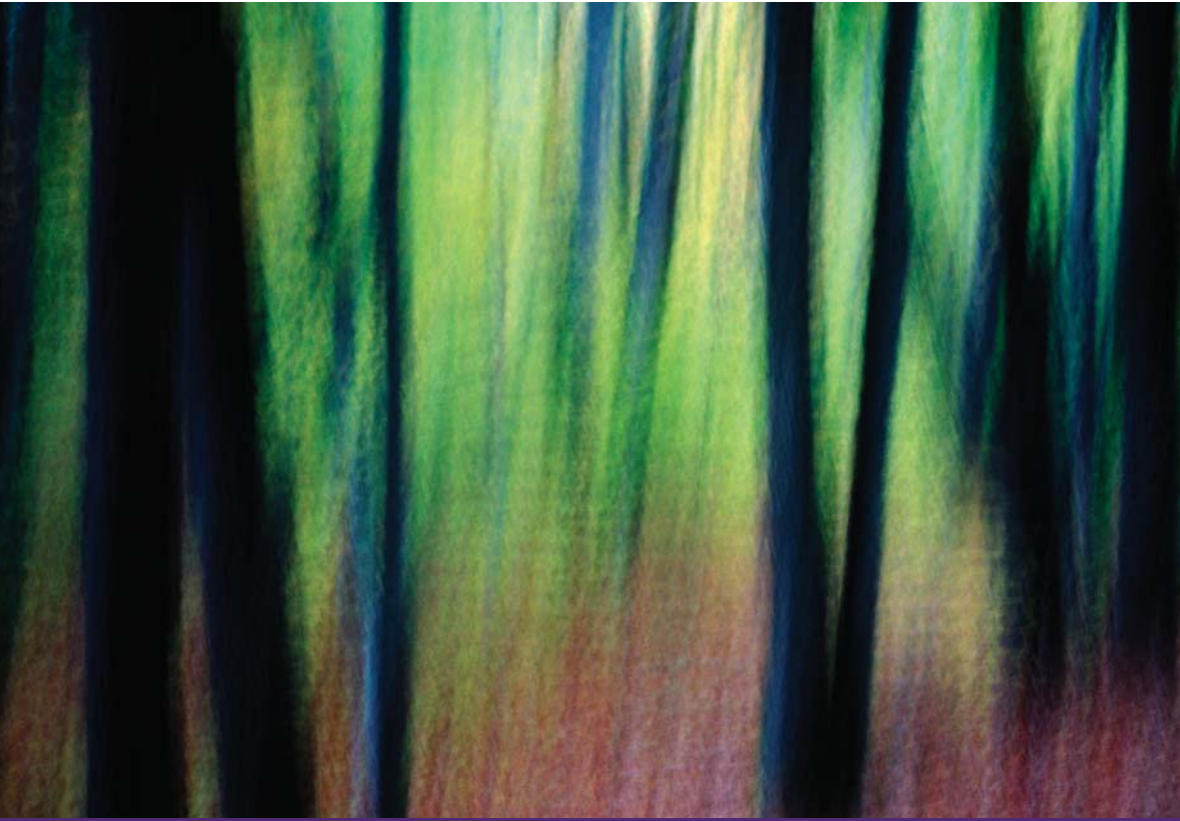


# ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL THEORY

John Barry



Second Edition



# Environment and Social Theory

While the environment has been a perennial theme in human thought, the environment and how humans value, use and think about it has become an increasingly central and important aspect of recent social theory. It has become clear that the present generation is faced with a series of unique environmental dilemmas, largely unprecedented in human history.

*Environment and Social Theory* outlines the complex interlinking of the environment, nature and social theory from ancient and pre-modern thinking to contemporary social theorising. It explores the essentially contested character of the environment and nature within social theory, and draws attention to the need for critical analysis whenever the term 'nature' and 'environment' are used in debate and argument. Drawing on a broad understanding of social theory, the book examines the ways major religions such as Judaeo-Christianity have and continue to conceptualise the environment as well as analysing the way the nonhuman environment plays important roles in Western thinkers such as Rousseau, Malthus, Marx, Darwin, Mill to Freud, Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. It also discusses major contemporary thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Richard Dawkins and Jared Diamond, and the controversy around Bjørn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. The book also explores the relationship between gender and the environment, postmodernism and risk society schools of thought, and the dominance of orthodox economic thinking (which we ought to view as an ideology) in contemporary social theorising about the environment. It concludes with an argument for an explicitly interdisciplinary green social theoretical approach which combines insights from the natural sciences such as evolutionary biology, physics and ecology with social scientific knowledge drawn from social, political and ethical theories and ideas.

