

BOOK REVIEWS

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Treading Softly: Paths to Ecological Order

BY THOMAS PRINCEN

xiii + 210 pp., 20.9 × 14.2 × 2 cm, ISBN 978 0 262 01417 5
hardback, GB£ 19.95/US\$ 22.95, Cambridge, MA, USA and
London, UK: MIT Press, 2010

A book with some very helpful insights about our current environmental dilemmas. In brief, Princen (who is an award winning academic on international environmental affairs) insists that society must reject the myth and incessant justifications of a ‘consumer economy’ and generate a ‘home’ economy instead. Because all governments consistently preach that they will achieve growth and ‘move forward’ (this very phrase was deployed by the Australian Prime Minister Gillard as her recent election catchphrase), large nations inevitably put too much strain on the environment. They mine and extract with insufficient thought for the long-term future. In prevailing consumer economies, moreover, humankind’s increasing disconnection from nature is ‘spurred by mechanization, commodification, commercialization, urbanization, long-distance transport, packaging, central heating and cooling, electronic communication, formal education, reading, touring, zoos, and . . . just about every product and process that constitutes modern life’ (p. 82).

Since it is obviously dangerous to continue in this manner, Princen posits an alternative image of economy and lifestyle, and calls for a new economic discourse ‘ecologically grounded’ in its metaphors to become ‘the new normal’ (pp. 154 and 179).

By ‘home economy’, Princen means a reciprocal ‘producer’ economy, of the kind he witnessed on Monhegan Island, where fish-trappers collectively refuse trawls and nets, their restraints yielding the best lobster catches (pp. 72–74). In general, Princen nostalgically evokes a ‘mostly unorganized collection of artisans, master craftspeople, small shop owners, and independent, yeoman farmers’, who should be cherished where they have not ‘faded from historical memory’ or been ‘eclipsed by expansionism’ (p. 121), because their limited drain on the environment can inspire humankind forwards, not backwards. Society must cultivate a new creativity, self-organization and reciprocal helping of others, a ‘living well by living well within our means’, as opposed to constantly centralizing consumerist activity, ‘biggering’ (*à la* Dr Seuss) or depleting the Earth’s resources, let alone committing the ‘sacrilege’ of destroying non-renewables (pp. 76, 124–25, 175). Princen has hope that humans, the most adaptive of all creatures, will meet the new challenge he poses, and even imagines a total change of worldview is possible in the process.

He presents four competing, yet related ‘Worldviews of the Environment’, namely the naturist, mechanistic, agrarian and economic (pp. 165–67). Those holding the naturist view primarily seek to understand the planet (especially its non-human aspects) and are not strong on action. Its key agents are physicists, chemists and biologists. Those with the mechanistic view consider the environment as interlocking building blocks, bits and pieces that can be rearranged. Archetypal actors are engineers, planners and architects. The agrarian view held by farmers, fishers and loggers

is also ‘mechanistic, interventionist, and managerial’, but relies on years of practice in a given limited area, and on yield enhancement. Those taking the economic line, namely economists, planners, policy analysts and investors, see life as being concerned with ‘buying and selling, investing, pricing, retailing and purchasing’. These outlooks are all useful, but an adaptive shift will have to occur, a diversification of portfolios so that plurality rather exclusivity of *Weltanschauung* (philosophy of living) applies, giving priority to the naturalists and agrarians for the world to ‘sustainabilize’ (pp. 171–73).

Princen’s critique of consumerist society is devastating; in fact it reads like an updated version of Marxism versus capitalism. With Marxism dead in the water however, and the USA’s socialist left exiled to the margins from the 1910s, Princen cannot appear to be left-wing in a country where large chunks of the population will react like bulls to a ‘red rag’. This is a worry, since the book is designed overwhelmingly for North Americans. I cannot find a single significant reference to the Two-Thirds World, and the Americocentrism of *Treading Softly* is so pronounced, it as if the USA’s environmental problem is only *intra*-American, which is hardly the case considering the USA’s mining, extractive and of course military activity outside its borders. As an indictment of the kind of economy the USA has ‘perfected’, this is very helpful, especially for inspiring Americans to isolate the ‘right problems’ and start from ‘the ground and work up’ to achieve ‘fundamental change’ (pp. 189–93). But as a means of apprehending the global environmental problem as a whole it is deeply flawed, and does not gauge what the kind of economy the USA possesses does as a globalizing force. Nor does it instruct on such massive world challenges as poverty and population stress. For this, in any case, it would be a book advertised as printed on recycled paper, and of course one being without its hard cover.

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Climate Change Science and Policy

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I read this book carefully and engaged with its inadequate index, concluding that the classification of intelligent environmentalist advocacy could be applied to it. The clearly written and well illustrated arguments do not appeal, however, to someone who feels strongly that environmental policy-science-technology linkages deserve better. I remain a ‘climate agnostic’, and despair of the claim that the climate science debate is over. I also doubt that a rapid transition to so-called ‘clean energy’ globally is either possible or even desirable.