



**Perrin Selcer.** *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth.* Columbia Studies in International and Global History Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 400 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-16648-5.

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Perrin Selcer's *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment* is a compelling examination of how the bureaucracy of the United Nations created a concept of the global-scale environment. He argues that the notion of a global environment typified by "Spaceship Earth" originated in postwar internationalists' political efforts to build a world community, specifically in the ways they attempted to create a global knowledge infrastructure. Through six chronological chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, Selcer proves his argument by detailing the projects and actions of scientists and bureaucrats connected to UN specialized agencies. He examines UN projects and conferences, such as the International Congress on Mental Health, the Arid Zone Program, the Soil Map of the World, the International Biological Program, and the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), relying predominantly on official sources from relevant agencies, technical reports, correspondence, and public commentary.

Throughout the book Selcer threads two structuring ideas. The first is the "three UNs"—member states; secretariats, or administrative offices; and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—which worked together or against one another to create and manage projects (p. 16). The second is the tension between the "view from everywhere" and the

"view from above," which plays out in the agencies and conferences as scientists and bureaucrats debated whether authority should be spread around the world or consolidated in an elite, allegedly objective, group of experts, increasingly understood to be scientists in this story (p. 21). For those unfamiliar with the structure of the UN or the tangle of referenced agencies, committees, congresses, and programs, the "alphabet soup" of overlapping names and goals can make the story difficult to track, but no less intriguing.

The first chapter centers social scientific efforts to create a world community through "action-research" and education using the supposedly apolitical work of science. Selcer focuses on these social psychologists' cosmopolitan work through the 1948 International Congress on Mental Health and UNESCO's school curriculum in Los Angeles, California. These efforts failed to produce the world citizens they desired in the aftermath of World War II; however, postwar internationalists established the UN goal of creating a view from everywhere by relying on their beliefs in science as universal and objective as well as their own global community within the republic of letters.

The second, third, and fourth chapters analyze conservation, aridity, and soil projects respectively, revealing how the scientists and bureaucrats of

various UN agencies turned from citizenship toward the environment to increase the scale of human perceptions to global levels. Through each, Selcer tracks the UN focus on development at local, regional, and global scales, examining how experts, governments, and publics participated in vital bureaucratic boundary work that formed the basis for global environmental knowledge. Conservation efforts in UNESCO analyzed in chapter 2 reveal the early origins of Spaceship Earth with regional resource management techniques called “integrated river basin development” facilitating the growth of both UN bureaucracy and global environmental knowledge (p. 75). Chapter 3’s focus on the Arid Zone Program shows how the attempt to redevelop deserts into productive lands failed scientifically but succeeded bureaucratically, building on the epistemic community of scientists who learned to more effectively navigate the UN. Crucial here is that desertification itself was a myth that served various and contradictory purposes, and this environmental focus was a more effective political tool than a scientific one. The aridity program also solidified the view from above in the UN, but as Selcer shows in chapter 4, this existed simultaneously with the view from everywhere. Here he intricately details the creation of the Soil Map of the World, examining how the standardization of soil science, most prominently featured in the map legends, created a group of elite international scientists who worked together at the highest levels to establish global environmental knowledge.

These chapters form a sort of base for the fifth and sixth chapters, which most forcefully bring Selcer’s argument home. Chapter 5 shows how biologists, ecologists, and physical scientists attempted to “materialize” the global environment and reveal its connections through large-scale dynamic models and concepts, such as the biosphere and cybernetics that turned the planet into a system with a Global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS) that served as the “cockpit” of Spaceship Earth (p. 204). UN experts vacillated from using lo-

cal examples connected to a global system to starting with the whole to conceptualize the global scale, but ultimately their technocratic efforts tended to erase human presence in what Selcer deems the “view from the middle of nowhere” (p. 194). The final chapter focuses on the 1972 UNCHE (often deemed the Stockholm Conference due to its location). This conference was a culmination of efforts to make the global-scale environment recognizable for political and economic understandings, primarily through the colonial legacies of “development” work.

Above all, Selcer’s book offers two key insights. First, he shows how the scales of environmental perceptions changed as bureaucrats and scientists made local and global connections between human minds, climates, soils, and, ultimately, the entirety of the environment. Second, while authors typically mark the beginning of the global environment with the Stockholm Conference, Selcer moves the timeline backward revealing how conceptions of the earth as a whole system were built on political, economic, and scientific efforts in the UN between the 1940s and the 1970s.

This is a challenging and insightful book best suited for scholars of environmental history and the history of science. Selcer uses and makes contributions to a variety of theories and histories—most prominently those of authors Ian Hacking, Timothy Mitchell, Bruno Latour, Paul Sutter, and John McNeill—that provide key foundations for his work on scales, the Anthropocene, and the global environment. Throughout the book there are places where it can be difficult to track exactly how the intricate bureaucratic and scientific detail connects to his larger arguments. Perhaps the most important here is the transition from imperialism to internationalism, which is not explicitly made to be a contextual element in the way that Selcer says the Cold War and decolonization are. It is possible that centering these contextual elements would provide the book a stronger impact, revealing how our understanding of the globe is in-

separable from the legacies and ongoing efforts of imperialism and colonialism. Regardless, this book offers a fascinating and intricate look at the nature of UN bureaucracy and how it made sense of the global environment many today take for granted.

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