

Fragments of anti-fragmentary views of the World

Edited by Dieter Steiner and Markus Nauser

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The sub-title reflects the style of this important, scholarly book: it is heavy going and cumbersome to read, yet contains a wealth of perception, analyses and insights into how society might change towards ecologically sound behaviour. Of course human ecology is anti-fragmentary; of course one cannot achieve any exhaustive coverage of 'human ecology' in one volume, so fragments must suffice. I am left with the wish that the erudite thoughts presented here, could be discussed in more straightforward language.

The two editors both have a background in geography. The book has its origins in a Working Group to "re-examine the possibilities of creating a bridge between natural science oriented physical geography and social science oriented human geography." But the work goes much further than this aim would suggest, in attempting, successfully, "to provide educational material for those who wish to become [integrated] scientists in the field of human ecology."

The book is divided into 4 parts, on human ecology as a transdisciplinary approach, on "the implicit and the explicit" as a philosophical examination, on "Structuration" of society, and on the regional dimension, in all 22 chapters by different authors including the editors. Apologies are given for two important omissions: one is that the work deals only with Western civilisation and its development, and the non-Western World is not considered. The excuse is that it might be best to understand our world first, so that any advice given would not lead to the same mistakes as we made. The other omission is the gender issues in our society; when they embarked on their projects in human ecology, the editors were not aware of the significance of this issue; they are now!

Nevertheless, there is so much thought-provoking material, that I can give here only some fragments, with many omissions.

The themes of most of the book are sociological; the editors consider that the human ecological predicament requires social solutions. The first chapters lay a basis with an "human ecological triangle" between Environment (E), Society (S) and Person (P); connections between E and P and between S and P are recursive, in the sense that the interactions between them serve for further interactions to develop. I would have thought that this is equally true for E and S, but the authors claim that this is merely a "structural coupling". The interactions within this triangle, and fuller more detailed versions, are developed from many viewpoints, philosophical, psychological, economic and sociological. Several chapters describe and analyse Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration – a circularly connected concept of the duality of persons and structures. This theory concerning stability and change within society is strictly a social theory; it is the authors' innovation to apply this within human ecology, to understand why society behaves in such ecological damaging ways, and what changes are needed to provide better reasons for hope. The first parts lead up to this, the later chapters analyse the scope and consequences. While only fragments were indicated, the whole yet presents an authoritative, scholarly and comprehensive overview and understanding. Human ecology nevertheless means so many things to different people, that there are many other ways to present related ideas. One example, would be Gerald Young's "Conceptual framework for an interdisciplinary human ecology" (1989).* This also has a strong sociological base, and would have made a valuable chapter for the current work. Yet its scope is quite different.

There are chapters on related topics, including one on ecological economics, with a discussion of the inadequacy of internalising of externalities, and the alternative of Howard Odum's analyses in terms of "eMergy". There is a valuable review on Aids.

Every chapter is thoroughly annotated with notes, and with very full references. For the Anglophone world, the references to German works are especially welcome, as these are too often neglected in the English literature.

There is no question that this book is required reading for the serious scholar on all aspects of the "holistic, integrative interpretation of those processes, products orders and mediating factors that regulate natural and human ecosystems at all scales of the earth's surface and atmosphere." Yet, as this (Lawrence's) definition of human ecology indicates, the language throughout is heavy-going, full of sociological jargon, and so very difficult to follow. I wonder whether equally thought-provoking concepts could not be presented in clearer, direct and simpler language.

There seem to me two serious omissions, other than those admitted, even in a work that only claims to be "fragments."

One is the distinction between knowledge, the characteristics of which are discussed at length (there are 19 references to knowledge in the index) and understanding, which many of the concepts are actually about (no references in the index). The other, implied but not explicit, is the unique character of the human ecological predicament, as the only species ever to be obliged to self-regulate, consciously. What might be the structure of a society that can do that, and how might we get there?

*Young, G.L. (1989) A conceptual framework for an interdisciplinary human ecology" *Acta Oecologiae Hominis*, 1.

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