Environmental Politics and Place Authenticity Protection[1]

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ABSTRACT

A large part of environmental politics is interested in protecting place authenticity against the 'disenchanting' effect produced by the advent of modernity. It adopts a rhetoric of nostalgia by regretting the loss of primeval relations between humans and nature, and endorses an essentialist, foundationalist and exclusivist definition of locality and the locals.

In order to overcome the problematic political consequences of this (widely accepted) classic approach, the paper proposes to differently outline modernity, by adopting a heterogeneous geography standpoint and postmodern hybrid networks theory. As a consequence, place is regarded in terms of heterogeneity, porosity and non-exclusivism; authenticity is reshaped in terms of throwntogetherness; and environmental politics is reconsidered in the structuration of a thing-oriented democracy.

KEYWORDS

Modernity, critical geography, hybridity, environmental thought, material semiotic

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INTRODUCTION

Conventional environmental politics is often based on a classic cultural geographic account of place authenticity, grounded on an exclusivist, essentialist and foundationalist philosophical background. According to a very widespread view, notably adopted by Critical Thinkers, modernity is considered responsible for the loss of authenticity and the consequent disenchantment of the world.[2] Thus, environmental politics seems to be principally intended to preserve place authenticity as a bulwark against the negative consequences of modern life.

However, the description of quintessential features of authentic places, according to classic cultural geography traditions and conventional environmentalism, are open to some criticisms – mainly focused on the definition of places themselves, the relation people are presumed to have with them, and the underlying ontological assumptions. After having described these criticisms, this paper proposes a different view of modernity and authenticity: it proposes hybrid theory and a non-representational approach as adequate means to handle environmental politics of places from an alternative point of view. Thus, authenticity is defined as 'throwntogetherness' and environmental politics can be regarded as an example of a thing-oriented politics.

1. PLACE AUTHENTICITY AND CONVENTIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Environmental politics deals with a large number of different issues, from urban chemical pollution to GMO experiments, from whale killing in the North Sea to the building of offshore wind energy plants…. Most of them can be regarded as basically concerning the setting up of places at different geographical scales.[3] Debates over the destiny of local tiny places involve the same environmental principles involved in the debates over the destiny of large places – and, eventually, the largest one, the entire Planet. The wide range of environmentalist[4] approaches toward places can be classified in two different epistemological frames: the first is the realistic order, based on technical and scientific authority, according to which empirical evidence is the proper base for environmental politics; the second is the constructivist order, concerned with cultural and ethical values, according to which social imaginary provides the base for political planning by autonomously elaborating scientific information. While the first is mainly enacted by the

International Organisations and environmental management programmes, the second is principally supported by Critical Thinkers and social movements. Despite the differences, these two orders can be unified under the general definition of 'conventional environmental politics', because of their common reliance on experts (natural scientists, jurists, technicians …); their common belief in a predetermined justification of environmental issues' relevance and the possibility of finding technical or procedural solutions for environmental problems; their consideration of the human and the natural as two separate domains, and their almost exclusive interest in the cultural side of the dualism.[5]

Place authenticity represents a powerful source of inspiration for conventional environmental discourses. In terms of environmental claims, places are often conceived as pre-given and discrete entities based on some eternal authenticity from where the becoming is excluded,[6] so that several environmental declarations make the case that 'deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the Nations of the World'.[7] Authentic places are pure, wild, untouched by man – or touched in a 'traditional' way – and are characterised by permanent harmonious relations between people and space.[8] Conventional environmental politics 'tends to mean that somewhere at some point in the dark past of urban-industrial society, the link between people and their environments has been broken'.[9] The concern for preservation, for rendering eternal the present,[10] is imaginatively entwined with the desire for the maintenance of an unspoiled paradise.[11] This narrative of nostalgia,[12] often romanticised in the environmental literature, retells the old story of the fall from grace, the expulsion from the garden.[13]

2. EXPLORING PLACE AUTHENTICITY

In their classic geography definition[14] places are characterised as static, bounded and definable, isomorphic with society and culture settled in, producing a sense of belongingness and authenticity. The static character of places is considered as the product of a relation between the concept of space and the idea of place: a place comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of a larger, undifferentiated geographical space. Duration has been excluded from space – and consequently from places – so that, according to this view, they lack dynamism, movement and duration.[15]

According to the Vidalian tradition of human geography,[16] places are material translations of social systems[17] which, through exchanges, fluxes

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and institutional relations modify places' physical geographies.[18] They are portions of reality defined by objective features, giving specific status to a confused anonymous space; and they are human artefacts that clearly express the underlying culture. Natural environment is interpreted as the rough material human societies effectively 'make' places with. This means that there is a clear distinction between human agent, as subject, and external environment, as object.

Cultural boundaries are seen as enclosing coherent and homogeneous fractions of space: 'Cultures and society are all imagined as having an integral relation to bounded place [and this produces] a particular hegemonic understanding of the […] relation between space and society.'[19] This isomorphism is the product of a social geographical construction because the evolution of social life, through delimitation of physical borders and their naming, renders places part of cultural categories.[20] As a result, places seem to have a social existence only through the perception, the analysis and the technical modification operated by human groups.

To establish a double bond among cultures and places (i.e. places as product of a defined culture and culture as product of a bounded place) is, according to Marc Augè,[21] the main effect of every *mythology of foundation* which originates a peculiar sense of belongingness.[22] This is a legitimisation of the appropriation, definition and modification of places, through a supposedly exhaustive social narrative. Behind this narrative of discovery and definition, there are strong assumptions about collectives, groups, individual identities and relations. This 'narrative of belongingness' naturalises the sense of place, that is the individual and collective meaning of being in a defined somewhere. When places do not inspire any 'sense of place', they are considered inauthentic; they could be 'anywhere'.[23]

3. THE LOSS OF AUTHENTICITY

The loss of place authenticity is associated, particularly in environmental claims, with the coming of modernity. The idea of the modern world as a disenchanted one, and of places as detached from temporality, disembedded and dematerialised, are both quite widely accepted descriptions of the present time; as well as the idea that environmental movements could be an effective opposing force against the loss of meaning. This widespread conception is frequently invoked in environmental discourses.

