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Postmodern Bearings on Environmentalism

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SSI 196B

May 15, 2020

Postmodern Bearings on Environmentalism

With recent notoriety of carbon emissions, ocean acidification, and global warming, protection of the environment has become a more significant issue scientifically, politically, and socially. The movement for environmental protection emerged around the same time as postmodernism, and the two have been closely linked since that point. There are many postmodern critiques of environmentalism and given the tendency of postmodernists to reject any conception of an objective reality, this can be detrimental to the cause of protecting the environment. However, some of these postmodern critiques raise valid points about problems with environmental science and its heavy reliance on data and technology. While many environmentalists who take modernist stances would wish to simply reject postmodern ideas which are not grounded in “objective reality,” postmodern theory has grown so broad that it cannot simply be shrugged off. Environmental science inherently looks forward to the future and seeks to make the best of nature in the world we live in—because this world is a postmodern one, those seeking to protect the environment must do so by the standards of postmodernism. The environment can be protected and promoted in a postmodern world by acknowledging the importance of postmodernism and its ties to the environment, and by using postmodern theory rather than challenging it.

Postmodernism and the environment have long been connected with each other, despite their seemingly irreconcilable differences. Both postmodern theory and environmental protection

began to become important “around the late 1960s and early 1970s, but communication between them was weak and relations unsympathetic... They construct and reproduce themselves in different discursive habitats” (Brand 633). Brand points to these different “habitats” as postmodernism’s social and cultural realm as compared to environmentalism’s tendency to work with practical ideas and natural laws. However, it is the underlying assumptions of environmentalism which unconsciously mirror postmodernism.

Environmentalism contains the idea that instrumental rationality (economic development) must take into account or be constrained by the laws of nature (ecology); it is founded on a recognition of difference based on the geographical-ecological diversity of life; and the environmental crisis materializes the illusion of unlimited progress

Brand 634

The second point is particularly a location of intersection between the environment and postmodernism. Environmentalism is essentially based on distinguishing between various aspects of the environmental reality and postmodernism, too, is focused on defining and navigating the differences that make up reality. Binkley writes about the definition of an ecosystem as compared to that of a tree, which “is more or less delimited by its trunk, roots and crown but no similarly stark boundaries exist for an ecosystem” (Binkley 136).

Environmentalism, like postmodernism, then, seeks to define its terms, even when they do not always match a version of reality which objectively exists—there is no physical ecosystem, because it is an idea made up of other components. Clearly, then, postmodernism has been interacting with environmentalism since the two first emerged. However, this relationship is not an idle one.

Postmodernism can be detrimental to environmental protection by undermining the existence of the reality which environmentalism relies upon. When an environmentalist fully accepts the postmodern views of nature, then “because everything we call ‘nature’ is relative to

our ideas, they argue, we should accept (indeed, embrace) our role as creators of ‘nature’ and assume full responsibility for governing the so-called natural world” (Wapner 72). If postmodernism is fully accepted in environmentalism, then it is accepted that “nature” is entirely of human construction. In a sense, this could be good, because it shows that humans do have a responsibility to the environment. However, if one fully commits to the idea of constructed nature, then humans have entirely created the concept and there is nothing that inherently needs to be protected because it was all produced by humans and thus can all be manipulated by humans. This means, then, that “our vision of stewardship need not be hindered by any preconceived notion of what is genuinely natural” (Wapner 73). If nature is entirely a social construct, then there is nothing “genuinely natural” to guide actions towards the environment. Humans are left free to construct the physical idea of nature in whatever way they choose, and there is no underlying “objective nature” to indicate that a particular attitude is the proper one in addressing these issues. Thus, the environmentalists who go fully in for postmodern ideas “can advocate certain environment-friendly actions, but how do they make their case? They have no ground on which to argue for *this* set rather than *that* set of ecological conditions” (Wapner 73). Totally accepting postmodern views of the environment leaves no room for the way that nature “should be,” and opens up the environment as a whole to any type of development which humans might care to impose. Wapner shows how this can make it very hard to advocate for protection of the environment, even if one might wish to do so using postmodern theory. In this way, postmodernism can be detrimental to the environment, as it opens the realm entirely to human control. Total dependence on postmodernism, then, is not wise to pursue for those seeking to protect the environment as something real and natural.

