

REVIEW ESSAY

Environment, Economics, and Hegemony

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Wendell Berry. **Citizenship Papers**. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003.

Shaul E. Cohen. **Planting Nature: Trees and the Manipulation of Environmental Stewardship in America**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Helena Paul and Ricarda Steinbrecher with Devlin Kuyek and Lucy Michaels. **Hungry Corporations: Transnational Biotech Companies Colonize the Food Chain**. New York: Zed Books, 2003.

This is a troubling set of books. They argue compellingly that environmental problems are far more complicated than they are generally understood to be, and that addressing them will require more fundamental changes than most people imagine. Each book makes these points in its own way, but they have two ideas in common: the importance of linking environmental to economic concerns, and the importance of carefully examining and monitoring environmental discourse. These ideas are deeply important for those of us concerned about the environmental movement and rich enough to make all or any of these books wonderful to teach with.

Shaul Cohen, a geographer at the University of Oregon, is disturbed by the ways trees and tree-planting are used to serve the interests of what he at one point calls the “governmental-industrial timber complex” [Cohen, p. 150]. His argument is that the timber industry, the U.S. government, and many organizations funded by them have used the idea that trees are good for people and the environment to convince the public that, by extension, environmental damage can be simply and quickly offset by planting trees.

Cohen’s work is guided by a Gramscian idea that he sketches briefly: the governmental-industrial timber complex must hegemonically persuade people to accept its authority and to trust that it serves their best interest and the interests of the ecosystems with which they live. This hegemony is established in part by the discourse of tree planting. The uncritical celebration of trees and the dazzlingly large numbers planted by these institutions, he argues, entices us to ignore and participate in their destruction of the natural environment.

To support this thesis, Cohen analyzes the history and activities of the National Arbor Day Foundation, American Forests, the U.S. Forest Service, and the timber industry, paying particular attention to the use of trees in their rhetoric. He notes, for instance, how often these groups claim that because trees absorb carbon dioxide, planting them will help prevent global warming. Particularly memorable along these lines is an EPA website that instructs citizens to plant one tree for every 1,000 kilowatt-hours of electricity used, with the explanation that “We use electricity everywhere, so use it without guilt by planting trees!” [Cohen, p. 100]. Cohen quickly but convincingly refutes the claim that tree planting is a

legitimate solution to global warming, citing this as an example of gross oversimplification by hegemonic powers to inspire support and unquestioning allegiance.

While reading this book I repeatedly found myself thinking, “but surely trees do absorb carbon dioxide, as well as prevent erosion, provide habitats for wildlife . . .” This seems a sign that Cohen is on to something, that I at least have been conditioned to equate trees with goodness and to assign virtue to all those who plant them. And *Planting Nature* is nuanced and careful enough that it never dismisses the legitimate value of planting and conserving trees. But Cohen refuses to let us be complacent, reminding the reader that what is needed to move toward healthier relationships to nature is “a reorganization of society and a reallocation of power,” fundamental structural changes that simply cannot be achieved by planting the trees distributed by hegemonic powers [Cohen, p. 168].

Overblown claims about the contribution of trees to environmental health were clearly not difficult to find, and Cohen makes a convincing and comprehensive argument that the timber industry, the U.S. government, and many nonprofit planting organizations do indeed use trees as part of a “normalizing discourse that enlists Americans in a culture that speaks about environmental stewardship but does not fundamentally address the tension between capitalist views of nature and the welfare of the planet” [Cohen, p. 14]. This book convinces me to rethink my immediate reaction to discourse about trees, and to approach with a more critical eye organizations like the National Arbor Day foundation, which Cohen describes spreading a simple message: “plant trees—change the world. From the perspective of the National Arbor Day Foundation, it seems that the world need not be changed much” [Cohen, 67].

Planting Nature is an exceptional book. It offers an argument for radical environmentalism that is reasonably and approachably articulated with a concrete and clear case. It has much to say to those in the nonprofit environmental sector (particularly those planting trees and protecting greenspace) about the capacity of hegemonic interests to appropriate and manipulate their very good work. Finally, this book offers a powerful lesson to those of us who consider ourselves environmentalists or conservationists, arguing that any appeal to simplistic answers or even simplified articulations of the problems we face can serve the interests of hegemony rather than environmental preservation and sustainability.

