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Production of nature

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The “production of nature” refers to the historically and geographically specific practices through which humans “make” their environments. This making should be viewed as a coevolutionary or metabolic process in which “nature” and “society” – categories that lose their meaning within the production of nature thesis – are mutually transformed. As a thesis, it represents a profound, perhaps scandalous, challenge to the belief that nature is a pristine realm, free from human influence. Most studies have focused on the production of nature within capitalist societies. As such, the production of nature thesis, first advanced by Neil Smith (1984) in his landmark book Uneven Development, has come to be closely associated with a critique of nature–society relationships under capitalism and a simultaneous critique of the commodification of nature.

Smith’s original formulation is framed as a reconstruction of Marx’s concept of nature and is juxtaposed with “a bourgeois” or ideological conception of nature (Smith 1984, 15). Smith revels in the perverse claim that nature is produced, a claim that appears no less quixotic when one realizes that Smith constructs the argument as a means of better understanding processes of uneven development and gentrification. Although building on a thorough reading of Marx, Smith’s thesis goes against the grain of almost all Marxist conceptualizations of the environment: he therefore produces one of the most brilliantly original readings of a range of geographical processes.

The success of Smith’s approach lies, in part, in the relative failings of earlier theorizations of nature. Uneven Development was published at a moment when Marxism was characterized by a strongly urban focus and an apparent inability to speak to a growing environmental consciousness. The production of nature thesis intervened in this moment and preceded several key debates on the relevance of Marxism to environmental questions (Benton 1989; Grundmann 1991) while exploring fundamentally different ground from previous writings on Marx and nature (Engels 1976; Lukács 1971; Schmidt 1971). The thesis simultaneously chimed with the growing emphasis on anti-essentialist readings of nature that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s: it thus became one part of a new constellation of ideas seeking to challenge dominant readings of nature–society relations. The production of nature thesis, perhaps inevitably, came to be read alongside William Cronon’s (1991) Nature’s Metropolis as the theoretical counterpart to Cronon’s more empirically grounded and liberally oriented effort to read nature in the city.

The approach

The concept of nature, Smith argues, is predominantly ideological. Taking his cue from Lefebvre, Smith describes this ideology as “an inverted, truncated, distorted reflection of reality” (Lefebvre, quoted in Smith 1984, 15). This distorted worldview has changed depending on the context in which ideas about nature are developed. Although it is not an example that Smith draws
on, we might think of the framing of nature within apartheid South Africa. The main environmental debates under apartheid concerned wilderness conservation, often through excluding those who had a justified claim to using that land for agriculture and settlement. With the end of apartheid, environmental justice activists sought to reframe nature as a lived, practiced, and embodied realm. Challenging the ideology of nature that had existed previously, the key environmental question became how best to provide basic services for those most in need. Nature is thus recast.

For Smith an essential dualism has come to dominate the social concept of nature. Understood simultaneously as that which remains outside of human practice (an external conception) and that which is essential to the human subject (a universal conception), interpretations of nature throughout Western philosophical and scientific traditions have been plagued with the fundamental contradiction between these two understandings. Marx, Smith claims, pioneered a fundamentally different approach that liberates his writings from such contradictions; nevertheless, how one gets to grips with Marx’s approach is not an easy task, given that the latter never laid out any separate treatises on “nature.” Having dispensed with Alfred Schmidt’s The Concept of Nature in Marx, a book that had come to be regarded as the “definitive” account of Marx’s concept of nature (Smith 1984, 18), Smith then seeks to reconstruct, largely from the Grundrisse, The German Ideology, and Capital, a fundamentally different approach.

Smith’s strategy is to reconstruct the methodological coordinates of Marx’s approach:

Marx nowhere talked explicitly about the production of nature. But in his work there is implied an understanding of nature which leads firmly in this direction … The first major task has been to detect these clues; the second is to lay them out and complete the jigsaw puzzle. Marx has given us the four corners and most of the straight edges; he has also given us most of the common pieces necessary to complete the picture, but these pieces are presented in the context of wholly different analyses. What must be done in order to recognize their significance is to turn these pieces over and, as it were, to reveal their nature face. (1984, 32–33)

