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Response to Memon

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Response

Li Cowell

I. Introduction

In considering the theme of this Roundtable, I was reminded of a documentary I watched recently about the Ecuadorian oil industry, called *La Estación de Encender*, or *Season of Burning*. The movie was intended to be an exposé of oil exploration and exploitation practices in the formerly pristine rain forest of the Ecuadorian Amazon. It focused on the unchecked pollution of an amazingly rich ecosystem surrounding the oil wells and showed that pollution was due, in part, to the unmonitored dumping of waste products, a faulty pipeline leaking more oil than was spilled in the Exxon *Valdez* crash, and a lack of cleanup efforts on the part of foreign oil companies. Furthermore, it revealed the extent to which the political, social, and economic realities in Ecuador had caused the national government to restrain itself from controlling or monitoring the exploitation of oil. With 70 percent of its population living in poverty or indigence, almost half of its gross domestic product dedicated to servicing the national debt, and oil as the struggling economy's most lucrative export, hopes for Ecuador's economic future are placed on the oil industry. Few steps are taken that might limit its growth. Despite this rather tragic portrait, the part of the documentary that struck me most was the question posed by a local Guaraní spokesman: What do foreigners need all this oil for?

For me, this question struck a cord in that it demonstrates the extent to which the Guaraní's relationship with and understanding of his environment differs from that of the oil companies, the Ecuadorian Government, or for that matter, my own. The Guaraní do not understand how a single commodity could be so important that people would place its value over that of the immediate environment or of nature as a whole. The oil companies, in turn, do not recognize the value the area has outside of its oil. And, because of the nation's poverty, the Ecuadorian Government feels that oil extraction is the best use of the area, despite the contrary beliefs of some of its citizens. Simplifying the issue, it is as if a contemporary system of economic relations has created two worlds: one modern, with an endogenous hierarchy of economic privilege; the other, at the periphery of the system's influence, existing in much the same way as it always has. The

globalization of this system causes the two worlds to clash over one of the few things they hold in common: nature.

As this example demonstrates, conflicts can occur between groups that inhabit different conceptual worlds and have different understandings of their relationship to nature. However, competition between people who have different value systems and priorities but share one conceptual world can also cause conflict. Any evaluation of human impact or interaction with nature must begin with an understanding of the relationship between the social and the natural. Here, I will first present, as one way of understanding the Roundtable theme, a model that assumes that our conceptualization of nature is fundamental in determining environmental policy. Second, I will touch upon the aspects of Dr. Memon's analysis that aided my understanding of the broader relationship between people and nature. Third, I will use the model to identify issues that I feel were not touched on or adequately explained by Dr. Memon.

II. Decoding Material Interactions

According to Antonio Gramsci, "transformative human actions do not result automatically from material contradictions; they are mediated by subjective meanings and conscious intentions."¹ In other words, people do not merely interact with the surrounding material and social world but develop a framework of understanding to interpret their world and decide how to act within it. However, a framework of understanding — the basis of "subjective" meanings and "conscious" intentions — stems from one's fundamental way of conceptualizing the world, particularly the natural world, and people's relationship to it. One can understand how different conceptualizations of nature influence human actions by looking at ways people imagine it.

On the one hand, one can think of nature as existing within a locality, defined by interactions between people and environment. Local environments are often understood by the limits or boundaries of social organizations within them — a home, a community, a corporation, or, most notably, a nation-state. Within scientific or ecological research, a locality can also be defined as a biological system: a cell, an organism, a valley, or a watershed, for example. Nature, when imagined as local, incorporates systems of great complexity, yet the value it holds, in whatever terms value is understood, is limited to the confines of a particular space. It is easier to understand people's immediate

impact upon the natural world and their immediate benefit from it within a fixed environment because the possibilities of action and interaction are limited, or at least estimable, by science. However, it seems easier to imagine how the demands of a human population, thought to be limitless, could exhaust what is available in nature when one imagines nature with boundaries. In other words, it appears logical that the limits imposed by nature are “physical constraints on human survival.”² To survive within a framework that *constrains* human action, it only makes sense to aim for the optimal *use* of nature.

