

Donald Worster, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance*

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Publisher

European Association for American
Studies

Electronic version

URL: <http://ejas.revues.org/12175>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Electronic reference

Joseph Michael Gratale, « Donald Worster, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-2, document 8, Online since 01 August 2017, connection on 01 August 2017. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/12175>

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- 1 Donald Worster, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance*
- 2 Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 265 ISBN: 9780199844951.
- 3 Joseph Michael Gratale
- 4 The American College of Thessaloniki
- 5 In 2012 an American billionaire and reality-TV personality tweeted the following: “The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” While some eyebrows were raised at the time of the tweet, not many were alarmed due perhaps to the perception that such a claim and stance about environmental issues is hardly surprising when uttered by a billionaire who does not hold political office. The plot thickens, however, since that same billionaire presently lives in the White House and serves as the forty-fifth President of the United States of America. Will President Trump adopt a more environmentally sensitive and sound approach to climate change? Will he change his previously expressed positions and ‘flip-flop’ as he has done on a range of issues during his first hundred days in office? Many hope so, but early indications prove otherwise. For example, he appears to be determined in reversing former President Obama’s turn from fossil fuels like coal to renewable green energy. Trump has also called for the US to remove itself from the environmental targets of the Paris Agreement signed by Obama. Equally alarming is his appointment of Scott Pruitt to head the EPA—the Environmental Protection Agency. When he served as Oklahoma’s attorney general he filed fourteen lawsuits against the EPA. Trump, Pruitt, and other key figures in the new administration appear to be climate change denialists. Should they succeed in steering America toward a less environmentally

sensitive approach to energy production and consumption, the ramifications will be felt both domestically and beyond America's borders.

- 6 Having read Donald Worster's new volume that deals with environmental history and American environmentalism, I would venture to guess that the author might be somewhat pessimistic about the present course of American environmental policies as articulated by the Trump administration. Worster's book is titled *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance*. It includes a prologue and epilogue, and is divided into three parts that are titled "Second Earth;" "After the Frontier;" and "Planet of Limits." It also includes an adequate number of black and white and colored images. (Unfortunately, however, a map on p. 9 is upside down). A total of nine chapters comprise the three parts with three additional chapters that are designated as "Field Trips." The inclusion of these explorations into nature is contextualized and adds a rather intriguing dimension to the volume. While each "field trip" focuses on a specific geographical space, the author moves across historical time, cleverly using each excursion to illustrate particular issues and themes discussed in previous chapters. Another fascinating element in *Shrinking the Earth* is its references to F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's metaphor of the green light finds its way into Worster's volume at the very beginning as do allusions to Jay Gatsby, the novel's main character who blindly pursues a dream and lifestyle that will lead to his own tragic end. It is the former, however, the green light, that Worster finds more appealing as a device to draw the reader into his narrative about the natural world, and in wide historical breadth, selected examples of Euro-American attitudes and representations of the Earth since the sixteenth century.
- 7 Readers of *The Great Gatsby* learn that on one level, the green light is the navigation light at the end of a dock that shines from the home of the woman Gatsby loves, Daisy Buchanan. His home sits across the Long Island Sound from the Buchanan estate. The pulsation of the beacon symbolizes Gatsby's love and desire for Daisy. By the end of the novel the green light assumes a different meaning, one that Worster utilizes for his analysis of environmental attitudes and mentalities. The quote comes from the narrator of the novel, Nick Carraway, and reads as follows:
- 8 Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder (Fitzgerald, 171).
- 9 For Worster, this excerpt represents one of America's "earliest environmental laments." More importantly, as mentioned earlier, it is deployed by the author and referred to as the theory of the green light that "holds that the discovery around 1500 A.D. that the earth has an entire Western Hemisphere of immense continents and oceans marked a watershed in human experience, perhaps the most extraordinary ever" (5). Diachronically, Worster examines the relationship humans have had with the natural world. His theoretical framework considers the impacts from colonial-imperial practices — the "hard work" of colonizers— but also places emphasis on the notion that the earth "has been a powerful agent in human history, both when it was replete with resources

