

Who Wants Nature to Die?

About: *Virginie Maris, La part sauvage du monde, Seuil*

by *Rémi Beau*

Faced with the Anthropocene, the philosopher Virginie Maris defends a compelling vision of the wilderness. Condemning recent developments in environmental thinking, she urges us to withstand its current refocusing on an exclusively human world.

These are difficult times for nature. On countless occasions, it has been laid to rest by the human and social sciences, and yet it continues to occupy the pages of numerous books and even work its way into the titles of those very books that would seek to do away with it¹. Is nature one of those concepts that the Australian economist John Quiggin calls “zombies” – those dead ideas that continue to walk among us just because we are unable to extricate ourselves from them even while knowing they are false?² Much like the “efficient market”, nature apparently does not exist and yet it continues to play a decisive role in shaping public policies on family, health and the environment. This is what the so-called “constructivist” social critics condemn, who, since the 1960s, have essentially turned their backs on the concept of nature.³

More specifically, in the field of environmental thinking, should—according to this perspective—the focus be on finally ridding ourselves of these “zombies” and learning to live without nature in the Anthropocene, as many authors advocate?⁴ In her latest book,

¹ LATOUR B., *Politiques de la nature: comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*, Paris, la Découverte, "La Découverte poche" series, 2004; DESCOLA P., *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque des sciences humaines" series, 2005, vol. 1/.

² QUIGGIN J., *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk among Us*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

³ HABER S., *Critique de l'antinaturalisme: études sur Foucault, Butler, Habermas*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, "Pratiques théoriques" series, 2006, vol. 1/.

⁴ In his book, recently translated into French, philosopher Timothy Morton calls on us to "let go of this nonexistent ghost" when thinking about nature. MORTON T., *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 5.

philosopher Virginie Maris takes the exact opposite stance. Indeed, as an expert in the area of environmental protection and conservation biology, whose developments she has been studying for a number of years, the author advocates a philosophical position that is both risky and simple: as the Earth enters the age of humans, nature must be defended more than ever!

This recovery exercise is perilous in both philosophical and political terms, because the aforementioned constructivist thinkers had good reasons for wanting to forego the idea of nature. On the one hand, their criticism of nature seen as a realm of objective reality that pre-existed scientific enquiry enabled them to challenge the model of expertise and contemplate the link between science and politics. On the other hand, “constructivist” criticisms proved inarguably useful when it came to identifying those logics of domination that used nature as a support. How, then, can we reconnect with a traditional conception of nature without going back on the emancipatory achievements of constructivist social thought? How can we restore the concept of nature while refusing to reactivate any form of scientism or moralism? These are the questions that guide Virginie Maris along a path that she knows to be precipitous:

“We are conscious of walking with faltering steps along a path flanked by two cliff edges: on one side lies a naive realism which continues to believe that the world is a world, independently of us, and that altruistic scientists merely lift the veil on some eternal truths that nature is supposed to have hidden from us. On the other side lies a reactionary moral naturalism, which opportunistically summons nature and the order of things to define the right way to live, to love, to orgasm or to have children. (p. 12)”

And yet the author is convinced that the theoretical difficulties stemming from the idea of nature, and its political misuse, should not justify abandoning it, at the risk of losing a vital form of support with which to address current ecological challenges. She establishes this theory on the basis of three argumentative strategies. The first consists in re-examining the arguments used against the idea of nature. The second paints a picture of the observable effects of reflections based on the end of nature, developed in particular by certain supporters of the Anthropocene in science, environmental policy and economics. The third and final strategy begins reconstructing a form of critical thought that borrows part of its normativity from the wilderness.

