



Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought

John M. Meyer

MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001, 224pp.

ISBN: 0 262 13390 3/0 262 632241 1.

Sustaining Liberal Democracy: Ecological Challenges and Opportunities

John Barry and Marcel Wissenburg (eds.)

Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001, 248pp.

Hardback, ISBN: 0 333 91981 5.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) 2, 247–249. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300067

These two books clearly represent both the increasing sophistication with which debates about the environment and political theory are carried out, and the diversity of possible directions such debates may go. While they may both be part of a broad project involving the interrogation both of claims made by environmentalists about politics and, in a relatively new departure, of main traditions in political thought concerning their potential for ‘greening’, they do this in an enormously different manner. Partly this reflects the fact that one is single authored and the other an edited collection, partly it reflects enduring differences in the assumptions about what such a project involved between North America and Europe, but nevertheless the contrast is striking.

Meyer’s book is an attempt to revisit the key themes and key thinkers in Western political theory, focusing on the way such traditions and thinkers construct a relationship between ‘nature’ and ‘politics’. His principal aim is to show that the arguments made by a range of environmentalists about the antiecological character of the main traditions of Western thought are misdirected. Claims are commonly made that Western thought either attempts to construct a sharp dualism between nature and politics, or that it attempts to derive justification for political arguments from a particular view of nature (both versions of which set the scene for and legitimize ecological destruction). He focuses mainly on Hobbes and Aristotle as exemplars of Western political theory who have particularly clearly articulated, but very different accounts of, the nature–politics relationship, to show that they have neither the dualist nor the derivative account of such a relationship commonly attributed to them.

This attempt to complicate relatively simplistic arguments about Western political theory is admirable in intent, and the way it is executed in the book’s two most substantial chapters, on Hobbes and Aristotle, respectively, is extremely well-organized and persuasively argued. He suggests that both authors, and by extension Western thought more generally, have accounts of



the nature–politics relationship that are constitutive (nature constitutes part of the ground on which political institutions and practices depend) and dialectic (nature and politics mutually produce each other).

Meyer also, however, attempts to connect this to practical debates about environmentalist politics. His aim is to show that if Western thought is not so clearly antiecological than many environmental commentators claim, then a wholesale rejection of this set of traditions and construction of an alternative ecological worldview is not necessary for the advancement of environmentalist politics. It is also to show that in practical debates, an account of the nature–politics relationship, as he develops in the chapters on Hobbes and Aristotle, can help the substantive claims environmentalists make. This last connection was for me the least well developed in the book. There were two weaknesses here. One was that the ‘nature’ in Hobbes and Aristotle and the ‘nature’ in contemporary environmentalist articulations are so different that I am not convinced that the translation involved in the argument works. The other was that the switch to an emphasis on place (in Chapter 6) could have been much more persuasively developed. The argument seems to be that a political conception of nature helps us to arrive at an orientation to environmental politics where the world immediately around us in the places we live, work, etc, is immediately constituted by both nature and politics in ways we can access for political arguments. However, the chapter was not well enough developed to really provide the basis for the claims in the final chapter that this way of thinking helps the strategies of the range of environmental movements he discusses there.

Barry & Wissenburg’s book is similarly an attempt to reclaim much-maligned elements in Western political traditions for environmentalist politics. They aim to show through the various chapters that liberalism has significantly more intellectual and political resources to adapt to the claims made by environmentalists than such activists, commentators, and scholars usually give it credit for. The chapters cover a range of aspects of both liberal thought and environmentalist themes and provide between them a comprehensive overview of the debates here. They cover the ways that liberal debates about social justice, democracy, property rights, rights *vs* duties, and constitutionalism, might be used in environmental contexts. At the same time, they discuss which bits of liberalism environmentalists may be able to engage more constructively with — liberal philosophy rather than free market liberal political economy, liberals with more of an emphasis on duties and responsibility rather than those simply focusing on rights and freedoms, for example. The book is thus admirable in its scope and will be very useful for teaching purposes.

As is common with an edited collection, the quality of the contributions varies. I had particular favourites (the chapters by Barry, de Geus, Achterberg and Mills I thought were particularly good) and others may have their own. In



general, I felt this would have been much better as a book with say eight much longer chapters than 13 pretty brief ones — at various times I felt frustrated that a chapter was unable to have its arguments developed fully. This is part of its legacy as an ECPR session, where inclusiveness won over ruthlessness perhaps.

One of this book's strengths, for me at least, and a strength it shares with the book by Meyer, is that throughout, there is an attempt to connect theoretical debates about how to interpret a particular thinker or principle to practical debates about environmentalism, sustainability, and politics. The importance of rescuing liberalism from its free market variant, of showing for example (as Mills does) that liberalism can talk sensibly about duties and doesn't need to be wedded to a hyper-individualist, rights oriented framework, was clear and its implications in a range of policy areas as well as in relation to general environmental strategies (ecological modernization, for example) could be clearly seen in the book.

Matthew Paterson,
School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment,
Keele University.