

Histories of Environmental Thought

Environmental geography, according to Castree, refers to any geographical inquiry ‘that formally relate[s] some aspect of the human world (society) and some aspects of the physical world (nature) to one another, [a self-reflexive epistemology] holding humans and the environment together in a single explanatory framework.’ Such epistemology openly courts a ‘weak scientism’ - positing the continual emergence, contingency and indeterminacy of human knowledge - to re-evaluate the traditional Enlightenment distinctions between nature (environment) and culture (man). That is, rather than nature as an ‘ontologically pure realm [an Otherness] that exists outside, and apart from, a separate one of human knowledge, culture and society, environmental geography recognises the multiple entanglements and interplays between the human and non-human, Latour writes: ‘agency, material effectivity, even existence itself, [are] emergent properties that are realised through historically and geographically contingent relations among the heterogeneous ‘actants’ of a more than human world.’ Environmental geography thus performs its inquiry with(in) an ‘ontology of dwelling’, wherein, through practices environments enter directly into the constitution of people and people into the constitution of environments. It presents a reflexive and conscious critique of dominant (western) narratives, opening itself to the possibilities of the local and how ‘different cognitive, emotional, spiritual and ethical [knowledges] subjectively influence our constructions [of environment(s)], and in turn our responses to environmental change’ (O’Brien, 2011).

Primarily, this essay explores how, intellectually and discursively, we have arrived at the epistemology of environmental geography. I explore how ideas of nature/culture have evolved since the 19th Century: (i) the Enlightenment and ‘Man triumphing’ (over nature); (ii) Romanticism and ‘Man dwelling’; (iii) Marxism and ‘Man producing’, and (iv) post-Romanticism and ‘Man dwelling-producing.’ Here I associate dwelling with Hay’s (2002) ‘ecological impulse’ or what Aldo Leopold termed the ‘ecological conscience’ - a respect for the entanglements-of-things and life in all its manifold forms. As such, environmental geography, in its attempt to integrate, and enmesh, multiple subjectivities and narratives can be regarded as an ‘ecological conscience’ that re-iterates our entanglement with nature(s), where ‘processes, responses and outcomes [of nature] are closely linked to social, economic and political processes [of man]’ (O’Brien, 2011).

I thus liken tracing an ancestry of environmental thought - from Enlightenment to post-modernity - to the growth of the human body: its birth in Romanticism (late 19th Century) with G.P Marsh and his damning polemic, ‘Man and Nature’ (1864); its adolescence in Marxism (1960-73) with *Silent Spring* (1962), Aldo Leopold and the *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968); its adulthood in post-romanticism (1980 - 90) with the *Brundtland Report* (1987) and Green politics (1970-2000) ; and finally its senility with ‘environmental geography.’ However, and with mind to the frail bones of metaphor, I suggest that this senility does not signify the encroaching death of the ‘ecological conscience’, but rather its emerging possibilities within a republican epistemology or, Popper’s (1984) ‘open society’ wherein ‘all knowledge claims (scientific and non-scientific) - along with their practical consequences - are [made] robust [having] withstood, been modified by, or enriched through an encounter with criticisms issuing from various quarters.’ Creating this intellectual space - a ‘multi-paradigmatic heterodoxy’ (Castree, 2009) - would, posit Grosz and Harding (2003), signify progress and a rupturing from ‘modern science [that holds its] epistemological foundations [in] an expression of patriarchal suppression of alternative forms of knowing.’

Environmental thought long preceded the romantic and transcendental musings of Wordsworth, Thoreau and Muir in the late 19th Century. Beinart (2011) explores how western narratives during the Imperial age framed nature as an ontologically pure realm, existing outside of the human. The Enlightenment, he writes, 'was the age in which science, as the application of human reason in its most rigorous form, came into its own...when the secular and the human triumphed over the ecclesiastical and divine [nature]'. This conquering of nature materialised as expanding capitalist economies of Europe swallowed and colonised far-away lands, transforming them into commodity and trading frontiers. Rose places environmental thought during this era within a particularly masculine gaze, suggesting that imperialism imbued nature with a sense of non-phallic Otherness, of 'castration and nothing else' (Rose, 1994).

