

Andrew Biro, ed.

Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises.

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Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crisis is an excellent compilation of articles on the continued relevance of the reflections of the Frankfurt school for environmental philosophy. The book comprises 12 chapters, an introduction, and an afterward, all of outstanding quality. The point of the volume, as Biro presents it, is in part to redress what Robyn Eckersley in the 1990s called the ‘failed promise of Critical Theory’ (9) to make a substantial contribution to environmental philosophy.

The book is premised on the view that the Habermasian turn in critical theory has resulted in a move away from environmental issues and that Habermas’ theory fails to provide tools for adequately dealing with the environmental crises. Consequently, in general the book does not reflect the work of third-generation critical theorists such as John Dryzek, or the later work of Robyn Eckersley, which, while critical of details of Habermas’ system, sees positive potentials in applying Habermas’ research program to the environmental thematic. Here, instead, the articles largely explore the application of insights from first-generation critical theory to issues in environmental philosophy, while accepting Horkheimer’s warning of the dangers of a ‘thoughtless and dogmatic application of the critical theory to practice in changed historical circumstances’ (312).

Though many essays in this volume make interesting points, I will focus on four specific ways that authors in this volume think critical theory can positively contribute to environmental philosophy. 1) It offers a sophisticated view of the social construction of reality that steers between the naïve realism found in many varieties of environmental thought and an overly linguistically oriented social constructivism found in others. 2) It provides a valuable critique of instrumental reason that nonetheless seeks to continue the enlightenment project. 3) It highlights the potentials of aesthetics for environmental thought, since aesthetics underlines a non-instrumentalist experience of reality. 4) It offers valuable insights for addressing the risks of science and technology.

In ‘The Societal Relationships with Nature; A Dialectical Approach to Environmental Politics’, Christoph Görg particularly drives home the first point mentioned above, noting that we construct nature not only through discourse, but also through our very interaction with nature. As Görg puts it, ‘nature is always socially constructed, in two senses: it is *materially produced* by economic and technical practices; and it is *symbolically constructed* through cultural interpretations, including those of science’ (49).

The epistemological orientation that Görg takes from early critical theory recognizes that there is something external to humans that they construct as objects of knowledge, but that, in contrast to Kant, the human subject that constructs those objects of knowledge is also constructed: 'Neither subject (society, the individual) nor object (nature) is something given; it is always connected with its opposite' (52). Given this connection, Görg underlines the importance of shaping societal relationships that are shaping the subject and the subject's understanding of the world. Among other things, he emphasizes the importance of examining power relationships as they affect science. This examination also involves a probing of the capitalization of nature and the effects of this capitalization on *how* nature is being constructed in environmental politics, for example, on how capitalization results in the '*selective treatment*' of environmental issues in late capitalism (60). In general agreement with Walter Benjamin, Görg notes: 'it is not nature we need to master, but rather our societal relationships with nature—that is, we need to control the impact those relationships have on nature' (47). Concretely, this means, *inter alia*, that '[c]ritical theory...should reconstruct the contradictions and struggles among various kinds of societal relationships with nature and try to estimate their impacts on nature and society' (61).

Steve Vogel's piece expresses similar views within the context of an analytically rigorous treatment of the concept of alienation from nature. He characterizes the two most typical understandings of that alienation as 'romantic' and 'tragic'. According to the former (which often presupposes a naïve realism), our present practices are out of sync with nature, but other non-alienating practices that align with it are possible. According to the latter understanding, alienation is an existential condition, given that nature always escapes us. Consequently alienation cannot be overcome by any human action. Vogel thinks that the Frankfurt school accepts this tragic sense of alienation and also still harbors a romantic tendency. But a more viable view of alienation is to be found in Marx's early view—namely that it consists in a failure to recognize ourselves in the world we create. It is here that Vogel emphasizes that we create the world in a twofold sense, similar to that noted by Görg: on the one hand, in mental constructions of the world; on the other, by shaping of the world through labor. Given this, Vogel's position, too, is that 'the problem we have without our environment is not a problem with nature, it's a problem with society' (202). For his part Vogel argues that, in light of these realities, in order to facilitate a non-alienating relationship with nature we need to institute democratic social practices that allow responsible collective action.

