Sinking to the Bottom and Coming Back up Again

An Encounter with:

Andrew Biro, editor. *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School
and Contemporary Environmental Crises.*

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On April 20, 2010, a blow-out in BP's Macondo oil well 5000 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico destroyed the off-shore oil rig Deepwater Horizon and killed 11 rig workers. Two days after the explosion the rig—rented to BP for upwards of a million dollars a day by the corporation Transocean—collapsed into the gulf. The well, whose oil reservoir was an unbelievable 13,000 feet under the sea floor (nearly 4 km), spewed oil for three months until the well was capped in mid-July. What was remarkable about this disaster was its unprecedented mediation. Mother Nature may have been fighting back, as one oil worker claimed, but Mother Nature did not put a camera 5000 feet below the surface at the bottom of the ocean, providing live feed of the gush. Although these **images** galvanized both public and BP response (the non-stop feed on the net and the footage was broadcast widely on mainstream television networks like CNN), once the well was sealed and the camera went black the damage did not stop. As BP itself claimed, 20 percent of the oil, some 650 million litres, was unaccounted for. Writing in response to the disaster, Peter Galison and Caroline Jones suggest that we move our focus away from the images of the disaster, and “take what’s out of sight, and keep it well in mind” (Galison and Jones, “Unknown Quantities”). I want to take their conclusion as a guiding frame for this

review: How to keep what is out of sight in mind? Nature is much more than what we can see, and this encounter with *Critical Ecologies* seeks to explicate several tensions in the conceptualization of nature: between the visible and the invisible, the human and the non-human, the calculable and the incalculable, and the rational and the irrational.

These tensions are central to the paradoxes of contemporary ecological crises that Andrew Biro sets out in his Introduction to *Critical Ecologies*. The first paradox is that the more power humans have over nature, the more vulnerable they are becoming to ecological catastrophes—and the more vulnerable humans become, the more science asserts mankind’s responsibility for fixing the problem. This difficulty is compounded by the second paradox: although the technology for meeting basic human needs is present, inequality has reached an “unprecedented level” (Biro 5). The third paradox addresses the environmental movement itself, which Biro argues has not been able to mobilize collective political responses to the growing body of knowledge on widespread climate change. To counter this inaction, environmentalists must address both the need for “immediate action” and “far deeper attitudinal changes” towards nature (Biro 8). It is with this third paradox that the authors in this anthology make an important contribution to understanding nature not just as a physical thing that needs protection, but as a concept that itself needs to be sustainable if humans are to tackle the current environmental crises. The authors here bring to the surface those “out of sight” understandings of nature.

The sections of the book make up a “loose narrative framework” that map onto these paradoxes (Biro 9). Part One, on “Science and the Mastery of Nature,” revisits the Frankfurt School’s domination of nature thesis in the context of contemporary scientific discourses and practices. In an effort to address the third paradox above, the essays in Part Two, “Critical Theory, Life, and Nature,” turn to and offer a critique of the philosophies of deep ecology. Part

Three, “Alienation and the Aesthetic,” builds upon work that has brought together Cultural Studies with the Frankfurt School, in an effort to bridge divides between nature, culture, and technology. Finally, Part Four, on “Critical Theory’s Moment,” argues most explicitly for the continuing relevance of the Frankfurt School by considering it in light of contemporary theory. It is the very inter-disciplinary nature of the text—particularly in these last two sections—that makes it relevant not just for political theory, but also for work in Science and Technology Studies and Environmental Cultural Studies, two areas which have in large part steered clear of Frankfurt School critical theory. For researchers interested in the connections between the Frankfurt School and environmentalism, this is a key text, as it brings together many authors who have previously published works on both the Frankfurt School and its connection with nature and ecology. The essays also provide excellent overviews of many of the complicated ideas and concepts of the Frankfurt School, which makes it suitable for readers who do not have a background with this school and its thinkers.

By way of entering into the arguments of this anthology I want to begin with Steven Vogel’s contention, in his essay “On Nature and Alienation” (from Part Three), that Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment ends in a *cul-de-sac* (Biro 200). This reiterates the argument he makes in his 1996 book *Against Nature*. I have turned to this argument as a starting point because Biro’s anthology is trying to offer a way out of the paradoxes of environmental crises through the Frankfurt School, whereas Vogel argues that following Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment will only lead to further paradoxes and contradictions for environmentalists. Vogel’s work also merits attention as it surfaces in a number of essays in this volume (e.g., in essays by Biro, Leiss, Farrell, Gunster, and Short).

