A review of Deborah Bird Rose’s ‘Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation’

by Val Plumwood

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high-consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively. We struggle to adjust because we’re still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and ‘dead’ nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies. The real threat is not so much global warming itself, which there might still be a chance to head off, as our own inability to see past the post-enlightenment energy, control and consumption extravaganza we so naively identify with the good, civilised life to a sustainable form of human culture. The time of Homo reflectus, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come. Homo faber, the thoughtless tinkerer, is clearly not going to make it. We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all.

This is where studies of Indigenous culture can be so helpful, challenging the conceptual blockages that keep our minds closed to options for change. Reports from a Wild Country is a marvellous contribution to the key area of culture and sustainability, as a profound and important account of alternatives to western modernity that are highly relevant to our current plight. Deborah Bird Rose, long-time student and friend of the Yarralin people of the Victoria River country, outlines a project that is dialogical and recuperative, humble, one that ‘seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims towards engagement and disclosure’. Nevertheless, Rose’s sophisticated and skillful philosophical analysis of conceptual frameworks of time, country, life and death shows that Indigenous concepts of human identity allow forms of ecological respect, restraint and recognition the dominant culture has lost sight of or never achieved.

There are those who deny that Indigenous culture has anything of value to tell us about ecological adaptation, while others can only see learning in terms of ‘stealing’ Indigenous power, ideas or identity. Rose steers a helpful and well-judged course between various such hazards that threaten the project. She notes that settlers can be attracted to Indigenous ideas for instrumental reasons that subtly continue the pattern of exploitation. But Rose does not follow the fashion for dismissing all desire to learn from Indigenous culture as ‘appropriation’, a mere cynical ploy designed to allow settlers to avoid acknowledging the wrongs we have done. The reader is never spared the hard knowledge of those wrongs, that settlers are here in this land through dispossession and death, ‘Settler societies are brought into being through invasion: death and silence pervade and gird the whole project’ (p. 58). But this hard knowledge is balanced with the promise that the respectful seeker can learn much, not least about our own sources of violence, indifference and endless deferral to the future. The ground itself, Rose says, holds traces not only of our damage but also of better possibilities (p. 8).

The opening chapters of the book’s first section establish the philosophical framework, and the main themes — resilience, violence, counter-modernity, time and death. These themes are discussed in the light of an ethics of connection based on feminist thought and on the work of Levinas (p. 24), in which life with others is inherently tangled in responsibility, and indifference to or justification of the suffering of others is at the root of all immorality. Rose adds ‘Our Australian context presses us to consider not only the justification of others’ pain but the denial of it as well’ (p. 14).

A fascinating chapter illuminates the master western narrative of progress naturalised in our concepts of time and economy, what Bauman calls the calculus of progress, in which ‘present distress can be claimed to be leading towards, and be justified by, a more perfect future’. The pervasively future-orientated societies of the west define an ontological break that determines that the past is finished (p. 17). For example, the major ontological disjunctive moment for Christians consists of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, transfiguring the conditions of life on earth for believers. Rose’s argument is that western colonising practice ‘replicates this pattern as the foundational template for frontier time, space and action’ (p. 59) — Year Zero — a framework that discounts those who came before and fosters ingratitude and delusions of disconnection.

Indigenous society, by contrast, has a basic orientation towards origins (p. 55) rather than towards a future state. The implications of this are profound. Far from the past, the Dreaming, being finished, ‘its action continues in the present in the bodies of all living things whose origins are in the Dreaming, (p. 56) while Dreaming action continues in the present through ceremony, creation, song and other forms of creative memory and connection. ‘Memory, place, dead bodies and genealogies hold the stories that tell the histories that are not erased, and that refuse erasure. Painful as they are, they also constitute relationships of moral responsibility, binding people into the country and the generations of their lives.’ (p. 57)

It is in their thinking about death and life that we find perhaps the greatest philosophical achievements of these Indigenous cultures. The Western problematic of death — where the essential self is disembodied spirit — poses a false choice of continuity, even eternity, in the realm of the spirit, versus the reductive materialist concept of death as the complete ending of the story of the material, embodied self. Both horns of this dilemma exact a terrible price, alienation from the earth in the first case and the loss of meaning in the second. Indigenous concepts of self and death succeed in breaking this pernicious false choice and suggesting satisfying and ecologically responsive forms of continuity with the earth. By understanding life as in circulation, as a gift from a community of ancestors, we can see death as a natural and ancestral community of origins. In place of the western war of life against death whose battleground has been variously the spirit-identified afterlife and the reduced, medicalised material life, the Indigenous imaginary sees death as part of life, partly through narrative and connection, and partly because death is a return to the (highly narrativised) land that nurtures life.

Such a vision of death fosters an imaginary of the land as a ‘nourishing terrain’, and of death as a nurturing, material continuity with ecological others, especially the lives and landforms of country. We grasp these solutions and glimpse their transformative power, only to learn in the last section that they are under siege from western-based organisations and religions that are working — still — to undermine such worldviews and impose their own maladaptive ones. Much of this sad conflict between ‘church way’ and ‘culture way’ people and interpretations is taking place precisely around these concepts and practices of human identity, death and country, concepts the west has interpreted in alienated ways hostile to the earth. But through this inspiring book the original Yarralin vision may yet contribute to finding a better way for our species.
A Review of Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics of Decolonisation*, Article, Jan 2007. Finally, in so far as this project coincides with other academic attempts at 'decolonising trauma theory', its other aim has been to create a collaborative network in Australia and overseas for researchers engaged in similar pursuits, and to organize collaborative exchanges of ideas, organizing shared conversations and research visits, and present together at conferences. [more]. *Reports From a Wild Count* has been added to your Cart. Add to Cart. Buy Now. Turn on 1-Click ordering for this browser. Buy Used. $27.35 + $3.99 shipping. Deborah Bird Rose is a senior research scholar and prize winning author of *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* among other books. Read more. Product details. Paperback: 256 pages. Publisher: University of New South Wales Press (October 1, 2004). Language: English. ISBN-10: 0868407984. Rose, Deborah Bird. / *Reports from a wild country: ethics for decolonisation*. Sydney : UNSW Press, 2004. @book{87554a7d4ef0409b99c0cabc7c7d2965, title = "Reports from a wild country: ethics for decolonisation", abstract = "Explores some of Australia’s major ethical challenges. Written in the midst of rapid social and environmental change and in a time of uncertainty and division, it offers powerful stories and arguments for ethical choice and commitment. The focus is on reconciliation between Indigenous and ‘Settler’ peoples, and with nature.” The focus is on reconciliation between Indigenous and ‘Settler’ peoples, and with nature. KW - Decolonisation—Australia.