On the other hand, one can think of nature as the set of all things. As such, it cannot be imagined as an entity separate from society. Nature from this perspective should not be limited to the concept of environment—what Wolfgang Sachs identified as passive and lifeless, waiting to be acted upon as we draw our resources from it,³ or what Vandana Shiva characterized as dependent on society, obtaining value only through our inventiveness and industry.⁴ Nature in this sense is, rather, the dynamic framework that defines society, a life force upon which all people rely, which nurtures all people in some fashion and upon which all people are dependent to some degree. As such, nature was global before people conceived of the world as a globe. Nature, by this definition, provides everything we need to exist. We can work within nature to negotiate our survival; because it defines the reality within which we live, we cannot work beyond it. If people will always live within nature, how we interact with it should be determined by the quality of life we wish to have rather than by the simple goal of survival. Unfortunately, in the view of nature as framework, it is difficult to see on a smaller scale an inherent biological variability and diversity and the almost infinite possibilities for action and interaction that individual organisms have within nature.

From this basic examination of two perspectives—one of nature as resource and one of nature as context—I believe one can see that how we conceptualize the world in which we live determines to a large extent how we interact with it—that is, how we use it, how we treat it, and how we organize ourselves within it. Imagining nature as being limited to resources in certain localities lends itself to believing that what nature has to offer is scarce and must to be put to good use while still available. This paradigm all but constructs natural limits as threats to human survival. However, imagining people living within nature leads to the conclusion that wise and perhaps limited interactions with the natural world will allow people to enjoy the best quality of life.

III. Nature and the Nation-State

In the modern world, it seems that the paradigm of nature as a limited resource is the most ubiquitous and powerful one expressed in the present global economy. On a worldwide scale, people place value on natural resources depending on how they can be used, on abundance, and on the ease with which they are acquired. Furthermore, because the natural resources available for use are imagined to be limited in comparison to limitless human need, people are pitted against one another in a fast-paced competition to gain control over resource accumulation and distribution, especially if that means having more than they need. In a world where there may not be enough for everyone, people prioritize their own survival over the survival of others. This is one difference in values that leads to conflicts over nature.

The globalization of the capitalist economy has legitimized the nation-state as the economic system's executor and maintenance crew. Through their policies, the governments of nation-states today "mediate conflicts around [nature] in an effort at maintaining capitalist accumulation."⁵ In other words, in resolving conflicts between people, and between people and nature, most governments favor the action that will have the least detrimental effect on the global economy and their place in it. Nation-states tend to prioritize economy over nature, even when claiming to have adopted the goal of protecting nature. This is evident from the concluding statement in the Brundtland report:

We have in the past been concerned about the impacts of economic growth. We are now forced to concern ourselves with the impacts of ecological stress — degradation of soils, water regimes, atmosphere, and forests — upon our economic prospects.⁶

The nation-state and the economy it supports are the operators that systematize people's relationship to the natural world for a reason: people secure their survival through the use of resources available in nature. However, in light of alternative ways of conceptualizing and interacting with nature, the organization of people around the competitive use, distribution, and accumulation of nature is not without its environmental shortcomings and cannot be used as a comprehensive model for understanding or reversing environmental degradation. Reform of either the nation-state or the economy to alleviate or mitigate crises caused by the competitive use of natural resources needs to

take into account what Arturo Escobar calls “the perceptual and cognitive nature of environmental problems.”⁷ It is from this point that I would like to begin my comments on Dr. Memon’s essay.

IV. “Nature, Society, and State”: An Appeal for Elaboration

The current economic and environmental situation in New Zealand provides a perfect example of a critical intersection between nature and society. Dr. Memon provides an excellent framework for evaluating both New Zealand’s policy reform in the context of the situation and the situation itself. First, he emphasizes the importance of looking at the relationship between people and the environment and of looking at social values as the foundation of environmental utilization both now and in the past. Without understanding something as basic as social values, one cannot develop a systematic or structural understanding of the relationship between civil society, politics, and nature in New Zealand, nor can one necessarily understand the “why” behind decisions made regarding the environment and trends in how people use it. Knowledge of both is essential in effectively changing practices that are damaging to the ecosystem. Second, he identifies economic ideology, both in the regulation of the economy and in the application of neoclassical economic theory, as the driving force behind New Zealand’s current environmental policies. Based on this information, one can, as Dr. Memon does, make certain generalizations and conclusions about the politics and society in New Zealand that bring to light the issues that are and will be considered of utmost importance to those deciding environmental policy. In emphasizing both general social values and particular economic policies in New Zealand, he establishes a foundation of sorts for comprehending the present and past environmental strategies and their implications. One can use this basis as a stepping stone for introducing the myriad issues that arise subsequent to as vast an economic and environmental reform as was undertaken in New Zealand. I would, in fact, like to commend Dr. Memon on this third point: the wide range of his gaze, which includes so many of the complex issues surrounding environmental policy, such as the sustainability debate, the arguments around market-led environmental solutions, the 150 years of political and economic evolution in New Zealand, and, in particular, the consequences of environmental policy with regard to the Maori population.

