

A Critical Geography of Britain's State Forests.

A review of the book on Britains's state forests by J Tsouvalis; Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, 227 pages, £40.00 cloth ISBN 0-19-823417-1

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In her book on British forests Judith Tsouvalis studies the ways in which people interact with forests and trees in Britain, focusing on the past and present of the Forestry Commission. She pays special attention to the FCs 'reflective turn' launched in the 1980s. Tsouvalis' work offers a historical overview on the changing knowledge-cultures of the state forestry industry in Britain and it also contains an inspiring critical geography approach to socio-environmental questions and forestry practices.

Tsouvalis concentrates on the history of Britain's state forestry industry, which takes the shape of large scale tree plantations in the first half of the 20th century and gradually turns towards wider forest services. The vision of forests as strategic reserves of timber fuelled the establishment of the FC in 1919 and it also legitimated the intensive planting of conifer trees. The model adopted was of German origin, and it had earlier been tested in colonial India. The introduction of even-aged conifer plantations attracted significant opposition in Britain and the confrontation soon turned into a cultural conflict between indigenous deciduous woodlands and imported conifer forests. In Tsouvalis' colourful words (p. 2), "the plantations were perceived largely as dark, dead, and unfriendly places", and were "often portrayed as alien invaders that march across the countryside blanketing whole hillsides".

The plantation model was however starkly defended by the FC, driven by its fear of impending timber famine. Wide areas of moorlands were planted with conifer stands, the process of which was described as a necessary transformation of 'wastelands' to 'productive lands'. The decades following the Second World War moreover witnessed an expansive destruction of ancient woodlands whose vegetation had hardly changed since mediaeval times. The post-war atmosphere favoured expansive loggings of the primary 'derelict woods' that, while accompanied by the still continuing expansive afforestation, resulted in an increasing visual presence of human domination over the wooded land- and lifescapes.

Both the plantation policy and the disappearance of the ancient woods finally led the British state forestry industry to a crisis of legitimation. Since the 1960s the FC became increasingly the target of environmental and cultural criticism and this resulted in the restructuring of the

organisation in 1992. The change included a gradual problematisation of the FC's 'self' and it was followed by a construction of a new corporate identity. The metamorphosis initiated a new forest vision based on such concepts as multi-purpose forestry, sustainability, and biodiversity.

Following the new vision, the FC has been involved in developing new modes of cooperation both with the local communities and the respective regional actors of Scotland, Wales and England. Contacts to the European Union have also been regarded as worth emphasising. Many of the agriculturally-depressed communities search today for forestry-based alternatives and this has in fact emerged as a societal test for the renewed organisation. Tree planting has also grown into a symbol of stability in a time of rapid socio-economic and cultural change. In addition, the latest timber forecasts indicate that wood supplies in the UK will increase from 8 million cubic metres in 1997 to about 15 million by 2020, equalling 15-20 per cent of the UK's wood demand. This will of course bring changes in the multilayered organisation of forestry industry and the timber trade.

Tsouvalis interprets the history of state forestry industry in the UK within the framework of critical geography, which guides her to study how human beings envision reality, institutionalise certain visions and begin to consider them as reality *per se*. Generally, issues examined are related to socio-environmental domination, empowerment and justice. In this case the approach helps the researcher to identify the central changes in the FC's knowledge-cultures, but it also reveals the practical co-emergence of symbolic and material transformations of social natures. Tsouvalis reveals how the symbolic power struggles are translated into material reality through forest-related practices.

The author states that although geographers have long been interested in society-nature relations, they have mainly neglected the complex relationships human beings have with forests. This is indeed true and this neglect has also had an impact on the paradigmatic development of geography. Geodiversities of forests are poorly identified as yet, as are the biopolitical interconnections between woods, societies and people. Similarly, the time-spaces of forest industrial change have mostly remained unexamined, as are the psycho-geographical dimensions of forest cultures (see some notable exceptions published in English: Mather, 1990;1997; Sandberg, 1992; Sandberg & Sörlin, 1998; Saether 1998; Kortelainen, 1999; Hayter, 2000; Walker et. al. 2000; Demeritt 2001).

Judith Tsouvalis' book is a welcomed contribution in the field of geography and forests, and it also opens new channels to critical geographers interested in socio-environmental changes. She takes the challenge of integrating the physical dimension of forests into the symbolic one seriously, and makes it elegantly. In this way Tsouvalis invites geographers to learn more about the multilayered regimes of woods and forests.

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