Written in an engaging and accessible manner, *Environment and Social Theory* provides the student with an indispensable guide to the way in which the environment and social theory relate to one another.

**John Barry** is Reader in Politics at Queen's University, Belfast.

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# **Environment and Social Theory**

Second edition

**John Barry**

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# **Series editors' preface**

## **Environment and Society titles**

The 1970s and early 1980s constituted a period of intense academic and popular interest in processes of environmental degradation: global, regional and local. However, it soon became increasingly clear that reversing such degradation would not be a purely technical and managerial matter. All the technical knowledge in the world does not necessarily lead societies to change environmentally damaging behaviour. Hence a critical understanding of socio-economic, political and cultural processes and structures has become, it is acknowledged, of central importance in approaching environmental problems. Over the past two decades in particular there has been a mushrooming of research and scholarship on the relationships between social sciences and humanities on the one hand and processes of environmental change on the other. This has lately been reflected in a proliferation of associated courses at undergraduate level.

At the same time, changes in higher education in Europe, which match earlier changes in America, Australasia and elsewhere, mean that an increasing number of such courses are being taught and studied within a framework offering maximum flexibility in the typical undergraduate programme: 'modular' courses or their equivalent.

The volumes in this series will mirror these changes. They will provide short, topic-centred texts on environmentally relevant areas, mainly within social sciences and humanities. They will reflect the fact that students will approach their subject matter from a great variety of different disciplinary backgrounds; not just within social sciences and humanities, but from physical and natural sciences too. And those students may not be familiar with the background to the topic, they may or may not be going on to develop their interest in it, and they cannot automatically be thought of as being at 'first-year level', or second- or third-year: they might need to study the topic in any year of their course.

The authors and editors of this series are mainly established teachers in higher education. Finding that more traditional integrated environmental studies or specialised academic texts do not meet their requirements, they have increasingly

met the new challenges caused by structural changes in education by writing their own course materials for their own students. These volumes represent, in modified form which all students can now share, the fruits of their labours.

To achieve the right mix of flexibility, depth and breadth, the volumes, like most modular courses themselves, are designed carefully to create maximum accessibility to readers from a variety of backgrounds. Each leads into its topic by giving an adequate introduction, and each 'leads out' by pointing towards complexities and areas for further development and study. Indeed, much of the integrity and distinctiveness of the Environment and Society titles in the series will come through adopting a characteristic, though not inflexible, structure to the volumes. Each introduces the student to the real-world context of the topic, and the basic concepts and controversies in social sciences/humanities which are most relevant. The core of each volume explores the main issues. Data, case studies, overview diagrams, summary charts and self-check questions and exercises are some of the pedagogic devices that will be found. The last part of each volume will normally show how the themes and issues presented may become more complicated, presenting cognate issues and concepts needing to be explored to gain deeper understanding. Annotated reading lists are important here.

We hope that these concise volumes will provide sufficient depth to maintain the interest of students with relevant backgrounds, and also sketch basic concepts and map out the ground in a stimulating way for students to whom the whole area is new.

The Environment and Society titles in the series complement the Environmental Science titles which deal with natural science-based topics. Together this comprehensive range of volumes which make up the Routledge Introductions to Environment Series will provide modular and other students with an unparalleled range of perspectives on environmental issues, cross-referencing where appropriate.

The main target readership is introductory-level undergraduate students predominantly taking programmes of environmental modules. But we hope that the whole audience will be much wider, perhaps including second- and third-year undergraduates from many disciplines within the social sciences, science/technology and humanities, who might be taking occasional environmental courses. We also hope that sixth-form teachers and the wider public will use these volumes when they feel the need to obtain quick introductory coverage of the subject we present.

