

Book Review *The Nature Spectacle* by Jim Igoe (Journal of Peasant Studies)

The Nature Spectacle: On Images, Money, and Conservation Capitalism by Jim Igoe is, as its Preface states, an ambitious book that seeks to make connections between diverse times and places. The preface also, in many ways, tells more about the background and intention of the book than its chapters do, tying together the author's origins and motivation. Igoe recalls his childhood in St. Louis, Missouri, much of which he spent "in front of a television and at a neighborhood movie theatre" (p. XII), once watching a musical, which was "essentially an extended Chevrolet commercial set among the geysers of Yellowstone" (P. 109).

It is the mix of such absurd and comical observations of commercialism merging with Nature, and much heavier criticism of the capitalist cult of economic growth, development, and also conservation that characterizes *The Nature of Spectacle*. Much of Igoe's outdoor experiences were shaped by green spaces, created in St. Louis as part of commodity exhibits at the 1904 World's Fair. The author admits to feeling both critical and nostalgic of those places that have merged (sub)urban aesthetics with that of industrially developed commercial "spaces" (p. XII) – important concepts that form a leitmotif throughout the book.

What is also significant is the history of Igoe's work with other researchers from the school of 'critical social scientists' (this term was used by the creators of The Future of Conservation survey <http://futureconservation.org/>, reviewed in Kopnina et al 2018). Critical social scientists focus on the potential negative side effects of protected areas for economically or politically marginalized communities. Critical social scientists argue that the impacts of conservation on human wellbeing and inequality should be at the forefront of the conservation debate (Sandbrook 2015). Conservation is presented as a tool of political, economic, capitalist or Western 'elites' to suppress marginal communities *vis-à-vis* nature (Kopnina 2016a). Critical social scientists are skeptical of the ability of neoliberal policy to deliver benefits for both nature and people (Cafaro et al 2017). In critical social science perspective, Nature itself is socially constructed by the same powerful elites (Cronon 1996). Furthermore, nature elements, including endangered species and their habitats are not seen as morally significant (Washington et al 2017), thus their marginalization and even extermination are not seen as unjust (Crist 2012). These critical scholars are represented by almost all inspiring influences that Igoe names – Robert Fletcher, Bram Büscher, Paige West, Rosaleen Duffy, Dan Brockington to name just a few. These associations are significant because, perhaps more than his childhood in Missouri, *The Nature of Spectacle* is largely influenced by the views of critical social scientists.

It is not surprising that Igoe's first chapter starts with the discussion of Marx, as critical social scientists perspective is grounded in a neo-Marxist worldview (Kopnina et al

2018). This worldview is based on interpretation of Marxism as supporting ‘mastery over nature’ (Marx 1981) and the intention to create a “new society . . . to benefit man alone”, which comes “at the expense of external nature” (Schmidt 1971: 155). In interpreting Marx and Guy Debord, Igoe links people’s commodity fetishes that “become visible and dazzling to our eyes” (Marx in Igoe p. 5) to the idea of “spectacular movements”. Igoe defines these as “abstractions (the images) by which we imagine our surroundings are materially confounded with those surroundings through whatever material medium they are projected” (p. 5). Projected is also the other type of elite’s imagery – that of intellectual experts (e.g. ‘scientific knowledge’), which became “bound and congealed in systems of industrial machinery” (Marx in Igoe p. 102). The thesis goes that these “intellectual experts” – scientists, conservationists – sell images to the greedy public generating income from the nature spectacles they create. The nature of money and the money of nature, as well as “images of ecofunctional nature” (p. 107) are at the heart of this book.

To portray nature as a capitalist spectacle, Igoe evokes the work of political ecologists and environmental anthropologists who deconstruct nature as objective reality. In *The Trouble with Wilderness* by Cronon (1996), which Igoe quotes, many issues that neo-Marxist criticism brings forth resurface, including blaming European colonialists in presenting nature as “pristine”. Igoe criticizes the notions of “pristine” - supposedly a defunct idea brandished by romantic (and potentially colonialist and racist) conservationists that cater to rich (eco)-tourists. Indeed, Cronon’s thesis fits well in *The Nature of Spectacle* due to its compatibility with the ethos of divorcing nature of its subjectivity or moral rights.

