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Author

Sowards, Adam M.

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Review: Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival: The Remaking of American Environmentalism

By Michael Egan

Reviewed by Adam M. Sowards
University of Idaho, USA

Egan, Michael. *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival: The Remaking of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007. 283 pp. ISBN: 0262050862. US\$28.00, cloth.

As postwar American society raced pell-mell into an embrace with technology, scientists emerged as nearly unrivaled experts who promised positive changes for all Americans' quality of life. However, a counter-current also emerged in which a dissenting group of scientists worried about the social and ecological consequences of the scientific and technological changes permeating modern life. Among the leaders of this group has been biologist Barry Commoner. Historian Michael Egan's excellent new study of Commoner reveals the contours where science, environmentalism, and social activism intersect.

More than a biography of Commoner, *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival: The Remaking of American Environmentalism* tells the story of the shifting ways American society valued the environment. With Commoner as the lens, Egan investigates how the emerging sense of ecological crisis demanded that environmental activism be reformed to include prominently social questions. To accomplish this, according to Egan, a historian at McMaster University, Commoner constructed a new apparatus to address the crisis, a structure emphasizing the importance of dissent, widely accessible scientific information, and public dialogues about environmental dangers.

Commoner employed several strategies to raise awareness and question assumptions about social and environmental costs of postwar changes. For instance, in 1958 he cofounded the Committee on Nuclear Information to publicly report on nuclear testing's health and environmental effects. Commoner also became well known for popular scientific writings such *Science and Survival* (1966) and *The Closing Circle* (1971), which resulted in popularizing ecology. By becoming so visible, Commoner attracted critics, including other dissenting scientists (e.g., Paul Ehrlich) and environmentalists. Commoner's vision was always broader than simple nature protection as he strongly incorporated social criticism within his analysis, and he ultimately embraced socialism as preferable to capitalism. Throughout his career, Commoner saw public information and risk assessment as central to a functioning democracy. Without adequate information and with greater exposure, America's poor and racial minorities bore significantly increased risks associated with technological pollution. Consequently and importantly, Commoner's environmentalism remained rooted in social justice, a neglected and marginalized component of modern environmentalism.

Egan's book is best when examining the intersection of social justice, environmentalism, and science. At that nexus, he persuasively argues, Commoner exposed critical and problematic fault lines in modern American society and charged fellow scientists and activists with a more radical environmental agenda. Egan concludes that "Commoner represented a durable, stalwart, and remarkably consistent position that American society needed to revise the manner in which it accepted or rejected risk" (p. 198). Understanding that risk demanded a public conversation to which scientists brought critical knowledge and in which social justice remained linked to environmental quality. Egan has furnished a valuable study that reveals through Commoner a critical component of environmentalism too often overlooked.

A narrative tension runs through a book like this one that takes a dual focus on an individual and a broader social context. Egan adequately analyzes Commoner's milieu and impact, but necessarily ranges away from the scientist to explain broader movements within science or environmentalism. At times, this narrative strategy leaves Commoner for several pages. Egan generally navigates this balancing act

successfully, and taking this away would eliminate one of the greatest strengths of Egan's book, which is the way he positions Commoner within a broad social and scientific context.

All in all, *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival* is an important scholarly contribution. Egan offers us the first sophisticated study of Commoner: that by itself is a significant achievement. But by framing the study as he does, Egan reaches far greater significance than a biography would have done alone. Readers will be amply rewarded with a compelling analysis of postwar science and activism.

Adam M. Sowards, PhD < asowards@uidaho.edu >, Assistant Professor of History, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. TEL: 208-885-0529.

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