Justin FARRELL, *The Battle for Yellowstone: Morality and the Sacred Roots of Environmental Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2015)

By the time I was born in Eureka, California, at least 95% of the surrounding old-growth coastal redwoods—the world's tallest trees, some millennia old—were gone. Their near-eradication, I was raised to believe, was among the founding sins of the white settlers to the area. Their preservation from logging was a theme of a redemptive narrative passed down from my parents who had relocated to rural Humboldt County to escape the sprawling traffic-jammed suburbs of Sacramento.

This story was, of course, not the only one to tell. Having been a major source of employment in the generations prior to the wave of migration that my parents belonged to, logging and lumber were in precipitous decline. As the industry faded, the region has suffered from some of the most pronounced poverty, addiction and violence in California. An alternative declension narrative saw environmentalism not as redemptive, but as an assault on a way of life and collective identity.

In this context, arguments amongst my peers were often organized around the caricatures of "tree huggers" or "hippies" versus "lumberjacks" or "rednecks." As we collided over trees, we invoked moral vocabularies, distinctions, and associations that were grounded both in our practical lives, and larger socio-historical processes. How we saw nature was inextricably bound up with how we saw each other and ourselves.

It is against this backdrop that I read Justin Farrell's excellent book, *The Battle for Yellowstone*. I begin with this personal anecdote to demonstrate that, if one is to follow C. Wright Mills' conception of the sociological imagination as the capacity to place biography in relation to history, Farrell has succeeded in stimulating mine. While its empirical focus is geographically specific, the book's implications for the study of environmental politics are broad. It suggests that if we look to economic interests, scientific knowledge and ignorance, or even political resources and opportunities alone, we will fail to fully comprehend the stakes of environmental conflict. Instead, Farrell [29] writes that, "only when we shift our attention to investigating

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what it is about nature that people find meaningful, that they find sacred, that they put their faith in and believe worthy of defending, will we start to understand what all the fighting over the environment is really about." In short, Farrell argues that conflicts over the natural environment are irrevocably moral, even if actors are often unable to fully articulate the content and sources of their moral commitments.

This is a book about morality, and more specifically, moral conflict. These terms are increasingly deployed, but not always defined in contemporary cultural sociology. For Farrell, morality refers to "an orientation toward what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust—not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences themselves can be judged." Moral conflict is "the struggle to enact and sustain moral order," something that "can become especially intense and intractable when groups compete to enact and sustain moral orders that are incommensurable," that is, having "no standard or metric by which we can compare the moral orders to each other to adjudicate which one is more worthy of being chosen or realized." Further, in a society obsessed with technical rationality, Farrell argues, "social actors involved simply miss the fact that they are fighting tooth and nail to promote and defend incommensurable moral orders, obsessively marshaling evidence that is itself meaningless when abstracted from their larger narratives and moral commitments" [10-12].

One aim of this book is simply to cross-pollinate between the resurgent sociology of morality and environmental sociology. As Farrell points out in the introduction of the book, morality has largely been neglected in the sociological study of the environment. The book also speaks to the sociology of religion. Throughout, Farrell draws connections between morality and spirituality. Despite the persistence of a clear spiritual dimension within the history of environmental thought and practice, Farrell [21] observes that "the concept of spirituality (and religion more generally) has largely been left out of sociological conversations about the environment." Conversely, in conflicts over nature, Farrell finds an exemplary secular context that sociologists of religion might look to in order to move beyond "a false dichotomy of the sacred *or* the technoscientific" [23].

The book is divided into five substantive chapters, in addition to an introduction, a conclusion and a methodological appendix. The first two substantive chapters are historical. The others are detailed case

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studies of specific contemporary environmental conflicts that have occurred in the Yellowstone area of the American Rocky Mountains, which includes parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Farrell draws on an impressive body of evidence: two years of ethnographic participant observation, over 100 formal and informal interviews, quantitative indicators of social change, and large textual corpora, which he analyzes using computational and qualitative techniques.

Chapter 1 provides historical background on the origins of Yellowstone National Park (the first national park in the US), and shows how struggles to define it were "rooted in different visions of what nature is good for" [62]. This chapter introduces three such visions in their broad socio-historical context: "utilitarian," "spiritual" and "biocentric." Each moral vision links notions of what nature is good for with notions of what it means to be a good person.

The utilitarian vision is associated with the group Farrell calls "old-westerners." It views nature both as a resource, and an important source of identity which links the physical transformation of the land, by way of ranching and mining, to a moral narrative grounded in manifest destiny, rugged individualism, and sacralizing work. The spiritual vision, on the other hand, emerged as a quasi-religious response to the apparent excesses of the utilitarian vision. While, as Farrell points out, Native Americans have resided in and around Yellowstone for some 11,000 years only to be forcibly and violently removed during the ascendency of the old-west, a nascent spiritual ecology in the late 19th century saw untouched "wilderness" as "a doorway to the sublime and a refuge from society" [55]. Yellowstone emerged as "America's Eden."

