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Edited by Mikulas Teich, Roy Porter and Bo Gustafsson

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## INTRODUCTION

IN general terms, one way of encompassing the world we live in is to say that it is made up of society and nature with human beings belonging to both. This collection of essays attempts to contribute through selective, interdisciplinary studies to a much needed but scant debate over reciprocal links between perceptions of nature and perceptions of society from Antiquity to the present.<sup>1</sup> This is most important not only for the understanding of evolution of knowledge of nature as well as knowledge of society but also of type of truth produced in the process. This takes us to the heart of the issue provocatively highlighted by Ernest Gellner when he begins his introductory essay as follows: ‘The basic characteristics of our age can be defined simply: effective knowledge of nature does exist, but there is *no* effective knowledge of man and society.’

It is reasonable to connect the beginnings of human cognition of inanimate and animate nature (stones, animals, plants) with the ability of systematic making of tools/arms within a framework of a hunting-and-gathering way of life, presently traceable to about 2½–2 million years ago. It is also reasonable to perceive in the intentional Neanderthal burial, about 100,000 years ago, the earliest known expression of overlapping social and individual awareness of a natural phenomenon: death.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the theme of interpenetration of the social, human and natural has a long history. It makes itself felt, as Jan Janko argues, in cosmogonical texts of Greek and Roman authors, exercised by opposing linear and circular visions of the development of the universe. In the case of the former, deterioration and in the case of the latter, stability were the resulting conditions of the world.

Moving on to the Middle Ages, the theme of the volume is explored valuably in two approaches to madness from the social perspective, in the Byzantine and English–Welsh contexts respectively, which inevitably invite comparison. At the heart of Lenos Mavrommatis’ approach lies

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the contention that in Byzantine society madness was associated not so much with illness (impairment of natural physiological processes) as with the devil's perverse activities. Persons thought to be mentally deranged were not excluded but incorporated into Byzantine society and could be instrumentalized purposefully as channels of communication by authorities in the political and religious spheres. Mavrommatis' claim that, in contrast to Byzantine practice, Western Christendom pursued policies of rejecting mad people as social outcasts, is relativized by Chris Philo who finds the involvement of 'thoroughly *intermingled* exclusionary and inclusionary elements'.

What emerges from the inquiry into perceptions of nature during the Renaissance by Gerhard Jaritz and Verena Winiwarter is how much their variability was entangled with social relationships and economic interests, including spatial and temporal circumstances, religious faiths, supranatural beliefs. By consulting Lower Austrian village laws as well as pictorial representations, they point out that the different social groups perceived and sought to utilize for their own ends such economically highly valued constituents of nature as fish and woods: 'The landlord's nature is another nature from the peasant community's nature.'

The next five essays deal, largely in the British and French contexts, with developments more or less between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and a few general points may be made.

For Peter Burke, before the Scientific Revolution there is no sharp boundary between populating society with notions of natural order and populating nature with notions of social order. To view the king as the sun of the social world was as current as it was to think of the lion as the king of the beasts. In fact, interpenetrating images of nature and society embodied in terms, such as the mineral kingdom, vegetable kingdom and animal kingdom, persisted long into the nineteenth century.

Simon Schaffer documents the interaction between the natural and social in his discussion of the early modern debate on the earth's fertility in Britain. He holds that different approaches to it, including agricultural theorizing, depended on different models of society, and notes:

As nature's capacities were transmuted into market values, so the laws of political economy were naturalised ... Both nature and society were redefined and remoralised. In the agricultural crises of the period after 1815, natural laws of supply and demand were ingeniously combined with moral principles of the fallen nature of humanity. The implications were global. British landlords and agrarian scientists applied their doctrines to colonial land management and in contests with indigenous social ecologies.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

The latter topic is specifically treated by Richard Grove in his review of the origins of what he calls ‘from hindsight’ British colonial environmentalism. It concerns the Kings Hill Forest Act passed on St Vincent in 1791 which, reflecting as it did ‘a novel climatic theory, that deforestation might cause rainfall decline’, Grove links to French conservationism indebted to physiocratic thinking as practised on Mauritius.

A more extended discussion of physiocracy and its place in the history of economic thought, from about 1620 to 1770, is to be found in the contribution by Lars Herlitz who suggests that ‘the economics of this time were explicitly ideas about society and nature’. This leads him, among others, to ponder on works/issues also considered by Burke (Mandeville’s *The Fable of the Bees*) and Schaffer (morality and agriculture). Neatly pointing out that ‘physiocracy means literally rule of nature’, one of Herlitz’s main concerns is to explain the physiocratic notion of nature, identified with the land, as an order governed by laws ‘which were physical and moral, the physical laws regulating the course of physical events, and the moral laws guiding human actions in conformity with the physical order’.

