

Peter Bille Larsen and Daniel Brockington (eds.). *The Anthropology of Conservation NGOs: Rethinking the Boundaries*. Switzerland. Palgrave Macmillan. 2018. 289 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-3-319-60578-4. EUR 103.99.

***The Anthropology of Conservation NGOs:
Rethinking the Boundaries***

The global expansion of environmental conservation initiatives throughout the late 1980s and 1990s has been the focus of considerable scholarly engagement, particularly in disciplines like anthropology, geography, and sociology. Academics have made significant contributions to a better understanding—from a critical analytical perspective—of the ways that politics, socio-cultural dynamics, historical processes, and economic interests are part and parcel of large-scale environmental conservation. Social scientists laid the foundations of these approaches during a period of highly productive output that spanned the late 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. The work of these social scientists addressed concerns stemming from the proliferation of big environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in the Global South.

This research drew attention to a slew of unintended consequences that were commonly associated with the proliferation of Western-modelled environmental conservation initiatives in the Global South. Scholars writing within this context highlighted, to name but a few of these effects, the eviction of local inhabitants by “fortress” style conservation (e.g., Brockington 2002; Igoe 2003); the onset of new forms of social inequality in formerly colonial settings (e.g., Brockington 2004; West and Brockington 2006); and the marginalisation of local ‘nature preservation’ wisdom and practices (Igoe 2003). They also showed that conservation had become a highly consequential and globally reaching form of governance as well as an arena in which new hegemonic interests coalesce and unfold (e.g., Agrawal 2005; Igoe et al. 2010; West et al. 2006), although at times also resisted and subverted (Ferguson 1994). They demonstrated, moreover, that the logics and operational realities of neoliberal projects often go hand in hand with mainstream NGO environmental preservation efforts (e.g., McCarthy and Prudham 2004). The output of these studies reveals that conservation is often modelled under the aegis of ‘selling nature to save it’ (e.g., McFee 1999), and as a result, ‘nature conservation’ has become an important frontier in the renewed expansion of global processes of capital accumulation (e.g., Büscher 2013).

By the time Büscher et al. (2012) produced a synthesised review of this literature, new questions were already being asked about the ways in which the above body of scholarly work might develop further past some of its own limitations. Amongst other important considerations, there were calls for greater depth in the investigation of historical lines

of continuity from ‘earlier forms of capitalism’ through ‘neoliberal conservation capitalism’, whereby the latter (re)produces and transforms the former (e.g., Neves 2010); for closer attention to the dynamics that often occur among the State, capitalist processes, social movements, and the neoliberalisation of ‘nature’ (e.g., McFee and Shapiro 2010); and for more nuanced accounts of how dominant forms of environmental governance intersect with, and are affected by, counter-hegemonic forms of agency (e.g., Fletcher 2010).

A new generation of critical studies of environmental conservation ensued from this turning point. In addition to the themes evoked in the previous paragraph, this growing body of work paid greater attention to the complexity of the encounters taking place amongst the epistemologies, institutions, and constituents that meet and interact within the parameters of large-scale environmental conservation. For example, scholars have recently sought to overcome dichotomies and/or reified divides between expert and non-expert knowledges (e.g., Beck et al. 2014; Haenn 2016) and explored environmental conservation institutions that lay betwixt and between State and E-NGO constituencies as well as beyond them (Neves 2019).

This book is a prime example of the high-quality scholarly work that is being produced within the framework of this new generation of critical environmental conservation studies. Anchored in the conceptual apparatus that the notion of ‘boundary organisation’ affords, it aptly expands the literature mentioned earlier by exploring E-NGOs as nodes in highly complex networks, where a variety of agents interact in the pursuit of their specific ‘conservation’ agendas.

This approach is timely, especially when other scholars have highlighted the nature of our current environmental problems as exceedingly large in temporal/spatial scale, complexity, and in socio-ecological intersectionality (Morton 2014)—whereby, they constitute veritable “hyperboundary objects” (Neves 2019: 112–113). Managing such large-scale and complex phenomena requires the collaboration of multiple epistemic communities (Morton 2014) as well as between various agents of governance (MacDonald) which, in turn, begets the involvement of boundary organisations. To be sure, this book, in relying on the notion of boundary organisations as its foundational orientation, brings forth attention to the dynamic webs of relations that characterise conservation efforts; highlight the ways in which differential power positions interact and unfold in the course of conservation action; and widen the scope of scholarly foci in this field to investigate the interaction of multiple epistemic communities (Castree 2014). This is a welcome step in critical social studies of conservation

that goes beyond the earlier predominance of science-policy interfaces and market-conservation alliances.

