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Journal of Ecological Anthropology

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Volume 16, Issue 1 (2013)*

Article 4

1-1-2013

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Recommended Citation
Kopnina, Helen. "Environmental Problems and the Grand Old Theory of 'Human Nature'." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2013): 61-68.

Available at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol16/iss1/4

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Crib Notes

Environmental Problems and the Grand Old Theory of 'Human Nature'

Helen Kopnina

ABSTRACT

While the notion of 'human nature' has been devaluated from the status of 'grand theory' to a marginal anthropological debate, I argue that it deserves to be resurrected in order to comprehend some of the explanatory gaps inherent in other theories. Industrialization signifies a turning point in human history, which in combination with certain 'universal' human traits led to recent environmental problems. Such universals include, but are not limited to, the propensity for technological innovation, the desire to elevate one's status, and preoccupation with social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Most observers agree that the increase in adverse effects of human activity on the environment is linked to the processes of industrialization, consumption and population growth (see publications of United Nations Environmental Program; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Millennium Ecosystem Assessments, etc.). Globalization and the environment are closely related since environmental problems are inherently global (for example, chlorofluorocarbons released into atmosphere contribute to stratospheric ozone depletion everywhere). Problems can also be said to be transnational in that by their nature they cross boundaries of nation-states (Greene 2001). The processes leading to over-exploitation are intimately linked to broader political and socio-economic processes, such as the generation and distribution of wealth, which themselves are part of global political economy (Elliot 2004).

While the actual consumption patterns differ across the globe due to the unequal power balance and uneven benefits of global trade, the seemingly uniform desire of the citizens of both developed and developing nations to accumulate material goods, and to distinguish themselves on the basis of their possessions (e.g., Veblin's "conspicuous consumption") makes the culture of consumerism seem universal. Traditional culture or religion seems to play a diminished role in providing impetus for moral consideration in regard to non-human environment.

While beliefs and values espoused by different peoples in the course of human history were quite successful in fending off political or ideological movements, they are presently unable—to put it quite simply—to say no to McDonaldization. How come the proclaimed nature-friendly Hinduists and Buddhists engage in exactly the same practices as followers of other religions? How come the communist state ideologies end up having many of the same ills as capitalist economies? Despite the differences in their religious, cultural or social values or ideologies, Ukrainian, Zimbabwean, Brazilian, Japanese, Turkish, or Dutch citizens do not seem to be prepared to give up their personal possessions and comforts (such as cars) for the sake of (non-materialist) religious or ideological ideals. We are left with the staggering question of how global consumption patterns became possible, considering the supposed diversity and resilience of ideologies, religions and cultures, and the supposed respect for nature of the traditional societies. What is the mechanism that drives this unprecedented spread of globalization?

CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Some explanations of the causes of (as well as implicit solutions for) environmental problems concern global political relations as well as socio-economic factors. Perhaps the best-known explanations of causation of environmental problems are the prisoner's dilemma and the tragedy of the commons (Greene 2001). At both national and global levels, it is recognized that the power groups, such as industrial lobbies, may push their interests with the governments as much—or more than—environmental groups or ecologically oriented citizens do. Within complex industrial societies, other priorities and risk perceptions may leave environmental problems as a "back of the mind" issue (Giddens 2009). A society governed primarily on the basis of ecological values would not necessarily be democratic since the mechanisms of representation, participation and deliberation that are inherent in democratic systems will not necessarily lead to positive environmental outcomes (Lidskog and Elander 2009).

As a social anthropologist, I was trained to recognize cultural differences and employ cultural explanations. Recent environmental problems, however, such as the loss of biodiversity or pollution, seem to be a global or "universal" phenomenon, rather than restricted to certain cultures, societies or countries. However, the idea of 'human nature' is relatively marginal to mainstream contemporary anthropological scholarship. Clifford Geertz stated "There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture . . . would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases" (1973:49). According to another prominent anthropologist Tim Ingold, "there is no way of describing what human beings are independently of the manifold historical and environmental circumstances in which they become—in which they grow up and live out their lives" (Ingold 2006:259).

