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 OPEN ACCESS

Rejoinder: Discussing Dichotomies with Colleagues

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Strang

I very much appreciate Veronica Strang's references to an indigenous all-inclusive worldview, in which they offer 'not "romantic harmony" with a thing called nature, but something much more interesting: a model of how to think about human-non-human relations integratively, and without reifying alienating dichotomies'. However, as in the case of my reaction to Reuter (below), pragmatically speaking, can we really use the indigenous worldview as an alternative on a global scale?

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Also, I absolutely agree that a dualistic vision of nature and culture should have no place in holistic ways of thinking. Yet, to me, this means that humans and non-humans should be treated equally. Deconstructing the dichotomy implies no discrimination on the bases of being non-human – no medical experimentation, no close confinements within the concentrated animal-feeding operations, no euthanasia or sterilisation of pets. Deconstructing this dichotomy also implies that those who kill animals should be tried for murder. Obviously, this is not happening, other than in very isolated incidents of killing of poachers, which human rights advocates decry as violating human rights. I am not sure whether any of us are prepared to go so far in carrying out the logical implications of deconstructing dichotomies.

The primary problem is well summarised by Strang:

But even accepting the need to extend social justice to the non-human, how many anthropologists would give non-human beings priority over the interests of human groups severely disadvantaged by colonial (and neo-colonial) appropriations of their land and resources? It is difficult for our profession to think counter-intuitively to a century of advocacy on behalf of such communities.

Reuter

Thomas Reuter makes a number of insightful observations as to the need for a radically different cosmology in order to achieve the broadening of human identity away from a narrow subjective conception of Self, and towards a more world-embracing and objective sense of Self. I fully agree. I am afraid we are very far from achieving the ancient ideal either of the hermetic *Anthrôpos* and the *Vedic Brahman*. As Reuter himself reflects, his proposal describes an ideal spiritual and moral condition, and while both the *Anthrôpos* and the *Brahman* have been around for millennia, few have lived their lives in conformity with this ideal. As an idealist, I believe these embracing cosmologies will always shine light in the dark. As a pragmatist, however, I suspect that without employing the increasingly globalising language of liberal individualist cosmology and derivative notions such as subjectivity, rights and justice, very little can be understood, and more crucially done, either by academics, policy-makers, political leaders and society as a whole to advance the ambitious objectives of ecological justice.

I agree that we must work harder to strengthen small-scale economies through cultural protection. On the other hand, I do doubt whether this is realistic on a global scale. The simple fact is (and this is part of ecological data we rarely discuss in anthropology) that *Homo sapiens* is a relatively large animal (an apex predator). If we had about seven billion apex predators, let us say lions, walking around on this earth, it is likely that without technological innovations in the production of antelope meat, the lions would end up following the Hobbesian path of war and starvation. Small scale antelope consumption, as in the olden days of demographic balance between predator and prey, seems unlikely.

West

Paige West accuses of me being ignorant of what she sees as relevant literature, creating straw men, and of selective reading. She follows this with an extended reflection on

open access publication that seems to have little to do with the main subject of my article – ecological justice.

The straw men accusation goes both ways. In many self-references, West presents a common critique that reduces ‘environmentalists’ to neocolonial capitalist imperialists. For example, West and Brockington (2012, 2) argue that environmentalism ‘went south’ to the recently decolonised nations, and while there, ‘it got snugly in bed with its old enemy, corporate capitalism’. Unfortunately, West also seems to be very much selective in her (mis)reading of conservation.

Addressing the ‘ignoramus’ issue, many references that West recommends are in fact referenced in my own publications, which I suspect West is unfamiliar with. I would also recommend to West a lot of cross-disciplinary readings, particularly in the fields of biology (Wilson 2016) biological conservation (Soulé and Noss 1998) environmental sociology (Dunlap and Van Liere 1978), conservation psychology (Stern 2000), deep ecology in environmental ethics (Naess 1973), animal rights (Singer 1977), critical animal studies and an emerging fields of animal law (Peters 2016) and earth justice (Higgins 2010). Very little of the interdisciplinary work that directly relates to my article is to be found in exclusively anthropological references that West recommends.

West and I fully converge in the argument that ‘capitalism and global industrialised political economies, and the subjectivities that come with them, are the key factors in both the loss of global ecological and cultural diversity’. Yes, I agree that the rich and the powerful are to blame for most environmental destruction. I wonder, however, whether it is possible to ever realistically eliminate social inequalities – especially in the world of competition for limited resources. In this sense, if an alternative path to the present idea of economic development cannot be found, raising the global living standards will have potentially catastrophic impacts on both the ecosystems and human well-being. In my own publications (most of my research is based in my own Western consumption society) I discuss these alternative paths – the cradle to cradle, circular economy, de-growth, steady-state-economy, etcetera.

General Comment

This leads us to one of the salient points regarding dichotomies. Both what might be termed deep ecology scholars as well as more ecumenical, post-modern, open, inclusive, plural, anthropocentric, etcetera scholars, reject the human–nature dualism, but they do so for different reasons, drawing diametrically opposed ethical conclusions from their opposition to it. The reason why some conservation critics argue that humans are part of nature is to show that, as products of evolution, our presence in ‘nature’ is natural, and so are human-made objects – in other words, there is no distinction between ‘artificiality’ and ‘wilderness’, as William Cronon or Robert Fletcher, among others, have argued. In other words, the human co-optation of the elements of biosphere then becomes as unobjectionable as any other phase of evolution. In this framing, it is assumed that since human beings are part of nature there is no reason to insist upon the detrimental role of communities.

In this context, the term, ‘nature’, does not adequately designate the intended object of conservation. From the deep ecology perspective, humans are indeed also seen as part of nature, and products of evolution. In deep ecology, human beings are also seen as one of

many species on this planet and not morally privileged in relation to other elements of nature, but must share those resources equitably with other species. Reserving some areas exclusively for the use of non-human species is then consistent with the non-dualist stance of deep ecology.

The deep ecology (Naess 1973), land ethics (Leopold 1949), and animal rights (Singer 1977; Peters 2016) conceptions of unity with nature require recognition of the integrity of ecosystems and a certain balance of needs, which can be interpreted in terms of interspecies egalitarianism or equity (Baxter 2005). If the questions of interspecies equity and animal rights were taken seriously, the planet would need to be divided on the basis of species' natural resource requirements (for example, Mathews 2016), and not on the basis of what one single species proclaims to be its entitlement. Most critics I cited in my initial article are specifically drawing attention to situations where strict designations of human and nature made by groups of environmentalists' – who are generalised, and often misrepresented as misanthropic – can effectively sever indigenous/local people from their land and livelihood(s), and that environmentalist/local relations should be understood through the lens of power indifferences. My criticism of this position is that by displacing entire *non-human communities* – and in some cases annexing their entire habitats and exterminating them – the perpetrators of ecological injustice seem unaware that they themselves support the apparatus of oppressive governance that entirely discounts the most vulnerable groups – those of non-humans (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2016; Kopnina 2016a, 2016b).

Thus, the issue at stake is not so much whether humans are part of nature or not – of course they are in one way or another – but whether their influence endangers all other elements of nature. After all, Ebola virus is part of nature as well, yet it is questionable whether the spread of its population and influence should be welcomed by other species. The fact that, when we speak of justice for all, we do not speak of *all* communities of life on this planet, seems lost here. Just as we have become attentive to the ways that conservation can disadvantage local communities, I hope that we can also avoid discriminating against all other species, in practice and in our academic writing.

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