

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mark J. Smith. *Ecologism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. viii + 107. \$19.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-3302-9; \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-3301-2.

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As I read *Ecologism* I was struck by the difficulties involved with describing a way of living that is sensitive to the environment. Author Mark J. Smith attempts to accomplish this goal by examining political and social dogmas. He discusses fundamental principles and how they relate to humans and the environment. This is no easy task. The book outlines two main themes revolving around the questions: how do humans value the environment and what implications do the debates over valuing the environment have for existing approaches towards justice, entitlements and obligations? (p. 3). What does it mean to be environmentally sensitive? Does it signify that one has a love of nature? Does it mean that one examines the needs of future generations and attempts to preserve the resources to meet those needs, i.e., to live sustainably?

All of these contribute to what Smith attempts to consider as a part of ecologism. He explains ecologism as a way of thinking based on a set of assumptions which displaces human beings from the central position they have occupied in social and political evaluation (p. 1). *Ecologism* does not really break any new ground in the field of environmental studies per se, but it is a valiant attempt at integrating this subject into other disciplines. Those disciplines include political science, philosophy, and sociology. Interdisciplinary paradigms are new to most of us and, as such, it takes considerable effort to think outside of the box. Specific disciplines tend to shape most thoughts and world views; it is how we are taught to think.

The unfortunate but necessary need for Smith to paint with broad brush strokes makes me uneasy. To say that all scientists or socialists behave a certain way in relation to the environment is far too general. I believe that one's view of the world, and subsequently one's relationship with nature and the environment, has some connection to the group in which individuals place themselves, but that relationship is also determined by one's life experiences. I would have been more comfortable if Smith chose instead to discuss ways of doing things or economic forces which guide the way things are done in relation to the environment. However, this approach would not have provided the type of examination he was attempting. To gain a healthier relationship with the environment, Smith argues, we must embrace ecologism and shift our social and political thought to a new politics of obligation (p. 99). I think *Ecologism* is important to those of us following interdisciplinary studies, but its relevance to the layperson is relatively low. It would prove to be a useful book in college courses that seek to open avenues of environmental discourse among the different disciplines. This is by no means a scientific book. It stands wholly in the arena of the arts and humanities. That categorization helps to make *Ecologism* different than the typical environmental studies guide.

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