Several social philosophers, such as Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens, propose a view of the modern world as a place that irreparably

lost its authenticity. According to Taylor[24] there are some specific features of modernity which generate in contemporary people the feeling of decline and loss, despite the development and the fine achievements they are experiencing. In pre-modern time, he writes:

> People used to see themselves as a part of a larger order […], a 'great chain of Being' […]. This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchy of human society […]. The discrediting of these orders has been called the disenchantment of the world. [25]

This hierarchy of society corresponded to a hierarchy in the cosmos, as Taylor explains:

> The hierarchical differentiation itself is seen as the proper order of things. […] In one way or the other, the modern order gives no ontological status to hierarchy or any particular structure of differentiation.[26]

In this process society lost the sense of 'perfectly interlocking parts, in which the purposes of each kind of creature mesh with those of all the others'.[27] From Taylor's complaint about the loss of the enchanted order, a sense of nostalgia for the past emerges because, despite all the benefits deriving from its less 'restricted orders',[28] modernity entails the loss of *meaning*, the loss of 'something worth dying for'.[29] As a consequence of this *malaise* of modernity:

> we have lost the contact with the earth and its rhythms that our ancestors had. We have lost the contact with ourselves, and our own natural being, and are driven by an imperative of domination that condemns us to ceaseless battle against nature both within and around us. [30]

According to Giddens, the primacy of place in pre-modern societies has been made to vanish by the disembedding attitude of modernity and the differentiation of time from space, so that the lack of locally organised activities makes places increasingly 'phantasmagoric'. Indeed, traditional cultures were able to handle time and space to insert any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future; while on the contrary modern societies progressively separate space and time and allow the disembedding and dematerialisation of social systems. As a consequence, the relation between humans and nature, and people and places, has been broken. The political effect of these transformations is 'the exclusion of the majority from the arena where the most consequential policies are forged and decisions taken'.[31] The effect of technological trust, which 'make us believe that we should seek technological solutions even when something very different is called for',[32] is an alienation from the political sphere. Modern

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technological society locks us into an 'iron cage'[33] in which every effort to resist is wasted breath: industrial-technological societies severely restrict people's choice by alienating them from the political sphere. Nonetheless, Taylor argues, people's degree of freedom is not zero. There are many points of resistance and one of these is the whole movement since the Romantic era which has been challenging ecological mismanagement, committed to 'the preservation of some wilderness area, for instance, the conservation of some threatened species, the protection against some devastating assaults on the environment'.[34]

4. QUESTIONING THE CONVENTIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION OF PLACE AUTHENTICITY

The necessity of belongingness and the threat to local cultures produces an environmental political strategy of strengthening cultural diversity as a means to access the authentic meaning of a place.[35] The environmental politics of place protection is frequently based on the empowerment of local people (defined in essentialist terms), which enables strategies of romantic 'othering' by eco-planners, policy makers, activists and tourists.[36] The isomorphic (but dichotomous) relation between places and culture, proposed by a large part of cultural geography, implies that the features of places are automatically transferred on to the local cultures and *vice versa*. Both are seen, in environmental discourses, as victims of the globalising modernity[37] that deprived them of their real essence and created an undifferentiated 'anywhere'.

Environmentalist rhetoric asserts locals to be the owners of a special relation with the place and part of the conservation process. Efforts by international environmental organisations, individuals and networks to sustain their struggle for the preservation of their home place, confirm the legitimacy of their cause. At the same time, locals' discourses become more politicised by internalising a language of rights, of political claims and scientific references which confers authority on them.[38] Arun Agrawal analyses this process by investigating the history of environmental regulatory forms, from colonial rule to independence, in the region of Kumaon in northern India.[39] He states that:

> New environmental subject positions emerge as a result of involvement in struggles over resources and in relation to new institutions and changing calculations of self-interest and notions of the self. These three conceptual elements – politics, institutions, and identities – are intimately linked.[40]

Until the 1970s, local people were considered as an impediment to conservation. As political scientists Michael Pimbert and Jules Pretty put it, 'participation' was merely regarded as voluntary submission of people to conservation projects, but 'Although they may appear untouched, many of the "last refuges" of wilderness conservationists wish to protect are still inhabited or have been so for millennia'.[41] Open protests, rallies, insurgences and harassments organised by local people are unavoidable consequences of the attempt to control and direct the life of people and place. It was only at the end of the 1980s that 'participation' became a tool to involve people in drawing up conservation projects. Furthermore, from the 1990s onward post-modern interest for marginalised voices resulted in several environmental planners starting to explore local cultures, their sense of place, their deliberative processes and their decentralised decision making in order to demystify the role of experts.[42] The contrast, so to say, between anthropologists' and ecologists' view of environmental issues is evident both at the international level (UN agencies), and at the level of non-governmental organisations. Both these levels have been deeply influenced by the postcolonial critique of environmental politics; however, postcolonial studies also tend to romanticise the 'others' by shifting from the colonial excess of *denying* them to the postcolonial excess of *fetishising* them, and assuming questionable ideas about locals and natives.

The concern for the cultural/human-side of the dualistic human-nature relation entails some problems, particularly originating from a quite *naïve* view of locals, their interests, their beliefs, their needs and an overestimation of their disinterested care for nature. This romantic view is sustained quite often by the idea that local people have a long tradition of sustainable natural resources management.[43] Environmental campaigners interpret locals and indigenous sustainable ways of life in contrasts with western way of life. However, the idea that locals, especially if qualified as indigenous,[44] have a more direct access to nature because of their maintenance of traditional value,[45] and a privileged understanding of environmental issues, is questionable. Particularly, Bruno Latour addressed the topic by arguing that non-westerners' environmental knowledge and practice does not derive from a consideration of natural domain as separate from human domain – as westerners usually assume. He argues:

> Non western cultures have never been interested in nature; they have never adopted it as a category; they have never found a use for it. On the contrary, Westerners were the ones who turned nature into a big deal, […] a formidable moral gigantomachy [which] constantly brought nature into the definition of their moral order.[46]

