

Epilogue: Towards a Politics of Dwelling

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Abstract: *Assertions about the existence and constitution of 'nature' are not statements of fact but claims to original human potentialities, lying on the 'far side' of society. The concept of nature is thus inherently political. In reality, human beings do not dwell on the other side of a boundary between society and nature but in the same world that is inhabited by creatures of all kinds, human and non-human. Can a 'dwelling perspective', then, be combined with the recognition that human lives are lived collectively within fields of power? Is human History necessarily distinguished from the history of non-humans on the grounds that only the former involves the reproduction of power relations in the production of Society? The paper argues that there are not two kinds of history but one, comprised by the interplay of diverse human and non-human agents in their mutual relations. The infliction of pain and suffering is not limited to relations among humans. Like other creatures, humans adopt various means to protect themselves. In so doing, they create places. Ultimately, however, the protection of place and the protection of nature are incompatible. The politics of dwelling lie in this incompatibility and the struggles it entails.*

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TOWARDS A POLITICS OF DWELLING

WRITING of the concept of society, Eric Wolf reminds us that it is far from a mere label under which we may subsume certain objective groupings, of human beings or creatures of other species, whose members are held to share

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some common bond (Wolf 1988). Assertions about the existence of society and the manner of its constitution, Wolf insists, are not simple statements of fact, of the way things are. They are rather *claims*, ‘advanced and enacted in order to construct a state of affairs that previously was not’ (Wolf 1988:757). Throughout the last few centuries of European and North American history, numerous and often conflicting claims have been advanced in the name of society, each however motivated by a vision of future equilibrium that would finally balance the needs and desires of human individuals with their conditions of mutual coexistence. The ever-changing upshot of the coercive enactment of these claims, alternately murderous and monumental, is the messy world we now live in. It is a world where—rather as in a modern city—structures dating from different periods and driven by different finalities jostle for space while inhabitants pick their way as best they can between them, turning every closure into an opening for the continuation of their own life projects. Of course for as long as people have been pursuing their projects in the company of others, social life has been going on. But it has not always gone on under the rubric of society. What is perhaps most distinctive about life conducted under this rubric is the experience of having to weave a path through a medley of structures built by others for you to live in, according to designs that answer not to your particular background and circumstances, but to some generalised conception of pan-human needs. For as Wolf says, the concept of society—wherever and whenever it has been unloosed upon the world (and this has always been at specific times and places)—has been aggressive in its claim to universality, for all times and everywhere.

My reason for beginning with these reflections on ‘society’ is that I believe much of what applies to the concept also applies to the concept of nature. Indeed the two concepts share a common history in which they have been often paired, whether as analogues or opposites. No more than the concept of society does ‘nature’ signify the brute facticity of the world, or what is objectively ‘out there’ regardless of the endeavours and aspirations of those who have resorted to the term. Assertions about the existence and constitution of nature, as of society, are claims, and the aggressive pursuit of these claims by agents with sufficient coercive power to impose their vision can greatly affect the circumstances under which people have to lead their lives. These claims have been many and various, ranging from the original invocation of uncultivated commons as *terra nullius*, that opened the door to the colonial expropriation of the lands of indigenous peoples, to the contemporary appeal of ecological restoration that would see the landscape revert to some image of what it was before humans arrived on the scene. If there is a difference between claims advanced in the name of nature, and those advanced in the name of society, it is that the former are more retrospective than prospective, more concerned to establish a universal point of origin for humanity than a final destination. In reality, of course, just as people have forever carried on their lives in the fields of their relations with others, so they have always inhabited an envi-

ronment including manifold non-human as well as human constituents. Social life has always been part and parcel of ecological life, if indeed the two can be sensibly distinguished at all. It is a peculiarity of life lived under the rubric of society, however, that relations with non-humans are construed to lie on the 'far side', in a world of primordial potentialities rather than instituted finalities. Not only, then, do the inhabitants of society have to find their way through the maze of conclusions that various times have offered to history; they also have to piece together the many alternative presentations of origin that may be glimpsed on the other side, each going by the name of nature and each claiming a timelessness and universality particular to its age and place.