For the most part, I agree with the framework and conclusions laid out by Dr. Memon. However, there are aspects of Dr. Memon's framework, the issue covered, and the conclusions that I still find somewhat inadequate or inconsistent. My main concern relates to the broadness of the canvas and, therefore, the lack of deeper analysis. I present four questions here that beg further clarification or explanation.

First and foremost, the essay lacks grounding in the natural reality of New Zealand. By this I mean that the reader is given little idea of the actual physical nature of the situation. For example, Dr. Memon writes that at one point, New Zealand was a "grassland economy based on the export of primary produce and a limited amount of product diversification."⁸ Even taken in context, the phrase left me with several questions: What is a grassland economy? What were the primary products? How much of the country's arable land was dedicated to their production, and how did that use of land differ from before? How did society reorganize or migrate to support this economy? What was its environmental impact, and what "environmental malaise" did it create? In another instance, Dr. Memon states that "the new [post-1984] policies provide a better framework for addressing environmental problems and concerns."⁹ However, the claim is based on the theoretical—that government decentralization and deregulation provides a model that encourages good environmental conflict mediation—rather than on historical facts or trends.

Physical examples that are given tend to stand alone without a link to either their cause or their consequence. This, in effect, diminishes the value of the examples for the reader. New Zealand, states Dr. Memon, is a country "as diverse as it is dynamic," with "a high level of seismic . . . activity," a varied climate, and a unique physical isolation.¹⁰ While there is some idea that this combination of physical factors has influenced the development of endemic flora and fauna and has "presented both opportunities and constraints to [settlers] . . . and their descendants,"¹¹ there is little mention of the actual impact it had on how people in New Zealand relate to and interact with the environment. For example, how did the environment affect the crops that settlers planted? Were settlers coastal or did they move inland; and how did that affect the way they used the land? How did people use or relate to endemic species whose attributes were unfamiliar to them? Finally, how "homogeneous" was the society that resulted from such a diverse environment, and how diverse is the environment now after so many years of use? Questions like these, whose answers would have

greatly helped my understanding of the current situation in New Zealand, came to my mind throughout my reading of the essay.

Second, Dr. Memon states that “the co-option of the environmental reform... within a much wider-ranging political agenda to deregulate the economy... has been ultimately instrumental in achieving [environmental reform outcomes]” and then goes on to state that “[e]nvironmental objectives have to be pursued within the context of a free market economy.”¹² By criticizing the former regime for the ill-effects of poorly planned and excessive management, and by basing the success of the current regime on its neoclassical economic model, the paper places the burden of fault with respect to environmental problems on New Zealand’s government and its policies. If environmental policy is the expression of a system of social values whose implementation will determine how people use the environment, then to discover if people’s use of the environment will change after policy reform, it seems appropriate to ask if the policy reform was based on a change in value system. A comparison of the commercial objectives of the current government and the development objectives of the previous government, both based on the ultimate goal of economic growth, would suggest that they have not. While the paper does question the extent to which the recent reforms demonstrate a change in “mentality,” it gives no basis for the doubt, nor an indication of the possible consequences of a lack of conceptual change in the context of New Zealand, nor an alternative solution.

