

WILDERNESS – A MORAL COUNTER WORLD A TYPOLOGY OF EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS OF WILD NATURE

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Abstract

Wilderness is a notoriously ambiguous concept. Discourses on the topic feature a broad range of competing implicit views of what constitutes wilderness, wildness or wild nature and of why we should cherish or disapprove it. In our paper, we develop a systematic typology of different perceptions of wilderness that exist in contemporary western European cultures. Our analysis is based on the well-established theory that what constitutes wilderness is not the specific biophysical properties of an area but rather the specific meanings ascribed to it according to cultural patterns of interpretation (cf. Nash, 1967/2001; Cronon, 1995). What these interpretations—which include projections of people's inner wilderness onto outer nature—essentially have in common is that an area is regarded as a moral counter-world to culture (Kirchhoff and Trepl, 2009).

We assume that perceptions of wilderness are indeed always subjective and idiosyncratic but at the same time that they rely on shared intersubjective, culturally shaped patterns of interpretation. These have been internalized through socialization and are usually deployed unconsciously. Our analytical method involves constructing ideal types of such perceptions by accentuating and grouping together certain of their common features: We set out to describe, first, notions of wilderness associated with worldviews that emerged during the Enlightenment period (theological, early Enlightenment, liberalism, democracy) and as a critical response to it (Rousseauism, early Romanticism, English conservatism, German conservatism). Then, we move on to outline four recent transformations of these traditional notions of wilderness: wilderness as an ecological object, wilderness as a place of nature's self-reassertion or re-wilding, wilderness as a place of thrill and wilderness as a sphere of

characterisation and valuation of wilderness as a moral counter-world to culture.

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Our thesis is that the main types of contemporary perceptions of wilderness can be reconstructed on the basis of a clearly defined set of classical worldviews that arose during the Enlightenment period and in critical response to it. This is, however, not to deny that these classical worldviews and their related perceptions of wilderness have been modified since their emergence.

Enlightenment notions of wilderness

Early Enlightenment: wilderness as a place of unspoilt divine exaltation

In medieval Christendom uncultivated nature was mainly regarded as a site of the sinister and the demonic. It was considered as corrupted by the Fall, as *natura lapsa*. For example, mountains were interpreted as ruins of a once flat earth destroyed by the Flood, with the seas as the remains of that Flood where the evil resides. This negative perception of wilderness as an obstacle to a godly life was dominant well into the 17th century.

In the 17th century, however, Christian perceptions of wilderness changed fundamentally: it now became possible to attribute positive meanings to wilderness as well. A main precondition for this change was the introduction of an aesthetic of the infinite: Whereas the world had traditionally been believed to be finite (for only God could be infinite), it was now assumed that God's attributes also applied to His creation.

On this basis, Shaftesbury famously explained the fact that 'Wildness pleases' as follows: If humans abandon themselves to purposeless observation of nature unchanged by human action, they understand its divine harmonious order in a 'reasonable Extasy'. It is exactly that wild nature that seems to be unordered and inexpedient from the perspective of human ideas of order and utility that features a place of pristine divine order that has remained unspoilt by men.

Liberalism: wilderness as an arena of war, an object of appropriation and a place of freedom

With the Enlightenment disentanglement from theological worldviews, new secularised concepts of individuality and society emerged and, concomitantly to them, new meanings of wilderness. In liberalism, classical proponents being Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, wilderness—understood as a region that is unexplored, uncontrolled, and unutilised—assumes an essentially double meaning, a negative and a positive one.

On the one hand, wilderness symbolises the pre-societal state of nature in which the natural urge for self-preservation leads to a state of war that pits everyone against everyone else. Accordingly, wilderness is perceived as being chaotic and dangerous nature. It must and can be explored, controlled and exploited.

On the other hand, wilderness is perceived as the symbolic and real place where the individual human being can live according to his or her own particular nature without being constrained by governmental rules or social conventions. This interest in the unregulated non-human nature corresponds with an appreciation for human non-conformity which is corresponding to 'genius, mental vigour, and moral courage', and it is mirrored in the aesthetic interest in the picturesque, introduced by William Gilpin, as an independent aesthetic category between the beautiful and the sublime.

Democratism: wilderness as a medium of self-experience for the autonomous subject

In Enlightenment democratism, of which Immanuel Kant is a prominent representative, wilderness is perceived negatively as the domain of instincts and passions, and thus—contrary to liberalism—as the domain of lack of freedom.