While anthropologists tend to view environmental problems through the cultural lens, conservation psychologists (such as Paul Stern and Tom Dietz) and ecological sociologists (such as Riley Dunlap and William R. Catton) suggested that human behavior toward environment was also determined by some innate commonalities. The question of human rationality, embedded in the tragedy of the commons, as well as certain failures of the capitalist, communist or any other political or social systems, to control consumerism and to foster ecological morality, leads us to the question of human nature. In the words of psychologist Peter Kahn, "in fostering the human relationship with nature, we need to pay attention not only to nature but to human nature."

THEORIES OF HUMAN NATURE

Theories of human nature are exemplified by the works of Plato, Kant, Marx, Freud, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, Skinner, and Laurenz (see Stevenson 1991; Stevenson and Haberman 2004).

An appeal to human nature is one of the most ubiquitous forms of explanation or justification within debates about a variety of social phenomena (Berry 1986). The concept is used in cases when other explanatory theories of social action have been exhausted, and to supplement and complement existing theories.

Many of the classical philosophies and theologies were preoccupied with the issue of whether human nature is good or bad, rational or emotional/passionate, and whether human nature is more fixed than flexible (MacIntyre 1966:183-184). The classical thinkers often grappled with questions of human exclusivity and difference with animals. Humans, in essence, could be seen as similar to other species that adapt and change their behavior in relation to their environment. What makes them different from other species is that humans can create this environment (e.g., the condition of industrialism) themselves. One of the contemporary proponents of a human nature, Edward Wilson, asserts that it is precisely the animal features—such as the necessities of reproduction and survival—that drive the human species (Wilson 1975). Many critiques, while acknowledging the importance of the notion that human beings have evolved from other animals and are a part of biological nature, have blamed evolutionary psychologists for making "it appear that a commitment to evolution and to the importance of natural selection necessitates a commitment to pan-selectionism, genetic selection and the 'selfish gene'" (Sahlins 1976; Gould 1997). Steven Pinker, experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist, believes that the truth lies somewhere in between "nature" and "nurture" (Pinker 2002:ix).

The linguist Noam Chomsky and philosopher Michel Foucault debated an age-old question: is there such a thing as "innate" human nature independent of our experiences and external influences? Without resorting to reductionism through the nature-nurture debate, Chomsky considers "nature," or a cognitive system or ability that enables every human child to acquire language, as a significant, if not the core, characteristic of humanity. Foucault, however, sees human nature merely as an epistemological indicator. Chomsky sees human nature primarily as a capacity to develop certain mental traits, but also as something connected to universal sense of morality, ethics, and—as in the case of the Amazon tribe's sense of being unjustly displaced by the authorities—perception of justice (Chomsky and Foucault 2006).

While not referring to human nature but to "psychological processes," Miller emphasizes the importance of certain innate psychological mechanisms employed in environment problem-solving strategies (Miller 1999:11). Miller, similarly to Chomsky, postulates that certain cognitive systems, or modes of reasoning or cognitive styles, while culturally diverse, are innate and responsible for certain universal features of human psychological repertoire. While there is value in the relativistic position that warns us that there is huge variation in expressions of human culture, forgetting the underlying commonality of the "natural equipment" (Geertz 1973:41) or "processes of ontogenetic development" (Ingold 2006: 273) may lead anthropologists to ignore fundamental processes in human ecosystems.

In this article, following Chomsky, human nature is a capacity to develop certain mental traits. However, it is helpful to distinguish between form (which might be innate) and content (which can be changeable depending on historical and structural context). Human nature is thus not independent of environmental conditions, while nonetheless constant in form. Repetitive universal features are neither context-independent nor culture-free, but nonetheless always present. The universals are certainly not set in stone—they are rather tendencies, capabilities and propensities, which could be broadly generalized to humans. Universals thus comprise features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no significant exceptions within the cross-cultural perspective (Brown 1991).

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THREE UNIVERSAL FEATURES OF HUMAN NATURE

Brown (1991, 2000) developed a list of human universals, based on the classifications developed by Murdock (1967) and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952). While Brown's list contained many ethnographic examples, it did not expand upon their significance in the industrial context.