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the relentless pursuit of the Enlightenment goal of

autonomy turns against itself as modern subjects, motivated by a desire for complete control of outer nature, forget the nature within themselves. Desire for control stems from the fear of that which is unknown, that which cannot be identified and named: “nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is the real source of fear” (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). The more humans try to control external nature, the more they unwittingly dominate their inner nature, and, as Vogel puts it in *Against Nature*, “by the end of the dialectic the subject has entirely ... dissolved into the very nature over which enlightenment had promised it control” (57).

Vogel takes issue with the idea that humans can somehow be alienated from something called “nature.” In this sense, he argues that Adorno and Horkheimer’s thinking is also marked by a “palpable nostalgia” for an idea of nature that precedes practice, and which “their materialism assures them is there but which their epistemology guarantees is unattainable” (Biro 200). Here, Vogel is referring to Adorno’s understanding of non-identity. The non-identity of *Negative Dialectics* says that “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (Adorno 5). Adorno offers a “disenchantment of the concept” by focusing on the “nonconceptuality” of the concept (Adorno 13). But claiming nature exists, counters Vogel, and then arguing that something of it can never be known, Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument cannot provide a critical theory of nature. In other words, to recognize the paradoxes of the dialectic of enlightenment, that it is irony all the way down, is not going to get the world’s countries closer to a global climate deal.

Vogel’s thesis in this anthology is that humans are not alienated from some unknowable nature or pre-human environment, but from a “built environment” that “has always already been affected by human action” (Biro 202). Humans must acknowledge their collective responsibility for an environment of their own making, suggesting that what needs to be mastered is not nature,

but human *relations* with nature. Many of the authors make this argument by drawing on Walter Benjamin's claim in "One-Way Street" that "technology is the mastery of not nature but of the relation between nature and man" (487). The challenge then for the authors of this anthology is to bring to the surface an understanding of nature that can take into account the positions I have set out here. The question of mastery is taken up in the anthology's opening section on "Science and the Mastery of Nature." William Leiss, in his essay "Modern Science, Enlightenment, and the Domination of Nature: No Exit?" writes that Benjamin's claim "remains as true today as ... in 1928" (Biro 33). Echoing Vogel's critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic, Leiss argues that domination of nature is not in and of itself a bad thing; the problem is the incessant development of new technologies without any corresponding social change, leading to an imbalance between what Leiss calls "inventive science" and "transformative science." Although inventive science provides humans with the basic needs for survival, a transformative science controls society's irrational impulses by universally applying the standards of rational scientific thought to all human endeavours (Biro 33-34). Reiterating the need for rational social and ecological relations, Leiss calls for a utopian vision of a society that reconciles the tension between these two sciences (Biro 34). Although the turn to utopia is interesting here, as many other authors in the anthology do the same, my contention is that Vogel and Leiss attribute too much power to human society, and not enough power to the non-human and to a more radical understanding of the idea of nature.

Christoph Görg, in his essay on "Societal Relationships with Nature," also argues that the domination of nature is to some degree necessary for human life to continue, but he also attempts to offer a nuanced understanding of Benjamin's "mastery" that accounts for the non-identity of nature. In typical dialectical fashion, domination (*Herrschaft*) and mastery (*Beherrschung*) have

negative and positive connotations depending on the context in which they are used. Benjamin, for example, seems to use mastery in its positive sense, as do many of the authors here. The domination of nature implies a neglect of nature's non-identity insofar as "nature has its own meaning" (Biro 49). Görg's approach, though, is not to draw out the aesthetic side of the non-identity of nature, as other authors do in subsequent sections, but to deploy it as a critique of the domination of nature. It is not that the non-identity of nature is some primordial pre-social, and hence unknowable nature, but it is a critique of the cultural and scientific ways that nature is constructed (Biro 51). Nature does exist for itself and to think otherwise simply promotes the illusion of human autonomy. At the same time, nature can only be experienced in some mediated way. The separation *and* "constitutive interconnection" between nature and society can pave the way for a "utopian reconciliation between nature and society" (Biro 50).