Hungry Corporations, written by a group of four researchers, offers a similar lesson about environmental discourse from a different direction, developing a detailed account of the ways corporations have promoted genetically modified (GM) food crops. They argue that these corporations have repeatedly and systematically ignored important lessons from the past, the limits of genetic engineering, and the dangers inherent in the technology. Furthermore, they shed light on the ways public relations firms manipulate rhetoric to sell corporate biotechnology as the savior of all who hunger and all degraded ecosystems.

Interestingly, very little of this book is devoted to a critique of the genetic modification of crops itself, and the authors note early on that one can support GM foods in theory but still reject the current system of biotechnology with its agenda “set by the corporations and limited by corporate control of patents” [Paul. et al. p. 3]. *Hungry Corporations* thus offers a focused argument against genetically modified foods as produced and distributed by multinational corporations.

The story they tell begins with the green revolution, of which both the authors and corporate boosters of GM foods see contemporary genetic engineering as a direct outgrowth. The difference is that the authors of *Hungry Corporations* present the green revolution as a failure that did not spread as widely as its supporters hoped, increased dependence on industrial farming methods, discouraged small-scale farming, and caused the demise of locally adapted crops. Current research toward GM foods, the authors argue, merely continues these patterns and therefore leads to less sustainable, diverse, and local farming.

In part, this is a book about global North-South relations, and the authors are deeply skeptical of any control or manipulation of poorer and more traditionally minded peoples by the wealthy, “developed” world. While the line between “North” and “South” is somewhat simplistically drawn here, it leads *Hungry Corporations* to a powerful argument that the corporate distribution of GM foods is a continuation of colonial relationships. The authors caution that corporations “are busy recolonizing every space that has experienced colonization before, and a multitude of new spaces that could not previously be colonized either because the technology or legal rights were not available—our bodies, our brains, the products of collective and traditional human experience and creativity” [Paul et al., p. 229]. As an alternative to the colonial, corporate control of food, the authors support those in the global South who have resisted and avoided genetic engineering and argue that Northern farmers should ultimately turn to their Southern counterparts to relearn how to farm without the industrial technology and monoculture seeds of corporate biotechnology.

Hungry Corporations starts from the assumption that there are deep-seated problems with the global economy as it currently operates, and the book is clearly directed at readers already suspicious of corporate activities and genetically engineered food rather than those who start out unconvinced. For those with such concerns, however, this book provides a wealth of useful information and history. Because it attempts to so comprehensively chronicle the debates and institutions involved in GM foods, the style is less engaging than it could be and parts of the book might seem repetitive for those seeking a broad view rather than an encyclopedic account of the issue. Nevertheless, this is an invaluable reference for those closely following the genetic modification of food and an important case study for those interested in corporate control of human and natural communities more broadly.

A compatible but very different criticism of genetic engineering can be found in *Citizenship Papers*, a collection of 19 essays by Wendell Berry. In one essay, Berry argues that food is corrupted by industrial genetic engineering because the science behind such engineering is corrupted by the marketing, political lobbying, and greed that characterize contemporary industrial societies. For Berry, the solution is to abandon any attempt at a global, technological solution to hunger and land degradation: “the problems of agriculture—as such, not as an industry—will be solved on farms, farm by farm, not in laboratories or factories” [Berry, p. 54]. We as a society should not look to scientists to heroically design crops that can save the whole world; rather we should empower local farmers to take on the work of feeding their communities.

In style and genre, Berry’s book must be sharply distinguished from the extensively researched *Hungry Corporations* and the more theoretical *Planting Nature*. Berry is adamantly

not an academic; he is an essayist, a poet, a social critic, and perhaps first and foremost a Kentucky farmer. He therefore unapologetically asserts: "I speak from a local, some might say provincial, point of view" [Berry, p. 43], and is clear throughout that what he provides are his answers determined from where he stands. Nevertheless, Berry deals with broad questions facing the nation, species, and planet, insightfully addressing such topics as the post-9/11 National Security Strategy, the environmental movement, the status and future of agriculture, the nuances of sheep breeding, and the Christian doctrine of creation. Through all these essays runs a commitment to a properly scaled attention to the world and its problems and a suspicion of the global, industrial, and comprehensive scale toward which contemporary rhetoric and economics push us. Berry is unfailingly critical of attempts to create global industries with no regard for local concerns, or global defense strategies that ignore the concrete living conditions of the communities they defend and defend against.

