

**Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment**

Jill Ker Conway, Kenneth Keniston, and Leo Marx (Eds.), 1999.

University of Massachusetts Press, Boston.

£17.00, 349 pp

ISBN 1-55849-221-6

It is significant that the four-year Workshop on Humanistic Studies of the Environment from which this collection of papers was generated began in 1992. The year marked not only the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio 'Earth Summit') which formally broadened the discourse on environmental issues from biophysical to economic and social domains, but it also marked the publication of *Beyond the Limits to Growth* (Meadows et.al., 1992). In the final chapter of *Beyond the Limits*, the scientifically-trained authors appeal for additional tools to address the environmental crisis which they graphically display through use of systems modelling. Their tentative suggestions include what they refer to as the 'soft' tools of visioning, networking, truth-telling, learning, and loving. A number of critics have expressed concern that such conclusions are too wishy-washy and distracts from the necessity to engage with the political economy context of environmental issues, and particularly the global context of modern capitalism. In my opinion, *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment* (EAFW) mediates between both viewpoints. The book's humanistic approach supports the value and use of qualitative research approaches implicitly being asked for by Meadows et.al., and in so doing it surfaces the essentially cultural and political nature of environmental issues which need to be addressed. As part of this exercise, however, the book is particularly critical of the mainstream scientific and technical expertise associated with books like *Beyond the Limits*. The main argument presented by the editors is that environmental issues associated with the earth, air, fire and water have been systematically disembedded from the cultural and political context and redefined through traditional expert scientific support as technical problems which implicitly invite technical solutions e.g., 'deteriorating' rangelands, 'eroding' soils, 'shrinking' forests, ozone 'depletion', 'loss of' biological diversity, 'acid' rain etc. The title of the book signals an underlying purpose to re-embed these issues as a counter to the alienating tendencies of scientific discourse.

EAFW is a collection of 14 papers written by 15 authors who participated at various stages in the Workshop on Humanistic Studies of the Environment held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology between 1992 and 1995. After an introductory chapter co-authored by the editors, the book is divided into 3 sections. Section 1 examines the historic understandings of each of the four elements. Section 2 explores the interaction between people and nature through different social institutions. Section 3 explores our notions of modernity and 'progress' in shaping our vision of future engagement with the natural world.

The introductory chapter maps out environmental discourse or 'environmentalism' as a range of dualisms including, for example, ecocentrism versus anthropocentrism,

apocalypticism versus gradualism, and the global perspective versus local perspectives. This use of dialectics provides a useful means of surfacing the main issues of debate and also, as the authors comment, prompts thinking about the scope for associations between dualisms. Hence ecocentrism might be associated with apocalypticism and having a global perspective. In listing their twelve dualisms, the editors implicitly invite such associations. The over-arching dualism presented at the outset is that between constructivism versus realism. The implied association between constructivism and ecocentrism is tenable only insofar as ecocentric activists are engaged with a crusade towards a change in worldview. However, at a deeper level, I would have thought that social constructivists, who consider the environment as mere *human* narratives or representations rather than a real entity in its own right, represents an ultimate expression of anthropocentrism. If the dualism was reversed to 'realism versus constructivism', it would make more sense of the ensuing dualism of materialism versus idealism.

As someone with a scientific background I found the humanist historic perspectives on air (G. Nagy), water (D. Worster), fire (S. Pyne) and land (J.F. Richards) in Section 1 very compelling. One of the reasons for this is the refreshing grounding (if you forgive the slight pun) of these issues in historical/cultural settings. The authors have in a very real sense succeeded in 'bringing back home' issues which have been co-opted by the language of science and technology. Scientists tend only to deal with first-order data, or real world phenomena which can be immediately sensed, measured and enumerated. The human meanings attached to such data provide the source of second-order data to which the humanist tradition is associated. Examining second-order data through an historic perspective can challenge some of our fundamental perspectives on, for example, the distinctions we make between natural and artificial or the idealised notion of traditional peoples environmental practices.

Section 2 covered more familiar ground within the domain of social studies. An interesting distinction within this domain is made in the introduction to this section between social sciences and humanistic studies. Social sciences along with biophysical sciences are regarded as "distancing discourses" concerned ostensibly with merely objectifying knowledge. The humanistic tradition, in contrast, is more concerned with ethnographic, in-depth studies promoting personal understanding and, crucially, making explicit the ethical commitments of the authors. Sure enough these attributes come over very clearly in the five essays presented in this section, and again, the result is often a compelling and challenging read. The focus is on new social movements (NSMs) and social groups traditionally affected by, rather than being involved with, environmental decision-making. The influence of 'ritual' as a means of either conserving the status quo or providing transformative platforms for change were particularly interesting and provocative in the essays by R.White (North American Indians), T. Turner (indigenous rights in Brazil), O. Yanitsky (Russian environmental movements), and B. Agarwal (women movements in India). Barbara Epstein discusses the dynamics of the environmental justice movement in the United States since the late 1970s, noted particularly for the decision not to form a national organisation but to retain autonomous local groups. One result of this decision has been the distancing of academic support (in contrast, for example, with the antinuclear movement) which Epstein sees as being detrimental to the movement. For me this raised a broader question regarding the nature of academic support and the division between scientific and humanistic traditions made at the outset of this section. Presumably, scientific support, as depicted by the authors,

would merely reinforce the alienation of environmental issues. Rather than seeing science and humanism as dichotomous alternatives, is there not scope for making science more subjective? Can scientists be upfront about their ethical commitments? Indeed, there are many examples of such science being undertaken. There is a risk of caricaturing science as a fixed exercise rooted in positivism.

The very last essay in section 3 by L. Marx does share this concern, and seeks to alleviate the risk of downplaying the potential role of science and technology in serving modernity. Section 3 invites debate on the wider issues of modernism. The papers here are a little more difficult, particularly the first two essays by J.K. Conway and Y. Garb (*Gender, Environment, and Nature: Two Episodes in Feminist Politics*) and A. Struchov (*Environmental Degradation and the Ambiguous Social Role of Science and Technology*).

Personally, I would recommend starting with L. Menand's essay *Modernity and Literary Theory* which, despite the awesome title, provides a good and relatively accessible introduction to modernism and postmodernism with regards to environmental issues. The issues raised here are complex but vital to our understanding of, and appropriate engagement with, environmental discourse. Barring the paper from Struchov, the discourse here is centred very much on North American culture. Given the geopolitical significance and power of the United States (not to mention the Workshop venue) I think the focus is appropriate. Nevertheless, I would have been interested to learn more from a humanistic perspective the role of NSMs from less-developed countries in the South, particularly as they tend to have a much closer association with environmentalism. Are these NSMs expressions of postmodernism, as many postmodernists would have us believe, or possibly, as some development theorists maintain, simply expressions of a lack of access to modernism?

EAFW is an important contribution to environmental education. The humanist tradition provides a linchpin for informing an interdisciplinary approach to environmental problems. Technicians and scientists who acknowledge and are concerned with the restricted focus of their discipline, as well as social scientists in search of a qualitative grounding for their work, should learn much from these essays.

Dr Martin Reynolds (Lecturer in Systems, Centre for Complexity and Change, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. E-mail: [m.d.reynolds@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.d.reynolds@open.ac.uk))