Third, I question whether it is sufficient to analyze a market-led policy of environmental management by the success it has in resolving conflict over utilization. I agree that allowing the market to regulate resource use is a logical policy in that basing the price of a resource directly on its availability will limit and eventually reduce demand for it when it becomes more scarce. However, the neoclassical economic model concentrates primarily on the resolution of issues concerning *resource* utilization. Little is said about the human impact, especially of resource extraction, on nature that is not considered valuable in an economic framework or whose economic worth is unknown. It is less expensive and therefore more competitive to dump oil processing waste in unlined pits in the Amazon than to take proper environmental protection measures or to develop a use for the waste. Unfortunately, as we are all aware, any interaction with nature has an effect upon nature as a whole, which in turn has ramifications for people as part of nature.

Fourth, I feel that Dr. Memon left at least two issues untouched in the implementation of the environmental reform. It is important to remember that policy in general expresses the values of one group, as seen from that group's perspective. However, a nation-state's policy must apply to the many who understand the world from a variety of frameworks. New Zealand's new environmental policies, apparently a part of a larger economic reform, were obviously designed to benefit certain segments of the population in certain ways. Even if the reform is meant to benefit all citizens, I think we may assume that there is enough diversity within the country's population to deny the possibility of every individual "succeeding" within the same socioeconomic design, especially when such an argument necessitates a certain amount of competition over resources. A market-led economy in the context of a state that favors private property does not suggest the most promising of conditions for people who own nothing, or at least nothing productive. In the eyes of an individual on the dole, will the economic growth and stability of the country as a whole compensate for a drop in her family's healthcare subsidy? Are retroactive legal cases that "consider" Maori traditions and values in the process of litigation the appropriate way to compensate for the past decimation of Maori culture? Is there more to be said about the "social dislocation... and sustained levels of unemployment"¹³ referred to by Dr. Memon? In other words, how is civil society and, in particular, groups and communities not represented by the government carrying out the reforms, reacting to the decentralization of power to areas defined by the government and to the shrinkage of social services?

Furthermore, in a democratic parliamentary system such as New Zealand, policy is often, if not always, a product of the party in power at the time. Extrapolating from debates that we have had here in the United States over a similar issue, I would guess that the debate between liberalizing the economy and maintaining social welfare probably fell along party lines. What happens if the party implementing the reform currently falls out of power? What role does party politics play in the future implementation and success of environmental reform? It is evident that more information is needed to understand the complexities of the current environmental situation in New Zealand.

V. Conclusion

It is here that I would like to interject my personal thoughts on the theme of the Roundtable.

First, I place a great deal of importance on understanding; by understanding I mean both the amount of information available and the ability to put the knowledge we have into perspective and to good use. Nature is complex, as is our relationship to it. I believe that in order to alleviate our negative impact upon it, it is necessary to broaden our cognitive range.

Second, what has always intrigued me about nature is its diversity, and how that leads to great flexibility. Just a few simple devices randomize the form of our immune system cells, enabling ten thousand cells to recognize almost 100 million pathogens. It seems that such a diversity and complexity offered by nature requires a commensurate response from those that interact with nature. We can generalize neither our use of nature — for example, monocropping has had disastrous effects on soil quality, pest control, and climate — nor our solutions to its problems. For this reason, I believe that relying on the workings of a free market economy to mediate or lessen human impact on nature is not the solution. Furthermore, thinking this way is akin to removing responsibility for environmental damage from ourselves, making the impact of the human/nature relationship less human.

In conclusion, any action we take to reverse environmental damage already done must be as complex as nature itself. Most important, effective action must be based on an understanding of the consequences of human action. While it is essential to comprehend the relationship between the global and national economy and national environmental policies, those factors and that relationship do not constitute the totality of a nation's impact on nature. One must also pay attention to the individual relationship to nature.

Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci, as quoted in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, ed. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (London: Routledge, 1996).
2. Wolfgang Sachs, "Environment," in his *Development Dictionary* (Johannesburg: Winwatersrand University Press, 1995).
3. Ibid.
4. Vandana Shiva, "Resources," in *The Development Dictionary*.
5. Peet and Watts, *Liberation Ecologies*.

6. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987), as quoted in Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*.
7. Arturo Escobar, "Constructing Nature: Elements for a Post-Structural Political Ecology," in *Liberation Ecologies*.
8. Pyar Ali Memon, "Nature, Society, and State: An Antipodean Perspective," *Macalester International* 6 (Spring 1998): 201.
9. *Ibid.*, 215-16.
10. *Ibid.*, 198.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 206, 209.
13. *Ibid.*, 208.

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