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The *imbroglio* of a deep form of exoticism embraced by western culture, where no primitive harmony or authentic immediateness is present, is perpetuated by the 'environmentalist myth [that] non-industrial societies possess a degree of ecological wisdom which has been lost in the process of industrial development'.[47] This romantic view quite often has its origin in the idea that indigenous people – more than locals who have probably had some contacts with moderns – have built up on a long history of sustainability and management of natural resources for their communities.[48] At the same time, environmentalists' claims to defend or to restyle a place according to green criteria, usually consider the native as 'both incapable of protecting their natural environment (and therefore in need of assistance from Western environmentalists with a more objective view) and as "natural" stewards of […] resources'.[49] Embracing the romanticised ideal of the noble savage who is a disinterested natural custodian of the environment disregards the possibility that local inhabitants might be very proprietorial about their land and resources, and deeply resent the idea that foreigners have any right to unilaterally declare them in need of conservation or to limit their economic activities.[50]

Attitudes of local and indigenous people toward environmental issues are diverse in diverse cases. The desire for protection of their bounded and well defined place can be based both on a specific commitment to environmental issues, and on the desire to preserve traditional values. In the latter case, local people are willing to campaign together with environmentalists against moral contaminations and physical destruction introduced by modernity; but they are also ready to campaign against environmentalists where they seem to be subverting the structure of place, in the name of global values that 'have the same force everywhere and which do not depend upon being agreed upon or not'.[51] Without locals' participation it is not possible to proceed, but at the same time, local communities and their representatives often state very circumscribed interests, egoistic and of short duration, and are often the first opponents of environmental projects.[52] According to the classic account, cultural identites and place biogeographies mutually influence each other.[53] Nevertheless, not all the identities are a product of identification with places:

> One of the problems has been a persistent identification of place with community. Yet this is a misidentification. On the one hand a community can exist without being in the same place […] On the other hand, the instances of places housing single 'communities' […] have been quite rare for long.[54]

The problem of group's identities charged with preserving the pureness of their 'place-cultures', has a particular relevance in the debate on environment and development. In conventional environmental discourses it is often assumed that locals are satisfied with their lifestyle, and have limited material and financial aspirations.[55]

On the contrary, on one hand locals and indigenous demand an identity to be publicly acknowledged, as part of the centres of power, and on the other hand they demand living standards, political and social order and greater social justice. Thus, the idea of environmental politics as a means to protect place authenticity in terms of local-vs.-global could falsely propose a homogeneous view of places and corresponding cultures involved in the struggle for the preservation of authentic environmental values, against the global power.[56] At the same time, the image of global environmental politics enforced by International Organisations, defending the supreme interests of Nature against particularistic local intentions, is equally misleading. Indeed, the idea of an authentic, homogeneous, harmonic and environment-friendly place is the product of an essentialist view because there is no (and probably there never was) such a place or a community, but hybrid practices and discourses that define what kind of world humans and non-humans inhabit in conjunction.

5. AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO MODERNITY

As a consequence of these considerations, environmental politics seems not to be the appropriate means to break the 'iron cage' of modernity and to re-enchant the world by preserving what has generally been imagined as place authenticity. This is probably due to the basic view of modernity environmentalists themselves adopt; thus, in order to propose an alternative understanding of environmental politics it could be necessary to rethink modernity itself and the consequent view of place authenticity.

The goal of this section is to outline a positive account of modernity, not as a second modernity, or a modernity still worthy of being completely realised (as Jurgen Habermas and Critical Thinkers propose), but a modernity that never experienced such a strong separation from the so-called pre-modernity. Moderns' view of pre-modern societies (or today's 'non-modern' societies, such as indigenous or very local societies) associated with order and cosmic hierarchy and contrasting with modern societies, is rather unrealistic. By following this modernist schema, asymmetry between nature and culture corresponds to an asymmetry between past and future:

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> modernisation consists in continually exiting from an obscure age that mingled the needs of society with scientific truth, in order to enter into a new age that will finally distinguish clearly what belongs to timeless nature and what comes from humans, what depends on things and what belongs to signs.[57]

The (supposed) power of moderns resides in their ability to maintain the distinction between human culture and natural beings as an unbridgeable distance. The price of this power that moderns believe they have is the impossibility of thinking of themselves in continuity with pre-moderns. Moderns manage to hide the process of 'mediation' consisting in creating 'mixtures among entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture'[58], by 'conceiving every hybrid as a mixture of two pure forms'.[59] Moderns 'do differ from pre-moderns by this single trait: [...] in their eyes, hybrids present the horror that must be avoided at all cost by a ceaseless, even maniacal purification'.[60]

Nonetheless separation between non human nature and humans has never been effective. The presence of 'hybrids' reminds us that the modern world never existed and its promises are voids. Hybrids are everywhere, they are the cyborgs, the tricksters, the monsters generated from the overlapping realities of the world. As Donna Haraway puts it: 'Nature is a commonplace and a powerful discursive construction, effected in the interactions among material-semiotic actors, humans and not'.[61] The possibility of interaction, interference or co-creation of hybrids is the result of a deep appreciation of co-dependence which enacts an increasing differentiation and a consequent relational identification. Hybrid forms are constituted by relations, not between stable entities, but between *in fieri* entities. In that sense hybridity indicates not only the inter-connectedness between pre-given entities, but also their immanent potential of becoming. [62]

Any *a priori* division between society and nature is dissolved in the hybrid theory and a different politics is required to take into account the fate of organisms, machines, nonhuman natural elements and relations. Instead of two separated realms, the world is composed of a multiplicity of relations connecting together very different kinds of beings, not in the form of pre-given entities but in the form of constituting realities with an effective causal potentiality. Those realities can be defined as heterogeneous networks. In a network

> all entities are assembled 'symmetrically': that is, the 'natural' entities are just as likely to be active as those labelled 'social', so that processes of 'construction' cannot be seen as emanating from purely social or human causes.[63]

The resultant conception of social agency is not a manifestation of unitary intent because social agents are never located in bodies alone, but in constituting embedded and contextual networks of virtual/material relations: 'This ontology of not-quite natural, not-quite social entities rejects […] binarist thinking and urges us to see them as outcomes that illicitly compartimentalize a messy, impure, heterogeneous world'.[64]

