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Review: The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks

By Raul Lejano, Mrill Ingram and Helen Ingram

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Lejano, Raul, Ingram, Mrill and Ingram, Helen. *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks*. Cambridge: MIT Press, American and Comparative Environmental Policy Series, 2013, xiv+225 pp. ISBN: 9780262519571. US\$ 22.00. Paperback; also available in hardback.

Environmental issues are usually conceived or retold in the form of stories such as “this is what happened over the years” or “here is how pollution affects us within this particular context.” This interdisciplinary book connects environmental studies with narrative studies: “we gained a deeper realization of the extent to which these narratives were, in fact, constitutive of the networks themselves for its members” (p. xii). The authors argue that there are standardized stories about the environment that we read and hear about daily: “Any day of the week, most of the environmental articles one finds in a newspaper, magazine, web site, or other media outlet are cautionary tales” (p. 1). And like every story, we find the “good ones” and the naughty ones;” in the world of environmental issues, humans play the role of the bad characters while nature is inevitably good and fragile: “Human beings will play the role of villain or victim” (p. 1). Taking from this Manichean framework, the authors announce their goal: “In this book, we chart how narratives are used to challenge conventional knowledge about complex ecological situations and to provide new frameworks for understanding” (p. 10). More than any report with data and numbers, narratives tie emotions to values, for example in the case of natural resources: “different narratives connect water to emotionally charged ideas such as private property, fairness, justice, and universal human rights” (p. 12). To put it in other words, “the ‘ties’ of a network are stories” based on social interactions and in these cases mostly human-environmental relationships (p. 36).

But what are these stories made of? The authors observe a variety of disparate elements linked by a narrative: “

What we find is a unique intermingling of aspects of science, local practices, culture, religion, and taboos, and a keen understanding of the political environment” (p. 137).

Undoubtedly, Lejano, Ingram and Ingram bring many innovative ideas and concepts into a fresh theoretical framework newly designed for environmental studies. For example, the authors suggest the expression “ecological democracy” to designate “...the possibility provided by this process for sharing information, collaborative action, and grounded policy change...” (p. 8). Furthermore,

reflecting on Bruno Latour's framework to tackle the limits of deep ecology, the authors even dare to use the term "radical" when they argue that

"It is the potentially radical heterogeneity of possible networks that allows us to imagine new kinds of ecological democracy, where nonhuman actants have agency, perhaps ... political representation" (p. 37).

The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks, however, is not just a strong theoretical contribution to the field of environmental studies; it also comprises three case studies: about conservation in the Arizona-Sonora desert, on the Turtle Islands in the southern Philippines, and in some of the U.S. alternative farming networks of eco-agriculture which oppose mainstream agriculture (p. 149). Among countless possible stories, one of these narratives retells how an expert in environmental studies decides to cross the border and become involved in environmentalism (p. 157). But this use of narratives is not just another way to say things or a strategy for persuasion; this approach is truly linked with group identity:

"Narratives reveal how identity is marked by both constancy and change, and that contrary to conventional assumptions about individual self-interest, people often come to define themselves in relation to a complex world of humans and other beings and things" (p. 193).

Clearly written, engaging, rigorous and timely, *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks* is innovative research in environmental studies and in sociology of the environment. It is one of the very few books that can successfully renew the field of environmental studies and bring a new framework for doctoral students and scholars. Such renewal does not happen every year. Even academics in narrative studies that might be unfamiliar with environmental studies will benefit as well from reading this excellent book.

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