Paradigms in Human–environmental relations: Orientalism, paternalism and communalism

Background

○ Modern-day ecologists continue to 'compare' the orders of nature and society as if they were separate, autonomous systems, exploring the links between them (Holling *et al.* 1994).

○ Despite the dialectic, interactive language, then, the boundary between society and nature remains a contested interface.

○ In the 1970s, Sahlins quite suitably characterised anthropology, a discipline continually trapped between idealism and materialism, as a 'prisoner pacing between the farthest walls of his cell' (1976:55), reinventing the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*.

○ In social theory, the organic individual has often been contrasted with collective social life; the former, it is assumed, is part of nature while the later is superorganic.

Distinction between nature and society

○ A key constructs of modernist discourse, and increasingly been subject to critical discussion in several fields, including anthropology and environmental history.

○ Marxian approach, usually restricted to *human* relations, to the analysis of human-environmental relations.

○ Tapper (1988) has argued that in hunting and gathering societies humans and animals engage in the 'mutual production of each others' existence' (1988:52)

○ Similarly, Brightman (1993) alludes that in the case of the Canadian Cree, a process 'in which humans and animals successively participate as producers of the other, the animals willingly surrendering the "product" of their own bodies and the hunters returning it to them as cooked food, all figured in the idiom of "love"' (1993:188).

The three paradigms: Orientalism, paternalism, and communalism

- The paradigm of communalism (differs from both orientalism and paternalism in that) it rejects the radical separation of nature and society, object and subject, emphasising the notion of dialogue.

  Communalism: an environmental philosophy based on ideals of simple living, self-sufficiency, sustainability, and local economies.

- While ethical approaches to the environment and human-environmental relations are highly interconnected.

  a scheme of classification.

- Merchant (1990) has applied a taxonomy for human-environmental relations, to environmental ethics, distinguishing between egocentric, homocentric, and ecocentric approaches.

  centered on all human beings   prioritize nature over human

  thinking only of oneself, without regard for the feelings or desires of others; self-centred

- Merchant (1990) suggests, the egocentric approach is grounded in the self and *laissez faire* capitalism; the homocentric one is grounded in society and the notion of stewardship; and, finally, the ecocentric approach addresses the whole cosmos, assigning intrinsic value to non-human nature.

  an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

  No tax, regulation or tariff

  the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care

Nature-society in Medieval Europe

- ==In medieval Europe, there was no radical separation of nature and society;== As Gurevich (1992:297) argues, in medieval times 'man thought of himself as an integral part of the world.... His interrelation with nature was so intensive and thorough that he could not look at it from without; he was inside it.'

- The medieval term 'individual' originally meant 'indivisible'—that which cannot be divided, like the unity of the Trinity.

- The systematic fragmenting of the medieval world and the 'othering' of nature it entailed first took shape in the Renaissance period [The Renaissance began in Italy during the 14th century], during which the whole western attitude to the environment, knowledge and learning was transformed.

- Early Renaissance painters, trained in the static and holistic world of Aristotelian philosophy and the medieval church (the canvas was primarily decorative space for the glorification of godly designs).

Cartesian anxiety

- **Cartesian** anxiety is a hope that studying the world will give us unchangeable knowledge of ourselves and the world.

- The Cartesian anxiety of estrangement and uncertainty, however, of the separation from the mother-world of the Middle Ages and the nursing earth, was compensated for by the rational ego, the obsession with objectivity, and a 'masculine' theory of natural knowledge'.

the fact of no longer being on friendly terms or part of a social group.

- ==“She” [nature] becomes “it”–and “it” can be understood and controlled. Not through “sympathy”… but by virtue of the very *objectivity* of the “it”==. The “otherness” of nature is now what allows it to be known’ (Bordo 1987:108).

- For example, if nature is an ‘Other’, it has to be ‘translated’; much like the noise in the ruins of the Tower of Babel it demands close attention and effort at understanding.

- A translation indicates the relative submissiveness or superiority of the translator and the authority of the receptor *vis-a- vis* the source.

