



**Psychoanalysis and Ecology: The Unconscious and the Environment by Cosimo Schinaia, New York, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2022, 168 pp., \$34.36, ISBN 978-1-032-11482-8**

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*The inferno of the living is not something that will be: if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities)*

Cosimo Schinaia's vision in *Psychoanalysis and Ecology* is surely in the category of those who seek to imagine and create a new space and way of being in response to the ecological disruption caused by our actions. To recognize and face up to the hard facts of the environmental devastation that is unfolding, while maintaining a balanced outlook to enable thought and conceive of reparative action takes a great deal of internal work. It is evident that Cosimo Schinaia, a training and supervising analyst at the Italian Society of Psychoanalysis, who practises in Genoa, has devoted serious attention to his topic.

The book under review is a natural outgrowth of the enriching dialogue between diverse disciplines, an interweaving of external and internal worlds, that Schinaia (2016) addressed in a previous book, *Psychoanalysis and Architecture, The Inside and the Outside*. In the current volume, Schinaia expands the definition of "external" to include the natural world. Eschewing the phrase "applied psychoanalysis", Schinaia instead suggests "involved psychoanalysis", a reframing that is integrative and inclusive. The positive connotation of involvement can counterbalance our tendencies to retreat to inner concerns as a defence against unbearable affect, and instead engage with the evolving crisis.

*Psychoanalysis and Ecology* is short and well referenced; it seeks to connect two extensive bodies of knowledge and approaches to the world. The ten chapters read as self-contained essays, for example “Human Beings and the Environment”, “Freud and the Environment”, “Work-Health Balance Conflict” and “Servants of the Future”. Schinaia’s myriad sources reveal his wide-ranging curiosity and include psychoanalytic literature, blogs on climate, fiction from Dante to Calvino, philosophy and poetry. There is less emphasis on ecology. Psychoanalysts will be more familiar with citations that address the inner weather and interior landscapes of clinical concern. Recently, psychoanalysis has grown more open to the relevance for personality development of an ecological perspective that addresses the relationship between living organisms and the physical and organismic environment in which they grow and reproduce. Our embeddedness within the natural world is a fact of life in Money-Kyrle’s term, and this reality has an emotional meaning to us that affects our treatment of environmental concerns (Money-Kyrle 1971).

Many references are in Italian, evidencing the rich discussion that is occurring in Italy. Distracting to an English reader, there are frequent glitches in translation, ranging from word substitutions, for example, “exhausted” for “exhaustive”, or “adhesion” rather than “adherence”, to sentences that are nearly incomprehensible. In future editions, more attention to the English text is warranted.

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The weight of interest in this book is the role psychoanalysis has to play in understanding our current place in the changing environment, and what interferes with our ability to cope with the anxieties and despair that the situation evokes in each of us. Although the weather, networks of living beings and biogeochemical cycles of Earth have always affected humans, the balance has shifted. In his opening chapter Schinaia reviews the salient and ballooning effects of human impact on Earth, and the consequent degradation of the biosphere. It is dispiriting and sobering reading. Our current way of life in the modern West is not sustainable, and is precipitating a catastrophic change that we are not able to control.

Schinaia outlines multiple efforts by nations to come together globally to prevent further climate warming, to protect the natural world and to decrease our ecological footprint. Hopeful agreements in principle flounder when attempts are made to commit to change. Decisive action is overdue. Schinaia asserts we must recognize limits to growth, and extend the domain of our ethical responsibility to a communal concern for other people globally, for

diverse organisms that accompany us on Earth and for future generations. If we are aware that our way of life endangers our existence and the sustaining environment, how is it that we seem to be unable to change, Schinaia queries. It is an inherently interdisciplinary question, relevant for climate scientists, ecologists, policy makers, citizens from all walks of life.

Psychoanalytic thinking can support reflection and forestall simplistic solutions or false reassurance. Areas of experience or knowledge that are unthinkable and yet have a persistent influence on our ways of being are well described in the psychoanalytic literature. Schinaia is particularly interested in the ways in which anxieties (in both the individual and the group) evoke protective defences that can interfere with our ability to think, or work imaginatively for change. He includes the psychoanalytic literature that has developed with respect to a relationship with Nature, to the origins of the climate emergency, and to our multiple reactions to its effects, commencing with Harold Searles' prescient work, and documenting the literature that began to emerge in the 2000s.