One way of looking at physiocracy and its place in the history of economic and social thought is to see it as concerned with the role of landed property in the development of agrarian capitalism within French feudal society before the revolutionary events of 1789. By then, in England, capitalism was well entrenched not only in commerce but also in the agricultural sector – hence the virtual disinterest of the aristocratic owners of landed property in the ideas of the physiocrats. Instead, they developed effectively a feudal rural perspective on the quality of urban life – *rus in urbe* – which Roy Porter exposes as an artifice:

It is easy to say why the great aristocratic developers of the Georgian age basked in the ideology of *rus in urbe*, for it reinforced *domini in urbe* or *equites in urbe*: in a nation where dominion was rooted in the shires, and the country house was still the power house, bringing the country into the city meant imposing upon the townscape the stamp of grandee glamour and authority – no difficult task, since the peerage owned the freeholds to the great estates around the old Cities of London and Westminster. Indeed, many forces in the Georgian age were drawing the leaders of the landowning nation to town as never before: Parliament and politics, shops and entertainments, the marriage market, money and mortgages, the pleasures of fashionable society and the Season. The metropolis was the site for the parade of superiority and the elegant expense of time and money.

This volume, in contrast to some in the sequence of collections of which it is a part, is not explicitly concerned with distinct national

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[More information](#)

aspects. Nevertheless, as we have seen and shall see, such aspects make themselves felt. The next three essays discuss attitudes to and meanings of nature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in German and Scandinavian contexts.

German *Naturphilosophie* (nature philosophy) and Romantic *Naturforschung* (nature study), which flourished at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, continue to be controversial subjects in the history of science and philosophy. This is not surprising, given the boldly speculative claims their protagonists made about principles governing reality, such as unity and polarity in nature, society and history. Romantic *Naturforschung* receives in this volume an understanding, albeit not uncritical, treatment by Dietrich von Engelhardt who has long urged the need to gain a broader perspective on it. He attributes the fateful divorce between natural and human sciences to the victory of positivistically minded natural sciences over Romantic *Naturforschung* in the nineteenth century.

A significant feature of German Romanticism was its celebration of imagined Norwegian/Nordic attitudes to nature and society. Pristine, Norway, writes Nina Witoszek, was ‘an epitome over land where “nature man” lived for centuries in a “natural state”’. Witoszek also makes it abundantly clear that such a romantic reading of the North was seriously flawed. It failed to take on board a major strand in Norwegian social thought cross-bred, as it were, from a union of naturalism and humanism, which she labels provisionally ‘ecohumanism’. Witoszek’s concern

is not merely to de-romanticise a tradition which still employs Nature as an emblem of identity; it is to suggest that the dominant system of values which in the last 200 years empowered social change in Norway has been based on a pragmatic, ecohumanist code of action. Although there is no doubt that this code was not shared equally by all classes, it has nevertheless constituted a crucial axiological reference system. Nobody who has aspired to political or cultural leadership could afford to ignore it in the past century.

Joachim Radkau writing as an environmental historian approaches nature through the ‘forest’ and demands a more rigorous treatment of the history of German forestry which ‘has too often been written as a mere history of the forest regulations’. Radkau argues that the historian should also allow for the ecologically notable influence of their being disregarded. Radkau raises altogether a variety of topics which the history of German forestry should address. Among others, he points to the tradition persisting from the Romantics through the Nazi period up

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

to the present time, which extols the forest as the embodiment of unspoilt nature. This position collides with the economic attitude toward the forest as an exploitable and manageable resource.

Relationships between perceptions of the natural and social, within the framework of nineteenth-century North American history, are considered by Mart Stewart and Gerhard Strohmeier respectively. Stewart's contribution centres on climate which, since the Enlightenment, was thought to determine racial differences. Indeed, Stewart emphasizes, that the climate–race nexus constituted the 'objective' core of the argument put forward in support of slavery before the Civil War. Strohmeier is interested in nature represented by images of the West American landscape, recorded in literary sources and paintings. He finds that they can largely be understood as metaphors for visions of religious mission as well as political and economic expansion, which were pushing the American trek to the West.

In a volume, such as this one, a discussion of historical approaches to the issue of human nature is virtually obligatory. It is variously contained in the contributions by Adam Kuper, Paul Farber and Mikuláš Teich.

Because of Darwin's surpassing influence of buttressing the idea that man is part of nature, his views on the evolution of human nature, including morality, are of more than passing interest. Kuper, whose essay is focused on this matter, points out that here Darwin was affected by contributions from socially oriented British anthropology, which was in the process of becoming a scholarly discipline during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Kuper argues that, in this area in the end, Darwin owed more to the social anthropologists than they to him:

Most strikingly, he was prepared to compromise his materialism, shifting the emphasis from the growth of the brain (which was, he came to believe, the most significant single factor in the emergence of the human species) to the development of the forms of knowledge and moral principles (which explained the subsequent progress of humanity); and knowledge and morality, he argued, were learnt rather than inherited.

