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# Thematic section

## Revisiting the Culture-Nature Divide Under Global Forces

A great fault line separating Culture from Nature as one of the classic logocentric oppositions in Western thought anchored in the legacies of anthropology has been discussed in a number of works over the past few decades. Though the ethnographic record of the relationships between nature and human societies resists the imposition of a nature-culture dualism and tends to see them as “reciprocally inscribed”, the idea of an opposition thrives.

By looking back at one of the key discussions in anthropology, this monothematic issue reconsiders the culture-nature divide by seeking to unpack the current dynamics of human-environment relations with the emphasis on cultural understandings of the environment under the ideology and practice of neoliberalism. The following text will successively deal with the complex relation between culture and nature, its dual nature, connections and disconnections, as well as hierarchisation within the dichotomy. A focus will be placed on anthropocentrism (cultural determinism), biocentrism (biological determinism), and attempts to propose a new model that goes beyond the distinction of nature and culture. Then, the text will briefly explore the culture-nature divide under global forces, namely neoliberalism and environmentalism. The last part will be devoted to the introduction of the papers included in this monothematic issue.

### **The Relation Between Culture and Nature: Connection, Disconnection, Dualism, Hierarchisation**

The relation between culture and nature, between the human and the natural, is immensely comprehensive and complex. The core of the dilemma is the contradiction between the unity of the human and non-human world, and the conflict between nature and culture (Komárek 2008). The very distinction between nature and the social world is a product of Enlightenment thought, which produced and required the “Othering” of nature<sup>1</sup> (Tilley et al. 2000). The idea that culture “deforms” human naturalness has brought about the concept of “endangered nature”, which went hand in hand with the need to save the “original”, “natural” world, and “unspoilt” culture. This idea was then taken on board in the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, which understood Civilisation as alien, damaging and unwanted – as an “ulcer on the earth’s

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1 Nature as the Other for culture (culture’s Other).

face” (Komárek 2008). The duality between the human and the natural, with the supremacy of culture, has affected European modernity and its cultural heritage. The tension between the unity of the human and natural world on the one hand and the conflict between nature and culture on the other culminated in the environmentalism as political movement of the 1960s. Western societies, rich enough to afford to engage with ecological issues, articulated environmentalists’ concerns to “cleanse” the world and assure our return to Paradise, perceived as organic nature. The driving force of these movements is a feeling of alienation and uprootedness, a need to fight Civilisation (modernity), and an appeal to eradicate “anti-nature predatory culture”. Now, the conflict between culture and nature has ranged across race, sexuality, gender, etc. Besides by anthropologists, the divide is being explored by a whole host of scholars: psychologists, philosophers, ethologists, evolutionary biologists, and social geographers, among others.

The nature-culture distinction seems to be one of a series of classic logocentric oppositions in Western thought. Once in place, the distinction became one of the methodological and ontological foundations of the social sciences. The idea that there is one nature and many cultures seems central to the anthropological enterprise (Descola 2011). Yet, as Lévi Strauss persuasively claimed, the nature-culture divide is not just an anthropological concept but is to be found among all societies in some form as a cognitive device for understanding the world. True, some cultures articulate a much stronger opposition between the two categories than others. However, almost all human societies have always distinguished between the human and non-human world as something distinctive and contrarily different (Komárek 2008). Thus, the opposition of nature and culture cannot be simply denied or ignored. Each culture has its own way of knowing the world and that knowing cannot be separated from a variety of practices that situate the known in its cultural context (Descola 2011).

Though the premise of the duality between culture and nature, largely seen as a product of Western epistemic culture, was declared ethnocentric and much effort was undertaken to revise or deconstruct it (see, e.g. Descola 2011; Tsing 2001; Hastrup 2014; Franklin – Lury – Stacey 2000), it has nevertheless persevered both in much of scholarly writing and in the laymen’s understanding. By and large, the idea of an opposition thrives.

