

Reviews

Environmental Leadership in Developing Countries. Transnational Relations and Biodiversity Policy in Costa Rica and Bolivia by Steinberg, P.F. (2001), Cambridge: MIT Press.

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The book of Paul Steinberg, an assistant professor of political science and environmental policy at Harvey Mudd College, provides an excellent example of how to use the comparative politics and public policy literature to address questions related to the development of biodiversity conservation policy programs in Latin America. The main task of his work is to understand how in the development of such policy programs a diversity of resources is deployed bidirectionally between national and international arenas. Steinberg contextualizes his work in Costa Rica and Bolivia, which he claims have been able to develop leading biodiversity policy programs in the last four decades. The book is pitched at a U.S. graduate student level and students of development of environmental movements in Latin America, North-South relations for natural resources management, and conservation policy are likely to find it most insightful.

Much of the book is devoted to understanding the role of “bilateral activists” in the success of the Costa Rican and Bolivian national biodiversity programs. Steinberg defines bilateral activists as those individuals that move and interact at the national and international arenas facilitating resources between these levels. Although known that individual leadership can play an important role for development and democracy in developing countries (see Krishna 2002), Steinberg offers a careful look at how bilateral activists’ leadership plays out at the domestic policy level. Steinberg’s contribution is particularly relevant because the dynamics of domestic policy culture have not received adequate attention in the past. As Steinberg explains, questions related to global environmental politics have been addressed mostly from research traditions characteristic of the international relations literature. Such literature has mostly focused on understanding Western-based transnational environmental institutions or the data they generate, usually from outside the countries of interest. The use of these traditional research strategies are partly explained by the lack of easily available longitudinal data on developing countries of the tropics and because gathering such data requires spending considerable amounts of time in the country to collect it. So, in a welcome break from previous research engaged in main stream comparative politics, Steinberg mixes qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather in-country data, and thus, from the bottom-up, he provides useful insights for bettering the understanding of global environmental issues that is the main theoretical goal for the book.

The second main goal of his work is to instruct “readers concerned with practical problems of tropical conservation and sustainable development,” by increasing their understanding of the role that domestic political processes play in natural resources management. This goal is a challenging undertaking especially if Steinberg hopes to capture the attention of policy makers, managers, or practitioners in developing countries. Presumably the chances of finding this book atop desks in Costa Rica or Bolivia will be highest among mid-level governmental managers or non-governmental practitioners, although increasing the readership will depend of the ability to translate the text into Spanish, reduce its current length, and minimize academic jargon. However, because the book is pitched at a U.S. graduate student level, it would not be surprising that most of its Latin-American readership will likely be among international bilingual students. Some of them will be planning to go back to their home countries to join government or NGO ranks and hopefully, a few of them will be motivated enough by Steinberg’s book and become future bilateral activists in their home countries.

As part of building his general argument on the importance of domestic policy culture and the role of “bilateral activists,” in chapter two, Steinberg addresses to the often stated assertion that poor countries are too busy to care about the environment without the influx of foreign financial incentives. Steinberg rejects these claims by comparing the conditions under which the national parks movement developed in the United States with those established recently in developing countries, showing that at the time the former was less urbanized, its’ people less educated, and with a lower life expectancy than the average developing country today. To demonstrate that significant levels of environmental concern are not the privilege of Northern populations,

Steinberg offers survey data showing that there are no differences between rich and poor countries regarding the importance they give to environmental problems.

Aware of the fact that popular support to environmental and biodiversity conservation issues does not necessarily translate into national policy changes, in chapters three and four, Steinberg provides a macro-historical account of how the environmental movement developed in Costa Rica and Bolivia during the last four decades. The data were gathered from historical materials in government and private archives, letters, news clips, governmental reports, written testimony, personal communications and published accounts. To address the lack of longitudinal public opinion data, Steinberg and eleven assistants conducted a quantitative content analysis of more than 3,000 environmental news stories of leading daily newspapers from 1960 to 1995. The inclusion of a detailed methodological appendix on the content analysis data collection procedures is helpful to understand why and how data coding decisions were made and a great opportunity for students to learn about research methods. The original coding sheets are included in Spanish and English and the sheets with instructions for coders are available through the author upon request.

Chapter five and six constitute the theoretical core of the book. In chapter five Steinberg explains the role that bilateral activists played linking international and domestic resources for environmental policy. According to Steinberg, these activists succeeded attracting international scientific and financial resources to boost conservation research and training to their home country's institutions. At a domestic level, the activists' extensive knowledge and long-term presence in the political arena allowed the mobilization of four types of political resources that Steinberg labeled as: process expertise, social networks, agenda setting and political learning. These elements provided institutions for environmental protection with institutional memory and allowed for long-term planning and implementation despite the shortsightedness of political cycles and high turnover of political appointees in key managerial and administrative posts. To set the stage for chapter 6, Steinberg argues that the "technology of social influence" put into action by bilateral activists could be applied towards "any number of social goals." Why then, he asks, have "politically engaged citizens in Costa Rica and Bolivia" used these resources to advance environmental policies in particular? To answer to this question, chapter 6 explores the origin of national environmental concern, the timing and form of changes in public preferences, international origin and transnational diffusion of policy ideas and the impact of these ideas on state institutions. Most of his content analysis data are discussed here and the answers portray bilateral activists as the catalytic force behind institutional change. These people frequently transmit novel concepts and innovations from abroad to their home societies. As these concepts get assimilated at home by a broad range of political and social players, they are also adapted to fit their own agendas and pet projects. Steinberg argues that at the end these discourses resemble more a blend of domestic and international environmental issues than a broadcast of foreign political debates.

