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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

General / Général

***Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond.* By Andrew Biro.** (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2005. xiii + 250 p., ill, notes, index. ISBN 0-8020-8022-7 hc. \$50 0-8020-3794-1 pb. \$24.95)

There has been no shortage of books in recent times which have attempted to reconcile ecological politics with pre-existing “isms” – in particular, with Marxism. One might say that fervent attempts have been made to graft green shoots onto relatively moribund or quiescent trees or, in another way, to graft troubled branches onto a currently vigorous environmentalist trunk. These attempts have often stretched and strained the original intentions of previous movements or have led to doubtful syncretisms which attempt the artificial reconciliation of resolutely productivist ideologies with (presently more acceptable) ecological and green understandings. Thus, it is refreshing to read a book grounded in a penetrating, knowledgeable, and expansive exploration of critical theory that makes a case for an ecological politics which draws from what might be considered the “taproot question” lying underneath the surface of the contested ground of left-wing politics and the green persuasion: the alienation of human beings from nature. The consideration of alienation plays, in various guises, as the *leitmotif* throughout this book. It is Biro’s overarching theme that there are actually *two* forms of alienation: basic and surplus. The former is implicated in our necessarily transformative dialogue with nature; the latter is produced and reproduced in and through domination.

Biro’s first and second chapters endeavour to point out the failings of “deep ecology” and postmodernism, respectively, in laying meaningful groundwork for the development of a critical structure that could reconcile the social needs of human beings with the “needs,” so to speak, of nature. “Nature” is itself a highly troubled concept throughout the book – not least, according to Biro, for those who privilege it the most, viz.: deep ecologists. Ecocentrists, in their “ecological correctness” (p. 20), as Biro puts it, often miss the point that nature, before human beings, has unsettled ecologies, and that the question of where nature “stops” and human beings “begin” is impossible to determine if one concedes that human beings, too, are natural creatures.

There is no question that Biro is more sympathetic to postmodernists than he is to deep ecologists. What Biro seems to object to most,

however, in the postmodern corpus is its ultimate tendency, in its ruthless deconstructivism, to end up like “a ride on a Möbius strip” (p.56), rendering essence and appearance an equivalency, or rather a double negation, stymieing meaningful political assertions.

Biro moves penetratingly through the writings of four major philosophers of alienation: Rousseau, Marx, Adorno, and Marcuse. He offers us, as well, diverse perspectives on each of these from many other later theorists. It is to Biro’s credit that his book manages to progress with great intentionality along a cogent pathway through even the most thicketed Adornian and Marcusean constructions. Nevertheless, one of the frustrations of this book is that the famously dense language of much critical theory (and, at times, Biro’s explorations of it) renders the question of “politics” something which seems to refer more to left-wing academic theorizing than to actual engagement with the world which such theorists wish to change – or at least to critique for the ultimate purpose of change.

Readers of this journal will not find here a strict focus on science and technology (and certainly not a focus on particularly *Canadian* science and technology). But, of course, if one takes the basic Marxist premise that human alienation from nature is due to technological/productive *transformation* of nature – and Biro does stand firmly in this tradition – then considerations of technology are inevitable. Biro’s discussion of Rousseau is particularly valuable in demonstrating that Rousseau, albeit using 18th century terminology, foreshadows much in the 19th and 20th century discussions of alienation. For Rousseau, Biro asserts, the state of nature is not something to return to, but something that we can step away from to a “necessary” (but not to an “excess”) degree. Biro then argues that the importance of Marx’s theoretical explorations consists of his “[separation of] alienation from nature on the one hand from alienation from social processes on the other” (p.116). But what of the overcoming of our rift? For Biro, Adorno’s key contribution seems to be his emphasis on *tearing down our fundamental instrumental/rational ideological stance* towards nature; if there is any supersession, it is through art. Ultimately, though, Biro seems most sympathetic to the Freudian-imbued Marxism of Herbert Marcuse, whose ideas of basic and surplus *repression* again recapitulate Biro’s essential thematic opposition. (Marcuse’s ludic *Aufhebung*, it appears, ironically returns us, with a Freudian twist, to the *1844 Manuscripts*.)

It is perhaps the mark of a book so profoundly theoretical as this that the final chapter, try as it may to finally find the “denaturalized” ecological politics which it seeks, falls short by remaining firmly in the territory of more recent *theoretical* explorations. While keenly struggling

with the question of “surplus alienation,” domination, and essentialism, and even advocating a *necessary* articulation with other political movements, these more recent theorists, at least in Biro’s presentation, still don’t provide a truly assertive (post-postmodernist?) response to the problem of alienation.

One yearns, finally, for Biro himself to take a stand. If he enters briefly into the territory of current political/environmental struggles, these short explorations are far outweighed by more abstract theoretical discussion. How *would* we move towards – or engage in – a political *praxis* which accepts that we, as human beings, *must* use nature to survive, but are not obligated to engage in the domination of nature or people in order to do so? How, concretely, would such a politics engage global warming, the socioeconomic side of natural disasters, the environmental justice movement, and military environmental destruction?

That Biro doesn’t assertively attempt to respond *in terms of actual political practice* to these questions speaks to far more than his style of presentation. It speaks, as well, to the current situation in which the roots of solidarity have been afflicted by a globalizing blight, and the Left, though not dead, now grows only rhizomatically or perhaps lies in seed-hibernation, waiting for another Spring.

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***Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing Culture, 1800-1920.* By Margaret E. Derry.** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. xvii + 302 p., ill., notes, app., index. ISBN 978-0-8020-9112-3 \$63)

Horses in Society represents a thorough effort on the part of Margaret E. Derry to outline the evolution of the horse during a period of massive transformation. Linking the interconnected equine worlds of Canada, Britain, and United States, Derry successfully demonstrates the centrality of the horse in nineteenth and early twentieth-century society. Or perhaps more accurately, *horses*. For key to Derry’s study is her assertion that the changing social and technological contexts weighed heavily on horses, their roles, and ultimately on their very composition – as Derry puts it, the book explores “the alterations people thought were needed to make the horse fit better with the developing technology, and what practices breeders suggested as strategies to accomplish those changes” (p.xvi). As