

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL

LAND DEGRADATION AND SOCIETY. Edited by PIERS BLAIKIE and HAROLD BROOKFIELD. London: Methuen, 1986. xxiv, 296 p. *Maps, ill., bibliogr., tab., ind.* 23 cm. £10.95 (pbk). ISBN 0 416 40150 3

This book is a valiant struggle with a subject in which everything is connected with everything else in bewildering local variety, and where earlier studies have often had serious blind spots resulting from disciplinary specialisation. Blaikie, as a political economist, and Brookfield, as a geographer, have achieved or perhaps were driven to, ideological pluralism in their analysis. Their multi-interdisciplinarity is illuminating, for instance where they discuss the differences between economic, ecological and politico-economic marginality. They make the 'land-manager' the starting point, and define and use the concepts of land management, land degradation, resilience and sensitivity. They abjure the fundamentalist view of the value of soil as absolute, and regard its value as dependent on the supply and demand for soil at specific places and specific times. Attempting to capture the physical and social realities which are so often treated separately, they use the phrase 'regional political ecology' to combine the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy, encompassing 'the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself'.

The book falls into three parts. The first is analytical, the editors defining and debating the problem of land degradation and of approaches to it. Then Michael Stocking argues that methods for measuring land degradation are inadequate and can mislead; the domination of United States research, for example, is dangerous because the same soil loss on similar soils can well be innocuous in the United States but a disaster in tropical conditions. David Seckler discusses the application of discount rates to assessments of soil and water conservation investments, and concludes that after conventional economic evaluation of benefits and costs based on discounting, there remains an 'option value', meaning options for future use. He concedes that 'the amount of this option value cannot be estimated by economists. That is a task left to decision-makers who presumably reflect the ethical and other values of society as a whole'. Would it were so simple; one is left with the fear that normal economic discounting which values the present more than the future will remain a threat to sound decisions about environment and development.

The second part of the book is a succession of case study chapters. These consider: colonisation, development and degradation in Africa and Asia; questions from history in the Mediterranean and Western Europe; degradation under pre-capitalist social systems (the ancient Pacific and the New Guinea Highlands); management, enterprise and politics in the development of the tropical rain forest lands (with cases from Indonesia and Fiji); the degradation of common property resources (CPRs) (including Narpat Jodha on CPRs in India); land degradation in socialist countries (including USSR and Vaclav Smil on China—an ancient problem getting worse); and the farmer, the state and the land in developed market economies.

In the third and final section, Blaikie and Brookfield give no comfort to those who hanker after simple explanations. Their aim has been to clarify complexity and reduce it. However, even when 'pressures of production on resources' (not pressure of population) does emerge as a common element, except where a production system is in collapse, even this has many causes, forms and effects. Here, as throughout the book, the respect for diverse empirical evidence is impressive. That there is no concluding overarching theory is a victory for intellectual honesty.

All the same, one is left wondering what to do. Academics and policy-makers should and will read this book, or parts of it, with interest and at times enlightenment. It carries our understanding forward. It also provokes the speculation whether an analytical approach which started from solutions rather than with problems might not integrate some of the bewildering complexity. But that is to ask for another book, and we should be grateful for this one for its impressive disciplinary, geographic and intellectual range, as well as for helping us a good step forward in understanding.

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