

The Rise of the US Environmental Health Movement

Kate Davies

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Author risks alienating supporters by urging the environmental health movement to follow the example of civil rights through “collective, peaceful civil disobedience.”

The Greek mathematician Archimedes, referring to levers, is reputed to have said, “Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.” It is in that spirit that author Kate Davies calls for identifying “leverage points” for improving environmental health: “Leverage points are places in complex systems where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes across an entire system.”

For example, Davies points to the cost of health care, noting that health care in the US is “one of the least effective health-care systems among industrialized countries.” She argues that combining environmental health with the economics of health care will help create change.

Davies is well equipped to generate social change. She founded and directed the first local government office on the environment in Canada and is on the faculty in the Environment and Community program at Antioch University’s Center for Creative Change in Seattle.

In the most revealing portion of the book, Davies closes with a discussion of what she calls “Strategies for Social Change.” She details how, historically, the movement organized for collective action on local issues, such as the response to the Love Canal contamination in Niagara Falls, New York, during the 1970s. Later, groups began lobbying for new legislation controlling toxic chemicals. Davies acknowledges that these latter efforts created tensions among environmental advocates. She argues that local groups felt state lobbying organizations, who were pursuing legislation, ignored local problems. Furthermore, she says, these local groups consisted mostly of passionate, penniless volunteers who believed the state and national groups dominated fund raising.

Davies downplays the legislative accomplishments made in the 1970s by national environmental lobbying groups, such as adoption of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. However, she clearly acknowledges the failure of the Toxic Substances Control Act passed in 1976. “By ‘grandfathering’ nearly all the chemicals that were used in 1976 (about sixty-two thousand) and excluding them from any review or testing requirements, the Act created a monumental loophole for the chemical industry.”

Davies urges the environmental health movement to follow the example of others, such as the civil rights movement, by considering “collective, peaceful civil disobedience more often.” To defend such a proposal, Davies must conclude that other paths to social change using conventional, lawful means have been exhaustively tried and found ineffective—but she has not made this case. Needlessly engaging in militant actions could cause a negative reaction in some supporters. And, as Thomas Jefferson said: “The good opinion of mankind, like the lever of Archimedes ... moves the world.”

The Rise of the US Environmental Health Movement contains a great deal of complex information that will interest primarily those already in the movement. If the book were pared to its essentials and the typographical errors were corrected, it would be more accessible to people outside.

JOHN SENGER (Summer 2013)

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