Such Otherness was imbricated in the logic of the nature/culture binary and the detached, imperial gaze. Stoddart, writing of his voyage in Tahiti, held the exotic landscape in visual affinity with the feminine Other, his gaze blighted by the 'terrifying posture' of the land, its 'maternal swamps... inhabited by sphinxes and gorgons.' In similar vein, terrors of the unknown in North America and Africa were graphically visualised as a maternal suffocation and European sailors feared for the homeland, plagued by horrors of deluge, engulfment and dissolution into the mother (Rose, 1993 p.106). Yet, whilst these fears motivated and necessitated a voyeuristic, distanced gaze of the masculine subject (Man) upon his object (Nature), it too lured him to a narcissistic identification with the pre-Oedipal, phallic other; to the sirens of the unknown and penetrable. As Rose elicits, 'implicit in the metaphor of land-as-woman was both the regressive pull of maternal containment and the seductive invitation to sexual assertion' (Rose, 1993) This sense of an unstable psyche strikes a contradiction in the Imperialist nature/culture binary, suggesting that, in actuality Man was seen as deeply entangled and constituted - determined - by his environment.

Livingstone argues that such ideas were moulded by politicians, 'climate became an exploitable hermeneutic resource to make sense of cultural difference and to project moral categories onto global space', with the temperate world being exalted over the pathological space of the Tropics. Nonetheless, these unstable interactions of voyeurism and narcissism produced and necessitated the detached, controlling, imperial gaze that leached the life out of the scene surveyed' replacing it with 'a fabricated set of Eurocentric conceptions or a tabula rasa, an emptiness, blank but measurable' (Pratt, 1992 p.7) The transposition of European landscapes, values and beliefs onto the non-European space facilitated the familiarisation of the exotic other and the legitimisation of exploitation through a depiction of the idyll. Nash illuminates the colonial landscape of the West Indies, as perceived through this masculine gaze, as diffuse in palm trees and contented natives tilling the distant, ripe and Edenic lands. (Nash, 2008) In essence, bourgeoisie art mastered and ontologically 'othered' nature, by painting the colonial situation in soft light, 'lifting it out of historical actuality into an aestheticised real of abundance, innocence and harmony' (Wylie, 2000) Thus imperialism subdued strangeness - triumphing over nature - through its symbolic erasure of local histories and narratives of resistance.

The romanticism of the late 19th Century arose as 'an appalled reaction to the Enlightenment and [its] technologically applied science in which the all-knowing, all-powerful human stood above and apart from nature, manipulating it in his own interests' (Hay, 2002). Instead, the romantics edged towards the assertion that living nature was a unity from which Man could not be separated, Worster (1985) writes: 'the Romantic view of nature was what later generations would call an ecological perspective; that is a search for holistic or integrated perception, and an emphasis on interdependence and

relatedness in nature' and the dwellings and immersions of existence. Within the same generation, albeit not directly related to the Romantic movement, George Perkins Marsh (1864) would publish 'Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action', which argued that humans were causing environmental degradation across earth, he wrote: 'the earth is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant.' The transcendentalist school of North America expounded the notion of a higher 'Reason' of intuitive insight, through which it was possible to attain true understanding - both of the self and of self's worldly situating - rather than through the deduction from history and science that was urged by Enlightenment philosophers. Hay (2002) finds this higher 'Reason' and, moreover the nomadic seeking of it, problematic in that it reveals a rugged individualism at odds with Worster's 'ecological perspective', he writes: 'Thoreau's desire to immerse in wilderness was less that of an ecological sensibility than its opposite: a mechanism of individual salvation' and the perfection of our inner selves.

Indeed these ideas were rooted in the writings of other American wilderness pioneers, such as Muir and F.J Turner. Writing in 19th Century Yosemite, Muir (1897) would imbue the wild with a sense of the romantic, spiritual sublime: 'no pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future.' The wild was conceived as a space wherein the rationalising influences of logic and knowledge - the great 'disenchant[ers] of the world' (Weber , 1971) - briefly acceded to enrapture and myth. In similar vein, Turner (1893) would postulate that American democracy and national character had evolved out of, and due to, the wildness of the Frontier lands; its first European settlers uncovering from its thistles the mantra of rugged, masculine individualism. This strain of anthropocentrism - aligning, more than reacting, to Enlightenment humanism - seems discordant with Leopold's 'ecological conscience', and of 'Homo Sapiens [ceasing] to be the conqueror of 'the land community' and becoming instead a 'plain member and citizen of it' (Leopold, 1968). Leopold ascribes agency to those often categorised in the non-human, and he therefore makes a passionate case for the repudiating Enlightenment anthropocentrism and the separation of human society and the natural world. In today's environmental geography, Leopold's 'ecological conscience' would find common ground within Latour's Actor Network Theory and the 'animal geographies' (Lorimer, 2002) that speak of the mixed-up, mobile lives of people, plants and animals, and how animals have become a vehicle for opening up the ways in which non-human creatures have been caught up in all manner of social networks, from farming to wildlife, in ways that disconcert our assumptions about their, and our, 'natural' place in the world.

