

BOOK REVIEWS, NOTES AND COMMENTS

Edited by

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L'INVENZIONE DELLA NATURA
Le avventure di Alexander Von Humboldt, l'eroe perduto della scienza

Andrea Wulf
Roma: Luiss University Press;
2017.
544 p.
ISBN 978-88-6105-262-8
€ 20.00

[The invention of nature. Alexander von Humboldt's new world]



L'INVENZIONE DELLA NATURA SELVAGGIA
Storia di un'idea dal XVIII secolo a oggi

Franco Brevini
Torino: Bollati Boringhieri;
2013.
438 p.
ISBN 978-88-339-2355-0
€ 28.00.

[The invention of wild nature. History of an idea from the XVIII century to today]

Biomedical issues such as wellness “wellbeing”, “psychosocial stability” and psychophysical resilience are fruitfully emerging and progressively penetrating in the biomedical literature. Strictly biomedical issues, such as the recognized role of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) are populating a number of high-standard scientific journals [1]. Overall, the perspective considers the human brain (and the human mind) as a product of a Darwinian evolution process, therefore necessitating a constant, regular and well-balanced contact and immersion within a natural environment. Those environments, representing the ecological niche in which *Homo sapiens* evolved from pre-human ancestors, need to be defined and characterized. In other words, which are (qualitatively and quantitatively) the stimulus sets constituting a “natural environment” for the human mind? Are contemporary urban environments insufficient to provide the expected degree of natural stimulation?

How and when full (or partial) immersion within a natural environment is relevant for people affected by mental suffering, patients having to cope with frank,

overt mental pathologies, babies, children and adolescents passing through delicate and fragile ontogenetic stages? Also, other subjects not endowed by sufficient resilience mechanism are potential targets in such an analytic framework.

However, the definition of a “natural environment” had a very long and even tortuous history. Philosophical perspectives and historical reconstruction may both help experts, scientists and a part of the biomedical readers dealing with human mental suffering [2]. These two books represent valid and well-written volumes, among the classical references to enter these delicate matters, going into the long-lasting debate on nature\ culture determinants of human behaviour and psychophysical wellbeing.

Wulf's book *The invention of nature. Alexander von Humboldt's new world* (the author is a professional historian and writer, and this volume represents his most prestigious success) is focused on the pivotal figure of Alexander von Humboldt, an adventurous explorer described from some of his contemporaries devoted to him as “the most celebrated man after Napoleon”, as reported in the Prologue. This brilliant introduction acts as initial framework for the entire book. One of the explanatory avenues, a basic framework of the volume, exploits the relationship between Humboldt and other cultural pilasters, in order to arrange specific chapters on selected themes: Simon Bolivar & Humboldt (Revolution and nature), Charles Darwin & Humboldt (Evolution and nature), Henry David Thoreau & Humboldt (Poetics, science and nature), George Perkins Marsh & Humboldt (Man and nature), Ernst Haeckel & Humboldt (Heart ecology and nature) and finally John Muir & Humboldt (Protection and nature). A suggestion for readership is chapter XVIII (The Cosmos of Humboldt).

The second volume in this review, *The invention of wild nature. History of an idea from the XVIII century to today* (in Italian) signed by Brevini, a recognized expert of dialectal poetry, also a very passionate and experienced mountaineer, enlists a series of relevant paragraphs: Domination of nature or participation?; The industrial revolution and the concept of wilderness; An agreeable kind of horror; The esthetics of sublime; The Alps and the Arctic lands; Life in the woods and the myth of the Wild; Wild nature and the mass culture.

Some other paragraphs do represent somehow peppered contributions of a never-ending debate on nature\ culture, such as those on environmental ethics (a newborn discipline), primitivism and modernity (of course, given the format of the book, it may inevitably result in a rather superficial scrutiny) and “Grizzly man”, the latter under a zoo-anthropological perspective, inevitably opening a window on the human “fixed action

patterns” and the ethological framework investigating human behavioural patterns. The book provides an exhaustive and well selected reference list.

Overall, for a portion of the biomedical readership interested in understanding the epistemological transformation of the term “natural”, these books may result of some utility. This applies mainly to those whose research and/or social lives deal with (human and animal) mental suffering. A recent book review, also provides some hints in the same perspective [3]. The use and abuse of the term “green” and “natural” presently seem to be in need of a better definition, which of course includes boundaries and limitations.

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LO SPLENDORE CASUALE DELLE MEDUSE

Judith Schallansky
 Traduzione di
 Flavia Pantanella
 Original title: *The giraffe's neck*
 Milano: Nottetempo Ed; 2013
 258 p.
 ISBN 978-88-7452-4198
 € 16,50

[*The random splendor of
 jellyfish*]

The book softly proposes three main pathways to the reader.

The first is addressed to educators in the biomedical field since it proposes a magnificent pondering on

the ultimate sense of the technical and personal skills required by a biologist teacher, Professor Inge Lohmark (a character of the book), willing to provide a solid education to her adolescents pupils. She is a total failure, with her rigidity and anger towards her young students. She proposes a spoiled narrative of biological and biomedical topics; she looks at her class as a kind of ever-competing young males and females, despite the fact that she nearly hates the most talented ones. At the very end of the book she is almost expelled by her decadent school. The book testifies the silent battle between Prof. Lohmark and her pedagogical opposite Prof. Schwanneke, arts teacher, who approaches the students in a totally different way. In the school corridor, the two women “fight” on how to position artistic manufactures and posters with scientific schemes. Eventually, on the same wall, a Monet’s painting is positioned close to a Haeckel’s jellyfish illustration (wherein the Italian title of the book).

The second plan is the most succeeded interpretation which has to do with her inflexible Darwinian reading of any living event. With a strict sociobiological approach she attempts to interpret the individual personality, the social skills, the diverse effects of the various socio-economical environments to explain the different pathways of each of her pupils. Moreover, all the natural scenarios, the main cultural and socio-economical constraints of the area where the school is located are interpreted as a stereotyped selection for the survival of the fittest. Not coincidentally, this gymnasium is entitled to Charles Darwin himself. These parts, which permeate the entire volume, are very instructive about a few current socio-economical and ecological styles of analysis, yet soaked by a profound reductionist thought.

A third, historical reflection emerging from this nice and brilliant book, regards the quite recent changes occurred in Germany. The school, in the former teaching institution belongs to the East Germany. Despite the profound changes occurred in the meanwhile, Professor Lohmark is still looking for analogies somehow embedded into the mind of mature professors and overall in the architecture of the building. It is in fact a classical Eastern-European construction.

The Italian translation of this volume has been awarded the Literary prize “Giuseppe Acerbi” in 2021, among others. The translator Flavia Pantanella made a really magnificent job, dealing with a particularly difficult narrative style, which intertwines short phrases with diverse perspective inputs: a kind of mixture between biology, psychology, ecology, human and animal sociology, and so on.

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