Forward to nature: Ecological subjectivity after the discursive turn

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Abstract   Contemporary environmental politics is generally dominated by two discourses: scepticism/denialism and liberal, managerialist reformism. Romantic-inspired environmentalism and deep ecology, on the other hand, promote the notion of an ecological subject as the key to unlocking this double bind. Yet theoretical accounts of ecological subjectivity are mired in a myriad of problems that stem from the attempt to somehow go back to a nature that pre-exists language and culture. Employing Lacanian theory, this paper aims to correct this misrecognition. It maps the putative ecological subject onto those fleeting moments of dislocation in which established discourses of nature and culture reveal their historically contingent origins.

Introduction

To get 'back to nature' suggests a return to some original state, as if an ecological subject lay suffocating under the weight of civilisation. A common theme in ecological writing laments a culture that has wandered too far from the guiding wisdom of the earth and lost its way. Humanity's alienation from nature is widely perceived as the price of social and technological development. Rationalisation, industrialisation, urbanisation – modernity, in a nutshell – are thematised as the triumph of humanity over nature. For Kate Soper (1998), the human condition is torn between immersion in the natural world and this 'urge to productivity, innovation, the escape from cyclical, reproductive and traditional modes of being' (pp. 63–64). This will to 'cultural transcendence' lies at the heart of our ecological malaise.

Ecologism seeks to correct the imbalance of culture over nature at all levels, from large institutions down to individual psyches (Dobson, 2007, p. 3). It views consciousness change and cultural transformation as preconditions of a sustainable, ecocentric society (Eckersley, 1992, p. 27). Issues like climate change require citizen agency, not just national and international governance (Barry, 1999, p. 105). Without 'public awareness and depth of understanding, hard political decisions… would have little legitimacy or enduring support, and would be almost impossible to implement' (Christoff, 2010, p. 9). For its part, deep ecology seeks to advance a complete religious and philosophical worldview rather than the piecemeal approach that focuses on isolated 'environmental problems' (Devall and Sessions, 1985, p. 100).

To imagine a healthy planet without ecological consciousness is to imagine the fate of the planet entrusted to state leaders and technocrats and their thus far abysmal record of reaching global treaties. To transcend this technocratic 'iron cage' there must be a place for human agency, for a radical decision, in ecological politics. This is the place of the ecological subject: a subject *of* nature and *for* nature. Indeed, it is a subject whose very being derives from its entwinement in the ecological systems that support life on Earth. But where, as far removed from nature as we are now, might we find this ecological subject?

One answer, advanced by ecopsychology and some other schools, is that we might find it by spending more time with nature – by feeling its rhythms, observing its patterns, harmonising with it. Such answers, which tend to evoke New Age or 1960s countercultural ideas of consciousness change, are rightly pilloried as psychologically reductionist and politically naïve (see Dryzek, 2005, pp. 29–31). Perhaps more problematically, they are invariably premised on a vision of reconciliation, completion and wholeness arising out of some mystical moment of contact with nature as transcendental signified. Moreover, such calls either fail to problematize – or take leave of – the discursive turn and its insistence that any 'authentic' experience is always-already snared in a wily web of discursive mediations. The meaning of an experience or an object does not emerge spontaneously but is interpreted through historically contingent discourses. The 'nature' in 'back to nature' is a cultural product, a social construction (Haraway, 1992, p. 296), and thus cannot be the pure source of authentic experience, let alone of an ecological subject and its liberatory promise.

For Rousseau (2002), once civilised, the human has crossed the Rubicon (p. 23). Even if such a virgin subject existed, it is irretrievable. Nevertheless, it is true that spending time in the wilderness can seem to provoke a profoundly different state of being, a difference made stark upon one's return to the city. At every turn, civilisation is festooned with walls concealing the 'abject' or 'inhuman' element of nature from us: material barriers such as plumbing, packaging, porcelain, battery farms and slaughterhouses; cultural barriers ranging from the taboos marking copulation, urination and defecation[1] to the ideological situating of human essence in the transcendent, as shared by secular

humanism and religion. Behind these barriers lie the biological foundations of life, and thus, intuitively, that is where one might expect to find – and perhaps rehabilitate – an ecological subject.

In this paper I reject the notion that ecological subjectivity can be found by repealing culture and/or language. I draw upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005) to show that the ecological subject is not a primordial, pre-linguistic subject, because subjectivity as such is impossible without discourse. However, while we will not find an ecological subject 'behind' discourse, we will find one at the limits of discourse – or, to be precise, in the spaces between discourses and in the voids before the emergence of new discourses. Nature is a contingent cultural phenomenon, but one that serves precise social and political functions. Ultimately, the 'beyond' of Nature is not some pre- or extra-discursive reality, but a void. This void, however, corresponds with the space of a political subject that can play an epochal role in the struggle over competing articulations of Nature and other master-signifiers. Far from being a noble savage, the ecological subject is a social liberatory subject that can take us closer to ecological justice than can a primitivist or preservationist vision of reconciliation with Nature.

