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## REVIEW

Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature*. Durham: Acumen, 2011. 198 pp. 978-1-84465-262-4 paperback, £18.99. Reviewed by Craig Reeves.<sup>1</sup>

Adorno scholarship used to be weighed down with meditations on the culture industry and aesthetics. The relevance of his broader critical theory project was dismissed by Jürgen Habermas as a descendant of Nietzschean irrational scepticism, and this image stuck. Thankfully, over the last decade a number of excellent books have appeared that have helped to retrieve the work of one of the most important social philosophers of the last century, but one of the most important themes in Adorno's work – our relation to nature – has still to be properly explored. For Habermas, Adorno's constant references to nature were misguided and mystical, yet the problem of our relation to nature has, in the imminent global environmental crisis, returned to us with a gravity that makes Adorno's preoccupation with our mutually damaging relation to nature look less eccentric and more prophetic all the time. In this context Deborah Cook's new book on Adorno's philosophy of nature is doubly timely. The central motif is her observation that one of the cardinal and often misunderstood themes of Adorno's thought – humankind's violent and ultimately self-defeating attempt to dominate nature – has also turned out to be, since his death, the source of one of the most pressing global crises we face today. To say that it threatens 'the extinction of all life on this planet' (121) is no doubt a piece of anthropocentric exaggeration (life finds a way, to quote a well-known, albeit fictitious, mathematician), but it certainly threatens to destroy what we call human civilization and to radically alter the non-human natural world as well. Adorno's reflections on the relation of human beings to nature, Cook convincingly shows, both are essential to a proper understanding of the rest of his thought, and offer profound and urgent insights for us as we face down the imminent environmental catastrophe. Why have we unthinkingly caused such damage to the natural world on which we depend? Why is capitalism so impotent to tackle the situation even when its own existence is threatened by it? How might we avert the catastrophe? Cook shows how Adorno's thought offers, if not answers to these questions, at least promising orientations.

Those coming at the book from the perspective of Adorno scholarship, and critical theory more generally, will welcome the major renovation of Adorno interpretation Cook intimates via a re-centring of the dialectic of natural history to his thought as a whole. Through the lens of this dialectic she illuminates the materialist character of Adorno's critique of constitutive subjectivity, his philosophy of history, epistemology, psychology, social theory and ethics. And while the discussion is very scholarly and contributes much to specialist debates on Adorno interpretation, Cook also largely succeeds in making accessible to a wider audience Adorno's reflections on nature. While those with no background in European philosophy will struggle with parts of the text, considering the depth of scholarly insight on offer, it is impressive that the discussion on the whole manages to remain within the purview of a non-specialist readership. The central thrust of the book is an interpretation and elaboration of Adorno's account of the dialectic of nature and history. The author makes the case for re-reading Adorno in a way that appreciates the priority of this motif for his whole critical project, and that in turn sheds light on the environmental problem and our responses to it. The book

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consists of five chapters, the first two of which offer a careful interpretation of the dialectic of nature and history in Adorno's work, and reconstruct his critical theory in light of it. The third reflects on his account of identity thinking – the cognitive form of our problematic relation to nature – and the fourth considers Adorno's social thought, according to which it is the structure of modern societies, rather than anything metaphysical or 'natural' in the sense of fixed or innate, that lies at the root of our difficulties. A fifth chapter considers the relation between Adorno's thought and the ideas of 'radical ecology' – a slightly idiosyncratic excursion to which I will return.

The core of the argument is laid down in the first two chapters, where Cook expounds her account of the nature-history dialectic in Adorno's thought, defends it, and elaborates on some of its implications for his work. While the discussion (as throughout) is quite technical, there is much to be gleaned from it even for non-experts. The key idea is that 'nature and history are indissolubly entwined' (24). Our problematic, damaging relation to nature can be viewed as part of a mistaken separation and opposition of nature and history, where nature signifies something external, mechanistic, fixed or cyclical, and meaningless, while history represents the human domain of immanence, change, rationality and meaning. Yet this has led us to abuse nature and to harm ourselves. This means that both 'nature' and 'history' must be dialectically reconstructed if we are to diagnose and resolve the problems with our relation to nature. On the one hand, nature is in fact also historical: 'the idea of natural history discloses the damage inflicted on natural things and processes owing to their entwinement with history, their subordination to ends extrinsic to them' (18). At the same time, 'it is also the case that "everything historical has to be regarded as nature because, thanks to its own violent origins, it remains under the spell of blind nature"' (18, quoting Adorno, *History and Freedom*). Whilst what we traditionally think of as nature has been dragged into the mediation of history, causing terrible damage, what we usually think of as history distinct from nature has not yet dragged itself out of its own natural 'violent origins'. The historical damage done to nature is a mark of history's own persistent blind naturalness – history remains natural history. This is the point of Adorno's classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, co-authored with Horkheimer, which traces out history's actual subordination to the natural principle of blind self-preservation, a process that still underlies our degradation of ourselves and non-human nature now. Ultimately, according to Cook, 'Adorno hopes to foster a more dialectical relationship between human beings and the enviroing natural world' (23). Clearly Cook shares this aim, and devotes much of the book to elaborating on what it might mean.