While total postmodernism may be in opposition to protecting an objective environment, it does provide compelling and useful critiques of environmentalism and environmental science in particular. The most frequent critique aims at environmental science's heavy reliance on data and technology. According to Bäckstrand, there is a frequent argument that "environmental policymaking is becoming more science-driven and expert-oriented. Environmental problems are couched in technical narratives leading to a simultaneous scientisation and de-politicisation of environmental governance" (Bäckstrand 696). Postmodernism focuses on human influence and cultural connotations; thus, from a postmodern perspective, it is highly problematic that environmentalism is becoming more science-driven. This greatly lowers the political potential of environmentalism and seems to remove people from the picture. Postmodern critique raises "a concern with respect to the rise of technocracy in environmental decision-making... this tradition regards it as highly problematic that the normative and cultural assumptions underlying environmental discourse are not recognised in green political theory at large" (Bäckstrand 702). The problem with environmental science's heavy focus on data as a hard reality is that there's more to it than that; however, much as science would like to be completely factual, it is a field created and navigated by humans, which adds inherent biases. These postmodern critiques of environmental science find flaws in environmentalism that make protecting the environment in a postmodern age more difficult.

The responses to this kind of critique often discard it altogether, while postmodernism itself points out what is needed to address the problems that have arisen. Wapner discusses a modernist response to postmodern critique, which is one that many traditional environmentalists take. These environmentalists believe, "the whole notion that nature is constructed is simply intellectual sophistry practiced by those who either spend too much time indoors or who work at

such high levels of abstraction that they never engage the phenomenal world” (Wapner 72). While it may be more practical than postmodernist believes, this rebuttal from environmentalists completely dismisses postmodern eco-criticism as abstract and irrelevant to the objective reality of nature itself. It is important to give credence to legitimate critiques that postmodernism brings up rather than rejecting the ideology as a whole; we live in a postmodern world, and its theory cannot be so lightly disregarded. The postmodern suggestion to the modern response is that “instead of retreating to naive objectivism, scientists need to adapt to a postmodern age by becoming conscious of the significance of their narratives” (Allen 484). In the postmodern world, taking a modern reproach and rejecting theory is not enough. At least to some extent, postmodern critique must be met with and environmental scientists need to take on a responsibility for their narratives, even if they are unconscious of their existence. Bäckstrand notes that there needs to be a “recognition of the power practices and cultural biases found in the construction of ‘environmental threats’” (Bäckstrand 702). Once again, there is clearly a need for environmentalism to recognize its own biases and take some amount of responsibility instead of looking to hard data like the modernists. Despite the possible harm of postmodern critiques of environmentalism, they demand a self-conscious responsibility of environmentalism. While modernist environmentalists would simply reject postmodernism, the points these critiques raise are valid and so environmentalism must acknowledge them while moving forward.

In order to solve environmental problems and move forward in this world, environmentalists have to work according to the postmodern rules which define the world we are living in. There are several ways of doing this in order to concede the points made in postmodern critiques and still protect the environment. It is important to keep in mind that despite the history of environmentalism and postmodernism, and their similarities to each other, environmentalism *is*

not postmodernism. Brand notes a key difference between the two, as, “postmodernism abandons any practical sense of the future and of a collective project; environmentalism places the future, the very possibility of a future and the collective responsibility for that future to the forefront” (Brand 645). The importance of environmentalism is its outlook on the future, the need to use preventative measures and solve problems that may occur later on down the road. The postmodern view of a constructed nature is actually conducive to this aspect of environmentalism. Binkley notes the importance of accepting postmodern views and looking forward when he says,

Having come to understand that Nature is as much a social construction as a scientific fact, we can put aside the empty debates about whether or not humans should intervene in natural processes, and get on with the serious work of improving the relationship between humans and the natural world that sustains us all.

Binkley 142

It is in accepting the postmodern beliefs that dominate environmentalism and the world today that those who seek to protect the environment can actually move forward with discussions of “the relationship between humans and the natural world.”