The Nature Master-Signifier

We can eliminate at the outset any suggestion that an ecological subject is a pre-discursive subject. Wittgenstein's (2001) 'anti-private language' argument deems language necessarily social (paras. 243–265). For Lacan (1998), upon entering language the subject is fated to alienation[2] from a certain facet of its existence (pp. 209-13). The symbolic realm has no outside as such, but it must, if it is to maintain its consistency or integrity, somehow incorporate the notion of outside within itself. It does so through *dissimulation*, a closure that is the space of fantasy. The fantasy is the signifying (and a-signifying) substance of the edges of discourse, tending to the places in which the symbolic folds back on itself and dissimulates the lack at its very core. Paradoxically, then, lack does not generate a poverty of meaning, but an overflowing of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 113).

No site is richer in fantasy than the 'empty' space of the discourse's absent centre. As Žižek (2006) notes, 'the function of fantasy is precisely to fill in the void of the signifier-without-signified', the signifier that guarantees the validity of all signifiers (p. 372). As master- or empty-signifier, this signifier has no signification in and of itself – instead it offers the *promise* of signification. By gesturing beyond discourse it carves out a (non-) space for 'representation'.

This insight in fact originally belongs to Wittgenstein, who had claimed, in Pears's words (1987), that

> we can see further than we can say. We can see all the way to the edge of language, but the most distant things that we see cannot be expressed in sentences because they are the preconditions of saying anything.
>
> (pp. 146–147)

This space, which is carved out behind or beyond the transcendental signifier, is a 'mirrored' or doubled space. Without this space, signifiers lose their signification and slide indefinitely under signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). The master-signifier 'is the way for a self-contained, synchronic system, in which the meaning of each element is given by its relationship to every other, to signify its own outside, the enigma of its origin' (Žižek, 1991, p. 198). In other words, it is not 'a simple abbreviation that designates a series of markers but the name of the hidden ground of this series of markers that act as so many expressions-effects of this ground' (Žižek, 2005, p. 49). Ordinary signifiers are meaningful because of their relations of difference to other signifiers. But without a master-signifier to stabilise the system, difference would multiply endlessly. The master-signifier, then, is what makes any ordinary signifier legible. It inscribes itself on all the terms in its ambit, which are then inscribed, retroactively, back upon it, closing the loop. The formula is simply: $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ (chain of signification *is read through* master-signifier).

For Laclau, all discourses exist in states of greater or lesser dislocation (Laclau, 1990, pp. 39-45). Yet, in order to function, a discourse must pass itself off as a faithful rendering of the world; it must suture its own dislocation. Žižek and Laclau have clearly shown how master-signifiers such as 'order', 'the people', 'America' or 'Jew' structure a field (Žižek, 1989, pp. 96–97, 125–127; Laclau, 1996, p. 44; Laclau, 2005, pp. 95–97). And yet, the fantasies of completeness sought by the psychoanalytical subject are identical to those that produce social reality as well as ecological reality. Although Stavrakakis (1997, 2000) argued that ecologism – as a political ideology – is based around the master-signifiers of 'Earth', 'Nature' and/or 'planet', no work to date has unravelled how these signifiers situate human subjectivity in relation to the non-human world. Yet it is precisely through such analysis that we might begin to reveal the problematic that underlies 'alienation from nature' and its putative opposite. We do not need an extra-discursive world to account for this seemingly pre-existing realm of Nature. What we do need, however, within the flux of signifiers, is the stabilising force of Nature as horizon of signification: in other words, Nature as master-signifier.

On analysis, Nature vividly displays the qualities of a master-signifier. As Timothy Morton (2007) notes, Nature 'wavers between the divine and the material'. It is a 'transcendental term in a material mask', an 'empty placeholder for a host of other concepts', a 'Pandora's box… encapsulat[ing] a potentially

infinite series of disparate fantasy objects' (pp. 14-15). Nature is 'animals, trees, the weather… the bioregion, the ecosystem. It is the world and the entities in that world. It is both the set and the contents of the set'. It is precisely such unsymbolisable complexity that demands the dissimulatory effect of a master-signifier – a signifier that stands in for the Real, the beyond of discourse, *through a gesture internal to discourse.* The ground of nature is nothing more than the name itself which, as a rigid designator, aims at the 'impossible-real kernel', the surplus-production of signification (Žižek, 1989, p. 97). 'Nature', as name, functions primarily as a pole of condensation for the multiple 'natural' signifiers (the S_2s, in Lacanian terms), retrospectively positing a reality beyond the signifier. Rather than denoting an entity as such, Nature regulates the dispersion of 'natural' signifiers, constituting their field in relation to the extra-discursive beyond – in this case, material reality.

Yet the Nature master-signifier is formally identical to any other master-signifier: God, Nation, Progress, Freedom, Law, Market. They all vouchsafe the truth of a particular way of representing some segment of the world, and assure us that at the end of the signifying chain, meaning awaits. Simply put, the 'nature' that ecological subjectivity calls us 'back to' is not the crunching of leaves underfoot, the piquant aroma of the pine forest, the simple life of subsistence. Unravelled, it refers instead to a fantasmatic space beyond discourse, a space in which the cacophony of a million individual significations gives way to silent fullness. This is the place of the ultimate meaning promised by the master-signifier. Every intelligible statement partakes of the fullness of the master-signifier, if only to the extent of the tiniest sliver. Were the promise of the master-signifier to become fully present – and this is the force behind 'back to nature' – all signification would become redundant. A rapturous, blinding light would efface all inscriptions. It is this promise that courses through the discourses of Progress, Nation, Freedom, God, impelling the endless quest for the pot of gold at the end of the signifying chain.

