

Enhancing Society-Environment Relations through Theory

Our society is at risk. Ulrich Beck noticed the ever-increasing rate of risks as society further modernized. Beck's theory dictates that these risks differ because of the three key features that elevate their danger. *De-localization*, the risks will affect everyone geographically. Due to their *incalculable nature*, we cannot know when, if, or how they will strike, and finally, we may not be able to remediate the damage when it comes; they are *non-compensatable*. (Beck, 333:2006). We are occupied with preventing risks rather than fixing them because they are non-compensatable. Our classical institutions cannot stop them, isolating individuals from past pillars of truth. The result, Beck states, is an individual completely atomized, forced to understand and cope with "the uncertainty of the global world" (Beck, 336:2006).

Where does this revelation leave us? Does risk society theory have a glimmer of environmental hope in it? Yes, Beck sees a 'cosmopolitan moment' with aspects of hope but falls short in genuine action (Beck, 338:2006). We'll first examine the four that I find agreeable and the other two that describe the cosmopolitan moment, which seems too large an assumption for something relatively intangible. Firstly, *involuntary enlightenment*, through the media's coverage of risks, marginalized faces who routinely experience the worst effects of risks are highlighted to the public (Beck, 338-339:2006). The power of disasters is in their ability to destabilize existing order and be a step toward understanding where organized inequality is and how to tear it down (Beck, 338-339:2006). Next, Beck argues that risk *enforces communication across borders and differences*, and it has the power to ascend cultural, linguistic, and religious boundaries. Beck calls it an "involuntary democratization" where opinions are voiced on topics that previously evaded public scrutiny (Beck, 340:2006). Third, Beck argues that disaster allows

for a moment of *political catharsis*, where past grievances are released for present aid. The last of agreeable notions is that *risk serves as a wake-up call*; risks showcase the failures of neo-liberal governments who have pledged themselves to minimal intervention (Beck, 341:2006).

Beck asserts that risks can question the prevailing belief of the minimal state.

Beck wished the other two components could go together, but they do not. *Enforced cosmopolitanism*, Beck argues, will lead to the *possibility of alternative government*. The notion of enforced cosmopolitanism is *enforced communication* taken to the nth degree. Beck asserts that “cosmopolitanism ... opens our eyes to the uncontrollable liabilities, to something that happens to us, ... stimulates us to make border-transcending new beginnings” (Beck, 341:2006). Beck’s assertion that governments will cooperate where they wouldn’t have previously is ignorant of the realities of politicians. Single-elect short-term candidates can be in positions of power during crucial climate talks. Trump’s term was marked with anti-climate rhetoric and policy that set us back socially and politically. Beck doesn’t attempt to connect the two because if he did, the fault of conflating governmental cooperation with the possibility of alternative government becomes apparent. Beck argues that capital has become the only power; civil society movements “remain bound by the limited options of action and power of the national and international order” (Beck, 343:2006). Beck’s hope is the creation of transnational alliances where “new sources of legitimation and options for action for these groups of actors” (Beck, 343:2006). Beck never points to what these actions might be. Instead, he uses imaginative language that promises a society that values human rights and global justice. Beck is naïve in his view that neo-liberals and global capital would give up their power so easily. Instead of Beck’s future, Neo-liberal governments will hail new tech as our ecological saviors. Green corporations

will be called messiahs as they save us from the imminent ecological destruction that their corporate forefathers produced. Risk society is a democratizing, broadly cooperative theory that showcases how global risks open the public's eyes to fashioned inequality, enforce communication, and force moments of reflexivity between countries. However, Beck overstates its application; the nebulous threat of global risks will not lead to such a broad call to action that Beck asserts it will.

Foster's Findings

John Bellamy Foster is a prominent figure in eco-Marxism and one of society's most forward-thinking scholars. Foster's use of theory has been instrumental in describing and investigating Marx's early work for ecological hints and using Marx's concept of metabolism to critique the capitalist production process. Foster utilizes Marx's writing to define metabolism "He [humanity] confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head, and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs" (Marx quoted in Foster, 1999:380). That process of giving and taking between nature, Marx calls 'metabolism.' Using metabolism, Foster analyzes capitalism's toxic relationship between itself and the resources we use. The interaction changes nature and humanity; the material is taken from nature, and humanity is changed in response. Metabolism changes human needs because humans improve their material existence. Foster does not cover the lack of metabolic activity in modern society. How does a complete lack of this activity affect our relationship with nature? In an occupationally specialized society, only some of us engage in metabolism. Large-scale factories and farms have replaced any necessary adventures into the wilderness for sustenance.

Small-scale interactions like foraging develop a connection with the land one lives upon greater than any history or understanding of how the rock formations developed could.

Foster observed the disconnected cycle of use that capitalism entails. Marx argued that capitalism had caused human beings to be 'materially estranged' from natural conditions of existence (Foster, 1999:383). Vast farms distort the soil of their land and are forced to turn to chemical fertilizers. Marx's writings occurred with the first and worst kinds of industrial treatment of the land. Marx observed, "In London... they can do nothing better with the excrement produced by 4 ½ million people than pollute the Thames with it, at monstrous expense" (Marx quoted in Foster, 1999:383). A lack of circular use characterizes the capitalist agricultural industry. As opposed to creating a cyclical use of resources where the excrement caused by the use of food goes directly back into the food cycle as fertilizer, it is instead used to pollute rivers. The lack of ecological understanding and attention in capitalist agriculture is what Foster most poignantly discusses, utilizing Marx. Understanding and adjusting the resource cycle under capitalism would significantly affect how we consider resources going forward. Foster calls for a cyclical life of resources. Where outputs become inputs into new processes, where waste is not burned but utilized in any capacity.

