Nature / Society Theory

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Nature/Society Theory

Nature, it has been said many times, is a complex term, that is both very familiar and extremely elusive. From 'natural yogurt' to 'human nature', from 'nature parks' and 'natural boundaries', the term has a range of uses so wide that a loss of grip on what it is we have in mind seems almost inevitable. Since geography framed itself as the discipline entrusted to study the relationship between humans and nature, the changes in our understanding of what nature is have profoundly affected what geographers study, and how they study it. The prevalent Western geographical practices traditionally followed the modern dichotomy – presented as the common-sense understanding of the world – that separates nature from culture, or nature from society. As Steve Hinchliffe has written, in our everyday language, if something is social, then almost by definition it cannot be natural. And if something is described as natural, then it is unlikely to have much to do with society. Thus, despite a rich history of engaging with nature and the environment, geography only started to interrogate nature in itself in recent decades, having previously treated it reductively. Environmental determinism, possibilism, human ecology, and cultural ecology – as well as, to a certain extent, ecological anthropology – have thus been challenged or outright replaced by a multitude of intellectual newcomers. This entry explores many of these challenges, mentioning what new ways of thinking about nature and society have emerged, and how these have changed geographical practices. These include the social production of nature; the social construction of nature or 'social nature'; political ecology; as well innovative approaches to materialities heavily influenced by science studies.

None of these challenges emerged or exist in isolation, however much their proponents attempt to police the boundaries around them, but instead have drawn productively and opportunistically from sources as wide as Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, postmodernist, and postcolonial thinking. Presenting these challenges as a succession of different schools or coherent approaches would be both artificial and stunted: instead, ideas have travelled, been challenged, rejected and adopted by a variety of authors coming from different backgrounds. While some authors are easier to place within this spectrum, other resist fixity and draw creatively from a variety of more-or-less compatible new paradigms. Changes in the way nature and society are considered have not only come from the social sciences: as many 'new' ecologists and some political ecologists have highlighted, the understanding developed by ecologists and biologists that nature is not stagnant nor in equilibrium has also had a profound impact, changing how nature / society theories are made.

As noted at the outset, in everyday life in the Western world there remains a so-called 'common sense' understanding that the natural world and the social and political world are fundamentally different. Trees are trees, and politics – or society – is something quite different altogether. One challenge to this understanding has come from ecologists, and in particular 'deep' ecologists who attempted to collapse the binary by claiming that nature was all-embracing, making humans a (usually destructive) equal part of it. Paradoxically this has done little more than reify the binary further: nature, rather than being 'everything', ends up being considered only truly 'out there', surviving in a (few) remaining 'real wild' places free from human impacts. This return to a Romantic view of nature sees it as something pure and ideally untouched by humans that should be left alone to thrive through its own pristine devices. As the real remaining 'true nature' is often physically located in the

Global South, these approaches have frequently implied expelling the people who have inhabited these places for generations and directly took part in shaping them. This “racism buttressed by naturalism” (Hinchliffe 2007 : 11) ignores that places are peopled, have histories and geographies, and are social as well as natural places. In response to this, William Cronon first suggested that what might look natural to a Western eye is already mixed up with human worlds, and that ignoring this directly threatens not only human livelihoods but the places themselves that proponents of such ideas seek to protect.

Such critiques drew heavily from social constructivism that emerged within the social sciences in the 1980s, and increasing attention was explicitly given to the social dimensions of nature. This led geographers to explore how the construction of the spatial and the natural at the level of the social imaginary changed over time, for instance when writing about protected areas and national parks. In such studies, discourses challenging the location and the (im)pertinence of the boundary between nature and culture were variously seen to question who and what were considered legitimate insiders and illegitimate outsiders. Nature, in this line of thinking, could no longer be simply ‘natural’ or wild, but rather was taken to be intrinsically social and political. Taking nature in itself, as non-social and unchanging, was seen to lead to the perpetuation of power and inequality in the wider world. In a series of works by geographers, drawing creatively from social constructivism, poststructuralism and Marxism, an agenda emerged that studied the politicised construction of social natures. Binaries such as nature / culture, but also wild / domestic and nature / artifice were revisited in this light, all taken in a sense to be equally made, and potentially equally political. In other linguistic contexts, such debates about the construction of nature have taken place within other disciplines, albeit within a slightly less political

slant, such as in sociology for the Francophone world, in particular by Raphaël Larrère, Isabelle Mauz, and Sophie Bobbé. Conceptions of nature and space have been seen to have wider and direct implications for the study of spatialised difference as the (human) other is metaphorically and discursively constructed simultaneously to the (non-human or 'natural') other. Studies often focussed on protected areas, since these particular spatial entities are directly designed for nature conservation, a topic frequently discussed and appropriated by natural scientists. In this context, the temptations are manifold for those involved in the management of such areas for grounding what are in effect political decisions in 'reason' or 'objective science'. Grounded in natural arguments purporting to be value-free, linked to a conception of nature as wholly removed from society, such environmental discourses have a perverse tendency of taking on a life of their own, instrumentalised within reactionary politics that have a very real effect on people's lives. Geographers have therefore put their finger on how political such discourses actually are, and how potentially disempowering they can become to less powerful actors and alternate forms of knowledge, including indigenous ways of knowing.