We may think of a number of universals, which, in combination with the condition of industrial capitalism or socialism are responsible for the detrimental effect of human activity on the environment. Definitions of these universals may be ambiguous as there are many attributes associated with manifestations of human behavior in most societies. If we consider the notion of material waste, for example, and the related notion of "material wastefulness," we may illustrate it by concrete cross-cultural examples, such as throwing potentially recyclable products into mixed garbage containers in The Netherlands, or littering the streets of major cities in India with plastic waste. Obviously, such a universal as wastefulness is hard to define and capture as the range of behaviors associated with it is culturally variable. Yet, the author believes that generalizations about such behaviors are possible. These universals partially explain global patterns of consumption, including but certainly not limited to: propensity for ingenuity in technological innovation, the desire to elevate oneself above one's status through material markers and one's perception of social justice. We shall examine each of these in turn.

Technological Innovation

The propensity for ingenuity in technological innovation is present among the hunting/gathering Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert and the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration alike. Human propensity for innovation has pushed forward historical epochs, propelled Industrial and Green Revolutions, and has arguably created some of the environmental problems we are facing today. While the negative effects of technological development are widely acknowledged by environmental groups, the positive effects are emphasized by industrial and development lobbies. A large part of humanity seems to believe implicitly in human ingenuity and humanity's exceptional talent for solving problems (Dunlap and Catton 1983; Hornborg 2001).

Recent technological efforts at "greening" energy supply by placing shields or growing algae to combat global warming testify to the belief that human ingenuity that can address many—if not all—of our environmental problems.

In the modern world, increasing rates of resource use, population growth, and armed conflict have tended to magnify and complicate environmental problems that were already difficult to solve a century ago. Moreover, attempts to modify nature for the benefit of humankind have often had unintended circumstances, especially in the disruption of natural equilibria. Yet, at the same time, human ingenuity has been brought to bear on developing a long range of sophisticated and powerful techniques for solving environmental problems; for example, pollution monitoring, restoration ecology, landscape planning, risk management, and impact assessment (Alexander 1999:v).

While optimists of industrial development believe that humans can solve most of the environmental problems, they deny neo-Malthusian concerns (Sachs 2005). Others argue that Western development enterprise actually creates more problems than it solves (Easterly 2006). In *The Power of the Machine,* Alf Hornborg (2001) described human proclivity toward technological innovation but also the limitations of our collective illusion about the superior nature of modern technology and our blind belief in "technocratic fix." The optimism held by economists, and other adaptationists that have unbounded belief in human ingenuity, may be challenged by real-world limits.

Future generations might have to face scarcities much more complex and urgent than today's, which could sharply raise their need for ingenuity. Furthermore, future societies may experience greater social friction due to scarcity, which could impede ingenuity

supply. In some societies the additional capital will not, by itself, compensate for this ingenuity deficit (Homer-Dixon 1999: 126).

Future research could explore in greater depth how temporary (historical) and spatial (cultural) variations in technological development have shaped human relations with the environment. At present it appears that human propensity for innovation—coupled with unprecedented acceleration in industrial growth and seemingly universal belief that the problems created could be solved by the same technocratic mechanism that has created them—prevents humanity as a whole from halting industrial activities.

Seeking Status

Another universal feature is concerned with desire to elevate oneself above one's social status. Brown's categorization of universals includes categories of "statuses and roles," "statuses, ascribed and achieved," "statuses distinguished from individuals," and "statuses on other than sex, age, or kinship bases." Political and social theorists struggle with the explanation as to how global justice issues have brought us into a conflict with our own interest. The mechanism behind the consumptive urge of both the rich and the poor may lie in the universal human desire to elevate oneself above one's social status to accumulate distinction that the industrial society often links to wealth. The content of this universal capacity can be quite broad—from the adornment of hunter-gatherers to distinguish the status of one person from another to the drive to accumulate and consume goods in the modern world. However, the form of this universal process—the fact that material possessions or adornment stand for markers of social status—remains consistent.

