
David W. Kidner*

Models of nature have usually referred to ecological, or more generally, scientific understandings, and have seldom included cultural factors. Recently, however, there has been a trend toward defining nature as a “social construction,” that is, as an artifact of human social and linguistic capability. I argue that constructionism attempts to assimilate nature to an exclusively anthropocentric “reality,” and that it should be seen as expressing long-term industrialist tendencies to separate the “human” and the “natural” realms and to assimilate the latter to the former. Consequently, the constructionist approach, rather than offering us a fertile means of incorporating cultural influences within environmental theorizing, is better viewed as a cognitive counterpart to industrialism’s physical assimilation of the natural world.

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST ALTERNATIVE TO OBJECTIVISM

Scientific understandings of nature, including ecological understandings, have often been accused of being mechanistic; and in the last two decades, as dissatisfaction with positivism has grown, many theorists have moved toward recognition of the roles of culture and language in our perception and understanding of nature. Clearly, naive forms of realism according to which nature is a directly perceptible entity that is unambiguously available to all regardless of experience, cultural context, or motivation are untenable. Among some social scientists, however, this emphasis on cultural factors has replaced rather than complemented biological explanation, in a swing of the epistemological pendulum from the biologism of the 1950s to an equally uncontested preoccupation with culture; and the ripples of this linguistic and cultural preoccupation are spreading into environmental writing on both sides of the Atlantic. Although this paper is primarily a critique of this exclusively cultural focus and of the social constructionist approach which most clearly exemplifies it, I also suggest that a critical realist perspective overcomes the difficulties associated with both social constructionism and the naive realism which constructionists often set up as their straw adversary.

* Faculty of Humanities, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton, Nottingham NG11 8NS, England. Kidner's interests are in exploring the relations among psychological, cultural, and natural structures, and in clarifying the impacts of industrialism on these structures. He is the author of Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity, to be published by State University of New York Press at the end of this year. He thanks two anonymous referees, Bryan G. Norton and Peter Miller, and the editor, Eugene C. Hargrove, for suggesting improvements to an earlier draft of this paper.
Claims that nature is entirely “socially constructed” have become widespread in recent years. Thus, Vivien Burr suggests that “what we regard as truth . . . is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of . . . social processes and interactions.” Similarly, Peter Mason argues that “reality” itself is a product of the activity of our imagination. Language is often seen as playing a leading role in this construction: thus, William Chaloupka and R. McGregor Cawley suggest that “nature, like everything else we talk about, is first and foremost an artifact of language.” In these terms, language is seen not as representing nature more or less adequately, but rather as constituting it, so that “any attempt to invoke the name of nature . . . must now be either naive or ironic.” Similarly, constructionists “question the assumption that science is about nature as it exists outside us.” Rather, “scientific paradigms are socio-historical constructs—not given by the character of nature, but created out of social experience, cultural values, and political-economic structures.” Nature, according to this view, has no inherent structures or patterns of its own—a notion often criticized by constructionists as “essentialism”—but is structured discursively. The “dubious” logic of nature, as Chaloupka and Cawley argue, must therefore be replaced by “rhetoric.”

Such claims suggest that nature is an entity very different from that which many environmental theorists, writers, and activists have up until now believed. Rather than being viewed as a multifaceted, diverse order whose patterns and possibilities extend well beyond our ability to understand them, nature becomes an offshoot of a social reality which also constructs individuality. And since the social world varies according to time and place, then it follows that each of these social worlds will construct a somewhat different version of nature, and there is, therefore, no single “nature,” but rather a diversity of “natures” constituted by our various fantasies and languages. In William Cronon’s words, it “hardly needs saying that nothing in physical nature can help us adjudicate among these different visions [of nature], for in all cases nature merely serves as the mirror onto which societies project the ideal reflections they wish to see.”

---

4 Ibid.
tionism therefore implies a relativistic stance within which one attitude toward or interpretation of the natural world is no better or worse than any other.

The implications of redefining nature thus are considerable. Cronon, for example, argues that wilderness

... is not a primitive sanctuary where the last remnants of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural."

According to views such as these, then, nature is not the ground out of which human life grows, but “the site for a repertoire of definitional and contestatory activities.” In other words, nature is part of a discursive world, and any “problems” which might exist within this world are produced and solved by debate rather than by embodied action. In this spirit, John Hannigan argues that environmental problems originate in the discursive realm we call “science.” Criticizing the view that science can, at least to some extent, “reflect the physical reality of the natural world,” he claims that scientific knowledge “is highly dependent on a process of claims making.”

