BOOK REVIEW

Algeny, by Jeremy Rifkin, Viking Press, New York, 1983, 288 p., ISBN 0-670-10885-5, $14.75.

Some time ago the *New Philosophy* published a review of *Entropy: A New World View* by Jeremy Rifkin.[1] Recently the editor was sent a pre-publication copy of Rifkin's new book, *Algeny,* and this writer was again asked to provide a review.

The first challenging aspect of this work is its title, *Algeny.* Apparently this term was coined by the biology Nobelist Joshua Lederburg of Rockefeller University, and it relates to the artificial transformation of living beings in a kind of world view which includes as its major component the technology and implications of genetic engineering. By way of illustration, a comparison is drawn between alchemy as the transmutation of material substances and all that implied, and algeny as a transmutation of living systems together with its philosophical implications. Once the title word is defined, albeit somewhat loosely, the reader can dive into the book and move rapidly in the swift current of the author's writing style.

There seems to be a very major assumption in this work which underpins its structure; namely, man's view of nature, his cosmology, is strongly influenced by the economic and social order in which he finds himself. And further, this cosmology has a positive feedback or reinforcing effect upon the existent social order. Under this assumption, only those operations of nature which have a correspondence with the human condition are emphasized and allowed to contribute to the unified view of nature. In this way objective data and disinterested synthesis of facts are only illusions.

One example of this view is the thesis that the reason medieval peoples believed the earth to be at the center of the universe was due to the social power of the church and not objective analysis of the data. As time passed and the church's domination was challenged by social pressures, the heliocentric (sun centered) cosmology became acceptable.

Rifkin argues that social origins give rise to cosmologies because 1) the derived cosmology gives an intellectual basis for the social order; and 2) the cosmology explains and justifies any inequities found in the social order, thereby justifying the favorable position of

[1] *Jeremy Rifkin, Entropy: A New World View,* Viking Press, New York. Reviewed by Gregory L. Baker, *New Philosophy,* 84: 3 & 4: 122-127, 1981.

the 'power elite' As a corollary to this psychology that nature is only a reflection of man's society, man comes to see nature as having worth only in so far as it may be subservient and even ravaged for man's insatiable needs—a process Mr. Rifkin calls the "desacralization of nature."

Rifkin's assumption plays a significant part in the discussion of algeny, but before dealing with the subject itself he spends about 80 pages examining the social origins and acceptance of Darwinism in an effort, not only to prove his point, but also to set a framework for a discussion of a new theory of biological nature. The discussions of Darwinism and social Darwinism are possibly the most vigorous and interesting parts of the book. Anyone who has the feeling that the theory of evolution is more doctrinaire than scientific will find the treatment most gratifying. Not being an expert in this area, the reviewer cannot comment on the fairness of Rifkin's version.

Following the chapters on Darwinism Rifkin introduces a variety of concepts and modes of thought from several sources, and attempts a synthesis of present attitudes toward the development of living systems. Time studies, feedback, information processing, order through dissipation, and protein computers are all included as aspects of the 'new biology' Computers and data processing, rapid sampling, and anticipation of the future through feedback, are now to be the perspective from which to view biological development. Yet as with Darwinism, Rifkin sees the new biology as having its origin in the social arena, especially that part of human activity for which computers are required—information processing.

Finally, the last chapter entitled "Choices" suggests two possibilities in the form of ethical imperatives; either we dominate or ravage nature, or we see ourselves as part of nature and seek conciliation with nature. How we treat nature ultimately reflects how we feel about each other, and if nature is treated as subservient then probably we tend to see our human neighbour in similar terms.

This very brief summary may not do justice, to the book. Rifkin is always challenging, but this reviewer felt the chapter on the new biology to be lacking in clarity and direction. Perhaps the subject is too current to be properly summarized and assessed. Most disappointing was the final chapter which contains the ethics discussion. There were no new insights or conclusions beyond those of the ecologists of the 1960's (valid as their goals are), and this seemed to be anti-climatic after the earlier allusions to exciting new scientific and technological developments.