The Subject

It is this promise that unites the subject and the master-signifier. The identity of the person of faith derives from a certain subjective relation to God. Citizenship is a form of subjectivity acquired through a more or less intense identification with Nation. Although, to the subject, this identity may appear to reflect an inner essence, it is, of course, historical. Fundamentally at odds with itself, constitutively split, the subject is propelled by the quest for the imaginary fullness offered by the master-signifier. This becomes a more pressing mission when the discourse in which the subject's identity was lodged becomes dislocated by, for example, an event that resists being integrated (Stavrakakis, 1997, p. 108). At that moment,

the promised El Dorado is revealed as a mirage, and that part of the subject's identity that derived from it is shattered. Without the master-signifier to fantasmatically suture over it, the discourse of God, or Nation, or Law, no longer compels the subject. Something is awry. And yet in this dislocation is freedom (Laclau, 1990, p. 60). No longer structurally compelled, the subject can take a decision and seek to incorporate itself through another discourse, to stabilise once more its discursive universe and resume the quest for fullness. The space of the subject, then, is the episodic space between dislocation and the decision (p. 39).

> [T]his dialectic between absence (dislocation of the structure) and presence (identification with an unachieved fullness) is nothing but the space of the subject. The subject (lack within the structure) only takes on its specific form of representation as the metaphor of an absent structure.
>
> (p. 63)

Because of this absent-present dialectic our analysis will be inadequate if it remains at the level of positivised subject positions. Instead, the key to the socio-political analysis of the subject is to trace the historical emergence of the discourses and their master-signifiers (Norval, 1996, p. 64). We will not find an ecological consciousness by seeking a pre-civilisational subject. Instead of seeking the ecological subject *through* or *behind* discourse we are led to the *before* and *between* spaces of discourse. If we trace the historical emergence, consolidation, and dislocation of the master-signifiers, we are led to a gap not between the subject and an extra-discursive Nature, but between discourses of Nature and their (non-)spaces of inscription.
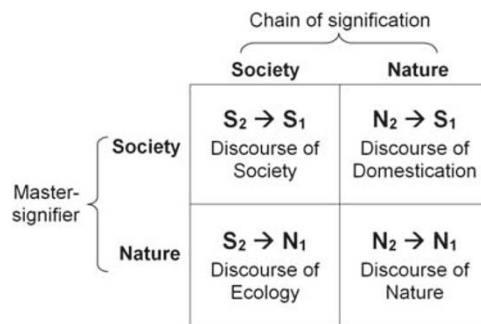
Raymond Williams (1983) reminds us that the emergence of 'nature' is historically contingent, and its usage in the singular to refer to the 'natural world' is very recent (pp. 219-25). Most pre-modern societies had no overarching term for nature (Proctor, 2009, p. 302). The discourse to which 'back to nature' is most closely linked is, of course, 19th century Romanticism. Nature offered a much-needed source of meaning amidst the *anomie* of the dislocations wrought by industrialisation and the casting off of traditional forms of association and modes of life. Progress had brought smog and disease, and cramped and filthy living and working conditions. Romantic Nature arose to provide a promise of meaning when confronted with the dislocation of the master-signifiers that had constelled the 18th century ideological universe: Science, Progress, Reason, Utility, Trade.

And yet, Nature is first and foremost a discursive category and not the pure source of authentic being posited by deep ecology. Materiality is always made meaningful in historically contingent ways. Thus, while we have shown that Nature is identical in formal structure to other master-signifiers, we now need to analyse how the 'return to Nature' derives its discursive force through Nature's

relationship to the other master-signifiers of our time. The task is to identify the antagonisms and affinities between the most potent master-signifiers of contemporary ideology. To do this, I first construct an analytical schema of the relations between the Nature master-signifier and social master-signifiers such as God and Nation. The schema is constructed along two dimensions: the structural relations between master-signifiers; and the historical emergence of new formations of relations. I argue, following Laclau, that the political subject is implicated at the point between the dislocation of one formation and the consolidation of a new formation. Second, I show that internal to each historical formation exist points of tension, and that the subject exists in the (non-) spaces of promised resolution to these tensions – in other words, in the (synchronic) spaces *between* discourses, and the (diachronic) spaces *before* discourses. I focus on two pairs of these subjects, before demonstrating that it is in the gap between the members of one of these pairs in particular where we will find the fault lines that 'back to nature' discourse seeks to traverse. These fault lines, I argue, do not guide us to a primordial reconciliation with nature. They do, however, describe the discourses presently thwarting the emergence of an ecological subject as a subject of *social* liberation.