Katharine Farrell's essay "The Politics of Science: Has Marcuse's New Science Finally Come of Age?" also engages with the need to master technology, and specifically science: what humans do not need is more mastery of nature—that project has been wholly achieved—but "liberation from a set of human-generated technological and social systems" that only perpetuate and deepen the domination of nature (Biro 74). Farrell returns to Marcuse's call in *One-Dimensional Man* for a "new science" that would reintroduce critique "into a world dominated by one-dimensional technological rationality" (Biro 75). Farrell turns to postnormal science as a way of answering Marcuse's call and as a way of speaking to the fundamental political content of questions of ecological sustainability, the definition of which cannot be left to science alone. In the postnormal science discourse, "the lines between science and politics and between facts and values have become blurred" (Biro 83). Farrell rightly argues that the kind of science that leads to environmental damage cannot be the same science that seeks to fix the problem.

The two essays in Part Two, “Critical Theory, Life, and Nature,” address and critique deep ecology philosophies and practices, arguing that conceptualizations of nature are not about mastery or control, but about the complex relation between inner nature and external nature. In his essay “Sacred Identity and the Sacrificial Spirit,” D. Bruce Martin argues that “reconciliation with nature through a non-dominating mimesis of the Other in nature, or mimetic identification, will allow us to abandon the logic of sacrifice that results in ... self-domination” (Biro 112). For Martin, remembrance of nature is not about a return to an “original, immediate relation to nature,” as deep ecology expresses it, but a “nature that has yet to exist,” that brings to light the past suffering of a repressed internal nature (Biro 122; 123). The obverse of this is repressed mimesis: inner nature is not attributed to the subject but to the object. The repressed mimetic impulse is acted out upon the object, often in violent ways. Subjective reason can only dominate external nature “by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn” (Adorno and Horkheimer, quoted in Biro 116).

Colin Campbell’s essay raises one of the most complex paradoxical questions of this anthology: How can separation of humans from their environment deepen the feeling of dependency on that environment? Vogel’s answer is through a realization that the environment, if not nature, is a human creation. Campbell provides a more complex answer through his reading of German philosopher Hans Jonas’ philosophy of the “unity of life,” of which he attempts a Marcusean imminent critique “to draw out repressed inner potentials” in Jonas’ panvitalism (Biro 143). Jonas’ philosophy sees no line of separation between subject and object: “the sense of life within me is relatively extended, relatively continuous with the entire universe” (Biro 144). The problem is that the dialectical counterpart to Jonas’ panvitalism is an aggressive desire for separation rooted in fear and guilt. Campbell turns to Marcuse’s understanding of the dialectical

relationship between Eros and Thanatos, life and death, as a corrective. To change the balance away from Thanatos (toil, fear, guilt) and in favour of Eros (play, pleasure, and an absence of surplus repression), is not just to live a greener life or to subscribe to deep ecological philosophies, but rather to offer a fundamental critique of the inequalities of capitalism and to address the “social, material and cultural conditions that produce fear” (Biro 216-7).

In Part Three of Biro’s anthology, “Alienation and the Aesthetic,” we find the questions raised by Vogel again coming to the fore. Donald Burke, who takes the antithesis to Vogel’s position, writes that there *is* an exit from the dialectic of enlightenment and it is to be located in the “non-dominating nature of aesthetic rationality” (Biro 166). In an inversion of the usual invocations of the end of nature, he argues that a concept or idea of nature free from domination has yet to be born. Burke finds this in Adorno’s concept of the cultural landscape. Burke points out, first, that the bringing together of landscape and culture is contingent upon the “abolition of scarcity” (Biro 180). A landscape that is “etched by the real suffering of the past” also hints at a “utopian image” that would bring about a “reconciliation of culture and nature” (Biro 181). The examples from Adorno which Burke cites seems banal in comparison to these claims—houses built from local materials or buildings incorporated into the landscape alone are hardly the stuff of utopia—lending credence to Vogel’s critique that Adorno’s non-identity of nature cannot offer an adequate response to ecological crises.

In his essay “Fear and the Unknown: Nature, Culture, and the Limits of Reason,” Shane Gunster agrees with Vogel’s critique of Adorno, but he also reminds us that we should neither reduce Adorno’s interpretation of nature to simply the non-identity of *Negative Dialectics*, nor should we align it with “the fear of the unknown” that is the driving force behind the dialectic of enlightenment. Gunster argues that a sublime view of nature’s otherness, an unknowable part of

nature that humans should respect and be in awe of rather than fear and thus try to control, reinforces “experiences of helplessness and disempowerment” common under capitalism (Biro 211). The need for immediate action on the ecological front means that limiting reason in favour of a humbleness in the face of the ecological sublime is “spectacularly irresponsible” (Biro 212). Gunster seeks to rescue the dialectical character of Adorno’s thought by suggesting that humans can *both* be sublimely enthralled by nature *or* ruthlessly rational in their deconstruction of it, depending on the context. Gunster concludes his essay by suggesting that sustainable and ethical limits can only be set once we use communication technologies “to understand, experience, and *master the enormous power that we collectively possess but do not yet control* to shape and construct our social as well as our natural environment” (Biro 224, emphasis mine).

