

Focusing on Relational Matters to Overcome Duality

I am writing this editorial from a neighbourhood in the UK's second largest city, Birmingham, where bird song and car engines intermittently can be heard competing for attention. While my preference is for 'living in the sticks', rather than a city, I nevertheless like Birmingham for its generally down to earth, friendly people, and its multicultural, innovative, collaborative spirit. Still, I struggle with the urban car obsession, and polluted air. Towns and cities in the English West Midlands are largely known for their manufacturing past, their factories and warehouses, road and canal networks. Birmingham has the infamous 'original spaghetti junction', an intertwined road interchange in the Gravelly Hill area that connects the M6 motorway with various main and local roads. Between 2002 and 2015, Birmingham had the second fastest growing UK city centre population and more growth is forecast for the city over the coming years. Like all cities there is a schizophrenic range of policies and actions trying to achieve economic prosperity – constantly seeking investment and economic growth that adds concrete, bricks and tarmac – while claiming to be 'green'. It has struggled to 'green' new developments, maintain communal spaces and provide active transport infrastructure across the city such as traffic-free cycle networks and footpaths. Since 2015 it has been marketing itself as a 'biophilic' city¹ and declaring its intent to be the UK's first 'natural capital city'.

These different 'traits' could also be expressed as a dichotomy between development and nature or, more generally, between humans and nature. Economic development is largely driven and funded by those who see nature and environmental benefits as separate from, or an add-on to, their primary objectives. They do not see environmental concerns as a fundamental and intimately connected way of thinking about place-making and relating to nature.

A few months ago, a colleague from Birmingham City University, Professor Kathryn Moore, added an interesting proposal to the regional development discourse: a West Midlands National Park encompassing Birmingham and the Black Country. Here the attention shifts from a landscape dominated by industrial heritage and manufacturing to the West Midland plateau's waterways, parks and open landscapes. This vision has been created and impressively captured by Moore in her colour-markings of maps. Instead of highlighting roads, trainlines and built-up areas, the lines of natural features such as rivers and areas of heathland and forests are accentuated and elevated viewpoints marked and envisioned as nature observatories. In her own words:

When we think of a National Park our natural inclination is to look at rural areas but there are swathes of natural beauty right here in the heart of a metropolitan region. For a long time the West Midlands has been viewed as a concrete jungle

1. See <http://biophiliccities.org/partner-cities/birmingham-uk/>

and the way that we have carried out our planning and construction has fed into that but if you look at the maps in a different way, there is huge potential for this project. (Robinson, 2018)

Addressing and overcoming the human–nature dualism has been an ongoing aspect of *Environmental Values* (e.g. Karoonen 2018; Konik 2018; Richardson et al. 2015). It also provides an underlying theme to this issue. The way we use language and specific concepts or phrases matters because it shapes thinking and actions. This influence can be negative (e.g. biased framing and unhelpful prevalence of narrow thinking) or positive (e.g. stimulate new visions or kinder ways of relating to other humans, animals and plants).

The five articles in this issue of *Environmental Values* feature research on the processes and politics of designating conservation areas and national parks and examples of how ‘labelling’, specific concepts and classifications shape environmental policies and influence management decisions – for better or worse. The authors draw on anthropology and environmental sociology and related methods in their observations and the deconstruction and/or (re-)construction of their respective arguments.

Cassie Hays considers how racialisation of nature evolved in Tanzania’s national parks and conservation areas. Hays argues that safaris and the boundaries of and conditions in ‘parks’ or reserves ‘continue to enable the performance of colonial and contemporary whiteness’ (Hays 2019: 142). She explains how this has led to creating and preserving ‘wild nature’ (this apparently extends to the Maasai tribe), while also allocating privileges and power. Hays conducted interviews with safari tourism actors/participants and analysed archival, cartographic and ethnographic material. She describes a ‘cultural “positioning”’ (Hays 2019: 151) in which certain past practices and landscapes become racialised in reserves where both animals and human beings live ‘in their primitive state’ (as quoted from Neumann 1995, Hays 2019: 152). For example, Maasai practises of gardening and agriculture do not fit either with specific conservation goals or the tourists’ expectation of living ‘wild’. Cultural positioning also extends to the ‘outsiders’: the tourists and safari participants coming to the reserve. For example, Hays reports that certain expectations and assumptions about behaviour and wealth were held by some tour operators and Maasai tribe people with regard to tourists and safari participants of different skin colours (and nationalities).

