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Review: Inequality, Democracy, and the Environment

By Liam Downey

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

DeKalb, Illinois, USA

Downey, Liam. *Inequality, Democracy, and the Environment*. New York: New York University Press, 2015; ix, 331 pp. ISBN: 9781479850723, US \$89 cloth; ISBN 9781479843794, US \$30 paper; 9781479885970 various pricing/vendors eBook. Printed on acid-free paper.

Downey, Associate Professor of Sociology and Faculty Associate for Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, identifies himself as a macro-structural environmental sociologist who supports the argument that “local, national, and global social structures are largely to blame for the world’s many serious social and environmental problems” (p. 4). Social and environmental problems are primarily the product of organizational, institutional, and network-based inequality (OINB). The book focuses on case studies that demonstrate the important role structural forces have played in shaping social and environmental outcomes. The case study investigations cover the post-World War II era to the present in the U. S. and U. S. global dominated institutions.

Measuring OINB inequality and environmental degradation is based on six hypotheses, for example, “allows a small number of people and organizations to monopolize decision making power,” or “allows elites to divert the public’s attention away from what they are doing so that their actions will not be scrutinized, questioned, or challenged” (p. 51). The more hypotheses that can be shown in an event the more predictable will be the inequality, undemocratic methods, and environmental degradation. Downey goes so far as to say that the causes of environmental degradation cannot be found:

Without examining either the link between OINB inequality and environmental degradation or the organizational, institutional, and networked-based mechanisms through which elites exert power (p. 14).

Downey’s own macro-structural theoretical model, the inequality, democracy, and the environment (IDE) model, holds that OINB plays a key role in harming individuals, societies, and the environment by giving elites the power to develop and control OINB mechanisms that they use of achieve their goals. In short, economic and political elites are able to monopolize U. S. and global decision making power. The elites are identified as individuals, such as, Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volker, conservative organizations, such as the American Enterprise Institute, corporate contractors, such as Lahmeyer International, and most of all, international institutions including the World Bank, World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. The latter three, for example, make structural adjustment loans to Third World countries and then require, for example, a reduction in government spending that could place limits on managing and protecting natural resources.

The book covers a vast terrain and is unique in incorporating environmental sociology, justice, environmental degradation, and social aspects of policy. Additionally, the text covers the impact of armed violence on natural resources and the environment. Solutions to OINB and environment degradation and inequality are dealt with in brief. For example, Downey suggests that if environmentalists and activists are to be successful in their goals, they will have to work toward reducing, reconstructing, or abolishing elite-controlled organizations, institutions and networks.

Inequality, Democracy, and the Environment will mostly interest students, scholars and professionals in sociology, environmental studies, or political science. Downey does indicate that OINB has primarily been ignored by macro-structural environmental sociologists; this book should help fill that gap. Lay readers may be interested in the important role that is played by OINB structural forces in shaping social and environmental outcomes. The book is supplemented with tables, notes, references and an index. Recommended for sociological and environmental collections.

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