

Review: Towards Sustainable Communities: Transitions and Transformations in Environmental Policy

Daniel A. Mazmanian and Michael E. Kraft (Eds.)

Reviewed by Kaustuv Ghosh
National University of Singapore, Singapore

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The very public attention paid to the environment in recent times tends to obscure the policymaking that lies at its heart, though regrettably not the politics. Policymaking is not only about politics but a larger and more complex encounter between many different players. *Towards Sustainable Communities: Transition and Transformation in Environmental Policy* is the second edition of a collection of essays edited by Daniel Mazmanian and Michael Kraft and examines US environmental policy in detail. It is aimed at environmental policy scholars and students and offers a guide to US environmental policymaking over the last forty years. The exhaustive list of references after every essay as well as the tables showing the chronological progression of legislation, concepts and movements are of immense help to scholars and students alike.

This book makes the case that the United States has progressed through “three epochs” (pp.3-32) towards effective and relevant policymaking- the underlying message being that the lack of commitment of previous administrations is not an indicator of the commitment of the American nation as a whole. The epochal framework, the idea of sustainability narrated by Hempel (pp.33-62) and the evolution of policymaking (especially the rise of civic environmentalism) written by Fiorino (pp.63-86) provide the conceptual bedrock for the book. The epochs are mirrored in the arrangement of the essays. It is possible, though, that the first epoch could have started with the creation of the National Parks. By beginning with the 1960s, Mazmanian and Kraft may have bypassed important periods when intense planning debates were taking place. The writers do refer back to the works of Mumford and Geddes but the earlier periods could have been provided more than a tabular mention. Nonetheless, case studies of Los Angeles (pp.89-114) and Wisconsin (pp.115-140) are worth mentioning as evidence of earlier planning problems being corrected in an evolutionary manner and do provide a connection to the past.

The essays also bring out the complexities and paradoxes of third epoch sustainability policies- especially in the blueprint planning of California (pp.227-251) and the Great Lakes Basin management (pp.289-311). The fundamental problem of America’s environmental policy comes out-- its libertarian emphasis on individual and community effort versus the need for government support. This is a theme well worth pursuing in a separate book on sustainable democracy, a term I suggest here for consideration. The Great Lakes essay brings up the thornier problem of how to improve an effort that involves two countries, numerous states, and many communities in these states. The authors have also hinted at the ineffectiveness of policy implementation though they might have wished to go further and taken issue with the volume and frequency of legislation which are surely at odds with actual achievement. The essays on local open spaces (pp.141-168) and watersheds (pp.255-288) are extremely relevant for contemporary policymakers as these deal with two of the thorniest issues before society. Indeed, the watershed management framework would have great relevance in Asia, where this is an immediate concern. With a number of distinguished academicians as authors, very impressive editing, exhaustive tabulation and detailed references, this book should be made compulsory graduate level reading for environment students. Needless to say, it is also a handy reference for any scholar, writer or civil servant in this field.

Kaustuv Ghosh <kaustuv.ghosh@nus.edu.sg>, Graduate candidate, School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore; Research Assistant, Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore. TEL: 65-92353702.

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