

Culture/Nature, Society/Environment: Beyond Dichotomies, towards an Interdisciplinary Theoretical Framework

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The dichotomy Nature V Culture has characterized anthropological discourse since the beginnings of the specific discipline and in a way still occupies an important place in various ongoing debates about a broad spectrum of subject matters. The same can be argued about the Environment V Society dichotomy, which in a way or another comes up again and again in various contexts of sociological and environmentalist narratives.

These dichotomies, surprisingly enough, are reproduced even in post-modern contexts, perpetuating essentially a conception of culture as something external to nature and vice versa. Culture either as a product of the appropriation of nature by human society or as a means of man's adaptation to his environment remains something separate and nature, on the other hand, continues to appear as something external, as an objective reality out there, which has to be in a way or another manipulated, used, exploited and so on.

It seems, in a way, that it is difficult to get rid of this deeply rooted dichotomizing approach, which is actually located at the foundations of western thought since the inception of modernity. One could also argue that this dichotomy lies at the roots of Ecology as a discipline. The objectification of environment separates it from human society and experience in a more than obvious positivist manner. Any way, the whole distinction between society and environment seems to be fallacious product of western intellectual tradition (Latour 1993).

Within the realm of the Social Sciences this dialogue about the relationship between society and environment (*societe/milieu*) is, in fact, as old as the disciplines of Sociology and Human Geography. Needless to remind the very well known disagreement between Durkheim and Ratzel (Milton 1996) on whether the natural environment determines society and culture or the other way round. This question, one way or another, is still present in today's environmental discourse and implies by it's presence the reproduction of the dichotomy we are talking about. In actual theoretical terms, the former view has been expressed and promoted by environmental determinism and the latter by cultural determinism (Milton 1996, Eder 1996, Hirsch - O'Hanlon 1995). It is worth noting, though, that, even within the trend of cultural determinism, which gives precedence to culture, adopting at the same time a rather dialectical approach to the nature/culture relationship, the dichotomy is nevertheless reproduced.

As far Social Anthropology itself is concerned, the theory of social and cultural construction of the environment tends to acquire a dominant position, but in no way this means that all the theoretical as well as methodological problems one faces when studying relevant themes have been resolved. We should also stress the fact that the various approaches to the nature/culture-environment/society relationship even in the field of Social Anthropology have left many questions unanswered. These concern the concept of culture itself, which apart from the criticism coined on the way it has been treated so far, as though it was an external to nature entity, as a means of adaptation to it or as a result of the process of it's appropriation, from the 1980's onwards has

been not only de-constructed but seriously contested as a problematic analytical tool in cultural studies altogether (Abou-Loughod 1991). In any case, the two categories appear to be separate realities, constructed or not, which relate to each other in one way or another, in the best case in a context of interaction, which implies a dialectic relationship, whatsoever that means. This reality has become the subject of considerable reflection and criticism the last decades mainly from the branch of Ecological Anthropology but also from Human and Cultural Ecology (Croll-D. Parkin 1992, Milton 1996). These critical approaches focus on the aforementioned reproduction of the dichotomy and the most radical ones propose a spiritual version of Ecology, a kind of animism, whereby, *inter alia*, nature and culture are conceived as a unity (Croll-D. Parkin 1992).

These approaches are usually supported by ethnographic evidence drawn from non western societies and cultures, where it is assumed that people think of themselves as an integral part of the environment and the natural elements are treated as living entities in the context of an ever present animism. There, it is also assumed, the environment, nature, is not something external to human beings, an object to be exploited, manipulated, interpreted and so on. It is a part of everyday life, consecrated and enchanted, like every other aspect of their reality, connected with myths and rituals, which are vital for social reproduction, part and parcel of the whole universe of the material and symbolic practices and processes which constitute and are constituted by what we call culture.

It is not my intention to enter an analytical discussion concerning all this quite complicated issue, but I think it is essential for our project to reflect on some fundamental aspects of it and decide on an interdisciplinary basis which theoretical approach, which methodologies and what conceptual tools we are going to adopt in order to carry out our enterprise.

