

Week 1 – Lecture 1

- Nature is something in the media portrayed as ‘terrible’ or an adversary = separate from us
 - = during natural disasters
 - we can’t let nature get the better of us
 - it’s unpredictable and random
- Shark culling protest in Western Australia – sharks are an endangered species and should be protected
 - Previously nature was an uncontrollable force we tried to tame but now with cases like shark culling people are starting to have to expect that nature can hurt them

The social construction of nature: Wilderness

The social construction of nature

- nature as material entities which exist on earth but which are not human
- since the 17th century ‘nature’ counter-posed with ‘culture’: a ‘Cartesian’ dualism (from Rene Descartes)
- idea of ‘pure’ or pristine nature only tenable if we suppress knowledge of human invention and intervention
- all environments are therefore social
- different social group have different ‘ways of seeing’ the environment
- how to theorise different ways of seeing (economic value, social value etc)
 - perception is highly individual, BUT this doesn’t tell us why groups share particular common ways of seeing
 - need to relate this to social and historical contexts
 - perception is therefore related to wider societal judgements about value: beautiful, useful etc
 - a dominant way of seeing can become ‘naturalised’
 - Flinders Ranges = inaccessible and unproductive land = settlers view. Indigenous view = fundamentally different view to settlers = rich in life and meaning

Ideas of Wilderness

- importance to contemporary environmentalism
- idea of untouched/ unsullied nature e.g. David Brower ‘wilderness is a place where the hand of man has not set foot’
- Cronon’s reading on “the trouble of wilderness” – more than we can touch, it’s experiences too
 - suggests wilderness is made up by humans – hides unnaturalness under the mask of nature

How has wilderness been socially constructed

- we can make a distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ responses to wilderness

Classical

- from early Judaeo-Christian to the end of the 18th century
- changing the environment was a mark of civilisation
- enlightenment notion of ‘progress’ related to the conquest of nature
- wilderness was land that was not used/useful (agriculture, domestication)
- notion of wilderness is especially resonant in Judaeo-Christian tradition

Romantic

- 19th century saw an important transformation in views held of wilderness
- painting by Thomas Cole *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1828)
- untouched places viewed more positively
- feared AND revered
 - viewed nostalgically
- linked to the rise of industrial capitalism
- two important features of the romantic response are the *sublime* and the *frontier*

The Sublime

- most notably associated with Edmund Burke (1729-1797), a conservative political theorist and philosopher
- published in 1757 *the philosophical enquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful*
- sublime was about invigorating the senses of the bourgeois male subject; it was about excitement bordering on fear, the pleasure of terror

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- to glimpse the 'face of God'
- awe bordering on terror but without actual fear of death
- greatness of dimension and infinite prospect
- charismatic wilderness: cliffs, heights and depths, raging seas etc
- self-preservation and self-improvement in the sublime landscape/wilderness

The Frontier

- idea of 'the line' between untamed and domestic
- confrontation with wilderness forged human spirit/ national identity (especially USA)
- wilderness understood as primitive and available
- wilderness as land ready for annexation and conquest
- ignored/ romanticised stories of prior occupancy and dispossession of indigenous peoples
- If wilderness is just untouched areas: Australia has none since Aboriginal people have been everywhere

Conclusion

- the romantic view of wilderness is the unexamined foundation of modern environmentalism
- by enhancing wilderness as a sublime and primitive place we perpetuate a fallacy
- the fallacy is that people are outside of nature
- Cronon argues we must retreat from environmentalism which reactive the human/non-human dichotomy

Week 2 Lecture 1

The Production of Nature

The social construction of nature:

