



## Book Review

Gibson, James William. 2009. *A Re-Enchanted World: The Quest For a New Kinship With Nature*. Henry Holt and Company, LLC. New York, New York.

---

Dan Shope, PhD<sup>1</sup>  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Murray State University

---

It is seldom that an author can offer to readers a book that can be used to gain a sociological understanding of grass roots social reform, and at the same time create a reference tool that chronicles the history of such social movements. However, this is exactly what James Gibson has done with his book *A Re-Enchanted World*. Utilizing Max Weber's notion of "disenchantment" Gibson's book chronicles the history of modernization with all its inherent discontents leading to a re-enchantment with nature. In a historicist fashion, the book analyzes the many attempts to rectify environmental abuses associated with modernization that have plagued the U.S., a society that prides often boasts of its natural beauty. Each era of environmental reform is examined by Gibson and is placed in historically significant social contexts, which forces

the reader to consider from a sociological perspective the environmental struggles of past generations.

Gibson opens his book by telling the story of a tree sitter, who in 2002 believed that saving one 200 year old Oak tree from a housing developer's bulldozer in Santa Clarita, California could activate public outrage with modernization's environmental failures. The oak tree eventually became known as "Old Glory," which proved to be quite troublesome for the developer, especially in light of the recent attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. However, Gibson quickly pointed out that this type of story was not unique. To illustrate this point he unraveled the vast tapestry of American Environmentalism demonstrating that the idea of economic and technological

---

<sup>1</sup>Direct all correspondence to [dan.shope@murraystate.edu](mailto:dan.shope@murraystate.edu)

innovations promising a new and better life for the American citizenry did not go without protests from past generations. Waves of modernization were followed by protests of those who became disenchanted with modernization and its attendant environmental problems, which lead to an era of re-enchantment with nature, its beauty, and elegant simplicity.

Gibson's book examines the world of animals and how if one listens closely they speak to us warning of their own, and ultimately humanity's demise if precautions to protect the environment are not heeded. Gibson reminds readers of Darwin's insistence of the kinship and similarity between animals and people, even in terms of emotive response to stimuli and types of thinking. Although twentieth-century biologists accepted Darwin's evolutionary theory, his arguments about animal intelligence and emotions were primarily rejected due to what could be reasoned as anthropomorphisms. Gibson's stories of contact between wild animals and humans have little in the way of happy endings. This section is truly not for the faint of heart. Gibson unveiled what appears an almost murderous spirit as so-called American settlers tamed the great wilderness in what was to later become U.S. territory.

In the chapter entitled "Holy Lands" Gibson argues that until the ascent of monotheistic thought, nature provided the place for what Mircea Eliade called "primary religious experience." All the majesty of natural spaces could be regarded as a sacred site created for humans to enjoy, live, and prosper. However, these holy lands seldom have a voice of their own to cry out for protection from human abuses, and need people to aid them in the call

for peace. When what many American Indian groups considered sacred lands were in the way of U.S. expansion and development, individuals had to come forth and proclaim the wonders and holiness of natural spaces. These re-enchantments with nature took root in many forms. Gibson pointed out that artists, photographers, hikers, campers, and poets would all play a part in movements that wished to protect the natural environment from the destructiveness of the modern world.

Gibson's chapter on space exploration, Gaia, and the Greening of Religion poses a difficult question for those who literally believe in supernatural creation myths prominent in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Muslim teachings, and Hindu beliefs. Gibson questions the authorship of sacred documents and their intent. This section would especially difficult for Judeo-Christian and Muslim adherents' belief concerning creation of life on Earth and how one should interact within it. Gibson tells the reader how the various authorships of the creation stories in Genesis are important in the development of a philosophy of how humans should interact with nature. Religious scholars and theologians suggest that the two different writers of the creation stories in Genesis, the "Priestly Writer" and the "Yahwist," differ in their approaches as to how nature was to be regarded. The Priestly Writer, who lived sometime in the sixth century BCE, dealt with a social world controlled by Judaism, which was already an established belief system with trained clergy that was undoubtedly controlled by the upper class. Israel was occupied in this period, and Jews were forced into exile. Gibson argued that these realities highlighted the importance

