

Book Review Essay

Everyday Possibilities

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Czarnezki, Jason, 2011. *Everyday Environmentalism: Law, Nature, & Individual Behavior*. Washington, DC: Environmental Law Institute Press.

Norgaard, Kari Marie, 2011. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Soderholm, Patrik, ed. 2010. *Environmental Policy and Household Behavior: Sustainability and Everyday Life*. London/Washington, DC: Earthscan.

The common, often mundane routines of everyday life are largely absent from research and teaching on global environmental governance. Few essays on the topic appear in this journal, for instance, and the major textbooks of the field are equally silent. Everyday life is, after all, so “everyday,” even when marked by small acts of environmental stewardship: it is uneventful, sometimes idiosyncratic, often banal, and wholly incommensurate with the magnitude of change required by any transition to sustainability. It is little wonder, then, that the field is more comfortable with the interplay of elite behavior, concentrated economic power, scientific knowledge, social movements, and transnational bargaining and blocking, with everyday life as the dependant variable in the equation. From this analytic perch, the routines and small choices that define our day are things to be acted upon by larger forces that can be analyzed and shaped, rather than the domain of power and change in their own right.

As convenient as it may be to view daily choice and household routine as the product of larger forces and structures (e.g. price, subsidies, information flow, prevailing norms, the architecture of consumer choice), drawing the causal arrow in only one direction may be analytically incomplete and politically foolish, especially at a time when the deficiencies of science based, elite driven, state-brokered regime building are so evident. A closer look at everyday life—its rhythms and possibilities as they bear on an individual and collective politics of environment—may open up critical lines of inquiry and action. In the search for a potent politics of transformation, everyday life may not be so everyday after all.

One such line of inquiry, advanced implicitly by Jason Czarnezki in *Every-*

day Environmentalism: Law, Nature, & Individual Behavior, engages the politics (or lack thereof) of green consumption. Many have argued that as well-intentioned as “buying green” may be, the ultimate biospheric impact of these everyday choices is marginal at best.¹ Moreover, to the extent that voting with one’s wallet comes to supplant voting with one’s ballot or, worse yet, one’s sustained activism, green consumerism can undermine a norm of civic responsibility central to lasting regulation of global production and consumption. Most debilitating, though, is the social-change narrative that green consumerism quietly advances. By privileging easy, “low hanging fruit” behaviors like swapping out light bulbs or reducing the idle time of one’s automobile (which make aggregate sense only if a large portion of the population diligently participates), advocates of green consumption unwittingly propagate the myth that social change occurs only, or best, when super-majorities unite around small changes in everyday life. To the extent that contemporary environmental action has tilted toward an unpromising politics of guilt focused on the individual behavior of the many, rather than an engaging politics of structural transformation that mobilizes the most committed, we have only the green-consumption advocates to blame.

Czarnecki, though, is unpersuaded. His tightly written book (weighing in at 150 pages with sometimes extensive legal footnotes) is written for the uninitiated who may, in the author’s words, “lament that the environmental field is ‘hopeless,’ ‘sad,’ ‘full of problems,’ or simply ‘depressing’” (p. 4). Like many before him, Czarnecki hopes to remedy such despair by underscoring small, individual eco-actions accessible to all. After an opening history of consumption in the United States, his book turns to climate change and carbon, food, and sprawl. Each chapter documents how small acts of everyday life conspire to generate enormous environmental damage, identifies lifestyle changes that might reduce the trauma, and documents a variety of state regulatory action that could fill the breach.

Everyday Environmentalism is least promising when it uncritically extols the promise of “low hanging fruit.” The simple and easy things will not save us; privileging them in any political analysis denies the necessity and promise of future sacrifice, and focusing on individual choice obscures the extent to which choice is structured, and sometimes controlled, by state and corporate interests. The book is at its best when it acknowledges the limits of green consumption and highlights the promise of regulation that re-engineers, in small ways and large, the fabric of daily choice. Where Czarnecki really shines, though, is when he considers the interplay between individual consumer choice and broad policy change. Like many, he is drawn to low-hanging fruit out of frustration with regulatory gridlock, yet he acknowledges that uncoordinated green consumption is too puny a response to the environmental degradation he documents. He is left, often implicitly, with this question: Under what conditions will green consumption activate citizen engagement? Might there be some forms of con-

1. Luke 1993; Maniates 2001; and Smith 1998.

sumer-focused, “small/easy” acts of saving the planet that help lay the groundwork for more political, public action? If so, how can these acts be privileged as part of a larger project to green the state? Czarnezki’s struggle with these questions is sometimes implicit and often unsuccessful, through no fault of his own. His difficulties reflect a failure in the field to fully dissect that which already is—the everyday practice of green consumption—in search of openings for a more vibrant politics of sustainability.

If Czarnezki would have us look to the everyday for opportunities to boost regulatory aggressiveness, Patrik Soderholm and his colleagues in *Environmental Policy and Household Behavior: Sustainability and Everyday Life* wonder how an already green state might retain legitimacy as it increasingly intrudes into household decisions. For Soderholm’s project, the state in question is the Swedish one. The approach is both theoretical and empirical, and the primary subject is accommodation and resistance by households already responsive to environmental concerns. The eleven chapters are rich and eclectic; each is a compelling contribution to the field, a rarity in edited works. They range from an analysis of the diffusion of household environmental norms, to the impact of eco-labeling on the sense of private vs. public responsibility, to barriers to sustainable travel behavior. The prose is tight, the thinking clear, and the argument compelling: If household choices account for as much as a quarter of climate-change emissions, how can scholars and practitioners successfully shape public policy without a clearer understanding of the motivations and constraints within households that goes beyond the economic? Indeed, to what extent do analytic misunderstandings about household dynamics generate policy that complexifies that which should be simple or that unnecessarily fosters resistance or resentment? A great deal, it seems.

