

H-Net Reviews

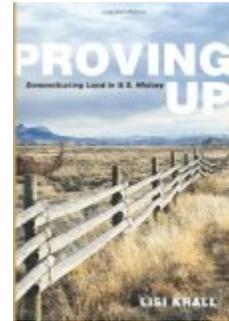
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisi Krall. *Proving Up: Domesticating Land in U.S. History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. 132 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-3079-9.

Reviewed by Michelle Mart (Penn State University, Berks)

Published on H-Environment (November, 2010)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



Capitalism and the Domestication of the Land

The mythic power of western land has long dominated narratives of American history. Lisi Krall seeks to challenge this myth, untangling the narratives into their component parts of philosophy, economic systems, political decision making, and spiritual awe. Her slim volume, *Proving Up: Domesticating Land in U.S. History*, successfully argues that the frontier myth was constructed foremost from a capitalist imperative superimposed on material circumstances.

The book has two starting points, one anecdotal, one philosophical. The anecdote concerns the author's paternal grandfather, a homesteader in southwestern Wyoming, who was shot by his neighbor in 1920 in a dispute over water rights. Krall's grandfather, according to the federal government's homesteading regulations, was required to dig canals to irrigate his dry land in an impossibly short period of time. In the short term, he did what he needed to do for survival, and thus impinged on the water rights of his neighbor. The grandfather's downfall illustrates what the author explains to be the mismatch of nineteenth-century agricultural homesteading expectations with an arid landscape more suitable for ranching.

Krall presents this episode with her grandfather as a consequence of what happened when the "agrarian ethos" shaped federal land policy. Thus, she introduces the main focus of *Proving Up*: to trace the origins and tenacity of the "agrarian ethos," how it evolved in tandem with market capitalism, how it came to shape federal land policies, and, more broadly, the relationship of

Americans to land over more than two hundred years.

The philosophical roots of this ethos lies, Krall argues, in John Locke's understanding of property and Thomas Jefferson's view of the human relationship with land. Locke's view that property status devolved on those who made use of the land supported Jefferson's agrarian ideal and an understanding of property rights in the new republic.

Krall argues that Jefferson's views would necessarily have to evolve or give way to a new cultural ideology since his "agrarian ideal" and faith in liberal capitalism was rooted in petty commodity production. Yet, there was a dramatic shift in the first half of the nineteenth century from use value to exchange value, where the "purpose of production shift[ed] from making useful things to making money" (p. 24).

Krall traces the development of federal land policies from the early republic to the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862. She makes a strong case that the culmination in the Homestead Act was the predictable continuation of existing land policy, doing nothing to change the basic thrust of fee simple ownership and the privileged position of settlement and the agrarian ideal.

Despite the unique circumstances on the arid lands further west, Krall argues that the basic assumptions of federal land policies continued into the early twentieth century, leading to "a patchwork of policies [that] were mixed and matched to extend basic agrarian expecta-

tions in the arid West” (p. 63). Along with the changing material conditions of the land in question, Krall argues that federal land policies also adapted to the constraints of the developing market economy with now competing uses for land. Thus, a multidimensional land use model was developed. The competition for multiple land uses—agriculture, mining, ranching, timber, and conservation—ended up overwhelming the patchwork system in place. The biggest loser in the competition, according to Krall, was conservation.

Krall cannot escape the conclusion that the market economy has been the consistently dominant force in defining the American relationship to land. Even with such conservationist measures of the 1970s as the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act, the evolution of the agrarian ethos and the market economy in tandem, reinforced the idea that public land could be effectively managed to meet its multidimensional uses. But despite the repeated efforts to frame conservation as just one of the multiple uses, Krall argues that it is incompatible with market-based uses.

Although most of *Proving Up* is an examination of the simultaneous evolution of the agrarian ethos and market capitalism, the last chapter and epilogue turn to a competing cultural formulation: the wilderness ethos. Contrasting this formulation with the agrarian ideal, Krall concludes that “the wilderness ethos comes out of our history of domestication but it is not an ethos of domestication” (p. 90). As have other authors before her, Krall finds a spiritual dimension in this ethos: “Wilderness clearly evokes a sensibility in us that is part of the full exploration of what it means to be human” (p. 89). In the end, Krall concludes that thus far, the wilderness ethos has always lost out to the agrarian ethos because the relationships valued within the ethos have no market value. Thus, “the wilderness ethos is not as adaptable as the agrarian ethos. Absence of the hand of man is not easily reconciled with continued economic expansion. It simply cannot be sustained for long while basic economic institutions remain unchanged” (p. 94).

Proving Up has many strengths. Foremost among them is the broad philosophical sweep tying together capitalist development, governmental policies, and environmental views over more than two hundred years. For those without a background in economics, Krall’s overview and explanation of complex developments is enlightening. The author’s decision to tell of this interaction in a brief, tightly woven format strengthens the

overall story.

But as much as the breadth of perspective is valuable, greater context from the historiographic movements of environmental history would have enriched the interdisciplinary aspect of the book. For example, Krall’s discussion of the conservationist strain within the agrarian ethos and the competing wilderness ethos does not address the long-standing discussion in environmental history comparing the conflicts among conservationist and wilderness ideals at different points in American history, nor the relationship with late twentieth-century environmentalism. In her defense of the wilderness ethos, Krall pleads that it should not be dismissed as an elitist indulgence, but it would have been valuable to discuss this as a long-standing topic of historical debate.

Krall’s use of the term “agrarian ethos” also leads to some confusion for the reader. Although Krall carefully explains the agricultural origins of this term and the persistence of an agricultural ideal, she also writes that “the agrarian ethos was adaptable and as an ethos of domestication it ultimately extended beyond simple agriculture” (p. xvii). Thus, it is unclear why a term such as “domestication,” “development,” “environmental,” or “land ethos” was not chosen instead.

The emphasis on the agrarian ethos for most of the book also overshadows the author’s stated purpose at the outset: “I hope this environmental history will help us ponder more fully the necessary ingredients for creating a sustainable future” (p. 1). The goal of debating a sustainable future slips from view, only to reemerge in the last chapter and epilogue when the author makes a plea for the value of pure wilderness, untouched by the development imperative. Krall’s embrace of wilderness is accompanied by the acknowledgement that there can be no change in the agrarian ethos without a change in fundamental institutions. Yet, despite the passion of the last ten pages, the author stops short of actually calling for the overthrow of the existing market system or of clearly spelling out what should replace the agrarian ideal. We are left with the injunction to “think more clearly about all that makes for a good life” (p. 104), and although the author seems to have come to her own conclusions on this score, she is not announcing them to her readers.

Proving Up challenges readers with a broad, interdisciplinary interpretation of economic, cultural, and environmental policies, and is a unique integration of some familiar subjects.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Michelle Mart. Review of Krall, Lisi, *Proving Up: Domesticating Land in U.S. History*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30796>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.