## **Nature in Culture and Culture in Nature**

In his presidential address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1958, American anthropologist Leslie White said that between man and nature there is a veil of culture (Barnard – Spencer 2011). It is impossible to understand the concept of culture without reference to its opposing concept: nature. Nature and culture are seen as variables in the process

of interaction, rather than as distinctive layers of reality. Culture is part of nature, firmly embedded in the biophysical environment. There is a mutual feedback between cultural systems and the environment. The effects of physical environments on human behaviour are never purely material or “natural” but are always in part cultural since they are mediated by the culturally determined ways in which they are perceived (Barnard – Spencer 2011). Franz Boas claimed that people are able to survive in diverse environments thanks to culture and its core quality – adaptation. The mutual constitution and ultimate inseparability of culture and nature is perhaps best described in the following statement: “Human and non-human agency”, or “person and environment” are “reciprocally inscribed” (Croll – Parkin 1992: 3).

The level of reciprocity between culture and nature obviously varies according to what nature is supposed to be and how it is defined and understood. “Nature” is not the same thing in different cultures; each culture attributes different qualities to the same nature. Moreover, it is a widely known fact among anthropologists that in many small-scale societies there is no linguistic term that might be translated as “nature” or a “natural environment”, and opposed to culture and society (Descola 2011). In such societies, a continuum exists between humans, plants, animals, ancestors, spirits and substances, such as rocks. All these may be endowed with consciousness and a soul. The ethnographic record thus resists the imposition of a nature-culture dualism, which cannot simply be projected onto other cultures either in the past or in the present and would therefore be problematic.

The relation between culture and nature is not only reciprocal but also highly hierarchical. There is hardly a situation in which both culture and environment would have absolutely equal weight in determining the form of a particular culture pattern. The role of culture seems paramount. The assumption that culture is primarily superior to nature stems from the thesis that culture is able to transcend natural conditions, i.e., to “subjugate nature”, or in Sherry Ortner’s words (1974) to “socialise” and “culturalise” nature. Hence, nature appears as a product of culture: as a frontier that is constantly on the move but cannot be overstepped (Hazelrigg 1995).

The supremacy of culture and the inescapable and central role that it plays in all aspects of human behaviour, cognition, affect, preference, and meaning is the basis of cultural determinism approaches. An emphasis is put on the *cultural* dimensions of relations between humans and their nonhuman environments. Culture is seen as one of the most complex and difficult to comprehend “environmental uncontrollables” (Bennett 2009). “Culture bound” landscape is understood as anthropogenic Nature – its appearance and function is a reflection of the local culture; it is a product of human history. Cultural determinists argue that different cultures give diverse meanings to environmental elements, their preferences and notions of environmental quality, images, or ideals. Similarly, different groups are affected differently by the same attributes

of environments. Thus, the variety of environments and their characteristics, and changes to them, are also a result of cultural variables (Rapoport 2014).

As opposed to cultural determinism, biological or environmental determinist arguments overemphasise the influences of specific components in the environment, and downplay the role of humans. The most salient examples include Marvin Harris' attempt to explain the worship of cattle in India by reference to the usefulness of cow-dung to Indian farmers, or Roy Rappaport's explication of the religion of the Tsembaga Maring people of Papua New Guinea by their ecology and mode of livelihood.

### **Beyond the Distinction of Nature and Culture**

The idea that the distinction between culture and environment is essentially erroneous and its dualism must be shed has been discussed in anthropology for almost a century (see, e.g. Bernard 1930). For some anthropologists, the culture-nature dichotomy worked as a straightjacket encapsulating the duality between the old and new worlds, between tradition and modernity, or the West and the Rest. Can the Western nature-culture division ever be abandoned? Recent attempts to straddle the nature-culture divide include the theories presented by Descola (2011), Tsing (2001), Hastrup (2014), or Ingold's (2000) sentient ecology and dwelling perspective. Descola, for instance, challenges the premise of culture-nature divide as essentially ethnocentric since the nature that supposedly stands behind all cultures is the one defined by Western science, i.e. by a product of our culture. He sets out to "recompose nature and society", to overcome this duality by showing how the elements it organises are shaped differently in different cultures. He reviews four possible approaches: biological and symbolic reductionism, phenomenology, and actor network theory. Descola himself largely identifies with the last one, which, according to him, proposes an alternative escape from the nature-culture dilemma. It attempts to explain the distinction as the result of a more fundamental activity which associates objects in hybrid networks and then distributes them conceptually between the two domains of nature and culture. The idea of a "third" and more basic source from which the various ontologies of the different societies arise, including our ontology with its sharp distinction of nature and culture, has obliged Descola to find a word even more general than nature to refer to the kind of objects that we identify as nature across cultures. Within the actor network theory, he calls them the "non-human" (Feenberg 2011).

