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Mark Hudson. *Fire Management in the American West: Forest Politics and the Rise of Megafires.* Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2011. Illustrations, map, tables. 256 pp. $44.00, e-book, ISBN 978-1-60732-089-0.

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Few observers doubt that America's wildfire scene has become unsettled; many would describe it as catastrophic, aptly symbolized by the emergence of megafires; and most would attribute the cause for the eruption of this pyric plague to the violent collision between past and future. The past consists of poor choices made primarily by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), which rendered the nation's backcountry into an overgrown tinderbox. The future is the fast-morphing syndrome called global change, particularly global warming. Where they abrade, they spark fires of a size and intensity outside historic precedents.

The saga of poor choices is what Mark Hudson identifies as the "dominant narrative" of American fire. It is his announced ambition to propose "an alternative explanation for the genesis of catastrophic fire in the West" (p. 4). This takes the form of an explicitly Marxist critique that shifts the burden of guilt from the USFS as a putatively autonomous agent to its "weakness relative to a highly organized network of timber capitalists" (p. 6).

In this telling the USFS emphasized fire, obsessively, because fire suppression was almost the only activity that industry would allow it, the one point of compromise between them. The agency wanted fire control to protect the nation's forests for future generations. Industry wanted it to protect those woods for future harvests. The state, nominally promoting the public good, had to yield to the capitalists' threatened axe. Unable to regulate private logging, it directed its zealotry into firefighting, which then became overweening. "Fire protection" was an internal contradiction that yielded the ironic outcome that the forests are now more at risk from fire than before.

The author frames his analysis in proudly Marxist terms to identify the competing forces. He then critiques "state-centric" theories to show that the USFS was badly compromised almost from its creation by organized capital. This conflict has led to an endless series of unresolved problems--of

which forest health and megafires are the latest avatars--all of which the author explains by appealing to "Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of crisis." Since the agency cannot by itself resolve them, it faces an interminable "crisis of crisis management" (p. 10). Eruptive wildfires are, in a sense, nature's proletariat throwing off the chains of their managerial oppression.

The *experimentum crucis* that the author uses to prove this thesis is the Clarke-McNary Act of 1924. Building on the Weeks Act of 1911, Clarke-McNary confirmed that American forestry would develop in "cooperation" between the state and industry. That critical piece of legislation redirected the USFS away from a political context over regulation and into a common firefight. Hudson provides compelling evidence that the USFS, notably its chief forester, William Greeley, deliberately made fire the focus of the agency's political energies. That Greeley subsequently left the USFS for the West Coast Lumberman's Association only seems to nail shut the coffin of that lethal argument. Despite efforts in the 1930s and 1940s to oversee logging and the commitment in recent decades to adopt ecosystem management, the agency remains hobbled by its political past, its legacy of degraded landscapes, and its continued context within a capitalist system. Instead of a forest policy, the USFS had a fire policy.

The problem with this argument is that, surprisingly, it adds very little to what the dominant narrative already tells of the USFS and fire. The historic participants were transparent about what they were doing; the standard texts openly relate the political logic behind their strategy. ***Fire Management in the American West*** more or less restates this story in overtly Marxist language. While Hudson's approach allows him to tinker with the historical numbers to be tabulated, their end sum is unchanged. A more useful explanation might be found not in the influence of forest industry but in that from the guild of foresters to which all parties belonged.

The fact remains, Greeley and the USFS had their own compelling reasons to fight fire with or without industry support. One could even argue that Clarke-McNary was the USFS's way of co-opting industry to support its commitment to fire control. Where the failure of capitalism did affect the national forests was in its contribution to the Great Depression, which led to the Civilian Conservation Corps, half of whose immense labors went into fire protection. There is no evidence for a counterfactual case that the USFS would have followed a different fire policy had Clarke-McNary failed. The 10 AM suppression policy, after all, was enacted by an ardent New Dealer.

Worse, the book's thesis does not explain megafires. No one doubts that a legacy of fire-excluded forests, along with drought, is a major factor in the contemporary fire scene. But burned area, even when classified as megafire, is not by itself a useful index of that troubled inheritance. The proximate causes for the metastasizing burns are changes in land use (particularly placing more land into wilderness or protected status); a resolve to improve firefighter safety (refusing to put crews at risk); and reforms in fire policy and practice (encouraging fire's reinstatement). For decades it has been the announced ambition of the federal agencies to return fire to something like its presettlement geography (be careful what you wish for). It is hard to explain the Wilderness Act, the Endangered Species Act, or the 1988 Yellowstone fires as the lackeys of timber capitalism. The USFS, once a fire hegemon, has not enjoyed autonomy of action for decades, but the pressures are at least as great from the agents of environmentalism as from those controlling the forces of production.

For me, the real disappointment with *Fire Management in the American West* is that it fumbles the opportunity to take on the "dominant narrative" in a more robust way. Hudson treats that received account generously--far more so than I would if our positions were reversed. He accepts

much of it, and wishes to buttress the existing edifice where he feels its load-bearing walls are shaky. In the end he removes the old stones and replaces them with another brand. The wall remains.

Probably no case study will topple the prevailing narrative. Replacing it will require an alternative narrative of comparable power and completeness. Or better, the American fire community needs a pluralism of stories as it does of practices. ***Fire Management in the American West*** contributes to such an undertaking, but it does so in ways that will likely appeal more to Marxists searching out useful illustrations of their theories than to those wanting a better explanation for the varied strands that tangle into the American fire scene.

Still, the origin story is worth fighting over. It matters because if you misread the causes, you are likely to misjudge the suitable remedies. If historians cannot supply a usable narrative to fire officers, those in the field will be tempted, as in the past, to simply sever that Gordian knot with the swift stroke of a Pulaski.

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