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Book Review: Ian Morris. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 400 pp.



In *Why the West Rules—For Now* (2010), the archaeologist and historian Ian Morris argued that geography has been the primary factor shaping the relative political and cultural power of Asian and European civilizations over the last fifteen millennia. *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* continues in this same controversially materialist and macro-historical vein. In this new book, Morris outlines “a general theory of the cultural evolution of human values across the last twenty thousand years” (3), which he argues has been driven by cultural adaptation to changes in the way societies “captur[e] energy from the world” (4). The book developed out of Morris’s 2012 Princeton Tanner Lectures, and the second half of the volume contains four critical responses (by classicist Richard Seaford, historian Jonathan Spence, philosopher Christine Korsgaard, and novelist Margaret Atwood), as well as Morris’s own response to this commentary.

“Values,” in Morris’s functionalist account, are “adaptive traits, which people adjust to maximize their effectiveness” at group survival (10). Because different energy capture practices pose different challenges, Morris argues that “the competitive process of cultural evolution” dictates that all societies organized around a given form of energy capture will eventually adopt “whatever values work best” (14) to promote survival in that situation. For example, farming, the practice of capturing energy from domesticated plants and animals, requires a large work force and complex divisions of labor; Morris suggests that farming thus pushes communities to adopt values compatible with stable and extensive social hierarchies, including an acceptance of social inequality and an aversion to interpersonal violence. One could of course engage in farming without such values, but Morris argues that the material realities of farming are such that communities with these values are more likely to survive than those with other values, and that it thus becomes overwhelmingly likely that all farming societies will eventually adopt the same survival-optimized value system. Thus the value system in place at any given point in history will be the one that best promotes collective survival in the context of the particular material realities of that moment; or, as Morris puts it, “each age gets the thought it needs” (24).

After outlining this premise, Morris identifies three stages of human history: the age of foragers, of farmers, and of fossil fuel users. Each of these evolutionary stages involves unique material challenges and a corresponding value

system. Prehistoric foragers “value equality over most kinds of hierarchy and are quite tolerant of violence” (4); farmers—a category that for Morris includes “pretty much everyone who lived in the ten thousand years before AD 1800” (217)—value “hierarchy over equality and are less tolerant of violence” (4); and the citizens of modern fossil-fuel societies “tend to value equality of most kinds over hierarchy and to be very intolerant of violence” (4). Morris acknowledges that cultural differences exist within each of these categories, but argues that these differences represent variations on basic global patterns. “[T]o make sense of the vast, confusing mass of historical and anthropological material,” he writes, “I clustered both energy capture and values into three ideal types [. . .] what ideal types lose in reality, they make up for in clarity” (240). This abstraction, he argues, “is the price we have to pay if we are to identify causes behind the chaos of real life” (9).

Jonathan Spence offers a sharp rebuke to this methodological claim in his response, objecting to “a certain blandness to [Morris’s] picture of the world,” which provides no “deeper feeling of ‘what it was like’” to live in any of the historical societies discussed (181). Richard Seaford makes a similar point; focusing on the category of farming societies, Seaford identifies classical Athens in particular as an exception to the type that “cannot be marginalized as merely ‘qualifying’ rather than challenging the model” (175). Morris responds to these critiques by reiterating an argument made in his opening chapter: “rather than denying the obvious fact of my reductionism, I want to embrace the charge. My defense is that *all* scholarship is reductionist [. . .] The question we should be asking is not whether [a scholar] is being reductionist—the answer is always yes—but what level of reduction is required to resolve the problem being posed” (9-10; italics original). It is true that even the most diligent scholar must work, to some extent, with abstractions; the world is bottomlessly complicated, and scholarly language is no more capable of perfect mimesis than any other representational system. But Morris’s rather flippant response to the suggestion that he has gone too far in the direction of abstraction is irresponsible. The question that we should ask of scholarship is not, how well did it make use of reductionism to abstract clarity from the confusions of the real, but rather, how well did it avoid the worst of reductionism’s obfuscatory pitfalls? Spence and Seaford suggest, and I agree, that Morris has failed to avoid these pitfalls, and that his ideal types obscure more than they reveal.

There is not sufficient space here to summarize the entire dialogue between Morris and his respondents, including Christine Korsgaard’s critique of his theory of values and Margaret Atwood’s discussion of the future of energy capture, but I do want to touch on one other point raised in the exchange, involving the question of ideology. Seaford argues that Morris is effectively naturalizing the ideologies of late capitalism through his uncritical assumption that competition and the maximizing of efficiency are the processes that drive all forms of cultural evolution, and that his arguments are thus “closer to the ideas of our ruling class than to the thought that our age needs” (178). Morris responds by dismissing the charge,

equating critiques of ideology to Dorothy searching for a manipulative wizard behind the curtain in Oz, and then asserting that this wizard is “a figment of modern academics’ imaginations” (249). Denying that ideology plays any substantial role in shaping societies, Morris argues instead for the transhistorical primacy of “common sense,” which he defines first as “the ability to learn from experience” (249) and later explicitly equates with “embrac[ing] markets and wage labor” (251). Readers will have to judge this response for themselves, but it seems to me to reveal a penchant for reductive reasoning that extends beyond the construction of theoretical models to inform—and limit—both Morris’s willingness to engage with his critics and his insights into contemporary politics.

