

Review

The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice

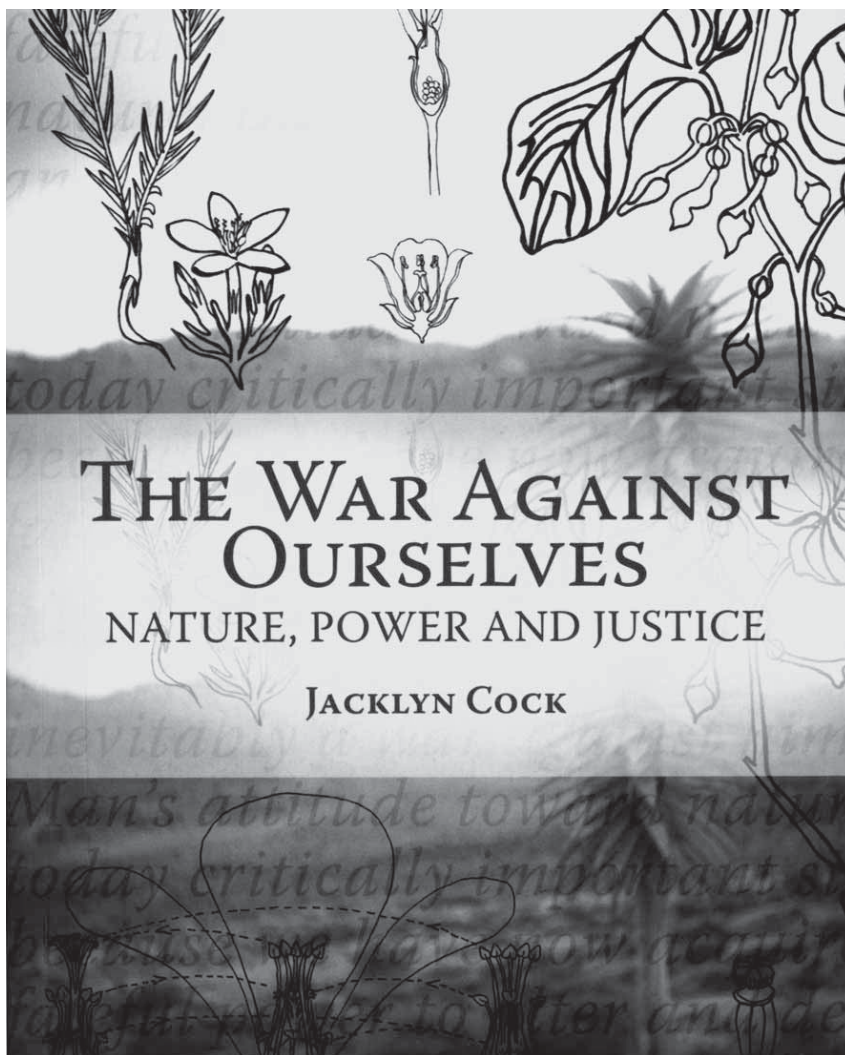
Jacklyn Cock (Wits University Press, 2007)

Reviewed by Vishwas Satgar

Jacklyn Cock is one of South Africa's leading public intellectuals. Whether it has been her interventions on gender, militarisation or 'maids and madams', she has consistently prompted society to look at itself critically. Her commitment to an 'activist academic' orientation has broken down elitist boundaries and has ensured knowledge production is implicated in processes of social change.

Put differently, her writing is part of the process of social change and not positioned outside it. This comes through in her latest work entitled *The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice*. This book is not written to shock or to propagandise in a self righteous way about the 'web of life' that it is unravelling. This is not another book proclaiming millenarian scenarios resulting from ecological crisis. Instead Cock's latest intervention utilises analysis, textured empirical description and understanding rather than fear to raise awareness about environmental justice.

Cock's book is about thinking with us about our place in nature and hence her whole narrative weaves together around four conversations. Her first conversation is with the public, with us. Her starting point for understanding our place in nature is the invisible aspect of the 'crisis of nature'. She reveals the connections we take for granted like the water we drink from taps, the food we purchase from stores, and the electricity we utilise through pressing switches. Cock's book pierces beyond the appearances of everyday life to highlight our



connections/disconnections with underlying natural and social processes shaping our lives.

