

On Conceptualizing Our Place in Nature

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Andrew Biro. *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

In *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics*, Andrew Biro emphasizes the inherent connection between matters social and matters ecological in the hope of clearing the way for an ecological politics that need not appeal to a fixed concept of nature. As Biro sees it, environmental ethics goes wrong to the extent that it understands nature as the sum total of natural processes of which human beings are somehow separate. Insofar as such reification seemingly compels us to do nothing other than affect nature as little as possible, Biro takes it to be both politically impotent and fundamentally flawed. Natural processes are not separate from human processes, but are necessarily bound to them. It is a reciprocal rather than exclusionary relationship. That granted, Biro looks to recover a social dimension within the concept of nature that can bridge the gap between environmental ethics and political theory. To do so, he looks alternately to Rousseau, Marx, Adorno, and Marcuse to show how the “natural” and “social” are intertwined in a way that necessarily makes environmental issues germane to political discourse.

Biro presents the overall problem as a debate (be it real or imagined) between ecocentrism and postmodernism. Whereas the former understands nature as that which underlies or transcends social processes, the latter takes “nature” to be nothing more than a social construct that is relative to time and place. Focusing on these diametrically opposed positions at the start, Biro considers the strengths and weaknesses of each. In regard to ecocentrism, Biro concedes that arguments in favor of an inherent value in nature can, if successful, provide the ground for an environmental ethic. Quite often, however, this results in an “inverted ethnocentrism that uncritically valorizes ‘primitive’ modes of social organization” and a “willingness to accept (and in a few cases even an eagerness for) the reactionary authoritarianism that often accompanies attempts to legislate social organization on the basis of what is deemed to be ‘natural.’” [p. 29]. In short, what many ecocentrists call us to is a “return to nature” that uncritically understands nature as some kind of lost paradise that we may one day inhabit again. Raised to the level of a political doctrine, this idea becomes as dangerous as it is untenable, which is why Biro subsequently emphasizes the social dimension at work in the concept of “nature.” In doing so, he turns to postmodernism (particularly Baudrillard and Foucault) to show how “nature,” if pushed to the extreme, turns out to be nothing other than a social construct. The “natural” and “social” thereby become virtually indistinguishable, a view that counters the idea of nature as a timeless, extra-human affair, but at the cost of making environmental arguments tenuous if not altogether impossible insofar as the “real” nature that such arguments typically appeal to does not exist. Taken separately, then, ecocentrism and postmodernism prove inadequate in regard to establishing an ecological politics. He thus proposes a third option, one which plays up the social without losing sight of the natural by understanding human beings as simultaneously *a part of* and yet *separate from* a nature that resists reification.

Biro suggests that a denaturalized ecological politics can be developed in and through a consideration of our “alienation from nature,” understood as “the ongoing process whereby human beings self-consciously transform their natural environment” [p. 58]. For Biro, it is natural for human beings to alienate themselves from nature. Self-consciousness and alienation arrive together

and equally define us. This is not to say, however, that we can totally transcend nature or that we should aspire to do so. Though we are *political* animals, we remain animals nonetheless. According to Biro, considering “alienation from nature” as opposed to mere “nature” allows us to think of the relationship between the natural and the social in a way that retains both elements without artificially driving a divide between them. The conjecture here is that an understanding of human beings as the beings who “*alienate themselves* from nature . . . might form the basis for preserving the moments of truth in both the ecological defense of nature and the postmodern critique of ‘nature’” [p. 59]. Working from this hypothesis, Biro considers how Rousseau, Marx, Adorno, and Marcuse variously develop the “alienation from nature” theme in a way that is increasingly sympathetic to the interrelation of social domination and natural alienation. Though we, by nature, alienate ourselves from the natural world, such alienation should not and need not imply the domination of that world or the human beings who constitute it. The fundamental challenge, then, is “to distinguish those forms of interaction with the natural world which are *necessary* to the flourishing of human and other forms of life, and those forms of interaction which are *surplus* to it” [p. 196], the notions of “basic” and “surplus” alienation from nature deriving from Marcuse’s distinction between “basic” and “surplus” forms of repression. Just as Marcuse holds a certain refusal of one’s instincts to be a defining and unavoidable characteristic of being human, so too does Biro take basic alienation to be central to our existence. It is “surplus” alienation, then, that is to be avoided and not alienation altogether. Such a concise statement of the problem, however, belies the difficulty of any proposed application, since what counts as “basic” and “surplus” perpetually evolves in a way that precludes any final say in the matter. Critique and action, therefore, must remain ongoing processes, unfolding, as it were, with our historical situation.

Though Biro does well in showing how humans, by definition, are alienated from nature and how a denaturalized ecological politics should consequently aim only at overcoming such alienation to the extent that it involves social domination, the original problem comes across as contrived while the proposed solution strikes one as wanting. In regard to the initial problem, ecocentrists and deep ecologists who call for a literal return to nature represent a radical minority within environmental thought. Thus, while Biro’s critique of such a position is justifiable, his failure to consider more nuanced approaches to environmental ethics until the final chapter means that the majority of the work assumes a rather distorted view of the field. Conversely, whereas postmodernism provides an interesting foil to an extreme ecocentrist position, it (as Biro himself admits) offers very little in the way of a productive environmentalism. The claim that “nature” is nothing more than a social construct should rightfully fall on deaf ears at a time when environmental atrocities are all too real. So while it certainly becomes important to locate a social dimension in the concept “nature,” to consider the issue from a postmodernist perspective is a thought experiment that bears little fruit.

In the end, Biro’s concluding reflections on environmental theorists who more carefully consider the relationship between the natural and the social should have appeared earlier in the text and at greater length as they do more in expounding his overall project than the polarized views of ecocentrism and postmodernism. Such considerations might also have been of service in regard to thinking through more thoroughly the distinction between “basic” and “surplus” alienation since, as it stands, Biro offers us very little in the way of evaluating actual practices. Acknowledging that the principal aim of the book might have been to open up a space for such discussion, Biro’s critiques of the alternately unworkable or untenable solutions of Rousseau, Marx, Adorno, and Marcuse raise within the reader an expectation for a more practical solution on Biro’s own part that never actually materializes. Though Biro’s future work may move in that direction, a more exacting explication of what counts as being “basic” and “surplus,” perhaps taken from the vantage point of individual

rights, would have been welcome here.