

**Review of Deborah Cook's *Adorno on Nature*. Durham: Acumen, 2011. Pp. 198.
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Camilla Flodin, Uppsala University and Södertörn University

From the early essay "The Idea of Natural-History" (1932) to his uncompleted *magnum opus* on art and aesthetics, *Aesthetic Theory* (posthumously published 1970), Theodor W. Adorno engaged the complicated relationship between humanity and nature. This central theme in Adorno's philosophy and aesthetics has not received adequate attention, even though his observations on the detrimental consequences of a continuous denial of nature are incisive in a time when we are facing a possible climate catastrophe. Deborah Cook's study on Adorno's conception of nature is thus a very valuable and timely contribution to Adorno scholarship.

Consisting of five chapters, the first four of which are revised and expanded versions of previously published essays, Cook's study highlights different aspects of Adorno's dialectical understanding of nature. Adorno regards human history as intrinsically intertwined with non-human nature, and non-human nature as historical, both in itself and because it is transformed by human history. In the first chapter, Cook examines Adorno's idea of the preponderance of the object. Taking his cue from Marx's understanding of capitalist society as second nature, Adorno is wary of any direct appeals to a "first" nature. We cannot know what first nature would be, since it "has been," as Cook writes, "occluded to such a degree that what now appears to be natural is actually social in character."¹ This has consequences for our self-understanding, and Cook points out that Adorno follows Marx in his critique of the idealist "fallacy of constitutive subjectivity."² Cook manages to show Adorno's thesis of the preponderance of the object as both critical and utopian. We need to break through society as petrified second nature and see capitalism as a construction, not as a natural law. At the same time, we also need to acknowledge material nature as primary in the sense that mind is more dependent on nature than nature is on mind, but without illusions of the one being reducible to the other, or of us ever being able to attain nature without mediation.

The second chapter discusses Adorno's indebtedness and criticism of Kant. In Cook's words, Adorno sees Kant as "a non-identity thinker *avant la lettre*."³ Adorno regards Kant's idea of the *Ding an sich* as a registration of the non-identity between concept and object, mind, and nature, but he nevertheless criticizes Kant for making this non-identity too rigid: Kant's philosophy is hampered by his neglect of the affinity between humanity and nature. The chapter also examines Freud's influence on Adorno's understanding of internal nature. Although Adorno criticized Freud for being a traditionalist thinker and for not analyzing the social dimension of the renunciation of

instincts, he turned to Freud for a conception of instincts as constituted by both bodily and psychological elements. In his attempt to overcome the mind–body dualism, Adorno regards the separation between ego and instincts as both real and false. Real in the negative sense because the separation, as Cook points out, “reflects our (flawed) self-understanding,” but also in the positive sense, because “the ego is not fully reducible to instinct.”⁴ Even so, the separation is also false because mind has developed from instinctual drives; denying this only impedes freedom.

In her carefully elucidated third chapter, Cook also manages to show Adorno’s interpretation of conceptuality as both critical and utopian. In identity thinking concepts are used as classificatory instruments abstracting from the concrete particulars they refer to. However, in Adorno’s view concepts also contain a utopian – or, as Cook prefers to call it, speculative – moment. The idea of freedom, for example, is such an emphatic concept: Freedom has not yet been realized, thus the concept points to a non-identity of the wrong kind between itself and its content.

Chapter four examines the way society dominates over individuals. Adorno locates this in analogy with how universal concepts dominate and subsume particulars. Late capitalist society is an exchange society where individuals are reified and “where virtually all nature and most aspects of human life become commodified.”⁵ Cook emphasizes Adorno’s efforts to point towards the possibility of a changed relationship between humanity and nature through a critical self-reflection on ourselves as part of nature.

In the final chapter, Cook compares Adorno’s views on human–nature relations with the work of Arne Naess, Murray Bookchin, and Carolyn Merchant. This comparison highlights the common emphasis on the need for a radical change in our relation with non-human nature, both for our own sake, but also for the sake of non-human nature itself. Cook shows how we might benefit from Adorno’s thinking when addressing the challenges that ecological activism meets, as well as when we regard the philosophical challenges of understanding the relationship between the particular and the universal.

In most cases Cook manages to do justice to Adorno’s dialectical conception of nature. However, when it comes to non-human animals, she sometimes wavers. Cook correctly observes that Adorno believes that damaged nature is given voice through “[o]ur ideas of justice, equality and freedom”⁶ that arise as an answer to oppression, and she emphasizes that oppressors often liken the people they want to oppress with animals, thus identifying them with nature in order to subjugate them just like nature has been subjugated. Cook also accurately attributes to Adorno a remodeled idea of humanity that “supersede[s] the antagonism between the animal and the human, instinct and reason, body and mind.”⁷ But in the conclusion of her study she nevertheless ascribes to Adorno the idea that “we will continue to behave like other animals as long as survival instincts shape our behaviour.”⁸ Here Cook fails to capture Adorno’s dialectical conception of non-human animals.

Human beings in denial of themselves as part of nature do not behave like other animals, according to Adorno, but rather like the faulty conception of other animals characteristic for our petrified society and identity thinking.⁹ He does not regard the other animals as merely slaves to their own instincts, and Cook would have benefitted from elaborating more on Adorno's writings on aesthetics and art where he uses the concept of *Tierähnlichkeit*, likeness to animals.¹⁰ As usual, Adorno employs this concept both in a critical and a utopian manner. When we deny our likeness to animals and define ourselves as radically distinct from other animals, we become increasingly like the false conception of animals that stems from this denial: instinctual creatures trapped in ideological conditions. But if we reflect critically on our likeness to animals, acknowledging both our affinity (identity) with them and our difference (non-identity) from them – which is an acknowledgement of their identity with themselves and their non-identity with our attempts to define them – we would provide for a reconciliation which at the same time allows us and the other animals to realize our different potentials. Apart from this lapse, Cook has written a clear and nuanced book that shows the urgency of thinking through Adorno's conception of nature.

Notes

¹ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 9.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2005 [1973]) xx.

³ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 37.

⁴ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 52.

⁵ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 92.

⁶ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 89.

⁷ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 89.

⁸ Cook, *Adorno on Nature*, 160.

⁹ For a discussion of Adorno's view on non-human animals, see for example Arnd Hoffmann, "Rien faire comme une bête": Überlegungen zu Adornos Tieren," in *Marginalien zu Adorno*, eds. Arnd Hoffmann et al. (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2003) 107–141.

¹⁰ See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London and New York: Continuum, 2002 [1997]) 119, and "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981) 270.