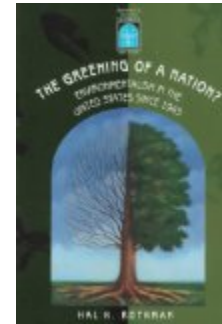


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hal K. Rothman. *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945*. Orlando, Fla. and London, England: Harcourt Brace, 1998. x + 210 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-502855-5.

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A Pale Green Nation

On January 28, 1969, an oil-well platform off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, dumped 235,000 gallons of crude oil into the ocean. Residents of the wealthy town expressed outrage at the insulting black sludge that fouled the white beaches, yet they failed to recognize their own roles in the calamity as major consumers of American abundance. Moreover, the spill was only one of many in other places in that year and was certainly not the worst case of pollution the world had seen in the years since 1945. In *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States since 1945*, Hal K. Rothman argues that Americans in the postwar years supported environmental ideals when they were convenient or, as in the case of the Santa Barbara oil spill, when ecological disaster forced the issue, but they were generally unwilling to sacrifice even the smallest amount of material comfort in the name of those ideals (pp. 101-105).

Rothman's book is part of the series edited by Gerald N. Nash and Richard W. Etulain, "Harbrace Books on America since 1945," commonly used to introduce specific topics in U.S. history surveys and other undergraduate courses. It serves this purpose well and also is a valuable tool for educators as a reference for teaching about postwar America. Importantly, this is not just a book about the environmental movement. Rather, Rothman presents environmentalism as a significant indicator of American values in this period. The book can help students examine postwar America in a variety of ways, such as how affluence affected and reflected American values and ideals, how people responded to environ-

mental problems, and how those responses changed over time. Indeed, the history of environmentalism is a fascinating story of the American process of political action; of a national dialogue about such fundamental issues as human health, technology, and the worth of nature; and of broad social change over time. The story involves a wide variety of groups and individuals, including college students, mothers, radical activists, politicians, scientists, and federal government agencies. Because Rothman brings the story up to the 1990s, and because environmentalism has become such a mainstream, but still contested, element in American culture, *The Greening of a Nation?* provides an effective tool for teaching students the value of historical perspective in evaluating current social and political issues.

Rothman begins by discussing the environmental consequences of postwar growth and how the environmental movement that responded to them was different from the conservation movement of the turn of the century led by the Sierra Club and Progressive public land managers. The postwar environmental movement gained strength under the politically savvy leadership of David Brower and the large public awareness that he helped create over the Echo Park Dam controversy in the early 1950s. The early movement established a trend that would persist into the 1990s: it was confined to a narrow focus on wilderness preservation. Although it had broadened its appeal from the earlier elite conservation movement—now including members of the growing middle class—it neglected urban environmental issues affect-

ing poorer Americans.

Environmentalism did not enter the mainstream of American politics and culture until the 1960s when certain individuals and groups helped popularize environmental causes. Rachel Carson and Lady Bird Johnson increased awareness about various forms of pollution, and Paul Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin raised important questions about the effects of uncontrolled population growth on shared resources. Mass media and popular culture also played an important role, affirming environmentalism as central to American values. In fact, Rothman argues that “of all the changes of the 1960s, [environmentalism] was second only to the transformation of the concept of individual and group rights in the way in which it transformed American thinking and action” (p. 107). Bipartisan support for such legislation as the Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the Clean Air Act of 1977 reflected a general American consensus about environmentalism that would last until the backlash of the 1980s.

Particularly important is Rothman’s analysis of the influence of the economy on environmental ideas. Environmentalism experienced great success as an increasingly mainstream movement between 1945 and 1974, the period of the highest ever American affluence and of concern with a new idea that emerged from that privilege vaguely called “quality of life.” Americans wanted both a higher standard of living and a cleaner environment (p. 195). Affluence provided more freedom for environmental activism and for the notion that America could afford to be both wealthy and “green.” However, an economic downturn in the 1970s made that same activism too “expensive” and set up opposition between environmental thought and economic well being that would express itself most poignantly in the Sagebrush Rebellion and the Wise Use Movement in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ranchers and others in the West rebelled against what they perceived to be federal government and environmentalist infringement on their private property rights and their rights to develop lands for private enterprise. Led by Secretary of the Interior James Watt, such defiance during the Reagan era represented the extreme expression of a tendency seen more widely in American society since the 1960s: to value individual rights often at the expense of a broader vision of social responsibilities. By the 1990s, this was also a national tendency: Americans criticized developing countries for industrial excesses but refused to modify their own consumption patterns. Because of such contradictions, the general

public in the United States never became fully “green,” even as radical environmentalists became increasingly polarized in contrast to their opponents. As Rothman contends, “environmentalists had succeeded in persuading the majority of Americans of the value of protecting the environment. They had not resolved the fundamental tension between the cultural and individual restraint that this ethic of protection requires and the acquisitiveness and individualism that has been the hallmark of the nation during most of its first two hundred years” (pp. 208-209).

Caught in the middle of environmentalism’s unresolved tensions were the institutions charged with managing millions of acres of public land. The author devotes a somewhat incongruous chapter to explaining the increasing alienation the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Bureau of Reclamation felt toward their publics. Although they had previously relied on conservation groups as allies, the new environmentalism that emerged in the 1950s initiated waves of continuing public criticism of federal land management. Rothman brings to bear his background as a historian who has studied federal land agencies to make this chapter a useful examination of the federal government’s role in postwar environmentalism. This may be more useful to professional historians than to students, however. Instructors may need to field questions and complaints from students about the utility of a detailed chapter that explores, one by one, the administrative challenges of each agency.

This is a book that broadens the definition of environmentalism from a political movement to a fundamental new consciousness in postwar American society. But Rothman questions whether environmentalism was truly a “green revolution,” as Kirkpatrick Sale suggests in his book about the movement.[1] Rothman answers his book’s title query skeptically when he explains that the “greening of the nation was far from complete” (p. 209). The environment was cleaner and laws now protected the health of habitats, humans, and other species, but Americans embraced the idea of environmentalism more than the behavior required to sustain it. In part, this was a reflection of the movement’s failure to address working class concerns and international environmental efforts. Just as important, environmentalism, like other political movements, paid a steep price for becoming part of popular culture. Rothman illustrates this dilemma well when he describes the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Day celebration held in New York’s Central Park in 1990. More than 200,000 people expressed their envi-

rommental feelings by producing almost 45 tons of refuse at the event. The author quips, "it is entirely possible that the planet might have been better off if they had just stayed home" (p. 210). At best, environmentalism since 1945 seems to be the story of a pale green nation.

Notes:

[1]. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Green Revolution: The American Environmental Movement, 1962-1992. A Critical Issue*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. See also Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*. American Century Series. New York: Hill

and Wang, 1993.

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