This attention to livelihoods and social justice is particularly pronounced in what is often presented as the neighbouring field of political ecology that has drawn additionally from cultural ecology and the political economy of development. Pertinent questions have included exploring how the relationship between society and nature has been defined and conceptualized, how access to land and resources are controlled in a variety of contexts, and how environmental costs and benefits are distributed. Understanding the interplay between power and space at multiple scales, symbolically and materially, has been a central concern of these approaches, drawing further from feminist and Marxist thinking. Cindi Katz, for instance, while noting the

common threads between the exploitation of people and the exploitation of nature, and referring to feminist and eco-feminist writing, has picked apart the notion of nature as an accumulation strategy, taken to be an investment for the future controlled by powerful capitalist interests. The environmentalist literature, she notes is so full of the metaphors of investment, saving and future gain that it often reads like boardroom script. All of this, she argues, begs the question of who has rights to determine the appropriate use of preserved land, and how the altered temporalities and spatialities affect future access to the land. In parallel, geographers such as Jessica Budds, Michael Watts, or Paul Robbins have worked within similar political ecology perspectives to explore examples as varied as the socio-environmental outcomes of water management in Chile; issues of drought and food security in West Africa; or the expansion of turfgrass in the U.S. In the Chilean case, such an approach has illustrated how large-scale farmers have exerted greater control over water, while peasant farmers have been granted increasingly less access. Examination of social equity and the environmental aspects of resources management have highlighted new causes for concern in terms of social and spatial justice.

Literature from science studies and in particular from Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway provided a different and equally innovative impetus and theoretical grounding for rescripting the divide between nature and culture (or society), partly through a vigorous engagement with the process of scientific knowledge production. Scientific discourses, rather then being purely rational or objective, are taken to be "vulnerable to critical scrutiny only by getting up close and tracing its (un)making through the laborious assemblage of interpretative communities, ritual words and phrases, documentary precedents and professional protocols; performative achievements that are always partial, contestable and incomplete" (Whatmore 2002 :

61). Knowledge producers are taken to be active participants who are situated, embodied, passionate, political, social, temporal and spatial. They are spatialized, connected, and disconnected in varying ways to others and lots of elsewheres. This critique has focussed on the silencing effect of approaches to the social construction of nature, noting how these have perversely assumed that that non-human world is mute and malleable, endlessly susceptible to being constructed following human ingenuity.

Diverse appeals to relations, actors, materiality, and material encounters have therefore led geographers to explore and spatialise concepts such as hybridity, exploring the physicality and copresence of the non-human, both animate and non-animate. This has lead to approaches where nature, rather than being of interest only in how it is "imagined, represented, thought or conceived" (Hinchliffe 2007 : 1), is also explored through other practices such as "growing, infecting, digging, counting" (Hinchliffe 2007 : 1). The dualism of nature-society is rejected as strongly as in approaches mentioned earlier, but this rejection is based on a detailed exploration of the networks – or assemblies – that link together humans, organic non-humans, technological objects and quasi-objects (or hybrid objects) that are combinations of technology and living organisms. Nature is not considered a malleable mass, passive and a-spatial, susceptible to human will or to cultural, political or economic forces and contestations, but instead is taken to be something that resists dynamically, takes part in its construction, makes and shapes its multiple complex present.

Identifying what kinds of spaces remain for nature is crucial to this approach, assuming that it neither dead nor neatly bounded in a self-sealed shell. This is a more directly political position than might at first appear, since it is driven by the idea that existing conceptions of nature lead to unjust politics that consign people, plants and

animals to unsatisfactory ends and limited spaces. By exploring the specifically messy laborious assemblages of ritual words and phrases, interpretative communities, documentary precedents and professional protocols as well as the physicality of bodies, plants and animals that are mobilised to enshrine and construct particular spaces, more just policies are seen to be ultimately made possible. Rather than seeing nature fixed in particular places, figures of transgression, bodies transgressing accepting bounds, are used to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space, echoing Tim Cresswell's attempt to explore and disrupt the discursive attempt to create and maintain normative geographies (where everything is in place). The overtly political claims of such approaches have been challenged by authors of a more Marxist bend, pointing out that such claims of politicizing practices that naturalize rarely address the thorny problem of power explicitly, leaving open the question of whether it is possible to weave this approach with practices of a nuanced, historically informed approach to power.

Nevertheless, this fusing of innovative ways of rethinking nature has led to a variety of material engagements with nature as something emerging globally. These approaches to the vitality of nature in part address the charge that nature/society theory has not contained enough ecology, or else has understood ecology poorly. In the most overt engagements with the dynamic relations and materiality of nature, it is taken to be always already unpredictable, vital, and always shot through with multiple, transversal, non-linear relations. Interest extends to things as diverse as species, bacteria, viruses, and other runaway mobile hazards. Nature, on this global scale, is taken to be "no more than the provisional outcome of local processes, the current state attained by a universe of systems whose ultimate states will always defy prediction. As compensation for the certainties that the physical sciences once aspired

to, however, the world which is now materializing is more deeply imbued with creative and self-generative properties than at any other stage of our modernity; it is a restless, turbulent, unfinished place which promises surprises in perpetuity" (Clark 2000 : 12). In arguing that such 'global natures' are always specific assemblages "whose intricate geographies form tangled webs of different length, density and duration, and whose consequences are experienced differently in different places" (Braun 2006 : 644), authors have dismissed all temptation of returning to the notion of nature as both singular – and thus culturally situated – or universal.

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See also: Critical studies of nature; Nature; Political ecology; Science and technology studies; Social construction of nature

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