
Preface

This book was prompted by a growing unease with the discussion of nature and society in academic discourse. It was written in an attempt to set the discourse on a different path. My unease can be boiled down to three distinguishable problems, which the book seeks to address. These are the continuing deficit in historically grounded, but comparative, discussion of the links between the environment and society; the problem in establishing how physical space is culturally assimilated; and the need to question the one-sided discussion of the environment as a socially constructed object. All three of these concerns led me to the theme of frontiers.

First, in my view, the discussion of anthropogenic environmental change has become divorced from the civil society transformations with which it is always associated. The environment, like gender, is increasingly treated as a kind of intellectual ghetto, only loosely connected with the momentum of social change. Often the connections between the environment and social structure, when they are made, suffer from solipsism and, in their specificity, they fail to illuminate wider processes. Alternatively, the discussion of nature and culture is sometimes pursued in an abstract theoretical fashion, which ignores historical and political realities if they temper the conclusions of academic discourse. This book seeks to address the common ground in the histories of civil societies and nature.

Second, the discussion of space and place, in contrast, has been one of the most promising areas of geographical thought in recent years, and has attracted many who are not geographers to think seriously about the links between spatial and social relationships. This has shown

itself in recent work on globalization, for example, and writing on networks and flows. The question of physical space and its cultural assimilation under capitalism has benefited particularly from critiques of Henri Lefebvre, whose work is discussed in chapter 2. This promising discussion can be employed to good effect in analyzing the discourses surrounding “frontier,” as myth, analytical framework, and material reality.

The frontier encapsulates this concern with the intellectual potential of rethinking space and place. The originator of the Turner thesis in North America, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, wrote of the prevailing disorder on the “primary” frontiers that interfaced with wilderness areas where civil societies had still not been properly established. My aim in this book is to suggest that the social noncompliance that Turner identified with these primary frontiers is not a stage in a sequential, civilizing process but a symptom of deep-seated social conflict. In the last two chapters I discuss the other side of the frontier, evidenced in the Mayan rebellion of the Caste War, as well as the attempts to resist the further development of tourism in the Yucatán peninsula today. It is often asserted today that some peoples’ versions of history are ignored or erased in favor of more dominant narratives. I argue that unless we see the frontier as essentially two-sided, we relegate minority histories to oblivion.

Third, the literature on nature and social construction has given considerable attention to the way in which we construct our view of nature, but much less attention to the way in which nature influences and transforms us. This book is an invitation to view human societies and their environments as part of a wider process of dialectical change. From this perspective the material forces that are galvanized under late capitalism, especially by migrant populations, have the capacity to influence both ecological and cultural changes. Envisioning nature as an object of conquest or material exploitation has, in turn, created antithetical concerns, among them the belief in nature conservation and environmental sustainability. This book suggests ways in which spatial structures, and a sense of place, are increasingly subordinated to new forms of cultural hegemony. The frontier is both a boundary *and* a device for social exclusion, a zone of transition *and* a new cultural imaginary. As argued in chapter

2, we might think of the frontier more in terms of process than form, within a critical realist frame of reference.

What drew me to consider these frontiers over others? The obvious answer is personal experience. In all but one of the cases I discuss much of the material rests on contemporary, or near-contemporary fieldwork: the Spanish Pyrenees in the late 1960s, coastal Ecuador in the mid-1970s, and Mexico primarily during the last decade. The exception is British Canada in the midnineteenth century, which I have accessed primarily through the original archive papers of Francis Codd, a young English doctor who arrived in Canada in 1847, and the accumulated writing about this period and its migrant populations.

While conducting field research, I was aware that frontier was a term being employed to describe the very experiences that I came to see as very disparate. This proved to be part of the intellectual challenge that prompted me to write this book. Each of the cases I describe raises issues about the effects of migration on boundaries and space, and the use that is made of natural resources. They also flagged up the continuing significance of cultural and geographical place to those whose livelihood depended more or less directly on the natural resources that surrounded them. I was also aware in each case of rival imaginaries: local Aranes/immigrant, British and Irish immigrants/native populations, coastal sharecropper/landlord, *chiclerolchicle* contractor, Maya/tourist. At the same time these binary distinctions did little to capture the complexity and reflexivity of social relations in each of these places, nor their populations' links with nature.

I came to see these frontier histories as contested zones, where rival versions of civil society (or its denial) vied with each other, and where it was often their definition and management of nature that was most at odds. These frontier histories demonstrated a process of renegotiation between the increasing penetrative power of the market and the establishment, or defense, of cultural identity. The battlefield was usually the land base (including the forests). Later in the book I consider how far global responsibilities might affect these negotiated responses, as transnational institutions increasingly wrest control of the environment from local people, in the name of all of us. This, however, is one of many important concerns that lie at the margin of this particular endeavor.

This preface was written in a small town called Jimena de la Frontera in southern Spain. It is one of several towns and villages in the area, all bearing the name *frontera*, that describe the territories held by Christian and Muslim populations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Spain's "reconquest" of its own territory from Islam was the precursor of its conquest and possession of the New World. As this book is poised between the Old World and the New, this seems an appropriate point to begin. It also serves to remind us that the divisions between Christianity and Islam represent perhaps the biggest challenge even today for those who choose to take frontiers seriously.

Michael Redclift
Jimena de la Frontera
Spain