

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Alex Loftus, *Everyday Environmentalism: Creating an Urban Political Ecology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8166-6572-3 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-6571-6 (cloth)

Everyday Environmentalism is Alex Loftus' treatise on the theoretical and practical possibilities for the emergence of a radical environmental politics born of the everyday metropolitan experiences of people in diverse material circumstances. Where others focus on the potential for social transformation that inheres in moments of crisis, Loftus encourages us to look to our quotidian socio-natural interactions as a source of possible liberatory change.

The book collects contributions from an interesting group of (mostly Marxist) theorists; the thread that binds these particular thinkers is Loftus' contention that each has a role to play in creating a coherent philosophy of urban political ecology. He draws on Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw's theories of circulation and urbanization, Neil Smith's interpretation of first/second natures, Donna Haraway's conception of cyborgs, György Lukács' understanding of the political potential of our sensuous entanglements with productive activities, Antonio Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, and Henri Lefebvre's reinterpretation of the dialectic and his politicization of the everyday, among others. Taking these contributions, Loftus creates an assemblage of theoretical moments that has the potential to reframe contemporary socio-natural relations. He uses this framework to argue that it is our everyday sensuous experiences of the material world that embody the possibility for a new urban environmental politics.

A strength of the book is its careful attention to both the content and the spirit of the seminal works from which it draws. Loftus is a conscientious reader, and his nuanced understandings of the intricacies of both Marxist and post-humanist writings are evident in the book. He provides us with succinct summaries of the key contributions and context of each theory he introduces, and then turns to a discussion of the particular aspect of the work that relates to his model of urban political ecology. Loftus also convincingly argues that it is worth excavating each theorist's understanding of the relationship between humans and the material

world, as their perspective on this relationship informs their views on the potential for radical environmental and political change. At times, the question of socio-natural relations may seem tangential to the theorists' bodies of work (for example, this aspect of Lukács' work is notably underdeveloped, and even Marx's perspective on the pertinence of the sensuous aspects of daily life to social and material relations does not occupy much space in his writings). However, the quality of Loftus' textual analysis and the calibre of his insights prove the value of his approach. The outcome is a complex yet accessible examination of a breadth of ideas that culminates in a cohesive theory of urban political ecology.

One of the main contributions of the book is its successful interweaving of distinct intellectual perspectives. Loftus draws on notions of assemblage and the cyborg in his collation of concepts relevant to the re-imagining of socio-natural relations, while also creating his own hybridized philosophical viewpoint. This integration of diverse perspectives is particularly apt for the field of urban political ecology (an interdisciplinary and heterogeneous area of study), and an impressive coherence emerges from the intellectual melange of Marxist historical materialism, critical urban studies, and feminist standpoint theory. Marxist geographers have a tendency to focus on labor and urbanization as key moments of capitalist production (and therefore as hubs for contemporary socio-natural interactions); Loftus reminds us that there are other moments of sensuous interaction (for example, social reproduction, the creation of art, our inhabitation of city spaces, *etc.*) that are also involved in the production of urban environments. Because environmental relations are gendered, classed, and racialized, these moments of sensuous interaction often reinforce dominant power structures. Loftus encourages us to consider that as material activities reproductive and creative work can also become entry points for transformative socio-ecological change.

In the final pages of the book, Loftus positions himself within an urban socio-nature as he describes the act of walking his daughter to school over a cobblestone street. This reflexive vignette invites us into the materiality of the author's daily life. Unfortunately, the self-awareness of this passage does not carry through the project, and a weakness of this book is the underdevelopment of its empirical bases. Loftus has chosen what could be two excellent case studies to support his arguments about urban socio-natures and the potential for the radical politicization of everyday life. He tells us of the struggle for access to water in an informal settlement in Durban, South Africa (where the social and technical mediation of this access is

highly politicized), as well as about an activist art intervention in London, UK. However, Loftus devotes scant attention to methods, and does not address the nature of his interactions with respondents and research sites. How long did Loftus spend in South Africa? What was the context for his interactions with civic organizers and residents who were seeking access to water? Did he speak to informal settlement residents himself, or is he relaying second-hand accounts of their struggles? How many respondents did he interview, and under what circumstances? What type of access to water did he have in this place? Similarly, we do not learn about Loftus' interaction with the London research site. Did he observe and experience the art intervention himself? Did he speak with residents to learn about whether this installation influenced the ways that they experienced their everyday surroundings or their relationship with their urban environments? These questions and concerns may seem secondary to those readers most interested in the theoretical contributions of this book, but I maintain that they are crucial. Praxis is a central theme in the book, and Loftus contends that our daily interactions with people, technologies, socio-natures, and places are at the heart of the liberatory potential of our modern world. However, he does not reveal his own intellectual praxis, and does not discuss his everyday experience of being a researcher. In effect, he obscures his own intellectual labor and the everyday relationships that enabled the insights gained from his case studies. The imbalance of theory and empirics is evidenced in Loftus' use of extensive quotations from academic literature, compared with few first-hand comments from people involved in the case studies. Loftus does not provide much detail of what a new radical politics of everyday environmentalism would look like, seemingly because these politics will emerge organically and in unforeseen ways from the lived experiences of people like those struggling for access to water in Durban. Given the centrality of their everyday lives to the radical reimagining of socio-natural relations, perhaps we should hear more from these voices whose interests Loftus seeks to champion in the book. Similarly, I was surprised that Loftus did not discuss established research and activism on 'brown' agendas of environmentalism or 'right to the city' movements, since such initiatives often represent urban politics of everyday environmentalism.

Despite these limitations, Loftus has created a compelling and engaging theory of the ways in which everyday sensuous interactions with our world can engender radical socio-natural politics. This book is well suited to academics interested in urban political ecology, contemporary human-environmental relations, the production of the urban sphere, and

philosophies of activism. Running throughout the book is a current of optimism, leaving the reader with a sense of hope that a groundswell of radical political change based in our everyday lives may yet emerge.

Kate Parizeau
Department of Geography
University of Guelph
kate.parizeau@uoguelph.ca

May 2013