Four Discourses

Depending on the master-signifier they are articulated to, 'natural' objects can be presented either 'naturally' or 'socially'. Similarly, 'social' objects can be presented either 'socially' or 'naturally'. In Figure 1 we see the basic schema. All four discourses share the same form – chain of signification (S_2) is threaded through ($\rightarrow$) the master-signifier (S_1). Obviously, Lacan does not distinguish – as I have – between signifiers of Nature and Society. Natural and Social master-signifiers are structurally identical; my distinction is more of an elaboration. An N_1 is a type of S_1; an N_2 a type of S_2. They are all situated at the privileged position between a discourse and its putative outside, acting to stabilise a discourse by signalling the

	Chain of signification	
	Society	Nature
Society	$S_2 \rightarrow S_1$ Discourse of Society	$N_2 \rightarrow S_1$ Discourse of Domestication
Nature	$S_2 \rightarrow N_1$ Discourse of Ecology	$N_2 \rightarrow N_1$ Discourse of Nature

Figure 1: The basic schema is comprised of the available permutations of signifier and master-signifier on one axis, and Society and Nature on the other.

limits of objectivity. Nature master-signifiers differ from Social master-signifiers only insofar as they go under the name Nature, rather than 'God', 'the market', or 'nation', for example. I will briefly introduce each of the four discourses before going on to develop the historical dimension of their emergence.

D1: Discourse of Society ($S_2 \rightarrow S_1$)

The Discourse of Society, in which a social chain of signification is threaded through a Social master-signifier, is the elementary form of discourse. A classic example is monotheism, where the master-signifier is God, the giver of meaning to all things, and the chain of signification is Creation. The Great Chain of Being is a system of differential links in which all things under God are fundamentally equivalent, differing primarily by the degree to which they are spirit or matter. In the Discourse of Society, all objects are totalised by the social master-signifier, and thus, while mammals and ferns exist, they cannot exist *qua* Nature. Fundamentalisms of all stripes take this simple discursive-ideological form. In the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism, for instance, the Economy or the Market indexes all identities to exchange value.

D2: Discourse of Domestication ($N_2 \rightarrow S_1$)

Where D1 concerns a group of objects (S_2) always-already immanent to social discourse, the Discourse of Domestication concerns objects classed natural but rendered through a *social* frame of interpretation. D2 effectively augments the range of objects that can be taken by a Social master-signifier. The paradigmatic cases are natural science and utilitarianism. These discourses translate something non-social into social terms. They break the world up into distinct objects with the purpose of rendering its unfathomable flux amenable to discourse. The cost of this translation (or domestication) process is the unsymbolisable excess of the object itself. Science does not know plants, for example, *qua* plants. It has merely mastered a series of interconnected codes that science takes as the plants' essence. What grounds the code, giving it the appearance of access to the plants in themselves, is a certain scientific ideology, or faith, condensed in the master-signifier Science. In Lacanian terms we can see any object of the natural sciences as possessing two sides: this domesticated side, which exists in the Symbolic, and the obverse, alien side that, for now at least, exceeds signification: the Real. The role of the master-signifier Science is precisely to dissimulate this excess, to assure that in principle, with sophisticated enough instruments, all is knowable. All *may* be knowable, according to the limited way Science constitutes the objects of its discourse. But scientific truth is a kind of instrumental truth; it is concerned with the object's extensive, relational qualities, rather than its essence. We can best characterise D2 as a discourse of *domestication*, performing a very specific task of translating natural objects into social ones.

D3: Discourse of Nature (N$_2$ → N$_1$)

If we replace the Social master-signifier of D2 with a Nature master-signifier, we have a discourse that competes with D2 to represent natural objects. Instead of situating them in a straightforwardly *social* field, it would articulate them through a Nature master-signifier. What are the defining characteristics of the field enacted by the Nature master-signifier? The logical way to answer this is to consider the classic Nature/Culture binary with which it is inextricably implicated (Phelan, 1992, p. 385). The peculiarity of Nature/Culture is that, upon closer scrutiny, it spontaneously deconstructs. We know how to move from Nature to Culture (add Society and its artefacts) and Culture to Nature (subtract all that is artificial), yet there is no path between the two. Despite their mutual dependence, where we expect to find a continuum, we find only radical discontinuity.

By definition, each pole of a binary produces its Other through negation. But it is not only that we cannot specify the boundary separating the two poles – the very space of the boundary is empty. To move towards Nature is not to move *away from culture* but towards *the negation of culture*. Yet this is happening on the terrain of Nature (itself nothing but the negation of culture). Similarly, when we move away from Nature, we are not moving *towards culture*, we are moving *away from the negation of culture*. Yet because the only definition of nature we have is 'the negation of culture', it appears that we are travelling on a smooth space between the two poles. In fact what we have is two distinct spaces, each being grounded in a radical other that exists not in the same field, but rather as the disavowed core of itself.

The node-like structure of Nature, emerging out of and yet discontinuous with Culture, mirrors precisely the historical trajectory of the term. As Williams (1983) observes, the first usage takes the form 'the nature of x' (specific singular). Next emerges 'the nature of all things' (abstract multiple) and then, finally, the overarching category, the abstract singular Nature. Tellingly, the advent of the latter 'is structurally and historically cognate with the emergence of God from a god or the gods' (p. 221). This isomorphism is perhaps unsurprising given that the qualities imputed to Nature – purity, authenticity, sublimity, authority – derive from the negation of Culture or Society as well as from the secular, scientific appropriation of God. The Romantic turn to Nature was as much a turn away from the perceived corruption, impurity and inauthenticity of rationalising, urbanising, industrialising, 19th-century society (Bronk, 2009, pp. 92–93).

