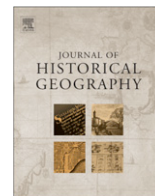




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Review

Richard Widick, *Trouble in the Forest: California's Redwood Timber Wars*. Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2009, xxiv + 353 pages, US\$25 paper.

Resources are culturally defined, and conflicts arise through the clash of opposing views and institutional values over their use. The conflicts are frequently intense. Indeed, metaphorical and literal references to resource wars are widely cited around the globe, in rich and poor countries alike, and involve a wide range of resources, renewable and nonrenewable. According to several observers such resource wars have become more widespread in recent decades, an important feature of contemporary globalization, as Ballard and Banks have described in 'Resource wars: the anthropology of mining', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003), 287–313, and I noted in my essay, 'The war in the woods: globalization, post-Fordist restructuring and the contested remapping of British Columbia's forest economy', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 (2003), 706–29. This recent proliferation of resource conflicts is not fortuitous. Global resource use that increased with industrialization began at the end of the eighteenth century and escalated massively during the twentieth century, especially under the Fordist imperatives of mass production and consumption. In response, environmentalism has grown rapidly as a global–local professionalized movement to oppose vested corporate interests and resource commodification. Meanwhile, even as per capita efficiencies have improved, political imperatives related to security and development, not always congruent in producing and consuming regions, and now encompassing the new economic giants of China, India, and Asia in general, have ramped up overall demands for resources. Less noticeably, but with substantial local implications, aboriginal peoples whose global survival is most evident in resource peripheries have not disappeared, as was conventionally anticipated in the 1960s, but have become increasingly insistent on their rights. If environmental and cultural opposition to corporate control over resources has increased, labour's role has declined in this regard, a trend most evident in the established resource producing regions of North America where unions became powerful during the Fordist boom. The restructuring of specialized working-class communities is on the front line of the conflicts generated by over-use and the revaluation of resources.

Richard Widick's *Trouble in the Forest* makes a fascinating, original contribution to the understanding of resource wars, specifically with respect to conflicts within Humboldt County and California's redwood forest country. The book's point of departure and integrating focus are the environmentally inspired conflicts over redwood timber use that peaked in the 1990s, themselves part of the global proliferation of resource and indeed timber wars mentioned above. Widick's approach, however, emphasizes the periodicity of resource conflicts in Humboldt County by emphasizing the Indian Wars of 1860–65 and the 1935 labour strike as

well as contemporary environmental conflicts. For him, these three 'troubles', each marred by violence and death, albeit on a progressively decreasing scale, are the defining moments in the social evolution of Humboldt County and its distinctive character as a place. Generally (and non-ideologically stated), *Trouble in the Forest* reveals the intertwining of geography and history. The geography starts with the redwood forest (and other resource) bounty and the relative location of Humboldt County (isolated until the nineteenth century); the (modern) history begins with its nineteenth-century colonization.

Widick interprets Humboldt County's evolution from a social and cultural (rather than political economy) perspective. Conceptually, his analysis draws upon psychoanalytic social theorizing that has evolved out of Marxism and contemporary studies of nature–culture dialectics in which social imaginaries emerge as a key 'umbrella' theme that is defined by shared practices, values identity, roles and ideas of legitimacy. Empirically, the study is pursued through ethnographies that rely on historical accounts and direct interviews with key respondents, especially representing environmentalists, aboriginal peoples, and labour.

In terms of objectives, if not stated with clarity, the book provides a social evolutionary history of Humboldt County from the 1860s, an analysis of contemporary conflicts over the use of redwood forests based on that history, and an understanding of Humboldt as a place. More generally the book is a critique of capitalism. In terms of format, following brief conceptual reflections, two chapters focus on developments and conflicts in general in Humboldt County that are then elaborated in historical sequence in the next three chapters that progressively detail the Indian Wars, labour strike, and recent environmental battles. In the substantive chapters, ethnographic detail provides a prelude to conceptual reflections (rather than the other way around).

The ethnographies provided in *Trouble in the Forest* are eloquently presented and insightful. Widick understands and presents the differing values of aboriginal peoples, environmentalists, labour, and companies while recognizing that each of these institutions is not a monolithic entity but internally differentiated. The focus on three crises effectively illuminates the evolution of Humboldt County; the crises are important themselves for revealing the anatomy of conflict and as turning points in terms of changing social identities, marginalization, and tensions, not to mention in how resources are mapped and used. However, crises also need to be understood as part of the longer run political economy of evolution and brief references to the contradictions of capital are a little facile in this regard. Social imaginaries are not simply crisis-driven but are rooted in enduring routines as well. As Marx noted, historical periods are connected and different, and they differ for various reasons including technological and institutional innovations, population dynamics, the accumulation of knowledge, and changing geographies. Crises are significant for evolution but evolution is not just about crises.

The culture theory perspective driving *Trouble in the Forest* highlights the changing social identities of Humboldt County and addresses its nature as a distinct place, especially in drawing out processes of fragmentation and marginalization. But in contrast to the balanced, sympathetic ethnographies, the conceptual claims are more strident, deterministic, and exclusive, especially in with respect to issues of political economy, evidenced, for example, in Widick's casual pejorative comments regarding private property rights. The 'straightforward' empirical descriptions of conflicts tend to lead to rather sweeping and at times opaque criticisms of capitalism as a whole without much attention to questions of social choice. Possibly the idea of social evolution should be given more attention. Alternatively, the book's objectives might have focused more explicitly on understanding the contemporary crisis over the redwood forests in Humboldt County. As Humboldt continues to change, social

imaginaries will doubtless be shaped by past conflicts (and routines), but they will also involve new beliefs and attitudes, not least by an influx of residents with no connection to the locality's past. In the intertwining of history and geography, which is more powerful?

In summary, *Trouble in the Forest* is a provocative contribution to the growing literature on resource wars. If its reliance on culture theory will perhaps repel some readers, the ethnographical research is rich and detailed, and the use of crises as focusing points of social as well as economic analysis an effective starting point for interpreting the nature of evolution. Perhaps there is also a need for alternative theoretical interpretations of resource wars to more explicitly engage with and possibly draw upon one another?

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