Inner wilderness is the urge-driven, unregulated part of human nature, it has to be mastered by humans if they are to be guided by reason and, thus, to act freely and in a morally appropriate manner.

Outer wilderness, first, represents the place where humankind is still subject to the forces of nature. It is, second, perceived as a sphere of natural disorder that symbolises societal disorder, i.e. a society where humans lack guidance by virtue and reason.

In the late 18th century, however, a broad cultural movement developed in which wilderness became the subject of a new, secularised experience of the natural sublime: Exceedingly vast or disorderly natural phenomena overwhelm our imaginative faculties; but rather than

straightforwardly triggering aversion and fear they can also evoke what Kant has called a 'negative pleasure' (the mathematically sublime). The situation is similar if we observe—from a safe vantage point—natural phenomena whose physical power would otherwise overwhelm us (the dynamically sublime). This negative pleasure occurs every time the realisation of our limitations as sensual beings awakens a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us, that is the Idea of Reason. Thus wilderness is not itself sublime but rather a distinguished place where the subject confirms his own rational nature as it transcends sensuous and instinctive nature.

Notions of wilderness in Enlightenment critique

Transition towards Enlightenment critique: wilderness as a symbol of unalienated life and as a surrogate for virtuous community life

In the transition from Enlightenment democratism to Enlightenment critique, further meanings of wilderness emerged, as can be seen in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

As is well known, for Rousseau wilderness assumes the meaning of paradisaical nature and a symbol of virtue and freedom from a morally deprived modern society. Wilderness is stylised as nature unspoilt by civilisation. However, as is often overlooked, Rousseau does not advocate primitivism and he does not regard wilderness as the ideal state for humankind. Instead, Rousseau's ideal was a republican, agrarian society in which land is cultivated and where unalienated living is linked with reasonable virtue. But since the current societal conditions are remote from this ideal, sojourning in the unspoiled wilderness can serve as the best available surrogate for life in a virtuous community.

Early Romanticism: wilderness as a place for roaming sentiment, original chaos and freedom from the constraints of civilisation

The European Romantic Movement that began around 1800 was shaped by the experience that the Enlightenment had abolished the good Christian order and empowered the autonomous subject but had failed in return to establish reason as a meaning-giving authority. This resulted in a loss of meaning and the disenchantment of the world—to use Max Weber's later phrase.

The early Romantics deeply mistrusted reason. Against it, they set the appreciation for the unreasonableness of aesthetic autonomy and wild nature in all its irrationality. The ambivalent

feeling one has at the sight of ravines, precipices and waterfalls was not interpreted as proof of the rational superiority of humans over nature, as in Kant. Rather, such sights (of nature) were regarded as eluding human reason and as mirroring the abyss of one's soul, as Gothic tendencies within Romanticism emphasised. This facilitated the aesthetic re-enchantment of the world by the aesthetically productive subject. As a counterpole to reason, wilderness serves as a distinguished place for a 'roaming of sentiment'.

Classical English conservatism: wilderness as a place of the natural sublime that fosters the drive for self-preservation

Edmund Burke, an early representative of classical English conservatism, interpreted the experience of the natural sublime in a novel way that laid the ground for new positive perceptions of wilderness.

Burke develops a physiological theory of the sublime according to which the effect of the natural sublime is to paralyse our rational capacities. When it acts most powerfully, it elicits a state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror. Nevertheless, as long as the situation involves no danger, the natural sublime is capable of prompting 'a sort of delightful horror'. This is because the horror increases the tension of the nerves', and thus strengthens the body and its active powers. In this way, the experience of the natural sublime fosters the egoistic instinct of individual self-preservation: It functions as a 'remedy for counteracting the tendency—we cite—so common in all times and in all countries, of being softened, relaxed, enervated, dissolved, melted away by pleasure'.

Classical German conservatism: wilderness as the sphere of urge-driven wildness, original power, and authenticity

In classical German conservatism, the liberalistic society and the modern metropolis within it were regarded as *Wildnis*. They were considered to be the symbolic or actual location of a detached, immoral and dissolute life, of an unfree existence driven by egoistic urges.

Truly free and reasonable action consisted, by contrast, in developing one's individual natural vocation within the scope and in the service of the given hierarchical societal order and thereby contributing towards conserving and developing the traditional order in its uniqueness. In this vein, classical German conservatism values unique cultural landscapes, not wild landscapes.

