

Book Reviews

Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Coevolutionary Revisioning of the Future by Richard B. Norgaard. London: Routledge, 1994. Pp.xiii + 280; indices. £45 (hardback); £13.99 (paperback). ISBN 0 415 068 614 and 068 622

Norgaard's arguments revolve around the process of evolution in natural and social systems. Familiar descriptions of environmental degradation lead into a detailed critique of modern development. Mainstream economics is identified as central to current unsustainable development (p.18). Diversity in biological and social systems is clearly on the agenda, and the concluding pleas for local governance are predictable. Notable features are a case study of the Amazon, from which the book originated, and the restriction of references to extensive 'biographic essays', potentially useful for teaching.

Among the strongest sections are the critiques of 'modernism'. Modernist, scientific methodology is defined in terms of atomism, mechanicism, universalism, objectivism, and monism. Modernism views nature as a complex machine, with the whole merely the sum of the parts. Thus, knowledge is thought to be gained via dissection and universally applicable. An effective deconstruction of this view is performed. However, universalism is preserved for physical and chemical processes (p.90); conflicting with the rejection of absolute knowledge (p.95). Also, mechanicism is consequentially both 'good' and 'bad', but 'bad' is described as dominant without clarifying why (p.82).

The scientific concept of coevolution is offered as an alternative perspective to modernism, but is itself a strong, over-arching (universal?) principle. In short, coevolution is where two species interact closely so that '... the fitness of genetic traits within each species is largely governed by the dominant genetic traits of the other' (p.26), as in the shape of hummingbirds' beaks and the flowers they feed on. This concept is extended to interactions between socio-economic and environmental systems. 'In the coevolutionary explanation, knowledge, technologies, and social organisation merely change, rather than advance, and the "betterness" of each is only relative to how well it fits with the other values' (p.37). 'Hence myth and social organisation are selected according to their fitness to the environment' (p.40). Values and beliefs which are 'less fit' eventually disappear; leaving cultural traits as selected much like genetic traits (p.41). Later, the text leads into a discussion of knowledge which teeters on Richard Dawkin's idea of memes without it ever being mentioned.

There is much to question here. How is fitness measured? Population size suggests humans match their environment well, but this 'fitness' appears short term. The naturalistic fallacy needs discussion, because the use of coevolution switches from description to prescription. More generally, 'fitness' as a policy goal appears coldly objective, an apparently intuitive ideal, paralleling the way economists employ efficiency. Just as a *laissez-faire* economist designing government policy, Norgaard finds himself, as a coevolutionist, 'in a quandary', because designing a specific future conflicts with his view of process (p.170).

Despite this a green liberal (local democratic) future is recommended, at length, although the reasoning requires little use of coevolution. In fact, how the flaws of modernist, scientific methodology lead to the recommended social structure is unclear.

In addition, coevolution adds no prospect that the prescriptions will be preferable. For example, the 'coevolutionary patchwork quilt of discursive communities', is just as likely to lead to tribalism, ritualised murder and hatred, as to peace and love.

Underlying the failure here is the lack of an explicit treatment of morality and values. What is 'betterness' (p.37) and 'intrinsic rightness' (p.91)? A bibliographic postscript acts as an apologia for the failure to discuss values. Norgaard also recognises, without elaboration, the need for a moral framework (p.179). Norgaard is arguing for harmony with Nature. However, coevolution appears as an objective, universal, scientific concept, obscuring as much as it illuminates. In essence, coevolution is a modernist concept which denies the revisioning of the future appealed for in the initial chapters. I believe that harmony with Nature implies more than a hummingbird being genetically able to stick its proboscis up a flower.

This book encapsulates numerous ideas, encouraging a wide readership. I found much of interest in thought-provoking passages and recommend its use as a source to initiate debate on the process of environmental degradation.

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