The first step is to historicize nature-society relations. From the beginnings of human history, acts of production have served to break down the perceived divide between nature and society which is held to be sacrosanct within the philosophy that runs alongside it. Building on such an approach, Harvey (1996) challenges his readers to try and separate out their own lives into that which is natural and that which is social. The task quickly becomes impossible, as we consume, breathe, walk, type into a computer, and so on. Human relations with nature are, as Marx writes, metabolic. Against both environmental determinism and socialized conceptions of nature, Marx and Smith (and Harvey) see “nature” and “society” as code-determining. Capitalism establishes important sets of social relations in this process. Numerous examples of such a produced nature abound. William Cronon’s Nature’s Metropolis (1991) is one example where an environmental historian has sought to demonstrate how the emergence of a city like Chicago is dependent on a symbiotic relationship with its hinterland, and how nature is progressively transformed through this symbiosis. To take a somewhat more banal example, when an individual wakes up in the morning (in an “environment” owned by a landlord to whom he or she pays a monthly rent), the organic oatmeal and fairtrade coffee that he or she first consumes are all transformed aspects of “nature” mediated through a set of colonial, gendered, and capitalist relations of production and exchange. Although
the individual’s metropolitan life seems utterly divorced from nature, it is, in reality, entirely dependent on “nature’s” bounty. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2000) similarly recount a tale of standing on Piccadilly Circus while tracing the socio-natural connections that produce that specific place: music floats from the Rainforest Cafe, high roast coffee fills the air with its pungent odor, and the vast TV screens selling new commodities are fueled by the transformation of oil resources drawn from disparate locations.

If Smith’s work (and Kaika and Swyngedouw’s) contrasts with that of Cronon’s, it is in the greater influence accorded to capitalist relations of production and exchange. (Cronon was roundly critiqued by geographers in an entire issue of Antipode (26(2)) dedicated to Nature’s Metropolis for failing to emphasize the importance of capitalism.) Nevertheless, far from a narrowly deterministic reading of capitalism as the sole influence on nature in the present moment (a critique that Cronon seems to level at some of his own critics), Smith sees human activity (not capital, money, or capitalists) as having forged this coevolutionary relationship throughout history. Smith quotes the Grundrisse, in which Marx writes “some determinations belong to all epochs, others only to a few,” before re-emphasizing the point that the need to produce means of existence is a transhistorical act: without production, humans would, quite simply, starve, freeze, or expire. However, in tarrying with this notion of transhistoricity, Smith inadvertently replicates the dualistic conception of nature that he is seeking to refute. Thus, “Human beings are born with certain natural [universal conception] needs – food, sex, warmth, social interaction – and they are born into a world where nature [external conception] provides, either directly or indirectly, the means for fulfilling needs” (Smith 2010, 54). This brief dalliance with a dualistic conception is then quickly dispensed with, and, instead, Smith considers, albeit at an abstract level, the practices through which metabolic relations have been forged. Practical activity and the natures produced out of such practical activity shift according to a variety of determinations (the new needs that are created out of fulfilling original needs; the conceptions of the world that circulate within particular societies; and emerging divisions of labor).

Although attentive to the changes in nature’s production, Smith’s thesis can be contrasted with epochal arguments that detect a blurring of the nature–society relation within the contemporary moment. (In many respects, discussions of the Anthropocene can be read as one more recent manifestation of such an epochal argument, against which the production of nature thesis would, quite rightly, present a more historically and geographically specific reading of what has always been a metabolic process.) Challenging shallow, and often apocalyptic, claims about the death of nature, Smith is quite explicit in stating that “production in general is the production of nature” (1984, 53). Nevertheless, some confusion has emerged around the relationship between the transhistorical (the production of nature) and the historically specific (the capitalist production of nature), leading to Castree’s (2000a, 643) claim that Smith “used Marxian economics to argue that capitalism has replaced a non-human ‘first nature’ with a socially produced ‘second nature’.” Nowhere does Smith make such an argument, even if he appears to come close to doing so. Much of the confusion arises from Smith’s idiosyncratic reading of “first” and “second” nature in Uneven Development. Although they have some historical purchase in their reference to the human and nonhuman, first and second nature acquire a qualitatively different meaning in the present moment. Thus, against the
common sense reading of first (nonproduced) and second (produced) nature (as interpreted by Castree), Smith (1984, 55) claims:

This distinction ceases to have real meaning … the distinction is now between a first nature that is concrete and material, the nature of use values in general, and a second nature which is abstract, and derivative of the abstraction from use value that is inherent in exchange value.

Reception

In the first readings of Uneven Development, the production of nature thesis was often overlooked. Even now there seems to be a reluctance to see Smith’s theorization of the production of nature as fundamental to the production of space. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s and early 1990s the production of nature thesis had become a fundamental influence on the fast-moving tide that sought to retheorize nature in nonessentialist ways (Braun and Castree 1998; Castree and Braun 2001). Elsewhere, Castree has noted the distinctiveness of the production of nature thesis within Marxist readings of socio-natures. He argues that Smith’s work, although much less known, avoids the pitfalls of other theorizations such as O’Connor’s and Benton’s. Writing in 2000, Castree offered a long overdue presentation of an alternative tradition of Marxist work on the capitalist production of nature … It thus promises to take us beyond the Nature–Society dualism organising both previous Marxian work on nature and versions of bourgeois technocentrism and radical ecocentrism. (2000b, 10)

If Castree gave a long overdue presentation of the production of nature thesis in 2000 (and was in many respects fundamental to the revival of the fortunes of the production of nature thesis within and outside geographical scholarship), Smith’s work has been engaged with more readily since then; however, it has still perhaps not quite achieved the status of a “classic” thesis within Marxist debates.