Critiquing the Idea of Nature

What do we mean exactly when we refer to this multi-faceted idea of nature? It is necessary to make some prior semantic clarifications if we hope to understand the theoretical issues involved in the debate. To that end, Virginie Maris briefly retraces the history of the idea of nature, from the pre-Socratics to the present day, and proposes to single out three primary conceptions: nature-totality, nature-normality and nature-alterity (p. 20-21). According to the first meaning, nature refers to “the whole world” or “all observable phenomena”. Under the second, the natural state describes the organisation and “normal

functioning of things”. Under the third and final meaning, nature is defined as the sphere of reality that is separate from humans. According to the author, it is this nature-alterity – which humans did not create – that specifically constitutes the “wild part of the world”.

The main criticism of the idea of nature, to which the philosopher John Stuart Mill lent its conventional form as early as the 19th century⁵, can be expressed through these categories. It consists in denying the legitimacy of the normative character of nature-normality in the social sphere by relying on the other two definitions of nature given above. Nature is either “totality” and therefore includes humans and their activities in such a way that the normative reference to a natural functioning is in no way discriminatory; or else nature is “alterity” and it would be entirely irrational for humans to wish to follow a natural order from which they are by definition excluded. Mill thereby established the fact that the idea of conforming to nature was nonsensical for humans.

For a long time, the nature protection movement has opposed a derived form of Mill’s argument as reiterated by Virginie Maris:

“Those who want to protect nature are sometimes told that humanity is part of nature, and that what humans do is therefore inevitably natural. It would make no sense to try to defend nature against itself; worse still, such an effort would be a contradiction in terms.” (p. 27)

However, while the argument appeared irrefutable when it focused on the principle of conformity to nature, it falls short on this point, since it is only supported by one of the two definitions of nature cited by Mill – nature-totality. As the author highlights, reintroducing nature-alterity here makes it possible to dismiss the objection of the contradiction in terms concerning the desire to protect nature:

“By highlighting the difference between nature-alterity and nature-totality, we understand there to be no inconsistency in wishing to preserve nature-alterity and that doing so would inevitably mean protecting something from human influence.” (p. 27)

Virginie Maris thereby dispels a persistent misunderstanding: the desire to defend nature does not require humans to conform to any natural order. It is actually about defending an almost symmetrical position, one that gives nature the option of not unavoidably yielding to human will. From this perspective, if we agree that the deepest aspiration of any critical project is to break power relations, then the defence of nature-alterity is – as the author argues – no more than a critical project that seeks to protect part of nature from what the eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood calls a “logic of colonisation” (p. 45).

⁵ MILL J.S., *La Nature*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

Science and Politics after the End of Nature

This criticism seems especially important for Virginie Maris because she believes that notions of the end of nature are currently prevailing in all areas of environmental science, from sociology to economics and conservation biology. Everywhere, the call to think beyond the dualism of nature and culture, supported in France by Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola in particular, has apparently been heard. It has been effectively passed on for a decade by defenders of the Anthropocene, for whom the term specifically validates the disappearance of nature-alterity. For the author, the idea of an Anthropocene acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy: by heralding the omnipresence of humans on the planet, we end up forgetting that there are still spaces that have only marginally been modified by humans, thereby hastening their loss. For Maris, thinkers who support the Anthropocene are essentially describing a world according to their own standards, a world that can now be entirely shaped by humans. Under this new form of environmental thinking, nature is dissolved three times over, the victim of a triple absorption:

“technical absorption, through the increasingly indistinguishable blur between the natural and the artificial; economic absorption, through the growing power of economic rationality and market-driven conservation tools; bureaucratic absorption, through the proliferation of monitoring devices and the vast accumulation of data on ecological systems at all levels of organisation and on all spatial scales.”

Adding her voice to Frédéric Neyrat’s criticism of notions of an “after-nature”⁶, Virginie Maris disputes the idea that moving beyond the great sharing between humans and nature is a win-win situation for science and politics⁷. Even though it was supposed to help us avoid the incapacitating choice between the naturalisation of cultures and the acculturation of nature, and ultimately authorise the coherent study of the construction of scientific knowledge and political decisions, the philosopher maintains that it brings these processes under the control of a single model – that of Earth system sciences. In contrast to the democratisation of ecology policies, the goal of putting an end to the concepts of nature and society would ultimately lead to a project of “global management of the planet and its people” (p. 103).

