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Culture–nature

Sarah Whatmore

INTRODUCTION

Has anyone noticed how many television wildlife programmes seem to be scheduled around mealtimes? It's a mundane coincidence that illustrates just one of the ways in which we confront the tricky borders between culture and nature in our everyday lives. The feeding habits of the creatures on display and the food on the viewer's fork collide momentarily in millions of homes. In that moment, the cordon separating the things we call 'natural' from those we call 'cultural' loses its grip. Which is on the screen and which on the plate? At first glance, the big cat tearing into the flesh of its prey seems to embody nature at its most elemental – a world apart. But look again. This vision of nature 'red in tooth and claw' has been carefully framed by the hidden crews and technologies of filmmaking. They in turn are shaped by the conventions of science and television which establish our expectations of how a particular type of animal should eat and which aspects of feeding make good viewing. The meal in front of us, on the other hand, is more obviously of human making. But on closer inspection we cannot fail to be reminded that, however *haut* the cuisine or industrial the ingredients, we share the metabolic urges of our animal kin. Culture and nature, it seems, are not so easy to pin down.

Geography, as we are constantly being reminded, asserts itself as a subject uniquely concerned with this interface between human culture and natural environment. While the overt sexism of exploring 'Man's role in changing the face of the earth' (Thomas *et al.*, 1956) may have become outmoded (or at least better disguised), this classic description of the geographical project has lost none of its appeal (see, for example, Simmons, 1996). But it has also become shorthand

for one of the underlying difficulties with the way the discipline is organized. The assumption that everything we encounter in the world already belongs either to 'culture' or to 'nature' has become entrenched in the division between 'human' and 'physical' geography and reinforced by the faltering conversation between them. As a result, even as geographers set about trafficking between culture and nature, a fundamental asymmetry in the treatment of the things assigned to these categories has been smuggled into the enterprise. Geography, like history, becomes the story of exclusively human activity and invention played out over, and through, an inert bedrock of matter and objects made up of everything else.

This division of the world into two all encompassing and mutually exclusive kinds of things, the so-called culture–nature *binary*, casts a long shadow over the way we imagine and live in it. It has not always been so and does not hold universal sway today. Rather, it can be traced to the European **Enlightenment** which, beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, came to embrace the world through networks of commerce, empire and science. The geographical tradition of exploration and expedition played an important role in extending and mapping these networks and has left us with a thoroughly *modern* sense of nature as the world that lies beyond their reach (Livingstone, 1992). From this European vantage point, nature comes to be associated with the places most remote from where 'we' are – like jungles and wildernesses or, more recently, nature reserves and national parks. The trouble is that as the twentieth century draws to a close, 'we' seem to be everywhere – from the hole in the ozone to the cloning of sheep. Where is this pristine nature to be found now?

In this climate it is not surprising that geographers, like the rest of us, are having problems holding the line between the cultural and natural.

This chapter examines some of the ways in which contemporary Human Geography handles the relationship between culture and nature. The opening themes of food and wildlife are used to illustrate various approaches and interpretations, and to show the difference they make to the ways in which we understand and act in the world. The chapter focuses on two well-established kinds of accounts which explore different aspects of the ways in which human societies have refashioned natural environments over time. It concludes by looking at the growing dissatisfaction with such accounts and their assumption that we can best make sense of the world by first setting ourselves apart from everything else in it.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATURE

We begin then with established efforts by Human Geographers to make sense of the ways in which the ideas, activities and devices of human societies reshape the natural world. To put it another way, Human Geographers have treated nature first and foremost as a *social construction* although, as we shall see, they disagree over what this means. Two different, but in some ways complementary, traditions of academic work have been particularly influential over the last 25 years or so. The first is the **Marxist** tradition which has been concerned with the material transformation of nature as it is put to a variety of human uses under different conditions of production. The second is cultural geography which has focused on the changing idea of nature, what it means to different societies and how they go about representing it in words and images.

Producing nature

Writing at the height of the industrial revolution in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx observed the ways in which plants and animals were being physically transformed by farmers using careful selection and breeding methods to produce commercially more valuable crops and livestock (Marx, 1976 (1867)). The lesson he drew from this observation was that with the rise of industrial capitalism, those things which we are accustomed to think of as natural were increasingly becoming refashioned as the products of human labour. This apparently contradictory idea of 'the production of nature' has become a central theme for Human Geographers.