Perhaps the main subfield to explore the production of nature thesis has been urban political ecology; thus, in the writings of Swyngedouw, Heynen, Kaika, and others, the production of nature has been seen as the starting point for an analysis of the power–laden ways in which nature comes to be urbanized (Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006). Loftus (2012) places the production of nature thesis in conversation with an immanent critique of everyday life and thereby seeks to position the thesis more centrally within the Marxist tradition. However, elsewhere the sources turned to for an analysis of Marx’s approach to nature remain works produced by sociologists, economists, and political scientists.

Several engagements with the production of nature thesis have, unsurprisingly, taken offense at the stark, and seemingly paradoxical, claim that nature is produced. For both Marxists (Benton, personal communication) and non-Marxists (Lorimer 2009), this assertion is one step too far; the thesis appears to place too much agency on humans and quickly lapses into dualisms. The production of nature is portrayed as hubristic, insensitive to nonhuman agency, and even dangerous. The normative implications are then read as the demands of a demagogue whose wish to fully “humanize” nature will be frustrated by nature’s own “liveliness.” Whatmore (1999) has taken issue with the dialectical framework. Thus, against Castree’s claim that the production of nature thesis is nondualistic, and against the clear overall intent of the production of nature thesis, Whatmore mistakenly writes: “far from challenging this a priori categorization of the things of the world, dialectics can be seen to raise its binary logic to the level of a contradiction and
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engine of history” (1999, 25). These criticisms are perhaps to be expected from a thesis that is so deliberately provocative. To place labor squarely within an environmental politics was always likely to raise the ire of those who would seek to defend nature’s beauty, its vitality, and the agency of nonhuman over human. However, beneath the provocations and the aggressive prose, the production of nature thesis is acutely sensitive to nonhuman difference, to the interrelationships between human and nonhuman, while it also remains profoundly open to nuanced readings of coproduction and nonlinear science.

Future directions

Given the mass of scholarship now accumulating on nonhuman agency, it seems likely that such themes will be explored further within work on the production of nature. Donna Haraway, whose writings on the figure of the cyborg and on companion species chime rather beautifully with Smith’s ideas, would seem one of the most brilliant of fellow travelers on such a journey. Indeed, the relational approach to socio-natures developed by Haraway (2008) has many similarities to that of Smith: one can sense how indebted Smith, Hartsock, and Haraway might have been to one another in their initial shared readings of Marx and also in their collective efforts to elucidate a nondeterministic understanding of the socionatural. Hartsock’s writings on feminist standpoint theory may well provide another valuable source of inspiration for future work, enabling a more thorough exploration not only of the gendered division of labor out of which “produced natures” emerge, but also of the conditions of possibility for nonbourgeois conceptions of nature (see Loftus 2007). These conditions of possibility are enabled by the practical acts of those working within capitalist patriarchy.

Such an emphasis on the gendered division of labor suggests another crucial area for development. Abstract labor and the role of the exchange abstraction are crucial to the kinds of nature that Smith sees being produced and reproduced within capitalist societies. Nevertheless, acts of laboring simultaneously exist as concrete practices: labor under capitalism is a differentiated unity of both the concrete and the abstract. By neglecting concrete practices and the multiple relationships out of which workers are not only classed, but raced, gendered, and sexed, the production of nature thesis risks assuming a white working-class laborer as the subject of history. Better historicizing the concrete acts out of which historically and geographically specific natures are produced would not only enable the thesis to speak more directly to a range of concerns outside of the Marxist canon but also open up conditions of possibility for thinking beyond abstract natures to other more democratic environments. Ekers and Loftus (2013) have suggested that Antonio Gramsci’s absolute historicism provides valuable conceptual resources for rethinking such a position.

Opening up the labor process to a broader range of determinants also necessitates a deeper consideration of mental, affective, and immaterial laboring practices, in addition to, while not excluding, the manual labor which is often prioritized within secondary writings on the production of nature. Smith discusses the importance of these emerging divisions of labor and their influence on the production of nature and associated conceptions of nature (1984, 52–53). As elsewhere, one of the primary inspirations for his discussion is Sohn-Rethel’s (1982) discussion of intellectual and manual labor and the real and conceptual abstractions that emerge from such concrete practices. However, in subsequent discussions little sense has been given of the kinds of nature produced through the laboring
practices of the call center worker, the caregiver, or the artist. As these forms of laboring have gained greater prominence within late capitalist societies, the production of nature thesis can seem a somewhat redundant basis for considering produced environments and conceptions of the world. However, the greatest advantage of the production of nature thesis in being able to respond to such questions is the way it is framed not as a doctrine but rather as an approach through which historically and geographically specific practices might be better understood and critiqued. The production of nature thesis thus encompasses a flexibility to accommodate other modes of working and an openness to a wide range of historical and geographical practices.

SEE ALSO: Marxist geography; Nature

References


Further reading