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On the Political Uses of Creative Darkness: Nature, Companion Ecologies, Biopolitics

The relationship between nature and politics informs the tradition of Western political thought since its inception. In its modern formulation, this tradition generally opposes the domains of the natural and the political, characterizing the “natural” in terms of determinism or necessity and the “political” in terms of decision or freedom. Given the ecological crisis we currently face (e.g., climate change), my dissertation pursues a wide range of questions about how theorizing nature and politics in new and different ways can make functional political futures more achievable.

This implies three principal questions for my dissertation. How do concepts of nature affect the apprehension of what is political? How must the concept of nature be revised in light of developments in biology and ecology, and what political theoretical consequences can be extrapolated from such revisions? Conversely, what is the nature of politics, such that various concepts of nature inform it so thoroughly?

In my dissertation, I challenge the modern conception of nature according to which nature is fundamentally deterministic or necessitarian. In contrast, I develop an alternative philosophy of nature, using a reading of the 19th-century German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling to argue that nature, in fact, serves as the very condition of possibility for political freedom. I show in the first two chapters how Schelling provides a novel concept of nature that is thoroughly ecological, material, and productive. In chapter three, I explore how this enables the emergence of free action in the form of embodied subjectivity. If nature and freedom are intertwined in this way, then traditional concerns about determinism and necessity dissolve. In their place, we find new, more generative theoretical prospects, and I pursue these in the next three chapters.

Specifically, I critically engage the history of ecology, as well as writings by American conservation ecologists like Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold. This engagement illustrates how embodied subjectivity is necessarily informed by ecological conditions. The human subject is always already an ecological subject. This implies that core political theoretical concepts (e.g., community and identity) must be reconceived as more generative, open, and pluralistic phenomena than contemporary communitarian political theory typically allows. To flesh out these arguments, I develop the concept of companion ecologies – composite, multimodal phenomena that mosaically constitute ecological conditions and from which the human emerges as a radically dependent, yet active and political, creature.

In the seventh and final chapter, I propose a new normative naturalism – or a theory of econormativity – on the basis of a critical reading of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. From out of Esposito’s work on biopolitics and immunological dynamics, I salvage a naturalistic conception of normative obligation capable of informing politics without introducing unwanted elements of coercion.