

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

PETER DICKENS, *Society and Nature: Changing our Environment, Changing Ourselves*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2004, xii + 270 pp. Index.

Born out of a synthesis of perspectives from sociology, philosophy, anthropology, economics, environmental studies, biology, history and other disciplines, this book offers a multi-disciplinary, well-rounded theoretical discussion of the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world. Upper level undergraduate courses intersecting any of the disciplines mentioned above would benefit from this text. Some of the original concepts of Dickens' preceding book, *Society and Nature: Towards a Green Social Theory*, have been reworked to provide an updated introduction complemented by illustrations, boxes, and a resourceful "further reading" section at the end of each chapter.

Dickens criticizes social theorists for being too human-centric by ignoring the natural world of which humans are an inextricable part. He also criticizes environmentalists and biologists for being too bio-centric, ignoring the cultural or social dimension. He claims that with such a narrow focus, these disciplines are limited. It is his intention to provide a conceptual link between the natural and social worlds in order to shed light on a range of contemporary issues. Evolution, industry, community, and risk are four distinct lenses that structure each chapter. The author should be commended for incorporating a wealth of material, thoroughly linking together aspects of these distinct issues.

Marx's influence is present throughout the book, most importantly his notion of "metabolism," or humanity's connection to the natural world through labour processes. The dialectical approach suggests that, through active participation and control, humanity transforms its external environment, while simultaneously undergoing internal transformation. Humans possess both natural and species powers, thus sharing commonality with other animals, but also possessing characteristics that are distinctly human. This book seeks to unravel complex relations between these powers, including the material estrangement between humans and nature under capitalism. The aim is to explore "how, as society transforms its environment, are people's own natures being transformed" (Preface).

To shed light on this central question, Dickens begins with a discussion of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Increasingly, the dualism between humans and "nature" (non-humans) that held strong throughout the Enlightenment period is being contested on theoretical and empirical grounds, and is losing its strength. There is no longer a clear distinction between what constitutes the social and the natural. For Dickens, nature can be considered both a priori, giving rise to social

organization, and as a socially constructed product where humans take responsibility for its ontology.

Through alienated labour, Dickens explains, individuals lose touch with the origin of commodities and the labour processes and social relations wrapped up in production. Thus, farmers have become 'deskilled,' piecework labourers with decreasing control and understanding of polyculture and genetically diverse seed production. "Super-seeds" and genetic 'improvements' to animals intervene with, and pose risks to natural evolutionary processes. "Manufactured risk," to invoke Beck's terminology, is a serious concern as we experiment with genetics, growth hormones, and move toward commodifying the commons.

Dickens argues that both commodification and consumption need to be examined in broader contexts. In terms of commodification, it is crucial to consider how industry is changing, and how land and resource use is entangled in these transformations. In terms of consumption, he advises that we get past the naïve perspective that we all need to consume less, and look at what is being consumed by who, and why, since it is largely a class and identity issue.

Dickens assumes a moderate perspective in the book contending that, for example, risks of genetically modified food are still rather unknown. In his view, science, technology, and mass communications can be used to bring about positive change, for example in the creation of cheap food and medicine. This may be a disappointment to readers who do not consider these types of changes positive, having so far brought with them major social and environmental costs. For some, the question may not be whether technology has the potential for improvements, but rather, who will have decision-making control over its future applications.

The discussion of "society" in this book generally refers to advanced, industrialized countries, leaving me to wonder if the analysis would hold for the rest of the world. Overall, this book covers a wide range of contemporary issues with a very comprehensible and attractive layout. As a graduate student in sociology, with a background in environmental studies, I feel it is a highly accessible and valuable contribution.

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