

## **Is 'nature' a social construct? Critically evaluate the geographies of social nature, and their implications for geographical thinking.**

This essay is about geographies of social nature. I will argue that our view of nature is mostly socially constructed, and then explain how and in what way it is constructed. I will also explain the capitalist, imperialist and ecofeminist approach to nature, and the various types of nature

To begin with from a social constructivist perspective our entire world is socially constructed, right down to the language we use to describe it. For example, the word tree bears very little resemblance to an actual tree, and standard symbolic representations of trees tend to resemble pine trees or those in the conifer family. On a more abstract level the tree symbol is used to represent the Conservative Party in the UK<sup>1</sup> so it's already burdened with ideological significance. Of course trees are not inherently conservative, and so the link is context-specific, and of course anyone who doesn't recognise English will not recognise the link between the word 'tree' and the object 'tree'.

Social constructivism throws up problems where the very essence of nature cannot be scientifically and categorically defined. Instead it exists as a context-specific emotional response. My view of nature is dependent on the environment I feel is 'natural'. As someone who has been naturalised to a tropical wet and dry climate I would feel a different environment, like a semi-arid or a mediterranean climate, would be 'unnatural'. 'Real' nature becomes hyper-real because our perception of it is based on a socially constructed representation of it, and not the thing itself. In 'Precession of Simulacra' Baudrillard describes hyperreality as something that becomes 'more real than reality itself'(Baudrillard, 1994<sup>2</sup>). Our cultural explanations for nature mean that the original concept of 'nature' becomes lost.

We have a social relationship with nature which encompasses both relationships of production and our environmental relationship. Relationships of production are purely economic, and when they're grounded in a capitalist mode of production these relationships tend to be exploitative. In *Das Kapital* Marx refers to a "metabolic interaction between man and nature"(Marx, 1867:637-638<sup>3</sup>) that is disturbed by capitalist production and John Bellamy Foster described the disturbance as a 'metabolic rift'(Foster, 2000<sup>4</sup>).

The environmental relationship is the metabolism Marx refers to; it's a harmonious relationship in which the forces of production and consumption are evenly matched such that man never exploits nature and is able to live comfortably within the limits of production imposed by nature<sup>5</sup>. This relationship is adhered to by animals who live within the limits of their environment.

Humanity have been able to live well beyond their means through the use of technology to extract useful resources. Robert Newman shows that capitalist production is incompatible with the natural metabolism as it is committed to economic growth through cycles of overproduction and overconsumption<sup>6</sup>. Natural resources are limited and finite so if we continue extracting too much resources we have to know that one day we will run out.

This has important implications for geographical thinking. The first is that within the capitalist relationship nature has value only in so far as it's profitable. There is no value in protecting an environment that cannot be commodified in one way or another and then sold at a profit. This has severe knock-on effects for nature. Issues such as deforestation and overfishing are bound to get worse as long as it is profitable to continue those activities. They can be made un-profitable with the use of fines and legislation, but this is only a temporary

measure, as it unbalances the supply/demand ratio and the rules of the market mean that a black market will be created. Without a significant shift in relations of production the problem will only get worse.

The second implication revolves around the alienation of man from nature. As humans we are aware that we live outside of our metabolic interaction with nature, and society has to create an artificial relationship. This takes the form of food packaging that displays a romantic scene of small-scale farming and animals grazing happily in fields. Rachel's Organic milk has pictures of dandelions on the carton, trying to imply that it's natural, and the Rachel's Organic website lists its history as a family farm in rural Wales<sup>7</sup>, yet its yoghurt is the product of a highly mechanised industrial process<sup>8</sup>. The message they're trying to convey is that nature is bountiful, that there is plenty of yoghurt to go around and that we are still living within our limits.

The concept of nature as a harmonious force is turned on its head in Western films like the *Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* where the 'wild west' is seen as chaos and as anarchy. The wilderness is lawless and the only force of harmony and order is the educated city-dwelling human who educates the savages of the desert, both cowboys and indians. The same effect is seen in *Mad Max* which explores the chaos left behind once resource scarcity kicks in and 'Max the Road Warrior' brings order and stability to the oil refinery. The message in both these films is that we can 'conquer' nature, and make it work for us. It's the application of imperialist ideology to the natural world (Rothman, 1996:112<sup>9</sup>). According to Richard Grove this can be traced back to the Colonial Era between 1600 and 1860 in which 'the new lands were referred to as "eden" and their inhabitants referred to as "noble savages"'. This description of undiscovered nature as a paradise, with its noble savage inhabitants, set the moral basis for the colonial state to colonise, however it's also noted as a historical precedent to modern environmentalism and 'nature-worship'.

The tar sands development in Alberta is an example from today, it shows oil companies like Suncor using the same imperialist attitude to violate both the natural environment and the land of the indigenous people who live there. From Suncor's perspective the exploitation is the same because the First Nations Canadians form part of the natural landscape.

The First Nations Canadians have for the most part learned to live harmoniously with nature, and from their perspective it is the oil companies who bring chaos and disorder. It all depends on how your society frames the relationship between man and nature.

According to William Cronon wilderness "hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural (Cronon, 1996:1<sup>10</sup>)". He then argues that genuine wilderness may be the most socially constructed landscape of all because many of us don't have first-hand experience of it, so our only knowledge of it comes from assumptions gained from others. Wilderness should not be seen as the last frontier of civilisation, rather that "it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. "

The view of wilderness as a frontier forms some of the thinking behind keeping areas free from human development in the form of nature reserves and parks. The definition of wilderness as an area 'not yet colonised' by humanity defines it in terms of its relationship to humanity. Unfortunately it ignores areas of wilderness which exist within 'real' civilisation, like urban sprawl and dead space which has been reclaimed as a natural feature of the environment.