I would argue that Gunster does not do enough to connect his critique of sublimity with the question of mastery and control. During the BP oil disaster, the webcam *was* the public’s experience of nature—a sublime experience. Yet at the same time, the sublime is not only about nature. As Allan Stoekl recently argued, there is a sublime to the incalculability of the external costs of environmental crises like the BP oil disaster—how do we even go about calculating the costs of the 650 million litres of renegade oil or of even everyday activities like driving a car?¹ To think that humans can *fully* understand, imagine, or even calculate the costs of this crisis—eliminating the unknown—displays a blind faith in calculating reason, and negates the possibility that an ecological sublime could be an anti-capitalist position as well.

Biro’s own essay, which concludes the section on “Alienation and the Aesthetic,” provides a good counterpart to Burke’s essay because it speaks to the very difficulty of realizing a space both socially and psychically free from domination, and where “mediation—necessarily including critical reflection on the world as it exists—can take place” (Biro 238). Although

humans now have both the knowledge and the power to end the domination of nature, enlightenment “is turning itself into an outright deception of the masses” (Adorno and Horkheimer 34). What do you get when the Culture Industry, as mass deception, meets the problems of environmental sustainability? The spectacle of climate porn! The pessimistic discourse of climate porn “presents the obscene possibilities of catastrophic climate change as little more than a spectacle to be passively consumed” (Biro 242). The more perversely catastrophic the film, the more anaemic a response it provokes. The BP webcam presents an interesting case here. Not a film with a narrative, it certainly qualifies as a kind of pornography of the visual, something like a three-month long ejaculation. But as Galison and Jones note, its being made public was a political success and it prompted BP to revise its very conservative claims on the amount of oil gushing from the well.² Echoing Vogel, Biro writes that spectators need to see the images from these films or videos as their “own creation” (Biro 238). He concludes that other ways of imagining nature must replace the “act of seeing” (Biro 245). The problem with Biro’s conclusion—that we need a “sustainable and humane society ... [which] will require environmental communication that is geared toward the expression and realization of self-consciously humane values” (Biro 246)—is that it is so vague as to be ineffectual.

The authors in Part Four, “Critical Theory’s Moment,” argue for the continuing relevance of Frankfurt School critical theory by rubbing it both with and against the grain of contemporary theory. Like Gunster, Jonathan Short takes up the question of fear in his essay “Natural History, Sovereign Power, and Global Warming.” Short brings together the work of Adorno and Horkheimer with that of Giorgio Agamben. The overcoming of the fear of the unknown is central to Adorno’s identity thinking and Agamben’s sovereign power, which Short sees as the manifestation and culmination of human reason born out of the fear of the unknown and the

compulsion to exclude the outside as such and make everything the same. To move beyond the idea that nature is somehow outside of humans, “occidental reason” should dissolve its own claims to power and domination through the “opening and exposure to that which is not like the self” (Biro 263).

But does dissolving these claims to power also mean dissolving the political subject’s claim to autonomy? This is a key question in Timothy Luke’s essay “Towards a Critique of Post-Human Reason.” In Luke’s critique, post-humanism serves as an ideology justifying capitalism’s anonymity rather than proposing a direction for its transformation. The post-humanist argument leads to dehumanism, as people are increasingly defined not by individual liberty and rationality, but by “carbon footprints and greenhouse gas emissions” (Biro 313). Post-humanist theory, and here Luke singles out N. Katherine Hayles, does not lament the passing of the autonomous human subject; rather, it celebrates this passing. For Luke, post-humanism fits perfectly well with the faceless dehumanized global corporations of global capitalism. The “chaotic complexities” described elsewhere by Hayles “read like ... another appeasement of the dynamic partnership of networks and people in friction-free capitalism” (Biro 325).

