The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism by Keith Makoto Woodhouse (review)

Sarah M. Pike

Journal for the Study of Radicalism, Volume 14, Number 2, Fall 2020, pp. 185-188 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

Book Review

The Ecocentrists: A History of Radical Environmentalism

Keith Makoto Woodhouse

New York, Columbia University Press, 2018; 392 pages. $24.00 (paperback), $35.00 (hardcover), $23.99 (ebook), ISBN 9780231165891.

Radical environmentalists are not outliers to be written off for their extremism. In fact, according to historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse, radical groups like Earth First! could not be more relevant to the development of the broader environmental movement, and have shaped contemporary debates about issues such as climate change. Woodhouse's book promotes an awareness of differences within ecocentric environmentalism as well as radicals' sometimes unexpected alliances, which occurred, in part at least, because of their opposition to classical liberalism. By framing his important contribution to the history of radical environmentalism with its relevance to contemporary climate change activism, Woodhouse underscores the ways in which radicals sharpened a concept of ecocentrism that forms the basis for much contemporary environmental rhetoric and action.

Woodhouse traces ecocentric thought and action within the environmental movement from the 1960s into the 1990s in rich and fascinating detail. He draws on interviews and archival material and probes the complexities of ecocentrism as it appears in various local cases and national (the book focuses on the United States) debates over the past century. During these decades, more radical expressions, such as Earth First!, emerged from ecocentric factions of the Sierra Club and other mainstream organizations. Ecocentrism eventually became the most influential view among radical environmental activists, focusing attention on the interconnections among all living things, human and nonhuman.

Throughout the late twentieth century, Earth First!, both internally and in its encounters with mainstream organizations, sharpened the opposition

between ecocentrism and humanism. As Woodhouse's case studies show, context is everything: in some cases the Sierra Club veered towards the more ecocentric visions of Earth First!ers, whereas in other contexts Earth First! was seen as misanthropic or anti-immigrant. In such cases, mainstream groups emphasized their distance from Earth First!'s rhetoric and tactics that seemed to discount social justice and human well-being by privileging the lives of nonhuman species. Woodhouse identifies radical environmentalism's perceived anti-humanism as one of the main reasons that the New Left often disregarded environmental issues and took a "non-stance toward ecology." As Woodhouse observes, in many ways ecocentrism is fundamentally opposed to classical liberalism because it seeks to limit individual freedom. Radicals critique commitments to material progress at all costs and vilify mainstream groups for not challenging the "primacy of economic growth" (43).

Yet Woodhouse demonstrates that anti-humanism and attention to social justice sometimes coalesced in Earth First!, especially in the 1980s in the outreach work of California activist Judi Bari. Earth First!'s activity shifted to the West Coast where anarchists and other activists informed by social justice concerns began to target corporate CEOs and form coalitions with workers. Early members of Earth First! like Dave Foreman, who came from backgrounds in conservation, were often uncomfortable with this new emphasis. Even after Foreman left Earth First!, passionate debates over whether Earth First! should prioritize "wilderness first" over other issues has continued at Earth First! gatherings and in the pages of the *Earth First! Journal*, the most widely circulated radical environmentalist publication.

Although Woodhouse identifies some of the influences, like Earth First!'s Bari, who pushed radicals to be more attentive to multiple forms of oppression, he downplays the influence of anarchism, especially as it shaped young Earth First!ers on the West Coast in the 1990s. He ignores related anarchist-influenced movements, such as 1970s anti-nuclear activism, the 1990 Seattle protests against the WTO, and the Occupy movement, all of which had an impact on radical environmentalism. Activists moved through these affiliated movements, bringing concerns about social stratification, indigenous rights, and a host of other social justice issues into Earth First! gatherings and actions.

Other significant developments in radical environmentalism are also missing in the book, while the Sierra Club receives disproportionate attention. The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) gets one brief mention, but no further discussion of how

it fits into this history, even though it is a development that takes ecocentrism in a more radical direction, as does the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). This omission is surprising given the fact that charges of anti-humanism, one of Woodhouse's main themes, have been prominent in demonization of ELF and ALF activists as "ecoterrorists" (see Will Potter's 2011 study, *Green is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege*).[1] So why does Woodhouse not devote more time to ELF and ALF, instead of dedicating so much space to the Sierra Club? Many radical animal rights campaigns have not focused on individual nonhuman animals, as Woodhouse claims, but have been concerned with whole species (e.g., buffalo and wolf protection, wild horse and mink liberation). Including an account of the emergence of ELF and ALF in the 1990s would have made his study more comprehensive.

Another key factor in ecocentrism's U.S. history is absent from this book: the spiritual aspect of the radical environmental movement, especially the influence of contemporary Paganism. Ecocentric spiritual beliefs and practices were present since the early years of Earth First!, as religious studies scholar Bron Taylor's many publications have demonstrated.[2] Woodhouse uses the term "sacred lands" (15), but gives us no sense of how particular ecocentric notions of the sacred developed and changed over time in radical movements. In fact, Taylor's work is not mentioned at all, even though he is probably the most widely published scholar on Earth First!. Although beliefs in the sacredness of earth and ritual practices such as the Council of All Beings occurred at Earth First! gatherings, spirituality has remained controversial and the role of Paganism has faded over the years. This is a crucial part of the story of radical environmentalism's shifting understandings of ecocentrism over time.

The Ecocentrists lacks some significant aspects of radical environmentalism's history, but it is nevertheless a timely study of the complex relationships among movements like the New Left, conservation biology, Zero Population Growth, mainstream environmentalism, and radical environmentalism. The book makes a convincing case for taking radicalism seriously, rather than dismissing it as too extreme to be relevant. The many connections that major figures in the radical movement have with mainstream thinkers and activists in related movements and communities makes this study of central importance to understanding contemporary debates about climate change and environmental justice.

Sarah M. Pike

Notes

1 Will Potter, *Green is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2011).

2 See, for example, Taylor's *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009).