D4: Discourse of Ecology (S$_2$ → N$_1$)

It may at first seem peculiar that the identity of a social signifier can obtain against a horizon of Nature. Yet is this not the typical form of ecological discourse? The master-signifier of D4 is that used by ecological discourse to posit a world in which the being of both the human and non-human are disclosed

through the non-human, i.e. Nature. The Discourse of Ecology shares with the Discourse of Domestication the need to 'translate' objects across a void. While D2 presents 'natural' objects in a 'social' space, D4 presents 'social' objects in a 'natural' space. Again, we have to be careful here not to assume that natural objects or social objects come pre-ordained *qua* natural or social; it is only their (hegemonic) articulation that presents them as such. Thus, while D2 rearticulates (natural) birds as (social) poultry, i.e. *domesticates* them through *instrumental reason*, D4 rearticulates (social) consumption as (ecological) resource allocation through *ecological reason*.

Ecological reason seeks to illuminate the complex ecological assemblages that constitute a 'social' object or process, and allows us to think the social outside of its social articulations. An institution such as marriage, for example, can be rearticulated in ecological terms: genetics, population, the channelling of sexual desire, for example. That it appears somewhat odd to operationalise this translation speaks to the novelty of ecological reason. That it involves conscious and apparently contrived operations speaks directly to the fact that the Discourse of Ecology remains 'to come', a discourse whose present-absent dialectic, in Laclauian terms, remains undeveloped. However it is conceived – as we shall see in the next section – D4 presents an ideological challenge to the hegemonic articulations of D1, D2 and D3.

Historical Discursive Formations

Thus far we have only surveyed the four analytic possibilities arising when we dissect signifiers (the chain of signification) and master-signifiers along the lines of Nature and Society. We have indicated a Discourse of Ecology, but our schema cannot yet disclose the conditions governing its hitherto humble fortunes. Moreover, because an ecological subject is not a subject of the Discourse of Ecology but the subject that can choose to identify – and thus usher in – the Discourse of Ecology, we need to trace the emergent space of this subject in the dislocations of the three other discourses. Subject constitution, after all, occurs within the spaces between these discourses and the lack they try to conceal.

The emergence of a new discourse is prompted by the dislocation of the prior formation, its inability to suture the field of discourse. Thus, while Figure 1 only illustrated the analytical possibilities, abstracted from history and politics, Figure 2 illustrates the historical emergence of each discourse as exhibiting a certain dialectical logic. While Figure 2 gives a schematic view of the historical emergence of each discourse, I am not suggesting a teleological sequence. On the contrary, at any given moment a number of different subjects may be emerging and others retreating. In the next section, then, by exploring the affinities and antagonisms that emerge during this 'peculiar absence/presence dialectic' (Laclau, 1990, p. 63),

	F1	F2	F3	F4
D1	$S_2 \rightarrow S_1$	$S_2 \rightarrow S_1$	$S_2 \rightarrow S_1$	$S_2 \rightarrow S_1$
D2		$N_2 \rightarrow S_1$	$N_2 \rightarrow S_1$	$N_2 \rightarrow S_1$
D3			$N_2 \rightarrow N_1$	$N_2 \rightarrow N_1$
D4				$S_2 \rightarrow N_1$

Figure 2: Matrix of historical discursive formations, from the simplest (F1) to the most complex (F4).

I reveal the structure of the eco-political *problematique*. Reconstructing this dialectic via its mode of propulsion – the lines of tension, as antagonism and dislocation, internal to the four discourses – I will establish the conditions of the emergence of an ecological subject. As I will show, the ecological subject does not lie dormant 'beneath' discourse, but at the convergent point of two very specific lines of tension within the dialectical schema of historical formations.

F1: $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$

By radically excluding all challengers, a centripetal force sustains the Discourse of Society. The Elizabethan world is a good example of such a formation. Man, society and nature singularly acquire their meaning and being through God. The presiding cosmology, the Great Chain of Being, is a system governed by the principles of continuity, gradation and plentitude – a Platonic idea of fullness indicating that everything is covered (Lovejoy, 1960). This is a differential system grounded by God at the centre, with a chaotic void serving as the constitutive outside. As Ulysses warns in *Troilus and Cressida* (I.iii), 'Take but degree away, untune that string, And hark, what discord follows' (Shakespeare, 2005, pp. 75–137). Every link in the chain, and its relation to its neighbours, is crucial in maintaining the overall order.

F2: $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$; $N_2 \rightarrow S_1$

Formation 2 is a formation between Discourses 1 and 2: the Discourse of Society $(S_2 \rightarrow S_1)$ and the Discourse of Domestication $(N_2 \rightarrow S_1)$. Social objects *and* natural objects are threaded through a sole Social master-signifier, giving this formation an elegant unity. Yet, because natural objects are not able to be identified as natural *a priori*, then insofar as Formation 2 articulates objects called 'natural', this is only because of the retroactive articulation of those objects through the Discourse of Nature. This disrupts, on the one hand, the seeming stability of Formation 2. On the other hand, we need not worry about how,

or whether, these objects can have been called 'natural' before their domestication – such a question does not, after all, trouble the Discourse of Domestication itself. The objects of this discourse are not truly objects until they are read through the social master-signifier in any case. Formation 2 can inhere against an antagonistic Discourse of Nature, which would claim natural objects as exceeding the terms of their domestication, but it can just as well be sutured by the same constitutive outside that sutures the Discourse of Society: a generalised chaos.

