

Review of Adrian Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory*

“Modern accounts emphasised the difference between humanity and nature and set up independent sciences for each domain ... [but] this book contends that fabricated boundaries between nature and culture have been breached both in practice and in new theoretical accounts.”

These introductory statements from the back cover of the book will attract the many students of the natural world who have felt torn between widely divergent natural science and cultural theory accounts of nature. Dipping deeper into the book, however, the student will quickly realise that the ‘nature’ Franklin is concerned with is both quite exclusive and very broad. For example, among his targets are ‘realists’ and ‘environmentalists’ who “want to uphold and defend a pure and unsullied nature against a disordered (and sick) humanity” (p. 6), and so are responsible – together with “scientists and naturalists” (p. 14) – for the “misanthropic gloom” which “pervades the entire research enterprise on nature” (p. 5). Also in his sights are authors such as Macnaghton and Urry who “commit the folly” of conflating “a sociology of nature with a sociology of nature *leisures and tourism*” (p. 7), and books such as Alexander Wilson’s *The Culture of Nature* which have a “tendency to reduce a sociology of modern nature to that of the environmental agenda”, (p. 5), and so are “drawn into the gravity of risk, pollution, and environmentalism” (p. 6).

In contrast to these various viewpoints, Franklin suggests that “[n]ature is whatever happens to result from the interaction between species including the actions and designs of man” (p. 9). Quoting from Budd’s work on aesthetics, Franklin suggests that “[a]lthough a natural item is often not in its natural state or natural location or habitat, or has arisen only through human contrivance or as an intended or unintended consequence of human activity ... or is adjacent to or surrounded by non-natural items ... this does not prevent it from being appreciated aesthetically as natural ... ” (p. 85). Consequently, “[e]ven a caged wild animal in a zoo or the water in a fountain can be appreciated as nature.” (p. 86). So much for ecosystems. Similarly, “industrial and commercial landscapes are just as much habitats to animals and birds”; and the “myriad pipes in an oil refinery near London provides the perfect resting place for migrating birds” (p. 10). Given this view that nature is ‘whatever happens’, the possibility that the natural world might have been in any way damaged by industrial ‘progress’ is methodologically excluded; and Franklin is at pains to “deny the validity of claims that modernisation destroyed or eclipsed nature” (p. 58). This reading contrasts sharply with those which see current forms of nature as the outcome of historical processes from which it emerges as changed, and sometimes as reduced and degraded.

If Franklin’s account is strongly oriented towards the present day, it is equally resolutely focused on the social. ‘What is nature?’, he argues, “is no doubt an interesting philosophical question, but it is not for sociologists to pose or attempt to answer such questions. Rather, our job is to understand what these words ... mean and do for the people who use them ... in this way we can dodge a very complex question by suggesting that nature is a construction of culture” (p. 21). This exclusively *social* understanding, by identifying nature with cultural interpretations of nature, sidesteps the need to consider how these interpretations might be inadequate, how they are located within a long-term temporal context, or how nature – and alternative understandings of nature – might diverge from them. While this approach may indeed produce answers to a narrow range of questions, ‘dodging’ deeper, more inclusive, and arguably more urgent questions will not satisfy those who believe that the character and meaning of social knowledge can only be assessed with reference to the various contexts within which it arises. Similarly, the claim that “[s]ociology is almost exclusively urban in location and has been able to ignore the nature of the countryside or wilderness as an irrelevant variable ... ” (p. 24) will seem less than adequate to those who argue that some of the most compelling questions facing the

natural world involve precisely these excluded areas. Equally, the reader will find no mention of forest destruction, climate change, or loss of biodiversity; or the implications of trade rules, genetic engineering, or emissions trading.

