

February 2018

After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene

Ann Vitous
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea>

 Part of the [Physical and Environmental Geography Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vitous, Ann. "After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2017): 70-75.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol19/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Ecological Anthropology by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene

JEDEDIAH PURDY

REVIEWED BY C. ANN VITOUS

Although originally introduced in the 19th century, the debates surrounding the Anthropocene only began gaining traction within the past few years. Whether debating when *homo sapiens* first began transforming land, or whether or not the evidence even exists, scholars from a wide range of disciplines are now involved in the politics surrounding the Age of Humans (Monastersky 2015).

In *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy joins the conversation on the complex relationship between humans and their environments, only rather than focusing on the scientific data, he addresses what he describes as the politics that don't yet exist. By evaluating the political history of the American landscape, Purdy discusses how to approach the topics of environmental politics, economics, and ethics in an era when human and environmental futures are inextricably linked. Stating that human beings are the geological force shaping the earth, Purdy stresses the need for a new form of democracy that is "open to post-human encounters with the living world [that] would be more likely to find ways to restrain its demands and stop short of exhausting the planet" (288). The failure to move towards a stronger democracy, Purdy proposes, will have the effect of creating a world that is increasingly unequal and inhumane.

Purdy begins by looking at how Americans have historically shaped and maintained technological

control over their landscapes. This framework provides the reader with a roadmap to how various "environmental imaginaries" came into fruition as well as how they have shaped the laws and policies surrounding issues like global warming and climate change in the United States. These imaginaries are not only pertinent in reflecting on how environmental perceptions have been shaped but also the need for humans to begin living and planning for the future of the world in which they created.

Four imaginaries are presented by Purdy and are found to overlap in both space and time: providential, romantic, utilitarian, and ecological. The author provides a summation of how each of these imaginaries creates a way for people to view their landscapes; highlighting that nature has historically been viewed as a resource that is meant to be developed and settled. This perspective has been used to justify everything from settling the American frontier, to the expatriation of Native Americans, to deciding on policies of land distribution and ownership. All four imaginaries perpetuate a level of environmental racism and demonstrate the power struggle between the right to exploit the natural world for comfort versus protecting it.

In the first two chapters of the book, Purdy describes the providential vision of early colonists who saw nature as an obstacle for development. Quoting figures like John Winthrop and John Evelyn, the imaginary of this early era is described as one in which "nature expressed God's wishes and judgments" (53). The environment is viewed as being a land of "unequal terrain, one whose harmonies were designed to teach lessons in hierarchy and obedience:" a belief that allowed for the inhumane treatment of humans to be justified (57). During this early period, land that was not turned to property was considered a waste. This belief was reified by figures like John Locke who were responsible for early federal statutes, such as the Homestead Act, where people were awarded land ownership through the process of destructive practices, such as the clear-cutting of land.

Purdy then introduces the reader to the romantic vision that is based on the aesthetic and spiritual aspects that nature offers to humans. Unlike the providential imaginary, this vision provides a space for “religious contemplation and a sense of wonder” (108). In chapters three and four, the author describes how the romantic imaginary is used a way of forming civic identity, with things like art assisting in forming a “collective self creation” (115). This cognitive perspective is explained as not only promoting a greater harmony between people and their environments, but also in establishing a product that is “easy to package as a consumer experience” (122). Beginning in the 1870s, organizations like the Sierra Club were established, constructing wilderness laws that touted the need to keep parts of the natural world wild. Like the providential imaginary, the romantic vision provides a promise of being able to start over. Only rather than being based on development, this utopian imaginary is based on the idea of reconnecting with nature rather than chasing the luxuries that development offers.

The late 19th century marks the beginning of the Manifest Destiny era, introducing the beginnings of what we now know as environmentalism. During this period, figures like Teddy Roosevelt viewed the natural world as no longer needing to be conquered but to be remade. Believing that this process needs to be managed by experts, bureaucratic leaders created policies that allowed the elite to run national forests and shape various infrastructure projects, such as irrigation systems. The belief in the need for strong national government extended into areas outside of environmental politics; including the oversight of labor and antitrust laws. The belief was that making nature better would innately make people better, essentially viewing humans and the natural world as products that could be improved and profited by. Proponents of Roosevelt saw these conservation efforts as being naturally connected to eugenics: carrying over the earlier beliefs that the environment was innately an unequal terrain and justifying the acts of environmental racism that remains prevalent today.