It is rare indeed to find an environmental problem which does not have its origins in a body of scientific research. Acid rain, loss of biodiversity, global warming, ozone depletion, desertification and dioxin poisoning are all examples of problems which first began with a set of scientific observations.

Cronon echoes this sentiment, claiming that “some of the most dramatic environmental problems we appear to be facing... exist mainly as simulated representations in complex computer models of natural systems.” Environmental problems, according to this viewpoint, are not disruptions of the ecological fabric of the world which can be more or less imperfectly detected, assessed and described through the scientific and conceptual tools available to us. They are, rather, constructed by these tools, and cannot be said to exist independently of the ways we measure and discuss them.

The difficulties and uncertainties surrounding assessments of ecological health are often used to justify these views. Thus, Hannigan suggests that because “so little is actually known about how species interact in ecosys-
tems,”14 and because “key concepts” such as “nature, ecology, and environmentalism” are “by no means fixed in meaning but instead are both socially constructed and contested,”15 then “rather than a fixed entity, the environment is a fluid concept which is both culturally grounded and socially constituted.”16 The variety of human interpretations of nature, then, rather than being taken as suggesting that the complexity and diversity of the natural world exceeds our capacity to understand it, indicates to constructionists that there is no world “out there” independent of human cognition and language. There is, therefore, a clear conflict between the social constructionist viewpoint and a more realist one which holds that although the natural world allows us to interpret it in various ways, the existence of this world is nevertheless largely independent of human social life.

PROBLEMS WITH CONSTRUCTIONISM

Given the otherwise unenthusiastic response to John Cantlon’s call for “ecological bridges” between the sciences and the humanities,17 some theorists have welcomed constructionism as a way of broadening the otherwise mechanistic focus of the natural sciences to include a much-needed cultural dimension. However, as the quotes above indicate, constructionism is not so much concerned with integrating these disparate academic fields as with replacing one with the other, so that “our knowledge of the world,” since “it is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is,” instead comes to be viewed as constructed “through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life.”18 But just as the force which keeps us in our seats during a tedious lecture is a combination of gravity and politeness, as the physicist Richard Feynman put it, so our relation to the natural world has both cultural and physical dimensions; and just as the biological reductionism of an ecologistic approach is now rejected on good grounds, so sociological reductionism shows no more promise.19 If the demolition of nature stems, in part at least, from the dissociation between culture and nature, then it is difficult to see how this demolition could be countered by theories which arise out of and perpetuate this same dissociation.

14 Hannigan, Environmental Sociology, p. 151.
15 Ibid., p. 126.
16 Ibid., p. 109. I am reminded of this sort of claim each time I drive up the busy motorway near my home. As I travel through the mainly agricultural and urban landscape, I pass a large sign informing me that I am entering “The National Forest.” Such victories of discourse over reality are becoming increasingly common outside academia as well as within it.
18 Burr, An Introduction to Social Constructionism, p. 4.
Few environmental writers would quarrel with the notion that our understandings of nature are affected by our cultural background, training, language, and so on, or that unmediated contact with nature is unrealistic. By analogy, most of us would accept that the way we see an animal will be affected by the type of binoculars we use. However, we might be more reluctant to accept that the animal is constructed by the act of looking through the binoculars, or that it has no independent existence aside from this act—claims that embody what Roy Bhaskar has referred to as the “epistemic fallacy,” or the view that “statements about being can be reduced to or analyzed in terms of statements about knowledge.” Environmental writing influenced by constructionism frequently confuses these two quite different types of statement. For example, Philippe Descola begins a recent paper by stating that “many anthropologists and historians now agree that conceptions of nature are socially constructed”—a statement with which few environmental writers of whatever persuasion would disagree; but two pages later, this statement has mutated into the much more debatable assertion that “nature is socially constructed.” As Andrew Collier ruefully notes, “the kind of idealism which treats the world as dependent on our cognitive choices . . . has really come into its own” in recent decades.