Other scholars apparently do not share the aforementioned urge to abandon the dualism and rather admit the impossibility of transcending the culture-nature divide, for many reasons. One of them is obviously the social fact of global ecological destabilisation and devastation caused apparently by human agency. Other, anthropologically oriented explanations, largely

embedded in social constructivist theories, have reconciled to dwell within the confines of the culture-nature divide because they conceptualise “nature” – and its surrogates, such as environment or landscape – and “culture” as social constructs. The “social construction of nature” debate on potential intersections between cultural and environmental concerns, including place/space, agency and ecocultural identity/difference, has produced diverse “imagined worlds” – “ethnoscapes”, “technoscapes,” “mediascapes,” “tourismscapes”, etc., constituted by the historical and geographical imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe within “global cultural flows” (Appadurai 1995). Such a perspective allows the observation of different modes of human interactions with multiple environments and “immersion” with(in) nonhuman environments. Sadjadi, for instance, argues that in the contemporary debates on the origins of identity in the United States, the nature-culture dyad is reconfigured as internal-external; the conception of natural as internal, stable, and thus authentic is opposed to the cultural as external, unstable, malleable and thus spurious.<sup>2</sup> For anthropologists, it is imperative to understand how local people interpret their culture, political, environmental, and epistemological tensions through the dichotomy between culture and nature. It is equally important to know how people build, contest and perform their local identity vis-à-vis the culture-nature opposition.

### **The Culture-Nature Divide Under Global Forces: Neoliberalism and Environmentalism**

The predicament of the nature-culture divide becomes even more salient when “nature” is caught between the two millstones – global forces represented by the neoliberal paradigm pressures, and “local culture”.

Neoliberalism as planned social change is not merely a political, economic and ideological project; neoliberalism is also an environmental project (McCarthy – Prudham 2004).<sup>3</sup> Yet, the relationship between neoliberalism and environmentalism seems rather underexplored (Davis 2006). Moreover, the existing studies tend to point to neoliberalism’s bad reputation both among most scholars and the social groups and individuals who bear the negative burden of this global order (see Freeman 2007). Negative effects of neoliberalism on human society and environment have been documented (especially by political ecologists) for many years, particularly in relation to many parts

2 Sadjadi’s presentation sent to the panel Revisiting the culture-nature divide under the global forces for the 2016 EASA conference in Milano.

3 Neoliberalism as a project of environmental governance (McCarthy – Prudham 2004). From this perspective, neoliberalism is understood to be more than merely a political economic project with impacts on the environment; rather, neoliberalism is conceptualised as being constituted by (and of) processes of socio-environmental change (see, e. g., the special issue of *Geoforum* 2004 on neoliberal nature – Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism, *Geoforum* 35: 3: 275–283).

of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America (Altieri – Rojas 1999; Rodrigues 2003; Schroeder 1999). The outcomes of neoliberal reforms on the environment include biophysical damage such as increased pollution of air, earth and water, as well as land degradation in the form of deforestation, soil exhaustion, salinisation and erosion.

With some notable exceptions (see, e.g., Angel 2000), the socio-cultural impacts of neoliberalism upon environment are assumed to be largely negative (Bakker 2005). Such impacts often translate into “creative destruction” (Harvey 2006). The proliferation of accumulation by dispossession as an inherent part of the neoliberal order has been particularly severe in rural areas. It includes the commodification and privatisation of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the wholesale commodification of nature in all its form, among others (Harvey 2006: 153). Reliance on market mechanisms and non-state actors for environmental regulation and management is viewed as a short road to environmental degradation (see, e.g., the case studies collected by McCarthy – Prudham 2004).