The ecological imagination grew out of the ideas laid out by Roosevelt and his colleagues and is based on the idea that the world is composed of complex and interconnected systems and “wilderness” is the key to a new consciousness. Defined in chapter six as being “roadless, free of built structures, and minimally shaper by human activity,” this idea of wilderness maintains the romantic vision of solitude as being valuable to the human spirit (189). Organizations like the Wilderness Society, however, knew that this emotional and spiritual connection to the land would not be enough to defend it and instead argued for the utilitarian benefits that beauty and recreation yielded and therefore should be managed like other valuable resources (190). This movement is successful in creating a set of laws that are aimed at unifying the human relationship to nature but ultimately fail due to their unreachable goals of restoring “natural order.” Despite the failure of this set of laws, however, it does introduce the idea of environmental economics that promotes the need of innovation to control destruction.

After presenting an intellectual history on the connections between the environment, politics, and economics, Purdy uses the final two chapters to transition into what all of this means; arguing for a “post-human” form of democracy that corrects where past democracies have failed. The author introduces three main opportunities to move towards this change: food, the treatment of animals, and climate change. Purdy calls for the need for responsible labor in agriculture, citing the food movement as a current process that is preserving rather than exhausting environmental resources. Purdy also asserts the need to have transparency in the ways that animals are treated. This transparency would create public access rights granting consumers the right to know the source of their food. Finally, Purdy focuses on the need to change the ways that conversations regarding climate change and global warming are transpiring. The author argues that the concept of climate change is too far removed from individual worlds and needs to be reframed in a way that both shows local impacts and promotes solidarity. These opportunities

could promote a new type of imagination, creating a form of “natural capital” that brings nature to the forefront of political economy. Purdy argues that this change in focus could assist in developing a consciousness that promotes responsibility, where people receive the full benefits of labor and are personally vested in both the cost and paybacks of what they produce.

After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene is a well-written and intelligent book that seeks to reframe how Americans imagine and therefore interact with their environment in the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. It provides an informative and provocative look at how the United States has gotten where it is and where it could be headed. Like other current research on this topic, Purdy focuses on how economic capital is and always has been the driving force behind the management of landscapes (Malm 2015; Klein 2015).

This book delivers valuable insight into how various imaginaries have shaped our political and cultural landscape and opens new ways of engaging in dialogue. Rather than evaluating the scientific facts of the proposed new geological epoch, Purdy focuses on the meanings behind these facts and calls for stronger democratic politics that can confront our changing landscape. Purdy proposes that the failure to adopt a new form of democracy will only worsen the inequalities that we have created throughout history. Humans have control over their environment and with this control comes responsibility.

Despite its strengths, however, *After Nature* is not without its weaknesses. Purdy dedicates a significant portion of the book to intricately weave together the historical processes that are responsible for the current environmental crisis. His concluding chapters, however, fail to deliver the level of political engagement that is so actively engaged with throughout the rest of the book. The opportunities presented in the concluding chapters are disappointingly abstract and lack any concrete suggestions for how to implement the

opportunities he presents. Other scholars focused on the Anthropocene, such as Laura Ogden and Paul Robbins, suggest that there is a crisis in the responsibility of stewardship and needs to be fundamentally rethought. These scholars view grassroots organizations as key to resilience and political resistance, asserting that “earth stewardship requires a willingness to recognize the politics of the Anthropocene and the socioecological consequences of such politics” (Ogden et al 346).

The book is also too American in its focus, failing to include any of the complexities that are involved in the interconnectedness between the United States and the rest of the world. The failure to demonstrate how the United States fits into the global world reduces the current crisis into a local one, where the United States exists in isolation from the rest of the globe. As Ogden and Robbins point out, addressing the Anthropocene requires “considering the complex ways that global connections, and sometimes research, contribute to political, economic, environmental, and social inequalities” (Ogden et al. 346).

Finally, although there is a strong focus on the environmental racism of the past, Purdy fails to adequately address how a stronger democracy would correct the problems of stark social differentiation, particularly at a global level, a common concern for researchers studying the potential dangers of adopting the Anthropocene as our new geological epoch (Moore 2007).

REFERENCES CITED

- KLEIN, N.
2015 In the eye of the anthropocene. *The Contemporary Condition*. Retrieved from <http://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2015/03/naomi-klein-in-eye-of-anthropocene.html>.

MALM, A.

- 2015 The anthropocene myth: blaming all humanity for climate change lets capitalism off the hook. *Jacobin Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>.

MONASTERSKY, R.

- 2015 The Human Age. *Nature* 519 (7542): 144–47. <https://doi.org/10.1038/519144a>

MOORE, G.

- 2007 *Living with the Earth: Concepts in Environmental Health Science*. Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

OGDEN, L, HEYNEN, N., OSLENDER, U., WEST, P., KASSAM, K.A., AND ROBBINS, P.

- 2013 Global assemblages, resilience, and earth stewardship in the anthropocene. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 11(7):341-47. <https://doi.org/10.1890/120327>