Noel Castree has identified three reasons for its

geographical importance (1995). First, to acknowledge that nature is produced undermines the familiar, but misleading, idea that it is something fixed and unchanging. Instead we are forced to look at the specific ways in which human societies have interacted with natural environments in different times and places – from hunter-gatherer to post-industrial societies, from economies based on slave labour to those based on wage labour, for example. Second, it captures the double-edged sense in which the process of producing goods for human use and exchange simultaneously transforms the physical fabric of the natural world and people's relationship to it. For those of us whose idea of provisioning is stacking our shopping trolleys at the supermarket, it is difficult to imagine the intimate bonds that characterize societies in which the medicinal properties of plants or the seasonal habits of animals are part of everyday knowledge and practice. Third, it alerts us to the way in which capitalist production, in particular, seems to stop at nothing in its quest for profitability, turning landscapes, bodies and, these days, even the molecular structure of cells into marketable commodities.

Neil Smith's book *Uneven Development*, first published in 1983 and in a revised edition in 1990, has been one of the most influential elaborations of this analytical approach in contemporary Human Geography. Capitalism, he argues, for the first time in history puts human society in the driving seat, replacing God as the creative force fashioning the natural world. We can get more of the flavour of the argument from his own words.

In its constant drive to accumulate larger and larger quantities of social wealth under its control, capital transforms the shape of the entire world. No god-given stone is left unturned, no original relation with nature is unaltered, no living thing unaffected. Uneven development is the concrete process and pattern of the production of nature under capitalism. With the development of capitalism, human society has put itself at the centre of nature.

(1990: xiv)

This revolutionary social capacity to produce nature is termed *second nature* by Smith, and other Marxist geographers to distinguish it from nature in its 'god-given' or 'original' state, so-called *first nature*. These terms have an explicit historical dimension, marking off modern, or more particularly, capitalist societies from all those that have gone before in terms of their relationship with the natural world. In the same vein, a further transition is deemed to be going on today as we move towards postmodern social forms (see Chapter 2) accompanied by a *third nature* of computer-simulated and televisual landscapes and creatures.

The transition between first, second and third

nature also has significant geographical dimensions which are illustrated through the example of the potato in the three part sequence of Figure 1.1a–c. The potato arrived as an exotic curiosity from ‘the new world’ amongst the booty of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century explorers like Christopher Columbus and Walter Raleigh. Since then, the humble spud has become a staple of northern European diets and, in the guise of the McDonald’s ‘french fry’, of a global fast-food cuisine. The image in Figure 1.1a dates from around 1600 and shows a drawing from Guaman Poma’s encyclopaedic survey of the ancient Inca state



Figure 1.1a First nature. Seventeenth century drawing of the Inca state of Tahuantinsuyu. Potatoes being laid up for storage



Figure 1.1b Second nature. Industrial potato cultivation in Brittany, 1980s

of Tahuantinsuyu (in modern-day Peru) for the King of Spain. It shows sacks of potatoes transported by llamas being laid up for storage. It is the kind of image that from our own time seems to capture just what is meant by first nature – plants (and animals) in their ‘original’ state, remaining essentially unchanged by their encounter with a ‘pre-modern’ society. The Figure 1.1b is a photograph of potato harvesting in Brittany in the 1980s. The large featureless field, the monotony of the crop and the presence of the tractor tell us that this is an industrial agricultural landscape. A readily recognizable picture of second nature, wearing its human fabrication on its sleeve. The third image, Figure 1.1c is a cartoon illustrating some of the popular anxieties associated with the current transition to a third nature. Here, not only has the location and landscape of potato growing become a human artefact but the genetic structure of the potato plant itself has been mapped and engineered to enhance its commercial properties – in this case its size!

Summary

- Nature is socially constructed in the sense that it is transformed through the labour process and fashioned by the technologies and values of human production.



“Who ordered the baked potato?”

Figure 1.1c Third nature. A genetically engineered potato. Credit: Pugh/The Times, 31/7/97

- From this perspective, nature–society relations are seen to have changed progressively over time from *first* (original) nature, to *second* (industrial) nature to today's *third* (virtual) nature.

Representing nature

A rather different interpretation of what is meant by the social construction of nature is that associated with the cultural tradition of Human Geography. In this geographical enterprise the natural world is understood to be shaped as powerfully by the human imagination as by any physical manipulation. This is because 'nature' does not come with handy labels naming its parts or making sense of itself, like a plant from the garden centre. Such naming and sense-making are the attributes of human cultures. The importance of this approach is that it forces us to recognise that our relationship with those aspects of the world we call natural is unavoidably filtered through the categories, technologies and conventions of human *representation* in particular times and places. As Alex Wilson, a Canadian landscape architect, puts it:

Our experience of the natural world – whether touring the Canadian Rockies, watching an animal show on TV, or working in our own gardens – is always mediated. It is always shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as by institutions like religion, tourism and education.