That national parks and other protected areas are socially constructed is also evident in the paper by Annina Michel and Norman Backhaus (2019). Their research unravels the reasons for why a national park proposal in Switzerland was unsuccessful. Drawing on pragmatic sociology they analyse struggles, conflict, compromises and collaboration within the Swiss legislative process for establishing a new national park (e.g. requiring a local or regional ‘bottom-up’ initiative). Their research highlights issues of trust between outsiders and locals; the importance of culture and heritage and especially what is locally

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perceived as worthy; the relative marginal significance of nature conservation as a driver for designation; and the importance of rhetoric as part of communication efforts (and its potential negative impacts if bland or not credible – what the authors, following Büscher and Dressler 2007, term ‘discursive blur’). These factors form aspects of relational processes and characteristics which are the main focus of the article by Alice Brombin.

Brombin (2019) takes a multi-species ethnographic approach to consider relations between human beings and other animal and plant species within the eco-village movement and how non-human encounters create relational bonds and behaviours of reciprocity. The importance of relational values and eudaimonic approaches was also highlighted in an earlier issue of *Environmental Values* by Arias-Arévalo et al. (2018). Brombin’s main interest is ontological, referring to the ‘nature–culture’ continuum and the urgency to identify radical alternatives to the prevailing paradigms of species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. The author draws on her own lived experiences in eco villages in Italy and Mexico and interviews gathered during those periods and in the article picked two situations to illustrate the importance of sensory experiences, direct emotional engagement and deep relational connections. Brombin’s first interview extract is from an eco-villager in Italy working in a garden and vineyard, and another extract from an eco-villager in Mexico detailing how an ant attack on flowering trees was addressed in a relational manner rather than reverting to insecticides or other planned forms of killing the ants. Collective values, communitarian approaches and the importance of understanding the manifold multi- and inter-species dependencies are unravelled through analysis of the interviewees’ accounts and with reference to anthropological, feminist and environmental sociological texts.

Paul Radomski and Donna Perleberg (2019) take a different viewpoint on the role of emotional connections, de-emphasising emotional reactions and appealing to a more rational and scientific approach to manage ‘invasive’ species. They argue that the label in itself may be problematic and automatic attempts to eradicate invasive species may create more harm than the actual co-existence of such species. This argument is made in the context of aquatic non-indigenous plant management in Minnesota. In their words the ‘[u]se of a binary classification of species may be a sign of ecological illiteracy and intellectual laziness’ (Radomski and Perleberg, 2019: 225). They illustrate the negative effects that a management principle based simply on ‘nativeness’ may bring. Instead they suggest using criteria of social nuisance, consequences on ecosystem health and economic cost-benefit ratio of planned actions versus inaction to determine what should be done in response to the occurrence of an invasive species. Thus no blanket approach is recommended, but a case-by-case examination and the need for specific species management plans. They conclude by offering seven policy principles for managing aquatic invasive species, building on work by Woods and Moriarty (2001).