- “Nature is like art or weeds: it tells us more about ourselves than about the fixed order of things”
 - Nature doesn't just reflect or describe the world, it's the apparatus by how we as humans shape ____
 - Ambiguities in the definition say more about us
 - It's a label we use for different things
 - Nature is a category of language we use to mentally order our world
 - Nature makes claims to being universal when in fact it is socially constructed
 - The idea of nature is thus politically powerful in organising society
 - This power is fundamentally the power of language to classify and assign order
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- No consensus about the social construction of nature
 - Two schools of thought:
- **1) The discursive or LINGUISTIC construction of nature (from poststructuralist theory)**
 - Prof Donna Haraway argues: nature cannot pre-exist its construction in language
= our encounters with environments are entirely mediated through language
 - The *postmodern* response: before everything else, comes language. Nature can't have a meaningful existence outside this prism BUT this tends towards anthropocentrism and a denial of the materiality of nature
 - Problem = ^ is nature entirely a product of our imagination, is it just confined to the sphere of human activity. Can nature be reduced entirely to the level of discourse
 - We live in a world where we're constantly trying to warp nature for our own exploration e.g. cloning sheep

2) The material and discursive *production* of nature: The Marxist critique of nature

- 3 key themes on society and environments: dialectics, production and appropriation
- Marx was an important thinker that reminds us that capitalism forces types of relations between humans and nature
- Ideas on Dialectics:
 - A **dialectic** is an ongoing relationship which gives rise to contradictions.
 - These contradictions provide us with windows onto the larger structure and logic of that relationship.
 - Thesis VS antithesis = synthesis.
 - Dialectic thinking emphasises process not 'thing' (capitalism isn't a thing for e.g.)
 - Marxist argues capitalism prospers due to centralisation of production, workers could organise their labour forces to overthrow the capitalists
 - Nature isn't neutral of human effort
 - The case of 'lazy beds' shows how ecological systems reflect social systems including class politics
- Marx: nature is man's inorganic body- man lives from nature, must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. Man's spiritual and physical life is linked to nature, therefore nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature

- Marx's concept of Production:

- Production expresses the most basic material relation between humans and nature
- Production is a process by which the form of nature is altered
- All production is social and involves relations between humans and nature
- Societies use nature to meet their own survival = *use value*
- Under capitalism this society environment relation was transformed: nature appropriated not for immediate use but *exchange value* in order to enter into a system of market exchange as a commodity: Results in alienation
- *Prof Neil Smith*: The nature of a capitalist social order is hidden in the order of nature it produces. Emphasises human labour as central to nature
 - the apparent contradiction of 'produced nature' works to deflate the vocabulary of wilderness and pristine nature' - deciding what kind of nature we want

Conclusion:

- Nature is always social
- Ecological systems reflect the social systems that give rise to them
- Every environment, all nature is in some sense power laden or political

Privatising Nature & The Tragedy of The Commons

“The tragedy of the seas is that if something is not owned by anyone, no one will protect it. ... But if we adopt market principles, and if we allocate property rights, then we can harness, without conflict, human instincts to protect nature.’ – Terance Kealy, 2001

‘The notion of ownership of the seas implies an ability to control all variables affecting the system. Can the people who harvest fish from the sea control the pollution that comes down the rivers and sewerage outlets? Or can they control what impacts on the breeding grounds of the fish that they seek to catch? The fish they seek are merely one part of a complex system that humans did not create and will only ever be a strand of.’ – Adam Pepper, 2001

...privatise Tasmania's forests and let individuals determine the best use of the land. Would this be committing forests to destruction? Absolutely not. It is one of the **fundamental principles of property rights that individuals who own property take care of it**. Environmental **disasters occur when no property rights have been allocated** – this is what is described as the tragedy of the commons. – Aaron Lane, 2014

Nature as Property: Enclosure

- Enclosure: a process by which land (and its resources), once held in common, were enclosed or consolidated
- Historically, land ownership was reorganised, such that formerly common lands were expropriated by the few
- This process was marked by the transition to a market economy
- Led to restructuring of agriculture -- the precursor of modern industrial society

Prior to enclosure:

- Unfenced, open fields, communally managed strips of arable; guaranteed access to land resources for most people; collectivisation: e.g. common pasture.
- Common use of land was not without 'regulation': complex social arrangements existed about grazing, fuel wood or peat cutting etc.
- From capitalist perspective, limitations included:
 - Limits to accumulation of surplus or profit
 - Limits on specialisation of agriculture
 - Limits on the extent to which rent monies could be extracted

E.p.Thompson "English Working Class p 238

'What was 'perfectly proper' in terms of capitalist property-relations involved, nonetheless, a rupture of the traditional integument of village custom and right: and the social violence of enclosure consisted precisely in the drastic, total imposition on the village of capitalist property definitions. [...] The loss of the commons entailed, for the poor, a radical sense of displacement...'

Ways on properties to keep desirable in and undesirable out = fences, hedges = **the produced nature of enclosure**

Outcomes of Enclosure:

- Rural workers dispossessed of land; emergence of the landed gentry; by 1976, 98.5% of the land owned by 0.6% of the British population.
- Rural workers became 'tenants', paying rents and selling labour to the landlord.
- Labour re-directed from use-value to exchange value > profit for landlord.
- Enclosure one part of wider capitalist system leading to unevenly distributed processes of capital accumulation.
- Land = property = tradeable commodity
- **Enclosed land became aestheticized as 'landscape'**

THE ULTIMATE CONSEQUENCE OF ENCLOSURE IS THAT LAND REVERTS FROM COMMON USE TO PRIVATISED OWNERSHIP. LAND BECOMES PROPERTY AND BECOMES A SOURCE OF WEALTH IN A NUMBER OF WAYS- THROUGH LAND EXTRACTION, RESOURCE EXTRACTION AND CONVERSION BY PRODUCTION OF GOODS FOR EXCHANGE OF PROFIT.

Garret Hardin: The Tragedy of The Commons

- Hardin's 1968 essay 'The tragedy of the commons' is a parable about environmental crises
- The individual using a common resource is tempted to use a bit more for their own personal benefit, but assumes that any negative consequence will not be confined just to them, but shared across all users of the commons
- Centred on story of archetypal herdsman in common pasture who adds one more cow to maximise his individual return; all other herdsman do the same; pasture collapses
- It is a story that continues to bolster free-market claims on natural resources to this day, thus it is important to understand...

The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all... As a rational being each herdsman seeks to maximise his gain. ...The rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal ...and another, and another. ...Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked in to a system which compels him to increase his herd without limit in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all (Hardin, 1968: 1244).

Critiques of Hardin

1. Hardin implies that there are no social arrangements for the regulation of a commons. In practice this is very rarely the case.
2. The idea of some archetypical, transhistorical, transcultural commons is not grounded in any social reality (there is a difference between abstraction and fiction). Therefore this idea ought not to be applied to any environmental/ social reality.

The Modern Commons

- The question of property 'rights' and what sort of 'ownership' regime is best able to respond to environmental crises is still very current
- The commons remains a central metaphor in this debate, with two competing discourses:
 - Commons as cause of crisis (Hardin and others)
 - Commons as antidote to crisis (left/ green response)
- Different social actors and groups are struggling for different property rights:
 - resource-dependent communities struggle for sovereignty/ tenure/ sustenance
 - corporations are fighting for surplus value/ profit...

Modern Commons- *Space*

- Res communis: 'a thing for everyone'
- Res communis humanitatis (common property of all)
- Res communis omnium (space as the heritage of all humankind)
VS.
- Res nullius a 'thing for no one'
- Res nullius naturaliter fit primi occupantis ('finders, keepers!')

Conclusion

- All these contests are ultimately about the control of the source of use-values – that is, nature!
- The metaphor of the commons – whether as cause or antidote to environmental crisis – persists in contemporary environmental politics as well as policy and regulation regimes (see Mansfield, 2004)
- It still arguably offers a potential model for society-environment relations that runs against the grain of contemporary capitalism