

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Darren Frederick Speece.** *Defending Giants: The Redwood Wars and the Transformation of American Environmental Politics.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. 384 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-99951-7.

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Darren Speece's important new book on the battles to save the northern California redwoods in the 1980s and 1990s is a significant contribution to our understanding of environmentalism. The first major book on the late twentieth-century redwood wars and the Headwaters Campaign, arguably the most important grassroots environmental movement of the period, it is also the finest book written on the history of American environmentalism in the last five years. Exploring the deep complexity of grassroots environmentalism that properly places large green organizations in the background and explores how the ideology of local activists shaped campaign tactics, Speece has provided a new model for studying the environmental movement.

The book begins with a brief discussion of the early history of activism to save the redwoods. Speece argues that a corporatist regime developed in the nineteenth century to log the redwood forests and that attacking corporate domination, not logging itself, was the ultimate goal of many environmental activists stretching back to the early twentieth century. That most of this was private land ultimately required new strategies for preservationists that evolved and peaked during the 1980s and 1990s, when venture capitalist Charles Hurwitz purchased longtime local company Pacific Lumber and sought to liquidate the timber to turn a quick profit. This caused Earth First! and other radical groups to challenge the industry through direct action while other, less radical organizations, led the fight in the courts and within the state and federal government, a multipronged strategy Speece notes goes back far within the redwood protection movement.

The outlines of this history are well known, but Speece's attention to detail, grounded in both the history of capitalism and the history of social movements, shines new light on this story. He pulls our attention from middle-class environmentalists to the local people who put their bodies on the line to save these forests. He challenges conventional wisdom about consumer-based environmentalism dominating the movement in recent decades, noting the resolutely anticonsumeristic positions of activists. Moreover, he brings a much-overdue focus on gender in the environmental movement, observing that women have played leading roles in redwood activism from its beginnings in the 1920s into the twenty-first century. He also delineates the divisiveness within a fractured movement, with big personalities and an emotional rollercoaster that strained friendships and alliances, even in the midst of victory. Through these stories, Speece paints a complex picture of a grassroots movement with a useful attention to both detail and clear writing that should spawn conversations among both historians and activist communities on the lessons to be learned from the redwoods.

Speece carefully lays out how local activists in northern California were opposed to corporations, not workers. He clearly and convincingly demonstrates that greens had a place for work in their worldview and as local residents understood the complexities of a working-class economy. This is most famously articulated in Judi Bari's promotion of the Industrial Workers of the World in the woods, although more books have mentioned this fact than there were actual loggers who met with Bari or joined her iteration of the IWW. Activists struggled

mightily to connect with workers and the possibility of alliances with loggers went unfulfilled. Unfortunately reflecting the historiography of environmental movements, Speece does not take the loggers themselves as subjects, people who had also deeply complex positions on environmentalism and who also often believed that some balance between jobs and environmental protection could be struck.

This thought-provoking book also comes out at an interesting time. Written during the Obama presidency and published at the outset of the Trump era, Speece's fundamental optimism about the use of executive power to promote environmental gains feels very different now than it would have a year ago. He notes that the battle to save the redwoods "severely eroded corporate power in California and across the nation" (p. 5), but this is hard to square with the United States in 2017, a nation with un-

limited corporate contributions to elections, where the secretary of state is the former CEO of ExxonMobil, and a billionaire runs the Department of Education. Speece correctly notes that the Clinton administration's intervention to buy contested lands ushered in a new era of executive branch governance on environmental matters. But this is a limited strategy for greens. Reliance upon the executive branch can be effective, as campaigns to create national monuments and stop the Keystone XL Pipeline demonstrated under Obama, but the weakness of that strategy is becoming increasingly clear with the new administration, which has now reversed Obama's decision on Keystone. One might ask whether the campaign to save the redwoods is actually a story of the last great grassroots environmental movement instead of a model for a new generation of activists. Either way, *Defending Giants* is an outstanding contribution to the historiography of environmentalism.

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