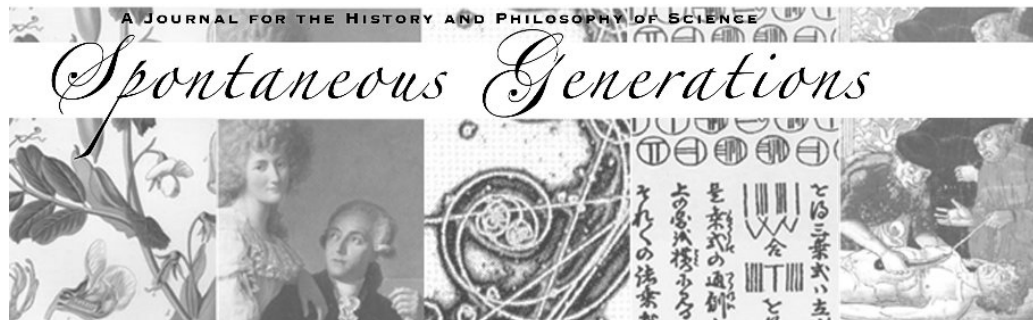




REVIEW: Adrian Parr, Hijacking Sustainability

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REVIEWS

Adrian Parr. *Hijacking Sustainability*. 206 pp. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009.*

R. Moore[†]

Defining sustainability is a tricky endeavor. While Adrian Parr's *Hijacking Sustainability* does not contribute a clear definition of the term, it does provide a series of interesting and useful examples to illustrate some of the difficulties and inconsistencies of applying so-called sustainable ideals to a capitalist infrastructure. While the concept behind Parr's work is intriguing, the book itself, which focuses on the nature, construction, and impact of sustainability culture, is verbose, convoluted, and difficult.

Parr begins her book with a brief history of the sustainability ideal. This introduction is one of the only focused articulations of this central term. Parr outlines the findings of the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development, which was focused on assessing the state of global natural resources and the human environment. Titled *Our Common Future*, the released report holds the most cited definition of sustainability, one that sees true sustainability as the integration of social, political, and economic systems to ensure that the future will be more prosperous, just, and secure for all.

Parr's contribution relies on a Marxist (or, at least, anti-capitalist) discourse to analyze how what she calls "sustainability culture" has been commandeered to advance the goals of pro-capitalist enterprises. The first half of the book is Parr's attempt to illustrate how sustainability culture has been co-opted by the private sector in a way that is (1) against the nature of sustainability culture itself, and (2) meant to distract from or cover-up the capitalistic and militaristic nature of the enterprise, which, she argues, is antithetical to true sustainability. In the second half of the work Parr turns away from the hijacking of sustainability culture to a discussion of challenges that currently face the movement in the existing capitalist system.

In section one, Parr uses phrases like "ecobranding," "greenwashing," and "greening" to describe the absorption of the idea of sustainability

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by corporations and groups, which are antithetical to Parr's conception of sustainability. For example, Parr provides case studies to illustrate how large multi-national corporations have absorbed the appearance of a "green" ethos to further their corporate aims. British Petroleum (BP) revamped its corporate image in 2000 to indicate a dedication to environmental sustainability. When BP changed its slogan to "Beyond Petroleum," Parr argues that this was the corporation's attempt to reposition itself as a "green" company by aligning with other environmentally conscious organizations, such as the Rainforest Action Network that boasts the slogan "Beyond Oil" (p. 17).

This is an example of the process Parr calls "ecobranding." The case studies she provides in section one are perhaps the strongest examples of how the sustainability culture is often used to reinforce power structures by "[camouflaging] the darker underbelly of [the State and corporate culture]—militarism and capitalism" (p. 6). In this sense, "ecobranding" does little to change the root problem and can often distract from it.

Yet those guilty of hijacking sustainability culture are not limited to faceless corporations. The trend of irony and hypocrisy continues when Parr examines the greening of Hollywood by focusing on the April 2007 cover of *Vanity Fair: The Green Issue*, which includes a photo of actor Leonardo DiCaprio with Knut the captive polar bear cub.

Again, similar to the BP example, the themes of economic and state powers come to bear on Parr's analysis of Hollywood's interest in "green" issues. She argues that there is an inherent irony to the illusion of sustainability put forth by an organization that ensures tight control of messages by corporate stakeholders. Put another way, it is odd for DiCaprio to critique a consequence of the system that he is a product of and embedded in. For Parr, the Hollywood establishment is indicative of "the hegemonic system of late capitalism and militarism, of which wildlife, the environment, and the poor are all casualties" (p. 37).

While the inherent inequalities of a capitalist system are not difficult to point out, the first section leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Unfortunately, these questions are not thought-provoking ones but merely practical, such as *what is sustainability culture?*

Defining sustainability is a difficult enough task, but including a cultural dimension without first clarifying the central term "sustainability culture" makes the main argument of the book at best vague and at worst incomprehensible. At most, Parr provides some characteristics of sustainability culture: sustainability culture has an affective energy, and is a grassroots movement. But understanding which individuals and organizations can contribute to this affective energy, and when it actually becomes something different than sustainability culture, is not discussed.

While the central concept of the book is painfully veiled, Parr does make a useful contribution as she works to disentangle the perception of sustainable action versus the reality. Providing a more nuanced discussion of the nature of the so-called green movement is a useful way to highlight issues such as greenwashing and ecobranding, where damaging practices are disguised by illusions of “sustainability.” Parr also does well to link larger social, political, and economic forces to issues of sustainability, much in keeping with the spirit of *Our Common Future*. For Parr, the fact of the matter is that true sustainability cannot come from a capitalistic, militaristic system where the poor and disenfranchised are left to bear the burden of unfettered consumption.

In section two, Parr nicely illustrates the conflict between capitalism and sustainability. For example, chapter six, which focuses on the issue of “trash,” highlights “the unequal power relations underpinning the disposal of waste and the resale of recyclable products and materials” (p. 96). Even though the existing system may appear to democratize access to services, it is, according to Parr, still part of a capitalistic and exploitative system where the poor and disenfranchised are left to bear the brunt of the environmental consequences.

In section two, Parr also discusses disaster relief, slums, and poverty. The entire section is much easier to read than the first section and the information and research included is more coherent and accessible.

Those who are not already privy to the discourse of Marxist critiques will find little aid here. For those who are well versed in such areas of discourse the point that capitalism results in environmental exploitation and that organizations will attempt to co-opt the popular opus of sustainability to further their personal gains may seem a facile point. The central ideas in this book should be captivating. But the execution—Parr’s opaque prose and verbose narrative—may dissuade anyone pulled in by the pithy title. Nevertheless, in a time when detailed consideration and mitigation of humanity’s impact on the environment is of utmost importance, works such as Parr’s challenge us to consider if so-called “environmentally friendly” options are genuine in both definition and spirit.

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