The final paper in this issue is by Oscar Krüger. He asserts ‘how concepts describe situations’ (Krüger 2019: 234) and therefore how descriptions, or specific terms, matter in terms of framing situations or evoking change. He argues that ‘sustainable degrowth’ is a paradox based on certain assumptions which he systematically elaborates. A key part of the argument relates to the assumptions that underwrite both sustainability (the goal) and consumption (the problem). ‘In harnessing the force of sustainability in order to challenge growth and consumption, then, such degrowth-arguments rely on the same sentiments which would have us believe that what we really want is to consume to begin with’ (Krüger 2019: 240). Krüger also draws attention to the insatiability of money accumulation and how profit-oriented behaviour thereby will disregard planetary boundaries. Attention is then paid to alternatives, and particularly *dépense* (e.g. Romano 2016) and conviviality (drawing heavily on Ivan Illich’s work). Krüger highlights relational aspects, and specifically Illich’s ‘*relational* understanding of the person’ (Krüger 2019: 246) which highlights the importance of ‘creating’ and ‘shaping’, ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ others. The article concludes that ‘[c]onviviality, in its concern with friendship as an ordering idea for social life, embodies a more thorough break not only with sustainability, but also with consumption’ (Krüger 2019: 248).

Studying these five articles also provided some food for thought with regard to assessing the somewhat unusual suggestion of the West Midlands urban national park. Possibly the harsh dichotomies of countryside vs. city or rural vs. urban will be unhelpful in future decades when most people will live in urban areas and cities will have to become healthier and provide encounters with nature through careful planning as well as communal action (whether this will become a reality remains to be seen,² but such goals are often expressed in urban development strategies). With accelerated climate and environmental change, our thinking about native and non-native species may also change if ‘foreign’ species show more resilience than native ones; gardens and parks already typically are ‘hybrid’ habitats where native species co-occur with (possibly naturalised) non-native species. Urban areas may provide opportunities for biodiverse and varied mini-parks, gardens and various green infrastructure that provide suitable homes for animals and plants and possibly more biodiverse habitats than some rural monoculture landscapes (especially where land is farmed intensively). The greening of urban areas and the shift from individual motorised to active transport by bicycle and on foot may in turn increase contact and relations with other humans as well as nature. The proximity of people may lead to inspiring, mutually supporting and jointly creative ventures of planting, tending and harvesting and a spirit of conviviality.³

2. It could also be argued that many cities, and especially mega cities, fail to provide healthy living conditions. See e.g. Davis (2006).

3. While not necessarily seeing the city as an ideal or being an ‘urban optimist’, I would still argue for the necessity to reimagine cities; i.e. to imagine the best possible and creatively

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Having recently browsed the *Environmental Values* special issue on Rewilding (see e.g. Drenthen 2018; Renes 2018; Brook 2018), I can see the imaginative recolouring of the West Midlands plateau map taking further shape. There may be wilfully or accidentally forgotten corners that – while not per se ‘wild’ or undisturbed – escape (excessive) human disturbances and management and that may provide habitats for familiar and rare species. Such ‘rewilding’ would not necessarily involve active erasing of past cultural landscapes but would show an openness to give some space and autonomy again to non-human species, experimenting with new layers of landscape that are ecologically rather than predominantly culturally or economically driven.⁴

So, maybe Kathryn Moore’s imagined future and suggestion to re-green the West Midlands is not so far-fetched after all. As she explains in an interview for the *Guardian* newspaper:

Birmingham was once famous as the city of a thousand trades. Imagine if it became famous as the city of a thousand cycle and footpaths, a thousand parks and a thousand lakes. (Jeffries, 2018)

I’d rather like that; preferably without the catalyst of a crisis (see Koch 2018). Also, without the need for excessive third-party analytical reports and monetary valuations but simply because Brummies and Black Country folks will connect with such a vision and their immediate environment, develop greater awareness through conversations and deliberations, and form multiple and deeper relations within and beyond their neighbourhoods (see e.g. Herrick 2018). Will we fall in love with such vision and help create it?

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work towards such goals.

4. Undoubtedly, this would bring challenges, not just in terms of aesthetics, but also in terms of various social, economic and even environmental interests and experiences that may not tolerate such ecological ‘restoration’ (see e.g. Prior and Brady 2017).

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