



# Bram Büscher: *The Truth about Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-truth Politics and Platform Capitalism*. University of California Press, Oakland. 2021. ISBN: 978-0-520-37145-3 (Paper), ISBN: 978-0-520-37144-6 (Cloth); ISBN: 978-0-520-97615-3 (epub); xiv + 230 Pages, Index

Michael Kleinod<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 15 February 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

This article reviews Bram Büscher's book *The Truth about Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-truth Politics and Platform Capitalism* (2021).

**Keywords** Africa · Conservation · Distinction · New social media · Web 2.0 · Political ecology · Post-truth

In the post-truth web 2.0 era, the truth about nature becomes a battleground regarding climate change and biodiversity loss mitigated through conservation efforts. Bram Büscher's new book, *The Truth about Nature*, provides a balanced, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded account of the contradictions in saving nature on social media (web 2.0 environment). The book's overarching argument is that "*Sharing truths about nature through online new media to counter post-truth has the unintended effect of reinforcing the structural dynamics responsible for the environmental crisis*" (p. 6; all italics in citations in original). Büscher takes the reader on a journey from theoretical elaborations on the relation of post-truth, platform capitalism, and the place of nature conservation into various intricate empirical investigations related to conservation initiatives in Africa, Büscher's fieldwork home turf.

The book starts with "(meta)theoretical bearings" regarding the nexus of nature, truth, and platform capitalism, establishing "a metaphysics of truth tensions" (p. 13) as the main conceptual frame. Büscher wisely refrains from dealing with the problem of truth as such. He is interested in rendering this concept productive for understanding environmental

politics in the post-truth era – "*a political ecology of truth*" situated in the "uncomfortable space between solid rock and shifting sands," that is, between the truth of nature as objective, autonomous, and as subjective and socially constructed (p. 16–18). Büscher argues that platform capitalism "hollows out truth" by degrading it to "the incessant flow, capture, and commodification of data. Platform capitalism is the embodiment of post-truth" (p. 31). Subsequent chapters elaborate on the political-economic structures actors grapple with in their everyday practice.

In Chap. 2, the author probes how web 2.0 media affect the relationship between truth and nature and how this relates to political economy. He thus elaborates on "natural capital" as a truth regime to "speak nature to power." He further focuses on tensions in the mediation of nature between truthful representation and intensified spectacularization. The focus is on narrative in competitive nature mediations, culminating in the "digital natureglut" of "overabundant natures on the internet" and "the endless possibilities for cocreating further natures" (p. 48) in fragmented niches of audiences.

In Chap. 3, Büscher expands further along those lines, taking the reader from more general considerations towards empirical investigation, explaining the issues of data, algorithms, and platforms against the backdrop of Igoe's notion of nature spectacle (Igoe, 2010, 2017) and of "algorithmic governmentality" as mediating social, ecological, and self-relations. Here, Büscher introduces the notion of

---

✉ Michael Kleinod  
mkleinod@uni-koeln.de

<sup>1</sup> Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany

“conservation 2.0,” which runs like a red thread through subsequent Chaps. (4–7), which dive into the empirics of it all – where actual actors are never entirely determined by the structures laid out, but also creatively and consciously navigate structural contradictions and affordances. Most notable is the intriguing case of the discontent between online and offline discussions concerning an elephant corridor in the monumental KAZA Transfrontier Conservation Area (Chap. 5), where Büscher concludes eloquently that,

The elephant 2.0 is a liquid elephant, one that morphs into a ‘mother with HIV’ or a ‘child slave’ depending on a combination of the tastes of the ‘generic you’s,’ the workings of online algorithms, and the marketing capabilities of those behind online projects [...] an increasingly accidental nature. (p. 120–21)

The examination of Kruger National Park as a classic conservation fortress for “post-mastery whiteness” in South Africa is fascinating (Chaps. 6 and 7). It demonstrates how the sharing of nature online can reinforce fault lines along race or class that underlie parks and how such distinction is intimately and often ambivalently related to fortress conservation and green militarization. A complex case for this is the “politics of hysteria” around rhino poaching as a way of taking control through heroization and violence within an oversimplified good/bad discourse that connects issues of race, nature, and capital (Chap. 7). In these chapters, Büscher shows that new media opens peculiar ways for sociostructural distinction and encourages more extreme and exaggerated behavior just as it stimulates intensified nature spectacle. The conclusion drives towards practice discussing questions of “speaking truth to power” in the context of platform conservation and truth tensions. A central practical task in this endeavour, Büscher argues, is the “compressing” of (Arendtian) understanding into “commonsense kernels that challenge hegemony” and, finally, the building of “meaning-rich post-capitalist platforms [...] that allow for understanding and the emergence of alternative truths to become common sense” (p. 179). In this vein, algorithms should serve “post-capitalist ends” rather than capital accumulation.

