Book Reviews


When unpacking the front cover of John Hultgren’s Border Walls Gone Green: Nature and Anti-Immigrant Politics in America, one can already learn much about its core themes: anti-migrant sentiments, restrictionist environmentalism and the rethinking of sovereignty especially in light of the meaning of borders. On the cover we see the Mexican–American border wall which is the physical reinforcement of a border that is supposed to keep nature in and migrants out. The wall therefore represents the nation and its public goods that have come under perceived threat from migrants – particularly from Central and Southern America. At the same time, the dry landscape along the wall reflects environmental destruction.

In his book, Hultgren discusses the anti-immigrant discourse and restrictionist stances deployed by historical and contemporary environmental protection movements and the extent to which they directly link nature to the nation by arguing that “[...] the fate of nature is the fate of the American nation” (p. 14). As such, they view nature as something that on the one hand takes place within the sovereign nation state and on the other side becomes an element of the sovereign nation state that has to be protected. Using discourse analysis of texts, speeches and public relations material from environmental protection organizations and their representatives, Hultgren shows how many environmental organizations have adopted anti-immigrant language in the name of protecting the environment – a so-called greenwashing of nativism – by deploying notions of the barbaric other as a threat to the environment. Against this backdrop he suggests to challenge this restrictionism and the dominant nature–culture dualism (“the nature–culture dualism is in crisis” [p. 6]), where nature has become a part of national pride. He argues that this assumption contradicts the fact that “nature exceeds sovereign borders” (p. 125) and outlines the need to reassess the way sovereignty is approached. Far too many environmentalists take sovereignty as a given and believe that environmental protection happens at the state level, thereby ignoring that nature does not stick to borders but also that the way sovereignty operates has changed. Instead, Hultgren offers an alternative that builds on the transnational nature of both the environment and migration to build global alliances to protect nature and to bring people across countries together.

Hultgren begins with a historical analysis of three waves of environmentalist anti-immigrant movements. The first two waves – social and ecological nativism – had obvious racist undertones, reinforcing a civilized vs. barbaric dichotomy between whites and non-whites and their appreciation of and impact on nature, thereby legitimizing policies restricting the entrance and growth of immigration populations. Social nativism refers to traditional white supremacist and nationalist ideologies that embraced eugenics and aimed to protect whites from savages, while ecological nativism moved away from eugenics and expressed concern about the overpopulation in developing countries and the potential threat this poses to the environment. They expressed concern about the problems of the “uncivilized outside”, especially from the Third World, seeping in and
negatively affecting the U.S.: “American sovereignty, therefore, needed to be secured against these cultural, environmental, and ideological menaces” (p. 44). Many organizations, like the Sierra Club, supported both movements which generally showed a “commitment to natural and national purity” (p. 38). Thus, Hultgren explains how the impact of these social and ecological discourses of nativism “is to provide nativists with a flexible set of discursive strategies with which to advance their exclusionary prescriptions, enabling both the broadening and deepening of overtly xenophobic alliances” (p. 57).

Both of these first two waves are outdated today and most environmental organizations present themselves as neutral to immigration. The third wave, ecofeminism, sees itself as colorblind and blames neoliberalism and as such globalization and overconsumption for environmental destruction. Immigration simply becomes a part of this larger trend. Hultgren, however, sheds light on how their work and language is still imbued with racist myths. One example is that immigrants are delinquents who do not know how to treat and enjoy nature. On the other hand, the potential harm that environmental destruction can have on immigrant populations is ignored. They thus turn a blind eye to the unequal distribution of environmental goods and bads. Even though the racism is less obvious, it still exists. It is just less visible and as such becomes more effective at controlling and disciplining the mind towards adopting anti-immigrant stances. In light of sovereignty, ecofeminisms continue to operate in a state-centric mode and do not assess the global sphere of environmental protection. Hence, Hultgren makes a compelling case that this third wave is really not an improvement from the previous two waves: “The ecomonist viewer is subject to the same tropes, and is encouraged to think the same things about the same categories of people, but is also encouraged to think to herself: ‘You’re doing this for Nature’” (p. 87).

