Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Damian F. White, Alan P. Rudy and Brian J. Gareau, *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory: Towards a Critical Hybridity*, London: Palgrave, 2015. ISBN: 9780230241039 (cloth); ISBN: 9780230241046 (paper); ISBN: 9781137524256 (ebook)

As I write this review in early December 2016, thousands of Native Americans, environmentalists, and military veterans are congregated on the frozen, snowy plains of North Dakota protesting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through sacred lands of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. The Army Corps of Engineers has tried to evict them while North Dakota's governor is blocking supplies and withdrawing emergency services. Dozens of law enforcement agencies from around the US have joined forces to surveil, harass, and arrest the activists. The images of protestors sprayed with water cannons in subfreezing temperatures reveals the brutal irony of water being weaponized against water defenders. Add to this coldness the fact that Trump is president-elect with all his bluster regarding environmental deregulation, fossil fuel promotion, and his promise to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement and it seems the sky is truly falling. Indeed environmental politics in the so-called "post-truth"[1] era of authoritarianism, willful ignorance, and fake news requires a heightened level of intellectual engagement on the left to adequately anticipate the impending onslaught by powerful reactionaries. For those of us who want to better theorize and situate these struggles, *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory* is a potentially welcome and timely intervention that can help us contextualize them both theoretically and practically.

White, Rudy and Gareau have written a book that asks us to consider environmental struggles like these in the context of a hybrid world where virtually every aspect of nature around us is at least in-part produced and contested by people. Their tome is a comprehensive

1 The term "post-truth" era is increasingly used to describe the realm of politics under Donald Trump and the rise of the so-called "alt-right". See Sullivan's (2016) article in the *Washington Post* as just one of many examples that easily turns up in an online search.

undertaking, to say the least, asking the reader in 215 pages to consider everything from the problem of nature in classical social theory to the rise of the Anthropocene to the future of market natures. The authors seek to accomplish four primary goals with their book. The first is to consider how well environmental questions are addressed by social theory. Second, readers should understand that all answers to environmental questions are formulated by what the authors refer to as our sociological imagination. Thirdly, environmental questions must necessarily be addressed in the context of what they refer to as an inevitable, socionatural hybridity. Lastly, the authors want us to acknowledge that work on hybridity and its political import is not complete, and therefore needs to be a central task going forward. Overall the book meets these challenges, is fairly well organized, and an engaging read. Let me elaborate in the following paragraphs.

In the first section the authors critically remind us of the common, yet problematic, social theories that summarize our relationship to the natural world around us and each other. Theories include various iterations of neo-Malthusianism, "planetary boundaries", and market-oriented Prometheanism. We are made aware that writings on catastrophism by people like Ehrlich (1968) and Diamond (2005) are prominent ways of portraying our relationship to each other and nature in rigid and overly-simplistic, reductionist terms. Talking about "too many people on the planet" or "the need for technologies that can feed a burgeoning population of poor people" are examples of the kinds of narratives that result from such discourse. Such simplified tropes are weaponized in ways that result in the marginalization, oppression, or colonization of certain groups of people, especially those living in the global South–as they are the ones blamed for environmental destruction. Instead, our authors contend, we need to more fully consider the complexity of the relationships between people and nature. Only then can we begin to appropriately assign blame to the real perpetrators of environmental destruction. They hint that this will likely lead readers in novel, necessarily hybrid theoretical directions.

The authors of *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory* suggest that there are better accounts of our relationship to nature, that despite receiving much less attention overall are worth paying *much* more attention to given their ability to acknowledge socionatural hybridity. They include social ecology (Bookchin 1990), political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987), and various Southern critiques of Northern environmentalisms (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997), among others. All of these alternative intellectual currents, it is argued, better juxtapose humans with the environment and are more sophisticated and nuanced in their understanding of how nature is in part a product of human social, political, and economic interactions. One major difference is that these concepts can be structural critiques that interrogate how capitalist institutions create oppressive discourses/narratives/representations of humans, poverty, capital accumulation, and environmental problems. In other words, these concepts are somehow deployed outside capitalism and critique inward, rather than being produced and deployed within capital-oriented institutions and directed outward toward other people/places to situate blame there. These theories ultimately make more room for ethical correctives based on Marxist, feminist, anarchist, and anti-colonial/-imperialist commitments, among many others.

White, Rudy and Gareau go on to discuss the pros and cons of specific alternative sociological imaginings of our relationship to nature. “Treadmill of production”, “metabolic rift”, and “ecological modernization” theories are all examined in the middle chapters of their book. Treadmill of production arguments of course criticize capitalism’s ever-expanding need to make a pollution-based profit (Schnaiberg 1980), while metabolic rift theorists like Foster (2000) note that capitalism routinely exceeds the sustaining capacity of the ecology in which it is embedded. Ecological modernists including Huber (1982), on the other hand and according to our authors, focus on modernity as a project amenable to change, rather than challenging capitalism per se. Ecological modernists insist that the treadmill of production is flexible and can accommodate crises and avert ecological catastrophes. In this sense it has much in common with neo-Prometheanism. The authors praise treadmill and metabolic perspectives for their emphasis on

the structural shortcomings of capitalism. However, they are critical of the supposed lack of socionatural hybridity found within these modes of thinking and also in ecological modernization theory. This reviewer, though, is not in agreement with said accusation in relation to metabolic rift, specifically; work on urban agriculture as hybrid socialnature immediately comes to mind as a potential refutation (see McClintock 2010).