(1992: 12)

For cultural geographers, then, nature itself is first and foremost a category of the human imagination, and therefore best treated as a part of culture.

This can be a rather unnerving starting point for those who look to nature as the reassuring bedrock of a 'real' world that stubs your toe when you trip over it, regardless of any attempt to 'imagine' it otherwise. And one could be forgiven for not taking it very seriously if cultural geographers were arguing that nature is 'just a figment of our imaginations'. But, of course, they are not. What they are saying is that the relationship between the 'real' and the 'imagined' is no less slippery than that between nature and culture (see Chapter 6). These arguments are brought to a head in the concept of *landscape*. In everyday speech, landscape refers both to physical places in which we encounter the natural world and to artistic representations of such encounters and places. Cultural geography builds on these ambiguities to direct attention to the ways in which the relationship between the two – the 'real' and the 'represented' landscapes of nature – is far from straightforward.

In their influential book *The Iconography of Landscape* (1988), Stephen Daniels and Denis

Cosgrove suggest that landscape is a way of seeing the world which can take a variety of forms:

in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. A landscape park is more palpable but no more real, nor less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem

(1988: 1)

Whatever their form, these 'ways of seeing' the natural world share three common principles. The first of these is that the representation of nature is not a neutral process that simply produces a mirror image of a fixed external reality, like a photocopy. Rather, it is instrumental in constituting our sense of what the natural world is like. This is easy to accept for paintings or literature where we make allowance for 'artistic licence' in terms of the artist's vision and the technical qualities and stylistic conventions of their chosen medium, say, oils or poetry. But it holds equally well for natural history programme-making, or the geographical art of map-making, in which the nuts and bolts of the process of representation are less readily apparent or more actively hidden from view.

It follows, that the second principle of landscape is not to take representations of the natural world at face value, however much they seem, or claim, to be 'true to life'. The 'real' and the 'represented' cannot be so surely distinguished or firmly held apart in the practical business of 'seeing the world'. The work of the imagination, for example, has begun before a single brush stroke has been made on the canvas. What has brought the artist to this particular spot and made it a worthy subject for painting? As much as anything else, it is an established repertoire of cultural reference points for interpreting the natural world which repeat and ricochet off one another down the ages, like the biblical imagery of the 'wilderness' or the 'ark'. Likewise, representations of the natural world shift effortlessly from being understood as depictions of what it *is* like, to being used as blueprints of what it *should be* like in the guise, for example, of management plans for the conservation or restoration of historic landscapes.

The third principle of landscape is that there are many incompatible ways of seeing the same natural phenomenon, event or environment. For example, the drawings and accounts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European colonists depicted Australia as a 'waste and barbarous' land. Yet this representation could hardly have been more at odds with the 'dreamtime' landscapes of its aboriginal peoples whose communal stories and dances teem with plant and animal life. Such irreconcilable landscapes underline the importance of carefully situating different representations of the natural world, including our own, in the historical and social contexts which make

them meaningful (see Chapter 23). They also alert us to the highly political nature of the representational process. British colonization and settlement of Australia were justified by treating it as an 'empty' continent. The prior claims and land rights of its aboriginal inhabitants went unrecognized in the country's constitution and legal process until an historic ruling in the Australian High Court in 1992.

We can illustrate these points by returning to the case of natural history programmes that opened this chapter. Television wildlife documentaries are widely taken to 'tell it like it is', providing us with a direct lens onto nature's creatures and landscapes. But as David Attenborough, one of the world's leading wildlife film-makers, made clear in an interview with geographers in the early 1980s, 'there is precious little that is natural . . . in any film'. He goes on to explain why.

You distort speed if you want to show things like plants growing, or look in detail at the way an animal moves. You distort light levels. You distort distribution, in the sense that you see dozens of different species in a jungle within a few minutes, so that the places seem to be teeming with life. You distort size by using close-up lenses. And you distort sound.