David Pepper and Phil O'Keefe  
1997

## **Series International Advisory Board**

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# Preface to second edition

A lot has happened in the six years or so since the publication of the first edition of *Environment and Social Theory*. The academic study of social theory and the environment has exponentially increased in that time with the ever-growing production of new books, journals, networks and research projects and findings. The area of social theory and the environment is now so vast that it is impossible for anyone to keep abreast of new developments, and thus this current volume will no doubt contain multiple omissions (as well as the usual errors and mistakes). It is however a positive complaint to make, since it demonstrates the vitality of the issues that the intersection of social theory and the environment raise – no doubt in part spurred on by the growing evidence of continuing ecological degradation from global climate change to more local losses of valued landscapes and species. Of particular note is the addition of other books in the Routledge Environment and Society series, such as Erika Cudworth's *Environment and Society* (2003), Susan Buckingham-Hatfield's *Gender and Environment* (2000) and Pratt, Howarth and Brady's *Environment and Philosophy* (2000), all of which were extremely useful in writing the second edition.

There also seems to be a discernible shift within disciplines such as politics and sociology towards mainstreaming the study of the relationship between society, social theory and the environment (less so with economics, as I discuss in Chapter 8), allied to the welcome growth of interdisciplinary programmes of undergraduate study, though more marked in North America than in the UK or Europe which lags behind in this respect. The interdisciplinary focus in research and research funding (discussed in Chapter 11) is also to be welcomed, driven in part by the (belated) recognition that technological and scientific approaches to complex and contested social-environmental issues and problems need the insights of the humanities and social sciences, particularly in terms of policy-making and governance.

In the 'real-world' we have witnessed the horror of 9/11, an event so seared on the minds of the present generation that it is enough to truncate the event to the

day it happened and the subsequent birth of the US-led 'war on terror'; the illegal war and occupation in Iraq, motivated in part by the need of Western powers for secure sources of oil; the maturing of the anti-globalisation movement into the global justice movement and the associated development of the World Social Forum as alternative 'global civil society' sites of resistance and opposition to the World Trade Organization and other institutions of the global and globalising economy (discussed in Chapter 6) and of course the now permanent background presence of 'climate change' in most societies; and most recently the associated popularity of 'energy security' and 'peak oil'. All of this means that research into the relationship between the environment and society and social theory is even more important and needed in the current age, and will continue to be needed in the coming decades as human societies come to terms with transforming themselves into 'post-carbon' economies against an unstable and aggressive international relations context in which we cannot rule out future 'resource wars' by powerful states as part of an extension of the 'war on terror'.

I dedicate this book to my daughter Dearbhla, who along with her sister Saoirse, are never-ending sources of inspiration and hope for the future and whose future interests and well-being are motivations behind much of my academic interest in this area.

I would like to thank Zoe Kruze at Taylor & Francis for her patience in waiting over two years beyond the original deadline, and her understanding of the hectic work and family context within which this second edition was written. The three anonymous referees who commented on the proposal for a second edition made some excellent suggestions, and I hope they will forgive me if I have not acted on them all.

Much of the additional material in this second edition and the thinking behind the rewriting of the book is based on the numerous publications I have written since the first edition, and my teaching and supervision of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. I owe a great debt of thanks to all those students, some of whom are now fellow members of the profession, whom I have taught or supervised and from whom I always learn so much. Here I would like to thank Iorweth Griffiths for co-writing the section on Giddens, which draws extensively on his Ph.D. thesis, and another former Ph.D. student Kate Farrell, who introduced me more fully to ecological economics. I also owe a debt of thanks to all those colleagues with whom I have discussed many of the issues in this book and to whom I have presented papers at conferences and workshops. Although too many to name, I would like to particularly thank Derek Bell, Andy Dobson, Brian Doherty, Peter Doran, Robyn Eckersley, Geraint Ellis, Mat Paterson, David Schlosberg, Graham Smith, Piers Stephens, Sharon Turner and Marcel

Wissenburg for the various conversations and discussions we have had over the past six years.

It is a curious aspect of the modern academic world that while scholars such as myself talk of the nonhuman environment, we rarely experience it (though this could be just me!), and while we may talk of the importance of community, we find ourselves hermetically hooked to our computers emailing rather than talking to one another face to face. Both of these I intend to rectify between now and the third edition!

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work and support of my partner Yvonne who deserves credit as a co-worker on this publication in the sense that this book could not have been written without her taking on an unfair (albeit temporary) burden of child-care and domestic work. While hardly in the same league as the products of real care work, I hope this book does at least prove I was doing something productive all that time in the office!

John Barry  
Belfast, May 2006





# Introduction: the environment and social theory

The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature existed for the convenience of man.