Perhaps sensing their untenability, however, social constructionists frequently retreat from these extreme claims toward a reassuringly “commonsense” view. For example, Ulrich Beck’s influential Risk Society vacillates between the claim that environmental problems are social constructions which have no reality independent of our understanding of them, and the quite different view that objectively measurable environmental problems are making living increasingly risky. John Hannigan also has his epistemological cake and eats it, claiming that “environmental problems and solutions are end products of a dynamic social process of definition, negotiation and legitimation” whilst also cautioning us on the same page not to “deny the seriousness of the threats faced by our planet.” Similarly, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry oscillate between a dispassionate, relativist social constructionist discussion of “the notion of nature as threatened,” emphasizing that “what is viewed and criticised as unnatural . . . in one era or one society is not necessarily viewed as such in another,” and more embodied, realist references to “the alarming rate of natural destruction caused by urban growth.”

---

22 Collier, Critical Realism, p. 86.
24 Hannigan, Environmental Sociology, p. 31.
This sort of vacillation reflects the tension between a detached academic stance which has already abandoned any felt commitment to or involvement in the natural world, and the intuited or directly experienced loss of the wild and the natural which, although we are often unable to articulate it, we deeply sense in nonintellectual ways. Environmental destruction is not just a matter of how we describe, model, and conceptualize the world; it is also a matter of empirical experience, as when I revisit the areas in Surrey where I used to roam as a child forty years ago, now transformed from woods and heathland to factories and housing estates. Given the extent of industrialism’s transformation of the natural landscape into sites for agricultural and industrial production, and the evolution of a social world which is consistent with this transformation, to identify closely with the natural order is indeed, as Aldo Leopold put it, “to walk alone in a world of wounds.”26 There are, therefore, powerful social and emotional reasons for resigning oneself to the loss of the natural world and withdrawing into a substitute fantasy world constructed with the aid of the electronic media. For example, a recent article in a medical periodical suggests that if we cannot find tranquillity in the physical reality of our often urban environment, then we should “try to visualise [ourselves] far away in a fantasy location, such as a sunny hillside in the summer.”27 Capitalism offers powerful incentives for us to make this type of substitution, and the proliferation of nature documentaries on television and the growth of manicured “natural environments” such as Sea World can be seen as part of an ongoing project to replace wild nature by manufactured substitutes. This substitution is rapidly colonizing even “nonindustrialized” societies: for example, Gary Nabhan reports that “a significant portion of kids today have never gone off alone, away from human habitations, to spend more than half an hour by themselves in a ‘natural’ setting. None of the six Yaqui children responded that they had; nor had 58% of the O’odham, 53% of the Anglos, and 71% of the Mexican children.” Furthermore, “77% of the Mexican children, 61% of the Anglo children, 60% of the Yaqui children, and 35% of the O’odham children . . . had seen more animals on television and in the movies than they had personally seen in the wild.”28

Nature, then, often appears to us to arise out of various technologically amplified discourses; and urban or agricultural environments provide few opportunities to assess the accuracy of these discourses. If we venture into one of the few remaining areas of wilderness, however, we may find our assumptions painfully contradicted by a nature which knows and cares nothing for our

languages and cultures. As Holmes Rolston, III points out, “All those persons who did not think that ‘lion’ refers to a real predator lurking in the grass are extinct.”29 But this position understates the extent of our predicament, for in the industrialized world, our assumptions are often widely accepted and underlie global practices, and may therefore ultimately be fatal to civilizations rather than to individuals.

To constructionists, however, reality is a product of social life rather than empirical assessment, and the entities and forms which science identifies are “constituted through the artful creativity of scientists.”30 However, as Rolston argues:

The sporophyte generation of mosses is haploid. Malaria is carried by Plasmodium in mosquitoes. Neither of those facts is likely to change with a new cultural filter. Golgi apparatus and mitochondria are here to stay. There is no feasible theory by which life on earth is not carbon-based and energized by photosynthesis, nor by which water is not composed of hydrogen and oxygen, whose properties depend on its being a polar molecule.31

Science, then, may be a partial understanding which we often fatefully misconstrue as being a complete description of nature, but it is nevertheless firmly anchored in realities which are beyond the influence of language. To an increasing extent, however, even these realities are being modified by industrialism, not only through the breeding of certain species and the elimination of others, but also, and increasingly directly, through genetic manipulation. If nature, then, was not originally constructed by technology and language, it is in many ways in the process of being reconstructed by these means; and the metaphor of “construction” assumes the absence or obliteration of natural structure, so that the world is simply made up of (verbal or physical) “raw materials.” This demolition of the nature that frames and transcends human awareness, and its replacement by a “nature” which is defined and constructed by industrial and discursive activity from the fragments of the original nature, implies a corresponding redefinition of the person to fit a rational, commercial world—a redefinition which, in Arthur Kleinman’s words, has “deepened discursive layers of experience . . . while paradoxically making it more difficult to grasp and communicate poetic, moral, and spiritual layers of the felt flow of living.”32 This transformation, suggests Kleinman, “can be of a kind to cancel, nullify, or evacuate the defining human element in individuals—their moral,
aesthetic, and religious experience.” Social constructionism, then, can be seen as rooted within a broader reconstructive project which reconfigures both humanity and the nonhuman world according to an industrialist blueprint. The physical and ideological replacement of nature, understood as the larger order out of which we grow, by a reduced order based on industrialist rationality finds its academic counterpart in the doctrine that nature is a mere part-actor in the wider drama of human life and language.