Much is demanded from each psychoanalytic author who makes a foray into an interdisciplinary inquiry concerning the environmental catastrophe. Not only must the writer engage with an emotionally and scientifically complex topic, but they must also think seriously about how best to accompany the reader to bear the anxiety, loss, guilt and other disequilibria evoked by the prevalence and urgency of the situation. A singular voice takes on some of the reader's anxieties, and accompanies the reader to provide emotional containment in the encounter with distressing material. The Pope's (2015) encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, Sally Weintrobe's (2021) *The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis* and Amit Ghosh's (2016) *The Great Derangement* are each narrated in a unified voice with a consistent perspective.

In *Psychoanalysis and Ecology* Schinaia chooses to use three different approaches to communicate with his readers. The first is the most prevalent. The reader is invited to accompany the author on what seems to be Schinaia's own path of discovery, without judgement, without desire, to look at the ideas and data he has amassed. Schinaia juxtaposes passages and precis from multiple references: aggregated facts about the state of the environment, steps taken to ameliorate the current crisis or theories about the nature of the defences employed to manage unbearable feelings. This narrative technique creates multiple encounters for his reader; it is sometimes difficult for the reader to discern where the reference ends and the author's reflection begins. After several readings, it occurred to me that Schinaia shows quick sketches of ideas or points of view that he has encountered during his research. He gathers

multiple voices without taking a position himself, to inform and affect the reader, to allow them to form their own synthesis.

The second quality of voice Schinaia employs is a subtle and detailed analytic perspective apparent in three chapters with clinical vignettes. These accounts describe intrapsychic

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conflicts that reveal themselves in particular relationships to recycling, overconsumption or maintenance of the body or the home environment. We encounter Schinaia as analyst, tolerant of ambivalence, non-directive and capable of opening up a space between patient and analyst to work on subtle and deep difficulties. The patient's internal situation, often traumatic, has a visible impact on their treatment of the environment. We recognize that change can only come with serious analytic attention.

An important issue is raised: how does one incorporate an awareness of a relationship to the environment into analysis? Following his case reports, Schinaia comments:

*In both cases, it had been necessary to make a twofold intervention: recognize the influence of the past over the present and, once the oppressive childhood anxieties had been worked through, recognize the harm, in environmental terms, of his behaviour and try to modify it. (74)*

The observation suggests that the analyst has identified something the patient should *try to do* better. This perspective is incongruent with the tone of the author's prior clinical discussion. If we envision a person's relationship to the environment as a central area of self, the relationship takes its place in a landscape containing our patient's areas of liveness, conflicts and otherness. With respect to concern for the environment (as is true with other vital links), what the patient *does* with what they learn or feels in analysis is best decided according to their own understanding. From my view the way the ecological enters our listening is in the analyst's recognition that each patient has a quiet or loud bond with the natural world, and that this connection must be given potential space in the analyst's reverie.

The third narrative approach is a more prescriptive and exhortatory voice about what we must do to put right what is awry in human society with respect to the biosphere, and indeed within ourselves:

*A good strategy could be to make us emotionally secure to create areas of dialogue and collaboration to reduce the intensity of our defenses, and share our internal worlds, and connect with our creativity and capacity to mend. Creating conditions for participation, avoiding drastic judgment, reducing the space of the 'environmental Super-Ego' so as to contain and regulate the effects of the environmental crisis—all are means to encourage people to explore their interior dilemmas and promote solicitude and creativity. (93)*

And also: "Psychoanalysts must contribute to the development of an environmental ethics that defines our alimentary choices, the products that we decide to buy, the way in which we build our homes and cities and in which we travel" (118).

When Schinaia avers that solutions exist, the reader perceives an alteration in tone from his previous neutral attitude towards multiple perspectives. The strength of the remedies proposed feels disjunct from the very anxieties, emotional impediments and the intricacy of social processes Schinaia has been describing. Alternatively, it might seem remiss to omit clear propositions of what has caused the current derangement, and what are the large and small changes of attitude and concern that would allow us to change our behaviour as individuals and a society.

