
BOOK REVIEW

After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene
by Jedediah Purdy
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015,
336 pages, \$29.95, Hardcover. ISBN: 9780674368224.

JACOB E. LIPSMAN
University of Kansas

The relationship between humanity and nature is long and complex, filled with spirituality, hope, and hardship. Nature has been both a political battleground and a guise for anti-politics as passing generations brought new perspectives to their relationship with the land. In his book *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy challenges the reader over the course of eight chapters as he unpacks the role of nature itself in the development of American social institutions and ultimately in the origination of the Anthropocene. Purdy argues that an evolving, collective “environmental imagination” is at the heart of “how Americans have shaped their landscape, and how ideas and practices around the natural world have shaped American politics and culture” (6).

Purdy connects the various phases of American environmental imagination to the onset of the Anthropocene before discussing the role of law and politics in fostering a democratic future for humanity within this new historical epoch. As the previously stark divide between human society and nature becomes unrecognizable, the politics of nature persist as humanity must again rearrange its environmental imagination to construct a new relationship between human society and the natural world.

Purdy begins by tracing the development of the environmental imagination from the very early stages of American settlement,

Jacob E. Lipsman is a PhD student in sociology at the University of Kansas. His research interests include climate change denial and environmental politics. Jacob’s recent work focuses on environmental risk and the politics of coastal restoration in southeastern Louisiana. He can be reached at jlipsman@ku.edu.

Social Thought and Research, Vol. 34

arguing that nature has always been an active agent in American social development. Purdy argues that the earliest settlers of North America brought with them a providential imagination in which the relationship between humanity and nature was governed by the divine purpose of taming the land and bringing it into order with society. To this group, how best to treat nature in accordance with God's will was the primary concern. The emergence of the romantic imagination in the writings of Thoreau, Emerson, Muir, and others raised the notion of unaltered nature as a source of human freedom and spirituality; to romantics, nature provided an opportunity to fully understand oneself in the context of the natural world. The romantics wanted to protect public land as a resource for individuals seeking spiritual excursions.

In the early twentieth century, a new phase of environmental imagination—the utilitarian imagination—brought the providential notion of nature serving humanity into order with the romantic idea that nature should be protected. Utilitarian conservationists brought a technocratic approach to nature by emphasizing resource management by “experts” who could mediate the relationship between society and nature. By the mid-twentieth century, skepticism toward technology raised concerns among a new group who imagined a political shift from a focus on economics to a focus on environmental protection; the very notion of “the environment” as a unique entity was born of the ecological imagination. Purdy's use of primary source material allows the reader to trace the development of the environmental imagination through the voices and language of its major contributors.

For all of its influence on politics, Purdy argues that nature has a distinctly anti-political dimension in the way that it is leveraged by the powerful to obscure the political nature of inequality. Purdy captures this paradox by arguing that each version of the environmental imagination...

has in some ways powered political imagination and mobilization by enlisting nature in support of political agendas; at the same time, each version has evaded politics, tried to shut down imagination and mobilization, by claiming that certain collective questions must be decided by nature, not by human judgment (31).

In this passage, Purdy succinctly points to the structural injustice that stems from particular sets of political formations, the role of environmental imagination in the development of these formations, and the inevitable attempt by elites to obscure the political nature of these formations by using the natural world as justification for social structure.

It is with this notion of anti-politics in mind that Purdy frames his discussion of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, at this juncture, is unavoidable, and it will bring challenges unlike any that have tested human adaptability in the past. Purdy argues that humanity now faces a three-fold dilemma—crises of ecology, economics, and politics. At the same time that natural systems are becoming stressed beyond the point of viability, modern capitalism has failed to protect these systems and is unlikely to protect humanity from the consequences of this failure. While the elite class denigrates politics in order to portray the status quo as “natural” and immutable, Purdy contends that humanity must actively plan its future to prevent the worst outcomes of the Anthropocene. Humanity must embrace the politics of nature for a democratic and just Anthropocene to be possible.

The question Purdy poses to the reader is how society will move forward. Will humanity dictate the terms of a democratic Anthropocene by engaging in legitimate environmental politics? Or will humanity continue along this dangerous road, using nature as an anti-political force, toward inevitable social breakdown? For Purdy, the key to society’s future is the use of law and politics to create a sustainable, democratic landscape that emphasizes environment over economy, and sustainability over accumulation. The next phase of the environmental imagination must be one that encourages political formations that benefit society as a whole rather than a group of elites—a unique challenge given the unpredictable nature of the Anthropocene.

Purdy’s perspective is unique in its approach to nature as an active agent in shaping social structure; *After Nature* is a thoroughly challenging book that incorporates a philosophical approach into the social science literature. For graduate students and faculty, particularly those with ecological focus in their research, *After Nature* provides an opportunity to gain a new perspective on the role of nature in social development in the past and the future.