However, wilderness is also perceived positively—as we can see in the writings of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, for example. Uncultivated nature and supposedly uncultivated people were stylised as valuable remnants of the assumed uncorrupted, positive origin of cultural development that had to be conserved as a constituent part of a developed culture. Wilderness was equated with a fountain of youth that was set against the degenerate life in the modern metropolis as a place of return to the evil, immoral wild as well as of suffocating democratic bureaucracy. By going into the wilderness, civilised persons can rekindle their natural capacity to experience and to be instinctively aware of the natural order.

Recent transformations of traditional notions of wilderness

So far we have described basic notions of wilderness that have emerged within European cultural history and have remained influential until today. In this section, we outline four important examples of recent transformations of the traditional notions of wilderness.

Wilderness as an area of natural ecological conditions

With the rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s the term "wilderness" has acquired the positive meaning of an area where ecological conditions are "natural", that is, where they have been unchanged by humans. At least two ecologised perceptions of wilderness can be distinguished:

In the first, wilderness is cherished for its natural order because it is assumed that nature's self-organisational order has led to a unique harmonious ecological order with a specific range of biodiversity. Human changes are regarded as disturbances that threaten a pristine, perfect order whose complexity transcends human capacities. This gives rise to the sentiment "let nature take its course". This perception of wilderness represents a seemingly scientific reformulation of cosmological optimism as expressed in Shaftesbury's view of wilderness as ultimately ordered and the ideology of the 'balance of nature' which has been rejected in scientific ecology.

In the second ecologised perception, wilderness is cherished for its natural wildness, i.e. for the multitude of unregulated natural processes exhibited by the many and varied living beings, each of which is individually striving for existence. This perception of wilderness seems to be motivated by a longing for freedom from

the social taming of instinctive nature. It is instantiated, for example, by German adventurer Rüdiger Nehberg, who seeks to reintegrate himself into nature by surviving in the 'jungle' with only rudimentary equipment and by overcoming the cultural exigencies that fetter the 'autonomy' of instinct.

Wilderness as a place of nature's self-reassertion

Since the mid-1990s there has been a heightened sense of appreciation of formerly cultivated, urbanised or industrialised sites that now exhibit spontaneous growth of vegetation. Essential to this perception of wilderness is the fact that nature is perceived as having regained control over places that were once under human control. So, wilderness is perceived as a process or place of nature's self-reassertion.

The traces of former human control or cultivation must, in this view, remain discernible in these places. It is the ambiguous character of wildness combined with the relics of culture that accounts for the appeal of this wilderness. This ambiguity has found expression in the identification of a new kind of urban nature that emerges naturally in conditions incontestably influenced by humans.

Wilderness as a place of thrill

In the context of nature-based extreme sports, wilderness has gained prominence as a place of thrill that offers an escape from an increasingly regulated and sanitized way of living. At least three versions of wilderness as a place of thrill can be distinguished:

According to the first version, the risk that something unforeseen or predictably dangerous will occur is experienced similarly to Burke's "delightful horror". It is seen as re-establishing contact to basic human emotions and physical responses from which one is estranged in comfortable urban living.

Longing for wilderness as a place of thrill is, in a second variant, motivated by a desire for authenticity as a remedy to the experience of alienation in contemporary urban life. This is reminiscent of the perception of wilderness described by Riehl. However, unhindered active physicality seems to have replaced contemplative introspection as a way to access feelings of authenticity.

In a third version, humans experience themselves as being in control by mastering the physical challenges posed by the wilderness. The self-assurance thus gained is reminiscent of Kantian autonomy in the experience of the sublime.

However, in contrast to Kant's sublime, it is the sports person's body that is being physically overpowered, and self-assurance emerges from the sports person's rational control and active use of their instincts and physical power. Wilderness as sphere of amorality and meaningfulness

The different perceptions of wilderness described so far have in common that wilderness serves as a meaningful counter-world with specific moral connotations. In contrast, in the context of existential nihilism, e.g. in Friedrich Nietzsche's late work, wilderness and wild men became representations of an a-moral existence that transcends all moral valuations: Wilderness is a place—or a time—in which all such valuations appear to be suspended; wilderness is the sphere of a-morality and meaningfulness.