All of this goes to show that the concept of nature, like that of society, is inherently and intensely political. It is invariably bound up in a politics of claim and counter-claim whose outcome depends upon the prevailing balance of power. Every one of the papers in this collection provides eloquent testimony to this point. But another theme, of equal importance, runs through them all. It is that the life of human beings, even when configured by the institutions of society, is not carried on in a world of its own, beyond the edge of another world of nature (Ingold 1997) wherein the lives of all non-humans are contained. Rather, all creatures, human and non-human, are fellow passengers in the one world in which they all live, and through their activities continually create the conditions for each other's existence. We may imagine ourselves to be living on one side of a boundary between society and nature, and non-humans to be living on the other, but such imagining is only possible for a being that is already situated in an environment of human and non-human others, and committed to the relationships thus entailed. In my own work I have referred to this view as the 'dwelling perspective' (Ingold 2000). Looking back, I rather regret having used the phrase. The trouble with 'dwelling' is that it sounds altogether too cosy and comfortable, conjuring up a haven of rest where all tensions are resolved, and where the solitary inhabitant can be at peace with the world—and with him or herself. This is not what I intended; for while we may acknowledge that dwelling is a way of being at home in the world, home is not necessarily a comfortable or pleasant place to be, nor are we alone there. However the connotations of singular harmony, which stem from the way the term has been taken up in phenomenological literature inspired by Martin Heidegger's famous essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, are unavoidable (Heidegger 1971). The question, which is really the central question of this collection, is whether it is possible to reconcile a dwelling perspective with a recognition that human lives are lived collectively within fields of power. If dwelling implies an openness to the world, how can it accommodate struggle, defeat and closure? Can dwelling be the foundation for a genuinely political ecology?

The criticism that the political is conspicuous by its absence from my own attempts to formulate a dwelling perspective is entirely just, and troubling. Something needs to be added if we are to understand the dynamics of power

in human environmental relationships, but what should that be? In my defence, I should point out that what originally attracted me to the notion of dwelling and to the idea of setting it up in opposition to building, long before my encounter with Heidegger's work, was that it helped to make sense of a celebrated passage from *The German Ideology* of Marx and Engels (1977). In this passage they speak of human beings as producers of their 'actual material life' and of the mode of production as a '*mode of life*'. Furthermore, they declare, 'as individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production' (Marx and Engels 1977: 42). I argued that production, in the sense implied here, must 'be understood *intransitively*, not as a transitive relation of image to object' (Ingold 1983: 15). The transitive relation may be expressed by verbs like 'to make' and 'to build'. Thus every particular act of making or building begins with an end in mind and ends with a material object that one can then begin to use. Life, however, does not begin or end anywhere, but is rather carried on *through* the successive acts that punctuate its flow. Producing their life, human beings effectively produce themselves (Ingold 1986: 322). The intransitive verb 'to dwell' aptly conveys this conception of the production of life as a *task* that has continually to be worked at. When, subsequently, I came across Heidegger's thoughts on building and dwelling, they immediately fell into place in terms of these Marxian distinctions. Dwelling encompasses building just as producing life encompasses the production of the material means by which it is carried on. And of course, Marx went out of his way to emphasise how the production of life is not only essentially social but also structured by power relations.

However what Marx did not do—nor even Engels, despite the strongly ecological orientation of his writing—was close the gap between human and non-human worlds. So far as both Marx and Engels were concerned, human beings were *distinguished* from other animals by the fact that they are producers of their lives. Even Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' is unequivocally human. Fundamental to the dwelling perspective, however, is the thesis that the production of life involves the unfolding of a field of relations that *crosscuts* the boundary between human and non-human. Human beings are not the only dwellers or inhabitants of this planet. It may be true that throughout the world, humans have decisively influenced the conditions under which other creatures live their lives. Even regions of so-called untouched wilderness are deliberately set up to be untouched, and their subsequent monitoring is more akin to conducting a scientific experiment than abandoning the world to look after itself. This does not mean, however, that the non-human world is counterfeit, a simulacrum of the 'real thing' constructed after an ideal that exists only in the human imagination. Is the seagull wheeling outside my window a genuine creature producing its own form of life, or a blob of raw material to which I have attached a concept, drawn from my cultural tradition, of 'seagullness'? It might seem strange that anyone should entertain the latter idea. Yet many anthropologists have found themselves arguing along precisely these lines:

namely that non-humans can figure in the world of humans only as animated cultural constructs. They have reached this conclusion as a reaction against the naïve realism that posits a world of non-human nature, given and complete, that is entirely innocent of the activities, beliefs and desires of human beings. Nature, they say, does not declare itself for what it is; rather it is what humans, guided by their cultural conventions and predispositions, make it out to be.

This may be so. But whether or not I attribute the seagull to nature is entirely secondary to my vivid awareness of the bird's presence as a living being in my immediate environment. It is *there*, regardless of what I call it or how I choose to categorise it. For all I know it is observing me at work, just as I am staring at it and wondering what it must feel like to fly. The gull is part of my environment, but I am part of the environment for the gull. And the world we both inhabit is one that undergoes continual formation as our respective lives, and those of countless other creatures, gradually unfold. Call this process one of production if you will (the term is undoubtedly preferable, in this context, to the hackneyed notion of construction). But then you must acknowledge among the producers every agent that contributes in one way or another to the formation of the environment: human beings certainly, but also animals of virtually every other kind, as well as plants and fungi, the wind and rain, glaciers, rivers and the ocean. Of course their relative contributions vary greatly, both geographically and over time. My point, however, is that an environment that has been prominently shaped by human activity—such as, say, a garden or swidden plot—is on that account no more 'artificial', no more of a 'construction', than one that shows no signs of human presence at all. It is just that the principal producers are different in each case. Nor, since the process of production did not begin with the arrival of humans and indeed has no discernible point of origin, is one environment any less 'natural' than the other. As John O'Neill puts it (this collection), 'the world in which we live is the result of an interplay of human and non-human history'. By the same token, I suppose, the lifeworld of the seagull is the result of an interplay of gull and non-gull history. But what, exactly, is non-human history or non-gull history? Is it a history of everything barring human beings or seagulls?

Introducing his book *The Mental and the Material*, Maurice Godelier (1986: 1) asserts that alone among animals, human beings 'produce society in order to live'. Because of this they have a History. Of course it is possible to argue that other animal and plant species also have histories of a kind, but these are generally regarded not as histories they have produced for themselves, but as the outcomes of an evolutionary process of variation under natural selection. Humans, by contrast, are not only made by history; they also play their part in helping to make it. Theirs, if you will, is History with a capital 'H' (Godelier 1989: 63). In these terms the O'Neill interplay, if we may so call it, would be between human History and non-human history, on the sides of society and nature respectively. But although Godelier takes his cue from Marx, in fact—as we have seen—Marx does not say that humans produce so-

ciety. He says that humans produce themselves. They do so by reciprocally laying down through their actions the conditions for each other's growth and development. What they produce, in short, is not society but the ongoing process of social life. Yet human actions establish conditions of development not only for other humans, but also for assorted non-humans. The farmer's work on the fields creates favourable conditions for the growth of crop plants, and the herdsman's work does the same for domestic animals. Moreover it is easy to turn the argument around and show how various non-humans contribute, in specific environments, to the growth and wellbeing of humans. Human social life is therefore not cut out on a separate plane of History but is part and parcel of a process that is going on throughout the organic world. Of course to chart this process, we can only focus on one region at a time. What we will find there, however, is not so much an interplay between two kinds of history, human and non-human, as a history comprised by the interplay of diverse human and non-human agents in their mutual relationships.