of violence and domination over nature to religious leaders, and that these historical circumstances resulted in a view of the importance of environmental domination by the Priestly Writer. Gibson continued his argument that contrary to its name and placement in Genesis, the Second Story of creation is thought to have preceded the Priestly Writer's narrative, which was written between 1,000 and 800 BCE. According to Gibson, the Yahwist is called such due to partiality to the term "Yahweh" when referring to God. Gibson continued his argument of how important historical and social circumstances can alter social perception. He finalized this point by arguing that the Priestly Writer and his associates placed the Yahwist's far older story of creation in a second and somewhat inferior place when the Old Testament was codified. At the time of the Yahwist writing, the Jews living in Canaan practiced a pastoral lifestyle tying them to the land and their animals. Their stories of creation depended on oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. Being tied to land in such a way offered a different cosmology of creation than that told by The Priestly Writer. The Yahwist urged a personal relationship with land and animals while The Priestly Writer's version stressed dominance over land and animals. Ultimately, religious beliefs developed from a trajectory of anthropocentrism, or bluntly that humans are above nature. Much of humanity was set on a trajectory that would suggest that humans were created to be in control of the Earth and decide its inhabitants' futures.

Gibson continued with chapters on eco-warriors, loving the environment to

death, and imitation wilderness areas. Each chapter examined the continuation of modern technology and economic development followed by movements of disenchantment culminating in re-enchantment with nature and the wilderness. Gibson utilized various sources that included sociologists, anthropologists, environmentalists, critical studies, and historians. In the chapter entitled "Loving the Environment to Death" Gibson demonstrated that loving a place, such as a mountain range, too much could be as harmful as having little regard for the environment. The case of Yosemite National Park is quite prominent. So many people now wish to visit the park, and do so by automobile that the air quality is often poorer than Los Angeles on the day of a Smog Alert. Gibson also explores the historic rise of American Indian reservations and their interest in providing economic resources by building modern gambling casinos. He demonstrates that this development is not the panacea of environmentalism envisioned by many environmentalist activists and traditional American Indians. Gibson also pointed out in this section of the book that Donald Trump and two other partners have invested 5 million dollars to try to get casinos developed on Indian land by financing would-be tribes; an interesting and somewhat shocking tidbit given Trump's recent popularity among many neoconservative politicians and voters.

Gibson closed his list of historical disenchantments with modern tech and economic development movements followed once again by re-enchantment with nature movements with a chapter entitled "The Right-Wing War on the Land." According to Gibson the re-enchantment movement came under a

deliberate, organized attack from the Christian Right, the Bush administration, and much of the business establishment. The Christian Right critique of environmentalism painted the environmental movement as possessing animistic tendencies, which Christian Right leaders argued were related to paganism. They likened it to the sins of idol worship. The Bush administration gathered these quasi-religious political troops wielding an anti-environmental covenant, which like a sword held aloft by the arm of the Lord cut environmental legislation back to the pre-civil rights era. These religious right-wing voters who viewed environmentalism as sinful became associated with a corporate elite who wished to dismantle years of environmental protection. This created a voting block that gave the Bush administration the authority to destroy years of environmental protection laws. It worked with great political success. This now rabid right-wing Christian voting block began forcing their religious interpretations of the Bible via politics onto an unprotected and often disinterested populace. Their views were clearly associated with the Priestly Writer's perspective. These religiously motivated voters would rally behind conservative politicians that agreed with their points of view. It is at this juncture where Gibson cleverly connected the history of the debate between The Priestly Writer and the Yahwist. By doing so, he clearly demonstrated the historic trajectory of what would later develop into a formerly unannounced Bush administration political platform as he and his administration sought re-election in 2004. Ultimately, the right-wing attack on the environment began to

fail as U.S. citizens became disenchanted with the Bush economic package or lack thereof, which resulted in the worst economic meltdown in U.S. history since the Great Depression.

Gibson closed his book with two chapters entitled "Fighting Back" and "The Journey Ahead." Bush era policies and their failures to yield promised financial success led the way for a new era of re-enchantment with nature. The journey ahead will prove difficult for many as the nation and many underserved groups within it once again grapple with development at the cost of our natural environs. Future politicians should take note that as many more people join the re-enchantment with nature movement, so will their voting behavior be affected in such a way as to reflect their preferences. Knowing this, Gibson ended his book with this observation, "The re-enchantment of nature-if coupled with political courage to act-offers a chance to remake the world."