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BOOK REVIEW

Redwoods, real and imaginary

R. Widick: Trouble in the Forest: California's Redwood Timber Wars. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, USA. 2009, 360 pp. illus., maps; 21.6 cm. Cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-5324-9, US$25.00; Paper, ISBN 978-0-8166-5325-6, US$25.00

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Trouble in the Forest by Richard Widick gives a scholarly review of the conflict-plagued north coast redwood region of California—a sociological analysis of the "redwood imaginary" as it has been experienced by three distinct groups: Native Americans, loggers, and environmental activists. The common thread is capitalist greed disguised as private property rights, with the local and global media playing a large role in spinning the story. This is not bedtime reading. It is a dense, academic dissertation containing many interesting historical nuggets for the factually-minded. Unfortunately, it is overburdened with impenetrable sociology jargon that makes it more or less inaccessible to the casual reader—and, unfortunately, to most landscape ecologists.

The 42-page introduction provides a comprehensive overview of the book's thesis and the key events (most of them violent) that have shaped the "redwood imaginary": the Wiyot Indian massacre in 1860, the killing of striking loggers in 1935, and, more recently, the 1990 car-bombing of activists Darryl Cherney and Judi Bari and the 1998 accidental logging death of activist David Chain, who was crushed by a falling tree. Widick describes a conflict between capitalism and humanity with roots "as deep as the nation itself." This conflict is anchored in the American notion of private property rights, recently accelerated by the advent of globalization. For the Headwaters forest, it was the 1985 takeover of Pacific Lumber by the Maxxam Company that prompted a radical response by activists, and this is a cornerstone of the book. Widick chronicled these protest events, symbolized by Julia "Butterfly" Hill and her two-year-long "Luna" tree-sit. The introduction lays out these core components of the book, and the author's intent to "combine the cultural theory of social imaginaries with elements of media studies and environmental sociology" to explore the roots and broader implications of the "timber wars." In this he probably succeeds, although not without some redundancy.

The first two chapters provide in-depth theoretical treatments of the "signature events" of the modern protest movement. Chapter 3 explores the role of the company town, Scotia, created by Pacific Lumber for its workers as an early model of corporate citizenship that helped ally workers with the company's economic interests. Chapters 4–6 provide a "social history" of several distinct periods marked by episodes of violence that shaped the region: the late nineteenth century settlement period and the associated decimation and banishment of local Indians; the organized labor struggles of the 1930s; and the modern environmental activist movement. The latter also describes the forestry regulations that allowed continued cutting in spite of environmental laws, and highlights the legal battles that led to the eventual protection of the Headwaters Forest in 2000. The conclusion restates the symbolic importance of these interrelated events,

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and emphasizes the prominent role of the redwood timber wars in uniting environmental and labor movements in the fight against globalization.

Although many interesting historical facts are recounted in these chapters, this is not a history book, nor a policy analysis. It is far from objective. More importantly, the facts are difficult to extract from the cumbersome, jargon-laden sociological analyses that accompany each piece of historical interest. As an example, from Chapter 2 (p. 73), I re-read this sentence several times without having more than a vague notion of its meaning:

> Such an understanding is crucial for the linguistic and communicative metaphors that social theory uses for culture and society: the objective order of institutions, encountered by every individual as the structure of meaning-making systems that mediate human engagement with the world, functions not just as the repressive and organizing, governing force of law but also as the very condition of possibility for participation in social exchanges that constitute cultural practice.

Of course, landscape ecologists and scientists in general are certainly capable of generating incomprehensible texts (how many sociologists care about interspersion-juxtaposition metrics, fractal dimensions, or neutral landscapes?). The writing style in this book, however, can only serve to strengthen the disciplinary walls that partition the analysis and understanding of important topics.

Pacific northwestern forests provided a setting for the development of landscape ecology theory in the context of timber management and conservation planning for the Northern Spotted Owl and other species (e.g., Franklin and Forman 1987, Landscape Ecology Volume 1, Issue 1). The redwood forests of California's north coast have received less treatment within the field of landscape ecology, but they comprise an intriguing landscape of superlatives for ecologists. Ecologically rich, the human dimension has often been ignored by landscape ecologists, except as a hindrance to conservation goals. Thus it is disappointing that this book, which provides that human dimension, fails to integrate it with an ecological perspective. In fact, the book is largely devoid of ecological content. Aside from several mentions of the forest's most visible icons—redwoods, spotted owls, marbled murrelets, and salmon—the book contains very little about the ecological process and patterns are of interest to landscape ecologists. And all of this is condensed into the first two pages of the prologue. Furthermore, the language is likely to turn off scientists who bristle at the use of meaningless terms like "planetary ecology" and "bio-zoological landscape" (and who may be left wondering about the validity of many other compound and hyphenated terms in the book).

I approached this book not just as a landscape ecologist, but also as an environmentalist who, as a college student, attended Earth First! rallies and Maxxam protests, gathered signatures for the "Forests Forever" initiative, and met Darryl Cherney at UCLA not long after the infamous car-bombing event. So the events and ideas described in the book were of significant interest to me. Even so, it was a laborious read. This book may be suitable reading for a graduate course on social movements, and redwood forest ecologists may benefit from its treatment of the region's human history. But it is not a priority read for most readers of this journal.