The space of overlapping hybrid entities suggests also the possibility of an alternative account of modernity not as a disenchanted but as an enchanted world. Jane Bennet[65] provides an interesting attempt to reverse the image of modernity as a disenchanted place of death and alienation, of control and disembodied freedom, compared with a golden age of cosmological coherency or with an image of dark pre-modernity. In contrast to this narrative, Bennet introduces a view of the world, not as a re-enchanted but as an already (or still) enchanted place where the marvellous emerges every day from the practices of hybridity: 'Enchantment, then, is a precarious concatenation, it requires a delicate balance of forces, a set of fortuitous circumstances'.[66] What Bennet is arguing for, as a source of enchantment, is the discovery of cyborgs and material complexity: 'I argue that, in addition to the beauty and sublimity of nature, there also exist hi-tech, artifactual sites of enchantment'.[67]

It means that modernity creates its own enchantments. Weber characterised the disenchanted world as stamped with the imprint of meaninglessness, a world in which there are no mysterious nor incalculable forces that come into play; on the contrary, Bennet's counterstory

> seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world – a world of in-equity, racism, pollution, poverty, violence of all kinds – as also enchanted – not a tale of re-enchantment but one that calls attention to magical sites already here. Not magical in the sense of '[…] supernatural powers […],' but in the sense of cultural practices that mark 'the marvellous erupting amid the everyday'[68]

Thus, far from demonising modernity and complaining about the loss of authenticity, there still is room for enchantment, materiality and political commitment. Especially, there is room for environmental politics which is about something more than a thing called 'the environment', and even about something more than a thing called 'the nature' of picturesque countryside, apocalyptic alarms and authoritative scientific reports.

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6. PLACES OF POLITICS, POLITICS OF PLACES

As this paper outlines in previous paragraphs, the realist view is based on the idea that there is an external reality existing *per se* and:

> Despite their seeming political differences, the radical 'deep green organisations' Earth First! and the multinational biotechnology company Monsanto actually have something in common: namely, both seek to justify their actions by reference to nature in itself. [69]

However, as Wolfgang Sachs puts it, realism

> constructs a reality that contains mountains of data, but no people. The data do not explain why Tuaregs are driven to exhaust water holes, or what makes Germans so obsessed with high speed on freeways; they do not point out who owns the timber shipped from the Amazon or which industry flourishes because of a polluted Mediterranean sea; and they are mute about the significance of forest trees for Indian tribes […] In short, they provide a knowledge which is faceless and placeless […] It offers data, but no context. [70]

On the contrary, the constructivist approach affirms that reality *per se* does not exist so that all the possible narratives are equally legitimated; nature is defined, delimited and even reconstituted by different cultures according to their peculiar categories, perceptions and understandings of the external world. In its attempt to oust the realist perspective, constructivism confers a great centrality to discursive practices so that environmental politics is regarded essentially as a matter of different linguistic frameworks in the public sphere and implicitly denies any active role of nonhumans and environment which merely became the effect of discursive creation. However, the exclusive interest for cultural/human-side of the dualism produces some problems.

Environmentalists claim to bring back together human and nature, but the existence of two separate domains moving closer to each other is out of the question: actually, both social constructionists and the natural realists they criticise have something in common, which is '*an inability to imagine human-natural relations in a non dichotomous way*'.[71] Despite their differences, both tend to produce discourses which embody agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement, even though the realistic approach bases this agreement on scientific evidence and defines scientific discourses *as* the rule for reliable discourses; while the constructivist approach bases the agreement on social consensus. Both built up normative political schemes resulting in quite authoritarian political projects.

How could a heterogeneous and hybrid view of modernity (and places) help in sorting out this *impasse* and rethinking environmental politics?

The intent of this paper is to provide a different view of what environmental politics on places is about, who are the actors and where politics 'is done', in order to avoid both the realist and the constructivist approach. An interesting suggestion in that sense comes from non-representational theory proposed by Nigel Thrift. Thrift contests the idea of a discursive building of the world created through a web of significances laid out over a physical substrate, according to which objects initially appear to human beings as phenomena to which potential uses must be assigned prior to any attempt at engagement. Non representational theory 'is anchored in an irreducible ontology in which the world is made up of billions of happy or unhappy encounters',[72] creating and created by numerous paths. The world is not only a human production, like a narrative is, but is the effect of mixed, overlapping hybrid realities which effectively produce multiple 'forms of life', not only linguistically but practically operating: it is the acting and not the rational signification that made possible the fusion of voices in public games. A material political approach suggests that environmental politics are not produced with deliberative, normative intent but through a great number of intentional and unintentional practices and plural interaction that are still deeply embedded, enchanted, collective.

The fundamental question of politics is not 'who' any more, but 'what', namely the 'matter of concerns' too often forgotten by political disciplines: the practical things politics is about play an important role in democracy.[73] A quite obvious temptation is to see this 'things-oriented democracy' as the proper terrain for experts as the only ones capable of grasping the matter, especially when facing complex problems, like environmental issues. On the contrary, the emergence of complex issues requires a democracy able to create effective public involvement: a thing-oriented democracy is exactly what is needed to assemble, to make up a public, to form an assembly, a gathering. In this view

> relations […] are understood as embedded practices. Rather than accepting and working with the already-constituted entities/identities, this politics lays its stress upon the relational constructedness of things.[74]

Of course, 'strangers' involved in the constitution of this things-oriented politics are quite often antagonistically related to each others. Disagreement is not problematic at all, anyway. One of the tasks of democracy consists in mitigating the potential antagonism, so that antagonists may see themselves as adversaries belonging to the same political association, instead of enemies.