Such argumentation is often linked to the notion of neoliberalism as a hegemonic, political economic project underpinned by a unitary ideology. The assumption that neoliberalism is the ultimate source of pervasive structural forces does not allow for the evaluation of local processes that often yield oblique, ambivalent outcomes. Hence, rather than rooted in doctrinal consistency, neoliberalism should be better understood as being situated, and the research should focus on localised forms of “actually existing neoliberalism” and the following resistance (Wacquant 2012; Jessop 2013; Peck – Theodore 2012). Scholars who adopt this approach analyse how neoliberal policies are transformed and often reconfigured as they are transported and implemented in new local environments (Gershon 2011). If the analysis focuses on “local neoliberalisms embedded within wider networks and structures of neoliberalism” (Peck – Tickell 2002: 380), one can find out different outcomes.

By and large, despite the large body of literature documenting the various effects of neoliberalism on people and environment, scholars have only recently begun to examine the complex relationship between neoliberalism and environment. Their research has begun to reveal that neoliberalism is not always necessarily bad for the environment (Bakker 2005).

The neoliberalisation of environment, especially natural resource management, has received much attention in recent years from geographers (McCarthy 2006; McCarthy – Prudham 2004 in a themed edition of *Geoforum*; Bakker 2005). Diverse variants of ecological modernisation or “market environmentalism”<sup>4</sup> are discussed with the attempt to seek a fusion of economic growth, efficiency, and environmental conservation (Bakker 2005). It is

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4 The term “market environmentalism” is defined as a mode of resource regulation that promises both economic and environmental ends via market means (Bakker 2005: 543).

high time for anthropologists to have their say on this topic. As we shall see, the empirically oriented contributions selected for this monothematic issue provide uneasy, complex and multiple “solutions” to the ongoing dilemma of the culture-nature divide clenched by current global forces.

## The Contributions

The culture-nature divide is one of the most persistent logocentric dichotomies. The aim of the five contributions to this monothematic issue is to view it through the multiple nuanced ecologies, rather than to perpetuate the simplistic polarity.

*The “Virtual Heterotopias”: Reimagining Nature-Culture Relations* by Mihai Burlacu (Transylvania University, Brasov) focuses on the ways in which the nature-culture relations are mirrored, signified and reimagined in ‘virtual heterotopias’. He examines them using six principles of Michel Foucault’s ‘heterotopology’.

The contribution by Viviane Cretton (University of Applied Sciences, Valais) and Andrea Boscoboinik (University of Fribourg) *“Find Your Nature” in the Swiss Alps. In Search of a Better Life in the Mountains* is based on an ethnography done in Valais in the Swiss Alps using data collected since 2011. It points at the relationships between new lifestyle migrants in search of a “better quality of life” and the “natural” alpine environment they have chosen to live in.

*Land Art as a Means to Negotiate Natural and Cultural Heritage in the United Arab Emirates* by Melanie Janet Sindelar (University of Vienna) looks at the practice of land art within the United Arab Emirates as a means to negotiate the nature-culture divide in the context of neoliberal acceleration policies.

*Moving Around: How Bedouin Villagers in Dubai Respond to Challenges of Urban Expansion* by Anne Kathrine Larsen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim) interrogates the culture-nature divide in the case study of Bedouin villagers living on the outskirts of Dubai who have clear notions of desert versus built-up areas. Still, they transcend the borders between them in creative ways, which questions the very nature-culture dichotomy. New challenges emerge as recreational projects are developed in the village surroundings.

The last text *Crafted Nature: A Beach as Seen by Its Fishermen* by Francisco Maya-Rodríguez (Pablo de Olavide University, Sevilla) draws from the results of an ongoing doctoral thesis on an urban beach, analysing local fishers’ environmental perceptions and the concept of nature in order to understand the ways they develop discourses to legitimate their activity and roles in the urban coastscape.

May 2017

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