Charles Darwin heads and Edward O. Wilson concludes the list of Anglo-American scientists and philosophers, referred to in Farber's critical examination of the century-old debate about the theory of evolution providing insight into and, indeed, serving as a foundation for norms of ethical behaviour which he contests unequivocally:

The history of evolutionary ethics also underscores the danger of accepting facile links between nature and society. Gleaning social lessons

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[More information](#)

from nature should make anyone familiar with history uncomfortable. This, of course, does not mean that we can naively separate nature and society. Superficial judgments, however, about what is 'natural', or abstract intellectualizations of the 'natural state' of humans (or forests) for that matter – are not likely to be particularly productive. Such facile links, more likely, will destruct us from exploring potentially fruitful avenues rather than providing keys for answers.

The beginnings of human genetics as a recognized biomedical scientific discipline go back to the turn of the century. Ever since then, its theoreticians and practitioners have been inclined to favour primacy of heredity over environment with respect to human nature/behaviour and this attitude underlies, despite disclaimers, the Human Genome Project's perspective on human nature. This concerns Mikuláš Teich who examines critically historical aspects of the Human Genome Project, which belongs both to nature and society.

We have seen that in several contributions topics emerged which intertwine with the ecological agenda. Ecology is prominently present in the essay by Bengt-Erik Borgström who points to rhetorics used in the approach to underdevelopment and development through notions of nature and society. That is, the underdeveloped South is being equated to nature and the developed North to society. Ecology also enters into Bo Gustafsson's assessment of the circumscribed role of the market mechanism in coping with the nature–economy interconnection in general, and the environmental management in particular.

Is there a philosophical dimension to ecology? This is the problem addressed in the last essay by Kurt Bayertz, who draws attention to the dilemma of seeking to link philosophy and ecology through the category of rationality believed 'to be capable of nothing and everything at the same time'. That is, while rationality does not guide rapacious mankind for whom nature is merely a matter for exploitation, it underlies calls for establishing ecological norms to protect it as an inherently valuable entity.

Nature is infinitely faceted; in this book it is approached through facets from the ancient Greek 'kosmos' to the end-of-twentieth-century 'ecology'. One has not to be Mertonian or, *horribile dictu*, Marxist to profess that there is more to acquiring knowledge of nature and producing ideas on it than 'curiosity'. Not a built-in human disposition, curiosity manifests itself as such only within human society whose various forces it is exposed to and shaped by. It is due to them, as several of the contributors show, 'when, why and for whom [natural] science is done – also in what kind of [natural] science gets done and what is left undone'.<sup>3</sup>

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THE  
TEMPLE OF NATURE;

OR, THE  
ORIGIN OF SOCIETY:

A POEM.

WITH PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES.

BY

ERASMUS DARWIN, M.D. F.R.S.

AUTHOR OF THE BOTANIC GARDEN, OF ZOONOMIA, AND OF  
PHYTOLOGIA.

Unde hominum pœudumque genus, vitæque volantum,  
Et quæ marmoreo fert monstra sub æquore pontus?  
Igneus est illis vigor, & cœlestis origo.      VIRG. Æn. VI. 728.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD,

BY T. BENSLEY, BOLT COURT, FLEET STREET.

1803.

Figure 1 Title page of E. Darwin, *Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society:  
A Poem with Philosophical Notes* (1803)

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This collection of essays is distinctly exploratory and inevitably there are gaps: for example, the virtual absence of reference regarding historical relations between human law and the laws of nature.<sup>4</sup> Because of and despite it, we believe that a convincing case has been made for the need to investigate the still insufficiently comprehended ways perceptions of nature and society interlink in different historical contexts. The theme inspired the eighteenth-century polymath Erasmus Darwin to compose his last, posthumously, published poetical work *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society: A Poem with Philosophical Notes*, (1803).<sup>5</sup> May its beginnings serve as the ending of the Introduction:

By firm immutable immortal laws  
 Impress'd on Nature by the GREAT FIRST CAUSE.  
 Say, MUSE! how rose from elemental strife  
 Organic forms, and kindled into life;  
 How Love and Sympathy with potent charm  
 Warm the cold heart, the lifted hand disarm;  
 Allure with pleasures, and alarm with pains,  
 And bind Society in golden chains.