- Such a perspective may be applied to the ethnographic enterprise.

- How ethnographers, as visitors or guests, meet their hosts (and how they are met by them), how they manage their lives among them, and how they report what they experience, varies from case to case (Palsson 1993, 1995).

Environmental orientalism and paternalism

○ The contrast between domination and protection with respect to the environment

○ The key difference between them is that while the former 'exploits' the latter 'protects'.

○ Environmental orientalism suggests negative reciprocity in human-environmental relations, whereas paternalism implies balanced reciprocity, presupposing human responsibility. (In both the case humans are masters of nature)

Communalism

○ The third paradigm 'communalism' emerge by rejecting the radical separation of nature and society, object and subject, and the modernist assumptions of othering, certainty and monologue, adding the dimension of continuity and discontinuity.

Communalism: an environmental philosophy based on ideals of simple living, self-sufficiency, sustainability, and local economies

○ This paradigm suggests generalised reciprocity in human-environmental relations, invoking the notions of contingency, participation, and dialogue.

- Analogies of the human world and the natural environment – Humans often treat other human beings and the environment in a similar manner. [Indeed, discourses on nature, ethnography and textual translation have much in common]

- Thus the metaphoric language of classic rhetorics—of irony, tragedy, comedy, and romance—has appeared in a wide range of fields and contexts at different points in time.

- Metaphoric association draws upon the language of personal relatedness, of kinship and sexual relationships; have often been used to represent both textual translation and the nature-society interface.

  a sharing of characteristics or origins.

Orientalist exploitation

- This paradigm not only establishes a fundamental break between nature and society, but it also suggests that people are masters of nature, in charge of the world.

- the idea of a Tabula Rasa is that when people are born, their minds are effectively a blank slate, so their experiences make them who they are

  As Ingold says: In this 'colonial' regime, the world becomes 'a *tabula rasa* for the inscription of human history' (1993:37).

- The vocabulary of orientalism is typically one of domestication, frontiers, and expansion—of exploring, conquering, and exploiting the environment—for the diverse purposes of production, consumption, sport, and display.

- In the orientalist context, scientists present themselves as analysts of the material world, unaffected by any ethical considerations.

- The persistent 'othering' of the object, for example, the Baconian imagery of sexual assault, of 'entering and penetrating...holes and corners' (Francis Bacon, cited in Bordo 1987:108), is a recurrent one.

  the act of treating someone as though they are not part of a group and are different in some way

- As Bordo (1987:171) and Nelson (1992:108, 1993:27), have shown, the literature on modern science is replete with passages that describe human-environmental interactions by means of an aggressive, sexual idiom; nature appears as a seductive but troublesome female.

- Orientalist ethnographers colonise the reality they are studying in terms of a universalist discourse, asserting the superiority of their own society in relation to that of the natives.

- Given that anthropology was the offspring of colonialism, the predominance of the objectivist and orientalist extends over a long period in the history of the discipline.

- The relationships between translator and author not only in terms of a predator–prey relationship, they also tend to employ a violent sexual language. [The content of the source-text is represented as a passive, female prey to be appropriated by a male translator]

- Many examples of the industrial exploitation of 'wild', undomesticated species illustrate the characteristics of environmental orientalism.

- The literature on fishing economies, for example, often attests to an aggressive stance; the expansive Icelandic fishing economy is one case in point.

- During this period, the sea represented a gigantic, continuous mass of energy to be worked upon actively and offensively by humans, 'by force'—more specifically, by daring males almost at war with the ecosystem (see Pálsson 1991).

- To capture the morality of environmental orientalism and its impractical consequences [metaphor of *irony*]

- The producers naïvely expect to be in total control and yet by their own practices they seriously undermine their mastery, sometimes bringing the species they exploit to near depletion.

- Even more ironically, faced with the realities of resource depletion people sometimes adopt the fatalistic attitude that depletion is simply an inevitable ingredient of economic progress.

