

MODERNIZATION AND THE CONCEPT OF NATURE - ON THE REPRODUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL STEREOTYPES (Abstract)

by Ari Aukusti Lehtinen

In Myllyntaus, Timo & Mikko Saikku (eds.): *Encountering the Past in Nature: Essays in Environmental History*. Helsinki University Press 1999.

People rarely perceive the irony inherent in the idea of preserving the wilderness. "Wilderness" cannot be defined objectively: it is as much a state of the mind as a description of nature. By the time we can speak of preserving and protecting wilderness, it has already lost much of its meaning: for example, the Biblical meaning of awe and threat and the sense of a sublimity are far greater than the world of man and unencompassable by him. "Wilderness" is now a symbol of the orderly processes of nature. As a state of the mind, true wilderness exists only in the great sprawling cities (Tuan, 1974:112).

Nature as wilderness

The conclusion above by Yi-Fu Tuan is based on an evaluation of the two contradictory images of wilderness expressed in the Bible. The wilderness was a place of desolation, an unsown land frequented by demons. It was a land condemned by God, to which Adam and Eve were driven, and it was the cursed ground where Christ was tempted by the Devil. But the wilderness was a place for refuge and contemplation, too: the land where the chosen were scattered for reasons of discipline or purgation. Thus, it was a holy ground from which to see the divine more clearly (Tuan, 1974:109-112; Short, 1991:5-27).

The dual and opposing meanings of wilderness were maintained in the ascetic tradition in Christianity; the wasteland and the symbol of freedom were both included as features of the wilderness. However, through the waves of western modernization, the value of wild and vast nature has changed dramatically. In the minds and hands of the white pioneers of the Western Plains in North America, the wild nature to be feared and appreciated have turned into obstacles to overcome. For modern western man, the wilderness is seen as something which must be conquered, the source of one's livelihood. Instead of applying the Biblical idea of humility within nature divinely designed, expressed, for example, in funeral rituals emphasizing the human life span from ashes to ashes, man has been interpreted as the guardian and cultivator

of nature. His divine task was to "populate the earth" by human life and by means derived from the premises of western civilization (Tuan, 1974; Evernden, 1981; Heiman, 1988: 188-192).

The landscape resulting from the invasion of white settlers of the "wilds" of North America also functioned as a motive for modern nature conservation. The rapid disappearance of wild natures and the destruction of indigenous landscapes were received with broadening criticism in the early 1800's. This new reaction shared a common ground with the Biblical notion of appreciating nature: there rose a need to preserve at least some parts of the holy lands "untouched by civilization" before the pioneers and their sons of the industrial era complete their task of turning nature into profit. The modern idea of nature conservation is based on romantic visions of wild natures in need of protection (see Nash, 1967; Heiman, 1989).

Thus, the western idea of nature has been dramatically modified by the conditions of modernization. However, it is still marked by thorough-going dualistic thinking: nature has been considered, reciprocally, as the raw material for industrial development and as an object to be conserved. But what has been the role of the natural sciences in modernizing the ancient abstractions of nature? To what extent have we been liberated from the Christian and medieval myths? The shift from geocentrism to heliocentrism pointed a way out of the anthropocentric misconceptions of nature - or did it?

The more recent debate seeking to broaden the scientific basis of nature research in the direction of the social sciences has placed new challenges and confusions on the agenda. Perhaps we can even talk about a paradigm shift in nature research - an institutional shift from abstractions of nature (celestial idea of nature) towards studies of natures as human environments (terrestrial ideas of nature) - toward environmental histories, environmental sociologies as well as human and political ecologies? These are the questions which will be handled now, beginning with the debate on the paradigm shift and, then, describing the semantic confusion by dealing with some conceptions of nature frequently expressed in the forest debate in Finland.

Nature as the Other: Standards of the Average

Techne and Poesis

Environment as Nature Bound to Culture

Landing at the Margins: An excursion into the Finnish Forests