But if agents can foster each other's development, they can also act to block it, by removing or subverting the conditions of growth. History brings pain and suffering as well as growth and prosperity. Neither is the monopoly of humans or non-humans. That humans regularly inflict pain and suffering on other humans, not to mention non-humans, is all too obvious. But it is worth bearing in mind that a great deal of the distress of non-humans is attributable to other non-humans, and that humans can suffer at the hands (or teeth or claws) of non-humans too. Perhaps the infliction is less deliberate, but it is no less real in its consequences. Against this infliction, most creatures attempt various means of protection. Human beings are generally concerned to protect themselves, their homes, their fields and gardens, their animals and their land. They do so in order to create a sphere in which they can dwell in relative peace and prosperity. We could call such a sphere a place, meaning by that not a bounded portion of territory but a nexus of ongoing life activity. Threats to place can come from many quarters, human and non-human. Thus people may seek protection against theft, sorcery, raiding or military attack, but also against fire, storm, disease and dangerous wild animals. Many of the peoples documented in this collection, however, are facing a new kind of threat, which comes from attempts, at national and international levels, to protect nature itself. This leads me to reflect on the differences between protecting place and protecting nature. Why should endeavours to protect place threaten nature, and why should endeavours to protect nature threaten place?

The first difference to note is that the protection of place extends to constituents of the environment that are known to you, with which you have a personal relationship and a shared history, as *against* the unknown forces of disorder that lurk beyond the range of the familiar. The protection of nature, by contrast, appears to side with the unknown against the known. The objects of protection are circumscribed by a territorial boundary that sets them rigidly apart from the sphere of social interaction. Within this boundary, living be-

ings are reduced to counters whose variations can be catalogued, distributions mapped and populations tallied. Indeed on the level of broad strategy, the conservationists' protection of nature is somewhat analogous to the company's protection of profits: it is a question not of personal care but of book-keeping and rational management, of balancing recruitment and loss in wildlife populations rather as one might balance monetary income and expenditure. On the level of tactics, however, it is rather different. For the tactics of conservation are played out through ground manoeuvres that more often than not involve forms of policing and surveillance, aggressively backed by the threat of overwhelming physical force, that are directed against known local persons and have an immediate impact on their lives and livelihood. A line on a map that delineates the territory takes the material form on the ground of a fence that impedes movement not just for wildlife but also for people—except, of course, those in authority who can flaunt their superiority by coming and going as they please, often in expensive motor vehicles or even by air. Measures to regulate wildlife populations by means of access restrictions and quota limits require people to submit to forms of interaction with officials and bureaucrats in which they may be unskilled and initially ill at ease. For the protection of themselves and their homes from these new forms of aggression and subjugation, inhabitants may find themselves facing criminal prosecution, loss of livelihood and eviction.

Ultimately, the protection of nature and the protection of place are incompatible because the former entails enclosure, and enclosure destroys place. It does so for three reasons. First, it reduces the constituents of place to only that which can be 'parked' within a perimeter boundary. The result is a peculiarly landlocked view, as though everything of significance in the world we inhabit could be pinned down to the surface of the earth. But you cannot enclose the sky, or the birds that fly in it. You cannot enclose the clouds, the wind and the rain, or the water of flowing rivers, all of which are essential to life. You cannot enclose the sun or its light, or the moon, or the stars. Nature enclosed—the *park*—simply cannot be part of any world we experience. And places belong to the experienced world, not to some full-scale model of it. Secondly, places are not static nodes but are constituted in movement, through the comings and goings of people and animals. It is a mistake to equate dwelling with rest or stasis. For being at home in the world entails action and perception, and to act and perceive one must move about. But enclosure blocks movement, converting the places that people inhabit to containers in which they are imprisoned. No-one can be at home in a prison. Thirdly and finally, the places we inhabit have horizons, not external boundaries. You can stand at a place looking out, but you cannot stand outside a place looking in. Thus the world cannot realistically be divided into compartments, with some blocks reserved for society, and others set aside for nature. True, edges and borders are everywhere. We may speak of the water's edge, the roadside, the garden border, the fence. But not one of these marks the edge of nature, or the border of soci-

ety. No-one yet has made the crossing from nature to society, or vice versa, and no-one ever will. There is no such boundary to be crossed.

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