Cook takes pains to emphasize the non-reductive and non-dualistic relation between nature and history in Adorno's dialectic. To this end she productively engages with Marxist misreadings of Adorno (Sebastiano Timpanaro, John Foster), showing convincingly how Adorno has typically been misunderstood. Developing the relation between Adorno and Marx very carefully, she draws out Adorno's materialism which in no way subscribes to reducing either nature or history to the other. And her interpretation brings out well the intimate relationship between these ideas and Adorno's critique of idealist epistemology, engaging with Brian O'Connor's work on Adorno's 'preponderance of the object' thesis. Although she agrees with O'Connor that Adorno's materialism is a 'critical materialism', she stresses that the critical aspect of his materialism is located above all in its radical negation of damaged life (32). The idea of natural history, Cook suggests, ties together Adorno's criticism of modern socio-economic conditions, his philosophy of history, and his critique of idealism. At the root of his reflections on these issues lies an account of how human beings' relation to nature has

gone very wrong: we have taken up an adversarial stance toward nature and tried to dominate it, with disastrous consequences not only for external nature but for human beings too, who are at the end of the day also part of nature. The task of emancipatory criticism is, then, to attempt to reconfigure a more fluid and non-dominating relation to nature, both 'out there' and in us. In this way, the social problems of alienation, exploitation and oppression mirror and are in an important sense homologous with the environmental problems resulting from our thoughtless exploitation of the natural world. What is needed on both scores is a new '*mindfulness of nature in the self*' (54, my emphasis).

Particularly helpful in Chapter 2 is Cook's discussion of the place of Freudian ideas in Adorno's thought, and explication of how Adorno's appropriation of psychoanalytic ideas fits with his appropriation of Marxist ones. Here she is right to point out that Adorno's notion of possible reconciliation between ego and id contained more reason and rational reflection than Joel Whitebook thinks, while bringing out the radicalization of psychoanalysis in Adorno, which ties the project of psychic reconciliation to the project of social reconciliation and emancipatory social criticism. Her rejection of Whitebook's invocation of *sublimation* as a route to reconciliation seems right to me: the solution that Adorno proposes is 'mindfulness' or 'self-reflection' on nature, which is to say that 'reason' is much more involved than it would be on the model of sublimation (56); what is needed is the reflective realization that 'I myself am part of nature' (56, quoting Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*).

Chapter 4 turns to develop the social critique in Adorno's account – his rejection of modern 'totally administered' societies. Modern social life is thought to be based on a universalization of identity thinking in abstract exchange in the capitalist market, while this logic itself has given way to administered modes of organization that obliterate even the fragment of individuality available to *homo economicus*. Further, these historical developments in social life have cemented the suppression of nature characteristic of identity thinking in real life. Human metabolism with external nature has turned out disastrous, while the dialectical corollary of this process of the domination of nature in practice is the suppression of individual's nature construed as their needs. In exchange society, needs are not met, but are rather deferred by compromises and substitutions, as the whole of nature, both human and non-human, comes to be a place-holder for something else. This universal fungibility, Cook claims, means that the domination of nature has become totalized with the result that both external and human nature is subjected to degradation. Self-preservation has run wild, and the situation is now radically irrational because although self-preservation is now 'virtually easy' thanks to technological development, we still live in a world in which, for no good reason, production and consumptions 'occupy the lion's share of human life' (110). Here, Cook emphasizes the emancipatory and optimistic thrust of Adorno's project, since there lies in the present irrationality the glaring possibility that 'our relation to nature could be utterly transformed' (110) and a much more rational society could be attained. Not only could we change our attitude to nature, but we could change the antagonistic character of social life in which the bad universal of domination through identity prevails over the mute freedom of each overdetermined individual. Cook treats these two motifs as equivalent, because 'the reconciliation of the individual with society is of a piece with the reconciliation of labouring individuals with their Other – nature' (119).

