



S. Ravi Rajan, Lise Sedrez, eds. *The Great Convergence: An Environmental History of BRICS*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xix + 442 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-947937-5.



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This edited volume presents a detailed account of the emerging field of environmental history within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) states. While Jim O'Neill's identification of these emerging states[1] may have been born from economic considerations, the political traction that has subsequently emerged between them has given form to this geopolitical group. It has also seen a proliferation of analysis from researchers across various fields including politics, sociology, and, in this case, environmental history. This volume addresses the point that when it comes to BRICS, historians have largely been absent from the discussion.

While BRICS provides the framework for the book, as a group it is not, however, known for its progressive stance on environmental concerns. As Jairam Ramesh, former Indian minister of environment and forests points out, it was the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) group that came together to provide a collective voice at the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen (COP9) in 2009 (p. ix). In the introduction Rajan indicates

that while the BRICS states have very little in common “as far as history goes,” they are “staking a claim for a convergent future” (p. xv). A reading of the subsequent chapters reveals that perhaps they have more in common than has been previously assessed. The inclusion of authors from across these regions is a strength of the publication, offering an insider understanding of the environment from the position of the state, civil society, and environmental history.

In addition to historians, part 1 would be of particular interest to those with a political science background given the focus on the role of the state, the conceptualization of the environment, and policy development. In the case of Brazil, India, and South Africa, this includes the impact of colonialism and the marginalization of the indigenous people. All the chapters in this section point to the dominant role of the state in controlling their territory, resulting in environmental degradation, social deprivation, and corruption. As Regina Horta Duarte sums up in chapter 1 (Brazil), the relations between the state, society, and the environment

are characterized by “tension between development/conservation and nationalism/globalism, intervention/absence of state regulation” (p. 19). This is a theme carried across in the subsequent contributions considering Russia, India, China, and South Africa. While the chapters do point to progress in developing more inclusive environmental policies, particularly following the political changes of the early 1990s, problems of implementation and an emphasis on economic development and large-scale government infrastructure projects continue to marginalize concerns regarding the environment.

When it comes to implementation, this is affected by perceptions concerning the relationship between the government and the environment. For China, Xueqin Mei points out that “there was no such term as ‘environmental protection’ in China” prior to 1972 (p. 70) while for Russia, Paul Josephson highlights the perception that natural resources were low-cost or even free goods. This contrasts with the Indian approach, where a rise in environmental social movements and the study of the environment encouraged debate in the management of India’s environmental resources. Indira Gandhi’s government highlighted the importance of the environment for humanity, criticizing the West’s approach to environmentalism and consumption. On South Africa, William Beinart points out that although the focus was limited to conservation and agricultural development by the political elites, there was an emerging recognition of the link between the state and the environment. What the chapters all effectively demonstrate is the evolving relationship between the state and the environment.

In part 2, the focus shifts to the evolving voices of civil societies and their engagement with the state on the environment. On Brazil, José Augusto Pádua highlights two streams of environmentalism (middle-class and grassroots), while for Russia, Nicolai Dronin points to the role of academicians and writers in shaping the environmental lobby-

ing under the Soviet Union. In the case of China, Fei Sheng points to the growing civil awareness of the environmental challenges facing the state, but highlights the impact of culture and perceptions on the central role of the state in driving environmental protection. As Sheng argues, “while ENGOs [environmental NGOs] do ferret out environmental problems and criticize the negligent government, they abstain from radical confrontation, and are cautious about joining in street demonstrations” (p. 182). What both the chapters on Russia and China highlight is the challenges of resources (human and financial), lack of coordination between groups, and the distance between grassroots movements and environmental NGOs.

In the case of India, Radhika Krishman argues that civil society and NGOs have played a role in transforming ideas linked to development, sustainability, and the environment. Where India stands out from the other BRICS is in the increased use of public interest litigation linked to the right to a clean and healthy environment. In South Africa, Farieda Khan addresses evolving engagement from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century; however this is limited by the sociopolitical context of apartheid. With South Africa’s transition to democracy in 1994, there has been a move toward a “people-centred,” environmental justice approach (p. 208); nevertheless, perceptions persist that the environment is something of a luxury. This has limited the diversification of the membership of civil society and NGO organizations (p. 219).

All the contributions to part 2 highlight the challenges facing NGO and civil society groups across the BRICS states. This includes government resistance to NGO and civil-society approaches, the murder of activists, and the muting of disparate voices by the politics of nationalism and ideology. But perhaps the biggest challenge for the future of all states, identified by the Russia case, is the limited engagement by future generations with environmental activism.

In part 3 the discussion turns to environmental history as a field of study. For those looking to undertake research (comparative, regional, country-specific) in this field, this section provides detailed insight into the literature on environmental history across the BRICS. One of the key points in this section is that there are contested positions on knowledge development. This is highlighted by Lise Sedrez and Eunice Nodari (Brazil), S. Ravi Rajan and Rohan D'Souza (India), and Sandra Swart (South Africa) in discussions linked to knowledge development from the colonizer and indigenous knowledge systems. Consideration is also given to the external influence shaping environmental historiography within these states, where the role of the West, and the United States in particular, is highlighted in the cases of Brazil, Russia, and China. There is an acknowledgement across the chapters that there has been an uneven development in focus, where some areas remain under-researched. In Russia, for instance, this includes rivers, while in India questions on gender, social movement, and famine are only beginning to emerge. This may be a response to what Swart points out is the challenge of casting the discussion within a state-centric framework, limiting critical reflection on a field that is transnational in nature.

This is a point S. Ravi Rajan returns to in the final chapter, highlighting the need for further exploration of the subject and how it is studied: from comparative history, southern history, the history of the subaltern, and development studies. The book does well in addressing areas of similarity and differences between the BRICS, with the final chapter highlighting opportunities for learning. This point could have been taken forward even further in the conclusion. While the editors have done well to address overlap, there is naturally some commonality when discussing interlinked subjects across the book. Given the depth of research, this book would be useful for those setting out in advancing an understanding of environmental history beyond a Western perspective.

Note

[1]. Initially the group included Brazil, India, Russia and China. South Africa was included in 2010.

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