Paternalism

○ This involves privileging scientific expertise, an inversion in the relative power of experts and laypersons.

○ In the modern, environmentalist view, humans have a particular responsibility to meet, not only to other humans but also to members of other species (to fellow inhabitants of the animal kingdom, and the ecosystem of the globe).

○ The environmentalist movement tends to fetishise nature, thereby setting it apart from the world of humans (Humans, it is argued, are acting on behalf of nature).

○ The issue of animal rights among radical ecologists 'becomes something akin to the activities of the left revolutionaries of the nineteenth century, only now 'Nature', not the oppressed proletariat, is the beneficiary' (Bennett 1993:343).

○ Animal rights activists (trapped in objectivist, western discourse on science and the Other) often make a fundamental distinction between 'them' (indigenous producers) and 'us' (Euro-Americans).

Academic discourse on textual translation

- Derrida speaks of the 'translation contract', defined as 'hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth' (1985:191).

- Only *some* segments of humanity properly belong to nature, those reported to love animals and take care of their environment, variously called 'primitives', the 'children of nature', or *Naturvölker*.

- 'We', it is assumed, left 'the state of nature' long ago.

- Thus, deterministic, ecological models are sometimes presumed to apply only to some societies, notably hunting and gathering societies.

- In the case of Icelandic fishing, the paradigm of paternalism is represented by the current application of scientific rationality to fisheries management.

- While fishermen continue to appropriate their prey, in the sense of removing it *from* the natural domain, a world separated from that of humans, with scientific management extraction has been subject to protective measures *(fiskvernd)* and stringent regulations.

- Consequently, fishermen have become increasingly dominated by techno-scientific knowledge and the agencies of the state.

- The chief architects of the paternalistic regime of protective fishing and the present system of individual transferable quotas (economists, biologists, and other policy makers) often remain firmly committed to a modernist, objectivist stance.

Communalism

○ This paradigm rejects the separation of nature and society and the notions of certainty and monologue, emphasising instead contingency and dialogue

○ Unlike paternalism, communalism suggests generalised reciprocity, an exchange often metaphorically represented in terms of intimate, personal relationships.

○ The need to develop an 'ecological' theory that fully integrates human ecology and social theory, abandoning any radical distinction between nature and society, is often recognised nowadays.

○ Such a theory was proposed early on in the writings of the young Marx, who insisted that humans could not be separated from nature, and, conversely, that nature could not be separated from humans. Nature, he argued, 'taken abstractly, for itself—nature fixed in isolation from man—is *nothing* for man' (1961:169).

- Not only does such a theory provide a perspective that resonates with the paradigm of communalism, dismissing the dualism of experts and laypersons, it also offers a compelling view on how people acquire the skills necessary for managing their lives, starting, as Dewey put it (1958:23), 'from knowing as a factor in action and undergoing'.

- The theory of practice draws attention to whole persons, master-apprentice relations, and the wider community of practice to which they belong, decentring the study of human action (Gudeman 1992, Pálsson 1994).

- Such a perspective provides a useful antidote to methodological individualism.

- The proper unit of analysis is no longer the autonomous individual separated from the social world by the surface of the body, but rather the whole person in action, acting within the contexts of that activity.

Communalism/ anthropologists and ethnographic fieldwork

- The communalism of fieldwork may be characterised as a project in which anthropologists and their hosts engage in meaningful, reciprocal enterprises, as the inhabitants of a single world (Pálsson 1993, 1995).

- Habermas refers to as the written or spoken communication or debate. discourse ethics of the 'ideal speech situation', a general communicative strategy for recognising differences and solving conflicts (Habermas 1990:85).

- Fieldwork, Gudeman and Rivera (1990) emphasise in a similar vein, is a long conversation; anthropologists produce their ethnography *with* a responding people. Once again, there are obvious parallels in literary discourse.

○ Bird-David (1993) shows how many groups of hunters and gatherers metaphorically extend the communalism of relations among humans to the realm of environmental relations, thereby projecting an image of the 'giving environment'.

