Colonialism and Nature

Mick Smith

Deane Curtin, *Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World, Rowman and* Littlefield, 2005.

The idea of "ecological imperialism" has, following the work of Crosby, Mackenzie, Grove and others, had considerable influence in the development of a burgeoning field of environmental history. These recently "discovered" histories of colonialism in which nature, as well as culture, is at last recognized as playing an active role—as agent of biological disease, facilitator, instrument and object of expansionist ambitions, or just plain victim of invasive and exploitative social relations—have changed and enriched our understandings of past events. The presence of an environmental dimension to colonialism is now widely accepted, though its relevance to contemporary politics is still under-appreciated. The task Deane Curtin has set himself is to draw lessons from the legacies of social and ecological imperialism that might be applied to a contemporary global situation he defines—despite the book's title—as neocolonial rather than "post"-colonial. He seeks to integrate concerns over such issues as population, land and water resources, intensive agriculture and technological developments (like genetically modified organisms) in a manner that might make their colonial origins and interdependencies more obvious to a North American (U.S.) college audience. Here lie the book's strengths as well as its weaknesses.

Curtin has an easy, flowing style ideally suited to his educative task. Quite rightly, he does not try to portray himself as a dispassionate or neutral observer, but explicitly takes the side of the Third World (his preferred term) in key debates about development and debt. He is very critical of the homogenizing influences and material depredations unleashed by profiteering global corporations on those less able to defend their cultural or environmental integrity. His examples, though rarely original, certainly serve to both detail and critique the patterns of economic "development" imposed upon the global South following World War II. Yet, because of the book's intended audience, it also tends to appeal rather too readily to the somewhat ill-defined idea[l]s of a liberal political "consensus" that, while it may arguably still inhabit U.S. college campuses, has itself, both historically and practically, been intimately linked to the origins and growth of Western capitalism. There is thus a palpable tension in the book at points where the solutions suggested by Curtin's "common sense" political and ethical liberalism meet those dictated by neoliberal economics, perhaps explaining why the term "neoliberalism" never appears.

This political liberalism is so broadly defined as to be credited with achieving everything from environmental legislation and universal suffrage to establishing the civil rights, women's rights, and trade union movements [pp. 3, 38-9]. So much for the Wobblies! The struggles of radicals in the North and South are effectively erased from this liberal re-interpretation of history. It is not accidental that another word noticeable by its absence is "socialism," despite its long and intimate association with many anti-colonial struggles. Although Curtin certainly couldn't be accused of whitewashing liberalism, the book's tendency toward political over-simplification inevitably "makes it all the more puzzling, that the voice of political liberalism was also the voice of colonization" [p. 39]. Jeremy Bentham,

James Mill, and his son John Stuart Mill were, as Curtin details, intimately involved in the colonial development of British India. Elsewhere, we are also told that the exploitation of North America's indigenous peoples was dependent upon Locke's theory of private property: "The doctrine of Manifest Destiny was only possible because of John Locke" [p. 134]. This, of course, is the same Locke, and the very same texts, that underpin the U.S. Bill of Rights that founds Curtin's "liberal" consensus. (It also rather exaggerates Locke's role, since European colonialism rarely cared whether land was occupied or worked by indigenous peoples prior to their arrival, as the Inca, Aztec and numerous others found out.)

Both liberalism and colonialism are complex phenomena riddled with historical ambiguities, converging and diverging in different times and places. Curtin's book is a little like an iceberg, with four-fifths of the interesting arguments about their inter-relations hidden beneath its surface. If Locke's theory of private property is at the root of colonialism, does this suggest a problem with private property itself or just Locke's theory? Doesn't Curtin's defense of communal property rights over traditional agricultural products also depend upon a theory of the admixture of labor and nature, albeit on different temporal and social scales? Most importantly, what exactly is "(post) colonialism" according to Curtin? It is sometimes directly equated with globalization and frequently with capitalism, especially in terms of the disruption to traditional societies that is, according to Marx, a key feature of "primitive accumulation." But is Curtin espousing any recognizable form of anti-capitalism? It seems not, at least where the First World is concerned. So how are global capitalism and colonialism to be disentangled? Curtin is clearly right to argue that protecting cultural and biological diversity requires locally specific solutions, but if neocolonialism imperils such diversity, then surely we need a theoretically coherent understanding of what it is and how (if at all) it differs from the colonial adventurism of previous centuries. This book does not directly address any of the current theories of globalization, international relations, or other staples of development studies.

