

Bruce, Jennings. *Ecological Governance: Toward a New Social Contract with the Earth* by Bruce Jennings, Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2016.

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Where do we stand when political leaders of the world's largest economic power now relegate the consequences of global warming to the dustbin of history? How should we act when yearly Earth Day events or Car-Free Days can only do as much to tackle the disastrous challenges for our ecological and human life systems? Bruce Jennings' *Ecological Governance* is straightforward: "Humanity is at war with the planet," he writes (p. 2) An engaging and refreshing contribution that intellectually underpins one of humanity's most pressing problems, the book revolves around a problem-solution axis: what are the root causes of the environmental damage, and how can we tackle them? Jennings situates the problem in the so-called "consumptive social contract," and finds the answer in the "ecological social contract." This review will be likewise organized: the two types of social contract will be discussed vis-à-vis each other, after which the overall structure of the book will be presented.

The "consumptive social contract" has created unprecedented damage

to all forms of life on Earth, human and non-human. According to Jennings, this contract refers to a way of looking at the world which has emerged out of entangling processes of modernization, Enlightenment, and globalization – to cite a few. (p. 109) It is a *contract* because it is in essence “a pact for cooperative, mutually beneficial living together by the performance of humans actions of certain kinds and by the omission of others” (p. 18). It has been solidified by the historical development of legal institutions, cultural values, and politico-economic structures over the last centuries. It is *consumptive* because the fundamental premise on which it relies is that every individual human being needs “control and consumption as the basis for life, liberty and happiness,” both materially and for human capabilities (p. 18). The goal is to acquire and pursue desire, self-interest, or advantages to one’s full extent. Jennings is not limited to abstract thinking, and provides throughout the book real-life analogies that represent this worldview. For example, he argues convincingly how the “privatization of the transcendence” led to a void in which any “appeal[s] to a context of being or experience or value larger than ourselves has lost its self-evident or straightforward attraction” (p. 63). Suspicion arouses instantly if one mentions ideas of public interest or common good, things that are useless for self-interest and financially profitable goals (p.118-119). All of this is no longer sustainable. Virtually all of humanity’s economic mode of production and living are self-destructive in the long term, and their consequences will be increasingly more palpable in the near future. Lowering carbon energy usage and technological innovation are inadequate responses with limited effects.

The solution must be found elsewhere, namely in the so-called “ecological social contract.” One of the greatest insights of the book is Jennings’s engagement and rethinking of the pillars on which our current societies rest. For him, the solutions cannot be found outside humanity, but are intrinsically linked to ethical principles, rules, and norms,

expressed in concepts such as wealth, property, freedom, citizenship, and political governance. Through a critical reading of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Alexander Tocqueville, inter alia, Jennings's proposal is primarily centered around the goal of reinvigorating the links between humans and nature. As such, one key problem is that "we think of the human realm as set apart from the rest of the world, and we believe that we can manipulate nature, engineering it as we see fit in accordance with what we find meaningful and valuable" (p. 3). The nature is not an "endless dumbing ground," or free source of energy. Rather, it requires an ontological and relational turn to see ourselves not apart from the earth's biophysical systems, but as a species ultimately dependent upon it. We do not live off them, but *within* them (p. 4). From this point of view, more humble lifestyles or more effective state apparatuses to counter problems will not do the job enough.

What follows is an overview of the structure of the book, and some minor points that could be raised throughout the reading. The book consists out of four parts that comprehensively detect the problems and dissect the building blocks of the new ecological contract step by step. The reader will not be troubled in following the author's narrative and thoughts. Part I starts by laying out the basic notions of a social contract (its philosophical assumptions and normative functions), and how the (current consumption) contract determines the political economy we live with. While the short length of the chapter feels somewhat uneasy compared to the longer and in-depth sections, it nevertheless sets out the essence of an ecological contract, and how it differs from the consumption counterpart. Here, Jennings follows ecological economist Peter Victor's assumptions, that economies are open systems prevailing through "the inflow and outflow of energy and material from and to its environment" (p. 25-26). The issue, however, is that Earth is a closed system that has a limited tolerance in processing "material waste and excess energy," and that we are at the boundaries or already exceeding

the limits (p. 27).

Part II, named “nature in humans,” pursues a much more philosophical inquiry into the writings of Hobbes and Rousseau. Jennings sees Hobbes as a pioneer in establishing the consumptive contract, while Rousseau planted the seeds of the ecological contract. As such, Hobbes deemed it necessary to create a common sovereign with whom individuals would trade their “natural equality and democratic citizenship” for “economic growth and material affluence” (p. 39-41). Rousseau, on the other hand, developed a democratic version of the social contract. Humanity can decide its cultural orientation if it follows the “care for the self” principle (*amour-de-soi*), and has compassion for suffering (*pitié*) (p. 58-59). Humans, for Rousseau and for Jennings, need a “sense of something larger than themselves” to create a world that is not detrimental to their living (p. 77).

Part III is perhaps the most engaging, given that it connects the previous philosophical concepts with real societal issues. It sets out the terms of an ecological contract by reconfiguring such ontologically fundamental concepts as wealth, property, freedom, citizenship, and political governance. Namely, it tries to create a system of wealth with a balance between plenitude and frugality; a system where commodities are replaced by the idea of commons; a system that abandons the idea of non-interference and self-sufficiency, but supports on relationality and interdependence; and a system where citizenship stands for right relationship and recognition (p. 9). However, while this chapter finds the most balanced relationship between theory and practice, the readers’ appetite for concrete action and practical orientation might not be satisfied entirely. How can someone, for example, enact Jennings’s proposals in a world where humanity is not represented as one unitary and rational actor, but consists out of fractured political and socio-economic interest groups? Jennings clearly informs the reader that he does not have a checklist of specific policies, and intends to contribute to

the discussion on “fundamental ideas and concepts offering ethical justification” (p. 6-7). At the same time, Jennings may have discussed some the already existing solutions to the environmental damage, in particular those that he sees fit within his own intellectual discussion (fn. 9, p. 6).

The final part of the book sheds light on the political and governance aspects of the ecological contract. Jennings advocates the governance of an ecological democracy “that is democratic and deliberative in its substance[,] but not necessarily completely direct or representational in an electoral sense in all of its institutional forms” (p. 191). Democratic citizens should not act as passive electoral consumers, but collectively find the most appropriate way to ensure the common good, and to have the integrity for the biotopic community of which they are part (p. 184). At the same time, he discusses other possibilities, such as “ecological authoritarianism” and “ecological constitutionalism,” by highlighting their advantages and disadvantages.

To conclude, the reader will find a very rich and intellectual oeuvre, in which the author maturely flows through an abundance of inspiring scholarly writings. Throughout the reading journey, one will encounter discussion and dialogue with people from political, economic, or environmental backgrounds, from Plato’s *Republic* to Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*. And although the book is not without minor shortcomings, it draws a balanced picture of the dangers, hopes, and possibilities that present-day societies have to combat looming environmental disasters.