
VII. BOOK REVIEW

Werner Bätzing, *Homo Destructor. Eine Mensch–Umwelt–Geschichte. Von der Entstehung des Menschen zur Zerstörung der Welt*, 2023, München C.H. Beck Verlag, 463 pp., €32, ISBN 9783406806681

Ulrich Arnswald, arnswald@ulrich-arnswald.de
(PD, Dr., Universität Innsbruck)

The observation that humans are by nature “Homo Destructor” is neither new nor surprising. It is also not limited to the relationship between humans and the environment, but rather a truism that emerged already with twentieth-century catastrophes in the form of murders, mass murders, terrorist attacks, and wars—in other words, everything that exceeds the destruction of the environment. Whether humans will become a misguided product of evolution, as Werner Bätzing asks,¹ seems unlikely: the strange creature that is humankind is also known as a “Homo Constructor” or “Homo Creator,” which shows that humanity's destructive nature is only one of its many facets.

However, Bätzing also argues against this view, pointing out that the first human societies, which were farming societies, had not yet destroyed nature,² raising the question of how they managed without causing environmental damage. This is where the author comes in. In his book, Bätzing aims to show that we can only overcome the current environmental crises if we understand the course of human history. The book therefore attempts to identify and understand the important turning points in the history of the relationship between humans and the environment, starting not from the end, but instead at its origins.³

¹ Werner Bätzing: *Homo Destructor. Eine Mensch–Umwelt–Geschichte. Von der Entstehung des Menschen zur Zerstörung der Welt* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag), 36. All translations from the German are by the reviewer.

² Ibid., 37.

³ Ibid., 39.

In accordance with this objective, the author traces the history of humankind and the environment from its beginnings to the present day, focusing on human intervention into nature and the environment. He covers everything from hunter-gatherer societies to farming societies, city-states and large empires, right up to modern industrial society and today's service-based societies. This narrative begins with a description of how people lived in their respective eras and how they earned a living. Later, the author adds economics, politics, society, space, and culture. This "networked overall perspective," as the author calls it, is based on findings drawn from various fields of expertise.

In broad terms, human development can be summarized as follows:

At the beginnings of evolution, around three million years ago, humans were deficient creatures that were not specialized in any habitat and therefore made very few changes to their environment. This meant that humans were not dependent on a specific habitat but instead lived as hunters and gatherers in the transition zone between the tropical rainforest and the humid savannah, practicing subsistence farming. The situation slowly changed with the advent of settled life and the beginning of agriculture in the form of crop cultivation and livestock breeding. This marked the beginning of agriculture as well as the beginning of a surplus economy. Step by step, the environment became changeable, and nature was transformed into cultivated landscapes for use. Man created his own products: culture, fields were cultivated, houses were built, animals were domesticated. A kind of "second nature" emerged. Nevertheless, even during this period of agrarian societies, there was hardly any destruction of nature or the environment, as people were dependent on nature's ability to reproduce itself. Even the era of cities and large empires hardly altered this arrangement, even though it marked the first time that humans detached themselves from the observation of nature and began exploiting it by consuming natural resources without reproducing them. With the cities came material abundance and the emergence of property ownership. This led to hierarchies and the domination of some people over other people, and violence, including warfare, became a means of domination. Even though city dwellers became dependent on the surrounding countryside for food and raw materials, their impact on nature and the environment was still marginal and unproblematic in terms of environmental history.

In all three phases, people only hunted, gathered, and cultivated as much as they needed or could consume themselves, practicing a kind of “cultural self-restraint.” According to Bätzing, the major turning point in the history of the relationship between humans and the environment occurred with the Enlightenment, which promoted the systematic application of scientific research and rational methods.⁴ This led to a way of thinking and acting at the beginning of industrialization that exploited nature and the environment without considering the consequences for the future. The Enlightenment led to the Industrial Revolution, which in turn led to the exploitation of nature and the massive use of fossil fuels. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution changed the economic system: instead of self-sufficiency in essential material goods, a focus on unlimited economic growth emerged, driven by the interest-based monetary system.⁵ Self-sufficiency was thus replaced by the constant pursuit of greater prosperity through the acquisition of goods.

Consumption replaced active engagement in the world. The ideal of instant gratification prevailed, consumption became a source of identity, and needs grew constantly. Nature lost “all meaning and (inner) value” and became an infinitely available material that people could use, exploit, and consume at will.⁶ This led to a compulsion to grow, which for the first time in human history resulted in the economy becoming independent of society—a trend that has accelerated significantly since around the 1950s, as the economy would otherwise have been threatened with contraction,⁷ leading to a steady increase in the use and consumption of resources. Money and material goods gradually replaced people's sense of self and their relationship to the world.⁸

The author perceives a further phase in the twentieth century, starting around the 1970s, in the shift from an industrial society to a service society, even though industrial production continued. Since then, the service sector has grown massively. As a result, more potential areas for services are emerging. This change further exacerbates the exploitation of nature and the environment, as it affects all sectors of the economy and ultimately the entire world. Economic growth becomes an end in it-

⁴ Ibid., 263.

⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁶ Ibid., 248.

⁷ Ibid., 269, 279.

⁸ Ibid., 329.

self. Due to their belief in infinite growth, today's societies reject any limitation as an "unacceptable restriction of their possibilities."⁹ Nature is seen as a source of energy and raw materials that can be used at will. The exploitation of nature continues to increase. This step marked the birth of today's modern consumer, whose needs constantly grow and know no bounds, inevitably leading to ever greater ecological problems, rooted in humanity's increasing appropriation of nature.

In the course of human development, mankind's motto has changed dramatically. For the first humans, it was "Hunt as much as you need"; today's motto is "Consume as much as you can." In our present-day societies, nature appears as an infinite resource that can be exploited following the principles of reason. In this phase, which Bätzing refers to as the current service society, environmental pollution has reached a new level: traffic congestion, enormous energy consumption, consumption of raw materials, pollution from plastic waste, the sharp rise in carbon dioxide concentrations in the Earth's atmosphere, nuclear radiation, genetic engineering, global warming, increase in extreme weather events, damage to ecosystems, noise and light pollution. In addition, the health and nutritional well-being of many people is also affected. The author sees a new quality in the relationship between people and the environment, above all as some harms cannot be reversed. His thesis is that we are destroying our livelihood because we no longer see ourselves as a part of living nature. If we did, we would preserve our natural resources.

However, since only humans are capable of developing unlimited needs on the one hand and adapting to different habitats on the other, Bätzing remains optimistic. He believes that we can overcome the current environmental and climate crisis if we follow the fundamental concept of cultural self-restraint that he proposes. To do this, we must discover the starting point for a new way of dealing with nature, one that aims at an economy that primarily serves to provide people with essential goods and use energy mindfully. This is the only way we can reconcile our way of life with ecological sustainability.

Bätzing's negative conclusion follows from his view that the development he has traced cannot be halted by mitigating the effects of human activity on the environment or by leaving a small part of the

⁹ Ibid., 357.

Earth unused and returning it to nature. In a finite world, it is not possible to live and do business without boundaries. “Green growth” cannot therefore solve the problems.

However, an optimistic conclusion lies in the answer to the book’s central question: are humans inherently destructive to the environment? According to Bätzing, Homo Destructor does not have to have the last word. The boundless growth of the economy and our personal needs must be limited so that we can treat nature and the environment in an ecologically sensible way. If they limit themselves, humans can change nature without destroying it. This is a necessity, especially since the Earth is known to be a limited space.¹⁰

Bätzing draws another positive aspect from this perspective: a society without environmental destruction would integrate individuals more strongly into community tasks than our present societies do. It is imperative to understand the environment and nature, as well as the use of their resources, as public goods that affect everyone.¹¹

The fundamental insights of Bätzing’s history of humanity and the environment are that environmental problems correspond to the basic principles of the economy, society, and land use, and that there is no alternative to this economic system, even though it is based on false assumptions that will inevitably force it to change in the future.¹² The fact that the massive destruction of nature has only been happening for a very short period of time, beginning around 1950, gives Bätzing hope that the environmental crisis can still be brought under control despite all the escalations. To prevent humans ultimately becoming Homo Destructor, the destroyer of their own existence, self-restraint and finding the right balance are the urgent tasks of our time.

Werner Bätzing manages to connect the many different aspects of a complex topic so that the problems currently facing humanity, and their causes, become comprehensible. The book is insightful, often in-

¹⁰ Cf. Hans Lenk and Matthias Maring, *Natur – Umwelt – Ethik* (Münster; Hamburg; London: LIT Verlag, 2002).

¹¹ Cf. Ulrich Arnswald, “Öffentliche *versus* private Güter. Philosophische Gedanken zur ökonomischen Theorie der öffentlichen Güter und zu Gemeinschaftsgütern als politische Güter,” in Matthias Maring, ed., *Globale öffentliche Güter in interdisziplinären Perspektiven* (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2012), 267-298.

¹² Cf. Hans Lenk, *Umweltverträglichkeit und Menschenzuträglichkeit. Die neue Verantwortung für unsere Umwelt und Zukunft* (Karlsruhe: Universitätsverlag Karlsruhe, 2009).

structive, and provides readers with the necessary historical background. The work is particularly noteworthy for its skillful integration of facts from various fields of knowledge, presenting and connecting them in a way that is understandable even to non-specialists.