First of all, in my view, it is fundamental to reach an agreement as to whether we proceed beyond the nature/culture, society/environment dichotomy and formulate a context implying a holistic approach to the subject, which overcomes not only dichotomizing views but deconstructs the essentialisation of both nature and culture. In order to do that, we should first agree on the necessity to realize that all these conceptual tools are socially constructed, which means that they do not constitute essences beyond social reality and history. If we agree that they are socially constructed, then we must accept that they are also products of history. To say that something is socially constructed is not to say it is not real. Just the opposite, it is real because it is socially constructed. To accept the view that nature is not an objective reality does not mean that it does not exist. It does exist and it has a materiality. The way we perceive, understand, define it is socially constructed, that is why it differs from one historical period to the other, from place to place, from culture to culture, even from one social class to another, from one social category to the other and many times from one person to the other according to social status, age, profession, way of life (urban/rural etc), invested interests and so on. What I really want to say is that our colleagues coming from natural sciences should try to reflect (if they have not done so already) on the dominant by now view among social scientists, that "nature" does not constitute an eternal essence external to human society and culture, but it is constituted through the social relations of meaning production like all aspects

of what we call “reality”. Societies invest with meaning all the material conditions of their existence producing symbolic systems through which they appropriate materially as well as spiritually and communicate with what is called “environment”. This whole process, which should be conceived in historical and dialectical terms constitutes what we call “culture”.

If we move now on from this theoretical level to more specific considerations related to the notions of space and time, the basic constituents of social reality and culture, on the same line of argument, the constructivist one (Berger-Luckmann 1967), we could contend that both categories, although they are in the first place “natural”, from a social and cultural point of view, they are socially, which means also historically, constituted. Men appropriating space and time, through social and cultural systems, turn them into cultural categories transforming them at the same time according to the prevailing historical conditions. This happens in historical terms, that is to say on the basis of the relations of production and reproduction of the material as well as the symbolic conditions of social life, which change through time.

Culture is first of all a space, according to F. Braudel, and we can add that culture is also a time. There is no culture out of space and time. We can also reverse things and say that both space and time are above all culture. And this not in the sense that culture is reflected on space and time, but in the sense that they are products of it. If we want to go a bit further and think in more dialectical terms, we should talk about a mutual constitution, meaning that at the same time the culturally constituted space and time play their own role in the constitution of culture.

The relationship between society and space-time poses by definition the question of its relationship with what is conceived as “natural environment”. This has been a central theme in ethnographic approaches of so called “primitive societies”, where reference to the natural context was a prerequisite for any description related to social and cultural phenomena. It is worth noting that in the context of these structural-functional studies local societies are treated as organic wholes, more or less as organisms, characterized by social cohesion and showing a balanced interdependence of the parts which constitute the whole called dynamic equilibrium. (Needless to say, this theory has been revised by historical and critical Anthropology as a static and isolationist one). Within this context material aspects of life are structurally and functionally articulated with the spiritual ones, productive processes and relations with myth and ritual and, generally speaking, the appropriation of nature presents material as well as spiritual dimensions, in such a way that material processes are interwoven with the symbolic level and a deep relationship between man and his environment is evident. In a “system” like this boundaries between the material and the spiritual, the profane and the sacred are not clear. In these studies also it is easy to realize that western categories like that of “nature” are not valid, which means that all the dichotomies produced by it are also not valid. So let us keep this in mind before going into our next consideration which concerns the notion of landscape, which either as landscape in general or as cultural landscape is going to be central in our project given the fact that the forests or groves we are studying form cultural landscapes *par excellence*.

Landscape as a notion has its origins in painting where it has been used as a technical term. This by itself means that in order to speak about space-

place in terms of landscape you have to take a position out of it. You have to be an external observer and adopt more or less an aesthetic approach, an outsider's gaze which objectifies and to some extent exoticizes specific localities. Ethnographic descriptions from the beginning tend to produce specific narratives about places and localities under study which show the way they acquire their morphological characteristics through productive, social and ritual practices and finally they depict indigenous cultures being connected with collective identities and constituting a basic factor in the formation of collective consciousness itself by the way people are attached to them on a community basis. More recent ethnographic reports show that what we call "landscape" for indigenous people is not a random aggregation of physical elements but a context structured by their history and collective myths, a place indissolubly connected with their social existence (Hirsch 1995:1-30).