While postmodernism causes us to question “whose nature should we save? There is no one nature to save... since nature is always in part a social construction” (Proctor 295), it also provides a pathway for the answers. In light of multiple constructed forms of Nature, Proctor suggests that pluralism must be embraced and human influence on nature must be acknowledged, even if humans are not necessarily at the center of nature (Proctor 290). Nature is constructed such that there are many different kinds of nature, and which merit differing types of protection or use. Looking forward, these various constructions of nature are helpful to the discussion of its protection at various levels. Binkley suggests that

Just as we have areas strictly protected from industrial activities to respond to the naturalistic and ecologicistic constructions of Nature... we should have intensively managed areas

focusing on timber production and other tangible products to respond to the utilitarian and dominionistic constructions. Binkley 138-149

The solution here strikes a balance between traditional modernist environmentalism, which would suggest that humans be entirely hands-off with regards to interference in nature, and postmodern environmentalism, which is much more involved in possible uses of nature for human benefit. In the management of the environment, the very fact of its social construction shows that different strategies need to be used with different locations, and that human voices need to be heard concerning what is to be done with the environment.

Additionally, since humans are responsible for the environment, environmental science needs to become more transparent to allow for further civic involvement. “Civic expertise” as explained by Bäckstrand as a possible solution wants objective science, but acknowledges “the ‘situatedness’ of environmental knowledge, i.e. that all knowledge, whether ‘universal’ or ‘local’ is attached to a specific place and produced in a cultural context” (Bäckstrand 706). This concedes the postmodernist point that environmental science is biased, as all sciences inherently are. She argues that there needs to be a “democratisation of science” because many environmental issues are defined by lack of consensus on facts, values and policy principles” and those who have to deal with real environmental problems on a daily basis deserve to have a say in the outcome of these problems. Thus, environmental discussion needs to expand so that more can participate in the relevant decisions involved (Bäckstrand 707). Changes to the environment are issues which has many societal and cultural factors; because the realm of environmental science can never be fully objective, these biases need to be acknowledged. In response to the postmodern critique that environmental science focuses too heavily on technology and data, this “civic expertise” opens up environmental science to those who are affected by it. The science backing environmentalism should become more transparent so that the cultural influences are

clear and so that the people can play their role in shaping policy towards the environment—this is a “diversification of knowledge,” and allows for all to be able to access the same knowledge. This works well alongside the previous idea of the “pluralities of nature”—if nature is constructed in different ways by different groups of people, then all of these groups of people should have a say in how their relationship with the environment is to function.

In addition to these strategies of environmentalism working within the framework to promote and protect nature, postmodern theory can also be used against itself to impose responsibility for the environment. One key aspect of postmodernism is the thought that objective reality is “an ethical failing insofar as it silences the views of others... delegitimizes others’ perspectives on human experience and the world in general” (Wapner 73). This emphasis on giving voice to all experiences, especially minorities and the “other,” is helpful in giving voice to the environment. Nature, a non-human entity which cannot speak on its own behalf, is the ultimate “other.” Thus, while we

should be wary of those who claim to speak on nature’s behalf (including environmentalists who do that)... we need not doubt the simple idea that a prerequisite of expression is existence. This in turn suggests that preserving the nonhuman world—in all its diverse embodiments—must be seen by eco-critics as a fundamental good.

Wapner 74

Since postmodernism allows for all perspectives to be of importance since they are what construct reality, then the environment must also have a voice as an entity of its own. Those who speak for the environment may ultimately misrepresent it, but the very presence of nature as an entity which is a part of the world shows that this is an entity which must be preserved, simply for the perspective it gives. As a nonhuman “other,” the environment is deserving of discussion and importance, perhaps even more so than the human “others,” in this postmodern world.

Since the beginning of both movements, environmentalism and postmodernism have been closely linked. While postmodernism has the potential to be a danger to environmental protection, many postmodern critiques of environmental science are valid and in fact vital. Postmodernism cannot be avoided in environmentalism, but this does not mean that nature cannot be protected in a postmodern world. Looking forward, the movement of environmentalism needs to acknowledge postmodern perspectives and the idea that realities are constructed. By embracing a constructed nature, environmentalists can move on with how humans should best interact with nature with a variety of viewpoints and options involved. Environmental science should become less “technocratic” and more transparent, allowing environmentalism to become more of a civic and political realm. The people who construct and live with the environment are responsible for it and have a right to take part in what becomes of it. Finally, in addition to these measures, an appeal to the “otherness” of nature shows that it has a right to exist and that people should take part in its future even by the standards of postmodernism. Ultimately, environmentalism can only move forward by accepting postmodernism, but it will be able to move forward. Protection of the environment and a postmodern world are not mutually exclusive, and if used properly, the postmodern viewpoint can aid the progress of environmentalism.

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