Andrew Biro makes similar points in 'Ecological Crisis and the Culture Industry Thesis', but he goes on to contrast the form of rationalism in Horkheimer and Adorno's thought with the positions both of ecological thinkers who reject modern science and advocate a resurgence of 'Earth wisdom' and of advocates of a scientism that fails to account for the domination of nature that has been typical of instrumentalist reason (232ff.). Human liberation, Biro notes, requires steering a path between these two latter views; like others in this volume, he also emphasizes that we need an awareness of the way in which cultural projections of nature are conditioned by societal relations.

Along with Biro's article, D. Bruce Martin's 'Sacred Identity and the Sacrificial Spirit: Mimesis and Radical Ecology' is one of the few contributions in this volume to touch directly on current main schools of environmental philosophy, focusing on deep ecology. Martin argues that while deep ecology has generated fruitful insights into the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature, it would benefit from social insights that could be garnered from the assimilation of the work of critical theory (130). In particular, Martin, like Biro, emphasizes that critical theory could serve as a corrective to an irrationalist tendency in deep ecology, since it offers a sophisticated critique of instrumentalist reason that nonetheless simultaneously preserves a respect for reason more generally.

The teaching of the Frankfurt school on aesthetics and media theory is a further area that various contributors in this volume highlight. In 'Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty', Donald Burke argues that Adorno's juxtaposition of the aesthetic and instrumentalist views of the world in his work on aesthetics could prove useful to environmental thought. Since in our experience of beauty our relationship to the world is no longer one of instrumentalist domination, such aesthetic experience harbors an emancipatory potential—one as of yet hardly reflected in environmental philosophy.

While Biro's article on the cultural industry examines the views of critical theory on media, it does not highlight emancipatory potentials as much as how these are usurped in mass culture. As culture in its various forms becomes commodified in the cultural industry, even the potentially critical expressions of art, which theoretically might also evade means-end logic, are expropriated by the instrumentalist logic of the market. Feenberg, in his afterword to these contributions, agrees with Biro that there is justified reason for the concerns about media that were widespread among the first-generation critical theorists. Yet Feenberg also argues that first-generation critical theorists exaggerate the depth of medial manipulation and that their view 'smacks of mandarin elitism' and 'makes for difficulties interpreting progressive movements' (344). In fact, even at the time they were writing, mass media was having positive effects, spreading progressive ideas. In light of these things, Feenberg argues that a more nuanced media theory is needed. He suggests that the possibilities of art to underline non-instrumentalist forms of thought are not only for a later emancipated society and not only for the avant-garde.

Feenberg further touches on issues of science and technology that are treated in a few papers in this volume, arguing that the positive reception of phenomenology would serve critical theory well, particularly facilitating recognition of forms of knowledge they may be wont to overlook. Katherine Farrell, too, in 'The Politics of Science: Has Marcuse's New Science Finally Come of Age?', touches on the importance of issues of technology (and science) for critical theory and points to the value of reflections on these issues by first-generation critical theorists. Farrell highlights the widespread view in critical theory that while technology was developed to allow us freedom from the subjugation to nature, technology now is what oppresses us (80). Indeed, our daily interaction is no longer primarily with nature, but with the technologies that we have

developed in the process of dealing with it. Technology is now ‘the dominant other’ (73). Given this, she sees a particular value in examining the relationship between science, technology, and values. In her paper—the only contribution to explicitly reflect on positive potentials in Habermas’ thought—she argues that postnormal science occupies the position that Marcuse envisions for an emancipatory science and that by connecting the work of Marcuse and Habermas (88) it is possible to make a valuable contribution to science studies that equips us to deal with the environmental crises. In line with Marcuse, the postnormal emancipatory science that Farrell advocates acknowledges the value-laden character of scientific work (95) and recognizes a need to re-conceptualize the relationship between science and politics; and Habermas’ work on deliberative democracy and discursive ethics provides some model of what an emancipatory science might look like.

It is not possible here to discuss further interesting points made in the contributions to this book. Suffice it to say, the volume succeeds beautifully in showing the potentials of applying critical theory to issues in environmental philosophy. Environmental philosophers of many stripes will benefit from an examination of critical theory. This book does much to facilitate that examination.

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