In the last two chapters, Hultgren discusses alternatives to these restrictionist movements. Global environmental justice movements reject the view that nature sticks to global borders and also recognize that overpopulation does not end there. They instead focus on the inequalities among people both in terms of unequal contribution to the causes of environmental destruction and being unequally affected by its consequences. These movements uncover individual links between environmentalists and restrictionist organizations. However, for Hultgren, their work does not reach far enough and fails to address the structures of environmental restrictionism. He feels that they pay insufficient attention to the discourse used to link nature, culture and sovereignty. In addition, the counter-discourse they introduce is too simplified and portrays migrants as noble savages. As such, Hultgren offers an alternative approach of statecraft from below which challenges today’s conception of sovereignty and its exclusionary nature and allows for people from different localities to connect. This approach can make perfect use of migrants since they have ties to different places and can help build translocal alliances. In taking a more holistic approach that reflects on the interconnections between nature, social, economic and racial factors it aims to address the underlying factors causing environmental destruction and to capture the real effect on communities. He wants to reconfigure the way we think about the we and build a global movement that is not in the hands of the state but belongs to the people. To this end, he also builds on an environmental political theory of migration “that invites environmentalists to step across the geopolitical, conceptual, and strategic borderlines that […] have disabled their attempts to achieve socioecological justice” (p. 141).

In sum, Hultgren’s books makes two major contribution. First, he conducts a historical analysis of how environmental restrictionism first emerged and provides an interesting and insightful account of how it has evolved with examples of some of the racist language that has been used in the name of nature. What is particularly interesting here is how many environmental organizations that are still around today, actively participated in these nativist movements. Second, he proposes a new approach of opposing this restrictionism and delinking nature and sovereignty. While this
may seem harder to achieve today, it is still an interesting way to approach migration and environmentalism by moving away from state-centric frameworks and making active use of the transnational networks migrants build to reflect the transboundary nature of the environment.

Hultgren adopts a poststructuralist framework which can be seen in terms of his choice of discourse analysis as methodology, the documents he looks at and some of his conclusions. In his research he looks at texts, speeches and even goes beyond by analyzing some of the images of the work these organizations do on the ground. He aims to understand the relations that exist around the problem of environmental restrictionism, examining who is constructed as a problem, who are the actors, what language emerges and what concepts as forms of power are being normalized. In his analysis Hultgren regularly refers to Foucault and biopolitics. Moreover, he also recognizes the importance of networks of productive power relations which exemplify the decentering of power where power no longer rests with just one person or institution. One further element of his problematization of the current structures is his critique of the easy acceptance of the role and place of the sovereign nation state, which in fact helps reproduce an us vs. them perspective and replaces overt racism with cultural racism. This is particularly evident when he unpacks the constructed binaries of the civilized white versus the barbaric non-white.

With this book, Hultgren aims to fill a research gap in this field by examining how nature plays out in anti-immigration sentiments and how nature, nation and migration are linked. The book would interest anyone working in the field of the environment and/or migration or people interested in postcolonial studies because of its thorough historical analysis and the in-depth discussion of how nature, sovereignty and migration have been linked. It could inform further research in the fields of critical migration studies, environmental studies, cultural studies and comparative politics.

Sabrina Axster

Johns Hopkins University, USA


Described as the second in a three book series — bracketed by The Environment and the People in American Cities: 1600s–1900s and Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution and Residential Mobilities — Dorceta Taylor’s most recent work, The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection provides a nuanced and intersectional look at the development of conservation discourse and action in the United States. Taylor’s close attention to the interplay between U.S. conservation activities and earlier forms of activism provides readers with a deeper understanding of the social movement dynamics that shaped the development of U.S. conservation. Additionally, through a combination of sweeping history and sociological analysis, this book serves as a powerful corrective to the unfortunate tendency toward thinking of and writing about U.S. environmental movements without adequate attention to the race, class, and gender politics that fundamentally shape U.S. conservation. While today’s environmentalists may imagine themselves as the inheritors of a popular grassroots struggle, pitting rugged nature lovers against wealthy business elites, Taylor’s work provides detailed insight into the way ruling class preferences for European gentility and conceptions of the sublime shaped conservation practices in the United States. Focusing primarily on the intellectual and political developments of the 19th century, this book compellingly demonstrates how elite