

Cortés Vázquez, J.A. *Nature (s) as a Contested Field*. Alzira (Valencia): Germania. 2012. (pp.323) (ISBN: 978-84-15660-29-3). 18 Eur.

Nature (s) as a Contested Field

In recent years, concerns on environmental degradation and politics have been accompanied by a re-thinking of human-nature relationships. In this domain, social sciences have been making a strong effort to contribute to a deeper understanding of the logics behind individual and collective actions that precede and follow these policies. It seems clear that anthropology and, specifically, the ethnographic approach have taken an important role in this analytical process. By working on a local and detailed scale, this approach has proved to be invaluable to reveal the different voices that speak about a single place in a specific time. This *multivocality* (Vaccaro 2006) emerges simultaneously through a single conflict, and by doing so, it is possible to assert that different readings of the same space articulate different social groups in a time-dependent manner.

A good way to introduce this book is by dissecting its title: 'Natures in conflict'. It provides a contribution to recent, but nonetheless, necessary critiques on the monolithic and dualistic perspective of the domain of Nature within the 'Western' world. Firstly, 'natures' as it is used here, in small print and in a plural form, implies a diverse entity instead of a unique and singular ontology. This is followed by the word 'conflict' which serves both as a methodological tool that entails a process-based approach, and a theoretical contribution, meaning that not only is there more than 'one' nature, but that we should also analyse its diversity through the different voices that engage in simultaneous and conflictive dialogues within a determined space-time dimension. Therefore, nature(s) become dialogical and frontier categories since they are expressed and analysed from a discursive and conflictive perspective. Insofar as nature(s) are understood as a discourse, the linkage between those two generic domains, that is to say, nature and society, becomes an imbricated relationship where both of them attain and refer to a single time-space dimension.

This book offers excellent evidence on how anthropology works on the implicit meanings, from the most widely accepted statements in order to make the former emerge from the latter. The establishment of Cabo de Gata-Níjar National Park in South eastern Spain reveals the cultural practices that designate 'nature' as a self-sufficient domain isolated from human perception. One of the main ideas of this text is that: declaring a specific area as a national park leads not only to a change in the control and management of natural resources, but also to a change in the ways in which people think of and live in that place; that is, a change in *people* as such. In other words, space should be analysed as a holistic domain, "not as a sphere out of social representations, structures and practices"

(Cortés Vázquez 2012: 37), where individual and collective identities are constructed, and where social relationships take place. Thus, space manages to link these two main knowledge domains: socioeconomic interests (the practical scope) and the means of understanding, representing, and relating oneself to the environment (the symbolic scope).

The key term, used by the author to understand the interrelated dynamics between different social actors (scientists, Park manager staff, 'the locals', tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, etc.) and their complex and diverse perceptions of the same place, is "the process of production of the 'natural space' or (...) the process of 'naturalisation'" (Cortés Vázquez 2012: 117). This concept manages to condense the historical and diverse contents that have recently given highly symbolised meanings to the ontological category of Nature. This process of 'naturalisation' should be framed within a process of 'reterritorialisation' or a redefinition of the environment and a reorganisation of the resources within the protected area during a determined historical context. By doing so, it is possible to use it as an analytical tool that is able to bring together two different albeit contested 'paths':

1) the route to 'natural *patrimonialisation*'; and 2) the route to setting 'otherness', based on the confrontations of two opposite narratives that follow a parallel 'in-out' logic, e.g. 'the natural' and 'the local'.

One could argue that in order to better understand this first path (the route to natural *patrimonialisation*), the book should have drawn more specific attention to this process, which other authors have defined as 'commodification of authenticity' (Frigolé 2012) and that could be useful for a more profound problematisation of the case study. This route of *patrimonialisation* can be outlined in the following stages: 1) a demographic emptiness caused by dismantling the infrastructures of a previous process of industrialisation; 2) a process of territorialisation directed by conservation motives, by which, the area is put aside of the market through new government-regulated environment laws; 3) a process of revalorisation of the area resulting from its isolation, and the perceived purity of its wilderness; and 4) a reintroduction of this locale to the market, through a process of re-commodification that assumes the land as a result of production (i.e.: a 'fictitious good' in Polanyi's 1989 terms) rather than as a means of production. This theoretical approach would not only allow us to understand this historical process, but also to discover clues for understanding the mechanisms being used by different social groups, both in current times and in a hypothetical future. As it is extensively pointed out in the text, this 'route' must not be seen as a top-down discourse, but rather as a negotiated one

(even though, somehow still hierarchical) between two sides that attempt to impose their own representations of a single space onto one another. In this sense, narratives from different individuals should not be treated as static statements, but as dialogical ones. 'Local dwellers' are capable, then, of using and appropriating specific vocabulary from their counterparts (e.g.: the 'natural tourism entrepreneurs' or the Park technical staff) to defend the role they have been playing since immemorial times in order to succeed in their ecological aims.

Perhaps one of the main achievements of this book is its capacity to elucidate the parallel logics amongst opposite narratives through an extensive and long-standing fieldwork. According to the author, within the narratives of both the 'conservationists' and the 'locals', there is a common goal related to the hierarchical use of natural resources, which is sustained through two different but convergent logics, the one developed by technical and scientific knowledge and the one defended by the 'local inhabitants'. Thus, both of them deny the spatial representations of the counterpart, the 'others', through an 'in-out' conceptualisation of the space (Cosgrove and Daniels 1998). This process may be defined as a 'route to otherness': whereas 'locals' defend their position by evoking the time they have lived in a determined place and introducing themselves as the only true owners of the land, conservationists defend their position by evoking an everlasting voice of the 'Nature', as an objectified entity, and legitimating themselves as the only ones who are capable of representing it through their own voices. Therefore, 'Nature' and the 'Local' become ontological categories, in capital letters, that have always been there, exempted from any historical context while holding the capacity to automatically exclude 'the other'.

Consequently, there appears to be a final question: should ethnographic fieldwork really present 'local voices' as the ones who break up the dualistic approach between nature-culture domains? Or rather, should present such voices as the ones who succeed in translocating a visual naturalistic perspective towards a landscape approach, (i.e.: from an 'image-based landscape' towards a 'lived one', according to Jakob 2009) through another ontological and tautological division: the traditional-local dichotomy? In fact, local narratives are interpreted as the ones who manage to break up the dualistic approach ('naturalistic' according to Descola 2012) on human-nature relationships, but at the same time, those narratives tend to reinforce another essentialist and ontological category which tends to enclose in itself: the 'locals', understood as the ones who belong to a specific place, and, therefore, the ones to whom this space belongs to. However, one should distinguish two different appropriations of space that could give us some evidences to elucidate some important differences between both positions. One could suggest that, apart from forcing this symbolic conceptualisation of space based on the division between nature and society, the 'naturalistic appropriation' of space needs to bring about another important dislocation associated to that very space: time needs to be untied and made loose from it. 'Local appropriation', whilst may not

overcome this nature/society division, keeps space and time joined in a single and inseparable domain. It is left to investigate whether this second dichotomy works in a synergetic way with the nature/society one, in order to increase the value of a single space in a commodification process.

Finally, a persuasive advice is set out in the text: the need to include all social actors as equals in any 'process of naturalisation'. That is, avoiding the implementation of environmental policies without the participation of all the individuals who get related in any manner to a determined space. This should be a complex but compulsory requirement to trace new paths for more democratic procedures in the formation of new policies over natural resources.

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Ferran Pons Raga

*Current affiliation: Ph.D. Student, McGill University,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
E-mail: ferran.ponsraga@mail.mcgill.ca*

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