The protection of nature required more than a spiritual reorientation and, in this sense, the seeds of the newest moral vision could be found in the conflict between its predecessors. The rise of environmental science and the modern environmental movement, and the enactment of flagship environmental regulation in the mid and late 20th century saw the emergence of a biocentric moral vision, which would become institutionalized in what is now known as the "Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem." Farrell argues that "new-westerners" who migrated to the Yellowstone area to enjoy natural amenities, or to participate in environmental management, research or activism, draw on a mixture of the spiritual and biocentric moral visions.

Having laid out the historical sources and content of three ideal-typical moral visions, Farrell sets the stage for viewing Yellowstone as an environmental battleground. Specifically, he shows how the

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long-dominant old-western way of life was displaced by a new set of social realities, beginning in the early 1970s. Chapter 2 tracks migration patterns and the associated demographic and economic changes to the Yellowstone region, primarily drawing on quantitative indicators. It also follows the proliferation of different types of stakeholders in the Yellowstone region, with an emphasis on interest groups and their relationships with bureaucratic agencies, elected officials, and technical experts. Farrell follows this analysis of the emergence of the new-west with a broad discussion of its moral effects. In the face of rapid cultural change, Farrell argues, old-westerners have experienced moral condemnation and challenges to their sacred narratives. In response, they have pointed to the perceived moral hypocrisy of new-westerners.

The three following chapters detail specific case studies. Each showcases important dimensions of Yellowstone's status as an object of moral conflict. The first sheds light on the moral dimensions of a conflict that might otherwise appear to turn on interpretations of science. Chapter 3 focuses on the efforts of a single organization, the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC), to protect "America's only genetically pure and fenceless free-roaming bison herd" from government management including hazing and slaughter [120]. The government's rationale for its actions is that they are necessary to protect Montana's livestock industry from the disease brucellosis (although, as Farrell shows, the scope of actual risk is subject to significant dispute). Despite its small size and operating budget, the BFC has been able to motivate passionate volunteers, garner significant support from outside of the region, and ultimately extract major concessions from agencies in charge of managing Yellowstone buffalo. Farrell argues that the BFC owes its success to its framing of the matter, not in technical terms, but in the form of moral and spiritual protest. To do so, the BFC has bent the debate toward "its own moral logic, organized around the moral value of genetic purity, on the 'wildness' of free-roaming buffalo, on the animal's direct link to native spirituality, on ethical lessons humans must learn from the buffalo, and on the future of the [Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem], as the BFC sees it, moving away from old-west extraction toward a return to indigenous spiritual values of nature" [121].

However, despite the centrality of spirituality to the BFC's moral logic, when probed in interviews, individual members who act as "buffalo crusaders" in the context of organized civil disobedience are often unable to articulate in moral or spiritual terms what motivates

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them to participate in this activism in the first place. In response to this puzzle, Farrell contributes to recent sociological debates about the role of culture in action. His solution to the problem is that countervailing cultural narratives have "muted" religious claims and commitments from the habits of talk of "the typical BFC volunteer's white, young, middle-class, liberal, and secular background" [161]. For many volunteers, the rise of the religious right has created uneasiness with what it means be "religious" or "a believer," while cultural narratives associated with relativism and individualism dampen their abilities to make strong declarations about right and wrong.

Chapter 4 focuses on the controversial reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone, which has sparked markedly different responses from old-west and new-west constituencies. If conflicts over the buffalo force us to look beyond science, wolf reintroduction shows the explanatory limits of economic interests. While threats to livestock posed by wolf reintroduction are a persistent talking point, Farrell points out that instituted compensation for such losses has done little to reduce the intensity of conflict over wolf reintroduction. Rather, the author shows, the conflict is organized around two contending moral orders. The anti-wolf moral order is grounded in old-west narratives, which cast the wolves as a threat. Its elements include rugged American individualism, human dominionism, and what Farrell refers to as "simple and sacred heritage," which is composed of sacralizing work, recreational practices, distrust of outsiders, and lived knowledge [174]. The pro-wolf moral order, on the other hand, is grounded in a new-western redemption narrative, which seeks to make a fragmented and damaged ecosystem whole. Although science indeed looms large, Farrell's computational analysis of pro-wolf letters to the federal government shows that ecological arguments rarely occur in isolation, and are typically rendered meaningful in relation to morality, spirituality, and religion. What organizes the groups' opposition is how they understand "what the wolf is 'good' for" [215].

