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# The Politics of the Conservation of Nature

PETER J. TAYLOR

*Center for Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture*  
*Rutgers University, NJ 08903, USA*

In his key essay, 'Ideas of Nature', the English-Welsh cultural critic, Raymond Williams, rejected the conceptual separation of society and nature, challenging us to theorise the complexity of what we might call *social-natural processes*. At the same time, he observed the common simplifications or *discursive reductions* of that complexity, inviting us to examine the ways social agents use *ideas* of nature.

In this actual world there is... not much point in counterposing or restating the great abstractions of Man and Nature. We have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out. Except that if we mentally draw back... we are spared the effort of looking, in any active way, at the whole complex of social and natural relationships which is at once our product and our activity. (Williams 1980, 83)

In Williams' historical review he illustrated how people invoke ideas of nature to privilege the social order they were defending against perceived threats or promoting in times of change. These two angles – theorising the complexity of social-natural processes and critically interpreting discourse about them – run through the five papers; indeed, they could be used to characterise the mission of *Environment and History*.

As discussed by Haila, the modern idea of wilderness requires the suppression of the histories of inhabitation by aboriginal peoples, or a denial of their impact. The idea of unspoiled places and sentiments (i.e., nature separate from 'man') arose generally as a romantic opposition to the idea of a unified system of nature and society amenable to rational human exploitation. Although the idea of original and unspoiled landscapes was invoked in European nationalist projects of the nineteenth century, it gained most currency in reference to the North American 'frontier', connoting a social vitality lacking in Europe. For both North America and Europe – and for the 'people without history' (Wolf 1982) – this was a time when industrialisation and colonialisation were rapidly escalating exploitation of people and natural resources (i.e., producing unprecedented interdependencies among peoples and nature). Haila argues that such exploitation builds on a self-image of modernity, in which the conceptual separation of nature from culture (irrespective of which one is valorised) is one aspect of a more general process of 'othering'. He concludes with an ecologised

vision of society that depends not on referring to some situation 'outside of' human influence, but instead attends to Thoreau's 'wildness', the diverse uncontrollable elements inside human everyday existence.

The critique of modernity is also taken up by Denham, who examines the changing ideas about society's mastery over nature in the work of critical theorists, Max Horkheimer and William Leiss. In the 1930s Horkheimer's views were in line with Marxism in two key aspects. First, ideas about nature reflected the society's stage of development (a precursor to Williams' view). Second, with the future advent of socialism, domination of (external, non-human) nature would no longer be bound up with some social groups and nations dominating others, but take place 'according to a unified plan and purpose'. That is, through 'reason', individuals would be able to realise their full potentials. However, by the early 1940s Horkheimer focused not on the ideal socialist future, but on the existing subjugation of nature, both external and internal to humans, that is, in their subjectivity or agency. While nature in both senses could be repressed, Horkheimer emphasised the human potential to 'revolt', through rebellions, crime, and mental disorders. To this list, Leiss would, a generation later, add human liberation and also mention the breakdown of cycles of ecological maintenance or 'self-renewal'. Neither Horkheimer nor Leiss developed the ecological dimensions of the revolt of nature, but Denham interprets the revolt in terms of of non-human nature having agency. The non-human world is 'dynamic and often unpredictable', reciprocally affecting humanity, and thus worthy of respect and care.

Denham discusses Horkheimer's changing views about nature on his own terms, but Williamsian interpretation invites us to be less literal, to connect ideas about nature to concerns about society and a person's place in it. Perhaps the early Horkheimer's concern with 'reason' reflects a social theorist's need to imagine his work as politically important. And when the later Horkheimer borrowed the term 'nature' for humans, we might interpret this as his endowing human subjectivity with something external to society, something that could resist pressures to conform and comply with fascism and Stalinism. Consider also Denham's invocation of 'agency' for non-humans. She rules out endowing nature with one of the usual attributes of agency, intentionality. If this is stripped from nature's agency, does this mean that Denham, reflecting the strength of right-wing political reaction of the 1990s, is playing down the possibility of emancipatory social change through purposeful *human* agency? At least, then, nature would appear to offer some resistance to the dominant political-economic order. A similar resistance role might also be played by Haila's 'diverse uncontrollable elements inside human everyday existence'.

Williamsian interpretations, however, imply that social concerns can be directly projected into theory, an idea that is itself a discursive reduction of the complex processes of knowledge-, society-, and nature-building. Instead we might treat suggestions such as the ones above as heuristics or angles of entry. We would then proceed to tie in much more of the specific context for the

intellectual work of all these people. Nevertheless, even without more complex, ‘Williamsian-plus’ interpretations (Taylor 1997), we can discern in the socially critical writings of Horkheimer, Denham, Thoreau and Haila a troubling issue for environmental discourse. How are accounts of society and its environmental relations supposed to affect the state of affairs they criticise? What is the politics implied in the science, interpretation and knowledge-making? The answer, quite often, is a ‘moral-technocratic’ vision of social change and political change (Taylor and Buttel 1992).

Moral and technocratic are usually seen as opposite qualities. In technocratic formulations, objective, scientific, and (typically) quantitative analyses are employed to identify the policies that society or humanity needs in order to restore order or ensure its sustainability or survival – policies to which individuals, citizens, and countries would then submit. Moral formulations, in contrast, try to avoid coercion and exhort each individual making the change needed to maintain valued social or natural qualities of life. Coutinho, for example, classifies environmental discourses into two kinds. In ‘technocratic sustainabilism’, everything can be managed; ‘knowledge and science [provide] the instruments to effectively solve the contradictions engendered by progress’. On the other side, new values and utopian social arrangements are promoted in order to restore health to nature, which is diseased by modern, industrial society. In a similar spirit, Hammond disputes the generality of the connection I have drawn between systems ecology in H.T. Odum’s pioneering work and technocratic politics (Taylor 1988). Boulding and other important figures in the General Systems Community (GSC), Hammond observes, promoted participatory democratic and pluralistic perspectives on social and biological systems.

