

Reviews

day.... Their struggle to survive requires that they engage in practices that accelerate the deterioration of the resources on which they most depend” (91).

Throughout the book, Cruz-Torres situates her observations within a historical context, often moving seamlessly from the chronological to the particular to the general. She provides an excellent overview of the history of land and resource struggles in Mexico – including the emergence of ejidos and fishing cooperatives in the early twentieth century – and connects these to the shifting development strategies of the same period. Of particular note is the “modernist” approach of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship and its parallels to the current situation of southern Sinaloa. The Porfiriato’s emphasis on an industrial and commercial expansion driven by foreign capital, Cruz-Torres notes, produced “several unequal and contrasting Sinaloas” (43), ultimately fomenting tension and unrest throughout the state and partly contributing to Mexico’s decade of revolutionary violence.

While Cruz-Torres avoids casting long-term predictions, her book implicitly sends out a cautionary note about the future, exhorting the reader to consider the dangers of market-driven natural resource extraction. Beyond this broader theme, though, Cruz-Torres also offers a glimpse of the daily drama of the residents of El Cerro and Celaya. Her stories of love, betrayal, and survival, written in a straightforward and unassuming prose, resonate with the universality of human struggle. It is this last element in particular that elevates *Lives of Dust and Water* from the theoretically interesting and relevant to the universally poignant.

***Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought*, by John M. Meyer (2001), Cambridge: MIT Press, 210 pages.**

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In this timely book, John Meyer lays the theoretical groundwork for what he terms “political nature”. While sympathetic to the goal of environmentalists who seek a more profound consideration of nature in political decision-making, Meyer rejects their “calls for a new ‘ecological worldview’” (p. 1). Appealing to a vaguely defined concept of nature to direct political and economic actions, Meyer argues, ignores the political judgments involved in determining what is natural, and does not account for variations in interpretation. Instead, Meyer offers his concept of political nature which requires us to examine the factors that link conceptions of nature and social practices. By focusing on experiences of nature as a place, Meyer describes how the notion of political nature emerges from the dialectic between conceptions of nature and of politics. While this is Meyer’s conclusion, most of the book is devoted to detailed analyses of prevalent Western views of the relationship between nature and politics. Through his critique, Meyer shows these views ultimately to be unsatisfactory, though he emphasizes the valuable insights gained from each in the development of his theory.

Meyer begins by outlining the two most common interpretations of the nature-politics relationship in the history of Western thought. The first, which he calls the “dualist account”, treats nature as completely separate from human culture, including politics. The second account is referred to as “derivative” in that normative theories about ideal political structures and practices are derived from theories of nature. Meyer’s criticism of both the dualist and derivative interpretations is that they do not consider how the conceptions of nature and politics mutually influence each other. Meyer discusses these limitations while examining the work of contemporary environmentalist thinkers as well as the writings of prominent philosophers that are cited as the original proponents of these worldviews. As he explores the work of each thinker, Meyer uses an interpretive approach to find evidence of a dualist or derivative orientation, even if this was not an explicit intention of the writer. This allows him to identify patterns throughout history and to find links between what are usually taken to be theoretically opposed perspectives.

The analysis starts in the second chapter with arguments put forth by environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold, Lynn White, Robyn Eckersley and Murray Bookchin, who hold an ecological view of nature as central to the desired worldview from which social and political order should be derived. Despite their apparently dissimilar approaches, Meyer shows them all to share the derivative interpretation of the nature-politics relationship, which suggests that environmental

problems can be solved if an ecological worldview becomes dominant in politics. His criticism of these theorists is that “they seriously overestimate the importance of transforming our worldview” (p. 34) while ignoring the political processes involved in defining nature and constructing a worldview.

In the third chapter, Meyer describes in more detail how environmentalists have looked to the history of Western philosophy to find the foundations of the ecologically destructive worldview that is presently dominant. Support for both the dualist and derivative interpretations can be found in this historical approach to Western thought, but Meyer concludes that each is inadequate in explaining the current state of affairs. He points out that multiple conceptions of nature do exist within society as do multiple conceptions of politics. In order to change political and social practices with regard to human-environment interactions, more than just a change of worldview is required.

Chapters 4 and 5 are at the theoretical heart of the book. Meyer closely examines the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes in the fourth chapter and then of Aristotle in the fifth. These philosophers were selected because Meyer considers their conceptions of nature and politics to be the most influential on present day worldviews. His interpretive approach concentrates on writings in which the topics of politics and nature are addressed most fully. For Hobbes, these include *De Corpore* and *Leviathan*, in which a mechanistic view of nature is prominent. For Aristotle, he refers largely to *Physics* and *Politics*, in which a teleological nature is best articulated. Both chapters have a similar structure: first a discussion of how nature and politics are defined by the philosopher, then a systematic analysis of how the ideas can be interpreted within the dualist and derivative frameworks, with comments on contradictions and dilemmas, and finally a concluding discussion of how each is really setting up a dialectic between nature and politics, albeit unintentionally.

