



JEDEDIAH PURDY

After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene

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Humankind is at a perilous moment. The central tenets of democracy are frighteningly threatened in many contexts across the world. The unrelenting Covid19 pandemic continues to take lives and accentuate inequalities. The extinction of ecologies and slow-motion of climate change is haughtily rendered globally visible by both unprecedented fires and floods. Now, more than ever, Jedediah Purdy's rapidly growing and expansive oeuvre is profoundly important. Purdy, presently a professor of law at Columbia University, has already penned an impressive series of books and articles which are essential reading for all those concerned about the future of humankind's evolving relationship to nature and the interconnectedness of politics, economics and ecology. Indeed, in his words, 'As economy, ecology and politics unite with growing intensity, the natural world itself will enforce unequal economic and political power' (p. 46). At the same time, with both great precision and eloquence, Purdy manages to weave a persistent strand of hope for the future through a critical appraisal of the past and its relation to the bewildering present. For Purdy, 'the Anthropocene is a call to take responsibility for what we make, as well as for what we destroy. It is the starting place for a new politics of nature, a politics more encompassing and imaginative than what we have come to know as environmentalism' (p. 17). This book, as his

others, sits alongside those of many authors that are highly acclaimed academically. Yet Purdy's writing is refreshingly free of the plethora of pseudo-intellectualized dense jargon that is unfortunately becoming commonplace.

"After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene" is a relatively small book, nonetheless one which requires great concentration to digest its powerful insights. Purdy unravels the denaturalization of nature through humankind's unrelenting drive to conquer it. He creates an intellectual history of the "American environmental imagination" through four overlapping visions: 1) a providential vision/ frontier-settler thesis where nature serves a human purpose; 2) wilderness-seeking Romanticism where the natural world is cherished for its aesthetic and spiritual aspects; 3) a managerial utilitarianism of nature as an object exploitation; and 4) a 20th century ecological view of complex and interpenetrating systems. Purdy reveals how all four imaginaries perpetuate a level of environmental racism, imperialism and gender hierarchy and as well demonstrates an intrinsic arrogance embedded in the on-going power struggle between the right to exploit nature versus protecting it. The relatively orthodox description of the Anthropocene, where "humanity has outstripped geology" (p. 1) draws a wide range diverse texts—from Jacques Rousseau's "Emile" to Annie Dillard's "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", from Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" to Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma", from Virgil's "Eclogues" to Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis"—and a wide array of disciplines. It is as well animated by a personal narrative of his West Virginian upbringing and a focus of a political history of the landscape.

Throughout the book, Purdy unequivocally develops multifarious instances of humankind's transformation of the environment, where 'our lives knit into a kind of collective landscape architecture' (p. 22). Explicit examples of water management are woven into all of the imaginaries. He reveals how "wilderness" and "waste" were (and continue to be) extensively "reclaimed" for human purposes. 'The Swamp-land Act of 1850 gave public wetlands to those who agreed to drain them ... while irrigation laws exchanged ownership for canal building in dry lands. By the later nineteenth century, when it became clear that most private irrigation efforts would fail, the federal government undertook a massive reengineering of the continent's water supplies, moving the precious liquid from mountains to plains, from rivers to fields, until the tellingly named Bureau of Reclamation had hardly left a free-flowing waterway in the West' (pp. 73-74). At the same time, 'nature contained both the wild terrain that called out to be cleared and settled and the beautiful and sublime landscapes that offered symbolic, aesthetic and moral lessons' (p. 104). Purdy uncovers, through the writings of the transcendentalists (most notably Henry David's Thoreau's "Walden"), depictions of civic identity by the Hudson River School Painters and preservation/ conservation movement initiated by John Muir and the Sierra Club; water specifically and the landscape more generally were heralded as both spiritual and spectacle. However, he also warns that often

the 'romantic reverence for wild nature paradoxically disserved the natural world' (p. 123). During an era of social and moral reform, Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt, amongst others, set in motion a cascade of institutions and policies for technocratic resource management. Forests and water, in particular, were exploited and governed through a utilitarian and administrative prism. Fortunately, and unsurprisingly, there was a countermovement to the blind faith in bureaucracy as forcefully and passionately advocated during the span of the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries by George Perkins Marsh ("Man and Nature", 1864), Aldo Leopold ("A Sand County Almanac", 1949) and Rachel Carson ("Silent Spring", 1962), amongst others. They revived Alexander von Humboldt's notion of the interconnectedness through a "web of life" and instigated environmentalism, 'the defining political expression of the age of ecology' (p. 202). A number of US Laws followed, including the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), Clean Air Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972) and Endangered Species Act (1973). Purdy underscores the credit that needs to be given to political philosopher John Rawls, with "A Theory of Justice" (1971), law professor Christopher Stone and Supreme Court Justices William O. Douglas and Harry Blackmun all who wrote of the innate rights of nature. Douglas, in the *Sierra Club v. Morton* dissent wrote 'The river as plaintiff speaks for the ecological unit of life that is part of it The voice of the inanimate object, therefore, should not be stilled' (p. 210). Clearly, there is still some ways to go for a truly new ethical and political spirit for a new view of the natural world. Purdy is scathingly critical of the 'rise of cost-benefit analysis as the dominant language of environmental law and policy, and of economics as a sort of master-science for ecological management' (p. 213).

In the last two chapters of the book ('Environmental Law in the Anthropocene' and 'What Kind of Democracy?'), Purdy calls for a 21st century environmental imagination—for new concepts forged by a new responsibility 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). Ultimately, as he mentioned earlier, there is not any one clear path to such a novel relationship to the biosphere. Instead there will be the simultaneous requirement of '...two kinds of utopianism, the small experiments and the collective shaping of the world. Experiments need the landscapes that collective power produces, and collective power draws ideas, motivation and lessons from those experiments' (p. 146). For Purdy, 'Law and lawmaking are forums where cultural and imaginative innovation happens, innovation that will help lay the foundation of any future legal regime for climate change' (p. 252). Innovation from the professions of the built environment—across scales and geographies—are as necessary to convincingly address the Anthropocene and create a truly just 'world-shaping habitation' (p. 269).