Another troubling aspect of Morris’s argument is that despite its grand scope—he claims that his framework describes the values of “the overwhelming majority (probably 95 percent) of all the people who have ever lived” (10)—it fails to treat contemporary fossil fuel society as a truly global phenomenon. This failure is evident in an anecdote Morris offers as an illustration of his thesis. On a research trip to Kenya, Morris relates, he and his travel companion “took our full-blown fossil-fuel graduate-student values with us, and were particularly keen not to be like the colonialist anthropologists of yesteryear, with staffs of underpaid locals carrying their belongings around” (14); once on the ground, however, they found that they were unable to fend for themselves, and hired local women to fetch their water and cook. Morris argues that this proves the truth of his argument that “each age gets the thought it needs”: in Kenya, a farming society, he was obliged to accept and value social hierarchy, and to discard the ideas about social equality he had learned to value in the fossil-fuel society of England. But Kenya and England do not belong to different ages. Kenya and the rest of the “developing world” are integral parts of the fossil fuel economy: resources extracted from the global south fuel the industrialized global north. If a coherent set of “fossil fuel values” have evolved to allow us to cope with the material realities of the fossil fuel age, then this value system must, like the global economy that shapes it, be a complex and ambiguous thing that articulates itself differently depending on where in the system one is standing. Morris’s values did not change in Kenya as a result of movement from one social system to another; rather, his awareness of the complexity of those values changed as he moved around inside of the heterogeneous, globalized network of contemporary fossil fuel society. Both in England and in Kenya he lived in ways that involved an at least tacit acceptance of global social inequalities, in which the inhabitants of poor, colonially exploited nations labor on his behalf. This aspect of his fossil fuel values was simply rendered more immediate and thus more visible by his trip to Africa. To be clear, I am not challenging the premise that values are shaped by material circumstances, but simply suggesting that Morris’s development of this premise into a universalizing and deterministic account of world history is shallow and unconvincing: his descriptions lack nuance and his conclusions are hobbled by a blindness to the realities of contemporary global society.

These limitations become more clearly visible if we compare *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* to another study of energy regimes, Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011). Like Morris, Mitchell argues that changes in energy capture practices drive broader changes in social organization and social thought; he introduces *Carbon Democracy* as a study of "democracy as oil—as a form of politics whose mechanisms on multiple levels involve the processes of producing and using carbon energy" (5; italics original). But where Morris outlines a generalized account of cultural evolution from pre-history to the present, Mitchell focuses on the specifics of modern fossil fuel production—how and where coal mines, oil wells, pipelines, and refineries were built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and asks how these differences affected power struggles between the owners of energy production systems, the laborers who work in energy production facilities, and the communities that depend upon this infrastructure. This attention to the details of historically specific material and social circumstances allows Mitchell to provide a nuanced account of coal and oil production as practices that have shaped two centuries of world politics, including concrete insights into European democracies' evolving relationships with Middle Eastern autocracies. Morris's transhistorical, generalizing approach, in contrast, offers nothing more concrete than the claim that "everyone who lived in the ten thousand years before AD 1800" valued social inequality and was intolerant of violence.

Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels is ambitious, lucidly written, and exhaustively researched, and its argument-and-response format, which allows readers to see not only the product but the process of scholarly debate, is stimulating and productive. Moreover, the project Morris sets for himself is an exciting one; a study of moral values that does not center on human subjects producing themselves autonomously against a passive background but rather takes the material situatedness of culture seriously is precisely the kind of theoretical work called for by our present moment of crisis. An account of the evolution of values organized around a history of energy regimes would be a valuable contribution to ecocriticism generally and to the energy humanities specifically, and would be particularly useful to anyone interested in the relationship between social values and the practices of energy production driving anthropogenic climate change. But Morris's book does not rise to the potential of its project. It loses more to the abstraction demanded by its macro-historical approach than it gains in argumentative clarity; worse, Morris's simplistic and uncritical engagement with evolutionary theory and contemporary globalized capitalism give to his project the distinct and unpleasant flavor of an apologia for power.

Works Cited

Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy*. Verso, 2011.

Morris, Ian. *Why the West Rules—For Now*. Picador, 2010.