○ Just as a child may expect the care of its parents, the environment provides its *unconditional* support, irrespective of what happened in the past. In hunting and gathering societies, then, human-environmental relations may be described in terms of generalised reciprocity.

- The Canadian Cree sometimes speak of themselves as being in communion with nature and animals (Brightman 1993).

  Communion: he sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially on a mental or spiritual level.

- Hunting activities are frequently regarded as love affairs where hunters and their prey seduce each other; hunters must enter into relationships with game animals in order to have any success and *vice versa*.

- To kill an animal is to engage in a dialogue with an inhabitant of the *same* world; animals are social persons and humans are part of nature.

- In the hunter's view, there is no fundamental distinction between nature and society.

Relation to Land

○ Gurevich (1992) points out that in ancient Scandinavia people were so indissolubly linked with the land they cultivated that they saw in the land an extension of their own nature: 'the fact that a man was thus personally linked with his possessions found reflection in a general awareness of the indivisibility of men and the world of nature' (1992:178).

○ Social honour, then, was embodied in the land, the *óðal* (hence the German *edel*).

Economy of livelihood

- A pertinent modern example is the 'economy of livelihood' described by Gudeman and Rivera (1990) for rural Colombia. (Here, too, the force of the human body is embodied in the land)

- If the land (and, by extension, the human body) is not replenished, the 'base' will erode and people leave for the cities.

- Therefore, 'caring for' (or 'managing') the base is a major concern.

Exploring the spirit of communalism

○ To what extent the practical knowledge of fishermen could be brought more systematically into the process of resource management and how this knowledge differs from the textual knowledge of professional biologists.

○ Pálsson (1994) argued that skippers' extensive knowledge of the ecosystem within which they operate, the collective product of apprenticeship, is the result of years of practical enskilment and that it may be wise for management purposes to pay closer attention to this knowledge, allowing for extreme fluctuations in the ecosystem, relaxing at the same time the modernist assumption of predictability associated with the ecological project of sustainability.

- While it is true that an extensive body of local knowledge has often been set aside, if not eliminated, in the course of western expansion and domination and there are good grounds for attempting to recapture and preserve what remains of such knowledge, the reference to the 'indigenous' and 'traditional' in such contexts tends to reproduce and reinforce the boundaries of the colonial world, much like earlier notions of the 'native' and the 'primitive'; 'natives' and 'primitives' have a tendency to congregate in particular times and locations.

- Where does a particular skill or body of knowledge have to be located to be classified as 'indigenous'?

Conclusion

○ We have distinguished three kinds of paradigms with respect to human-environmental relations: orientalism, paternalism, and communalism.

○ Some of the modernist assumptions of orientalism (notably the conjecture of human mastery, the nature-society interface, and the distinction between laypersons and experts) are shared by the paternalistic paradigm—both paradigms are, indeed, the intellectual heirs of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and early positivist science (developed by, among others, Descartes and Francis Bacon), all of which instituted a series of decisive dualisms.

a person without professional or specialized knowledge in a particular subject.

The Renaissance is a period in history and a cultural movement marking the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity

- Moreover, whereas orientalism suggests the absence of reciprocity in human- environmental relations, the latter typically presupposes human responsibility and balanced reciprocity.

  paternalism

- Finally, the paradigm of communalism differs from both orientalism and paternalism in that it rejects the notions of certainty and monologue and the radical separation of nature and society.

- Unlike paternalism, it emphasises the *generalised* reciprocity of human-environmental relations, an exchange frequently modelled on close, personal relationships.

- The paradigm of communalism, with its emphasis on practice, reciprocity, and engagement, provides an avenue out of the modernist project and current environmental dilemmas.

- To adopt the dialogic perspective of communalism is not, however, simply to return to the pre-Renaissance medieval world and indulge in naïve romanticism, but rather to embrace a *more* realistic position, shunning the ethnocentric preconceptions of the modernist project.

- Our lives and activities are inevitably situated in larger ecological and historical contexts.

References

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