

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hilde Ibsen. *Menneskets Fotavtrykk: En Oekologisk Verdenshistorie*. Skandinavia: Tano Aschehoug, 1997. 258 pp. ISBN 978-82-518-3423-0.

Reviewed by Carsten Madsen (Odense University)

Published on H-Skand (July, 1997)

The Footprints of Man. An Ecological World History: It seems appropriate to review a well-written book on environmental history at a time when the environment is back at the top of the world political agenda five years after the Earth Summit in Rio. The Norwegian historian Hilde Ibsen's book introduces the essential ecological interchanges that have gone on between human communities and their surroundings in the past, and provides us with perspectives on the profound environmental consequences caused by pressure on natural resources, increase in population and pollution. The book is a compilation based on other texts written by environmental historians. She claims it to be an "environmental world history." I would rather call it a collection of impacts in the past that leads to a different picture of the human history. However, it would be a mistake to misjudge Ibsen's book because of that. Since we have no tradition of environmental history in Scandinavia at all, she is opening a door (as the Danish historian Thorkild Kjaergaard with his book: *The Danish Revolution, 1500-1800: An Ecohistorical Interpretation*. Cambridge 1994) between the two realms culture and nature. Convincingly, Ibsen shows how our history is deeply influenced by the changes in nature and how man's view on nature has developed in history.

In eight chapters Ibsen describes the transformation of human life when hunters and gatherers gave up their nomadic way of life to depend on the grain and domesticated animals, and the pressures on nature—cultivated plants and animals, irrigation, drainage, deforestation—that followed from agriculture and the enormous increase in population; she describes the growth in demand of natural resources like timber, rubber, metals, sugar, cotton, coffee etc... that appeared hand in hand with technical innovations and growing commercial importance; she describes the emergence of the enlightenment, the industrial revolution and the inevitable shortage of

energy, the results of poor farming methods, periodic crop failures, diseases, pollution etc. In other words Ibsen traces the shift from an absolutely necessary respect of nature (where the human beings under the threat of starvation depend on the nature's food supply) to a more or less disrespect for or objectification of nature (where the natural resources have undergone a fundamental value change).

At the very center of the book she dwells on the critique of the modern world-view of materialism, particularly economic and scientific materialism. However, that is by no means a new idea. The twentieth century thinking has produced several critics beginning with Weber, Heidegger and Adorno who have expressed an awareness of the conflicts of modernity. Hilde Ibsen finishes her book with the Brundtland-Report and the Summit in Rio in 1992. Both events signal a new kind of respect for nature. By pointing out the permanent environmental crisis in history Ibsen too indirectly reminds us that it is about time to start saving the planet, to start releasing nature from a disrespectful exploitation. Today, we all agree on respect for nature. On the other hand, this respect is still linked to the fact that the problems that the heads of state are discussing at the U.N. special session in New York this week are roughly the same as in 1992.

This calls into question whether environmental history is an indispensable part of today's history like political history or economic history or if this kind of historical research resembles other historical disciplines like women's history or military history. Ibsen undoubtedly favours the first. I incline to take the opposite point of view. That of course is not a proper answer. What is certain is that this book is not the last one on this topic.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Carsten Madsen. Review of Ibsen, Hilde, *Menneskets Fotavtrykk: En Oekologisk Verdenshistorie*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1174>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.