

Book Reviews

Organizations, Policy, and the Natural Environment: Institutional and Strategic Perspectives. Edited by Andrew J. Hoffman and Marc J. Ventresca. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002. Pp. xxxiv+489. \$70.00 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper).

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This book marks an important addition to the literature concerning the interplay of organizations and the environment. Its origins lie in a conference held at the Kellogg Graduate School of Management in April 2000, which was organized by coeditors Andy Hoffman and Marc Ventresca. The papers generated from this conference are primarily authored by management scholars and by a sprinkling of sociologists. Both groups aim to broach organizational behavior, policy construction, and environmental matters from the perspective of the new institutional theory. According to the editors, this is a topical lacuna: little organizational research addresses environmental matters and fewer yet from what the editors term “field-level processes,” where collective rationalities shape meaning and the actions of organizations. The book is an ambitious effort, with an excellent introduction, 15 empirical chapters arranged into five subsections, and two chapters of closing commentary by John Ehrenfeld and Richard Scott.

Institutional analysis has as its strength the capacity to examine organizations given the social world within which they exist (i.e., markets, governments, and civil society) and the socially constructed “control mechanisms” that characterize any field of organizational activity (i.e., regulation, normative, or cognitive [chap. 20]). These qualities are firmly exercised throughout this volume and are a testament to the field’s analytic strengths. Overall, the contributions are good: a handful hold considerable promise and few are of incidental importance. I will focus my efforts on the general thrust of each section, since the chapters are too many and too varied to comprehensively evaluate, given reviewer constraints.

The first section, “Institutional Origins,” addresses how environmentalism has been institutionalized (hereafter “environment-as-institution”), has been contested, and is currently structured at the level of fields. As an “institutionalized world frame” (chap. 2), environmental protection increasingly confronts contemporary firms and economic organization. The environment-as-institution reflects a range of influences; for example, the state establishment of rules and terms that have expanded markets, promoting the commensuration via monetary value of formerly incommensurable objects such as in the futures trading of air pollution (chap. 5) and also the part “subversive stories” play in institutional change (chap. 4). The environment-as-institution has also been shaped by commercial firms as they resist and cooperate, given the political environment and the corresponding nature of state interventions (chap. 3).

In “Beyond Isomorphism,” the chapters focus on “collective rationality” and complexify the isomorphic predictions of new institutional theory (chaps. 6–7). Chapter 8 explores how well trends in voluntary environmental management conform to the ideals promulgated by environmental activists. The third set of chapters discuss “Institutional Processes of Negotiation and Narrative” as represented in Habitat Conservation Planning (chap. 10), in firm-based public relations (chap. 11), and in voluntary program participation (chap. 12). Each explores how economic organizations maneuver to have their interests incorporated into the discourses, idioms, and policies that compose the environment-as-institution.

The fourth section emphasizes “Field-level Analysis” with chapters contending that variegated organizational strategies and behavior are based in differing cognitive models (chap. 13), differing field-level discourses (chap. 14), and differing nation-based environment-as-institutional settings (chap. 15). In the fifth and final empirical section, the authors explore how divergent “Governance and Regulatory Structures,” as reflections of distinct and institutionalized policy regimes, sponsor or impede more and less effective environmental outcomes (chaps. 16–18).

I must point out that, while there is power in unpacking institutional representations of the environment, there is also peril when institutions are analytically “decoupled” from materiality. That is, addressing the “natural environment” as an institution—and in this volume one that primarily reflects activities, actors, and conflicts in the market or economic sector—underemphasizes the “other” aspect of the environment: the real material threat its continued degradation poses to life. Emphasizing the power and discursive rise of the environment-as-institution on (mainly) economic organizations exaggerates the extent of environmental change and minimizes that production has changed very little, even if corporate “green ceremonial façades” (chaps. 3, 8, 11) and reactive regulatory mandates are rife. As the Worldwatch Institute (*State of the World* [W.W. Norton, 2003]) among others annually documents, the material basis of production (and consumption) continues to grow and with it parallel environmentally unsustainable withdrawals and additions accelerate. As such, when reified, the environment as an institution is reduced to “just another threat” to economic organizations, to the state, and to the public. Ehrenfeld correctly cautions that the environment is not only discourse or just another threat to the firm; harm to it reverberates well beyond “the firm” (chap. 19), any specific “field of firms,” “the economy,” or the “state.” Any analysis of the “natural environment” and organizations must take this into account.

Notwithstanding these reservations, as an exploratory effort *Organizations, Policy, and the Natural Environment* should be judged not as the final statement, but as an “opening salvo” in the fomentation of environmentally sustainable practices. While most chapters are highly speculative, they do collectively show the important part organizations play in shaping the environment-as-institution and how it can in turn shape

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them. What is more, they demonstrate that new institutional analysis has a contribution to make in better depicting and understanding what continues to be an enduring conflict: society and the environment.