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Review: Governing Environmental Flows: Global Challenges to Social Theory, Edited by Gert Spaargaren, Arthur P.J. Mol, and Frederick H. Buttel

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# Electronic Green Journal

## **Review: Governing Environmental Flows: Global Challenges to Social Theory**

Gert Spaargaren, Arthur P.J. Mol, and Frederick H. Buttel (Eds.)

Reviewed by Elery Hamilton-Smith  
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Spaargaren, Gert, Arthur P.J. Mol. and Frederick H. Buttel (Eds.). *Governing Environmental Flows: Global Challenges to Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 377 pp. ISBN 0-262-69335-9 (pbk.) US \$27.00.

From any perspective, this is a challenging book. Currently, changes in global structures and relationships demand a re-assessment of the central place of the nation-state concept in sociological thinking. This book is an exploration of that issue, and focuses upon the concept of flows as a move away from the dominance of structural considerations.

The authors walk a narrow path between the overall thinking of sociology as a discipline and the application of the discipline specifically to understanding and governance of environmental issues. This is a fortunate and extremely appropriate perspective from which to explore the overall question.

However, it also demonstrates the extent to which the world of sociology is indeed a tribal one and this is part of the intellectual challenge of the topic. The references cited demonstrate that the environmental sociology tribe apparently believes that significant insights from the literature have appeared only since 1990! As one example, in their inevitable need to draw upon the concept of hegemony, they accept the concept as clearly given and ignore the very powerful understandings generated through Gramscian theory.

Similarly, they make extensive use of the term and concept of globalization, ignoring and even demonstrating, the ways in which there are so many multiple meanings that the word fails to precisely and adequately communicate the intention of the user. Further, several of their contemporaries (e.g., Bauman) who have made significant contributions to understanding the impacts of neo-liberalist hegemony are overlooked, even though they should not be. One must assume they are seen as belonging to a different tribe!

Nevertheless, one must hope that other tribes will read and heed this book. It is in itself a very effective challenge to traditional thinking and deserves attention from theorists and practitioners in both social theory; and hence it is difficult to condense in a brief summary.

The first page opens with two graphic examples of flows: the commonly recognized global warming issue and the less familiar but probably equally important flows of waste across the surface of our world. Both demand consideration and governance which transcends state boundaries, yet at the same time, depend upon state-based action to share in the formulation and operation of reformed rule setting. The editors have endeavored to work towards an integration of understanding that is inclusive, yet open to flexibility, growth and change. They conceive of governance as involving a diversity of flows which may often be interactive and which demand the attention of trans-national agency, nation-states as agency and sub-national

agency. They suggest that the resultant processes should be seen as hybrids, recognizing that this idea suggests integration yet complexity. It certainly is congruent with the trend in general sociological analysis to integrate place, time, structures and divisions.

Buttell's own contribution is an insightful and critical review of the world role of the United States. He argues that the nation exerts a disproportionate role in shaping the governance of environmental flows throughout the world and talks of the U.S. as an "Engine of Environmental Destruction." Much of his discussion points to the way in which the very term globalization can be seen as a euphemism for the dominant economic and cultural imperialism of his country.

There is no question that those who are not familiar with sociological thinking will find this a difficult book. Parallel reading of, for instance, the works of Ulrich Beck and John Urry may be helpful. But although theoretical in tone, it certainly suggests ways ahead for improved governance. I believe that serious policy-focused practitioners will find it very valuable.

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