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Political issues always involve decisions that require a choice between conflicting alternatives, the problem is to find a space where disagreement can be expressed without falling over into violent conflict or exclusion.[75]

In her *Cosmopolitics*[76] Isabelle Stenger wonders how to 'materialise' this antagonistic view of democracy:

> how to design the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that 'humans of good will decide in the name of the general interest'? How to turn the viruses or the river into a cause for thinking?[77]

The political relevance of things is not just superimposed by human rationality but is the ongoing effect of a co-definition process among acting, thinking, repeating, projecting, speaking and interacting of different dynamic components. Politics takes place not necessarily in the place usually devoted to it: of course a parliament is a place for politics, but a local market is a place of politics too, a scientific laboratory, a park, internet, a boiler, a compost holder, etc. Hybrid actors are the assemblies of mortals, gods, humans and non humans, science, technology, commerce, industry, popular culture, rocks …; they are both the subjects and the object of politics and define the forums where the political issues are pragmatically 'discussed'. Even the quietest natural site, Latour says, becomes a contested battlefield, because there is no mountain, river, flower that is not equipped with machineries, instruments, discourses and studies. Attention toward the multiplicity implies that 'the politics to pursue here is not blanket criticism but ontological politics that involves itself in the making of realities'.[78]

7. AUTHENTIC HETEROGENEOUS PLACES

In the frame of things-oriented politics, acted by hybrid assemblies, places are interpreted as the products of several actor networks, pulling in different directions and originating a 'somewhere' in becoming, without normative coherence or essentialist non-negotiable features. The conception of nature and environment as something fixed and external, should be substituted by a conception of the world as in commotion.[79]

We do not live in a grand closed system where everything that happens can be explained internally, but we live in an environment where the genuine novel may always emerge. Of course it will not lead immediately to a more co-operative and benign world, but it could help in recognising multiple interrelations. They structure complex power-geometries which connect people, places, objects, information, and processes around the globe by

giving a different weight to every single relation. Flows and interconnections enveloping the world may be variously structured according to the position, the history, the aspirations and the physical bounds.[80] In this idea of politics, the heterogeneous places are spaces of embodiment and mutability; spaces of motion traced by different paths, dislocation, migration through time; spaces of complicated and unexpected relations floating from material to virtual and back again.

As a consequence, the conception of places and identities as bounded and static is incorrect because 'the identities of places which people campaign to defend are themselves the product, in part, of a long history of connections with the beyond, with other places'.[81] There is a manifold of symbolic orders, material structures and stories that all made up places as multi-layered space people can recognise as their-own, can attach a sense of belongingness, not only because these multi-layered places reflect a sort of ancestral identity but precisely because they reflect present-day 'alienation' and estrangement.[82]

The aim of this paper, by following Massey's insight, is not to deny the identity of places and the sense of belongingness people can feel, but to reject the parochialism and the exclusivities that a commitment to place can generate. This requires a different concept of identity not as bounded, enclosed and pure, but essentially porous and open, linked with other places. Before human discursive practices, which give meaning to the world, the world is far from being meaningless, exactly because cultural meaning is only one possible form of meaning, not *the* meaning *par excellence*.

The very concept of 'locality' is profoundly challenged because heterogeneous networks define with their own activity the proximity not in terms of metric distance but in terms of similarity of set of elements. Together with the possibility of detachment of single places from their topographic collocation, in order to be joined with distant but similar places in a purpose-oriented geographical map, the identity itself of these places cannot be determined anymore

> 'nice and neatly and once for all'. Instead, all we find in this space are 'viscous combinations' in which 'elements inform each other' in ways that 'continuously alter' […]. Fluid relations, although quite distinct from regional and network forms, may therefore represent enduring features of the complex topologies that now compose the spatial realm.[83]

It would be a nonsense to affirm that geographical or ecological location does not count in bounding together metrically close places, but different bounds, in some cases, could prevail and have stronger effect in political terms.[84] What has been identified and implicitly assumed as a standpoint in

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classic geographical tradition, namely that geo-ecological features are the source of personal and social identity, is not self-evident.

The adoption of a material semiotic ontology is not a mindless enthusiastic supporting of a post-modern virtual world without boundaries, without hierarchy, without exclusions; on the contrary it explores how and why some non-territorial definable relations produce very territorial outcomes. Nonetheless heterogeneous elements always bind together, in pre-modern as well as in modern time. Places are part of these heterogeneous formations: they are at the same time political issues, and the arena for political processes, or the public forum. A place is given by the concentration in a fraction of space of overlapping heterogeneous collectives around several issues, which are, at the very end, material issues:

> we might be more connected to each other by our worries, our matter of concern, the issues we care for, than by any other set of values, opinions, attitudes or principles.[85]

Authenticity and enchantment emerge within the interweaving of people, organisms, elements and machines that form multiple and overlapping realities. The notion of places as settled, bounded, homogeneous and coherent can be replaced by a concept of place as meeting-place, namely 'the place of intersection of particular bundles of activity spaces, of connections and interrelations, of influences and movements'.[86] The peculiar feature of every place is not furnished by a pre-given collective identity or some eternal geographical features, but precisely from the 'throwntogetherness',[87] a negotiation of 'here and now' which must take place between both human and nonhumans. Nature itself is constantly moving and this makes a problem of any notion of intrinsic *indigeneity* or *naturality*. Every place is the outcome of temporary meeting up of cultures, history, political design, geological events, economic strategies, animals population, technological products, information produced by every organism and so on. Their future is always to be negotiated. Across permeable boundaries things move constantly and identities blend: 'The identities of places which people campaign to defend are themselves the product, in part of a long history of connections with the beyond, with other places'.[88] Their specificity is the result of a construction out of relations between creole networks, hybrid entities, machines, hackers, invasions, viruses and fluxes. Their specificity is continually reproduced from a number of heterogeneous sources and conflicts over the definition of what should be considered heritage and what should be considered development. As a result:

> Uniqueness is constructed (and reconstructed) [as] combinations of local characteristic with those wider social relations. Place is an articulation of that specific mix in social space-time. Nowhere else can have precisely the same characteristics, the same combination of social processes. [89]

The material semiotic approach seems to be adequate to frame environmental politics and to consider its performative effects, first of all in terms of democratic participation. The resultant conception of social agency is not a manifestation of unitary intent because social agents are never located in bodies alone, but in constituting embedded and contextual networks of virtual/material relations. Place is not only a site of meaning articulation for people living in it, but is a fundamental material-semiotic site for thinking about alternative construction of environmental politics, by linking cyberactivism[90] and face-to-face place-based relations. A place is entangled into very complex networks 'composed of heterogeneous actors and sites, each with its own culturally specific interpretative system, and with dominant and subaltern sites and knowledges'.[91]

This approach avoids romanticism but recognises the 'place-specific conjunction of human and nonhuman trajectories and it politically addresses the terms of their intersection'.[92] Places, also supposedly uncontaminated places like Amazonia, are already mixed places where local workers, literary narratives, human artefacts, geological events, flows of money, flows of information, colonisers, animals coming from the opposite part of the world, environmentalists … have dwelled the space and produced the shape of the place.[93]

The peculiar feature of environmental politics consists in the possibility of rethinking a political theory able to include nonhumans in public debate, so to enlarge this sphere and the political arena. In ecological crisis neither nature nor humans decide, but association of the two.

