

Review: Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought

By John M. Myer

Reviewed by [Pramod K. Nayar](#)
University of Hyderabad, India

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John M. Meyer. *Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. 210 pp. 0-262-13390-3 (cloth); 0-262-63224-1 (paperback). US\$55.00 cloth; US\$22.95 paperback.

John Meyer's *Political Nature* is essentially a reading of two important Western political thinkers: Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes. Beginning with the assumption that our most "fundamental" concern should be with "the ability of our political and social institutions to address environmental problems effectively" (pp. 3-4), Meyer delineates two interpretations of the nature-politics relationship. The first, the *dualist* interpretation, is characterized by the idea that "communities sought to tear themselves away from the cycles of nature by celebrating and elevating qualities believed to be distinctively human" (p. 5). This approach therefore sees all Western politics as being completely divorced from nature. The dualist interpretation sees a deep-rooted duality as endemic to the human-nature relationship. Instead, dualists argue, we need to acknowledge the inter-connectedness of all life forms. The *derivative* approach argues for the centrality of "natural right." This interpretation sees Western political philosophy as *derived* from certain conceptions of nature.

There have been two influential conceptions of nature in Western thought. The first, the *teleological* or *organic*, is Aristotelian with a Christian reinterpretation as forwarded by medieval philosophers. The second, the *mechanistic* or *modern* conception, is visible from the 17th century onward and is the result of modern science. Reading Hobbes and Aristotle's texts in an extraordinarily rich interpretive act, Meyer argues that both thinkers present several common features.

Hobbesian thought was caught in the dilemma between *state of nature* and artifice. On the one hand Hobbes opposed any artifice (intervention) in changing nature or human nature. Yet, he also argued that it is the "lack" in nature that artifice tries to fill. Hobbes' conception of nature argues that man has no natural "ends," while simultaneously suggesting that the end of all politics is peace. Meyer points out that Hobbes' nature "cannot provide a constraint that would prevent the sovereign (understood as an artificial structure) from ordering or organizing human ends even though they are not

so 'naturally" (pp. 84-5).

In Aristotle's teleological view the *polis* is the fulfillment of potential within human nature. Human nature itself is the manifestation of a more general nature and this makes Aristotle's polis entirely natural. Yet Aristotle also suggests that any particular regime is a form of artifice, hence lacking a natural *telos*. Aristotle's conception of nature, Meyer points out, pays attention to the particularities of place in the formulation of ideas/opinions/politics about the nature of the political regime, economic relationships, household arrangements, and educational forms within the polis. Meyer suggests that this is a remarkable move in Aristotle (and Meyer builds on this idea in his concluding remarks). Here "nature and human nature provide the inescapable context within which discussions about the boundaries between different realms of practice take place" (p. 118).

The derivative and dualist interpretations of these thinkers offers the following lessons: Nature can offer us a principle in the form of a conception of *natural law*, and all politics must be derived from such a conception of nature. Both thinkers end up suggesting a subject role for nature since politics is the "master science" (Aristotle) and the Hobbesian ruler is the interpreter-ruler of all realms. However, as Meyer demonstrates, both thinkers suggest that political authority cannot be fully derived from a natural order. The realm of politics may be legitimated by its naturalness, but it has to be differentiated from nature. We thus have two senses of politics: politics as akin to the order of human society itself (polis as natural), and of politics as differentiated from the totality of human activity.

We need to recognize the ways in which conceptions of nature and politics interact dialectically. Meyer suggests a rethinking of the nature-politics relationship where nature's role must be seen as *constitutive*. This means that we need to see humans as "inescapably natural beings, whose thought, actions, and potentialities are inextricably interdependent with and embedded within the world" (p. 6). We need to speak of nature as a "condition, a place, or a realm of experience," thereby producing a category-*political nature*-emerging from a dialectic between nature and politics. Meyer summarizes this when he writes, "We should recognize that by highlighting and perhaps even attaching privileges to certain qualities that are said to distinguish humans from the rest of nature, one need not be led to ignore or reject that nature's role in constituting who we are" (p. 52).

The product of this dialectic is what Meyer terms political nature. The advantage of emphasizing nature as constitutive of all politics, Meyer argues, is that it "allows us to recognize that all questions on the political agenda are related to nature" (p. 125). Politics is about a range of issues-

war and peace, technology, development, gender roles, housing, transport, economic activity—all of which are essentially about negotiations with the natural world around us. It is thus necessary to see nature as constitutive of our lives, and that our politics are to do with decisions that affect this important constituent. Meyer's suggestion of a category of political nature is a useful concept. It enables us to question, as Meyer himself points out, the use of nature as a source of legitimacy by power elites (pp. 132-3). Meyer's emphasis on the immediate context-of nature and human nature as dialectically involved-of all political decisions, debates, and *knowledges*-is a crucial one for it empowers the local. By locating political decisions in the immediate lived environment, Meyer maps a situational praxis for political nature. However, it must be said that despite Meyer's scrupulous attention to the *theoretical* framework for a political nature, the book hardly offers anything in terms of actual political *practice*.

In his concluding chapter, "New Possibilities for Environmental Politics," Meyer discusses the example of the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement, Third World ecological resistance movements, and the land rights movement in western United States. Emphasizing the lived experience of place as central to our notions of both nature and politics, Meyer argues that we need to focus on opportunities to raise environmental concerns and to promote changes in corporate behavior. Such environmental politics would be based on the recognition that all spheres of human activity are constructions and subject to change. We need to "configure a variety of human institutions and realms in a way that is open to environmentalist values and concerns" (p. 141). This is a salutary call indeed.

Meyer's work is a major re-reading of two of important political thinkers. Locating the ambivalence towards both nature and politics in Aristotle and Hobbes, Meyer is able to trace a line all the way to 20th century thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Murray Bookchin, and Robin Eekersley. Paralleling John Bellamy Foster's (2000) work on Marx's *political nature*, Meyer's book is both an interpretive history and a critique of the biases in Western political thought. Of particular significance is Meyer's position on the need to reconfigure the very definition of *political*. In an age of rampant "technologization," run-away global capital, and the blurring of the sovereignty of the nation state, Meyer's call is significant. Though Meyer does not mention it, his work dovetails neatly with the current socio-political thought as articulated by Anthony Giddens (1998) and practitioners of what has come to be called *The Third Way*. The emphasis on environmental issues, ecological resistance movements (varying in scale and scope from the local to the transnational), and the interconnectedness of all life in Meyer and Third Way politics is perhaps the only hope of a brave new politics in the

face of imminent apocalypse.

A green socio-political theory proceeding from such a political nature will appreciate what John Barry (1999) terms "biological embodiedness and ecological embeddedness" of human beings and society. Political nature as Meyer conceives it is also inherently forward-looking. It acknowledges the increasing technologization of the world, but incessantly calls into question the informing assumptions technologizations (such as technology as emancipatory, to take one example). Meyer's consistent attention to the ambiguity in all political thought is particularly welcome since it eschews the standard normative readings of concepts such as civil society or democracy. A political nature is, in John Meyer's lucid, eminently readable, and intellectually invigorating book, a sentient nature.

References

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Pramod K.Nayar <nayarpramod@hotmail.com>, Lecturer in English,
Department of English, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, 500 046, India.