



Ronald T. Libby. *ECO-WARS: Political Campaigns and Social Movements*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. xiv + 254 pp. \$72.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11310-6.



Reviewed by Jonathan P. Spiro

Published on H-Environment (June, 2000)

I wanted so much to like this book. The topic -- an investigation of the strategies employed by the most recent generation of grassroots public interest groups as they battle against large-scale corporate interests -- is inherently interesting. And the author --the chair of political science at St. Joseph's University and the author of five books -- is a well-informed and thoughtful writer who is certainly capable of producing a clear, crisp narrative. Unfortunately, the book's admirable scholarship is marred by an annoying (albeit subtle) anti-environmental bias that detracts from the author's message and does a disservice to his work.

OVERVIEW

Eco-Wars (according to the back cover) attempts to answer the question: "Can grassroots interest groups ever win the wars they wage against big business in America?" By studying the resources, tactics, strategies, and leadership of voluntary grassroots organizations, Libby claims that he hopes to illuminate the circumstances by which activist groups are able to successfully

challenge the political influence of corporations in a democratic society.

Libby presents his argument in a logically organized format. In Chapter One he introduces us to the topic of public interest groups (which Libby calls "expressive groups"). He masterfully reviews the literature of the field and does an excellent job of placing his work in its historiographical context. Political scientists who are interested in definitions, models, and theories of political behavior will especially appreciate his efforts in this regard. As for historians, activists, and the general reader, they can probably skim this chapter rather quickly in order to get on to the narrative portions of the book.

The introduction is followed by five chapters, each of which presents a case study of a recent episode where a grass roots organization waged a campaign against the corporate giants. Thus, Chapter Two is a sophisticated and fascinating overview of the anti-biotechnology campaign of the early 1990s, when the Foundation on Economic Trends (headed by Jeremy Rifkin), the Humane Farming Association, Rural Vermont, and the Cen-

ter for Science in the Public Interest crusaded against genetic engineering. They focused their attack on the manufacture of bovine somatotropin (a.k.a. "bovine growth hormone") by drug companies interested in stimulating increased milk production. While the expressive groups did not achieve all of their goals, their efforts did result in many states passing moratoriums against the drug.

Chapter Three discusses the Massachusetts animal rights campaign of 1988, when CEASE (the Coalition to End Animal Suffering and Exploitation) sponsored a ballot initiative that sought to establish government standards for the humane treatment of farm animals. The animal rights activists were particularly interested in banning veal crates, requiring anesthetics for castrating and dehorning livestock, and prohibiting the grinding or suffocating of unwanted male chicks. With the opposition of the agribusiness industry, which outspent CEASE by a margin of twenty to one, the initiative was resoundingly defeated.

Chapter Four is about the "Big Green" campaign of 1990, when California environmentalists tried to pass Proposition 128, the most ambitious environmental legislation ever proposed in the United States. Despite the support of the state Democratic Party and the Hollywood establishment, the initiative was rejected by the voters after agricultural companies and other business groups raised over fifteen million dollars to oppose it.

Chapter Five is about the successful efforts of the Coalition for Healthy Californians to defeat Proposition 188, the 1994 initiative sponsored by Philip Morris and R. J. Reynolds that aimed to override the state's Smokefree Workplace Act.

Chapter Six describes the efforts of a right-wing group called the Grassroots ESA Coalition to dismantle the Endangered Species Act. Arguing that the regulations issued under the Act threatened the property rights of private landowners, the coalition lobbied Congress to replace the ESA

in 1995, but the Republican leadership, fearful that their party's anti-environmental image would be a political liability in the election of 1996, killed the bill in committee.

These five case studies are followed by a concluding chapter, in which Libby induces that while expressive groups do not win all their battles, they are nonetheless "formidable opponents of business" and their existence "is important to the health of the American democratic system" (p. 208, 216).

PROBLEMS

The problems with *Eco-Wars* fall into two categories: mechanical and ideological. First of all, the book is repetitious to a fault, and could be at least twenty percent shorter. In addition, the text suffers from far too many editing -- or rather, lack of editing -- errors. There are scores of examples, with which I will not bore the reader. Suffice to say that the book often reads like a first draft, and would have been immeasurably improved if the editors had paid just a little more attention to detail. These mechanical mistakes are unfortunate, because there really is a well-written, lucidly-conceived book here, somewhere. Give me a red pen, and about twenty-four hours, and I am fully confident that I could whip it into shape. Why the good folks at Columbia University Press could not be bothered to do so is beyond me.

As to the ideological problems, the fact is that sometime around page thirty it dawns on the reader that this is not a wholly objective piece of research, but rather a cleverly manipulative polemic. And furthermore, the polemic favors exactly the opposite side of the "eco-wars" that the subscribers of H-Environment would expect. For throughout his narrative, Libby subtly but insidiously denigrates environmentalists, consumer groups, anti-smoking activists, food safety advocates, animal rights supporters, and their philosophical allies. Environmentalists are almost invariably characterized in this book as "extremists," "militants," "radicals," and "alarmists," who

are usually ill-informed, politically ambitious, and stand in the way of "economic progress." With their "aggressive" tactics and "doomsday" scenarios, it seems that environmentalists like nothing better than to place "onerous restrictions" on the rights of private property and impose "regulatory schemes" to prevent the "wise use" of the country's natural resources.

