

Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles. GENE DESFOR and ROGER KEIL. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2004. Pp. xviii+274, maps, photographs, table, index. \$45.00 paper. ISBN 0-8165-2373-8.

In *Nature and the City*, Gene Desfor and Roger Keil set out to critically examine the ways political actors use environmental narratives to formulate urban environmental policy. The empirical scope of their study is limited to Los Angeles and Toronto in the 1990s, with attention paid to four case studies: the restoration of an urban wetland in Toronto's Don River Valley; efforts to renaturalize the Los Angeles River; soil contamination in a Toronto brownfield redevelopment site; and the political struggle over air quality in the Los Angeles Air Basin. Yet the applicability of their arguments and method lie well beyond the urban ecologies of these two cities. *Nature and the City* is not solely an empirical work, but also a sophisticated theoretical engagement that draws together social ecology, local-state theory, narrative interpretation, and urban-centric approaches to the social production of nature. The overall thrust of their argument is that ecology itself represents a core ontological site over which political actors struggle to reshape the political economies of the post-Fordist urban form.

The text is significant, not simply because it adds new depth of analysis to the growing urban political ecology literature, but also because its case studies allow the authors to combine an impressive array of theoretical positions and methodologies. Their focus is on ecological modernization theory (developed in the mid-1990s by Maarten Hajer), which the authors insist offers a useful lens through which to observe shifting nature-society relations in industrial societies. Ecological modernization is a social response to environmentalist critique, but one in which the institutions of modern capitalism are not fundamentally altered in the design of ecologically "benign" futures. Instead, ecology and economy are seen to be fully compatible, harmonized through policy choices that produce synergistic benefits. The authors distinguish between "weak" and "strong" ecological modernization: the former is synonymous with the neoliberal idea that market-friendly policy instruments can overcome environmental problems; the latter focuses on open, transparent policy debates about desirable futures along with strong state and communicative intervention. In each case study, Desfor and Keil demonstrate the clear hegemony of weak ecological modernization in municipal policy discourse.

The Toronto brownfield case study is illustrative. Over the course of much of the 1990s, environmental activists struggled with development interests over soil remediation in a former industrial site that contained high levels of contamination. In the ensuing policy debate, Desfor and Keil track

how soil remediation policy guidelines shifted from “stringent” to “flexible” in accordance with the interests of an urban growth coalition comprised mainly of developers. The result was a significant reduction in remediation costs through a relaxation of standards. What is particularly interesting about this shift, however, is that it came on the heels of a crippling recession that devastated Toronto’s labor and real estate markets. (Desfor and Keil found a similar situation in the Los Angeles air-quality case study.) According to the authors, developers capitalized on this circumstance by arguing that stringent environmental standards halted growth precisely when it was needed for the city to overcome its real-estate crisis. Redevelopment, it was further argued, would improve environmental quality on the site itself. This response is perhaps predictable, but also ironic: in making their argument, the developers implied that by restoring ecology through development, the municipality could reestablish its competitive advantage. For Desfor and Keil, this sort of historical contingency is typical of how ecological modernization discourse unfolds. They insist, however, that while agendas such as this one have a tendency to foreclose alternative strategies, they are by no means inevitable. To the contrary, if ecological modernization is conceptualized as historically contingent, then alternative ecological narratives have an extremely important role to play in shaping urban environmental policy.

The text is also significant for the way it challenges the hegemony of ecological modernization as national discourse. Against this convention, Desfor and Keil write that ecological modernization must be understood and critiqued from an urban perspective precisely because it is forged in the crucible of municipal politics. The authors are well aware that ecological-modernization discourse is found elsewhere in the global chain of production and consumption, but contend that municipalities around the world now bear a significant burden of globalization in an era of downloading. Their message is that neoliberal globalization manifests itself, and is negotiated in, urban ecologies and spaces, as well as in the quotidian lives of urban people—all in ways that national political activity simply cannot address.

For all its strengths, the book warrants a few minor cautionary notes. In bringing together such a diverse array of theory and method and then applying these to the world of urban policy development, the authors sometimes lose sight of both. Their theoretical explications are sound but could use more elaboration, whereas their descriptions of specific policy processes and developments are overly detailed. The result is that it is sometimes unclear whether they are addressing their arguments to theoretically inclined readers, the urban policy community, or environmental activists. Another problem, familiar to anyone who has worked in policy, is the complex array of organizational acronyms. The chapter on air quality in Los Angeles, for instance, was difficult reading at times owing to the multitudinous abbreviations. This, of

course, constitutes minor criticism in what is otherwise a thoughtful series of engagements. *Nature and the City* makes a novel contribution to studies of nature, urban political ecology, and local state theory. But perhaps most of all, it draws attention to the need for governance regimes that place the urban domain at the center of environmental policy.

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Land of Sunshine: An Environmental History of Metropolitan Los Angeles. WILLIAM DEVERELL and GREG HISE, editors. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005. Pp. viii+350, photos, index. \$34.95 cloth. ISBN 0-8229-4254-2.

The second volume in the University of Pittsburgh's *History of the Urban Environment* series, *Land of Sunshine* aims to explore the "metropolitan nature" of Los Angeles, "one of the ecological wonders of the habitable world" in the words of architectural historian Reyner Banham. It is part of a growing literature on a hybrid topic that, in bringing cities into environmental history, has made urban scholars increasingly aware of the environmental issues in their midst. It is fascinating and fertile territory, as the essays in this volume attest: three "folios" of historical photographs with accompanying essays; an archaeological prehistory of the Los Angeles region; a reconstruction of its pre-modern prairie ecology; a treatise on the fate of Mexican land grants in US courts; four essays on zoning, planning, and public policy; three on flood control engineering; and musings on gardens, pets, and food. The approaches range from academic geography, history, anthropology, economics, and ecology to journalism, art history, and literary theory. On the whole, they are engagingly written. Two stand out in style and structure: John McPhee's "Los Angeles Against the Mountains," a tour-de-force example of what environmental narrative can be (first published in *The New Yorker* on September 26, 1988, and later collected to form one-third of the equally magisterial book, *The Control of Nature* (1989)); and Jennifer Price's "Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA," a clever celebration of how Los Angeles, popularly construed as the anti-natural city, is actually the most interesting intersection of nature and culture imaginable.

The collection offers a strong argument for the continued relevance and vitality of serious writing about Los Angeles, and of promise for the editors' enterprise in urban environmental history. They convincingly show the insufficiency of earlier paradigms in scholarly and popular discourse about