

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* by Bronislaw Szerszynski

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Although the book is oriented largely toward political science, it is highly relevant to sociologists interested in institutions, social movements, policy, or the environment. I recommend it highly to anyone thinking about forms of international governance that defy the usual categories. However, the book would have benefited from a greater engagement with sociology. In fact, Conca ignores several sociological literatures that might have provided middle-range theoretical tools to help him make his case. As he discusses competing modes of knowledge and reasoning about water, he makes no use of theoretically and topically relevant work by Wendy Espeland on commensuration. While he wants to argue that contention is being channeled and regularized, he ignores both classic and recent literatures on the institutionalization of social movements, not to mention the growing literature on “organizational fields” as arenas of cooperation and contention. Ultimately, perhaps these omissions are less of a sin and more of a sign that as social scientists explore the complexity of global governance, the benefits of disciplinary cross-fertilization will tend to increase.

Nature, Technology and the Sacred. By Bronislaw Szerszynski. London: Blackwell, 2005. Pp. xviii+222. \$74.95 (cloth); \$31.95 (paper).

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The classical sociologists, including Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, all argued that society was experiencing a rapid secularization, arising from the Enlightenment, industrialization, and capitalism. While Marx famously argued that under capitalism “all that is holy is profaned,” Weber just as famously referred to the “disenchantment of nature” associated with formal rationalization. Although by no means the first work to question this secularization thesis, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* does so to a degree perhaps unequaled by any other analysis. In Bronislaw Szerszynski’s view, secularization in Western culture was simply a phase in its larger sacral evolution. Much of his book thus contests the notion of the desacrilization of society, arguing that the sacred did not diminish but merely changed form. Today the postmodern sacred, he tells us, pops up all over the place, particularly in new views of nature and technology.

The concept of the sacred introduced at the very beginning of the book is so sweeping as largely to determine the rest of the argument. Although Szerszynski connects the sacred to religiosity, he sees it as not necessarily embracing either belief in supernatural beings or organized religion. In fact, he often treats the secular as subsumed under the sacred. His book is thus dotted with statements such as: “I will be arguing that the secular treatment of nature has itself to be understood in religious terms” (p. 11). “The emergence of this ‘absolute profane’ [the secular world] . . . is an

event *within* the ongoing history of the sacred in the West” (p. 27). At one point he supports Kay Milton’s claim that the sacred is to be defined as “what matters most to people” (p. 10).

Although such statements may at times seem to portend a more dialectical analysis, in which the sacral and the secular are interpenetrating opposites, in Szerszynski’s argument the secular is always presented as a moment in the history of the sacred, never the opposite. Bacon, Galileo, and Newton are treated as quasi-religious figures, their great scientific innovations and discoveries the product of their “secular theology” (p. 46). The all-embracing sacred encompasses 19th-century romantic and transcendentalist views of nature (Wordsworth, Ruskin, Emerson, Thoreau). It is also evident in conceptions of the “technological sublime” so that, for example, the sense of awe inspired by the first pictures of earth from outer space is treated as a primarily sacral rather than secular event—both in the worship of technology and the worship of the earth that it engendered.

One cannot help but be astonished, even impressed at times, by Szerszynski’s wizardry in turning all evidence for the “disenchantment of the world” into signs of its “re-enchantment” in new forms, pushing forward sacral history. But in the end, his singular emphasis on the sacral, so that all that is profaned is made holy, is insufficiently dialectical. It erases the main antinomies of modernity rather than allowing us to understand them.

To be sure, Szerszynski would argue that modernity has already in fact been erased to a considerable extent today by postmodernity, which has dissolved the dualities that defined modernity and introduced the “plurality of the postmodern sacred.” Postmodernism irreverently picks and chooses from earlier versions of the sacred with entirely unpredictable results. In the new postmodern “profusion of the sacred,” he tells us, “the sacred becomes feral” (p. 171).

Closely related to this is his argument on technology and the environment. Technology frequently becomes a new sacral object of worship, while environmentalism, which is rooted in the critique of technology, reconfigures it as a new profane within a new sacral cosmos. The renewed nature worship of environmentalism, in this view, is nothing other than the re-enchantment of nature that accompanies the critique of a profane technology and the discovery of the sacral quality of life itself. The supposed scientific reductionism of a figure like British ecologist Arthur Tansley, who introduced the concept of ecosystem, is contrasted, in Szerszynski’s analysis, to the sacral and holistic view of a deep ecologist like Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. The “one earth” view of mechanistic science is set against the “whole earth” view of the transcendental proponents of Gaia (p. 165).

Summarizing the main thrust of his argument with respect to the environment, Szerszynski writes: “I am presenting environmentalism as religion dressed up as Enlightenment” (p. 153). Elsewhere he asserts that “the modern concept of the environment, with all the complex of attitudes

and practices Western societies have towards it, could only have arisen because of . . . the long arc of transcendental religion” (p. 112). This is true, he contends, despite the fact that studies have shown “that American environmentalists are less likely than the general population to be involved in mainstream religion” (p. 112). Since today’s environmentalism is simply a by-product of the feral postmodern sacred, it is sacral in emphasis even as it departs from all previous religious modalities. He ends his discussion of the environment by calling for a “new global sacred” as an answer to pressing problems of nature, technology, and society.

Szerszynski concludes: “Taken as a whole . . . the book could be read as saying that the confrontation between modern technology and its critics is a confrontation that is very much internal to Western sacral history” (p. 174). However, the contradiction embedded in his analysis is such that this statement would sound equally true (though less surprising) if one were to substitute the word “secular” for “sacral.” Hence, we are left with a level of abstraction that does little directly to address what for environmentalists has always been the primary issue in the disenchantment/reenchantment of nature: the human domination of the natural world and its consequences. Environmentalists in general argue that the struggle for a more sustainable world needs to be fought on both nonreligious and religious, secular and sacral grounds. At its very best, *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* might be seen as reinforcing this stance, insofar as it argues that we need to attend to the sacral as well as the secular struggle to save the planet—and indeed sees them as constituting a single struggle.

Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs, and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism. By Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. viii+232.

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The high-tech world of human tissue biotechnology can be daunting to the general sociology reader with only a tangential interest in the topic. However, *Tissue Economies* has been revelatory. Not only is this book full of “did you know” bits of information that are fast becoming teaching anecdotes, but by charting the shifting boundaries between life and death, it offered unexpected connections to my area of speciality—the sociology of death and dying. For this reason, I recommend *Tissue Economies* to the general and specialist sociologist alike. However, I temper this with a word of caution. *Tissue Economies*, although insightful, is a complex book that can be difficult to grapple with.

Tissue Economies puts forward the provocative thesis that current tissue economies are truly global in their scope and consequence and should be understood as such by cultural theorists and practitioners alike. The