In her book she explores our 'alienation from nature' by journeying into our intersections, appropriations, silences, abuses and attempts at protecting nature. She does not do this in a way that suggests we are all revelling in a state of 'false consciousness' while she has the answers. Instead her

book is a journey into our common sense understandings of nature. It is about taking seriously the beliefs we have as the public about nature, while at the same time engaging in critical dialogue. In this regard, she deploys 'environmental sociology' to understand the various 'isms' such as nationalism, environmentalism, neo-liberalism, tourism, specieism, racism, cultural relativism, sexism that mediate our 'alienation from nature'.

In this way Cock explores the connections among us as human beings and between us and nature.

The latter theme derives from the work of Rachel Carson, a radical ecologist who has inspired Cock's own 'environmental sociology'. The conversation with Rachel Carson is an important part of this book.

Rachel Carson was one of the founders of the modern environmental movement and an eloquent voice for radical ecology in post-second World War USA. Her book *Silent Spring* (1962) highlighted the extent to which the agro-industries were poisoning nature through using pesticides and also how these poisons were being used to kill human beings.

In her book Carson brought to the fore the conflict of interest that exists between powerful corporates and all living things. Beyond the issue of destructive pesticides, she posed a larger challenge to modern production systems.

Both Cock and Carson share a deep love for nature (human and non-human) and its interconnectedness. They also share an understanding of nature's evolutionary character, drawing on the work of Darwin, and both come from a left perspective.

Cock's passionate and detailed descriptions of the injustices endured by residents of Steel Valley, Vanderbijlpark, due to the polluting effects of Iscor (now Mittal Steel) chemicals on community water resources are deeply disturbing (see previous article). So too is her description of the cruelty and suffering endured by animals in abattoirs and cages before being killed and packaged as meals.

Carson would have agreed with Cock's arguments and if Carson was alive, I believe, she and Cock would have been formidable collaborators. Carson's radical ecology and Cock's

environmental sociology would have brought to the fore the contemporary dynamics of global capitalism, nature, power and injustice. Hence, my own reading of Cock is that she has finished what Carson could not do due to her premature death from cancer in 1964 at age 56.

A third conversation in this book is Cock's conversation with herself. There is an autobiographical thread, which assists the reader in understanding how Cock came to understand the 'war against ourselves'. She reveals her long activist commitment to these issues (since the 1970s), is honest about her own carbon emissions through aeroplane flying, while she is also aware of her own love for bird watching and enjoyment of 'wild nature'.

Her involvement with South African National Parks as part of its board of curators in 1995 reveals how she and others learned from the conservative conservation forces entrenched in the national parks system. She also shows how things changed towards a new ethic in which social justice became a part of how parks management was conducted. This ensured important redress for communities dispossessed of their land due to apartheid-era conservation.

In short, Cock places herself in this 'war against ourselves' and is willing to share her victories, but also, through her own admission, her own short-comings. In this sense, she does not place herself apart from the rest of us, reflecting her radical activist side. Cock is willing to learn from others to overcome the war that she understands we are all blindly waging.

Finally, Cock is having a conversation with the environmental movement in South Africa. Her openness about the elitism involved

in birding societies, of which she is a member, epitomises Cock's candid and self-critical approach. In a similar vein, the limits of ecological struggles are discussed through looking at the two dominant currents in South Africa's environmental movement: 'sustainable development' versus 'environmental justice.' These conversations all happen in the spirit of seriously rethinking the interconnectedness of nature and human beings.

To really end this war Cock cannot be allowed to put down her pen. She has to write the sequel: *Ending the War Against Ourselves*. She has to take us beyond the troubled relationship we have with ourselves and nature in order to point to ways in which the 'web of life' can be restored and social justice achieved.

Post-national liberation South Africa's commitment to nuclear power and its fossil fuel and growth-driven development path increases food insecurity. This failure to address deepening inequality needs to be challenged fearlessly. Cock's sharp analytical skills need to expose the structures of power and social forces that stand in the way of achieving environmental and social justice today.

This means Cock's courageous voice as a public intellectual has to provide signposts as she calls for collective action to change our society. She needs to continue her dialogue with us on what is required to make another South Africa possible now. That is a South Africa in which post-apartheid capitalism is fundamentally challenged so that the war against ourselves comes to an end. LB

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