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Living Through The End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism by PAUL WAPNER MIT Press, 2010 \$16.95

Reviewed by TAYLOR KRAAYENBRINK

In *Living Through the End of Nature* Paul Wapner applies theoretical pressure to the idea of “Nature” in American thought and history. The beginning of his book brings some refreshing reminders to the reader about some of the difficulties that environmentalists (whether environmental philosophers or activists) face. Particularly, Wapner is concerned with the naturalization of a particular idea of Nature. Nature is not a universally existent and consistent category in all societies and periods of history. American culture has produced an idealized notion of what Nature is. This idealization, Wapner notes, the ideal of Nature that Americans have cherished is problematic in its own rite; but whatever one might think about it, at this point in US political and industrial history, it is also a practical impossibility. The ideal that Americans have maintained valorizes “the wildness of nature”; however, this wildness, though it may be an admirable ideal (and this is not necessarily a fact) is unattainable because human technological advances and intrusions in America have ensured that virtually no facet of the non-human is untouched and unaltered by human activity. This unattainability of wildness does not mean, for Wapner, that environmentalism is a lost cause. Instead, he calls for Americans to look for ways in which to positively engage with the non-human element of society. What Wapner calls “the end of nature” is actually a “new orientation” that allows for humans to re-theorize their environmental attitudes. This orientation should stop idealizing nature

and instead “focus on ecological and social health.” This “postnature” posture should also recognize human interaction with the environment, and instead of avoiding it, seek positive engagements.

One of the most valuable insights that this book offers—indeed a major premise of the text—is Wapner’s concentration on the line of division in environmentalism and environmental criticism between essentialists and constructionists. Wapner is against the naturalization of an ideal of nature, and he sees social constructivist criticisms of environment, environmentalism, and environmentalities as valuable for their suspicion of the idealism that neatly separates nature from humans. Wapner applies labels to the essentialist and constructivist camps: environmentalism (essentialist) and ecocriticism (constructivist). The recent emergence of ecocriticism with its questioning of traditional notions of environment has been criticized as a theoretical parasite of environmental activism, but Wapner believes these questionings offer valuable correctives to an activism that is becoming worn out in the 21st century and that needs to be retooled to assert itself in changing socio-political and technological situations. Every environmentalist, whether activist or more theoretically inclined, must be reminded that “[n]ature is not a self-subsisting entity with an essential character but rather a contextualized idea through which we approach the non-human world.”

In *Living Through the End of Nature* Wapner spends a considerable amount of time addressing current political and social environmental concerns. In particular, one of the valuable critiques he offers is of preservationist environmentalism that demonizes human intrusion of any sort into

nature. In his questioning of the preservationist movement, Wapner shows the dangers of essentialist thinking that is such a forceful part of it: “Are we aiming toward a preindustrial, prehistoric, or other state of affairs, and is this natural?” What environmentalists assume to be a natural state of operation can often be an ideologically or emotionally charged sensibility.

Wapner, building on his critique of naturalized nature, narrates the history of some of the most valued conservation areas in North America. Many of the national parks in the US and Canada are products not of “Nature” but of dramatic—sometimes excessive—human intervention. The sectioning off of national parks in Tennessee and Alberta have resulted in an isolated environment, and ignore nearby urban and industrial developments that are devastating to wildlife and wilderness. In this way an idealized and restricted “natural” space justifies the continued exploitation of the environment all around this space. Furthermore, Wapner shows how these idealized locations of conservation used to be home for the indigenous people of North America. When many national parks in the US and Canada were “built,” the governments evicted indigenous people as though they were contaminants to the country. Just as the neo-liberal exploitation of the non-human environment is closely linked with extensive human oppression, so an inverse idealization of environment can just as easily lead to the oppression of people. Wapner reminds his readers that neither one of these scenarios is desirable. The case studies of nationally mandated conservation areas that have occasionally become oppressive spaces are explicit examples in this book that support

Wapner’s thesis that the line in environmental studies between essentialism and constructivism that stereotypes the former as earnest activism and the latter as ivory tower intellectual play is unhelpful. Constructivist critiques of environmental idealization offer social redress in many cases.

Another valuable insight that Wapner offers is his critique of the current state of American politics, and its detrimental impact on attempts to move American policies to a more conscientious environmental approach. The polarization of American politics into Republican and Democrat camps completely incommensurable with each other in recent decades allows no room for bi-partisan cooperation with respect to urgent matters of environmental policy. However, Wapner offers tentative praise for the Obama administration’s environmental policy, which might be too hastily generalized. Obama’s approach to environmental controversies has been, in general, to stall without taking definitive environmental stances. The Keystone XL controversy is a primary example of this. Furthermore, Wapner could have paid more attention to the disjunction between President Obama’s public rhetoric and his actual policy on environmental issues. Questioning a major pipeline proposal on environmental grounds while major oil companies work around the delay in energy inefficient manners may be more environmentally damaging than giving green lights to straight lines.

In *Living Through the End of Nature*, Wapner offers a valuable contribution to the field of environmental criticism that examines the discourse in its current moment, and provides theoretical insights

that any environmentally minded person can benefit from.

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