(Carson, 1962: 100)

While it may be true that there is nothing new under the sun, when it comes to discussing environmental issues it seems that perhaps this is not the case. The novelty of environmental issues and problems, from global warming, climate change and biodiversity loss, to concerns for animal rights or the intrinsic value of nature, should not blind us to the fact that humans have always thought about their relationship to the environment. As such the environment and our relationship to it is a long-established issue in social theory.

The newness of environmental concerns is more apparent than real in that thinking about the environment, its meaning, significance and value is as old as human society itself. However, it is clear that the present human generation is faced with a series of unique environmental dilemmas, largely unprecedented in human history. The present human generation is the first one, for example, to have the capacity to destroy the planet many times over, while at the same time it is also the first generation for whom the natural environment cannot be taken for granted. So while the environment has been a perennial theme in human thought, the environment and how humans value, use and think about it has become an increasingly central and important aspect of recent social theory and political practice.

The overall aims of this book are the following:

- to introduce and discuss the ways in which the environment has been used and abused in social theory both past and present;
- to trace some of the historical origins of this relationship and to demonstrate the importance of the environment for social theory;

## 2 • Environment and Social Theory

- to examine key concepts such as ‘environment’, ‘human’, ‘nonhuman’ and ‘nature’ and related concepts in social theory;
- to explore some of the ideological uses of the environment in social, political and moral thought;
- to outline how some central thinkers and forms of social theory have thought about the environment;
- to outline both the ‘greening’ of recent social theory and the development of a green social theory.

### Outline of the book

The book is roughly divided into two parts. The first, historical, part (Chapters 2–4) offers a chronological discussion of past and present uses (and abuses) of the environment in social theory, from Judaeo-Christianity to contemporary social theory. The second part (Chapters 5–8) looks at a variety of contemporary social theories, from economics, to gender, postmodernism, risk society and recent attempts to integrate ecological and biological thinking into social theory.

Chapter 1 defines how social theory is understood and used in the book, and looks at some general conceptual issues of social theorising and the environment. These general introductory issues include how we define what we mean by ‘environment’, and how this is related to such terms as ‘nature’ and ‘nonhuman’. This chapter also looks at how and why the environment is used and abused in social theory, particularly when environment is understood as ‘nature’ or the ‘natural environment’. Four dominant models or understandings of the environment which are often used in social theory are then outlined, and the chapter ends with a discussion of one of the most common ways in which the environment is used in social theory in terms of ‘reading-off’ principles or how society should be from observations of how the natural world operates.

Chapter 2 outlines the historical relationship between social theory and the environment. It focuses on exploring the Judaeo-Christian legacy and moves on to examine the Enlightenment as a key turning point in social theorising about the environment. More specifically, it uses reactions to the industrial and democratic revolutions to organise the discussions of how the place, role and power of environment varied in different forms of social theory.

Chapter 3 looks at pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment social theorising about the environment. After a brief discussion of the different views of classical political philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, this chapter looks at nineteenth-century social theory and the environment. The centrality of social theory being ‘scientific’ is examined before moving on to analyse progressive and

reactionary social theorising about the environment. The latter proceeds by focusing on four social theorists: Malthus, Darwin, Spencer and Kropotkin. Following on from a discussion of the classical Marxist analysis of the relationship between society and the environment is an examination of the liberal perspective, focusing on the work of John Stuart Mill.