To argue the importance of bilateral activists' role in developing strong domestic biodiversity programs, Steinberg chose to compare two very different countries in Latin America. Steinberg presents Costa Rica as a case study with one of the longest democratic traditions, a majority population of Western European descent, and high per capita income and literacy rates. Bolivia, which has recently emerged from decades of dictatorships,,, has one of the most highly diverse ethnic populations in the Western Hemisphere and one of the lowest income and literacy rates in Latin America.

Based on the explanatory power that Steinberg gives to bilateral activists, future research would benefit from controlling other variables such as country size or bureaucratic complexity. For instance, when bilateral activists in Costa Rica were working to establish two of the most important projects for biodiversity development in the country: the Instituto Nacional de Biodiversidad (National Biodiversity Institute) (INBio) and the All-Taxa Biodiversity Inventory (ATBI), they generated enough foreign attention and financial resources that these bilateral activists were allowed direct and frequent access to the offices of the President. In larger, wealthier and more bureaucratically complex countries bilateral activists may not have similar access or influence.

The larger point is that when consideration is given to increase the number of cases to be analyzed, researchers' abilities to maintain a mixed qualitative and quantitative methodology becomes significantly more complicated. The risk is to leave those type of questions unanswered until enough cases become available in the literature and a large-N meta-analysis study are conducted. However, it was precisely this mixed approach what allowed Steinberg to focus on the

role that bilateral activists play at the domestic policy level. It seems that the type of questions that Steinberg's has been able to address would benefit from a small-N research design were we could continue to benefit from a mixed methodological approach. One exciting possibility is provided by qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) or fuzzy set methodologies (Ragin 2000). These are logical tools based in Boolean algebra suited for the systematic comparison of small-N case studies. Such strategies allow the integration of desirable characteristics of quantitative and qualitative strategies and make it possible to maintaining the richness and depth of information gathered with qualitative approaches while bringing some of the systematic rigor of quantitative ones. In very general terms, by looking at necessary and sufficient conditions it is possible to obtain standard levels of statistical confidence with a relatively small number of cases. Thus for instance, it would be possible to assess the importance of bilateral activists in a small set of countries with varying degrees of success in their environmental policy programs, without losing the depth of information gathered through qualitative means.

Cited References

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Lives of Dust and Water: An Anthropology of Change and Resistance in Northwestern Mexico, by Cruz-Torres, Maria Luz (2004), University of Arizona Press, 325 pp.

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Maria Luz Cruz-Torres began her fieldwork in southern Sinaloa in the late 1980s. Her long-standing relationship with the residents of two rural communities there, fostered over the past decade-and-a-half through repeated visits, is candidly documented and woven into the text of her broad and ambitious study of the political ecology of the region. It is this first-hand element that gives *Lives of Dust and Water* a refreshingly unselfconscious personal dimension. The book offers not just a critical analysis of Mexican economic policy and the impact of the internationalization of markets, but also very detailed, anecdotal, and personalized narratives that impress upon the reader a flesh-and-blood sense of the struggles undergone by southern Sinaloans in the neoliberal era. In this respect, the book stands as a fine example of mixing analysis with storytelling to make a broader point.

Cruz-Torres describes her study as “the political ecology of human survival in one of the most important ecological regions of Mexico” (6). Specifically, she looks at how global demand for shrimp and agricultural products has affected the communities of El Cerro and Celaya by ushering in, with the support of the Mexican government, large, privately-owned export-oriented companies. The results have been diverse and far-reaching: systematic degradation of the area's natural resources through contamination and overexploitation, diversification of subsistence strategies for local fishermen and farmers, and “the feminization of poverty” (277) as more and more women are forced to rely on wage labor.

Cruz-Torres pays particular attention to what she describes as an escalating cycle of natural resource exploitation. She points out that many locals – once members of the communal ejidos and fishing cooperatives – now form the labor base of commercial agriculture and fishing companies. The inadequate wages paid by these companies have forced cash-strapped workers to seek out alternative means of sustenance. This has inevitably meant growing and catching their own food, ultimately putting further stress on agricultural lands and coastal habitats already buckling from commercial contamination and resource-extraction. Cruz-Torres keenly notes this ill-omened subsistence paradox: “Rural communities such as Celaya and El Cerro must face the contradiction of relying ever more heavily on a natural resource base that is diminishing day by