The Problem of Nature

in

Contemporary Social Theory

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The Australian National University.
Declaration.

I hereby certify that the work contained in this thesis is my own work, and that I have cited in the references all works and sources consulted in the writing thereof.

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Abstract

This work examines the ways in which the relationship between society and nature is problematic for social theory. The Frankfurt School’s notion of the dialectic of enlightenment is considered, as are the attempts by Jurgen Habermas to defend an ‘emancipatory’ theory of modernity against this. The marginalising effect Habermas’ defence of reason has had on the place of nature in his critical social theory is examined, as is the work of theorists such as Ulrich Beck and Klaus Eder. For these latter authors, unlike Habermas, the social relation to nature is at the centre of contemporary society, giving rise to new forms of modernisation and politics.

Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics and governmentality is examined against the background of his philosophical debate with Habermas on power and rationality. The growth of scientific ecology is shown to have both problematised the social relation to nature and provided the political technology for new forms of regulatory intervention in the management of the population and resources. These new forms of intervention constitute a form of ecological governmentality along the lines discussed by Foucault and others in relation to the human sciences.

However, Foucault’s work is not sufficiently critical of the relationship between the natural sciences and power. Extending Foucault’s biopolitics to environmental discourse is consistent with his general approach to power, but his incomplete critique of political sovereignty meant that for him agency remained tied to an idealised notion of the autonomy of the human subject. He therefore made too strong a distinction between the human and natural sciences and between power and the capacities of non-human entities, and continued to view the natural sciences as separating themselves from power in a way that was not possible in the human sciences.

A more general critique of epistemic sovereignty reveals that the natural sciences (including ecology) are subject to disciplinary and normalising practices similar to those of the human sciences. Foucault’s key inadequacy is that he linked agency to human autonomy and sovereignty. The work of Bruno Latour and other actor network theorists show that an unambiguous ontological distinction between nature, material technologies and active human subjects is highly problematic. In the place of a separate ‘society’ and ‘nature’, this thesis argues that it is preferable to see these as a single socio-nature populated by the hybrid products of translation networks.

By drawing together the insights of recent governmentality studies and the approach of actor network theory to agency and translation, Foucault’s concept of biopolitics can be adapted to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the ecological programs of government that have emerged around the problem of nature in second half of the twentieth century.
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