(Burgess and Unwin, 1984: 103)

Figure 1.2 illustrates this more complex relationship between the 'real' and 'represented' landscapes of wildlife. On the left we catch a rare glimpse of the people and equipment that mediate between an animal and its celluloid image. It gives us some sense of the discomfort and risk that film-makers face to 'get the shot'. But look closely at the lion. She is within spitting distance of the cameraman yet completely uninterested in him and his paraphernalia. The reason is that this photograph was taken in Serengeti National Park which has become a favoured location

for filming African wildlife precisely because, after decades of intensive management and tourism, the animals have become habituated to human presence. Careful editing will be needed to make this animal and place live up to the standards of a documentary 'wildlife' landscape. Figure 1.3 adds a further twist. It shows the BBC Natural History Unit being caught out by a national newspaper over its filming of the Monarch butterfly for the series *Incredible Journeys*. In order to save money, the programme-makers decided not to travel to its native region in the Great Lakes of North America but to film captive-bred Monarchs which they had released into the comparable scenery of the English Lake District. Again, the film satisfies our sense of the wild aesthetically. But this time the representational process has left unknown consequences in its wake for both the butterflies and the regional ecology into which they were let loose.

Summary

- Nature is socially constructed in the sense that it is shaped as powerfully by the human imagination as by any physical manipulation. Our relationships with nature are unavoidably filtered through the categories and conventions of human *representation*.
- From this perspective, the *landscapes* of nature are understood as 'ways of seeing' the world in which the 'real' and the 'imagined' are intricately interwoven.

ENLIVENING THE GEOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE

Whether their emphasis has been on its material transformation or on its changing meaning, Human Geographers have treated the natural world primarily as an object fashioned by the imperatives of human



Figure 1.2 Taking a close-up of a lion.
Credit: Roz Coward/Planet Earth Pictures



Figure 1.3 The Monarch butterfly's journey to Lake Windermere. Credit: Jonathan Anstee/*The Independent on Sunday*, 17/11/96

societies in particular times and places. Each perspective illuminates different aspects of the convoluted relationship between the things of human making (culture) and those that are not of our making (nature). But in different ways the creative energies of the earth itself, in rivers, soils, weather and oceans, and of the living plants and creatures assigned to 'nature', are eclipsed in both accounts. In their eagerness to stress the capitalist capacity for producing nature, the Marxist tradition, for example, too readily overlooks the active role of these natural entities and processes in making the geographies we inhabit. Likewise, the argument that our relationship to the natural world is always culturally mediated has tended to fix attention on the powers of the human imagination, ignoring the multitude of other lives and capacities bound up in the fashioning of landscapes.

In these marvellous worlds of exclusively human achievement nature appears destined to be relentlessly and comprehensively colonized by culture. Human Geography's long march from environmental determinism to social constructionism seems to have brought us, as the environmentalist Bill McKibben puts it, to 'the end of nature' (1990). Whatever their differences, both accounts of this triumph of human culture over the matter of nature are grounded in the assumption that the collective 'us' of human society is somehow removed from the rest of the world. Only

by first placing it at a distance can human society be (re)connected to everything else on such asymmetrical terms as those between producer and product, or viewer and view (see also Chapter 5). These are geographies whose only subjects, or active inhabitants, are people while everything consigned to nature becomes so much putty in our hands.

Such *humanist* geographies do not square with the anguish and infrastructure of environmental concern that characterizes the late twentieth century. In unimaginable and unforeseen ways the forcefulness of all manner of 'non-humans' has come to make itself felt in our social lives. From climate change to 'mad cow disease' there is a growing sense that our actions, and indifference to their consequences, are returning to haunt us. The popular face of this growing sensibility is illustrated by the image in Figure 1.4 which was circulating as a postcard at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1995.

Likewise the pets and viruses, plants and wildlife that share the most urbanized of living spaces, and the peoples who over centuries have inhabited the deserts, jungles and swamplands where 'we' have seen only nature, make it apparent that 'the whole idea of nature as something separate from human experience is a lie' (Wilson, 1992: 13).

Over the last 5 years or so there has been mounting unease about the ways in which Geography has built



Figure 1.4 The cows come home. Credit: BSE II/Edinburgh Festival 1995

this binary division between nature and culture into its descriptions and explanations of the changing world. This unease stems from several different concerns, not least the crippling effect this polarization had on the contribution that Geography can make to informing more sustainable living practices (Adams, 1996). In Human Geography, it centres on a growing recognition of the intricate and dynamic ways in which people, technologies, organisms and geophysi-

cal processes are woven together in the making of spaces and places. Three of the most important currents in this rethinking of the 'human' in Human Geography give a flavour of things to come.

The first of these currents is concerned with showing that the idea of nature as a pristine space 'outside society' is an historical fallacy. This idea is so pervasive today that it is difficult for many of us recognise it as a particular and contestable way of seeing the world. But historical geographers are helping to expose the ways in which the presence of native peoples was actively erased from the landscapes that came to be seen as wildernesses in colonial European eyes, and which are now revered by many environmentalists as remnants of 'pristine' nature (Cronon, 1995). Try looking again at the image in Figure 1.1a, in this light.