But so long as this reconstructive project is incomplete, the claim that nature is socially constructed remains an industrialist fantasy rather than an ontological reality. Wildness still exists in the world, as does our intuitive capacity to sense and value it; although both are threatened by industrialism. Consequently, claims that “there is nothing about the nature of the world . . . that leads necessarily to the conceptual categories present in any language” are misleading. For example, Michael Soulé notes that “the taxonomies of aboriginal societies are virtually always the same in structure as those of modern scientific cultures . . . aboriginal taxonomies typically recognise the same entities as species as do modern taxonomists,” suggesting that there is something about the world which needs to be taken into account as we develop our models of reality.

CONTEXTUALIZING CONSTRUCTIONISM

A historical perspective allows us to step outside this industrialist reality and contextualize constructionism itself. If we consider cultural change in the Western world since the Renaissance, then a recurring theme has been the attempt to develop a “human” realm in contradistinction to “nature.” Western philosophy and industrialist practice have driven this enterprise through their increasing tendency to separate thought and materiality; and some contemporary writers such as Fredric Jameson see postmodernism, which is part of the underlying intellectual milieu out of which constructionism has grown, as an

---

extension of the same overall pattern. The assumption that the “human” realm is increasingly separate from “nature” is today part of our taken-for-granted understanding, and is a central tenet of science, economics, psychology, common sense, and almost every other facet of the global commercial system. Stemming from the influential Cartesian and Kantian traditions, constructionism can be understood as a predictable next step: having alleged the separateness of humanity from nature, and claimed that “the understanding does not derive its laws from, but prescribes them to, nature,” it is a relatively minor step to the position that nature itself exists only as an artifact of the superior, human domain.

In this respect, constructionism is consistent with other forms of colonization. In a manner reminiscent of the way the New Zealand flatworm reduces its earthworm prey to a sort of amorphous jelly before ingesting it, so industrialism’s colonization of the world operates by denying and dissolving any structure which is inconsistent with it, before using the resulting “raw materials” for its own ends. For example, Murray and Rosalie Wax point out that the settlement of the West involved a denial of both the natural forms of the landscape and the indigenous cultural structures which were continuous with them:

Confronting a land whose every area was known to and utilized by its native inhabitants, the land-hungry whites had perceived and spoken of ‘a wilderness.’ . . . just as the wilderness ideology rationalized for the invaders their seizing and occupying of Indian lands, so does the vacuum ideology rationalize for the educators their roles in the schools. . . . [for] if the child actually had a culture including knowledge and values, then the educators ought properly to learn about these and build upon them, but if, on entering school, he is merely a vacuum, then what need to give attention to his home and community?

Just as the colonizers perceived “empty” lands and “cultureless” peoples, and industrialists perceive “raw materials,” so to the constructionist “natural order is always an ordering constructed by people and used to make sense of nature, never an ordering insisted upon by nature itself and imposed upon people by it.” Colonizing principles thus become “built into” epistemology, which henceforth contains its own intrinsic denial of natural structure.

---

It is probably no accident that language, the human ability which, more than any other differentiates us from the nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth, is often selected by constructionists as the defining basis of reality. This attempt to redefine reality in linguistic terms has many precursors in colonialist history: to take just one example, Columbus insisted on giving Spanish names to each area of the New World, knowing that they already had indigenous names; and he insisted, at one point, that his crew swear an oath alleging that their place of landing—the island which today we refer to as Cuba—was part of the continental mainland. To summarize the view thoroughly elaborated by Timothy Reiss, the emergence of the modern world has been associated with a growing *disjunction* between concepts and reality, whereas in medieval times there was an assumed *conjunction*. Thus, the “discourse that names and enumerates becomes, replaces, the order of the world that it is taken as representing,” so that “a world of meaning” is placed over against “a world of being.” As this substitution of a manufactured, “human” reality for a natural reality proceeds, language appears not so much as a human attempt to communicate with and describe those forms which exist beyond language, but rather as itself constituting reality. Infected by this trend, environmentalists may fall into the trap of confusing terms such as *ecosystem* or *biodiversity* with the more complex and less visible realities which these terms point toward. Social constructionism can be understood as the inevitable culmination of this trend; and our forgetfulness that there exists an order “beyond the text” is epitomized by Baudrillard’s claims that there is no “nature” out there, and that “our true environment is the universe of communication.”