Formation 2 corresponds to hegemonic Enlightenment discourses of Reason and Science. It emerges historically with the breakdown of the old order represented by the Great Chain of Being. After the cosmology of the Chain peaked in the 18th century, Enlightenment ideas antithetical to the Great Chain – such as Progress – undermined the foundations of Formation 1, grounded in a sole social master-signifier (God). The dislocation was further provoked by the flourishing of the scientific account of nature as inert (yet often deistic), challenging the hegemony of theological accounts of the natural world (see Williams, 1983, p. 222). Science, reason and humanism brought forth a space of inscription co-extensive with a new subject: the subject of Reason and Science rather than of God, the subject of the new, domesticating Discourse 2 ($N_2 \rightarrow S_1$). It was time for a new man, a new subject. The unity of the subject of Formation 2 is that of a 'social transcendental' subject: a subject of reason ($S_2 \rightarrow S_1$) and impartial observation ($N_2 \rightarrow S_1$).

F3: $S_2 \rightarrow S_1$; $N_2 \rightarrow S_1$; $N_2 \rightarrow N_1$

I have already suggested that the nature-imaginary associated with the English Romantics and the New England Transcendentalists, among others, corresponds with Discourse 3 ($N_2 \rightarrow N_1$). In historical context, the powerful nature-imaginary of Romanticism represents a rupture from the totalising rationality of Enlightenment: an imaginary expressed by, for instance, Wordsworth and Coleridge's 'One World' and Thoreau's moral and spiritual articulation of wilderness. We know from Laclau that what precipitates such a dislocation is the 'dialectical' emergence of a mythic space, a space between the dislocation of the structure and the promise of a fullness, and that the subject only takes form as a metaphor of an absent structure (Laclau, 1990, p. 63). At the point of the disruption of Enlightenment dualism, the Romantic Nature master-signifier stood in for the absent fullness haunting Formation 2 (Figure 3).

Unlike the totalising effect of Formation 2, with both Nature and Society cast in social terms, Formation 3 contains an inherent tension: the Discourse of Domestication and the Discourse of Nature compete to represent natural objects. Whether a woodland is taken as a store of timber or as a quasi-monastic shrine depends upon which discourse is invoked. Now, at first glance, this competition produces a tension that threatens to short-circuit any unity Formation 3 may possess. Yet, recalling that the Discourse of Nature is formed, at least in part,
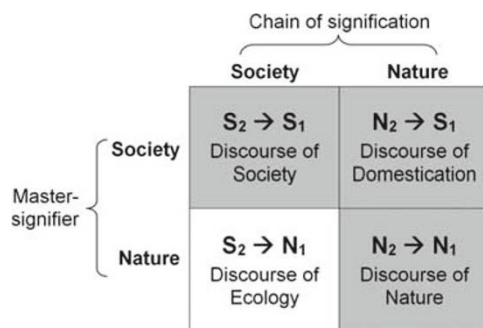
Figure 3: Formation 3 can be considered the schema of Romanticism. It exhibits the tensions between the latter and Enlightenment modernity.

through a negation of the Social master-signifier of the Discourse of Domestication, the tension between the discourses can be read as productive. And in this may lie the clue to the persistence of Formation 3. Nineteenth-century capitalism was able to take the Romantic Nature-imaginary as ideological foil; it did not threaten the duality of Formation 2 ($S_2 \rightarrow S_1$; $N_2 \rightarrow S_1$) but supplemented it with a 'division of labour' such that D2 ($N_2 \rightarrow S_1$) dominated economic affairs (material base) and D3 ($N_2 \rightarrow N_1$) dominated the cultural sphere (ideological superstructure). In this sense, the Discourse of Nature was – and remains – a classic example of a resistance successfully defused through a somewhat superficial appropriation. Just as industrial capitalism required a Romantic 'opiate', so Romantic ideology required society insofar as it emerges as a negation of the harsh living and working conditions and the spiritual poverty brought on by rationalisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation. The Discourse of Nature's functional role in sustaining both the Discourse of Society and the Discourse of Domestication is captured by Hess (2010):

> The degradation of everyday life and relationship, like that of everyday environments, has only been possible because Romanticism's various forms of imaginative escapism have opened a pressure valve to relieve an otherwise insufferable impoverishment of meaning, value, and identity.
>
> (p.21)

Perhaps the most intense site at which Romanticism's ideological-supplementary role is on display is nationalism. The nationalist project draws deeply upon a fantasy of unity between an ethnically or linguistically based people *vis-à-vis* a circumscribed territory. Nature here serves to signify the land and its inhabitants. We cannot downplay the extent to which nationalism, as Discourse of Domestication, co-opts what, for want of a better term, we can call the subject's organic feeling for nature: wild country belongs not to nature *per se*, but to the nation: the English countryside, for example. This process is nothing other than the

co-optation of the Nature master-signifier with the Social master-signifier. What is the Australian coat of arms, in which the kangaroo and emu stand placidly beside a shield emblazoned with the flags of the six Australian states, if not Nature's triumphant domestication – 'acculturation' – *under the flag* of Nation? Nature's ineffable kernel provides an 'objective correlative for the *je ne sais quoi* of nationalist fantasy' (Morton, 2007, p. 97). Yet, as with discourse generally, this mystical core is the condition of impossibility of the complete closure of national ideology.

