Book Review

O'Lear, Shannon. 2010. *Environmental politics: scale and power.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 228pp. ISBN 9780521759137; paper US$51.00.

Reviewed by Brock Ternes bternes "at" ku.edu

Dr. Shannon O'Lear offers a geographer's perspective of environmental issues in *Environmental politics: scale and power*. This eight-chapter text consistently focuses on the distinctly geographic lenses of spatial scales and power and how these social constructions are connected to environmental policymaking. O'Lear begins by raising some challenging questions—namely, how "the environment" is defined, how human interactions and commodity chains produce spatial scales, and how different forms of power shape how environments (and environmental problems) are interpreted. She then proceeds to build on those points in the following chapters, which cover climate change (Chapter 2), oil and energy (Chapter 3), food security (Chapter 4), garbage and waste (Chapter 5), toxins (Chapter 6), and resource conflict (Chapter 7). All of those environmental matters are "…relevant at several scales simultaneously…" and "constructed, or conceived or understood, in different ways by various actors at multiple scales" (p. 41).

O'Lear adopts Michael Mann's schema on power, and argues that economic, political, ideological, and military power influence (1) how problems or policies are defined and (2) the spatial scales at which environmental problems are perceived. This connection between power and scale-setting is touched on in each chapter, and it informs readers of how geographers study the environment. In so doing, she engages the framework of political ecology (made most explicitly in chapter 7 on resource conflict), which "…considers multiple spatial scales and connectivity among places…[and] aims to trace power relations that shape who has control over the management of and benefit from environmental resources" (p. 177). For instance, climate change is often seen as a worldwide phenomenon, but spatiality complicates that view; nations, communities, and even individuals' bodies can be seen as sites threatened by myriad environmental crises. O'Lear considers both the macroscopic and microscopic scales, and by doing so she reveals how complex and dangerous the Anthropocene truly is. One obstacle to establishing effective environmental protection is the timelines in which policymakers operate: "Election cycles rarely match the timeframe of environmental research and investigation" (p. 135), leaving environmentalist agendas in a constant state of flux.

To complicate matters further, the human perception of scale seldom matches the scale of natural systems. One of the first figures in the book maps the catchment area of the Mississippi River, a massive region that covers nearly the entire Midwest and nearly thirty states altogether. Such examples allow O'Lear to point out that "…our administrative units (i.e., countries and states) do not fit the scale of ecosystemic processes" (p. 13). By providing a conversation of how socially-defined boundaries can hinder the ability to address pressing environmental risks, *Environmental politics* compels the reader into mulling over how scales are defined instead of taking these constructions as a given.

Throughout the entire book, O'Lear describes manmade environmental hazards (and the difficulties of solving those hazards) as derivatives of incommensurate scales. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her section on carbon offsets and carbon trading (p. 45-52). Pollution trading schemes intend to limit emissions from a specific geographic area, yet uneven concentrations of emissions can create "toxic hot spots" and hurt nearby communities and ecosystems (p. 46). This serves as a key example of how human-defined spatial scales are critical for regulation, but can be mismatched with ecological systems—not to mention overlooking the underprivileged. By challenging socially-defined "bubbles" O'Lear insists the traditional views of scale-setting discourage major pro-environmental progress from happening. Relying on the same systems of production which have created these problems presents a dangerous situation:

Simplifying climate change to a matter of individual or corporate purchase of carbon offsets delays a discussion of the potential of social change as a means towards addressing climate change at multiple levels… Regardless of how well-implemented a cap-and-trade or carbon offset scheme may be, it is not a suitable instrument to incentivize an overhaul of the industrial practices thought to have contributed to accelerated climate change in the first place. Part of the problem is that cap-and-trade systems tend to neglect both how carbon emissions are cut as well as where emission cuts are made. (p. 50)

Similar important observations are made in the other chapters. Chapter 4 on food security ponders food availability at a variety of scales. The persistent questioning of spatial definitions is the overriding theme of the text, which also allows readers to question some of the dominant narratives surrounding environmental issues. One outstanding example is O'Lear's skepticism of the popular Environmental Kuznets Curve, provided in chapter 4.

Environmental politics has clearly been designed to be accessible for college students, and O'Lear covers a number of complicated policymaking issues with surprisingly clear language. For instance, chapter 3 on oil and energy raises some of the thorny questions and nuances of the geography of oil in a way that can be easily understood in her section on "Energy infrastructure: spatial networks and power" (p. 64-75). Here, she offers a host of examples of how pipelines "reflect arrangements of power as they direct the flow of benefits to some places and signify relationships between places" (p. 66). The book is full of illustrative, shocking, and often depressing examples of how a lack of consideration for certain spatial scales has exacerbated the destruction of environments and the harmful health consequences for people. However, this is not to suggest that O'Lear's writing is dark. *Environmental politics* relies on humor and pop-culture references that many college-aged students will follow. She uses the phrase "Knucks!" in her dedication page; she cites *Harper's Magazine* frequently and the satirical website *The Onion*; and she recites lyrics from the rebellious, provocative band Rage Against The Machine. O'Lear has fun, attention-getting introductions for each chapter, and her humorous asides also give the book plenty of personality, even though the subject matter is tremendously important.

In the end, the book serves as a clever, engaging, and outgoing read that is informative not just for its content but for its geographical worldview. It should be a valuable tool for many environmental studies teachers looking for a book that is manageable and classroom-friendly. By unerringly adhering to a spatial perspective combined with analysis of the influence of institutionalized power structures, O'Lear examines the interface between humans and nature. This perspective might be familiar to geography majors, but non-geographers should develop an appreciation for the complexities raised by *Environmental politics*.

***

Brock Ternes is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Kansas, USA. His areas of interest are environmental sociology, globalization, migration, demography, and quantitative methods.