The intellectual dismemberment of reality is often a precursor to and a legitimization of its physical destruction, and academics as well as logging companies have contributed to the degradation of the natural world. Language is particularly central to this process, since it enables us to synthesize a “human” realm which is apparently independent of the nonhuman world. Thus, Michael Billig, defending a “rhetorical” approach to psychology, argues that “we must concentrate on the one power which separates humans from all those other organisms: the power of language.” Discourse is therefore central to anthropocentrism; and it is hardly surprising that a discursively-defined world is one from which nature is effectively excluded.

This exclusion developed historically within Europe, and was spread through-

---

out the globe through the process of colonization. The triumph of the Spanish over the Aztecs, for example, was both a military conquest and the victory of a language which expressed its independence from the natural world over one which symbolically linked these two realms. As Tzvetan Todorov points out:

\[\ldots\] this victory from which we all derive, Europeans and Americans both, delivers \ldots\ a terrible blow to our capacity to feel in harmony with the world, to belong to a preestablished order; its effect is to repress man’s communication with the world, to produce the illusion that all communication is interhuman communication.\[44\]

The language of the modern industrial era is therefore not designed to communicate with the world, but to exclude it, to reduce it to “things and stuff”—a characteristic which makes the task of the environmental philosopher particularly difficult, since talking about nature becomes a way of not communicating with it, so implicitly reaffirming the separateness of the human realm.

Constructionism embodies a dubious “solution” to the problems which stem from this dualistic dissociation of the “human” and “natural,” simply allowing one pole of the dualism to be assimilated by the other. Thus, for Cronon, if “wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural,” the answer, apparently, is to redefine wilderness as “a product of \ldots\ civilization.”\[45\] But this “solution” conflates two quite different meanings of wilderness: first, wilderness as a term encompassing the indefinitely large number of cultural interpretations of nature, and second, wilderness as the only partly knowable realm which such terms indirectly refer to. As Rolston points out, to talk of “the cultural invention of wilderness”\[46\] is to conflate the epistemological construction of the world with the ontological construction of the world.\[47\] In addition, the claim that language constructs reality ignores the whole historical process whereby language distances itself from the natural order. As a result, the disjunction between language and reality seems to disappear; and as Macnaghten and Urry suggest, “an appropriate politics of nature would be \ldots\ one which stems from how people talk about, use, and conceptualize nature. \ldots\”\[48\] This is an entirely anthropocentric vision, all awareness of nature as existing independently of these activities being denied.

Within this discursively defined world, commonplace dualities such as those which dissociate the “wild” from the “tame” or the “masculine” from the “feminine” are seen as entirely socially constructed and as having no basis in

---


\[46\] Ibid., p. 79.

\[47\] Rolston, “Nature for Real,” p. 54.

\[48\] Macnaghten and Urry, *Contested Natures*, p. 3.
biological reality. While this view may in some ways be a refreshing antidote to the biologistic denial of cultural influence, the wholesale rejection of any non-discursive natural order seems equally dubious, leaving us with no basis outside language for verifying the accuracy of different descriptions. Language can mislead by glossing over difference as well as by reifying it. Claims, for example, that all societies are technological, or that “what we do to the world is . . . as much a part of the ‘natural’ process of change as is the work of termites, beavers or the elements,” ignore important distinctions. Moreover, some words conflate entirely different meanings: consider, for example, the term wild as applied to a person who is aggressively drunk and a mountain lion in its natural habitat. From a “critical realist” perspective, language can only imperfectly communicate reality, whether that reality is external nature or our own prelinguistic experience. As André Gorz expresses it:

Language is a filter which always forces me to say more or less than I feel. Learning one’s language is a form of original violence done to lived experience; that process forces these experiences for which there are no words to remain silent, while I am forced to express meanings which do not correspond to my experience. . . . It forces me to substitute a discourse which is not my own for the one it forbids me.