In Libby's world, American businesses are burdened by the government with unnecessary and onerous safety and health regulations; large corporations receive bad publicity because the grass roots organizations have a virtual monopoly over access to the media; and agribusinesses are humane and responsible stewards of the earth and its creatures, and they almost always use pesticides with extreme care. For Libby, the fact that a proposed environmental protection or food safety law might have an adverse economic impact on some company is ipso facto a reason to reject such measures. And he is always willing to give full credence to any alleged grievance uttered by a business spokesperson. Thus, if some industry is "concerned" that a proposed regulation will be "unworkable and financially onerous" (p. 72), then we are supposed to unquestioningly accept that the regulation must be unworkable and financially onerous. And if a business regards a government edict as "time consuming, costly, and unnecessary" (p. 72), then the edict is obviously an undesirable one, whatever benefits it might grant to society or to the environment.

In his case studies, Libby skillfully uses language to tilt the arguments in his favor. Thus, the property rights advocates who wanted to repeal the Endangered Species Act were merely seeking to "reform" it (p. 203). The large out-of-state agribusinesses who opposed the animal rights campaign in Massachusetts contributed "only" \$640,000 to the campaign (a campaign in which the industry's opponents had a total budget of \$50,000) (p. 76). And while the cigarette industry ran commercials to support its pro-smoking initia-

tive in 1994, its anti-smoking opponents conducted "an expensive high-profile advertising blitz" (p. 163).

In addition, Libby is fond of employing "weasel words" to make his points without being held accountable. Thus, he claims that the influence of public interest groups on the FDA "may" lengthen the drug approval process (p. 37); anesthetizing animals for operations "might" be dangerous to their health (p. 72); and the Natural Resources Defense Council "had a reputation" for criticizing anything and everything the government did (p. 105). And when the EPA surveyed a number of research studies and concluded that secondhand smoke significantly increases the risk of cancer, Libby informs us that "some" scientists feel that meta-analysis is a statistical form of "alchemy or witchcraft" (p. 144). (Tellingly, Libby has no qualms about citing a report by the National Academy of Science that also used meta-analysis to conclude that there is "no evidence that pesticides or natural toxins in food contribute significantly to cancer risk in the United States" [p. 108].)

To defend his positions, Libby sometimes engages in feats of logic that are wondrous to behold. Three examples will suffice. (1) He assures us that veal crates are actually good for the animals, because imprisoning calves in small pens enables growers "to keep them clean and monitor their health and development" (p. 73). (2) He feels it is unfair that grassroots organizations are small in size and have meager resources, because it often makes it difficult for their corporate opponents -- a la David and Goliath -- to hit back at them (p. 84).

(3) He claims (with a straight face) that the Endangered Species Act is probably unnecessary since "the extinction of a species may be tragic, but it is seldom catastrophic.... Indeed, the extinction of some species can make significant contributions to society. For example, humanity would have been better off if the deadly smallpox virus and the Ebola virus had never existed and if the

species of African monkey many scientists believe was the host for the AIDS virus had become extinct. Besides, stopping evolution is impossible. Scientists estimate that species have an average lifespan of only about 100,000 years. Therefore, we are constantly losing and gaining species" (p. 185).

Unfortunately, the publicity department of Columbia University Press (which, by the way, sent out an incorrect ISB Number) participates in the deception. Their literature asks: "Can grassroots interest groups ever win the wars they wage in the political arena against big business in America? In *ECO-WARS* ... Ronald T. Libby asserts that viable strategies are available to organizations that seek to challenge business interests in the political arena." In fact, the lesson of Libby's book is just the opposite: that viable strategies are available to *business* interests that seek to *fend off* challenges from grassroots interest groups. In other words, while the book claims to be a history of five campaigns waged by grass roots movements against big business, it reads more like a history of the campaigns waged by big business to *defeat* the grass roots movements. It is, in a sense, a manual on how to counteract environmental campaigns.

To be sure, Libby is scrupulous about presenting both sides of every issue. And he may well claim that in espousing some of his positions he is simply presenting the opinions of anti-environmentalists, without necessarily endorsing them himself. But, as seen above, the language he uses to present the arguments of both sides, and the amount of time he devotes to each, leaves little doubt as to where his sympathies lie. For example, in the section of Chapter Five that is disingenuously titled "Grassroots Antismoking Campaigns," Libby spends just the first two paragraphs discussing grassroots antismoking campaigns, followed by nine full pages defending the claims of researchers at the Tobacco Institute (the chief Washington, D.C.-based lobbying organiza-

tion of the tobacco industry) that secondhand smoke is not harmful to nonsmokers.

I have no objection whatsoever to Libby holding and defending a political position. In fact, to a certain extent I share his political views. I happen to agree with him, for example, that many of the opponents of genetic engineering are scientifically illiterate. But the great irony of Libby's tactics is that I found myself instinctively coming to the defense of groups and causes with which I do not normally agree. His propagandistic approach, in other words, backfires on him, as any reader with a sense of fairness will resent his linguistic sleights of hand and resist his arguments, however well-founded some of them might be.

Despite my forgivings, *Eco-Wars* will actually be of some use in the classroom. Historians will appreciate the concise narratives of the five grassroots campaigns. Political scientists will admire Libby's interesting exploration of the theory of public interest groups. And all teachers can use the text as a device to teach students how to spot bias in academic discourse.

Copyright (c) 2000 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 network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Jonathan P. Spiro. Review of Libby, Ronald T. *ECO-WARS: Political Campaigns and Social Movements*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4192>



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