

Review: The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century

By William A. Shutkin

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William A. Shutkin. *The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000. 273 pp. ISBN 0-262-19435-X (hardcover). US\$27.95. Acid-free paper.

"Smog is democratic," declared Ulrich Beck. Environmental degradation is the most egalitarian of problems. And it is this assumption that informs William Shutkin's *The Land That Could Be*. Shutkin's work, drawing upon his experience as activist (he is the founder of New Ecology, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and co-founder of Alternatives for Community and Environment), envisages a new direction for contemporary environmentalism.

Shutkin begins by suggesting that environmentalism thus far has taken two trajectories: the romantic-progressive and the mainstream-professional. The romantic-progressive strain, steeped in nostalgia for a past "golden age," has simply critiqued development without offering viable alternatives. The mainstream-professional was restricted to the educated, affluent classes, and visualized environmentalism strictly in politico-legal terms. In place of these two models Shutkin suggests a civic environmentalism that takes into account racial, cultural, and regional inequalities.

Shutkin suggests that a civic environmentalist democracy will be less of a "top-down, professional" (p.19) approach than a local, pluralistic, multicultural one. Shutkin's emphasis is on the role of the local community-including residents, businesses, government agencies-in disseminating environmental consciousness and effecting earth-friendly local policy changes. The community, therefore, is the central player here. While Shutkin acknowledges the importance of national policy initiatives like the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Air Act (1970), he argues that for environmental justice to become a reality, it will require more than pan-national policies: it requires grassroots understanding and tackling of problems. To this end, Shutkin suggests that the new civic environmentalist model will be participatory and will emphasize community development initiatives where diverse components like the social, economic, political, and environmental mesh together.

Using case studies like the Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative

Realization Plan, the case of Bay Area's "Transit Village," and Colorado's Cattlemen's Land Trust, among others, Shutkin puts forth the case for a localized approach to environmental thinking and activism. "Civic democracy," as Shutkin terms it, is "more than just community participation and conversion; it is rooted in a place, a physical environment conducive to collective action and community building" (p.31). A community feedback system, environmental education about local hazards, alternatives and development, Industrial Ecology (IE) informed by a sense of environmental justice and environmental health is the "real" solution to contemporary environmental problems.

Further, Shutkin argues that geographies of minority demography and development must be a component of all environmentalist initiatives. Since different ethnic/racial/cultural groups have different "conditions" and needs, and because they experience (biologically, economically, and culturally) problems like pollution and deprivation differently, a homogenizing (national) environmentalism will only perpetuate inequalities. The task, Shutkin writes, is two-fold: "rebuilding America's communities from the ground up, [and] of repairing the damaged social and environmental fabric" of American society (p. 244).

Shutkin's approach is commendable for several reasons. He refuses to reject national and global environmental efforts or development initiatives. His is not the environmentalism of the "radical ecology" mold. Rather his focus on *social and racial inequalities in local environment* approximates to what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier term "the environmentalism of the poor." Personally, I find Shutkin's approach attractive because he addresses the major problem of a "politics of access." The realm of decision-making/influencing public space is available, generally, to certain privileged groups/classes/communities. These groups functioning at, say, national levels, rarely address the problems of racial and social minorities. And the minorities, with no access to these spaces, seldom find a forum to voice their problems. Under such conditions, environmentalism is rarely democratic. Shutkin's approach, on the other hand, involves the minority "voiceless" in decision-making because his environmentalism is rooted in local particularities. As such, civic environmentalism becomes truly democratic. In response to Beck's comment, Shutkin would probably say "smog fighting must be democratic."

Shutkin's book caters to the specialist academic, the activist, and the common reader. His combination of philosophy (John Dewey appears to be the cornerstone of Shutkin's creed), law, literature, and practical details means that *The Land That Could Be* blurs the distinction between theory and praxis. And that is a truly democratic achievement. *The Land That Could Be*

is easily recommended for offering a genuine alter-native (with emphasis on both "option" and local/native) to contemporary environmentalism.

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