The view that culture transforms the natural environment into cultural landscape is a common place in the sciences of space today, but discussion has proceeded through the dialectical and dynamic approaches to rather processual theories (Ingold 1992; Hirsch- O'Hanlon 1995; Low- Laurence-Zuniga 2003:1-50). That is to say landscape is viewed as a process rather than as a thing. Furthermore, another group of anthropologists and geographers have developed an interesting contribution to this dialogue based on the idea of *dwelling* coined by T. Ingold (2001). The utility of this notion consists in the fact that promotes the idea of constitution of places and landscapes through human *praxis*. Human *praxis* creates meaningful places. The appropriation of land through cultivation or other productive uses, the knowledge of space and place as a product of work, technology and the productive process, constituting what Ingold calls *taskscape*s, the senses and the kinesthetic experience of space are acts that transform a space into a lived place. This approach puts at the centre of the discussion a mutualism between environment and person substituting the nature-culture dualism (Ingold 1992:40). Here we are closer to an Ecological Psychology of the kind Gibson has developed (Ingold 2000). I don't wish to go into this discussion, but I do think that the idea of *taskscape*s can be a useful concept for our work.

Moving now on to mountain landscape which is our case study, we have above all to deconstruct a myth that dominates discussions about and images of mountains even in scientific discourse. It is often assumed that mountains represent archetypal, primeval, ideal natural landscapes, only recently affected by human activity. In a way, especially conservationist narratives reproduce the view that natural landscapes are good and cultural landscapes are bad, because by definition human intervention with nature harms it. That is why in various conservation projects human presence is always something that has to be minimized or eliminated. This has also to do with new approaches to mountain space which give priority to its environmental and aesthetic value instead of its productive uses, a fact related also to the whole process of commercialization of nature in the context of modernity and post-modernity.

There is also a belief that mountains are remote, hostile and difficult to human adaptation, that is why people take refuge there only in hard times, for example in times of demographic pressure or politically unbearable living conditions in the plains (see dominant view in Greek national narratives about the retreat of the Greek population to the mountains due the Ottoman

occupation). In this context mountains have also become symbols of freedom and national resistance.

In reality mountain landscapes are as man-made as all other landscapes which have been shaped through historical human presence (Grove-Rackham 2001; Mac Neill 1992). What we need to investigate is not how close they are to ideal natural environments in the context of the nature/culture continuum, but to trace the historicity of human presence in the context of the wider political economies, that is to say setting the local historically produced modes of production within the wider political-economic systems of which they are a part. From this point of view the crucial dimension is not related to the nature-culture continuum but to the basic characteristics of the dominant mode of production. On this basis if we wish to think in terms of any continuum or any ideal types, we have to put at the epicenter of our discussion the binary opposition defined by two poles: On the one hand the *use-value* oriented modes of production and on the other the *exchange-value* oriented ones. This orientation would lead us also to another useful conceptual tool that of *transition*, since the sacred forests/groves we are dealing with have been formed in pre-industrial era and within local systems characterized by self-subsistence and production of use values to a large extent. Transition to modernity means gradual prevalence of exchange values, commercialization and commodification of all aspects of life and, of course, natural resources. *Transition* as a concept implies by definition dynamic approach, emphasis on dialectic and historicity.

Understanding of the local systems presupposes also getting close to local knowledge and adopting local categories and ways of thinking about things. For example, in local societies there are abstract notions neither of nature nor of culture. People talk about specific objects and specific practices. On this basis they also conceptualize and experience space, which in the same way is transformed into place. *Practice* could be also a useful tool which would take us away from dichotomizing approaches of any kind, since it was invented as a concept to overcome the difficulties of defining in deterministic terms the relationship between structure and agency. "Space can have no meaning apart from practice; the system of generative and structuring dispositions, or *habitus* constitutes and is constituted by actors' moving through space (Bourdieu 1977:214). By and large and put it in a simple way Bourdieu puts forward the idea that social practice activates spatial meaning, using as an ethnographic case study the Berber of North Africa. All this, apart from anything else, takes us to Ethno-ecology a relatively new branch developing at cross-roads between Anthropology and Ecology and giving priority to indigenous knowledge and cosmologies (Milton 1996:49-59).

Turning back to macro-theory and trying to find out a working theoretical scheme in order to face the dilemma about the nature/culture, environment/society relationship, we can now argue that dichotomies do not help and consequently look for answers to rather dialectical approaches which set the whole issue in a historical perspective and in the context of political economies. All this under the light of a general anthropological thesis which accepts the limits and constraints the environment poses to societies but does not accept the view that these determine cultures. In the last analysis culture as symbolic system defines the terms according to which a society adapts itself to its environment (Sahlins 1976). If the environment determined culture then

similar environments could create similar cultures which is not true. Put in different way and in terms of social logic, each society replies to the limits and the constraints of its environment on the basis on a historically produced *social logic* (Ingold 1980).

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