The Urban and Nature or Urban-Nature?

What is the city? This question is difficult to answer. Equally confounding is its relationship to another term -- nature -- as we reach the confluence of two complex systems that, in an age of sustainable-consciousness, have proven immensely challenging to reconcile. This essay will not attempt to definitively answer or solve the mysterious relationship between the urban and nature -- instead, the goal is to survey several scholars from the Chicago School to recent years, analyzing their approaches to the environment and its implications, while providing suggestions for how we can progress our understanding of the complex relationship between the urban and nature. The question, then, is: Are these terms mutually exclusive?

City – Rural – and Nature?

In the essay “Ideas of Nature,” Raymond Williams cogently establishes a relationship between historic definitions of ‘nature’ and the accompanying approach to the city fostered by those definitions.\(^1\) He explains his historic emphasis as follows:

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\text{“I begin from this ordinary problem of meaning and reference because I want this inquiry to be active, and because I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, and extraordinary amount of human history.”}\]

Williams is thus able to emphasize how the concept ‘nature’ has been historically leveraged to accommodate human needs. Beginning with the roots of the word ‘nature,’ the Latin *natura* attempts

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\(^2\) Ibid., 67.
to identify an essence of nature or an abstraction of the environment into a singular principle that, unlike the true beastly constitution of nature, could be readily comprehended.³ This conception of nature held for many centuries and is of import; however, the main focus here is the intersection of nature and the urban in a Fordist and Post-Fordist era.

Therefore, I jump to the Marxists. Though they rarely explicitly discussed natural systems, Marxism introduced a fundamental shift in the relationship between man and nature, instigated by the rising influence of capitalism. For instance, David Harvey for instance observes, “under capitalism, nature, for the first time, becomes an object of mankind (pure utility), as opposed to a power in its own right.”⁴ This concept is, near verbatim, Marx’s man-nature relationship.⁵ The critical takeaway here is the notion that even Harvey and Marx, who focused little on issues of ‘nature,’ were drawn to note the conceptual shift at-hand during the Nineteenth-Century – the commodification of nature.

The process of the commodification of nature is vividly portrayed in Marc Reisner’s text Cadillac Desert, most explicitly in his account of John Wesley Powell’s explorations and subsequent government lobbying.⁶ Reisner’s commentary centers on the destructive and nonsensical political and developmental reterritorialization of land in the West during the Nineteenth-Century. The dynamics of watersheds, rivers, prairies, and deserts were largely ignored as land was carved into 160-acre plots under the Homestead Act or as state boundaries arbitrarily ignored mountain ranges and rivers, bisecting the land with abstract lines.⁷ From a natural systems perspective, these divisions made little sense; however, from an economic standpoint, they are clear -- gridding off the land was efficient and manageable, getting more land into the hands of consumers more rapidly. As Powell

³ Ibid., 68-9.
⁴ David Harvey, Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography (New York: Routledge, 2001), 53.
⁵ Ibid. Marx is quoted by David Harvey.
⁷ Ibid., 47-8.
notes, this profoundly altered the landscape within a short period of time; the imposed geometric lines and large-scale alterations of the hydroscape were viewed as unnatural and destructive.\(^8\) Such sentiments were also shared by Ian McHarg, but in relation to the industrial city.

The industrial city appears at the heart of many theories of the city, but apart from nature; however, Ian McHarg explicitly juxtaposes the industrial city and nature. For McHarg, perhaps one of the most prolific Landscape Architects to date, the industrial city was a scourge, its rapid development eating away at nature and health and replacing it with unnatural city and illness.\(^9\) His experience in Glasgow colored his sentiments of the industrial city: “There are cities that produce more stimulus and delight than can be borne, but it is rare when they are products of the industrial revolution or its aftermath.”\(^10\) This dichotomous relationship between city and other is clearly evident in the Chicago School as well, albeit in a different manner than McHarg or Powell. The Chicago School, under the auspices of urban sociology and focusing mainly on the psychological implications of the industrial city, studied the city as a diametric opposite from the rural, or the natural. This idea was then turned on its head after the Second World War as proponents of suburbanization and garden cities advocated for a “return to nature,” in the sense of McHarg, to improve the health of the city dweller.

Despite the differences in these arguments, what is clear is that some aspect of humanity sets us apart from nature. Williams’ explanation cogently frames this critical industrialist notion:

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\(^8\) Ibid., 44-5.
\(^10\) Ibid., 2.
“What is often being argued, it seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this is not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies.”

Thus, nature is seen as ‘other,’ viewed outside of human activity either as a foreign, uncivilizing force, or as a refuge from a dangerous city.

**Nature as ubiquitous?**

While Powell, McHarg, and the Chicago School understood nature as ‘other,’ as an object outside of human activity, this seemingly axiomatic tenet can be read as an assumption. Discarding this assumption allows us to leave behind the notion of an essentialized ‘nature,’ instead considering nature ubiquitous, placing human activity within natural systems. Thus, the urban becomes an integral part of nature. Adopting such a view deeply complicates and enriches our analysis.

According to Williams, reintroducing human action as a part of nature is critical -- abstraction, while useful, proves dangerous as humans increasingly lose accountability for their actions affecting natural systems. This notion has also shown traction with several other scholars, such as Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw, who ascribe the fissure between city and nature as the prevailing issue in understanding environmental issues.

Heynen, et al seeks to dispel the notion that the city is somehow outside of nature. They view the city through an urban political ecology framework that “more explicitly recognizes that the material conditions that comprise urban environments are controlled, manipulated and serve the interests of

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11 Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” 70-1.
the elite at the expense of marginalized populations.” Ecology is understood, in this framework, as the interconnectedness of all environmental processes. For Heynen, et al, this is, by definition, inclusive of man-made systems. For Kaika and Swyngedouw, as well as Williams, social relations are also inextricably tied to ecology, such that any materialist approach “insists that ‘nature’ is an integral part of the ‘metabolism’ of social life.” In a similar vein, Marx, in a rare instance, refers to nature with regard to social aspects of life, focusing on the metabolic relationships at work between humans and nature. However, as mentioned earlier, Marx also notes the transformative qualities of capital in relation to nature, as social systems constantly push natural systems to their limits, often superseding them. At first glance, this argument could be construed as akin to that of Powell or McHarg, but Marx emphasizes the interconnectedness between social and natural systems. In this way, when humans begin to supersede natural systems, they are in effect creating new natures, or refashioning old natures.

It seems that Marx, Williams, and Heynen et al. reach a similar conclusion: that acknowledging the interconnections between humans and nature with respect to our social organizations is key in moving forward -- in a post-industrial age, it seems less plausible to continue the man/nature dichotomies that have dominated discourse since the Enlightenment. It likewise appears implausible to allow the abstract notion of \textit{natura} that has dominated popular thinking for centuries to continue. To overcome these vague, essentialist notions of nature, many contemporary scholars have begun to

\begin{itemize}
  \item[15] Ibid., 4.
  \item[16] Heynen and Swyngedouw, “Fetishizing the Modern City,” Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” 70-1.
  \item[18] Ibid., 53-4.
  \item[19] Ibid.
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call for a fundamental shift in our conceptualization of nature, seeking out and reveling in nature’s complexities.

**Bibliography**