and when it could no longer offer the old abundance" (7). *Shrinking the Earth* pursues this argument chapter after chapter through a narrative that includes fascinating biographical accounts of key historical figures connected in one way or another with earth's environmental history. Starting in the sixteenth century and continuing to the late twentieth century, individuals like Gerard and Rumold Mercator, Guillame-Thomas Raynal, Nicolas Copernicus, Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill and many other scientists and scholars are worked into the narrative in a seamless and adroit manner. For example, I find particularly interesting Worster's analysis of the cartographers Gerard and Rumold Mercator. The latter, in 1587, created an image of the earth that is commonly referred to as "Second Earth." In this map the earth is represented as two co-equal spheres rather than a single sphere. Europe's encounter with the so-called 'New World,' which commenced after Columbus's initial voyage in 1492, became tremendously important for numerous European countries in terms of the wealth that was amassed from its territory and the various indigenous populations that were exploited. This would also include the horrors of the Atlantic Slave Trade which lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The key observation that Worster makes is that the encounter or the "discovery of the Second Earth ushered in an age of unprecedented material abundance, eventually flooding the older civilizations with new natural resources and the freedom those resources made possible" (13). (It is somewhat unfortunate that Worster uses the word "discovery" rather than a more neutral term when referring to the exploits of European explorers of the period).

- 10 The exploration and colonization of the Western Hemisphere led to an entire range of developments of tremendous importance. Resources taken from the New World were part and parcel of the evolution of the system of capitalism, and later an essential part of the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Worster intricately makes the linkages between these developments, appropriately placing the role of nature—natural resources from the New World—at the center of the story. It is a story that informs the reader of the rise of the modern West and the "windfall" that these lands and peoples to the west of Europe provided to the old world. For many, the land, resources and riches of the Americas seemed infinite. Others however, expressed concern and questioned discourses that emphasized abundance and plenty. American conservation emerged with vigor in the latter part of the nineteenth century to counter prevailing attitudes that were ecologically insensitive. Conservationists began to talk about restraint and limits, the limits of nature's bounty, the limits humans need to have on exploiting our resources, and how limiting individual freedom and corporate power to ravage the environment has to be pursued by responsible governance. There were politicians in the USA that heeded the calls for conservation and helped in the creation of large national parks and wildlife reserves. Philanthropists also played a role in such environmental endeavors, but some viewed nature differently. Many wealthy individuals preferred "privatized conservation" which sought "to save and protect a few places under private ownership...that lacked any ecological or social coherence" (105). Clearly such efforts were 'drops in the bucket.' After the Second World War and into the latter half of the twentieth century it was also no longer possible to simply discuss a particular nation state's environmental policies. Scholars and ecologists began talking about global limits, global warming, and global degradation of natural resources. Formulas and notions of economic growth were challenged and represented as unfeasible, unrealistic, and utterly harmful to the ecological health of the planet. According to Worster the emergence of "modern environmentalism occurred most dramatically with the writings of Rachel

Carson, author of *Silent Spring* (1962), which prophesized a world in which no birds sang after massive pesticide contamination” (151). The publication of *The Limits to Growth* in 1972 was another important intervention in the environmental movement and was a book that reached and impacted on a large and growing audience that was becoming more responsive to calls for establishing an ecological balance between humans and the natural world. Equilibrium became the word of the period. Putting it into actual application was another issue.

- 11 Since the seventies, the USA has experienced moments of pragmatic environmentalism and sensitivity, progress in developing green and clean energy, and at other times steps that seem to counter making progress in lessening the harmful effects of environmental degradation. This book written by Donald Worster could not have been written at a more appropriate moment. If ever there was a time for serious reflection it is now. And perhaps not just reflection but also action to counter the discourses and practices of the Trump administration as it pertains to environmental policy. His call to “Make America Great Again” and “America First” threatens to undermine caution and prudence toward environmental and ecological concerns. His is a call that ignores reality and scientific knowledge and if followed will take America back to darker moments of the twentieth century and not ahead to the future. *Shrinking the Earth* represents a critical and important contribution to environmental history. It is a book that is fascinating to read, erudite, and engrossing to anyone interested in comprehending the choices we have related to environmental issues and our future here on planet earth.
- 12 Bibliography
- 13 Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Penguin Books: London, 1950.

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