Critical Environmental Justice

David Pellow was one of the first academics to attempt to fashion a theoretical viewpoint of environmental justice. Pellow's theory attempts to expand the scope of EJ theory to CEJ, which consists of four pillars.

The first pillar, intersectionality, and the racial discourse of animality intertwine environmental justice and the use of nonhuman language. Comparing sentences received for

killing a dog juxtaposed to the lesser sentences delivered for the murder of innocent black lives (Pellow, 2016:7). Pellow analyzes the dualistic use of animal language, one, racist remarks calling BLM protestors 'animals,' and the other, used to describe the perspective of institutions, "It feels like *open season* on black men in America" (Grisworld quoted in Pellow, 2016:7). Language can be misinterpreted and deployed for any means necessary, deconstructing its intention is imperative if we are to understand one's true intentionality behind their statement. Pellow's arguments should be echoed throughout the dictionary. Language is socially constructed, and its meanings are often hidden; if we want to understand meaning, we must understand the word itself.

The second pillar addresses scale, race, and difference. Pellow states that depending on one's choice of scale, the impacts of climate change are seen differently. If we look globally, it seems like not much has occurred, and if we focus on women in the global south, the picture is far grimmer. Pellow utilizes implicit bias to describe the responses of powerful institutions when marginalized groups resist oppression. Comparing the militarized response to BLM to images of militarized oppression in a faraway land (Pellow, 2016:8). CEJ is unique in its multi-dimensional understanding of environmental justice issues, the institutionalized responses that inform us of their implicit bias, and the scope with which we analyze ecological destruction, that often blocks out marginalized groups. The third pillar regards the governmental reforms that BLM usually looks to. Pellow describes multiple chants, quotes, and texts from the BLM website that all call for police defunding, persecution, and messages to the DOJ. BLM often desires to build safe communities *within* the state; however, Pellow calls for them to look toward building safe communities *beyond* the state, citing historical failures (Pellow, 2016:10). Pellow's anarchist

reading of BLM offers insight into how marginalized groups can work around the state rather than within it. The sentiment can be applied elsewhere to ecological improvement in general. Actors cannot wait for state or governmental action. Individuals can and should clean up the area around them and create groups to enhance their local ecology. Pellow's desire for ecology to move outside of state-bound action is bold, yet perhaps it is necessary in a world marked by the failure of governments to act effectively.

The final pillar is indispensability. Pellow describes the perspective of state and legal systems where "black and brown bodies are ... generally viewed as criminal, deficient, threatening and deserving of violent discipline and even obliteration" (Pellow, 2016:10). Pellow counters the perspective by positing that all marginalized, and othered groups along with non-human beings must all be considered indispensable "to our collective futures" (Pellow, 2016:11). Pellow rejects assimilationist approaches in favor of solidarity and recognition of conflict and inequality, and the state's position in that role. Indispensability embodies CEJ in that it asserts "that the wellbeing of all people, species and ecosystems is *indispensable*" (Pellow, 2016:11). Once again, the breadth of application for Pellow's arguments showcases itself, what could be more beneficial to human-environment relations than a decimation of dualistic thinking that has separated us for millennia. Lowering the barriers of separation between humans and nature, linguistically, culturally, and socially, will be the action that defines our eventual healing of the natural world.

Constructed Nature

As previously mentioned, the dualistic barrier between society and nature is ancient, dating back to Ancient Greece. *Phuysis* stood for everything, not social. Its meaning was passed

to *natura*, and thus, the linguistic separation between society and nature began (Scarce, 2000:2). Scarce asserts that “when we imbue *anything* including Nature—with meaning, we alter it (Scarce, 2000:8). The issue with Nature is that there are conflicting meanings, one group’s nature doesn’t align perfectly with another group’s nature. Scarce instead desires Nature proxies; he opts for salmon biology. The various meanings created by biologists for research or academic purposes conflict just the same as Nature does. Scarce’s interviews with various biologists showcase the differences. One sees “their worth being based exclusively on their dollar value,” and others revere them; McGuire states, “I’ve just gained such an awe and appreciation for their resilience and for their adaptability, their variability, and their beauty-- their pure and simple beauty...” (Scarce, 2000:88/148). Where do the differences come from, who’s informing one camp to see them as dollar signs, and where did McGuire get his notion of beauty?

The answer is found when we look at the external forces upon salmon biologists. Scarce finds that certain biologists, namely those employed at fisheries, frequently have the dollar sign definition, while conservation biologists often desire a self-determined future for the fish. Scarce’s interviews lead him to conclude that the fishery biologists’ meaning is heavily influenced by the organizations that fund their research. The BPA (Bonneville Power Administration) forces researchers into research questions that only desire one thing. To increase production, find new ways to spawn salmon cheaper and faster; thus, the meaning is adopted by micro-level actors.

Scarce’s research highlights the importance of understanding where meaning is delivered. In the case of salmon biologists, meaning was delineated by meso-level organizations

that utilized meaning beneficial to them. SCON enhances our view of the environment by forcing individuals to question where meaning comes from: Is timber just a building material? Should salmon be more than dollars with fins?

Works Cited

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