Following on from the previous chapter, twentieth-century social theory and the environment is the topic of Chapter 4. It begins with classical sociology, then moves on to a discussion of some key twentieth-century forms of social theory, such as the work of Sigmund Freud and existentialism. It then discusses the critical theory of the Frankfurt School of social thought and its critique of the ‘dark side’ of the Enlightenment and modern societies. This section focuses on how the domination of the external environment by modern societies (via the application of science and technology) can lead to the domination and distortion of human social relations and internal human nature. This then leads into a discussion of Herbert Marcuse and his take on the relationship between the domination of the natural environment and human emancipation. The latter half of the chapter is taken up with a critical examination of some recent social theory and the environment, focusing on the work of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens respectively.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at right- and left-wing social theoretical reactions to and interpretations of the environment and environmental politics. Chapter 5 which looks at right-wing perspectives explores the history of the relationship between environment and conservative thinking, noting the centrality of ideas of a ‘natural order’ and concern for future generations (based on respect for the past and tradition) to conservative thinking as well as the Malthusian concern with class and population increase. This chapter also looks at the authoritarian reaction to the ‘limits to growth’ thesis central to the green/ecological movement, and holds that exclusive concern with population often denotes a right-wing, developed world and sometimes racist concern with the population of the Southern world, without acknowledging that the ‘ecological footprint’ of the smaller populations of the developed North is much greater than the ‘majority world’ in the South. Hardin’s (in)famous ‘tragedy of the commons’ perspective is analysed and critiqued, as is the ‘free market environmentalist’ perspective that uses it to justify the privatisation of environmental public goods. The ‘Promethean’ viewpoint underpinning the right-wing rejection of the idea of ecological limits to economic growth is also outlined and analysed, as is the related right-wing discourse of those who reject the science behind environmental problems such as climate change or ecological degradation. This chapter also looks at the controversy around the publication of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* by Bjorn Lomborg which highlights the politicisation of science and the ideological

(mis)uses of science and empirical data (particularly statistics) in a manner which anticipates some of the arguments of Ulrich Beck in Chapter 9. The 'green conservatism' of prominent political theorist John Gray is also examined as an interesting example of the ways in which ecological concerns and thinking have influenced right-wing forms of social theory. Left-wing reactions are the focus of Chapter 6, which looks at the historical and theoretical reaction of Marxism to the environment and ecological crisis, which ranges from a negative rejection of the ecological perspective as a middle-class, reactionary and right-wing phenomenon (largely based on the 'template' of the Marx–Malthus exchange in the nineteenth century), to more recent attempts to develop an eco-Marxist and eco-socialist theory and politics. The environmental justice movement is also discussed as a class- and race-based form of ecological and health-motivated politics of local resistance to development decisions, and represents a grassroots form of ecological activism which has a left-wing, progressive character. The other main left-wing political tradition analysed is that of anarchism in general, and in particular the social ecology thinking associated with Murray Bookchin, including those critical of his conceptualisation of eco-anarchism. The recent emergence of the anti-globalisation/global justice movement and the political potential and aims of the 'World Social Forum' are also discussed as forms of left-wing (though not exclusively so) engagements with central issues of global ecological protection and a radicalised politics of sustainable development and global justice.

The issue of gender is a key issue within modern social theory, and Chapter 7 looks at the insights and necessity of adopting a gendered analysis of the relationship between society and environment. It begins with an analysis of the historical and conceptual set of gendered dualisms within Western culture. These gendered dualisms begin from an idea of culture or society being separate and above nature, and involve the identification of women and female with 'nature' and the 'natural'. The chapter then proceeds to discuss three of the main forms of eco-feminist social theory, essentialist or spiritual eco-feminism, materialist eco-feminism and political economy, and finally resistance eco-feminism.

Taking economics as a form of social theory, Chapter 8 looks at the ways in which economic theory has viewed, valued and conceptualised the environment. Beginning by showing how 'the economic problem' sets up the conceptual relationship between economics and the environment, it then outlines some of the historical connections between them in various economic schools of thought. In particular, the ways in which the emergence of the modern market economy and economics conceptualised and legitimated particular uses of the environment is discussed in terms of the relationship between land, labour and the enclosure movement, and the relationship which existed both historically and theoretically

between material progress, poverty and economics. It then examines the relationship between economic theory and environmental policy-making within the contemporary liberal democratic state, before looking at environmental economics as a contemporary form of 'economising the environment'. Finally, it introduces and discusses ecological economics as a recent development within economics which attempts to integrate ecological and social insights into the examination of the economy, and outlines 'green political economy' as a more politically motivated development of the ecological economics perspective.