Additional sections address the hybridities of Latour (1993), Haraway (1991), and Beck (1995), among others. Here the authors of *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory* elaborate in considerable detail on the advantages of Latour's actor-network theory and its embrace of hybridity through the assemblage. The dichotomy of nature and society as a Modernist project can be rejected as the enrolling of actants into networks destabilizes/delegitimizes preconceived notions of what belongs in which social or natural categories. But they go on to state that the hybridity of actor-network theory is problematic in that it is apparently apolitical in the sense that it is silent on the matter of the production and distribution of power. This is a criticism that this reviewer, among others, finds rather compelling (see, for example, Perkins 2007; Wainwright 2005). White, Rudy and Gareau then go on to outline Beck's notion of risk society produced through socio-technical entanglements like nuclear proliferation and climate change and his belief in the potential for a reflexive modernity based in ecological democracy. They go on to suggest, however, that in Beck's accounts of the production of risk, the complexity of hybridity is lost.

Contributions from "new", or "vital" materialists are also presented in the intervening chapters that challenge the poststructural constraints and humanist tendencies featured in the bulk of writings on hybridity. Books by Clark (2011) and Morton (2010) are offered as examples of "full-blown universalist hybrid ontologies" (p.138), but then quickly critiqued because they displace the centrality of human labor and also veer toward something akin to deep ecology. Our authors suggest then that, overall, they are most sympathetic to the ethically-charged hybridities that Haraway writes about. They suggest that "…it is our sense that it is Haraway's mode of

ethically and critically grasping our entangled worlds comes far closer to envisaging a critical hybrid worldview than the work of Beck or Latour" (p.135). This is the case because Haraway explicitly acknowledges highly complex power relations concerning capital, sexism, racism, labor, etc. that impact the development and trajectory of socionatural hybrid arrangements. She is in other words, unwilling to completely decenter the human subject while considering the efficacy of the nonhuman in hybrid assemblages.

In the remaining chapters White, Rudy and Gareau address environmental justice and urban political ecology as hybrid response, environmental governance, and neoliberalization, and finally prospects for a world of democratic natures and public ecologies in the face of rampant marketization. This reviewer found the detail regarding the contributions of urban political ecology to hybridity studies wanting, but overall these remaining chapters are engaging. The subsection on global environmental governance is especially well-developed, and the conversation on the Montreal Protocol, based largely on the work of Gareau (2013), is especially interesting. Arguably, however, the most valuable contribution in these chapters is the level of detail the authors go into regarding the future trajectories we may heading along theoretically and in terms of praxis. These subsections are termed "critical evaluations" and in them they address the shortcomings of a number of theories including "bright green", "post-environmentalist", and "post-capitalist" modes of thinking and acting. All of these concepts are evaluated in relation to their potential to produce more equitable and democratic socionatures going forward.

In covering such a diversity of topics, *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory* is well-placed in a graduate seminar on nature and social theory. It will also be useful for stodgy academics like this reviewer who need a refresher course now and then or are interested in learning something new about a theorist/theory they have not read before. The material is dense but is written in a manner that, generally, is approachable to educated audiences unfamiliar with work on hybridity in sociology or geography. I especially appreciated the ends of each chapter

where the authors intervene to critically interrogate and evaluate the tenets and claims made by theorists featured. Somehow, despite the incredible breadth of the discussion in the book, its depth suffers only modestly. White, Rudy and Gareau should be commended for their accomplishment. That said I finished reading it still wondering how it could help me think about the Dakota Access Pipeline struggle and other environmental struggles in a new or different light.

In the short time it took to write these intervening paragraphs, the US Army Corps of Engineers ruled that it would not grant an easement that would allow the company building the pipeline across its lands. Protestors are celebrating; they understand their direct action advocacy made a difference. But they also know their work is far from over in a Trumpian world. As I read this book, I kept asking myself, how does socionatural hybridity have bearing on this conflict? In particular, how can it help the water protectors on the front line? Surely it can help to remind theoretically-inclined academics like me how we might envision and demand a more just and equitable world from the safe confines of our universities. But beyond the academy? Does hybridity mean or do anything purposeful for those committed to direct action in the face of water cannons and rubber bullets? The answer to this question is far less certain–or at least much more complicated–I think. But to be fair, enhancing direct action politics is not one of the central goals of this text. However, I do think that all of us who study and write about socionatural hybridity have an obligation to figure out how to develop and deploy it in ways that help other people make the world a better place. This is more the case than ever given current circumstances, and I think *Environments, Natures, and Social Theory* is just the sort of book that can help us do so. It is, to my mind, a kind of directory where people interested in mobilizing social theory can look up compelling authors and concepts and begin to sift through the literature from there.

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