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The Political Ecology of the State: The Basis and the Evolution of Environmental Statehood

ANTONIO AUGUSTO ROSSOTTO IORIS
ROUTLEDGE,
LONDON, UK AND NEW YORK, NY, 2014
186 PP. \$150.00 HARDCOVER

REVIEWED BY JOSHUA M. MULLENITE

In *The Political Ecology of the State: The Basis and the Evolution of Environmental Statehood*, geographer Antonio Ioris seeks to reconcile state theory and ecological politics by examining how the history and functioning of the modern capitalist state affects environmental decision making. He argues that the political philosophies of Hobbes, Kant, and Hegel hold the key to understanding what he calls “environmental statehood,” “the combination of discursive, ideological, and material efforts by the state to deal with socioecological problems” (vii). To Ioris, environmental statehood represents a reactionary and inherently contradictory approach to the co-management of environmental, political, and economic burdens. He argues that the state plays a key role in the production and negotiation of socioecological and socioeconomic disruptions through its historical and contemporary role as the reproducer of a consumption-based capitalist economy. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre (2009), Ioris contends that the state “should be seen as complex structures and strategies that reflect the balance of political power and the growth of social antagonisms” rather than as only a set of regulatory agencies (2). To support his claims, Ioris draws theoretically from the (presumably political-economic, but ultimately unspecified) “radical left-wing tradition” (ix) and empirically

from his own research and policy-making experience surrounding the politics of water management, primarily in Brazil.

Ioris begins by providing theoretical richness to his argument. The first two chapters of the text are dedicated to outlining the history and development of the modern environmental state. Here, Ioris provides an in-depth understanding of the “radical left-wing tradition” he is using (which he later calls eco-Marxist) and how the state can be understood from this position. While Ioris’ approach is Marxist in nature, he also critiques much of the existing work in what might be called Marxist or neo-Marxist political ecology. He argues that the existing literature, which has theoretically rich critiques in a number of areas such as sustainable development, has not fully developed a critique of the state’s socioecological politics and how “it tries to control and regulate the ‘more-than-human’ world” (14). Instead, he argues for an eco-Marxist political ecology of the state. Here states are viewed as operating through what he calls a state-fix that “aims to respond to emerging environmental situations that affect society and the economy, but only within the limits of the hegemonic political and economic priorities that shape environmental statehood” (15).

Ioris’ state-fix can best be conceptualized through a trialectical relationship between nature, state, and society. That is, environmental statehood rests on a precarious balance between the state upholding the interests of the groups in charge of it, the apparent inclusion of the interests of the broader society the state represents, and the need to manage the environment in a way that can appease both of these groups. The contradictions in each of these goals produce and are produced by unique socio-natural situations stemming from environmental statehood. The use of the term has obvious similarities to Harvey’s (2001) “spatial fix” where capitalism solves its own inner crises by expanding into and restructuring new geographies but where it is only able to do for a relatively short period of time

before another “fix” is needed. The state-fix is a way for the state-society-nature trialectic to solve its own crises through emergent and flexible forms of environmental statehood.

The middle chapters of the book expand on the arguments and logic laid out above, tracing them through Hobbesian, Kantian, and Hegelian political philosophy in turn. The use of each philosopher is supported through reflections on research and fieldwork Ioris conducted in Brazil, Peru, and the European Union (EU) between 2008 and 2011 as well as his work in these areas more broadly.

In chapter 3, Ioris’ talks about the first instances of a truly environmental statehood, which developed and existed through much of the 20th century. The environmental state began as a Hobbesian Leviathan, protecting the environment from a civil society that would surely destroy it if left alone. This is done through heavy regulation and protection of the environment in a highly centralized form. Ioris supports his argument through a case study of urban development in Rio de Janeiro. Through this example, Ioris also shows how such rigid and centralized regulation caused new problems for the environmental state.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss how the state became flexible and adaptable to growing needs and demands of capital through the incorporation of Kant’s ideas for increased political rights for the individual. This “flexible” environmental state allowed for regulation to take place through the market in the form of neoliberal policies of sustainable development and popular participation in environmental regulation and management. These chapters are supported through three examples of how water management practices changed in the 1990s in Brazil (Chapter 4), Peru (Chapter 5), and through the Water Framework Directive of the EU (Chapter 5).

Chapter 6 ties the preceding chapters together arguing that Hegelian thinking underlies all of these changes as well as the discourses of freedom

surrounding the neoliberal (and “more-than-neoliberal”) state (140). Through this transformation from a regulatory Leviathan to a flexible field of market and individual governance, the state took on a Hegelian form, where there is a representative democracy fulfilling the various roles outlined in Hegelian political philosophy.

While this book makes for a dense reading, it begins a critical conversation about the role of the state in political ecology and the environmental social sciences more broadly. The philosophical nature of the argument, while interesting, seems wanting at times and the application of these three philosophers seems, at times, arbitrary as any number of political philosophers could have been chosen for the task to make a similar, but necessarily different, argument. This, however, does not detract from the overall argument: that there exists a flexible environmental statehood based on a trialectical arrangement of state-nature-society (expressed by Ioris in Hegelian terms that I don’t think are entirely necessary.) Instead, it shows how complicated and messy it is when a philosophical critique of the state is brought into political ecology.

This book fills an important gap in the political ecology literature by providing a philosophical basis for the critique of the environmental state. It will prove valuable to those generally interested in thinking about the role of the state in environmental decision-making, whether from a policy standpoint or a more critical perspective. Scholars working in water management or Brazil will also find the book a useful introduction to Ioris’ work on those topics. This book, or select chapters of it, would also be valuable for graduate seminars on political ecology, environmental politics, or eco philosophy.

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