To their credit, Soderholm and his contributors resist a rush to easy answers. Instead, their work is an admirable model of how one might treat seriously the proposition that the effectiveness, legitimacy, and persistence of environmental policy demand greater attention to everyday life. Readers would do well to heed their call, and to consider extending it in at least three ways. One would be to move beyond the view, which emerges occasionally in the volume, that the state intrudes (with varying degrees of legitimacy and effectiveness) into otherwise unfettered households. The arena of household choice is already contested, a condition obscured by interests that benefit from the illusion of choice neutrality and independent agency. (One need only go as far as the neighborhood supermarket to experience an environment of controlled choice hiding behind a veil of faux consumer sovereignty.) Could we not imagine instances where the state could expose and challenge this exercise of power, to the benefit of state legitimacy and the planet? Such opportunities will be difficult to see if one begins with the notion of state “intrusion” into an otherwise benign choice environment.

A second extension that could usefully be made lies with the notion of sacrifice. Some contributors to *Environmental Policy and Household Behavior* un-

derscore the importance of convenience and fret about the political backlash to state policies that could be seen as calling for sacrifice. When confronted by the possibility of sacrifice, this volume, like so much good work in the field, shifts its gaze and changes the subject. Yet households already sacrifice in myriad ways, some intentional and joyous, others hidden and negative.² Why and how? A complex environmental politics of sacrifice is unfolding in the households of interest to Soderholm and his contributors; greater attention to it, and especially to those conditions under which households sacrifice for larger collective aims (such as, but surely not limited to, environmental quality) could bear rich fruit.

A final opportunity for deepening the gaze into the everyday lies with common, often unspoken assumptions about motivation and emotion. Czarnezki is the standard-bearer: like so many in the field, he views consumer/citizens as despairing, but information-poor; more information will spur inspired stewardship and engagement. And while Soderholm's volume is at times more nuanced (in that it focuses on the interplay between awareness and norms, and the structural limits households face when they seek to do "the right thing" amidst policies and infrastructure that push in other directions), "awareness" is the linchpin for Soderholm too—policy-maker awareness of the intricacies and counter-intuitive aspects of "green" households.

What, though, if awareness—or at least certain kinds of awareness, cultivated in particular sorts of ways—robs individuals and households of the capacity to engage in a meaningful politics of sustainability? Kari Marie Norgaard unpacks this very possibility in her altogether remarkable *Living In Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, which explores the implications of what Norgaard calls "troubling information" on members of a rural Norwegian community.

Mixing detailed ethnography with sociology, psychology, and a keen eye for the political, Norgaard assembles a compelling portrait of ordinary life in decidedly unordinary times. She persuasively develops the concept of "socially organized denial," a process of norm creation and reproduction in the face of an ominous threat (climate change) over which no individual has meaningful control. Under these conditions, what may appear to be willful ignorance is a slowly coalescing response to clear understanding. What seems to be a flight from politics—adopting small, easy, consumeristic behaviors to "save the planet"—is in fact a meager attempt to reclaim political and moral relevance absent other avenues of meaningful agency. And what can so easily be read as an individual decision (or moral failing) to embrace apathy is, in fact, the product of a number of everyday and reproduced cultural mechanisms that hold bad news at arm's length while "normalizing a version of reality in which 'everything is fine'" (p. 208). Confronted by mounting evidence that environmental systems are coming unraveled, individuals "are paralyzed by troubling emo-

2. Maniates and Meyer 2010.

tions and . . . reach for cultural tools of order and innocence that are the building blocks of denial" (p. 226). And it is not just her Norwegian subjects that are both the agents and victims of denial and despair. Norgaard highlights similar patterns in the United States, where socially organized denial reigns supreme.

How can despair and a sense of personal impotence be transformed into compelling awareness and concerted action? This question weighs heavily on Norgaard. She seems inclined, as does US political organizer Saul Alinsky, another student of everyday life, to see "most people as eagerly groping for some medium, some way in which they can bridge the gap between their morals and their practices."³ Such pent-up desire is pregnant with possibility. For Norgaard (and Alinsky), tapping it requires the resuscitation of the local, not for its ecological benefits but rather for its political effects. Find ways of drawing the despairing into local political action around issues that matter to them, Norgaard says, and hope that the experience revitalizes the virtues and joys of engaged citizenship. Opportunities exist for doing so, she maintains, both in Norway and the United States, but they remain ignored or underdeveloped.

The idea that sustained political engagement can remedy ignorance and despair is nothing new. In American political discourse, it dates back to Jefferson, or even before. For many readers, this is surely an everyday notion. But "everyday" need not be a diminutive term. Twenty years ago, in their seminal work *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues, writing about the challenges of building a "great society" that would be just, participatory, and environmentally sustainable, observed that "it isn't enough to exhort people to participate in the work of building a Great Society. We must build institutions that make participation possible, rewarding, and challenging."⁴ Such institution building, long overdue, may now be the most promising vehicle for engaging the everyday yearning for meaning, agency, and sustainability that Czarnezki, Soderholm, and Norgaard each document and admire.

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3. Alinsky 1969, 94.

4. Bellah et al. 1991, 12.

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