Chapter 9 explores two recent social theories and how they analyse the environment – namely, 'risk society' and postmodernism. In the first half, Ulrich Beck's 'risk-society' thesis is discussed as a particular approach to the environment and environmental risk. The character of risk is explored before moving on to how the precautionary principle (which is fast becoming a central regulating principle of social–environmental interaction) may be seen as a logical extension of Beck's thesis. 'Reflexive modernisation' (a theme Beck shares with Giddens), stemming in part from a particular way modern societies can cope with increased environmental (and other) risks, is discussed in terms of how it seems to imply a redefinition of progress. A central part of this redefinition involves the extension of democratic forms of decision-making to more areas of social life. The latter half looks at postmodern approaches to the environment and environmental issues. Environmentalism and its commonalities with postmodernism are discussed in terms of a shared rejection of modernity. The insights of postmodern questioning of the concepts of nature and environment are explored, as are the useful and provocative suggestions of Tim Luke on 'eco-governmentality'. However, some problems with postmodern environmentalism are outlined. Primarily, an argument is made that environmentalism in particular, and social–environmental problems in general, do not necessarily call for the rejection of modernity. Instead, and in keeping with one aspect of Habermas' thought, a claim is made that environmentalism can be seen as a critical analysis of and call for the fulfilment or completion of the 'project of modernity'.

Chapter 10 is an exploration of some of the issues involved in the relationship between ecology, biology and social theory. A critical analysis of sociobiology is offered as an example of the way in which biology and particular understandings of the natural world and human nature have been used to advance or support particular political positions. Using the work of Ted Benton and Peter Dickens in particular, the implications of ecology and biology for social theory are discussed in terms of the desirability and necessity for a 'critical naturalistic' form of social theory. Of particular interest in this and the concluding chapter are the consequences for social theory of seeing human beings as both 'biologically embodied' and 'ecologically embedded'.

Chapter 11 outlines some of the main principles of green social theory and uses this as the starting point for an examination of the ‘greening’ of social theory. Building on the insights of green social theory, and ideas discussed in previous chapters, some suggestions are made concerning the implications of the greening of social theory. A central claim in the greening of social theory is held to include the overcoming of a strict and permanent separation of ‘society’ and ‘environment’. A consequence of this is that the greening of social theory requires an interdisciplinary approach to the study of society and environment in which the insights of the natural sciences are integrated with the insights of the social sciences. This in turn suggests new models of social theory and modes of social theorising.

# 1 'Nature', 'environment' and social theory



## Key issues

- What is social theory?
- Environment, nature and the nonhuman.
- Social theorising and the environment.
- The uses and abuses of the environment in social theory.
- Four environments for humans in social theory.
- The 'reading-off' hypothesis.

## Introduction

What does one consider when one thinks about the 'environment'? Is the environment the trees, plants, animals that we see around us? Is it the Amazonian rainforests or the world's climate systems upon which all life on the planet depends? Are genetically modified organisms part of the environment? Is the environment the same as 'nature'? Does the 'environment' have to do with concepts such as 'biodiversity', 'ecosystems' and 'ecological harmony'? Can we say that the room where you are probably reading this book constitutes an 'environment'?

The problem (which can also be an advantage) with the concept 'environment', like many other concepts such as 'democracy', 'justice' or 'equality', is that it can take a number of different meanings, refer to a variety of things, entities and processes, and thus cover a range of issues and be used to justify particular positions and arguments. While of course the environment cannot refer to anything (that is, it refers to some identifiable and determinant set of 'things'), it is an extremely elastic term in that there are many things – the room you are sitting in, the book itself, the chair, the desk, other people, the fly on the window,



and the unseen micro-organisms and the air around you – all of which could be considered to constitute your present and immediate ‘environment’. Like many things, the environment can mean different things depending on how you define and understand it, or who defines it.

In many respects thinking about and theorising the environment is one of the most enduring aspects of human thought. For example, the question of the proper place of human society within the **natural order** has occupied a central place in philosophy since its beginnings. *Hence, why, how and in what ways the environment, and related concepts such as ‘nature’ and the ‘natural’, are used in social theory is not only extremely interesting but absolutely crucial, given the different meanings and power of these terms when used in argument and justification.* For example, calling something ‘natural’ implies that it is beyond change, immutable, fixed and given. Hence the power of using this term to justify a particular argument, and the need to be aware of how and why the environment and related concepts are employed in social theorising.