The second current extends this historical repudiation of the separation of human society and the natural world by paying close attention to the mixed-up, mobile lives of people, plants and animals in our own everyday lives. The place of animals has largely fallen off or, more accurately, between the agendas of contemporary human and physical geography. But a new focus on 'animal geographies' is emerging which seeks to demonstrate the ways in which they are caught up in all manner of social networks from the wildlife safari to the city zoo, the international pet trade to factory farming, which disconcert our assumptions about their 'natural' place in the world (Wolch and Emel, 1998).

Finally, and most provocatively, a third current of work against the grain of the nature-culture binary is trying to come to terms with the ways in which the seemingly hard and fast categories of human, animal and machine are becoming blurred. This blurring is achieved by technologies like genetic engineering and artificial intelligence which are seen to recombine the

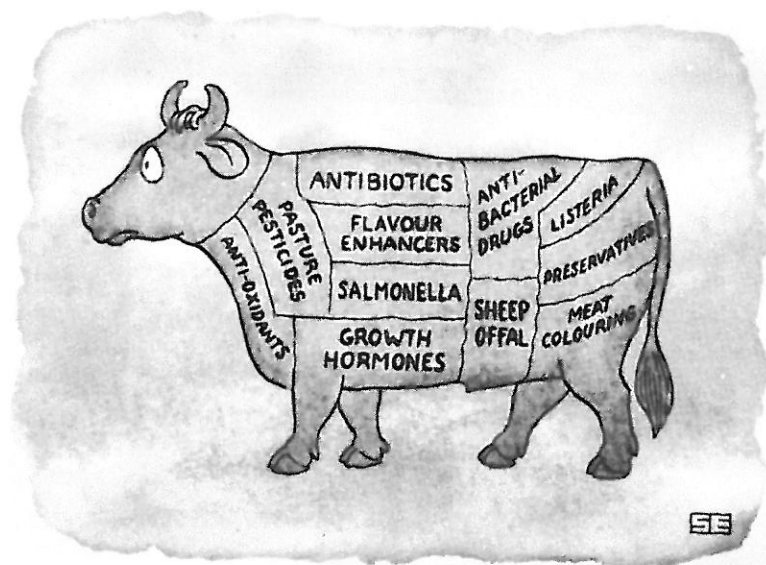


Figure 1.5 Mapping hybrid body spaces. Credit: Stan Eales

qualities associated with these categories in new forms, such as transgenic organisms, bionic enhancements and the like (Luke, 1997). In these 'cyborg geographies' the body is emerging as an important new site for geographical research. Returning again to the example of food, Figure 1.5 illustrates the ways in which body spaces are being reorganized at the most intimate of scales. Where does nature end and culture start for this cow?

Human geography has come a long way from defining itself as the study of 'man's [sic] role in changing the face of the earth'. The geographies now emerging challenge us to look again at how and where we draw the line between culture and nature and to recognize that this densely and diversely inhabited planet is a much more unruly place than these categories admit.

Further reading

- Anderson, K. (1997) A walk on the wildside. *Progress in Human Geography* 21 4: 463–85.

A thorough review of geographical work on domestication as one of the longest-running processes connecting human, animal and plant life worlds in new ways and helping to put the novelty of genetic engineering into historical perspective.

- Cronon, B. (1995) The trouble with wilderness: or getting back to the wrong nature. In Cronon, W. (ed.) *Uncommon*

ground: towards reinventing nature. New York: W.W. Norton, pp. 69–90.

A very readable piece by an eminent US environmental historian which reflects on both the intellectual and political problems of treating nature as 'outside' culture.

- Luke, T. (1997) At the end of nature: cyborgs, 'humachines' and environments in postmodernity. *Environment and Planning A*, 29: 1367–80.

A difficult piece written with more than a hint of irony at the hyperbole with which some current writing about genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and the like are breaking down conventional boundaries between 'nature' and 'culture'. Worth the effort to get a sense of what the geographies of 'third nature' might look like.

- McKibben, B. (1990) *The end of nature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

This popular 'bestseller' argues that nature in its 'true' sense as a 'separate realm' has been eradicated by the relentless industrialization of human society. It is a passionate example of an environmental politics premised on maintaining the distinction between nature and culture. It's short and worth reading in its entirety, but the basic case is set out in Part 1.

- Wilson, A. (1992) *The culture of nature*. London: Routledge. Written by a Canadian landscape designer, this book is a visual and literary feast concerned with the numerous ways in which nature and culture shape each other in post-war North American landscapes. The introduction and chapters on nature films (4) and nature parks (7) are particularly good.