

Abstract

Dwelling in Political Landscapes: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives

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People all over the globe are experiencing unprecedented and often hazardous situations as environments change at speeds never before experienced. This edited collection proposes that anthropological perspectives on landscape have great potential to address the resulting conundrums. The contributions build particularly on phenomenological, structuralist and multispecies approaches to environmental perception and experience, but they also argue for incorporating political power into analysis alongside dwelling, cosmology and everyday practice. The book's 13 ethnographically rich chapters explore how the material and the conceptual are entangled in and as landscapes, but it also looks at how these processes unfold at many scales in time and space, involving different actors with different powers. Thus it reaches towards new methodologies and new ways of using anthropology to engage with the sense of crisis concerning environment, movements of people, climate change and other planetary transformations.

Dwelling in political landscapes: contemporary anthropological perspectives builds substantially upon anthropological work by Tim Ingold and others, which emphasises the ongoing and open-ended, yet historically conditioned ways in which humans and nonhumans produce the environments they inhabit. In such work, landscapes are understood as the medium and outcome of meaningful life activities, where humans, like other animals, dwell. This means that landscapes are neither social/cultural nor natural, but socio-natural. Protesting against and moving on from the proverbial dualisms of modern, Western and maybe capitalist thought, is only the first step in renewing anthropology's methodology for the current epoch, however. The contributions ask how seemingly disconnected temporal, representational, economic and other systemic dynamics fold back on lived experience that are materialised in landscapes.

Foremost through studying how socially valued landscapes become

irreversibly disturbed, commodified or subjected to wilful markings or erasures, the book explores a number of approaches to how landscapes are entangled in the ways people gather and organise themselves. These processes have material as well as conceptual dimensions that anthropological analysis typically attends to. Developing such thinking in the context of studies of landscape specifically, several chapters draw from the work of Anna Tsing, who writes in this book about a case from Denmark. Mindful of troubling changes in Earth Systems, they nevertheless argue from empirics, using anthropological and interdisciplinary sources. In this way the authors show that processes of landscape change are always both habitual *and* laden with choices. That is, landscape change is political.

Undoubtedly, landscape politics is bound up not just in how nature has been imagined, but in long histories of consumption. Today, an alarming quest for raw materials and energy is changing both political and geological formations. Meanwhile dominant socio-political aspirations mean the exploitation of staggering volumes of cheap resources like fossil fuels in order to sustain economic processes that are as taken-for-granted as they are unsustainable. Like anthropology generally, this book attends to the contextual details buried in such planetary-scale pictures, whether in typically place-based ways of being human, or in the conditions and value systems reproduced through processes, for example resource extraction, that we usually think of as global.

Building on traditional anthropological strengths, many authors consider the details of how the past is brought into the present – or erased from it – in material flows and sensory awareness, as well as in narratives that are explicitly linked to particular landscapes. Colonial identity formation and the different ways that it links with how landscape is viewed and managed (for instance for resource development for a global market), whether in Southern Africa, Israel/Palestine, the Canadian arctic or Indonesia, is a particularly striking example of how to talk about landscape is also to talk about past, present and future. And as the idea that we inhabit the Anthropocene becomes commonplace, questions of the future have pushed their way into anthropology too, so that like Anna Tsing in this book, the discipline can meaningfully discuss the current era as one of disavowed ruins as well as of poorly understood multispecies relations. Even if new landscape approaches in anthropology explicitly acknowledge the many difficult legacies that the past 500 years of Western hegemony has bequeathed, careful ethnography also highlights complex, often multispecies and multi-sited and temporally nonlinear, processes of new landscape formation.

The interdisciplinary ethos of the book is also manifest in how it builds on previous work not just in anthropology, but also in the history of art and geography. Several authors pick up powerful critiques of representational conventions typical of Euro-American, and particularly colonial, administrations, but which also have historical roots in landscape painting. The authors remind us that, whether for business or pleasure, European visual techniques detached the human observer from the surroundings. Through ethnographic examples, they show the practical problems that arise through time, when such representational systems persist in discounting

or devaluing entities and processes of no interest to this colonising gaze. Late capitalism and post-colonialism have been even more destructive, for instance in Indonesia where forests have been disturbed over decades by successive but different waves of resource extraction. Similar dynamics are shown to apply in very varied settings: on an island community in the Baltic whose seascape has been managed to serve the shifting needs of distant powers, in Madagascar where ecotourism has left its traces in local lives, or in Mexico where the colonising force has a disturbingly "green" character in the shape of contested renewable energy (windmills). Like technology more generally, visual technologies and techniques usually associated with colonialism, mapping for example, thus remain important dimensions of anthropological work on landscapes, but in always open ways. For instance, the chapters discuss how they have been adopted and adapted by various colonised and marginalised groups for their own purposes.

To think of landscape as historical and produced across multiple scales, does not mean ignoring its sensuous qualities let alone its often significant role in cosmological systems and other strongly felt and meaningful knowledge. On the contrary, the analyses in the collection attend to the ways people's movements through the landscape produce it as a material and conceptual resource. And in dealing with landscapes of very different kinds, from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea or the gardens-turned-forest and back again in the Amazon, as Philippe Descola's chapter does, to the paradigmatically urban experience of frenetic construction, the book makes important connections between the very visions that the modernist imagination once separated, between the forward-looking city and the supposedly backward hinterlands. The book documents disruption and disturbance that connect even as they disconnect.