Although I am sympathetic to Luke’s critique of the trumpeters of complexity, he is generally unwilling to let go of the autonomous political subject. If the urgent task of critical theory is, as Adorno and Horkheimer claim, the “redemption of the hopes of the past” (quoted in Biro 17), and if these hopes are the enlightenment goals of autonomy and freedom, it is difficult to admit to the subject’s own withering autonomy in the face of increasingly complex nature-culture imbroglios. Luke appears unwilling to accept that the global ecological situation demands that, as Isabelle Stengers writes elsewhere, “humans do not feel themselves as masters of the situation” (Stengers 22). This is a crucial question: How to assert individuality—and more

pertinently, *autonomy*—when it appears that both nature and technologies are increasingly beyond our control? To which I add an even more problematic question: Who is the “we” of control? The frequent invocation in Biro’s anthology of a generalizable “we” is problematic, only because the effects of ecological crises are rarely, if ever, experienced uniformly. Aside from the essays in this section, which explicitly assert the contemporaneity of the Frankfurt School, the anthology as a whole in answering these questions could have further engaged with other contemporary fields, like Science and Technology Studies or Animal Studies, as a way of both building upon and challenging critical theory in this regard. One noticeable absence in this regard is any sustained engagement with a feminist perspective. In the Acknowledgments, Biro notes that Cate Mortimer-Sandilands had a paper in the workshop that lead to this publication, but could not have a chapter here. Her work on feminism, gender, and nature would have been a valuable contribution to the anthology.

Michael Lipscomb’s essay on “Adorno’s Historical and Temporal Consciousness,” presents an interesting response to Luke’s argument, suggesting that the tempos of information capitalism are not necessarily dehumanizing, but are working against the need for slowness and deliberation in thinking. Lipscomb’s essay can be read as simply a plea for slowing down. The very slowness necessary to encounter Adorno’s work forms a basis for a “temporal ethics” of rhythm (Biro 280). His essay is also a response to Luke’s critique of post-humanism since it calls into question the tempo of information capitalism that Luke believes the post-humanists do not critically interrogate. Finally, Lipscomb’s essay speaks to the general tension in the essays between immediate action and deeper attitudinal change. Adorno’s work imbues a “qualitatively richer slowness” that is out-of-step with *both* the calls for action *now* and the sped-up culture of information capitalism (Biro 282).

In the Afterword, Andrew Feenberg looks to phenomenology as a way of building on the importance of lived experiences of nature as an “alternative ontological field” that is not sidelined by science and practical reason (Biro 350). With so much focus on the rational in this anthology, I find it refreshing to imagine this alternative field of experience that could “release the aesthetic imagination from its marginal role under capitalism,” (Biro 350) and take a central place in the reshaping of technology akin to Marcuse’s own project in *One-Dimensional Man*. This speaks to the sub-theme of utopia that runs through the essays in this anthology, and one that Leiss explicitly calls for in his essay.

I find a good example of this kind of experience in the final section of Benjamin’s “One-Way Street.” I want to conclude by re-integrating the quote about mastery into the context of “One-Way Street.” Benjamin begins the concluding section, “To The Planetarium,” by calling to mind the pre-modern cosmological experience: the “ecstatic trance” [*Rausch*]. It is in this experience, writes Benjamin, “that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us” (486). This experience has become marginalized in the world of modern science. The repressive world subjugates sensuousness to reason, such that sensuousness can only assert itself in either ornamental or luxurious, harmless ways (the ecological sublime that Gunster critiques), or in barbaric forms (the violent plundering of the earth’s resources). To return to the BP oil spill: The images coming from the bottom of the ocean were on the level of the ecstatic trance, of what Benjamin calls an “unprecedented commingling with the cosmic powers,” but in the service of the oil industry and the insatiable global demand for oil (486). In this, there was something very sublime: both the images and the actual incalculability of the consequences. What is the proper response, then? To keep what is out of sight *in mind*—that is,

to turn to what is outside of the optical universe of modern vision: the irrational and the ecstatic. Following Benjamin's line of thought, all destruction must come with a corresponding ecstatic creation. But to give birth to something new requires first that humanity puts the brakes on technological progress *for its own sake*, to first "make whole what has been smashed," (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 392) rather than incessantly pushing forward to the ecological catastrophes that await.

Notes

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¹ This comment was made during a lecture at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art in Toronto called "Externalities and Sublimities." This talk took place on April 29, 2011 (see: <http://www.283college.ca/knot/>).

² Galison and Jones also note, quite ironically, that the technology of BP's "spillcam" was much more precise than any of the technologies BP used (or even had planned) to clean up after the disaster.

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