From this point of view, language clumsily attempts to articulate realities which are beyond its powers to describe. Roderick Nash, for example, points out that the term wilderness “has a deceptive concreteness at first glance. The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. . . . The term designates a quality (as the -ness suggests) that produces a certain mood or feeling. . . .” Thus, the term wilderness seduces us into thinking of it as a concrete “thing” which can be “saved,” rather like an old piece of furniture which we rescue from a rubbish tip—a mistake which intrinsically denies the wild, the symbolic, the nonmaterial aspects of wilderness. As Gregory Bateson noted, “language depends on nouns, which seem to refer to things, while biological communication concerns pattern and relationship.” The view of language as constituting reality therefore places us within a world of things, while what Bateson referred to as “the pattern which connects” fades from awareness. In this respect, Third World peoples who are in the process of being

---

54 Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 188.
colonized by industrialism frequently demonstrate a more acute critical insight into the character of global commerce than those of us who have inhabited the already-industrialized world since infancy. Among those Colombian peasants whose small-scale farms have been taken over by the sugar industry, for example, industrialism is understood as “an animated being that is said to slowly devour the men who bring it to life.” Just as industrialism devours indigenous, local adaptations, so the social sciences’ “paralysing . . . obsession with language and communication” has the effect of assimilating wildness to the realm of human discourse; and an environmentalism which accepts the priority of language is therefore one within which wildness is already lost.

As this constructionist view infiltrates environmental writing, there are increasingly claims that nature is already part of the domesticated world. Gómez-Pompa and Kaus, for example, claim that evidence concerning the Amazon Basin “shows not only a high density of human populations in the past and sites of continuous human occupation over many centuries but an intensively managed and constantly changing environment as well.” Terms such as high density and intensively managed, however, serve the same purpose as the claim that “all societies are technological,” concealing the extent to which both wilderness areas and peoples are less than entirely domesticated. It is precisely because, in some places and in some respects, the Amazon Basin transcends the ways it has been domesticated, used, and understood that it is sensed by wilderness advocates to be of more value than, say, an urban park. If we begin by defining rain forest as “artifact and habitat,” as do Gómez-Pompa and Kaus, then we ignore its other dimensions, reducing everything to fit a human measure. If the human and “natural” realms have become historically dissociated, and if environmentalists’ definition of “wilderness” areas as places where “man is a visitor who does not remain” have reflected this dissociation, then an appropriate correction is not to collapse what is wild into that which is human, but to find ways of recovering the relation between the human and the wild which respect their partial separateness. If we are to achieve this relationship, then language, in the widest sense of the term, is

---


CONSTRUCTIONISM AS A CULTURAL SYMPTOM

Contextualizing constructionism allows us to recognize that it is not merely an intellectual fashion, but that it also embodies deeper cultural trends which it cannot itself identify or critique. If nature, for example, is defined as “an artifact of language,” then the “nature” of the safari park, the TV documentary, or even the city, is as authentic a nature as that which we encounter in the wilderness area, which therefore becomes expendable. Constructionism thus colludes with commercialism in the long-term industrialist project of replacing the natural by the artifactual, defining a form of human existence which claims independence from natural processes and rhythms. Social constructionism therefore provides a model of nature which fits seamlessly into the industrialist view of the world, and so plays a similar role in the academic sphere to that played by commercial organizations such as Sea World or Centerparcs in the sphere of leisure.

We also noted above that constructionism enables us to avoid the pain which stems from our recognition, at some level, that we are destroying nature. Noam Chomsky has noted that if “it’s too hard to deal with real problems,” some academics tend to “go off on wild goose chases that don’t matter . . . [or] get involved in academic cults that are very divorced from any reality and that provide a defense against dealing with the world as it actually is.” “Nature” as an entity external to and prior to social life, according to this defensive stance, does not need protecting, for all action is, conveniently, discursive action. If, for example, we accept that “objects of discourse do not exist. The entities referred to are constituted in it and by it,” so that a “fish is only a fish if it is socially classified as one,” then as Andrew Collier remarks, we can easily solve two environmental problems at a stroke simply by referring to lumps of untreated sewage as “fish.”

