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Richard Widick. *Trouble in the Forest: California's Redwood Timber Wars.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. xxiv + 353 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-5324-9; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-5325-6.

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The Forest for the Trees

Anyone who has lived in California for a length of time or makes a living by studying the Golden State has at least heard of Julia Butterfly and the Headwaters Forest. Butterflyâs heroic and lengthy encampment in the canopy of the giant Humboldt County redwoods made headlines across the state and the country for two years in the 1990s. Her role as a symbol of what sociologist Richard Widick calls the "Timber Wars" brought to a head the inexorable and escalating conflict between environmentalists and capitalists, generating searing images and the rhetoric of owls over jobs in the public mind.

In *Trouble in the Forest, Californiaâs Redwood Timber Wars*, Widick brings us a sociological treatment of this recent history, arguing convincingly that Humboldt County, California is a quintessential place to study the impacts of capitalism on the natural and cultural environments. Unlike the publicly owned Pacific Northwest forests to the north, the forests of Humboldt County had been privatized by the United Statesâ nineteenth-century land disposition policies. Thus, the county represents the intersection of frontier history and capitalist enterprise and their clash with Americaâs indigenous people and majestic natural resources. The story of the Humboldt redwoods, told compellingly by Widick, is replete with cultural ramifications stretching over the course of two centuries, and although Widickâs book is a regional one, the subject matter reveals the larger story of American expansion and nation-building.

Your own passions–if you lean this way–might be ignited by the stories that launch Widickâs book. He begins with a brief reference to the 1860 massacre of the coastal Wiyot Indians, and then tells the equally horrific story about 24-year old activist David Chainâs 1998 death by tree felling in the forests of Humboldt County, both of which get fuller treatment later but which transport the reader into the folds of the book. The two stories also serve to convey Widickâs ultimate view of this place. He romanticizes the forestâs earlier, simpler times, and laments its terrifying metamorphosis into a cultural war against capitalismâs excesses. The book flashes an early caution light to all its readers about what he calls the âsocial struggles [that will] determine the planetary ecological futureâ (p. 7).

The press coverage of Chainâs 1998 death drew Widick himself into the modern conflict. Within weeks, he headed to Humboldt County to begin field work. The result of his work is a hard-hitting critique of capitalism and globalization. *Trouble in the Forest* grapples with Humboldt Countyâs modern social conflict, which he argues embodies âthe twentieth-century rupture of globalizationâ (p. 7). The book, while focused on the contemporary battle, also weaves in some of the more distant past through the examination of three historical moments: the 1860 massacre of Wiyot on Indian Island, the killing of redwood strikers in the 1935 lumber strike, and the car bombing of forest defenders in 1990. He char-

acterizes the story as a linear progression from primitive capital accumulation (the time of Indian âtroubleâ) to internal struggles (i.e., these were simply labor wars, no one was actually questioning the rightness of cutting down the trees), to the current era of environmental conflict, where the contradictions are external. Widick concludes that in each case, the violent outcome could be blamed on a struggle for property.

Herein lies the crux of Widickâs argument: that being American was so deeply rooted in the culture of capitalism that it defined Humboldt County. Most importantly, of all the qualities that defined the American revolutionary culture, the nationâs founders elevated private property above all else. Newspapers, upon which Widick relies almost exclusively for primary-source material, were indispensable for the local residentsâ formation of a national self-consciousness. He argues that the papers were a way for far-flung fortune seekers in the West to maintain ties with their eastern counterparts, and for ideas of capital to be disseminated from the East. They served to connect the pioneers with their country, and imbue in them Americaâs deep regard for capitalism, whiteness, and property rights.

Widick is sympathetic throughout the book to the âforest defenders,â portraying the forest defense as a âmovement of conscience, the objective of which is the refusal of unjust forestry laws and unaccountable corporate power, which activists correctly see as allowing the commons to be destroyed for the profit of a distant absentee ownerâ (p. 101). He argues that although the timber companies liked to portray the modern activists as non-law abiding, pot-smoking trespassers, it was the activists who were in fact operating in the tradition of civil disobedience from which the nationâs founders emerged, and are therefore the more patriotic Americans, a characterization that has evoked great anger from the timber companies. But in his story, the corporation writ large is undoubtedly the villain. Even Widickâs treatment of Pacific Lumberâs early days of corporate paternalism, all of which is drawn from secondary sources or the companyâs own literature, is tinged with skepticism, with the locally beloved Pacific Lumber characterized as a do-gooder for the environment and labor only because it was inherently good for capital (p. 110). While there is no doubt more than a little truth to this argument, a more balanced approach would have genuinely recognized the real improvements such paternalism made in peopleâs lives.

As a historian, I would like to have seen a greater examination of local archives, pioneer papers, or Indian archives that might have given the laborers and common people more agency in the story. What happened in Humboldt County is unquestionably tragic, from the native deaths to the laborers and eventually activists who have lost their lives for these trees. But what ultimately remains dissatisfying about Widickâs account is the complete lack of agency given to the underdogs. His storyâs trajectory assumes the triumph of capitalism at every step. Encountering provocative words such as âcultural hegemonyâ throughout the book, the reader is disheartened by the lack of any real chance the underdog might have had to stop the inevitable march of property rights. A reader canât help but wonder where the agency is for the women Widick includes, the Wiyots who get massacred, and the workers he portrays.

Another welcome addition would have been more detail on the actual effect of tree removal on the species in the forest. Widick assumes that his reader already knows (and believes) that it resulted in devastation. But some detailed information on the habitat of the endangered marbled murrelet seabird or the salmon and how they were impacted by the tree cutting would have helped ground his argument by demonstrating the real impact the timber industry had on the ecology of the place. Although he is a sociologist, just a bit of this would have improved the book. As it stands, the reader hears only the human rhetoric (and Widick should be credited for providing both sides) and is left to either rely entirely on Widickâs interpretation–which is that the forest defenders were right that the place was decimated–or to have unanwered questions. Of course studying rhetoric is a sociologistâs specialty, but some additional material would have been quite satisfying.

The book is at its best when Widick briefly describes Humboldt County as a place of contradictions, because it is here that balance is provided and modern people with real lives come off the page. He mentions the active tribal life, living reservations, labor halls and Labor Day picnics, old-growth reserves, and restoration economies. Not everyone who inhabits this place is engaged in its violent struggles, and it is undoubtedly true that some good has come out of the struggles when you look at the beauty that remains. The book–though theory heavy at the start–is valuable to historians who might be getting started on a historical study of the area (please!), sociologists, and activists alike. Readers will both love and despise this story. Love it because it will impassion you, and hate it because it may sadden you. But it is a story that everyone should know.

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