In the last section of the book, Meyer develops his own theory in which he builds on the insights offered by the dualist and derivative interpretations. He explores “the significance of one’s experience and relationship to place— where we live, work, and play— as both a product of [the interaction between our conceptions of nature and politics] and a key influence on our understanding of what is politically necessary and appropriate” (p. 18). Meyer synthesizes the philosophies of Hobbes and Aristotle, noting that both conceived of politics as belonging to a category broadly defined as being within the realm of the natural and that nature is constitutive of humanity. In other words, politics is a human activity and humans are natural beings; therefore, politics is natural. Meyer does not take the next step, however, and avoids claiming that politics is derived from nature. Instead, he describes politics as being largely a matter of defining our relationship to the natural physical world. The product of this dialectic relationship is Meyer’s “political nature.”

In the final chapter, Meyer examines three cases of environmental movements to illustrate the notion of place as a political environment. He first looks at the environmental justice movement in the United States, where people are trying to protect the places they live from pollutants. He then compares this to third world ecological resistance movements, noting how ecological and economic interests are inseparable. The last case is the land rights movement in the American west where the focus on the livelihood of ranchers, miners and loggers stems from connections to place and environment. Common to all three political struggles is the centrality of human-environment relationship.

The strength of this book is Meyer’s solid understanding of the philosophical writings he analyzes and his logical and systematic critique. He provides a clear, point by point evaluation of each argument and its implications for environmentalist aims to change social and political practices. Rather than simply finding holes in the dualist and derivative theories, Meyer acknowledges their contributions and takes their deficiencies as opportunities to seek a more satisfying alternative. The conclusion that politics must be accounted for is drawn from several angles and is well supported.

Undoubtedly, this is a book targeted for an academic audience. Meyer assumes that readers have a background knowledge of both contemporary environmentalist literature and philosophy. In order to truly appreciate the new perspective he is bringing to the issues and the significance of his arguments, one must already be familiar with the work of Hobbes and Aristotle. While there are some elaborated comments along with suggestions for further reading in the endnotes for each chapter, a reader who is new to philosophy may be overwhelmed by the chapters on Hobbes and Aristotle where the depth of detail and the sophistication of Meyer’s interpretations require some

knowledge of the original texts. For example, the idea of nature as mechanistic, so central to his interpretation of Hobbes, is never fully explained by Meyer.

For readers who are well acquainted with the theories and writings being analyzed, Meyer's book offers a thoughtful look at environmentalism, philosophy, politics and discourse. The extensive bibliography contains a wide range of works from the diverse areas of environmentalist theory, cultural ecology, and philosophy— useful to those interested in studying the history and development of these subjects. Some readers may be disappointed that the last chapter is so short. After following Meyer's carefully developed argument for "political nature" we are given only the briefest opportunity to see what such an analysis might look like when applied to contemporary issues. The three cases altogether are given only eight pages. If we accept Meyer's thesis that a deeper understanding of environmental conflicts requires an examination of the conceptions of politics and nature, then surely more than a couple of pages is needed for an adequate treatment, especially if it is to serve as an example of his approach.

In sum, Meyer's concept of political nature is a call to keep open the debates about how to define key concepts for environmental issues while giving attention to the fact that multiple interpretations exist, and striving to understand the ways that some of these are more privileged than others in a given socio-political context. Meyer points to experiences of place as the heart of political nature, reminding us that decisions about how we interact with our environments are inherently political and that political decisions are also embedded in nature and our conceptions of it. This book makes a valuable contribution to the political ecology literature while offering relevant theoretical and analytical approaches to the disciplines of political science, anthropology, philosophy and environmental studies.

***Political Ecology and the Role of Water: Environment, Society and Economy in Northern Yemen*, by Lichtenthaler, Gerhard (2003). Aldershot: Ashgate.**

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Intimate local knowledge can be a powerful yardstick of grand theory and the efficacy of broad policy prescriptions. Lichtenthaler's rich knowledge and long association with the region of his field study, the Sa'dah basin in northern Yemen, allows him to easily see through many of the accepted truths of water resource management in the developing world. But having deconstructed conventional wisdom, Lichtenthaler is left a little puzzled and clearly concerned about Sa'dah's future. He leaves us with just a prayer and poem for the future.

In *Political Ecology and the Role of Water*, Lichtenthaler searches for solutions to what seems a hopeless situation. Groundwater in the Sa'dah basin of northern Yemen is dropping precipitously and there is no plausible solution in sight. Conventional wisdom offers little recourse, or worse, contributes to the problem. Privatization of water resources, Garret Hardin's solution to his 'tragedy of the commons,' was adopted indigenously when new pumping technology offered access to abundant groundwater. Now, however, what is rational for the individual actor actually inhibits collective regulation of ground water abstraction. Worse, privatization of water is now contributing to the marginalization of smaller farmers who are unable to keep pace with the costs of constantly deeper drilling for the falling water table. Similarly, the international development agencies' political correct "decentralized and locally designed" projects that are "culturally sensitive" to local tradition are not very helpful in Sa'dah because local society itself is the source of much of the problem. Even the modernizing state cannot provide the social framework necessary for an effective adaptive strategy because state behavior also contributes significantly to the current problem. And finally, socio-economic development that would transfer water to more efficient alternative uses in industries is a remote possibility in Sa'dah. Left with little else, Lichtenthaler hopes that lessons are being learned and that local tribal society will generate institutional means to collectively manage water in a socially sustainable manner, these latter recorded and transmitted through popular poetry and Islamic reinterpretation. Recent news from Sa'dah is not good, however; local society was ripped asunder by three months of armed conflict during the summer of 2004 between rebels and government forces.