Igoe’s book highlights the ease with which Nature is appropriated to align with the dominant interests of capital, particularly tourism. It is this “elaborate nexus of conservation and tourism” (p. 9) that appears in all chapters. The tourists – or the ultimate capitalist consumers – greedily perform “consumerism as a kind of sacrament” (p. 102). Igoe skillfully draws on the readers’ predicted distaste (which the author of this review shares) of sly corporate servants who sell “iconic package deals” (p. 39) or “themed journeys in a marketplace of ideas” (p. 83) to Africa, or “celebrity galas” (p. 91). This distaste can turn into a moral outrage when it comes to the discussion of colonial evils of evicting local communities from “their” lands. The fact that these lands might also belong to animals, plants, and other nonhuman entities is ignored in this moral crusade, as these are not thought of as morally significant (Cist 2012; Kopnina 2016a).

There are many (perhaps too many) themes running throughout the book ranging from “transnational tournaments of value” (p. 73) and “endangered species chocolate consumption” (p. 92), to Disney and the Maasai. Throughout the book Igoe makes a number of excellent observations, pointing out how consumerism of any kind – green, responsible, or

ethical – is still consumerism, and creates the rebound effect in “sustaining the unsustainable” (Blüdhorn 2007). As Igoe says, “green consumer appeals highlight ways these prevailing choices could be made to repair some of the damage they do while eschewing their deeper socioecological contradictions” (p. 108). Indeed, while the focus on unbridled lifestyle choices and market-based solutions makes political sense, the emphasis on consumer-responsibility can be seen as a strategy for the powerful to defend their ability to resist the “regulation of resource-intensive, polluting, or socially damaging products” (Isenhour 2010:457). The skepticism about the encroachment of industrialism that glorifies economic growth and reifies consumption, with associated “green” marketing and imagery, is certainly well placed. This opposition to commodification is the point where both critical social scientists and ecocentric conservationists meet (e.g. Crist 2012; Soulé 2013; Cafaro et al 2017; Washington et al 2017; Kopnina et al 2018; Piccolo et al 2018).

However, the conflation of neo-colonial governments and the politics of oppression, green marketing, “the media”, rich tourists and even richer tourist operators, environmental non-governmental organizations, biological conservation, scientific experts, and Western consumers into one large conspiracy against the poor, marginal, oppressed and colonized people is gratuitous at best. No mention is given to the fact that the same capitalist, Western development has contributed to the global spread of modern medicine and intensive agriculture that enabled feeding seven and a half billion people (Kopnina and Washington 2016). Also, there is no mention of how the unintended complacency in destruction of nature has extended to everybody who directly or indirectly deals with “resources” - miners, farmers, loggers, hunters, fishers – and not just the Western consumers, the media, tour operators and other “elites”. Indeed,

“to feed a growing population and enter increasing numbers of people into the consumer class is a formula for completing the Earth’s overhaul into a planet of resources: for ever more intensified uses of land and waterways for habitation, agriculture, and farming; for the continued extraction, exploitation, and harnessing of the natural world; and for the magnification of global trade and travel” (Crist 2012: 152).

As far as solutions are concerned, *The Nature Spectacle* attempts a “radical re-imagining”, suggesting that “mainstream conservation may turn from being a limited project that turns on technocratic management of people, animals, and nature to being part of a movement that for redistribution of power and wealth” (p. 114). Realistically, though, environmental protection under socialist or communist regimes ranging from China to Russia had dismal results for conservation as they still rely on intensive exploitation of resources (Kopnina 2016b). While undeniably there is a need to challenge social inequality and the fixation on economic growth, and restrain corporate advertising and supporting media, redistribution of wealth is not going to protect endangered species and habitats. Even if the

over-consuming middle-classes are somehow convinced to share equally, in biological terms we are still large omnivores on top of the food chain who require vast areas of land for food production. In this context, the “trouble with wilderness” is not that it is imagined by the elites but that it is collectively destroyed, from bushmeat hunters to the CEO’s of oil companies.

Igoe’s overt aversion to “Euro-American imaginaries of nature, which were influenced by English country estates, American national parks, landscape painting, picture postcards, and later nature films and theme parks” (p. 20) and the “technocratic vision of a landscape that functions ecologically and economically” (p. 70) obstruct his own recognition of Nature as a subject. The book misses yet another spectacle – that of the global erasure of what many local cultures have recognized as their kin. Ironically, the indigenous or broadly defined ‘traditional’ cultures used to *see* Nature.

Perhaps we can learn from their way of seeing. If it is too late, pragmatic reforms of current economic systems, e.g. steady state economy and circular economy, as well as voluntary population reduction, can provide more realistic approach to sustainability of the living world. Igoe admits that putting a price on nature, however distasteful, might be most effective. Presently, at least, “it appears more pragmatic to imagine money as the means by which humans will achieve the most optimally satisfying relationship with nature” (p. 114). Without discussing other alternatives, *The Nature of Spectacle* leaves the reader with either a feeling of hopelessness or resigned indifference to the spectacle of what is left of nature.

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