Social Justice

The third universal—preoccupation with social justice, fairness, and the resulting propensity for judging others—expands to whole countries. In regard to the recent debate about global warming and greenhouse gas emissions, developing countries point out that developed countries are largely responsible for the present issues (due to the heritage of colonialism as well as present high consumption). Developed countries argue that growing economies increasingly contribute to this problem themselves. Developing countries inquire whether developed countries have any right to ask them to curb their economic growth while developed countries themselves are enjoying the benefits of progress. Developing countries recognize environmental issues as global, but they want developed countries to pay for the solutions. Poor nation-states fear that international agreements will limit their attempt for economic growth, whereas economically powerful nation-states refuse to make substantial concessions if developing countries do not make a similar sacrifice. This political paralysis illustrates how human desire for social justice may be impeding the process of "global thinking" in search of viable solutions for all.

Another aspect of both social status and global justice has to do with the divide between the rich and the poor. While the blame is still placed on the middle classes and while the poor are seen as innocent victims of progress, we may argue that there are certain mechanisms that govern the behavior of both the poor and the affluent that cause environmental degradation. At the individual level, we may imagine the anger of the poor at the prosperity of the rich, especially if the poor perceive that the affluence of the rich comes at the poor's own cost. The mechanism to achieve social justice in this case could be to either accumulate the same wealth as the rich (which many rich donors in developed countries agree with), or to bring the rich down to the same level (class struggle, the culture of envy, leveling mechanisms).

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

If universals only produced sporadic and occasional environmental problems under previous systems, why is the focus on structural issues not sufficient? While human universals intertwined within the

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complex and constantly changing political and social systems have not historically led to the negative environmental effects on the scale we are experiencing now, they do lead to environmental degradation in the context of industrialization. Certain capacities of human nature are not necessarily the cause of environmental problems, but salient features that act in aggregate with structural characteristics of modernity. If the basic formula proposed in this article were to be that historical conditions (industrialization, capitalism, etc.) + universal features of human nature (capacities) = environmental problems, then targeting just historical conditions and structural constraints might be insufficient for seeking solutions.

One such idea, seeking to eliminate the issue of a "wasted banana peel," derives from the book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* by the American architect William McDonough and the German chemist Michael Braungart (2002). The cradle-to-cradle framework does not reach for sustainability as it is usually defined in terms of the popular maxims of "reducing, reusing and recycling," but provides an ideological framework that seeks to create industrial systems that are not just efficient at minimizing waste but essentially waste free. McDonough and Braungart ask us to contemplate not just about minimizing the damage, but rather imagining how waste no longer needs to exist through using the very human universals. Ideally, using capacity for technological innovation such as biomimicry, every product can be designed from the outset so that after its lifetime is over, the product will then continue to live by becoming a nutrient within either a biological or technological cycle. In line with Kaplan's article *Human Nature and Environmentally Responsible Behavior*, and assuming that human nature does exist, a number of suggestions can be made:

1. Be sensitive to going with the grain, to recognizing and working with the motivations and inclinations characteristic of this species.
2. Treat the human cognitive capacity as a resource.
3. Engage the powerful motivations for competence, being needed, making a difference, and forging a better life (Kaplan 2000:505).

Rather than going against the grain of human nature by telling people to be good, to minimize damage, to economize and to pick up their trash, as well as learn to care about other species, solutions should be found in the human universals themselves.

CONCLUSION

I am arguing that the use of technological innovation (to improve the production and medical technologies which lead to both increased population growth and more extensive land use), the drive towards improving one's status (an attempt to move into the middle class bracket or beyond), and the perception of social justice (the idea that it is not fair that one is more dispossessed than the other), combined with the "developed" or "developing" industrial system produce an unintended and detrimental effect on the environment. While defining the universals may be difficult, it is nonetheless very instructive to think of them, however variably expressed, as defining certain features of our human behavior and thinking of the results of such behavior under industrial conditions.

The sense of guilt and impotence in solving huge environmental problems may be indeed beyond the scope of individual human capacity to resolve, even for those who are altruistically disposed toward other people and other species, and are healthy, wealthy and well-informed about environmental and social issues. Rather, solutions can come from designs such as the cradle to cradle framework. If individual choices can be channeled by the ecologically well-informed governments in a way that would allow individuals to go with and not against the grain of human nature, some positive changes could perhaps be seen.

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