

CCT640, Fall '10

Williams' essay gives us a sense of the changing meanings given to the term "nature," the coexistence of contradictory meanings at any one time, and how these meanings reflect ideas about the social order being defended or promoted. There is a cycle of projecting society into nature and then reading propositions about society back out of "nature." Ideas of nature are often invoked to explain aspects of the social order, usually aspects becoming problematic at that particular historical juncture. So when we hear people debating what nature is/what is natural, we should immediately ask ourselves what it is about society that is being debated.

The romantic ideal, for example, of a unspoiled places and sentiments (i.e., nature separate from "man") arose at a time when industrialization was rapidly escalating exploitation of people and natural resources (i.e., producing unprecedented interdependencies among peoples and nature), exploitation underwritten by the removal of traditional checks in the name, ironically, of the natural principles of individual autonomy and of unconstrained pursuit of utility in social transactions.

Open question: Why is nature (actually ideas of nature) such a powerful source of authority in social debates?

Ideas of Nature	nature = actual physical, material, or living world	"nature" = ideas of nature
untouched by human activity	very little of this left	tell us about changing & competing ideas of society (projected into what is "nature/al")
including human activity	marked by lots of transformations through history	"human nature" (supposedly universal) is often "nature" read back into ideas about society

General historical trends (altho' multiplicity of meanings persist at all times):

1. Multiplicity of natural processes, attributes, spirits ----->organized around a single principle (UNITARY, SINGULAR Nature)
2. Specific (nature = essential quality of something) ----->Abstract (nature = the whole material world) Personified (nature = inherent force)
3. Fixed place ----->Changing place & increased intervention

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece

Heuristic: Interpret a person's ideas about nature as ideas about the (actual or possible) social order favored by the person.

The logical complement of this heuristic is the idea that people build ideas about their favored social order into their ideas about reality or nature more generally.

Open questions: Why do they do this? How do they do so, and how well do they do so?

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece

Compose your own multi-person conversation about contemporary ideas about nature, starting with the following:

Partovo ("Humans are a Part Of nature"): Humans are living organisms. As such they are part of nature. Therefore, everything they do is natural.

Separata ("Humans have become Separate from nature"): People have lost touch with nature and that is why our environment and our society are in trouble.

Interpreta ("Interpret Socially views about nature and what is natural"): When I hear people draw lessons from nature, I hear them really telling me something about their views on society.

Separata: You'll have to explain this interpretation to me, because, without a sense of what is natural and what is unnatural, anything is acceptable.

Interpreta: But Partovo has a sense of what is natural that tells him everything is acceptable.

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece -- Darwin and ideas about nature

Williams describes the general trend: Western societies' ever increasing interaction with/in nature -> idea that nature has a history -> evolutionary theories of nature -> humans also evolve.

Darwin, specifically, contributed the idea that the "observation" that everything in nature is adapted to its place can be attributed to an on-going struggle for existence. It is not given once and for all by creation.

This relates to and supports a dominant idea about social order, namely, that one's place in society is a result of a natural process of selection, and, given that the result is well adapted, this is right/justifiable/ as good as we could hope for.

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece -- Tensions in Darwin's and subsequent ecology

uniformity of processes ~~~~ historically contingency of events

the balance of nature ~~~~ a struggle for existence

fixed, stable places (niches) ~~~~ scrambling for a place

stable equilibrium ~~~~ change

biological causes of changing conditions of life ~~~~ physical & climatic determination

ecological complexity integrated, like an organism ~~~~ an aggregate of individuals

nature passive or mechanical ~~~~ active or creative

"Tension" is meant to have associations of complementarity or push-and-pull, but not of binary opposition. These tensions serve as a check-list so

i) ecologists can review their own emphases and consider what would follow from emphasizing the other aspect in any tension;

ii) interpreters of science can relate the tensions to tensions in the scientists' experience of society; and most generally,

iii) we can see that ecology and environmental thought could or could have developed with other emphases (e.g., global warming research, Malthusian population concerns).

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece

Relate Botkin's views of ideas of nature (see additional reading) with Williams' and Worster's ("Scrambling" plus additional readings).

For reflection and possible integration into thought-piece

Which of the tensions in Darwin's view of ecology as conveyed by Worster, "Scrambling for a place" are evident in Begon et al., "The influence of predation and disturbance"?