The imperialist perspective keeps us away from nature, it separates nature as the 'other' and segregates us from it. We hold ourselves above animals; from an ethical perspective we are more intelligent than animals, we created culture and language, and we've used technology to give ourselves far better living conditions<sup>11</sup>.

As omnivorous creatures we are capable of killing and eating other animals to survive. This leads to a view that human life is worth more than animal life. The systematic killing of animals for human consumption removes us from the process and once again alienates us from the natural metabolism. There are those like Mark Zuckerberg who only eats what he kills himself, it's a way of re-establishing his relationship with his food and with nature.

From a moral perspective we hold ourselves higher than animals because sometimes they display deviant behaviour like eating their own poo. At the same time we ignore the moral failures of the human race with regards to the violence and aggression inherent in our own systems of living. Roald Dahl sums it up in a passage in the *Big Friendly Giant* where he says that "human beans are the only animals that kill their own kind". There are of course other animals that kill their own species, but none of them do it on such a grand scale as humans do. We are even alienated from the process of killing our own kind, the dropping of a bomb from an airplane is an incredibly violent act, yet it has no moral equivalent with our earlier forms of warfare where soldiers stabbed and hacked each other to death.

We also distinguish our behaviour from that of animals with social frameworks like supermarkets which obscure the primordial nature of our culture. At the base of it we're still a modern day hunter-gatherer society and while our methods of delivery have changed we're still picking tinned pineapples off the supermarket shelves just like our ancestors picked real pineapples off trees. Our patterns of behaviours haven't really changed, the only thing we've modified is our environment. As with Rachel's Organic, advertising still targets primordial instincts for accumulation and uses bright colours which have meaning derived from centuries of evolution in nature. The use of bright red sale stickers grabs our attention because of a socially constructed link with danger (Gagliardi, 1990:173<sup>12</sup>).

A part of the process of 'othering' is the view that nature is female whereas the forces of technology and progress are 'male'. The most obvious example of this in our culture is the notion of 'mother nature'. It also has real grounding in the natural cycles of the menstrual cycle, and its correspondence with the lunar cycle. Women have a rhythm in tune with the natural world, whereas men are synthetic and can be removed from nature. Vandira Shiva and Maria Miles argue in 'Ecofeminism' that within our western patriarchal culture men have dominance over women, and that this can be extended out to the dominance of men over 'mother nature', or the feminine nature (Shiva *et al*, 1993<sup>13</sup>). It relies on simple cultural stereotypes of gender that describe masculinity as aggressive, synthetic and mathematical while femininity is peaceful, emotive and natural. Ecofeminism challenges social nature as it fails to take into account the different positions of each gender on nature. It also takes into account different solutions to environmental conflict, according to Shiva patriarchal solutions tend towards a technological fix, instead of "rebuilding ecological cycles" (Shiva *et al*, 1993:33<sup>14</sup>).

However, the ecofeminist position can be criticised as an essentialist position which fails to see the problems of both gender oppression and environmental oppression within a cultural context. Some like Dr Adrian Harris have also pointed out that ecofeminism fails to take into account Queer theory and people who don't fit into clearly defined gender stereotypes<sup>15</sup>.

A compromise between these two positions is the 'third nature'. Third nature is the way in which humans create cyborg cultures which mix natural and machine elements to create new structures. A good example of this is the eco-homes which are man-made structures, but incorporate natural features so as to make the structure fit into the natural environment. It can be taken even further to where humanity shapes nature itself to its demands, like genetic modification where nature is directly modified. Not as some addition to nature, but the genetic structure of the plant is changed, so the plant in essence becomes different. In this scenario we cannot call the plant a human creation: a machine. It is still a plant, and so it is a cyborg: a fusion of man and nature which

results in a strange new entity. Donna Haraway says that cyborgs appear where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed (Haraway, 1991:149-181<sup>16</sup>). She goes on to explain how this challenges biological determinist ideology by contesting the meaning of the breached boundary. As cyborgs we can modify nature, and nature can modify us, because we are both products of nature and also synthetic products of our own technology, then we are both human and animal.

To conclude I think nature is socially constructed and take the view that nature is both social and cyborg-like. Our relationship to nature is still based in patriarchal and imperialist notions of dominance, however I think this is not biologically determined and is subject to change based on cultural context. Our relationship to nature also defines human development and so has profound implications for geographical thinking.

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- 4 **Foster, John Bellamy** (2000) *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press, p. ix
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- 7 **Rachel's Organic** (n.d.) *History*, [online] Available at: <http://www.rachelsorganic.co.uk/about-us/history>
- 8 **TM Robotics** (2009) *Pack Point Pick and Place Robotics*. [video online] Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2VYDh3SsgE>
- 9 **Rothman, H.** (1996) Review of Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860 by Richard H. Grove, *Environmental History*, 1(1), p.112. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3985069?seq=1>
- 10 **Cronon, W.** (1996) *the Trouble with Wilderness*, p.1.
- 11 **Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy** (2001) *Animals and Ethics*, [online] Available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/anim-eth/#SH2b>
- 12 **Gagliardi, P.** (1990) *Symbols and artifacts: views of the corporate landscape*, Transaction Publishers, p.173.
- 13 **Miles, M. and Shiva, V.** (1993) *Ecofeminism*, blank: University of Michigan.
- 14 **Miles, M. and Shiva, V.** (1993) *Ecofeminism*, blank: University of Michigan, p. 33
- 15 **the Green Fuse** (n.d.) *Ecofeminism Critique*, [online] Available at: <http://www.thegreenfuse.org/ecofemcrit.htm#definitions>
- 16 **Donna Haraway** (1991) "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* New York; Routledge, pp.149-181. Available at: <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>