CONCLUSION

By assuming that modernity is in total continuity with what is usually called pre-modernity, the myth of a dualistic ontology in which humans are clearly separated from the rest of the world, crumbles. The alternative picture of modern world proposes it as still enchanting, engaging and worthy of commitment; it builds upon a non-dualistic and non-foundationalist epistemology. Heterogeneous assemblies of humans and non-humans reshape the essence, the emergence and the role of environmental politics, particularly in dealing with place authenticity.

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Places are regarded as hybrid entities defined by the overlapping relations, some of them very difficult to identify or acting from geographical and temporal distances. Hybridisation is not a process based on undifferentiated mixture where everything is in everything (and as a consequence everything is the same). There are possible hybridisations and impossible matches because of the underlying structure, intentions, reactivity, openness of the elements involved. Thus, even very local places are (and have always been), more dynamic, more heterogeneous, more path-dependent, than a foundationalist and essentialist view suggests.

The fear of authenticity loss can be prevented by providing different meanings of authenticity, namely an inclusive authenticity that can be challenged and contested by different forms of life, by several overlapping material and non-material realities which characterise the specificity itself of a place. The intent of this paper is not to deny the importance of senses of place and the well-described effect of a particularly violent form of modernisation, but to question if there is no other reason for the attachment to a place, than the classic account of its authenticity. Even in the global world local places are spaces of daily life, power generations, novelty emergence and tradition contestation; it is necessary to reassert places, or, better, an anti-essentialistic notion of places; 'place at work, place being constructed, imagined, and struggled over'.[94] Non-exclusivist places are dynamic, fuzzy, and extroverted. Their porous boundaries explain strange presences, embarrassing links, inexplicable similarities in living organism and cultures: the intense presence of Australian trees in Cyprus, a Muslim community in Chiapas, Chinese musical elements in Giacomo Puccini's work….

This newly defined authenticity questions every effort of categorisation, taxonomic intents or technical management of the external world. At the same time this is much more promising from a political engagement point of view. There will be no over imposed iron cage to break because the participation in political life, and the definition of place (plural) identity will be a product of different realities involved in the political arena. And because all forms of political thinking and action have an environmental dimension, environmental politics, far from being abandoned, is the proper arena for creative politics. This would require a consideration of hybrid and plural actors involved in environmental processes and would be inclusive of new meaning and practices defining a non-exclusivist conception of place authenticity.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank the editor and the two anonymous referees for the insightful comments and useful suggestions on the first version of this paper. The usual disclaimers apply. This paper is dedicated to Marco (with a big 'thank you!' to Serena).

[2] The term 'disenchantment' was introduced by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

[3] This means that not only political theories aimed at explicitly preserving, conserving, restoring or improving environmental values, but also those not immediately directed to environmental preservation can be considered as a form of ('unintentional') environmental politics (such as landscape planning, agricultural politics, welfare politics, market politics …).

[4] A commonly accepted view defines environmentalism as the concern for fulfilling environmental values (frugality, sustainability, preservation of natural balance, recycling, non materialist style of life …) and the implementation of environmentally friendly policies, independently from the political affiliation of 'implementers'. On the other hand, ecologism is regarded as a more radical approach, inspired by Marxist literature and western '70s grassroots movements, whose critical consideration of social and economic structure of modern societies calls for a restyling of the international political order (see Dobson 2003). However, because for the purpose of this paper this distinction is not relevant, the definition 'environmental politics' has been here adopted as a general label.

[5] Conventional environmental discourses consider environmental issues as a matter of scientific and technological development. The conventional approach is often presented by some institutions, media, corporations and some large environmental organisations as the mainstream view for the protection of nature and human life quality by following a broadly accepted view of green commitment.

[6] See for instance, Nature Conservancy at http://www.nature.org/?src=t1

[7] General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1972.

[8] This image of an idealised place is generally referred to the ancient golden age, and obviously is far from being presented in these terms as a situation to return to again (because every environmentalist is aware of the criticism liable to result from presenting such a naïve description of authentic places). Anyway it remains as background of many initiatives and politics aimed at restoring, restyling, preserving or conserving places (see, for instance, Earthwatch Institute recruitment brochures at http://www.earthwatch.org).

[9] Hinchliffe 2002, p.209.

[10] Hinchliffe 2007.

[11] An interesting examples of this approach can be found in the Council for the Protection of Rural England's campaign *Tranquillity Where You Live*, aimed at saving from increasing development tranquil areas in the countryside of England that

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'allow us to escape the noise and stress of our cities, towns and suburbs' (CPRE, http://www.cpre.org.uk/home, accessed 23 May 2007).

[12] An attempt to maintain places as they are for their supposed value is the one proposed in the EU Common Agricultural Policy adopted in June 2003. The European metropolitan culture interprets its agricultural landscapes as 'countryside' containing both nature and traditional ways of life. With the introduction of rural development measures, such as payments and subsidies, farmers have been assigned to maintain the landscape for its ecological services and recreational value. This attempt has been opposed by farmers, who see in it a loss of their role and a transformation of the landscape they are used to seeing as a dynamic co-producer of a lifestyle and products they care for, in exchange for a sort of widespread open-air museum (Williams 2003).

[13] The feeling of lack (because of loss) of Eden has a deep resonance in the widespread environmentalists' feeling of the lost paradise, and the constant attempt to recreate it that went with the first colonial scientific expeditions together with the first requests of protection for unique and endangered places (Grove 1995). This rhetoric is still widespread. An interesting example of a new paradise discovery in New Guinea is provided by Conservation International and *National Geographic* at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/02/0207_060207_new_species.html.

[14] In this paper 'classical' geographical approaches are considered those which, since the beginning of the discipline, clearly demarcated boundaries between nature and culture, and regarded cultural geography as exclusively describing human activity.

[15] Massey 2005.

[16] See de la Blanche 1926.

[17] Rougerie 2000.