The final case is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most counterintuitive. Against the temptation to view old-westerners as simply "anti-environmental," Farrell demonstrates the salience of their moral-spiritual attachment to wild nature. Chapter 5 charts old-western mobilization to oppose fracking (short for hydraulic fracturing, a technique for extracting natural gas) in the Hoback Basin area of the Wyoming Range. Importantly, this was not a simple case of "Not In My Backyard." The same people who mobilized against drilling in Hoback were at pains to clarify that they were not

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against fracking as such, and proudly welcomed energy development just about everywhere else in the region. In fact, given that mining has long been the economic driver of Wyoming, those opposed were among its most direct economic beneficiaries in the area. Rather, activists grounded their opposition to drilling in Hoback in terms of the old-western ideals of family heritage, labor on the land, and wilderness experience. This particular place was deemed "too special to drill" [230].

The prospect of developing Hoback for extractive industry was viewed as a perversion of its purpose, and a breach of important symbolic boundaries. At the same time, these activists were not comfortable with being cast into the same category as other environmental advocates. Instead, they engaged in moral boundary work, to distinguish themselves from "tree-huggers," framing their activism instead around "practicality, reasonableness, regard for old-west extraction culture, and a general adherence to old-west 'Wyoming values'" [253]. This boundary work was not merely discursive. It was of a piece with their strategic decisions, including which environmental organizations to cooperate with, and what tactics were viewed as legitimate to shut down drilling. With respect to the latter, activists did not take their battle to the courts or to governmental agencies. Instead their movement's success came in the form of a market transaction: purchasing the leases from the energy company that had plans to drill 136 gas wells.

Among this book's many strengths is its empirical depth, enabled by the integration of a wide array of data sources and methods. Not only does the reader walk away with a solid grasp of the historical and contemporary significance of Yellowstone, but also with a better understanding of the stakes of American environmental politics more generally. It is a work that balances the voices of consequential social actors with an analysis of the historical and institutional conditions under which they act.

That this book has so substantively brought morality into the sociological study of environmental politics should make it an agenda setting work. Not only is it a significant contribution to environmental sociology, but also to the ascendant "new" sociology of morality. Yet in important ways, the book's argument remains strikingly classical, which Farrell readily admits to on page 18. At a basic level, the book has deployed canonical analytical strategies. Following Weber, Farrell asks why we do what we do, and ask what we ask. Because value presuppositions underlie claims and questions about nature, Farrell

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asks what these values are and how they came to be. If Weber provokes the "why?" of morality, Durkheim is focused on the "what?" Specifically, Farrell looks to environmental conflicts to understand how the world is carved up into morally salient categories like the sacred and profane, and how those moral boundaries structure our relations with others and ourselves.

These are crucial lines of questioning for any moral sociology of the environment, but the book implicitly points to others. One relates to the author's heavy reliance on the term "deep" to describe the significance of moral commitments vis-à-vis other factors contributing to environmental conflict (including economic interests, scientific disputes, and political mobilization). In the introduction and conclusion, Farrell modestly positions the book's contribution as the addition of an important *ingredient* to our understanding of environmental conflict, stopping short of proposing a general *recipe*. In searching for an implicit one, the reader finds a productive tension between the book's historical and contemporary halves. As the case studies convincingly point out, moral and spiritual commitments often lie underneath environmental political claims. Yet, as the historical chapters of the book demonstrate, present-day moral visions of nature owe their shape to the economic and political pursuits of previous generations. Thus, depending on the scope of one's historical vision, the book can support contending (though not necessarily contradictory) answers to the general question of exactly *how* morality relates to and interacts with other socio-historical factors contributing to the shape of environmental conflict. This points to yet another set of classical questions not directly explored in the book concerning the relationship between the "ideal" and the "material," and how history is conceptualized more generally, which might be addressed via critical engagement with Marxian and materialist approaches to environmental politics.

Finally is the question, more specific to the topic of nature, of the implications of Farrell's contribution to the horizon of global climate change, and the anthropocene condition. (Since publishing this book, Farrell has begun a significant new research project on climate change polarization that will likely show one potent way forward.) In reflecting on the broader implications and scope conditions of this book's argument, it is important to point out that Yellowstone is a prototypically American story of the preservation (and more recently, restoration) of wilderness. As the flagship national park in the US, it is among the nation's least human-altered landscapes. Although

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a detailed roadmap for future research is beyond the scope of the book, Farrell invites the reader to consider the moral dimensions of environmental conflicts beyond the gates of America's Eden. What happens when we think of the moralization of nature in "ruined" landscapes instead? What might it mean to struggle to enact and sustain moral order in a world that—both biophysically and politically—increasingly appears to be so *dis*ordered?

Farrell's outstanding book will be of substantive interest to environmental sociologists, sociologists of religion, political sociologists, sociologists of science, environmental historians, human geographers, and environmental ethicists. It will be of methodological interest to those in any field who seek to integrate qualitative and computational methods in the study of cultural change and conflict. In a time of radical political stalemate regarding the environment, *The Battle for Yellowstone* is a welcome reminder to look beyond facts, figures, and even interests, to consider the moral and spiritual dimensions of environmental conflict. It will change the way you see nature, and maybe even yourself.

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