Although he adopts a broadly constructivist approach, Franklin is clearly sensitive to the criticisms that critical realists have made of the 'strong' constructionist agenda, arguing that nature is "at once a physical reality, amenable to the senses *and* discursively ordered ... nature is constituted as an objective reality but may be further constituted socially in all manner of ways" (p. 38). Consequently, "social constructions of nature do not and should not obliterate the value of conceptualising nature also as an objective reality, a real materiality that exists prior to any social constructions that people may put on it" (p. 51). An immediate question that arises from this dual conceptualisation is that having recognised nature as a "real materiality", one cannot reasonably lay aside the character and practical consequences of this materiality while focusing largely on what is socially constructed. Furthermore, our *experience* of nature, it seems, partly exists *prior* to these constructions: "the process by which nature is constructed is preceded, presumably, by the experience of it in an unconstructed or differently constructed condition and this presupposes that the natural world is experienced in two quite separate moments" (p. 51). More specifically, nature "can be experienced in an everyday manner ... principally through an embodied sensual relation in which the species being of nature can be identified as separable from any constructions being put on it" (p. 51).

While it is perfectly reasonable to argue that nature has both a material constitution independent of what we make of it, and that it may also afford a range of social constructions, one might expect that the former would in some respects constrain the latter. For example, while we might plausibly perceive a bolt of lightning as the act of an angry god, it is more difficult to construe, say, a crocus petal in the same way. Franklin plays down this problem: in his discussion of pets, for example, he argues that "it does not follow that an understanding of [pets'] natural properties prevents any social construction from being placed on top of or alongside such knowledge" (p. 44). But while I might plausibly name a pet Doberman 'Killer', there would be something faintly incongruous about this name when applied to, say, a guinea pig. Nevertheless, the relation between nature and culture, we are told, works in only one direction: "[n]ature is understood in social terms and not the other way around" (p. 236).

This claim, curiously, is contradicted by some of the material Franklin himself refers to. In one of the most interesting sections of the book, he discusses anthropological studies of the relation between culture and nature, arguing that the way we construct our relationship with nature is not simply a semiotic or discursive matter but also involves a strongly practical, material element. Furthermore, the relationship with nature involves a complex accommodation between the social and the natural, expressed by concepts such as Ingold's 'dwelling', Latour's 'hybridity', or Descola's view that there is a 'single social field' which has both natural and cultural elements. Some of the material included, drawn from the work of Laura Rival, implies a more naturalistic viewpoint, suggesting that "unmediated or perceptual knowledge about the landscape, particularly of living things, can affect cultural choices and produce patterns of aesthetic judgement and social life" (p. 72). For example, drawing on Rival's work with the Huaorani, Franklin points out that a "concern with the right speed of growth is inferred from tree species onto human growth and maturity ... [t]he aesthetic of slow growth derives from two types of tree they greatly admire, the very tall canopy species and in particular the peachpalm trees that grow very slowly" (p. 73).

Recognising that natural form and process enter into the generation of social understandings is certainly a step forward from single-mindedly constructivist accounts; and Franklin's discussion of 'a new anthropology of nature' offers the reader some exciting

insights into the interplay between nature and culture. Elsewhere in the book, however, there is a more one-sided emphasis on “the *socially* constructed nature of human understandings of the natural world” (p. 236). Some would argue that given that the social world has only developed out of the pre-existing natural world during the most recent eyeblink of evolutionary time, one might expect that the ways humans interact with nature would in some ways reflect this evolutionary history. In Kellert and Wilson’s words, “the brain evolved in a biocentric world, not a machine-regulated world. It would therefore be quite extraordinary to find that all learning relating to that world had been erased in a few thousand years ... “ (p. 232-3). This possibility is strongly rejected by Franklin, who claims that “it is clear that in fact, the argument flows the other way, namely, contemporary concerns for, and expressions of value in nature are being projected *back* into deep history, about which Kellert and Wilson know very little ... “ (p. 237). Apart from the likelihood that one of the foremost evolutionary biologists of our era probably knows a great deal about ‘deep history’ (whatever that is), the claim that “what we find attractive, secure, reassuring, calming, spiritual etc. in nature is entirely given in our discourses on nature; they are cultural creations ... “ (p. 238) needs to be carefully argued and supported if it is to be at all convincing. Simply stating that “it is clear that in fact ... “, “it is only too obvious that ... “ (p. 237) one viewpoint is correct, while dismissing opposing views as ‘social constructions’, ‘dubious mobilisations’, and so on is to relativise others’ knowledge whilst claiming a more absolute type of knowledge as one’s own.