A constructionist perspective also leaves us ethically rudderless, removing

60 Wade Sikorski claims that “wilderness . . . is as easily found in the city as in the vast rain forest.” See his “Building Wilderness,” in Bennett and Chaloupka, In the Nature of Things, p. 29. Quoted by Rolston, “Nature for Real,” p. 48.
64 Collier, Critical Realism, p. 89.
the requirement to align morality, however indirectly, with nature, since morality is loosely defined within a broad spectrum of social and linguistic activity rather than by any criteria external to social existence. While few today would defend the view of those mediaeval historians who declared that we can use the natural world directly as a model of virtue by observing, for example, the chastity of the camel or the altruism of the stork, the very least we might feel the need for some morally relevant horizon which gives human life direction and meaning. As Charles Taylor argues:

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. . . . Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature . . . or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.

More generally, constructionism eliminates the need for us to assess our views with reference to any culture outside our own, since all knowledge is regarded as culturally relative, and so holds no implications for any other culture. This relativistic frame ensures that debate has little sense of moral urgency, of being connected to real issues in a real world. It can only, in the words of the anthropologist Stanley Diamond, “convert the experience of other cultures into a kind of sport, just as Veblen’s modern hunter mimics and trivializes what was once a way of life. Relativism is the bad faith of the conqueror, who has become secure enough to become a tourist.” Thus, we can enjoy the diversity of ways in which cultures relate to their “environments,” and “borrow” their rituals, sacred objects, and beliefs at will, without feeling the need to adjudge the extent to which they are environmentally benign or to try to learn anything from them. As a result, many environmental writers today draw back from the difficulties of assessing the ecological credentials of different societies, often implying that because they inhabit different historical times or discursive universes, what they do is simply not comparable. In any case, just as wilderness is regarded as already contained within an industrialist reality, much social science accepts the globalization of modern culture—a view well expressed by Marcus and Fischer:

. . . all other cultural worlds have been penetrated by aspects of modern life. What matters . . . is not ideal life elsewhere, or in another time, but the discovery of new recombinant possibilities and meanings in the process of daily living

---

anywhere. Alternatives . . . must be suggested within the bounds of the situations and lifestyles that are the objects of cultural criticism.68

In other words, we cannot look outside our own culture to any external alternative, since, for Marcus and Fischer, “the vision of difference it held out is disappearing.” “To invoke another culture,” they continue, “is to locate it in a time and space contemporaneous with our own, and thus to see it as part of our world, rather than as a mirror or alternative to ourselves.”69 All reality and all debate, then, must exist within the hegemonic sphere of meaning defined by industrialism; and industrialism has indeed “consumed and lost its other.”70 What has happened here is that since we have lost touch with any frame broader than that defined by our language and our social “reality,” anything beyond this “reality” will necessarily seem unreal, invalid, or nonexistent. All recognition of radical difference, all recognition of mystery, all ability to judge our own lifestyles by external criteria have disappeared; and the human industrialist project floats free within an ethical and ontological vacuum.

Denying the reality of anything beyond the “text” of industrialism can be understood psychoanalytically as an attempted incorporation into the self of what is beyond it—a pathological substitute for relation which Freud referred to as “secondary narcissism.” In other words, if in childhood we are not socialized toward a healthy relationality which can recognise and accept the other as different to self, differences between self and other become a threat which has to be got rid of by control and mastery; and we attempt to manipulate and change the other so that it becomes the servant of our own psychological needs. It is not difficult to see the definition of nature as part of a “human” realm, or the reduction of cultural diversity to a single “global culture,” as just such attempts to deny difference and to assimilate the other to self, just as the reductionism of technology ignores natural structures in its single-minded quest for “raw materials.” Frederick Turner captures this confluence between industrialist and psychological forms of narcissism in his insight that

...the lust for things that will automatically confer power on their possessors [may be] another symptom of the petrifaction of the faith . . . for . . . the native peoples who lived amidst vast, unexploited lodes of these very things often regarded them as mere sparkling parts of an infinitely larger and more beautiful design . . . Gold, silver, and stones, like technology, are pathetic substitutes for

69 Marcus and Fischer, Anthropology as Cultural Critique, pp. 133–34.
a lost world, a lost spirit life, and to the extent that they rule a culture we may infer its inmost health.71

