

Multinaturalism and the End of Old Time Environmentalism

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Recently, I came across a new word that I wish I had coined--“multinaturalism.” Although the name is new, the phenomenon to which it refers is already twenty years old. In a nutshell, multinaturalism claims that there are many different natures, perhaps as many there are different cultures. We are naïve, then, if we think—as I once did--that there is One True Nature to which everyone is referring when speaking of nature. Multinaturalists maintain that there is no universally agreed upon concept of nature; instead, specific ideas, histories, values, and beliefs are always helping to construct what shows up as and counts for “nature” in any particular culture.

Multinaturalism has become a thorn in the sides of Old Time Environmentalists (OTEs), who insist that there *is* One True Nature, that it is objectively *real*, and that it is best exemplified by *wilderness*, virgin land untrammelled by humans. Such wild nature is allegedly stable, enduring, harmonious, balanced, beautiful, and replete with inherent value. Because of multinaturalism, however, OTEs have had to contend with competing ideas about nature, including those that are don't put wilderness protection—or even global climate change—at the top of the environmental agenda. Multinaturalists argue that the idea of One True Nature was constructed by 19th and 20th century white males who were influenced by European romanticism, homegrown transcendentalism, and American individualism. Why is *that* idea of nature superior to those constructed from the perspective of the logger, the rancher, the real estate developer, the Latino immigrant, or the impoverished parent trying to feed her children in a developing country? “Are you an environmentalist,” so asked a 1994 Oregon bumper sticker, “or do you work for a living?” OTEs retort that if all perspectives on nature are put on an equal footing, there will follow an “anything goes” mentality that will justify heedless “development” of wild habitat. Even if scientists are right that there is no *virgin* land, OTEs point out, *relatively* wild areas still exist, and humans are harming them, for instance, by clear cutting old growth forests.

European scholar Ingolfur Blühdorn suggests that deconstructing the One True Nature has had an unanticipated consequence: deconstructing or at least destabilizing the unified subject that is correlated with such Nature. In other words, if you strongly

identify with the One True Nature, *deconstructing it amounts to deconstructing you*. If OTEs have resorted to heated rhetoric and even occasional violence, they may have been defending not only Mother Earth, but their sense of identity as well! This idea merits closer scrutiny.

The identities of those of us who came of age in the mid-1960s were shaped by modernism, mixed with elements of romanticism, among other cultural factors. Postmodern irony, critique of hierarchy, and emphasis on difference had not yet arrived. Although it is not easy to generate a unified self from contending polarities such as modernism and romanticism, it can be done. Consider forester and author, Aldo Leopold, who reconciled within himself modernism and romanticism, universality and particularity, science and art. He called on science to describe the workings of the One True Nature, but also summoned on art to represent its extraordinary depth. According to his Land Ethic: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.”

The modernist self prizes rationality, universality, conscious intentions, autonomy, honesty, sincerity, predictability, balance, harmony, integrity, and a keen sense for utility. For the modernist, nature is comprehensible, predictable, harmonious, and balanced, although lacking in inherent value and thus expendable for the sake of enhancing the human condition. The romantic self esteems personal depth, particularity, creativity, uniqueness, passion, freedom, adventure, novelty, and ultimate meaning. For romantics, nature reveals itself as mysterious, unpredictable, sublime, emotionally charged, sometimes violent, sensual, and radiant with a sacred presence. Arguably, the One True Nature combines modern ideals of stability, coherence, balance, and harmony, with the romantic ideals of passion, energy, beauty, and novelty. Just as I shuttled between modernist and romantic modes of subjectivity, I also encountered nature as showing itself at one time as harmonious and balanced, at another as chaotic and unpredictable. In a moment, I'll explain why I still honor both modernism and romanticism, but no longer identify with either of them.

The advent of postmodern deconstruction caused personal and cultural dislocation for many OTEs, as well as for Boomers, but most people muddled through. Identity structures did not implode, even though they may have been bruised. The modern subject

lacks secure foundations, and gained its identity by excluding Otherness, including emotions, the organic body, the female, and nature itself. Yet, that same modern subject espoused the universalism that demands equal standing for all humans. This demand eventually made possible the postmodern celebration of difference. Postmodernism has also claimed that all is surface, depth is lacking. Yet, the romantic's yearning for depth, mystery, and meaning has not been snuffed out. Seekers of all ages continue to explore the hidden recesses of their minds, the cosmos, and Divinity. In attempting to undermine objective truth and essence, and to erase depth and mystery, postmodernism has encouraged what some regard as a fragmented, incoherent subjectivity, one saturated with information and images, pulled in many different directions at the same time. Supposedly, irony replaces authenticity, posturing replaces sincerity, and profundity gives way to superficiality. Yet, even postmodern subjectivity recognizes the value of what Kenneth Gergen calls "serious games," including the game of environmentalism, the game of human development, the game of raising children, and the game of spirituality. The One True Nature may have been deconstructed, the correlated modes of subjectivity may have been critically scrutinized, but the rising generation raised in the context of postmodernity still appreciates the values of modernism and romanticism, while recognizing the importance of other cultural perspectives as well.

My own move away from Old Time Environmentalism was motivated not so much by deconstruction as by disillusionment. For many years, I was like other OTEs who condemned modernity wholesale, because of ill treatment of the One True Nature. I even argued that the famous anti-modernist German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, was an intellectual forerunner of the deep ecology movement. Not long afterward, I discovered that his infamous "flirtation" with National Socialism in 1933-34 was far more than an instance of bad political judgment. Instead, Heidegger shared the prevailing Nazi view that Enlightenment modernity marked the onset of nihilism. Now, painfully, I realized that the anti-modernism of some deep ecologists and OTEs was politically dangerous. My reaction against modernity had blinded me to its crucial contributions, not least in the domain of politics. Having so fervently supported the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, how could I now promote a view that claims to promote environmental well being, but is incompatible with doctrines of universal human rights?

The rest of the story must wait for another telling, but the short version is this: Reading Ken Wilber helped me to see the dark and the noble sides of both modernity and romanticism. I could honor these cultural perspectives, even while seeking something more inclusive and more integrative. Likewise, I learned to appreciate the contributions of postmodernism, without buying into its anti-hierarchalism, which makes it impossible to assess and to rank competing perspectives in ways needed to describe and resolve pressing environmental problems. In short, I remain an environmentalist, but I have come a long way from Old Time Environmentalism.