

Defensive Environmentalists and the Dynamics of Global Reform

By Thomas K. Rudel

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How do societies, perhaps most or even all of which are on the precipice of overshoot, come to be sustainable? This is perhaps the most important question facing humankind in the third millennium. The central question of Thomas Rudel's book is a critical piece of this. He asks (p. 9): "How [do] defensive environmentalists interact with movement activists to build sustainable social orders?"

With that question as a through-line, Rudel builds a framework for his inquiry in the nexus of three theoretical streams. After acknowledging the importance of modernization theory from sociology, and succession theory from ecology, Rudel then points the discussion to an emerging approach focusing on the critical interplay between natural and human systems. This coupled natural and human systems, or "CNH" approach (e.g., Liu et al., 2007) seeks, inter alia, to address weaknesses in earlier theorization by acknowledging the interactive, dialectical relation between natural and social systems. Each profoundly influences the other; Rudel makes a strong case that human ecology does well to appreciate that, particularly given the complexities faced by people and societies in late modernity.

Using this theoretical framework to guide the analysis, Rudel synthesizes lessons from a wide array of empirical work. While he does focus more on smaller level case studies and meso-level analysis, he also considers work more global in nature. He compares processes and institutions from around the globe, as he builds a multi-tiered analysis. In so doing, he looks at several levels of decision making, from individual and family decisions about fertility and recycling,

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to the most global of issues, such as ozone depletion and global warming. In between are meso-level decisions, such as those concerning agribusiness versus alternative agriculture, resource allocation, and energy policies.

In his thoroughgoing analysis, Rudel ties in a number of what may otherwise be mistaken for disparate and marginally relevant ideas, and shows their relevance and predictive capacity. He deftly takes a number of unexpected intellectual turns that are remarkably on point. His work is replete with examples, but a few will suffice for this review.

In applying ideas and observations from ecology to social systems, for example, Rudel sees the relevance of Romer's rule (the insight that many evolutionary changes, such as the development of bony limbs in fish, are actually adaptations that allow the species, at least in the short run, to hold on to an older way of life) in social and ecological systems (200ff.). Many of the activities, and even ways of seeing the world, of people living in social systems and interacting with the natural environment, appear to follow such a pattern as well.

He fleshes out this idea with discussion of events from history, in which a people (*Campeños* in Mexico), threatened by resource capture and ecological marginalization that they saw as posing an imminent threat to their way of life, gradually decided to fight over scarce resources. These actions were a key component of the cascading events leading to the Mexican Revolution (Womack, 1969; also see Homer-Dixon, 1999). While outcomes of the revolution may have been unexpected and novel in many ways, many of the ideas and actions precipitating it were grounded in trying to maintain older patterns.

Rudel's analysis takes an important turn when he looks at the role of events that serve as ways of focusing attention, such as tornados or earthquakes. These focusing events, after being run through the filters of framing provided by opinion leaders (who sometimes can be, but are not necessarily, environmentalists), serve to shape subsequent discourse. The attention cycle plays a key role here, and environmental policy changes and other related actions stand their best chances of adoption and integration into the culture at certain points in that cycle (164ff.).

Typically, though, the cycle ebbs before meaningful action can be put in place, because the political process moves more slowly. What is often left is a trajectory that favors more active, connected, and monied interests who are able to counter-frame and who ride different aspects of attention cycles such as economic downturns (McCright & Dunlap, 2003). Here again, Rudel finds relevant ecological theory to shed light on these processes. The attention cycle, "social cascades," and feedback processes follow equilibrium processes. Those processes are far from smooth, following something much more akin to

the punctuated equilibrium of ecology. Many political processes take place in a recursive set of subsystems, which behave in remarkably similar ways to punctuated equilibrium processes (True et al., 2006).

Rudel examines common human practices and culturally embedded ways of seeing the world and weaves his work in ways that show how tendencies to focus on certain aspects of problems can and do aggregate from the individual and interpersonal level to more macro levels. Large-scale ecological problems can and do result from focusing on the here and now at the expense of long-term consequences. Rudel points out that this product of long evolutionary forces made sense (and still does in some instances) historically, but is now a major contributor to environmental problems. But this tendency is not only the head of a wicked problem of the ways in which people degrade the environment. It also, Rudel shows, profoundly affects the sorts of problems people choose to engage, when they turn to environmental activism.

He is able to end on a somewhat hopeful note. Rudel points out that meaningful moves toward sustainability will necessarily occur not just locally, but more generally and on a number of levels. While environmentalists have often at best met with mixed success (for discussion, see Burns & LeMoyné, 2001), Rudel points to some hopeful signs in this regard. He looks, for example, at efforts of climate scientists to frame environmental knowledge in ways likely to resonate with existing cultural sentiments, so that people will tune into the dangers and be more likely to act in ways to help mitigate disaster. National and international nongovernmental organizations can craft strategies that include an array of interested actors, so as to bolster the chances of environmentally friendly action spanning levels of political actors, from the most local to the most global.

Thomas Rudel's work is a scholarly tour de force. It is theoretically grounded and synthesizes a wide array of findings into a coherent whole. The book deserves a wide and serious reading, from students and scholars to policy-makers across institutional levels.

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