The Critical Force of the Wilderness

For the author, bids to move beyond the dualism of modernity have not kept their promises of emancipation. In fact, they have gone hand-in-hand with a “large-scale

⁶ NEYRAT F., *La Part inconstructible de la Terre. Critique du géo-constructivisme : Critique du géo-constructivisme*, Le Seuil, 2016.

⁷ LATOUR B., *Politiques de la nature*, *op. cit.*

absorption” of nature, which has merely exacerbated social and ecological inequalities. Is it not possible to contemplate a way out of the modern opposition between humans and nature that does not result in the latter’s disappearance? In the end, have we perhaps been too hasty in throwing nature out with the bathwater of essentialist naturalisations? Borrowing once again from the work of Val Plumwood, Virginie Maris outlines a pathway that consists precisely in freeing nature-alterity from the fetters in which its traditional critics confine it. While, in the past, protection of the wilderness may have been the responsibility of neo-colonial institutions, and while it may have been based on fixist ecological concepts or carried out by actors who displayed a certain misanthropy, there is no evidence of a relationship of necessity between the defence of nature and these facts, which, for the author, are historical contingencies. These criticisms may have been legitimate, but Virginie Maris believes they also helped to conceal the critical part of the defence of the wilderness against the industrialisation of the world. As the philosopher reminds us:

“It is clear that [defenders of the wilderness] were fierce critics of their era, but it was usually out of a concern for humanity and society that they condemned a world based on industrialisation and consumerism that was devouring not just the planet but workers, women and slaves.” (p. 218)

By reasserting the value of this critical dimension of the notion of wilderness protection, Virginie Maris shows us a path on which new alliances could be forged between the social criticism of consumerism and productivism, and the defence of the world’s wilderness. The philosopher adds, moreover, that this is precisely the path that is already being marked out by various contemporary protest movements:

“In France, in Sivens, in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, in Roybon, naturalists — and protected species — have become the allies of the *Zadistes*, radical green activists, in their fight against a world shaped by industrial agriculture, dependency on oil (and nuclear energy) and mass tourism.” (p. 222)

Strategic Naturalism and Political Ecology

Overall, Maris’ book takes a stand in favour of what might be termed “strategic naturalism”. This differs from the naive adherence to an idealised conception of nature, while maintaining that it is politically useful to have a common definition with which to designate and defend a part of the world that is disappearing. This position has the undeniable merit of challenging the idea that antinaturalism remains the most fertile middle ground between social criticism and environmental thought. On the contrary, it suggests that reintroducing the question of nature into political ecology does not necessarily lead away from issues of social justice, but instead can bring to light shared points of departure from which to oppose the joint degradation of some ecosystems and the living and working conditions of some human populations. In this strategy, it is nevertheless questionable whether reactivating a

strong notion of wilderness, defined first and foremost by its exteriority in relation to the human world, can alone lead the way to that middle ground.

With this in mind, complementary research is needed, aimed at highlighting how this notion of wilderness is capable of transforming people's attitudes towards natural spaces inhabited by humans. Indeed, as Virginie Maris herself suggests, this plea for wild nature is primarily intended to re-centre an environmental debate that, by dint of replacing reflections on the protection of natural spaces with those on our relationships with non-humans, ends up talking solely about humans. Despite its many benefits, this shift alone cannot tackle contemporary environmental issues. Rather, it clearly re-opens a theoretical and political project that has striven, since the 1960s at least, to establish itself on the ruins of modern dualism, the aim being to link the defence of Earth's diverse life forms with projects of social empowerment, while refusing to believe that one of those objectives might inevitably stem from the other.

Reviewed: Virginie Maris, *La part sauvage du monde*, Seuil, 2018, 272 pp., €19.

First published in laviedesidees.fr on 1st March 2019.

Translated from the French by Susannah Dale.

Published in booksandideas.net, 20 May 2019.