Schinaia's orientation is apparently an urban perspective; his dedication to city environments gets through to his reader. He envisions a potential for cities and their inhabitants to be connected through a fuller engagement with their aesthetic and emotional capacities and a richer relationship with the natural world. His interest inspired me to reread Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The two books are well paired.

Calvino's story contains a marvelous dialogue between two men: Marco Polo, the traveller originally from Venice, and the ageing conqueror of the Mongolian empire, Kublai Khan. The great Khan is beginning to feel that the kingdom he has amassed is crumbling, and is

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concerned with questions about the meaning of life. Cities imagined or real in the Khan's empire are brought to life as strange and fanciful beings through Polo's narration of his journeys. The juxtaposition of brief depictions of multiple towns within an emperor's realm reminds me of the numerous references that Schinaia assembles for his reader's perusal. In addition to the series of cities, there is an unspooling thread of the deepening relationship between the

traveller and the emperor. The ways Polo and Khan communicate are quite mysterious and evolve over time; initially neither speaks the other's language. What is inferred when Polo gestures, aligns objects of natural history that he has gathered on his journeys, or howls, is influenced by the internal worlds of each man. The scenes of their intercourse depict a remarkably imaginative and alive way of getting through to the other, while also serving as an internal communication within each character. The reader is engaged as a rapt listener.

Two of the cities Polo sketches are relevant to Schinaia's theme of ecology, as both speak to situations in which humans have separated themselves from the natural world as though disconnection could be achieved without consequence to life. In the city "Cecilia" the narrator is reproached: "each of my stories takes you right into a city without telling you of the space that stretches between one city and another - whether it is covered by seas, fields of rye, larch forests, swamps" (Calvino 1972, 152, 153). Polo portrays a city that has severed its links to the larger environment. Over time Cecilia thoughtlessly eradicates a natural habitat that had supported a whole way of life.

Another city, Theodora, has been invaded by various animals: condors, spiders, termites and rats. The city manages through great effort to annihilate all of its fauna, perceived by human inhabitants as plagues. This liquidation proves to be a short-lived triumph, as all manner of imaginary and mythological, menacing and deadly creatures emerge from ancient texts in the libraries (Calvino 1972, 159-160). Although Calvino was writing in the early 1970s, he was aware, as is the emperor, Kublai Khan, that the world as we know it was folding in on itself, and that something was profoundly amiss.

Through Polo's narration of the cities he has visited, the Venetian comes to realize that all of his intrapsychic and actual researches started from home. The more he was lost in foreign cities, the more he understood about the nature of his journey, and the more he knew about the familiar places and experiences of his home, childhood and youth in Venice. The past was altered and enriched by the present encountered in Polo's journeys. Paired questions are raised: (are these) "Journeys to relive your past?", (are these) "Journeys to recover your future?" (Calvino 1972, 29). This theme runs through *Psychoanalysis and Ecology*, and is most evident in the penultimate chapter, the saddest and most personal. Like Marco Polo's boyhood in Venice, we might imagine that Schinaia's relation to his original home informs the whole manuscript.

Taranto, in southern Italy, the lovely seaside city of Schinaia's birth and childhood, is recalled in rich and sensory detail: foods, people, pines, beaches, sea, shellfish. Taranto was a vibrant and a productive ecosystem; people of

diverse occupations were in balance with the sea. When a massive steel mill was built in the 1960s, Taranto changed irrevocably. Although there were some gains for the populace in wages and education, the factory poisoned the land, the waters and their diverse inhabitants with industrial toxins. When Schinaia returned to visit from Genoa, he could hardly believe the devastation.

One could report the destruction as a straightforward example of a company's malevolent focus on economic benefit for the short term without accounting for the real cost to human and ecological health. Schinaia follows a different path. In a balanced way he includes the complexity of the relationship between the workers and the steel company, in part victims, in part colluding with denial about industry's effects on the environment. He raises questions about

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extremist environmentalists who promote simplistic solutions and indulge in fantasies of a romanticized past.

Schinaia knows he lost not a fantasy, but a real childhood home and rich experience of nature. Initially he was angry and bitter at the damage done to an intricate and living world, but he was able to make use of his experience to widen the discourse about our relationship to the environment as this book exemplifies. His orientation to psychoanalytic inquiry, communal effort and openness to change encourages each of us to carry on.

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