Mikuláš Teich  
 Roy Porter  
 Bo Gustafsson

## NOTES

- 1 During the preparation of this book *Natural Images in Economic Thought* appeared (1994) edited by Ph. Mirowski and published by Cambridge University Press. The collection, which investigates 'how images in the history of the natural and physical sciences have been used to shape the history of economic thought' may be viewed as a contribution to the debate.
- 2 R. L. Leakey summarizes 'the present state of play in the complex field of human evolution' in *The Origin of Humankind* (London, 1994); see also S. J. Gould, 'So near and yet so far', *The New York Review*, 20 October 1994.
- 3 R. N. Proctor, 'The author responds', *Social Anthropology*, 7 (1993), 322–6 (p. 322).
- 4 For a stimulating overview, see J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge, 1956), II, ch. 18; see also W. Krohn, 'Zur Geschichte des Gesetzesbegriffs in Naturphilosophie und Naturwissenschaft', in M. Hahn and J. Sandkühler (eds.), *Gesellschaftliche Bewegung und Naturprozess* (Cologne, 1981), pp. 61–70.
- 5 'The poem was published in 1803, a year after his death, at a time when his evolutionary views were unacceptable in either literary or scientific circles. The poem was generally condemned for its irreligious tendencies . . .'. See D. King-Hele, 'Introductory note' to the Scolar Press Facsimile, *The Temple of Nature* (London, 1973).



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[More information](#)

## ONE

## KNOWLEDGE OF NATURE AND OF SOCIETY

(†) ERNEST GELLNER

THE basic characteristics of our age can be defined simply: effective knowledge of nature does exist, but there is *no* effective knowledge of man and society. Each of these propositions has profound implications for our general condition. They also have important consequences jointly. Liberal social order is possible largely because *both* are true. If either of them did not hold, or ceased to be valid, free society would become very much more problematic.

Agrarian society, such as prevailed during the period between the Neolithic and the Scientific/Industrial revolutions, is defined by certain general traits. It is based on food production and storage, and on a fairly stable technology and no genuine, accumulative science. The consequence of this technological stability or stagnation is that it is also Malthusian: resources are limited and cannot be expanded indefinitely, so that any population increase is liable eventually to press upon the limits of supplies. Hunger is never too far away: 'give us this day our daily bread' is no trivial request. People starve in accordance with rank: the social hierarchy is a kind of queue to the storehouse. The place in the queue is determined by power, or it *is* power. The place is enforced, but occupancy of a place in time confers power.

The correct strategy for any group or individual is to be concerned with its or his position in the queue, rather than to be concerned with the augmentation of overall output. The latter idea is indeed largely absent, partly because it is unrealistic, partly because its absence in turn creates a situation in which it is *made* unrealistic. If everyone believes that power not work engenders well-being, no one creates institutions which would protect wealth from power. A kind of vicious or self-perpetuating circle operates: the fact that what matters is one's position in the queue rather than the improvement of output, means that the dominant values are those which elevate aggressiveness and strength and domination, and spurn work or innovation. But in a society

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[More information](#)

dominated by such values, those foolish enough to work and innovate will be despoiled by the strong and dominant. This will further reinforce the values in question, and so undermine any tendency towards concern with economic improvement, and by confirming the system, strengthen the values which perpetuate it.

Both the social *and* the conceptual organization of such an order militate against economic growth and against the cognitive penetration of nature. The preoccupation with status, aggressiveness and honour does not encourage efforts at productive innovation, which are not rewarded (power holders take all), or actually punished, in as far as novelty of technique is liable to violate the rules which are made rigid as part of the sacralization of status. To do something new is to go against custom, which is to undermine the hierarchy. Something similar operates in the sphere of ideas. Inquiry requires doubt: status and faith exclude it. Descartes commended the solecism of doubt in the hope of finding a firmer base for conviction, but in fact opened an age of Perpetual Doubt. There does of course even in such a society have to be some reference to external, natural fact: it is no use sowing and hoping to reap, unless the natural conditions of the growth of plants are respected. But the ideas-markers guiding the ploughman to respect the natural conditions are overlaid by a much heavier set of markers impelling him to maintain the social order. The maintenance of the social order is even more important for the perpetuation of an agrarian society than the production of sustenance: or rather, the latter cannot be achieved without the former.

In these circumstances, there is no serious knowledge of either nature or society. There is of course a certain sensitivity to some natural facts: the farmer cannot produce, nor the craftsman turn materials into tools, unless the realities of the relevant aspects of the environment are respected. But these sensitivities to bits of the environment are not connected to each other to form general theories of nature; they are disconnected from each other by being embedded in the socially local idiom of individual specialized craft guilds. Knowledge, such as it is, is tied to the social order and dominated by it: there is little if any trans-social knowledge. Some aspects of the life of agrarian society encouraged the notion of trans-social truth: the discovery of *proof*, which is independent of status; the use of *writing*, which liberates assertions from the status of the speaker; and the conspicuously ordered behaviour of some parts of nature (astronomy).

How did mankind escape from this condition of socially inhibited production of cognition?

Two independent but inter-acting processes were involved.