Berry refers to his own thinking as an agrarian stance, a belief in human dependence on and responsibility to nature and a commitment to work toward a culture that embraces that dependence and responsibility. For Berry, a key aspect of such a culture is that it must start from the local, the practical, the sympathetic, and the belief in alternative ways and patterns of life. This last point, that different paths are possible, must be carefully distinguished from the idea that change or progress are inevitable, which Berry sees as a central argument used by industrialists to dismiss people like him as antiquated Luddites. Rather, Berry's point is that we need not be forced by contemporary technology and economics into a single, global society; alternatives are possible.

Berry identifies himself as a conservationist but is reluctant to align himself with environmentalists, or indeed any large-scale, organized movement. An essay entitled "In Distrust of Movements" argues that any group so organized to have professionals in charge managing big budgets and drumming up support with simplistic slogans will inevitably be used as a tool of the global industrial cause. Furthermore, he argues, environmentalism that requests agreement in the form of theoretical assent or modest donations will be inherently ineffective. Instead, Berry the agrarian seeks "a movement that is a movement because it is advanced by all its members in their daily lives" [Berry, p. 50]. With such ideas, Berry offers an important external perspective to environmentalists, asking if our commitments go far enough and articulating the risks when they do not. This means that environmentalists or conservationists should concern themselves with their rural neighbors, their food supplies, and all the concrete details of their dependence upon and responsibility to the ecosystems with which they live.

I learn a great deal from such distrust of movements, but nevertheless wish that Berry would give some voice to the other side of this argument: movements nevertheless play an essential role in challenging and shaping our society's morality and policies. I accept what Berry says insofar as it critiques the big ten environmentalist organizations and the limitations of their work, and I further accept the idea that no single movement, institution, or idea deserves absolute and unquestioning trust. But I wonder if all movements really need to be reminded of this. The environmental justice movement, for instance, certainly has its limitations, but is pointing them out as important as applauding the ways it offers deep and crucially important challenges to contemporary U.S. society? Of course no movement is ever as successful or comprehensive as a committed social critic would like, but surely some movements nevertheless deserve praise and support first and foremost. Berry, modeling his

own, local answer to the limitations of big movements, does not address these ideas.

Reading this book as an academic with a predilection for large-scale, global theories, I was frustrated a number of times, wanting to argue with Berry and wishing he had a style with which it was easier to argue. But the limitations of *Citizenship Papers* from an academic perspective do not detract from the wisdom and inspiration to be found in its pages. Wendell Berry is a gifted and thoughtful writer and this book shows him at his best, thinking with a gravity, sensibleness, and beauty that make his challenging arguments difficult to ignore. These essays call us to careful thought and sympathetic appreciation for local places by offering careful and thoughtful alternatives to the industrial, progress-obsessed mainstream.

These books offer an agrarian argument about the importance of conserving and valuing the local, a justice-oriented critique of corporate biotechnology, and a Marxist argument about the discursive use of trees. All follow questions about the natural world closely with questions about the economic systems under which we now live, and make it clear that addressing environmental issues will require hard thinking about the implicit and explicit goals of global capitalism. This move will likely not come as a shock to most readers of this journal, but each of these books is recommended as a means of communicating that message to others concerned with environmental flourishing, social justice, or sustainability. They offer clear examples—from corporate laboratories, public relations firms, and dying rural populations—of the ways a global economic system focused so singularly on expansion ignores the interests of healthy ecosystems and the human beings who depend upon them.

Another idea common to each of these books is perhaps even more foreign to environmental discourse: that this discourse itself must be critically examined and carefully guarded. In other words, each of these authors begins to address a question that environmentalists frequently ignore: Who is shaping environmental discourse, how, and to serve what interests? While only Shaul Cohen explicitly uses the language of hegemony, all of these books are about the ways environmental discourse is hegemonically hijacked to serve the interests of profit and power.

Such attention to hegemonic discourse calls for a more careful environmentalism. From *Hungry Corporations* we learn to be wary of the ways economic players can oversimplify and simplistically market the issues we face. From *Planting Nature* we learn to look carefully at the interests behind that simplification and to be wary of how our own language and assumptions might serve it. Finally, we learn from *Citizenship Papers* to be wary of the simplification of even our own interests into large-scale movements that do not call us to reexamine all dimensions of our lives and the places in which we live them. Such lessons lead to a difficult and complicated sort of environmentalism, but books like these help to remind us why difficulty and complexity are exactly what we need.