Of course part of the *raison d'être* of such a text is to spark debate rather than provide answers. There is no doubt that Curtin's book will do this, and despite being rather descriptive, it is both informative and stylistically innovative. The book's unusual strategy of mixing of literary sources with contemporary examples generally works well to illustrate Curtin's points. Unfortunately it also overlooks the political and philosophical complexities inherent in the ideologies and practices of colonial enterprises and the ways they are reflected and *refracted* in the literatures of colonizers and colonized. This tendency is, perhaps, exemplified in the actual texts chosen, which include Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Books*. These texts seem to be chosen because they have connotations drawn from film and mass media that might resonate with the U.S. audience.

Whether this constitutes a good criterion for a book explicitly focused on post-colonialism is doubtful. It would surely have made sense to introduce some ideas through the literature of the *colonized* rather than the colonizers. Why, for example, mention Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* but not, say, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, especially given Achebe's well-known but controversial reading of Conrad's text as a racist product of colonialism? What about the work of anti-colonial writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o? One of the key questions for post-colonial studies has to be, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "can the subaltern speak?" Unfortunately the complexities of reading literature post-colonially get

little discussion. Spivak herself and post-colonial critics like Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said are not mentioned. If they had been referenced, then perhaps Curtin's reading of Kipling, for example, might have been more nuanced. Certainly Kipling might be thought an easy target for post-colonial critique, but this really misses so much of what his writings can tell us of the colonial experience. As Said argues, Kipling was *of* India. Having been born there and speaking Hindustani from an early age, he was at least aware, and often sought to communicate something of, the diversity of Indian cultures and natures. No one who reads *The Jungle Book* could possibly mistake it for the Disney cartoon of the same name.

There is a real problem in bringing issues down to "Frankenstein or Tarzan?" (the title of one of Curtin's chapters). Not just because this over-simplifies issues but because of its inherent contradictions. For example, having described the very idea of the "sublime" as itself based on a "Disney-like fantasy" [p. 25], Curtin can be found some pages later espousing Shelley's own "sublime experience" [p. 52] on the Chamonix glacier as a key influence that will make *Frankenstein* such a telling indictment of the North's relation to nature. Quite what Shelley's book has to say about colonialism *per se* is rather more difficult to extract, but then this, too, is partly to do with Curtin's extremely vague use of this key term. Frankenstein's monster certainly serves to represent a technologically mediated alienation *from* nature, but it's not clear what this might mean in terms of developing a critique of the North's colonization *of* nature itself.

Here Curtin is overly dismissive of what he terms eco-centric, or perhaps more accurately, ecologically directed forms of ethics—that is, the many and varied attempts to recognise ethical responsibilities towards non-human aspects of the environment. Such approaches are accepted so long as they form part of traditional belief systems (e.g. sacred groves) but apparently are indicative only of an unscientific romanticism when it comes to a critique of capitalism or colonialism from within the North itself. Indeed, the form of environmental citizenship he proposes happily reduces ethical concerns towards nature to matters of *social* justice—an example, perhaps, of the *colonizing* tendencies of dominant discourses like liberalism and Marxism when faced with a radical alternative that exceeds their narrowly prescribed worldviews. "Eco-centrism" is, quite wrongly, equated with a narrow concern for wilderness preservation [p. 196], and although Curtin admits that non-humans might be morally (rather than just instrumentally) considerable, he nowhere suggests what motivates such concerns or what this might entail in a world where environments, species, and individual organisms often do conflict with immediate human needs and desires.

If this all sounds rather negative, it may only be because I was, perhaps, hoping for the kind of insights that a college text can rarely develop. Curtin's chosen task was in any case Herculean in its size and complexity. There are very many positive aspects to this book, not least of which are its emphasis on grass-roots campaigns emanating from the Third World and its accessibility. Those who know nothing of Ghandi will find chapter five particularly interesting. Curtin has done an excellent job of producing a text that both provides a clear summary of many issues and one that will encourage enquiring minds to read further and deeper. Although not groundbreaking, it is a welcome addition to the literature and a thought-provoking and stimulating read.