Conclusion

The typology of wilderness perceptions that we offer in this paper is intended as a heuristic tool that can be used to explore the place of competing notions of wilderness, wildness, and the wild. It does so by tracing back different or even contradictory current perceptions of wilderness to diverse meanings that are deeply rooted in our cultural history and in the conceptual history of the notion of "wilderness", thus sensitising us to the fact that competing interpretations of an area as wilderness are ultimately ingrained in different world views (and not, just, in purely subjective preferences). This is why all types of wilderness perceptions that we have described here will presumably be intelligible to us, even if we might have a personal preference for one or a few of them. And whether or not one adopts the view that these world views are ultimately of equal value and that one cannot make a rationally founded choice between them, it becomes clear that these conflicts can only be solved through a complex societal process of negotiation; they cannot be decided by reference to scientific facts.

Our analysis of some recently developed European perceptions of wilderness has revealed that the current spectrum of these perceptions is characterised by both persistent topoi and more recent trends. Among the latter, naturalisation—as exemplified in the ecological perception of wilderness and in the perception of wilderness as a place of thrill—seems to be particularly influential.

It has further become clear that perceptions of wilderness differ not only between different

worldviews but that there can also be an ambiguity within one worldview, be it that wilderness can be either appreciated or detested, e.g. as a sphere of freedom or a state of war, as in liberalism, or that one and the same perception of wilderness is inherently ambiguous, e.g. natural wilderness, as in German conservatism or in the perception of wilderness as a place of nature's self-reassertion.

Finally, our analysis suggests that caution must be exercised when it comes to importing US-American ideas of wilderness into Europe, something frequently proposed by proponents of wilderness in European nature conservation. This is not only because of differences in land-use patterns in each place but also and above all because essential elements of the US American perception of wilderness are characteristically and exclusively American, e.g. the idea of a rugged individualism honed in the wilderness which serves as a basis for democratic socialisation.

Endnotes

- 1 Nash 1967/2001:1.
- 2 Kangler 2008: 313.
- 3 The ideas presented in this paper are based on Kirchhoff/Vicenzotti 2014.
- 4 Cf. Nash, 1967/2001; Oelschlaeger, 1991; Cronon, 1995; Schama, 1995; Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a.
- 5 E.g. Lupp et al., 2011.
- 6 Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009.
- 7 Cf. Johnson, 2007:2; Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a.
- 8 Cf. Taylor, 1992.
- 9 Nicolson, 1959; Corbin, 1995.
- 10 Most notably, Henry More claimed this view in his spiritualistic concept of space (Nicolson, 1959:113–143/271–323).
- 11 Shaftesbury, 1732/2001 II/43/217–228.
- 12 Cf. for the whole chapter Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009; Kirchhoff, 2011; Vicenzotti, 2011a:106–116.
- 13 Mill, 1859/2001:62f.
- 14 Cf. Guyer, 2006:203f.
- 15 Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:186; Kant, 1790/2007§§23–29; cf. Guyer, 2006:307–331.
- 16 Kant, 1790/2007§23.
- 17 Kant, 1790/2007§25.
- 18 For the following, cf. Cooper, 1999; Trachtenberg, 2009.
- 19 Cf. Trachtenberg, 2009.
- 20 We only go here into the Early Romanticism that,

- unlike Late Romanticism, was clearly distinct from conservatism.
- 21 Prickett/Haines, 2010.
 - 22 Cf. Saul, 2009.
 - 23 Cf. Praz, 1933.
 - 24 Koschorke, 1990:183.
 - 25 Burke, 1757.
 - 26 Kirchhoff/Trepl, 2009.
 - 27 Burke IV.7
 - 28 Burke IV.3.
 - 29 Burke IV.5.
 - 30 Burke IV.19.
 - 31 Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:140–143.
 - 32 Hiehli, 1854/1990; cf. Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009.
 - 33 Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:145–147.
 - 34 Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:161–172; for the transformation of this conservative perception of wilderness within National Socialism see Zechner, 2011.
 - 35 Kirchhoff, 2011.
 - 36 See Egerton, 1973.
 - 37 Cf. Hoheisel et al., 2005.
 - 38 E.g. Kowarik/Körner, 2005; Jørgensen/Tylecote, 2007.
 - 39 Cf. Edensor, 2005; Qviström, 2012.
 - 40 Cf. Jørgensen/Tylecote, 2007.
 - 41 Cf. Kowarik/Körner, 2005.
 - 42 Puchan, 2004:177.
 - 43 However, nature is secondary in this version of thrill because an equivalent thrill can also be experienced in a totally artificial environment.
 - 44 Schneider/Rheinberg, 1996.
 - 45 Cf. Drenthen, 2005.
 - 46 Cf. Vicenzotti, 2011b.

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