As Robert Macfarlane has written, all great works of place investigate not only “the question of how humans shape the landscape, but also the deeper and prior mystery of how landscape shapes the human.”ⁱ Franklin’s denial of the significance of this latter question exemplifies his general rejection of science; and he is keen to establish that a sociology of nature need not take into account any scientific claims. Defending constructionists such as Keith Tester against the criticisms of critical realists, he notes that “[a]t no point did Tester *evaluate* the science of the claims of animal rights, his material for analysis were the claims themselves,” adding that “this is surely a very standardised, almost safe procedure in the analysis of the natural world” (p. 44). Similarly, “[Burningham and Cooper] argue that the political debate on environmentalism centres on the making of knowledge claims and therefore the expertise of constructionism is a far better mobilisation of sociology than the dubious mobilisations of contestable scientific truths” (p. 46). This approach, we are told, places sociologists “at the heart of environmental debate” (p. 46). It is questionable, however, whether an exclusively social analysis which brackets off the epistemological status of the social constructions it studies is any more defensible than the mirror-image position which claims that natural scientists can bracket off cultural issues as irrelevant.

The later chapters of the book illustrate and extend the theoretical positions described earlier. Despite his denunciation of the ‘biophilia’ hypothesisⁱⁱ, Franklin suggests that “people from many different times and locations seem to find delight, pleasure and [beauty] in nature”, reflecting an aesthetic response that may be “generalised in humanity” (p. 86). Consequently, we in the affluent West are “re-embedding” ourselves into the natural world through such pursuits as gardening, dog walking, and angling: “[a]lthough much of our natural environment displays ... the influence of humanity, having been shaped ... by human purposes, so that little of the world’s landscape is in a natural condition ... this is not an impediment to the aesthetic appreciation of nature as nature ... “ (p. 85). Rather, Franklin gives plentiful examples of the ways “older relations relocated and recomposed around new objects, new practices, new social and cultural needs” (p. 81). Thus “[g]ardens and garden suburbs” are “one of the best and most prominent examples of the manner by which human-non-human *hybrids* have been developed and embraced by modern cultures”, incorporating “[n]atural things as detachable from natural spaces and as highly manipulated and fragmented by humanity” (pp. 81/2). Nature, he argues, can flourish even

in the most surprising places: for example, a “recent nature documentary *Living Britain* is explicitly about the hybrid natures of contemporary Britain”, showing, among other illustrations, “foxes living on municipal rubbish dumps (an inevitable natural uncrowded niche affording them security and privacy)” (p. 189). In sum, after “a long history of maintaining a separation, humanity and the natural world dissolved into each other ... ” (p. 247).

It is a strength of Franklin’s analysis are that he is prepared to recognise new expressions of nature; and his aim of overcoming dualistic cultural attitudes is one that many would applaud. His approach, however, embodies certain dangers which are not easily overcome. For example, the weight given to *current, urban* cultural practices and understandings precludes any external frame of reference through which these practices and understandings could be evaluated, and so is a precarious basis for a *general* sociology of nature. One such frame of reference is the evolutionary process out of which human social life and the rest of the natural world evolved; and another is the character, and, some would say, the intrinsic value of those relatively wild areas of the natural world which remain. By excluding such considerations from his analysis, Franklin also excludes some of the crucial issues and debates facing humanity today. At the time I am writing this, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, produced by 1,300 of the world’s leading scientists, has just reported that the welfare of future generations will be at risk without a fundamental reappraisal of how we use the world’s natural resources; and if sociology is to make the sort of contribution that is so urgently needed, such issues cannot be bracketed off as irrelevant.

ⁱ Robert Macfarlane, “Plains Song”. *Guardian Review*, April 16th 2005.

ⁱⁱ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).