The concept of boundary organisations focuses on the permeability of institutional boundaries between distinct NGOs as well as between NGOs and other kinds of constituencies. Chapters by Ruyschaert and Salles and by Brockington et al. beautifully illustrate this concept while presenting a possible comparative framework from which scholars working in other locations will benefit. Brockington et al. also add a much needed historical perspective to the interactive processes by means of which E-NGOs operating in Africa grew and expanded over time, a topic which, with the exception of Sachedina's (2008) PhD thesis had remained unexplored until now.

Other chapters revisit the matter of 'the neoliberalisation of conservation' which—as mentioned earlier—had been a central aspect in this field of studies in earlier critical conservation studies. Rather than merely confirming that market forces often co-opt E-NGO conservation efforts, these chapters explore the non-linear vicissitudes of market/conservation dynamics, with surprising results. Holmes's chapter is particularly illustrative of this. First, it points to the highly heterogeneous nature of conservation and NGOs as well as the consequent heterogeneity of neoliberal conservation outcomes. Second, it sheds light on the pragmatic nature of many of these processes while highlighting their socio-historic contingency.

The effectiveness of the boundary organisation approach is further enhanced through the use of a solidly grounded anthropological angle that brings forth a multitude of 'localised' voices, logics, and positions that conjure 'nature conservation' projects into existence and affect the dynamics of environmental conservation across wide spatial and temporal scopes. A chapter by Nuesiri and another by Redford provide insightful perspectives on strategies to move past the shortcomings of earlier conservation studies and their predisposition to focus on oppositional standpoints. These are much welcome contributions in a field that has at times been critiqued for its lack of engagement with multi-voice and/or with possible 'solutions' to the conundrums that large-scale NGO conservation often generates.

Arguably, the benefits of the dialogic approach in this book are most evident in its "discussion forum", where a mix of conservation practitioners and scholars respond to some key issues raised by this book's chapters. This collaboration facilitates the transcendence of conceptual blindspots while facilitating the exploration of productive dialogue between and across different institutional frameworks and epistemic paradigms. In so doing, it creates potential for effective dialogue amongst the many agents that meet and interact in the course of biodiversity conservation initiatives.

This book is to be commended for its success in addressing and transposing some of the limitations that accompanied earlier studies. Although the merits of this book are plenty and, in many cases, specific to chapters, three encompassing aspects deserve to be highlighted. First, it overcomes former dualism in scholarly approaches that heuristically pitched E-NGOs against local peoples and/or conservation experts versus

non-experts. Instead, it offers more intricate accounts of the various positions that actors negotiate and articulate in the ever changing E-NGO conservation dynamics. Second, it transcends monolithic accounts that inadvertently froze E-NGOs in time while implicitly reducing them into categories of the "Good", the "Bad", and the "Dirty Harry" of conservation (Larsen). Instead, this book offers a kaleidoscope of perspectives that inform E-NGO logics and practices across socio-historical and political frames. Third, it introduces a framework for reflexive dialogue between academics and environmental conservation practitioners which, in and of itself, has for long been lacking in this field of studies.

For future reference, it would be worthwhile to further build these pillars. First, it is important to learn more about the extent to which local peoples, E-NGO agents, conservation experts, government constituencies, and scholars learn from each other and/or how they build contexts to allow effective communication, even if power differentials inherently mediate these processes. This is a key aspect of consideration in studying multi-epistemic engagement within the scope of boundary institutions as well as in related discussions of potential transformations in the conduct of conservation (e.g., Neves 2004). Second, in scholarly contexts where the scholarly goal is to provide kaleidoscopic views of conservation dynamics, additionally extended uses of ethnographic data—in the traditional anthropological sense—will be pivotal in bringing to the fore the voices, rationales, and struggles of the multiple constituencies involved in these processes.

I have no doubt that this book will be of great use to a variety of readers who seek to deepen their understanding of contemporary environmental conservation. Given the enormity of our current environmental woes where old approaches to the conduct of environmental conservation have proven insufficient, this edited collection is indeed an important step forward.

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