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Review: *Frontiers: Histories of Civil Society and Nature*

By Michael R. Redclift

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller
San Francisco, USA

Michael R. Redclift. *Frontiers: Histories of Civil Society and Nature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 237 pp. ISBN: 0-262-68160-9 (paper). \$US23.00

In *Frontiers: Histories of Civil Society and Nature*, Michael R. Redclift, a Professor of International Environmental Policy and Head of the Environment, Society, Politics Research Group in the Department of Geography at King's College, London, seeks to set the discourse about nature and society on a different course. Redclift addresses three problems: "discussion of the links between the environment and society; the problem in establishing how physical space is culturally assimilated; and the need to question the one-sided discussion of the environment as a socially constructed object" (p. vii).

To do so, the book examines five frontier case studies: common-pool resource management in the Spanish Pyrenees Mountains, European settlement on the forest frontier in nineteenth-century Canada, conflicts over land and water resources in coastal Ecuador, Mayan civil unrest in the Yucatan peninsula, and the encroachment of tourism on the Mexican Caribbean coast. Redclift develops a broad definition of the frontier: "Frontiers are not simply existing physical and social boundaries; they are increasingly located at the outer reaches of modernity, in cyberspace as well as real space, in new genetic materials as well as in the embodied cultural forms. Frontiers are also the products of peoples' imagination, of geography, culture, and space" (p.208).

Much of Redclift's work focuses on the fieldwork he conducted in Spanish speaking countries, but he also draws upon a rich body of historical, theoretical, and philosophical work on the subject. Here one will find stories of the conflicts between indigenous peoples and the encroachment of western society. Global forces find marketable resources in the natural environment which change the areas that gave meaning to native peoples. At stake is cultural survival as well as the preservation of the natural environment.

The narratives covered invoke dualisms in the conceptualization of civil society and nature such as frontier/civilization, community/markets, commodity/conservation and conservation/tourism. The objective was "to examine not only the history through which the frontier has been colonized and settled, but also the way in which this history has been imagined, committed to memory, or written about" (p. 47).

Redclift argues that the frontiers of today, which include undeveloped areas with contested natural resources and indigenous peoples, require a different understanding

than that of Frederick Turner who a century ago wrote that the American character was influenced by the frontier experience:

"... although the debate that was waged about the frontier a century ago was largely about social inclusion, with the expanding frontier seen as a guarantee of freedom and social mobility, today the situation is reversed. In the United States today the frontier is largely conceptualized in terms of social *exclusion*" (p.205).

The frontier has meant different things to different people, but frontiers have been places of conflict between new settlers and nature and indigenous peoples. The myth of the frontier experience is replaced in this book with tales of market forces bringing modernity to displaced people.

One interesting issue that Redclift does not examine is the conceptualization of outer space as a final frontier. Devoid of indigenous people, detectable life, air, and easily accessible resources, outer space is not likely to be experienced as the frontiers of old were. Space (at least our probably sterile solar system, most of which will not be available to people to in our lifetime) needs a new myth other than the frontier myth. Science fiction writers should be able to envision stories where international cooperation in space exploration provides the means to unite humankind to explore the vastness of space as a unified people, rather than the contested frontiers of the past. Space can instead be appreciated as a wilderness with its own wonders, but as Redclift points out, wildernesses have not always been preserved in the past either.

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