But I am not proposing a sort of psychological reductionism here, for in industrial society, our loss of relation to and attempted incorporation of what is “other” to us are not merely individual symptoms, but have become defining characteristics of the social fabric of life. As Christopher Lasch argues in The Culture of Narcissism, “every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure.”72 If, as Lasch argues, our character structure is founded on the culturally sedimented separation of subject from object, then clearly one “solution” to the problems caused by this separation is to deny the existence of the object, so that everything becomes a manifestation of the subject. This denial, in turn, results in “a loss of belief in the meaningfulness or even the reality of the external world.”73 From this perspective, then, social constructionism’s denial of external reality implies a profound psychological problem as well as an equally profound epistemological error. As Freud noted, this “loss of reality” is characteristic of psychosis, as is the attempt “to reconstruct reality” from the materials of fantasy.74 Ian Craib’s characterization of social constructionism as a “social psychosis,”75 therefore, seems entirely accurate. In effect, we have created a solipsistic reality which allows us to recognize the natural world mainly to the extent that it accords with our needs and assumptions—as an other, that is, which is defined by the way it complements these needs rather than by our awareness of its own structures, values, and rights. Peter Mason’s description of the attitude of the European colonists of the New World can just as easily be taken as describing the attitude of the social constructionist:

The way . . . [they] resorted to the world that was familiar to them is a timeless response by self when faced with the challenge of the other. In using the elements familiar to them, they were in fact engaged in a double process of reduction and construction. In constructing the New World, resemblance was linked with imagination to avoid the endless monotony of the same. The result is a continuing process of construction and reconstruction of a world, which we may therefore call an imaginary world. . . .

73 Michael Fischer, Review of Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, in Salmagundi, Fall 1979, pp. 166–73.
The other side of this process is its reductive aspect. The perception of the other was not limited to observation from a distance. It was coupled with violence, and the violence carried out against the other was an attempt to reduce what was refractory to the bounds of self. . .

Thus, says Mason, an "exegetic apparatus is imposed on the New World to assimilate it to the closed circle of words and things. . ."76

Since it permeates our lives and institutions, this reductive stance is difficult to perceive, generating a "numbing sense of reality"77 which maintains the "social phantasy system" of modern society. Subjectivity becomes colonized by industrialist assumptions and distorted by an overemphasis on language, its resonance with the rest of the natural world diminished by a corresponding atrophy of those other forms of sensing and communication which we share with the rest of the animal kingdom. The environmentalist, caught within this distorted subjectivity, either attempts to "save" the "things"—species, biodiversity, wilderness areas—which are the fragments of wildness accessible to consciousness; or less constructively, becomes nihilistically resigned to a world viewed as already domesticated, since the available conceptual and linguistic tools deny the possibility of an undomesticated nature. What is not articulated by either of these alternatives therefore dies soundlessly, unnoticed, as the world increasingly conforms to its domesticated representation; and the world we have "saved" turns out to be a museum inhabited only by the dusty skeletons of once vital creatures.

RESTORING THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

As Roy Bhaskar has made clear,78 it is entirely possible to maintain a conception of nature as external to us and as existing independently of thought and language whilst appreciating that the ways we sense and perceive nature are deeply affected by cultural and cognitive factors. Indeed, the awareness of the extent to which these cultural and cognitive factors keep us from knowing nature directly should induce in us a humility based on the recognition that nature must, for the most part, remain a mystery to us; and the notion of preserving nature, if it is of any use at all, must be rooted primarily in the willingness to let nature be rather than presuming to "save" it through scientific knowledge or active management. While humans are part of nature and so have contributed in certain respects to the way it functions, this is a long way from

76 Mason, Deconstructing America, p. 20.
saying that nature is “socially constructed” or that it extends no further than the boundaries of our capacity to recognize or describe it.

Although I do not have the space to argue for it here, a “critical realist” perspective\textsuperscript{79} allows us to view language, rather than defining a “human” realm which denies the independent existence of nature, as potentially reaching out towards the natural world “in the light of an imaginative generosity that seeks to enter the other’s voice into the dialogue. . . .”\textsuperscript{80} Outside the industrialized world, as Barry Lopez notes, “language is not something man imposes on the land. . . . The very order of the landscape, the ecology of its sounds and thoughts, derives from the mind’s intercourse with the landscape.”\textsuperscript{81} This intercourse between the human and the nonhuman natural can become a dance which defines both our separateness and our interdependence; and as part of this dance, a language which is aware of its own limits can “hold the vision together.”\textsuperscript{82} Such an understanding of language, reintegrated into the larger realm of the natural, can restore our membership within the natural world rather than colluding in our dissociation from it.

\textsuperscript{79} See Collier, \textit{Critical Realism}.


\textsuperscript{82} Lopez, \textit{Arctic Dreams}, p. 298.