Tracing the evolution in (western) environmental thought after Romanticism requires acknowledging the discontinuities or more the departure of discourse from the nomadic aesthetics of transcendentalism, as Hay writes: 'there are [indeed] elements of romanticism within environmentalism...at base [however] the environmental movement proceeds from essentially non-romantic values: a holistic ecologism rather than a transcendent individualism; an orientation to the future and lack of interest in history rather than a backward-looking idealisation of a past golden time; a base in a portentous ecosystemic science rather than a 'nature study' aesthetics; and an orientation to social and political change and impatience with the ecological irrationalities of a global system based upon outmoded nationalisms rather than a change-resistant., nation-focused conservatism' (Hay, 2002).

The environmentalism that emerged in the 1960's was indeed restless and 'impatient with the ecological irrationalities' of society. It could be argued the emergence of an anti-humanist, deep ecology, was founded, and gained its early momentum in the stagnant airs surrounding Vietnam and the oil crisis of 1973. Throughout the 1960's and 70's 'the

image of *Homo sapiens* as a mentally unbalanced predator threatening an otherwise harmonious natural realm became widely disseminated. *Silent Spring* came to epitomise these disillusioned ecologies, redolent of guilt, loss and redemption over pesticide use; Carson's novel too however signified the emergence of environment and the nature/culture question into the realm of (global) politics. Castree (2009) suggests that the 'tragedy of the commons', a theory proposed by American biologist Garrett Hardin in 1968 had significant ramifications in the future political expression of the 'environmental conscience.' Hardin theorised that, in a village of peasant herders, each with access to open pasture (the commons), the field was naturally inclined to become overused and degraded, writing 'each herder thinks that the benefits of adding one cow will accrue to him, but the costs of overgrazing are distributed equally across all farmers.'

The tragedy - the inevitability of destruction of communally owned resources - raised the idea that mutual coercion, or management by global institution(s) was required to limit individual freedom/environmental destruction. Marxist accounts of the 'production of nature(s)' also emerged, arguing that more and more of the things we are accustomed to think of as natural - from resources to landscapes - have increasingly become refashioned as the products of human labour. As Mitchell (1996) posits, 'such accounts [identified] the intensifying social capacity to produce nature as second nature, a distinct phase in the historical development of nature-culture relations that supersedes its original or God-given state - first nature. Both theories - the 'Tragedy of the Commons' and 'the production of nature(s)' proposed a re-assessment of normative assumptions upon the environment. Soon after, in 1968, the 'Club of Rome' formalised and released in 1972 its report on *The Limits to Growth* exploring the dynamics of population growth and economic growth in a world of finite resources; in the same year, the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was held, stressing the impact of 'acid rain' from industrial pollution on Scandinavian ecosystems and expounding the importance of global interconnections.

Tracing the evolution in environmental thought after the 1970's again signifies more rupture than continuity, for as Hay (2002) writes: 'since the 1970's environmental thought has evolved at an extraordinary pace, yesterday's orthodoxy rapidly becoming today's history.' Central to this evolution apace was the rejection of Hardin's thesis and its underlying principles: (i) the notion of inevitability; (ii) its reliance of self-designated experts, and (iii) its authoritarian dimensions. What thereafter emerged was the age of 'sustainable development' - a progressive stage in the 'ecological conscience' -that served to challenge science to become more interdisciplinary and incorporate social and human dimensions. The UN Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* established links of human environmental rights as civil rights and promoted 'sustainable development' as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Green politics also emerged - from informal, ENGO groups to government-led initiatives - with a shared desire for social change and the promotion of environmentally sustainable ways of life, or moreover 'ways of dwelling' cognisant of the entanglings and interconnectedness-of-things.

Bibliography

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