Notice, however, some tensions. For Hammond, H.T. Odum is technocratic, but Coutinho places him on the ‘new values are needed’ side. In Madison’s account, we find the brothers H.T. and E.P. Odum on both sides. They seek to stabilise and improve United States agriculture. They serve government institutions, such as the Atomic Energy Commission and a White House Panel on World Food Supply, and yet dismiss the Soil Conservation Service and agricultural extension agents for promoting energy-intensive farming. To rework agriculture on the model of sustainable agro-ecology, the Odums develop texts and curricula, seeking to convert the next generation so that they think in terms of the ‘three E’s’: energy, environment, and economics. In short, the Odums’ approach to social action displays both moral and technocratic tendencies.

These tensions can be resolved by recognising the ways in which moral and technocratic visions of politics are allied, and remain popular, especially in global environmental discourse. Both approaches invoke the severity of the crisis and threat to our social order to command our attention. Their solutions and rhetoric appeal to *common, undifferentiated* interests as a corrective to scientifically-ignorant governance or leadership that is corrupt, self-serving or naive. The analyses and language discount the political economic *dynamics* behind people’s unequal responsibilities for causing and alleviating environmental

problems. (By dynamics I mean not just that there *are* richer and poorer people, but that their situation, past, present, and future, including their effects on the environment, results from their *interrelationships*.) The visions privilege the perspective of the outside observer diagnosing the problems of the system as a whole. Moreover, the interests of all are not quite equal; special places in the proposed social transformations are reserved for their exponents – the technocrat as analyst or policy advisor; the moralist as guide, educator or leader (Taylor and Buttel 1992).

System thinking plays an ambiguous role with respect to moral-technocratic politics. A system can denote just an orderly collection of interacting components, and a systems approach, a juxtaposition of different perspectives on the same system. But once modelling and other quantitative techniques are employed as a means of deriving at least some of the different perspectives, ‘system’ often takes on stronger connotations: something with clearly defined boundaries and coherent internal dynamics governing the system’s behaviour, evolution, and response to outside influences. Relations of a system with its environment are simply mediated and rarely disrupt the system’s stable functioning. The behaviour of such systems can then, systems analysis holds, be understood in terms of the feedback relations among the components within the system, so long as the analyst takes into account *all* of the components. (This analysis is, of course, easier if the analyst reduces the description of the system to a simple metric, such as the Odums’ energy currency.) In all these aspects, strong systems thinking privileges the position of outside observer or manipulator – moralist and technocrat – relative to the necessarily limited visions of those inside.

Hammond makes clear that the GSC’s concern with systems in relation to their environment is more complex than the simple flows crossing the boundaries of the Odums’ systems. This ensures that there is no privileged place outside the GSC system. In fact, the analyst is often part of a GSC system. Moreover, the interactions within GSC systems are not reduced to a simple metric. We might ask, however, given that philosophy does not translate directly into practice, what actual interventions Boulding and others in the GSC were involved in. In the specific situations in which they were enabled to apply their systems perspectives, how did they influence the state of affairs they theorised and criticised?

These questions return us to the project of cross-fertilisation among environmental history, history of conservation, and history of ecology described in this issue’s editorial introduction. Histories of conservation pay more attention to actual interventions in specific situations than do histories of ecology; interaction may shift the latter field away from its long-standing emphasis on ideas and theory. Histories of conservation and environmental histories also draw us quickly into the complexity and contingency of interactions among and within social, cultural, economic, and ecological realms. Social and ecological complexity has, of course, been emphasised by systems theorists, but, in order to

resist the tendencies towards moral-technocratic politics, I would propose a different source of insights and analogies for dealing with complexity.

Over the last decade a new generation of geographers and anthropologists has been analysing concrete situations of environmental degradation and associated political struggles (Peet and Watts 1996), such as the gendered conflict in the Gambia arising around market garden and tree-planting schemes that were initiated by international aid organisations. This kind of 'political ecology' aims to address the complexity produced by intersecting economic, social and ecological processes operating at different scales. Systemness and management by outsiders become problematic ideas given that these processes range from the local climate and geo-morphology, through the local institutions of production and their associated agro-ecologies, the social differentiation in any community and its social psychology of norms and reciprocal expectations, up to changes in national and international political economies.

The potential contribution of this kind of political ecology to the cross-fertilisation project extends beyond serving as an alternative to system thinking and counteracting moral-technocratic environmental politics. Its rich descriptions of ecological degradation inevitably include historical background and processes and address cases similar to those of environmental history and history of conservation. Its historical and non-equilibrical view of ecology is closer to contemporary theory in 'natural' ecology, than are concepts of balance and stability disturbed (Taylor 1997). And, finally, practitioners of political ecology have been pushing each other to clarify and strengthen the connection between their analyses of social-natural complexity and their engagement in those processes. All these aspects are helpful for studying the politics of the conservation of nature, especially if, individually and collaboratively, we make 'the effort of looking, in [an] active way, at the whole complex of social and natural relationships which is at once our product and our activity'.

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