This book is another example of Büscher’s political-ecological trailblazing project. Büscher is the innovative and original scholar at the forefront of recent developments, brim-full of new ideas and bold arguments, utterly inspiring, and with an accessible style of conveying complex, bulky issues. I have always regarded Büscher’s contributions as works that seek to break new ground regarding topics and their critical-theoretical conceptualization. However, trailblazing almost necessarily comes with the conundrum that it is always “only” a start, potentially raising more questions

than can be answered. Although not necessarily bad, it tends to be unsatisfying.

Similarly, as much as sweeping arguments are appreciated, there is a tendency to claim more than can be convincingly and consistently shown. Another book reviewer commented that “different theorists appear within their respective sections, yet the reader misses a direct contrast of their, at times fundamental, differences” (Gort, 2021, p. 17). Thus, theory-inclined readers may see a lack of conceptual consistency, which is undoubtedly true for the treatment of Bourdieu’s praxeology, on which Chap. 6 relies. Praxeology is still a rare species in political ecology, while utterly important to understanding inequality as a central concern for this field of investigation. Thus, why does it not become more central to the argument, especially as practice is generally stressed?<sup>1</sup>

Put differently, *Truth* is paradigmatic for the methodological pluralism of political ecology (Bridge et al., 2015), which often comes with a tendency towards conceptual eclecticism. Such a tendency leaves me unsure whether the book succeeds in demonstrating its basic and formally sound argument that by relying on platform capitalism, environmental organizations and campaigns tend to undermine their goals of saving nature. Be that as it may, given that groundbreaking work like this necessarily raises more questions than it answers, there are naturally various issues worth discussing further, which are beyond the scope of this review.

The bottom line is: in times when some emphatically embrace the abstract dualism that brought us into crisis (e.g., Malm, 2018), while others take off in the opposite direction, into an equally abstract “pluriverse” (e.g., Escobar, 2018) – *Truth* reads like a remedy thanks to its political-ecological outlook, with its feet on the empirical ground, its heart in the practical world, and its head in the conceptual sky; it stands contradictions and *does* what others only write *about* - dialectics. *Truth* is a prime example of topical, generative, cutting-edge contemporary political ecology. It might well be read in conjunction with *The Conservation Revolution* (Büscher & Fletcher, 2020), co-authored by Rob Fletcher, to arrive at a comprehensive picture of neoliberal conservation in escalating ecological crisis tendencies. Thanks to Büscher’s versatility and clear language, the book is commendable to students of political ecology, sociology, online

<sup>1</sup> From a sociological perspective, Foucault’s concept of power, on which the argument draws, is a prime example of Max Weber’s early insight that the notion of power is “sociologically amorphous” (Weber, 1978, p. 5), and its relation to that of truth therefore equally analytically blurry. For example, truth is conceptualized by Büscher “*simultaneously as an expression of power and as more-than-power*” (p. 5); yet, what exactly this “more-than” consists in remains quite opaque. Praxeology, in turn, would bring to this a “sociological concept of domination” that is “more precise” (Weber, 1978, p. 5).

cultures, social theory scholars, conservation practitioners, and other interested non-academics.

**Author Contributions** Michael Kleinod wrote the manuscript text.

**Funding** No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Data Availability** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Not applicable.

**Competing Interests** The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Bridge, G., McCarthy, J., Perreault, T.A. (2015): Editors' introduction. In T.A. Perreault, G. Bridge, & J. McCarthy (Eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* (pp. 3–18). Routledge.
- Büscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2020). *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene*. Verso Books.
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Gort, J. S. (2021). Book Review: The Truth about Nature: Environmentalism in the Era of Post-truth Politics and Platform Capitalism. *The AAG Review of Books*, 10(1), 16–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2022.1999738>.
- Igoe, J. (2010). The spectacle of nature in the global economy of appearances: anthropological engagements with the spectacular mediations of transnational conservation. *Critique of Anthropology*, 30(4), 375–397. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0308275X10372468>.
- Igoe, J. (2017). *The Nature of the Spectacle: On Images, Money, and Conserving Capitalism*. The University of Arizona Press. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/48462>.
- Malm, A. (2018). *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. Verso Books.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. The University of California Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.