The impossibility of complete closure, the doubling by which nationalism is routed through both the Discourse of Domestication and the Discourse of Nature, stands as a fulcrum from which a subject of the decision can emerge (Laclau, 1996, p. 92). It is a decision on an undecidable terrain – i.e. a hegemonic intervention – that determines whether the Discourse of Nature acts as an opiate enabling the totalisation of Formation 2 or a short-circuit that threatens the latter's dislocation through the excess of the sublime. In turn, it determines whether the ineffable core of Romantic Nature will serve or contest the domesticating project of Nation.

Romanticism constructs an inherently valuable natural realm in the same way that both humanism and deism – by positing an ineffable soul that distinguishes the human from the animal – prohibit its domestication as something useful only insofar as it meets human ends. Crucially, to break out of the totalisation of social discourse, the relation between D3 and D2 must become antagonistic. The Romantic subject-position offers a subjectivity that exceeds the one-dimensional subject of the Discourse of Society or the objectivised subject of the Discourse of Domestication. Yet the Romantic subject-position initially becomes available, historically speaking, as the inadequacy – the sense of an absent fullness – of the existing regime becomes apparent. Before there is the Romantic subject position, there is the subject-of-the-decision that to some extent must experience itself as split within the existing discursive formation. This subject (as opposed to subject-position) first existed as the metaphor of an absent D3 discourse. As the Discourse of Nature (or Romanticism) arose, the new subject-position it offered seemed to resolve the identity crisis. The subject, as subject of the lack, then became 'positivised' in the new symbolic network in which it locates itself.

Ultimately, the tension between the discourses is played out between the subject positions of D2 and D3. Yet, historically, this tension has been so biased in D2's favour that D3 has acted as an escape valve and effectively defused the tension. We must look for conditions under which a D3 discourse with a Nature master-signifier can reclaim natural signifiers from D2, bypassing the latter's domesticating logic. Although some forms of Romanticism offered a powerful critique of rationalising Enlightenment discourses, in general they remained aesthetic discourses of Nature, emptied of dislocatory potential. Though history has shown that it is by no means an equal contest, the difference – the decision – between co-optation or antagonism between the discourses of Domestication and of Nature, is the first condition of an ecological subject.

F4: $S_2 \to S_1$; $N_2 \to S_1$; $N_2 \to N_1$; $S_2 \to N_1$

How does F4 emerge? What is it about F3 that is unsatisfactory? As I have argued, a canny division of labour between the discourses of Domestication ($N_2 \to S_1$) and of Nature ($N_2 \to N_1$) ensures F3's persistence. Dissatisfaction with Nature's articulation to Social master-signifiers (Science, Nation, Market, etc.) finds an outlet in a Discourse of Nature. Yet D3 ultimately offers either a real alternative or an aestheticised, ideological escape-valve, a fantasmatic sublime or pastoral imaginary of purity and authenticity. As an escape-valve, it reinforces the domesticating discourse D2 ($S_2 \to N_1$). As a real alternative it produces a powerful nature-imaginary that transcends social and political categories, and a subject that refuses domestication. Eventually, however, this subject faces the choice of how to deal with the fragmentation caused by its position suspended between the incommensurable (because they have radically different articulations of natural objects) discourses of Domestication and Nature.

There are three ways to resolve this tension. First, the subject can expel the Nature master-signifier altogether and retreat to the relative stability of F2. Yet it takes a greater magnitude of force to expel an existing antagonistic discourse than to repress its initial emergence – hence the vehemence of climate scepticism and anti-environmentalism in general.[3] Second, the subject can exchange Domestication ($N_2 \to S_1$) for Society ($S_2 \to S_1$) and construct a new formation based around D1 ($S_2 \to S_1$) and D3 ($N_2 \to N_1$). In this case, social signifiers are articulated socially, and natural signifiers articulated naturally. Timothy Morton (2010) critiques such a choice as a retreat into (following Hegel) the 'beautiful soul' syndrome, a kind of Romantic rather than Cartesian dualism (pp. 290–293). When both discourses are concerned only with what is 'native' ($S_2 \to S_1$; $N_2 \to N_1$), the lack of a medium of translation can only obscure. This enforces a rigid dualism between Social and Romantic nature, perpetuating Nature's ideological function and 'screening out' the Discourse of Domestication ($N_2 \to S_1$). We see this in those brands of environmentalism that construct nature as a thing to be contemplated, reifying it in the same manner as the commodity. They are constitutively unable reflexively to critique capitalist production, developmentalism and consumerism because, as rigidly dualist, the latter stand behind an ontological curtain where they can safely evade confrontation with the Discourse of Nature.

