990s appears to hav-

ing been compromised from its inception. At the core of the emerging transnational environmental networks were individuals, institutions and organizations from the Western world and prominently from the United States. The finding that NGO initiatives mirrored unequal power relations in a world of social, political and economic inequity does perhaps not come as a surprise, but the expanse and diversity of local NGO engagement certainly does. It is the book’s accomplishment to map out numerous local nodes in the emerging „global“ NGO networks. Implementing their sweeping strategies, NGOs encountered specific situations, contestations and frequently also downright opposition. Increasing numbers of organizations wielded increasingly diverging opportunities for „sustainable development“. Macekura demonstrates that the hopes of qualifying development by limiting potential environmental damages grew into aspirations of sustainability as continued development, favoring readings of economic opportunity. Environment and development had „only paradoxes to offer“.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the book are five decades of transnational environmental activism geared towards creating alternatives to government-funded development schemes. The chapters are organized chronologically and include some well-selected temporal overlaps to tie the material into an in-depth account. The title’s promise of covering the twentieth century is perhaps overly sweeping. Setting his story between the late 1940s and the present, with special focus on the 1950s to the 1990s, Macekura begins by outlining the early decades of conservation and development in the 1950s and 1960s, when internationally operating private non-profit interest groups like the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its fundraising extension, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), were formally recognized in the UN

<sup>1</sup>Donella H. Meadows / Dennis L. Meadows / Jørgen Randers / William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New York 1972.

<sup>2</sup>On the paradox of reconciling gender differences and equal rights see Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, MA 1996.

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Charter. The UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 marks the moment when the environment-development paradox forced its way into the international public and political arena.

The center part of the book deals with the 1970s and 1980s when environmental NGOs, harvesting the fruit of their matured opposition, offered a range of ideas to offset the dominant foreign aid schemes that were primarily designed to contribute to „a noncommunist, stable, liberal world order“ (p. 65). Macekura traces three interventions to modernize developing countries not only technologically but also ecologically: the development tool of alternative or „appropriate“ technologies; the legislative tool of the environmental impact statements to hold development projects accountable; and the World Conservation Strategy as an environmental policy tool that programmatically outlined „sustainable development“ as the desired path for global development. The final chapter describes the „rocky road“ to and from Rio, the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. At once a highlight and a lowlight in international negotiations on sustainability, the Rio conference exhibited the achievements of a decades-long struggle and the disappointed hopes of participating NGOs. The conclusion outlines how the conflicts exposed at the Rio summit have stayed with us up to the present day.

Macekura points his readers to the „intellectual compromise“ (p. 8) required to resolve the predicament of economic growth and environmental protection. Westerners protecting the „global environment“ in Africa, Asia and South America acted in line with long-standing Western concepts of civilization that sustained environmentally destructive modes of capitalist operation (there is also some interesting material on Soviet and Chinese development aid; p. 65-66). The new leaders of developing countries welcomed modernization schemes that involved capital-intensive large-scale technologies, but they rejected environmental protection standards as undue and discriminating Western impositions. Indeed, the small scholarly elite of early conservationists promoting parks and game reserves to alleviate the loss of unique wildlife in newly decolonized countries were

fraught with the paternalism, progressivism and racism of the former colonial powers.<sup>3</sup> The more inclusive and holistic appeals of NGOs to the responsibility for a global environment common to all still overlooked that global wealth was proper to few. Accordingly, in the view of developing countries, small-scale, low-cost and labor-intensive technologies meeting basic local needs in accord with local environments appeared not as „empowering“ but as „backward“ (p. 168). The newly sovereign countries of the Global South would adopt nature preservation schemes of the North if they seemed applicable as tools of nationalist self-promotion, harnessing nature to generate tourist dollars while depriving the locals from their livelihoods. Examples from independent Tanzania and Uganda show that „universal“ environmental concerns worked as the glue that pasted new nationalism to postcolonial dependence. Environment became a geopolitical issue.

The struggle of aligning opposing values is perhaps best captured in the statement made by Brazil's Foreign Minister in 1989, „Brazil does not want to transform itself into an ecological reserve for humanity“ (p. 214). Social justice and environmental justice were reconciled eventually not by separating but by coupling environmental protection and economic development. Conceived in 1980 as a principle to integrate ecological considerations into development plans, „sustainable development“ and its shorthand „sustainability“ promised ecological as well as economic benefits. As the term gained wide currency with the „Stockholm plus 10“ conference in Nairobi in 1982 and the publication

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<sup>3</sup>On cosmopolitan conservationism before 1950 see Anna-Katharina Wöbse, *Weltnaturschutz. Umweltdiplomatie in Völkerbund und Vereinten Nationen 1920–1950*, Frankfurt am Main 2011; reviewed by Astrid Mignon Kirchhof for *H-Soz-Kult*, June 29, 2012: <<http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-16384>> (16.05.2016). On the continuation of colonial arrangements by means of conservation see Bernhard Gißibl, *The Nature of German Imperialism. Conservation and the Politics of Wildlife in Colonial East Africa*, New York 2016. On the cultural politics of nature conservation in parks see Bernhard Gißibl / Sabine Höhler / Patrick Kupper (eds), *Civilizing Nature. National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, New York 2012.

of the Brundtland Report<sup>4</sup> in 1987, sustainable development created space for the perception of development as sustained by technological and by environmental innovations, putting environmental protection into the service of continued economic growth (p. 264). Macekura shows that after two decades of struggling for alternative approaches „end-of-pipe“ solutions made their way back into international environmental and developmental politics. Like the emerging emissions permit trading schemes, these tools were explicitly based on market incentives. Thus, in the „Stockholm plus 20“ process leading up to the Rio conference in 1992, US president George H.W. Bush, avid supporter of privatization, deregulation and trade liberation, could well claim that he was an environmentalist.

Without belittling the immense success and the accomplishments of NGOs Macekura acknowledges the limitations of their interventions. „Of Limits and Growth“ is a highly recommendable book that is well researched and elegantly composed. The elaborate index helps to master the jungle of acronym organizations in the story. Regrettably, the publisher did not make space for a separate bibliography compiling the numerous scholarly works the study draws on. It is unfortunate also that the author tends to delegate important analytic thought and argumentative support to the footnotes for the sake of the storyline. And finally, a little more of Macekura's delightfully explicit wit would have been welcome. After all, his comments about the paradox of environment and development boiling down to a world defined „by the legacies of past inequities“ (p. 316) and by the persistent power of nation states make this book so enjoyable.

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<sup>4</sup> Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future. A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)*, London 2014.