[18] Lefebre 1991.

[19] Massey 2005, p. 64.

[20] Claval 2003.

[21] Augé 1995.

[22] The major gain of assuming as a touchstone for place definition the model of coherent, pre-given, bounded entities, is the sense of foundation and stable locatedness it provides. The search for a stable locatedness is briefly sketched by geographer Doreen Massey in her description of the Lake District in England: 'It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that this stretch of north-west England had emerged *as* "the Lake District", a designation that was integral to a shift in its position within the national psyche. This newly designated Lake District functioned precisely as some kind of grounding.' (Massey 2006, p. 38). The Lake District was, and still is, an area of symbolic importance for national identity, an icon of natural stability and harmony. Similar processes of labelling authenticity are now common procedures worldwide in order to find a ground for identity, to provide a living example of what every place should aspire to be, to embody the memory of Eden.

[23] Augé 1995, p. 78. For a broader explanation of the 'non-places' concept, see Drenthen 2009 in this issue of *Environmental Values*.

[24] Taylor mainly refers to the authenticity of the self, but, in this paper, the interest is mainly focused on the definition of places authenticity and refers to the sections of Taylor's work dealing with societal features.

[25] Taylor 1992, p. 3.

[26] Taylor 2004, pp. 11–12

[27] Ibid., p. 14.

[28] Taylor 1992, p. 4.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., p. 94.

[31] Giddens 1990, p. 122.

[32] Taylor 1992, p. 6. This is called 'primacy of instrumental reason'.

[33] Taylor 1992, p. 8. Even if the Weberian image of an 'iron cage' is an oversimplification, there is, Taylor says, a great deal of truth in it.

[34] Taylor 1992, pp. 99–100

[35] Vallega 2003.

[36] Katz 1988.

[37] As a result: 'Struggle over nature, land and meaning are simultaneously over identity and rights.' Braun and Wainwright 2001, p. 41.

[38] Brosius 1997, p. 55.

[39] In exploring the construction of environmental subjects, in response to management regimes, resource struggles and colonial environmental knowledges, Agrawal has been inspired by the foucaultian analysis of modern subject genealogy.

[40] Agrawal 2005, p. 3.

[41] Pimbert and Pretty 1995, p. 9.

[42] Empowerment of local and marginal voices and opposition of local to global does not, however, represent a guarantee of solving the problems conventional environmental politics entails, nor of dissolving its essentialist attitude. Enthusiasm for culture centred environmental politics, is questionable, particularly when the acknowledgment of locals' role and rights in managing local resources turns to a worship of the local against the global. Places are usually seen as belonging to people who have always been there (frequently indigenous people or village locals), who resist the arrivals of newcomers, be they multinational corporations or migrant people.

[43] The case of the Penan in the Malaysian state of Sarawak (Borneo island) reported by anthropologist Peter Brosius exemplifies this process. It all started in the 1980s when timber companies moved into upland inhabited by hunter-gatherer Penan, who spontaneously began an active resistance, focused by national and international environmental organisations and individuals supporters to assert Penan's land rights and rainforest preservation. Environmental activists constructed Penan's and their landscape's images to be deployed in the campaigns, and the Penan themselves

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assumed these images as really describing themselves. These images presented the Penan as traditionally exploiting their environment in a long-term preserving way, as intrinsically concerned with ecosystem balance and believing plants are sacred, posses a soul and are born from the same Earth which gave birth to people. Brousius (1997, p. 63) noted in fact that 'One of the Penan I was with stopped, pointed at [Belaban trees] and said that one environmentalist who had spent some time with them had said that in trees like these there were medicines, and that is one reason the forest should be saved'.

[44] There is a subtle but relevant difference between local people and indigenous people. Locals states that land belongs to people inhabiting there. Indigenous claim that people belong to the land. (I'm thankful to Ram Vemuri for having shared with me his insights about this subject).

[45] The issue of traditions preservation also clarifies the implicit link between indigenous/locals and pre-modern people, often imaginatively associated in environmentalist rhetoric. In philosophical and sociological terms there is a slippage between nature-stage societies (usually indigenous, traditional, very local and southern societies) and culture-stage societies (moderns, northern, technologically advanced societies). As well as uncontaminated nature, the first are legacies of the past; the second, as virtual spaces, are a projection of future, independently from their place on the time-line. Indigenous and sometimes locals' cultures are thus crystallised and essentialised in a sort of atemporal time, people spatially existing in an unchanging place. This collocation of natural societies outside of history implied a denial of 'coevalness' (Fabian 1983).

[46] Latour 2004, p. 43.

[47] Milton 1996, p. 7.

[48] See the CAFI course 'Ethno-environmental Management' held in Brazil by Nature Conservancy http://www.nature.org/wherewework/southamerica/brazil/work/art18820.html.

[49] Foale and Macintyre 2004, p. 1.

[50] Foale 2001.

[51] Olwig 2005, p. 297.

[52] Massey and Jess 1995, p. 49.

[53] Norton and Hannon 1998.

[54] Massey 1991, p. 28.

[55] This is the case of WWF *Solomon Islands Community Resources Conservation and Development Project* reported by Simon Foale who writes that 'the basic (scientific) assumptions underpinning the high value attributed to biodiversity by Western environmentalists are typically not shared by most rural Melanesians' (Foale 2001, p. 63). And again, an interesting example reported in a large work on co-managed natural resources cases, published under the supervision of Grazia Borrini-Fayerabend for The World Conservation Union-IUCN, refers to the Chapoto Ward administrative sub-unit in Zimbabwe, located between national parks estates

and the Zambesi river (border with Zambia). In recent years local people got large sums and highly increased social infrastructures from wildlife marketing, thanks to a collective project of communal wildlife management. What is interesting here is a single statement pronounced by the local chair during an assembly with international experts concerned about locals' non-scientific techniques of biodiversity monitoring: 'you should know that a general increase in wildlife is not our main concern. Yes, we like to see more kudu and bushbuck around, but they are not central for our management objectives. What we are really concerned with are two species: elephant and buffalo. They are the focus, because it is these two species that produce high safari revenues' (Borrini-Fayerabend et al. 2004, p. 28).