Third, the subject might choose to exclude Domestication ($N_2 \to S_1$) and adopt Ecology ($S_2 \to N_1$), but retain Nature ($N_2 \to N_1$). Where F3's tension centres on the unstable relation between D2 ($N_2 \to S_1$) and D3 ($N_2 \to N_1$), with both claiming the right to present Nature, F4's fault line exists between the Discourse of Society and the Discourse of Ecology. These discourses compete to articulate the social as either purely immanent to the social sphere of concepts and norms, or as ultimately dependent (however, indirectly) upon ecology and materiality.
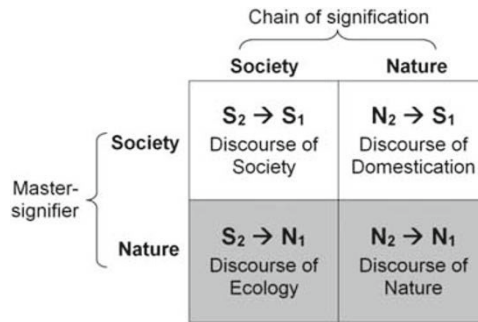
Figure 4: The discourses of Ecology and of Nature are antagonistic towards, respectively, the discourses of Society and Domestication.

Political ecology, Green ideology and deep ecology are all examples of the ecological articulation of the social (Figure 4).

The promise of F4, the force with which it seeks to draw a novel subject out of the lack in the structure of F3, lies in replacing the social articulation of social signifiers, D1 ($S_2 \rightarrow S_1$), with a 'natural' articulation of social signifiers: D4 ($S_2 \rightarrow N_1$). D4 and D3 ($N_2 \rightarrow N_1$) together represent an attractive formation, in which both natural and social signifiers are read through a Nature master-signifier. As Stavrakakis (2000) argues, the environmental movement emerged out of the dislocations afflicting the natural world and the political Left; they are propelled by the absent fullness of a fully sutured ideological discourse. The Discourse of Ecology, embodying an ecological imaginary, offers just such an absent fullness. It amplifies the dislocations afflicting both the Enlightenment formation of F2 and the partially sutured Romantic formation of F3.

A crucial question emerges: Is the Nature master-signifier in each discourse the same Nature master-signifier? Or, put differently, what is the unity of F4? It seems certain that the N_1 of D4 differs markedly from that of D3, which is related through opposition to the Romantic nature-imaginary. But the N_1 of D4 has a vested interest in replacing the N_1 of D3 to stabilise its space of representation. Should it manage to re-shape the N_1 of D3 and define itself in opposition to the S_1 of D1, we would end up with a simple situation in which natural and social signifiers are read through an ecological master-signifier. It is this point that must represent the emergence, after the first condition of an antagonism between D3 and D2, of an ecological subject. At this point, the social *and* the natural are presented through an ecological master-signifier. The 'compulsion' for the subject in this choice is that the single master-signifier promises unification. When we have no Social master-signifiers as such, only Nature, the binary ceases to exist, and we have only Ecology.

Conclusion

Western environmental politics is at a stage, broadly, of F3. A Romantic Nature lies at the heart of much contemporary Green discourse, while, increasingly, the domesticated Nature of market and bureaucratic institutions is winning Green acceptance. At the same time, strong branches of anti-environmentalism persist. The importance of an ecological subject is proportional to the 'double bind' that simultaneously marginalises ecologism through anti-environmentalism and co-opts it through ecological modernisation or sustainable development. An ecological subject offers Greens hopes of a fulcrum from which to transcend this deadlock.

It is the promise of such a subject that has propelled this paper, which located an ecological subject not before or beyond discourse, but in the spaces between two sets of discursive formations. The first condition, identified through my analysis of historical discursive formations, was the Nature master-signifier itself. The two prominent examples here are Romantic discourse and modern environmentalism. Such discourses' ability to dislocate the neat dualism of F2 is, however, dependent upon resisting co-optation (usually as ideological aestheticisation) by that formation. The Discourse of Nature must remain antagonistic, rather than complementary, to Discourses of Society and Domestication. The second condition relates to the tension between the wholly social discourse of D1 and the ecological discourse of D4, with their radically different articulations of the social field – as immanently social, or immanently ecological. D4 needs to take on D1, and challenge it for discursive hegemony; this is precisely what radical Green discourse currently attempts. Yet the latter is generally unaware that it is thwarted by the first condition – the Discourse of Nature – insofar as it acts as an ideological escape-valve that merely reinforces the Enlightenment formation dominated by the discourses of Society and Domestication. Ecologism must 'kick out' the ladder of its first condition, the Discourse of Nature, before it can ascend any further. Only by negating the Nature/Society or Nature/Culture binary that this discourse produces can it describe an arc away from the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment formation.

Just as the Enlightenment formation possessed no Nature master-signifier and all natural entities were presented in a social, domesticating space, F4 possesses no Social master-signifier – thus no social entities are produced. Yet this implies one further development. The master-signifiers of Nature and Society find that the binary opposition that had supported them is dissolved. When the N_1 is no longer N_1 and the S_1 no longer S_1, there is only what we might call E_1. Thus there is no longer nature, or society. There is simply ecology.

About the Author

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which appeals to ethical and epistemic authority are made in fields marked by uncertainty and complexity.

Notes

1 Among animals, only humans pose a problem of what to do with their excrement (Žižek, 2005, p. 179).
2 Lacan terms this the *vel* of alienation, meaning a 'choice' that is nevertheless essential to the becoming-subject (Lacan, 1998, p. 211).
3 Incidentally, D2 is also the discourse of (weak) ecological modernisation, which attempts to capture environmentalism within administrative and economistic terms.

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