If Cook's argument is right, and our problems are largely the result of a dominating comportment toward a largely misunderstood and reified nature, the question is what the

solution – ‘reflection on nature in the self’ – might amount to in practice. If it is not a matter of sublimation, nor an appeal to a mystical re-enchanted nature, what does it involve? The obvious answer, if self-reflection is said to be dependent on reason and rationality more than on sublimation, is that philosophy is the path to mindfulness of nature. Cook develops in Chapter 3 an account of Adorno’s conception of right philosophy – negative dialectics – that might provide a model for reflecting on nature in the self. For Adorno, ‘identity thinking’ is the characteristic cognitive upshot of a dominating attitude to nature (the ‘object’). What is required is an attitude to the object that does not equate fundamentally different things, that does not flatten out the world or imagine the surface actuality exhausts the deeper reality of things, that does not gloss over the potential for change. Here Cook emphasizes the role of determinate negation by which we can glimpse ‘improved conditions, but only in the form of an inverted image of damaged life’ (81). By negating the bad, we see a negative imprint of a better world, a possibility with which damaged life is already pregnant. In other words, ‘ideas that have been forged in resistance to damaged life’ may offer the key to changing it. What Cook doesn’t really tell us, though, is how negative dialectics is supposed in practice to lead to such a mindfulness of nature, nor how this is supposed to give us any cause for optimism.

She picks up the issue again in a final chapter dedicated to an unusual rapprochement between Adorno and radical ecology. Arne Naess, Murray Bookchin and Carolyn Merchant all agree with Adorno that we need to ‘search for ways to repair the damage inflicted on human and non-human nature by the unfettered sway’ of our instinct for self-preservation, and that ‘emancipation depends, in part, on acknowledging our own affinity with nature’ (122). Cook draws out the common ground between Adorno and radical ecologists on key issues – our damaging relation to nature and the need to change it, the need for radical social change to accomplish this, and the importance of solidarity in overcoming identity and domination. Yet she emphasizes that Adorno is better placed, in light of his sophisticated account of the dialectic of nature and history, to thematize ‘the holistic principle of unity in diversity’ (122), the problem of how solidarity can be achieved without identity and the suppression of difference. The task is to nurture a solidarity with human and non-human suffering that does not attempt to reduce otherness to identity, but rather to hold it in a reconciliatory and non-oppressive relation. Throughout Cook emphasizes Adorno’s sustained attempt at recognizing at once the nature in ourselves and our differentiation from nature.

Cook’s point is that the environmental crisis requires a radical transformation of our relation to nature that is nonetheless a difficult one to envisage or to get right. While treating nature as an alien other to be dominated is disastrous, treating the whole of being as one, or seeing nature as an equal partner, may be just as problematic, for these tend also to reproduce identity and reduction. On a more practical note, Cook points out that our situation requires change but also makes it very difficult to enact. Most of the options open to us are really dead-ends (like ‘green lifestyle choices’ or the ‘democratic’ process), and environmental activism is also ‘largely impotent’ (153). And while she realizes that Adorno’s outlook for social change is generally ‘bleak’, ‘it does have the merit of recognizing the gravity of our predicament’ (142). In other words, there is no merit to ungrounded optimism. The task of becoming mindful of nature is one that requires radical transformations that can only be entertained as a mere possibility. While we cannot simply sit back and accept the damaged world, we cannot realistically do anything to change it either (153). ‘The road to a more humane and rational society is fraught with almost insurmountable obstacles’, and although Adorno did not give up hope of change, Cook leaves us with a rather paltry offering: ‘where everything is bad, it

must be good to know the worst' (154). No doubt readers approaching the book from the perspective of environmental politics will find this unsatisfying. Cook's defence is that the question of prospects for change cannot really be a matter of wishful thinking: if things really are as bad as Adorno claims, it can be no objection that it would be good if they were not. On the other hand, Cook does make clear that Adorno did not rule out emancipatory change, and thought that things *could* be turned around at any moment. But the hope is limited to the thought that 'new forms of solidarity might emerge that accommodate differences between individuals, even as they pursue common goals' (162), and that this might go hand in hand with a renewed, non-identifying relation to external as well as human nature.

The reconstruction of Adorno presented here is compelling and will help restore interest in this sophisticated materialist. Though the discussion seems to job about (discussions of major themes are peppered throughout the various chapters, making the discussion harder to follow than a more systematic or thematic presentation would), this does justice to Adorno's commitment to the interrelation of the core themes – philosophy, psychology, sociology, ethics. What is surprising, given the author's familiarity with critical realist ideas, is that she does not engage with the elephant on the page: philosophical ontology. Indeed, Adorno's critical reflections on science, especially positivist accounts of it, his critique of Kantian free will, and his central concerns with nature, cry out for some account of nature's order. As I have suggested before, critical realism provides some helpful under-labouring here, but Cook does not address the question of ontology explicitly. Likewise, when it comes to thematizing unity in diversity, the One and the Many, in the final chapters, readers of this journal will find the discussion revolving around the same axis that fuels realist dialectics in Roy Bhaskar, and more recently Alan Norrie. Thus, Cook's discussion also brings out some of the important aspects of Adorno's thought which are both pressing politically and common themes with critical realism, a move which may well help to encourage more interrogation of what critical theory and critical realism can learn from one another.