[56] The example of ecotourism in Malaysian National Parks clarifies this point. When travelling toward the jungle of Malaysian National Parks people expect to find authentic places in which ecological balance is maintained by sustainable way of living, undisturbed nature in harmony with traditional culture: 'tourist do not visit mere jungles or areas covered with rainforests. They visit them if they are protected, if they carry the label of conservation area, a forest reserve, a national park, or even a World Heritage Site. This label serves them as a guarantee for visiting an authentic place' (Backhaus 2007, p. 151). Ironically, this experience of authenticity will only be chosen if a certain degree of security feeling and situation control is provided; and this goal can only be achieved by an intensive proliferation and use of what are generally referred at as non-places, namely spaces of the globalised understanding which plays a fundamental role in everyday lives (such as airports, shopping malls, theme parks and so on). The ironic result is that authentic places, preserved by the modern world as a monument to the past and a resolution for the future, only exist and can only be enjoyed as such through the mediation of a massive apparatus of inauthentic places.

[57] Latour 1993, p. 71.

[58] Ibid., p. 10.

[59] Ibid., p. 78.

[60] Ibid., p. 112.

[61] Haraway 1992, p. 298.

[62] Whatmore 2002.

[63] Murdoch 2006, p. 67.

[64] Castree and MacMillan 2001, p. 211.

[65] Bennet 2001.

[66] Ibid., p.104

[67] Ibid., p.14. Geographer Nigel Thrift writes: 'I think that we live in a world which is still populated by myth and magic in which people believe all manner of often contradictory things without batting an eyelid. From telepathy to precognition, from reincarnation to haunting, from angels to aliens, people appeal to all sort of explanation that are often regarded as "irrational"' (Thrift 1999, p. 300). Anyway, this interpretation of Bennet's work is probably misleading. Thrift refers to myth and

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magic as sources of enchantment that are very similar to the 'magic' of pre-modern societies: a timorous faith in the supernatural power. It seems quite evident that this kind of faith is still widespread but there is nothing new in saying that people still (and probably forever) fear ghosts. What Bennet is arguing for as a source of enchantment is exactly something new, that is the discovery of material complexity.

[68] Bennet 2001, p. 8.

[69] Castree and MacMillan 2001, p. 219.

[70] Sachs 1993, p. 22.

[71] Castree and MacMillan 2001, p. 210, italics original. 'Though social constructionists *seem* to breach the social-natural divide which organizes academic and lay thinking, they arguably go on to *reinstall it* at another level. What we means is that bringing nature within the domain of the social simply shifts the causal and ontological arrows from one "side" of the social-natural dichotomy to the other. The dichotomy itself arguably remains intact' (Castree and MacMillan 2001, p. 210).

[72] Thrift 1999, p. 302.

[73] Marres 2005.

[74] Massey 2005, p. 8.

[75] Mouffe 2005.

[76] Stengers specify that she was unaware of Kantian usage of this term while she was working on *Compolitiques* first book, and that there are no relationships between her concept and the Kantian concept.

[77] Stengers 2005, p. 996.

[78] Hinchliffe 2002, p. 265.

[79] Massey 1999.

[80] Massey 1995.

[81] Ibid., p. 64.

[82] Martin Drenthen (2009) proposes the idea of a new sense of place emerging in *non-places*, by moving from the analysis of the 'Room for the river' project in the Netherlands. His idea of acknowledging a crucial role to present-day 'rootlessness' in people's attachment to places is definitely worthy of further exploration.

[83] Murdoch 2006, p. 87 (quoting John Law and Annemarie Mol).

[84] Different bounds overlap in the same place which is, at the same time, part of a different network; its identity is precisely given from these overlappings, this stratification of webs and the effects of the coexistence of those different identity makes a place a fluid section of space, a versicoloured fuzzy agglomerate.

[85] Latour 2005, p. 14.

[86] Massey 1995, p. 59.

[87] Massey 2005, p. 149.

[88] Massey 1995, p. 64.

[89] Massey and Jess 1995, p. 222.

[90] According to Escobar, new localised political action is mainly based on the constitution of a cyberspaces and cybercultures 'that resist, transform or present alternatives to the dominant virtual and real worlds' (Escobar 1999, p. 32). Escobar criticises contemporary theory about networks and fluxes by arguing that what is missing is precisely 'the place-based uses and appropriation of technological resources' (Ibid., p.33). On the contrary, he stress the relevance of concrete places in defining the interactivity, positionality and connectivity in networks, because networks redefine places, but places are essential to their working. The very famous case of the U'wa indigenous people who threatened to commit collective suicide by jumping off a sacred cliff to protest against the US company Occidental Petroleum's oil exploration in a few acres of their original land, gained widespread publicity after the constitution of solidarity committees of environmentalists and from grassroots local groups arriving at the Occidental Petroleum Headquarters.

[91] Escobar 1999, p. 43.

[92] Massey 2005, p. 171.

[93] Hybrid actors animate the space of political antagonistic. The well-known story of Chico Mendes, reported by Haraway, is a good example of this kind of politics. According to Haraway the union of the extractors and the indigenous people of whom Mendes was a member derived their true position of defenders of the forest not from the idea of a nature under threat but from their daily relation with the forest as integral part of their struggle to survive. Haraway writes: 'Their authority derives not from the power to represent from a distance, nor from an ontological natural status, but from a constitutive social relationality in which the forest is an integral part, part of natural/social embodiment. In their claims for authority over the fate of the forest – the resident people are articulating – social collective entity among humans, other organisms, and other kinds of non-human actors' (Haraway 1992, p. 310). This permits a deconstruction of the image of the tropical rain forest as 'Eden under glass', and supports a politics not of saving nature but of '"social nature", not of national parks and walled-off reserves, responding with technical fix to whatever particular danger to survival seems most inescapable, but of a different organisation of land and people, where the practice of justice restructures the concept of nature' (Ibid., p.309)

[94] Escobar 2001 p. 4. A large number of environmental movements address global issues by enacting very local strategies (short food chains, participatory decision in public transport, eco-efficiency home-building …). They do not only act on the base of the old 'think globally, act locally', which regarded local action as the only possibility to react against globalisation; but they represent a new way of dealing with global issues, by recognising that global relations are at the same time very local. The world is not increasingly global, neither local; rather it is increasingly 'glocal'.

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