

Review of *Nature and Psyche*

By Craig S. Strobel

Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity. David W. Kidner. 2001. SUNY Press, Albany, New York. 375 pp.

David Kidner's book, *Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity*, does for environmental theory what Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*, did for post-colonial cultural criticism: it lays open the belly of the industrialist beast and shows how pervasive the assumptions of industrialism are in contemporary psychological theory and practice as well as in academic discourse and environmental practice.

Kidner, who is Senior Lecturer in Psychology in the Humanities and Communication Studies Programmes at Nottingham Trent University, does this in his book by first claiming that "the critique of industrialism by the Green movement is doomed to failure because the psychological, social and epistemological foundations of the green movement's critique . . . are often the same foundations on which industrialism itself is built" (p. 2). The book proceeds in an orderly fashion to interrogate each of the aforementioned foundations. According to Kidner, what is needed is a standpoint outside the universe of industrialism, but the question is how to envision something outside of the hegemony exerted by the linguistic and conceptual realm of industrialism.

Kidner looks at how industrialism reconfigures and replaces the natural world as the accepted basis for all life. It does this by defining human subjectivity as being separate and distinct from the natural world – in fact making "human" and "nature" as separate, even opposing categories. Industrialism is also characterized by an unwillingness to accord subjectivity to nature. There is a simultaneous transformation of the physical landscape and human person into the autonomous individual separate and distinct from the natural world in which it is situated. However, Kidner does not argue simply for a "return to nature." A reconfiguration of selfhood as *integrated within nature* is necessary. But how to reconfigure human selfhood and (re)integrate it within nature? That is the question.

Contemporary psychology is unable to do this reintegrating because its method of interpreting data is structured in such a way as to reinforce and reproduce the assumptions upon which industrialist culture is built. In other words, Kidner argues that contemporary psychology has emerged as a way for industrialism to shift the focus upon the variety of psychological malaises that riddle industrialized society away from industrialism itself and onto the separate and autonomous individual, a separation that has been effected by industrialism and that is responsible for the malaises in the first place. Industrialism does this by positing the autonomous self (autonomous from nature and human culture, that is), which serves as the epistemological foundation upon which psychology, academic discourse and the whole of industrial culture is built.

The line of thinking that emerges from this is familiar: If I am separate from the natural world around me, I can freely use it for my own ends. Whatever happens to the natural world does not affect me because we are separate entities. Psychology reinforces this position by attempting to reintegrate me within a particular model of society that is predicated upon the autonomous self. If I experience feelings for nature or places within nature or other species within nature, and those feelings produce conflicts within me, especially in regard to the destruction of the environment or the extinction of species, then psychology seeks to “make me well” by reasserting my autonomy and reestablishing my place within a social world whose boundaries have been defined by industrialist presumptions.

For Kidner, individualism is a problem, but not individuality. What is needed is a balance of autonomy and cooperation, which amounts to an integration of the individual into the whole.

Industrialism reduces the individual into an entity divorced from the “outside world” and reduces the world to a pile of “raw materials” to be consumed and manipulated by the autonomous individual. But it is wrong to propose relaxing the boundaries between self and world. What is needed is an integrative structure. That integrative structure is culture.

Taking his cue from Clifford Geertz, Kidner argues that culture contributes to our sense of identity, our ability to live purposefully, and the meaningfulness of our existence. Culture offers us a sort of symbolic integration of the cosmos, connecting us to what is outside us and so affirming our membership in a scheme much greater than any individual or society. Culture can serve to reintegrate human beings back into the natural world insofar as it takes heed of the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness, and recognizes the symbolic resonance between the natural world and the forms and feelings which make up the unconscious.

We must hold on to the long-term aim of reintegrating humanity fully into nature, even when current social, political, and demographic conditions make the realization entirely impractical at the moment. If we lose sight of this ultimate aim, then we are accepting some of the most basic assumptions of industrialism - for example, that humanity is *necessarily* destructive to nature, and that nature is something that is *outside* of ourselves. In contrast, a theory which insists on and expresses the membership of humanity within the symbolic community of nature, so furthering the resonance between our own wildness and that of the rest of the world, will reinforce the wholeness of nature, and so will avoid extending those splits between what is “wild” and what is “civilized” that unwittingly express a technocratic system of categorization. (p. 267)

Kidner does not offer any real plan of action as to how one might affect this “regeneration of culture.” His book’s chief usefulness is in offering a critique of the assumptions made in any sort of environmental work, be it restorative, preservationist, radical, conservative, deep or shallow ecology. Those who are academics concerned with environmental issues will find it a useful foil to test their own assumptions about the

environment and human society. Those who are engaged in the preservation of wild spaces will be challenged to think deeply about the meanings of wild and human. Those who argue for biocentric egalitarianism will be challenged to think about the complexity of difference and identity in natural systems, and the ecological place that human culture occupies. Those who utilize scientific research methodologies in their environmental practice will confront the issues of industrialism's hegemony in science head-on. In short, there is something for everyone to think about in this book, and I highly recommend it as a means for expanding any sort of environmental work into the realm of human culture.