At the same time, alongside the theoretical or academic interest, there is a very important practical aspect to thinking about and theorising the environment in relation to society. This has to do with the increasing quantity and quality of environmental problems which face every society on Earth, both nationally and globally. Global warming and climate change, deforestation, desertification, pollution, **biodiversity** loss and the controversies over the benefits and dangers of **genetic engineering and biotechnology** – all are familiar terms in our everyday lives. All of these, and others, seem to suggest that there is an ‘environmental crisis’ which faces humanity (and the nonhuman world), the like of which is unprecedented in human history. For the first time in history, humanity has at its disposal the capacity radically to alter the environment (primarily through the application of science and technology), and even has the capacity (though thankfully still not the willingness) to completely destroy life on Earth ‘as we know it’ (as Dr Spock would say) through the collected nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction possessed by a minority of the world’s nations. At the same time as being the first generation which has this capacity to affect the environment, one could also say that (particularly since the rise of the green or environmental movement) this is the first generation which knows (or at least has some sense) that it is transforming the environment in a way which will affect the state of the environment inherited by future generations. Hence thinking about or analysing the role or place of the environment in social theory (the aim of this book) is not simply of theoretical, but also of great practical interest.

The importance of analysing the environment and social theory can also be seen when one considers that the majority of the world’s environmental problems are largely the result of human social action or behaviour. Global warming, for

example, is accepted by the vast majority of the world's scientists to be the result of increased carbon emissions by humans, principally through energy production and consumption (the burning of **fossil fuels**, such as coal, gas and petroleum to create electricity) and forms of transport which rely on such fossil fuels. Hence social theory, defined below as the systematic study of how society is and ought to be, has an important role to play in explaining, understanding and providing possible solutions to the 'environmental crisis'.

## What is social theory?

'Social theory' as a field of study is particularly difficult to accurately determine or define. As understood here, social theory is the systematic study of human society, including the processes of social change and transformation, involving the formulation of theoretical (and empirical) hypotheses, explanations, justifications and prescriptions. In disciplinary terms 'social theory' is often associated with sociological theory, and modern social theory has its origins in the sociological tradition. This book however, takes a broad rather than a narrow understanding of social theory, in that it encompasses sociological theory but goes beyond it to include other disciplines and intellectual traditions and approaches. As may be seen from the range of authors and disciplinary approaches surveyed in this book, social theory includes the 'social-scientific' approach to the study of society (in terms of the disciplines one finds in the social-scientific approach to studying society and social phenomenon – sociology and anthropology, politics, international relations, economics, legal studies, women's studies, cultural studies). However, social theory may also include the disciplinary approaches of history, philosophy and moral theory and cultural geography. Thus 'social theory' acts as an umbrella under which are gathered a range of approaches to thinking about society, explaining social phenomena, and offering justifications for advocating or resisting social transformation.

The main disciplinary approaches of this book are: sociological theory (including cultural theory), political theory, economics and political economy, but it also includes the history of social thought. In broad terms what may be called an interdisciplinary conception of social theory is used throughout the book.

The historical origins of social theory may be found in **the Enlightenment**, though aspects of modern social theory may also be found in pre-Enlightenment thinkers and schools of thought (particularly in political philosophy and political economy, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3). And it is in reaction to the Enlightenment, and the emergence of 'modern society', that a large part of past and contemporary social theory finds its subject. It is in the spirit of the early emergence of social theory that a broad understanding of it is adopted here. In its

origins, social theory covered the broad field of the systematic or disciplined study of society in all its various aspects: political, economic, cultural, social, legal, philosophical, moral, religious and scientific. Social theory as the systematic or scientific study of society included looking at such social phenomena as the relationship between the individual and society, the origins and character of cultural practices, and the relationships within and between everyday life and social institutions, such as the family, the nation, the state and the economy. As May points out, in the nineteenth century the main trends in social theory were 'First, an interest in the nature or social development and social origins. Second the merging of history and philosophy into a "science of society". Third, the attempt to discover rational-empirical causes for social phenomena in place of metaphysical ones' (May, 1996: 13). In a similar fashion, this book attempts to offer an equally broad and inclusive view of social theory, though of course many issues, writers and ideas are necessarily left out, or only briefly mentioned. At the same time, we can use the Enlightenment as a way to demarcate modern social theory by noting that the 'subject' of modern social theory is 'the analysis of modernity and its impact on the world' (Giddens *et al.*, 1994: 1). In particular, modern social theory analyses the impact of the industrial, liberal-capitalist socio-economic system which has come to shape the modern global and globalising world.

Social theory typically has two dimensions, one descriptive the other prescriptive. In its descriptive aspect, social theory *describes* society and advances particular explanations for social phenomena, events, problems and changes within society. For example, a social theory may involve explaining the emergence of contemporary far-right politics across Europe by reference to a rise in unemployment, the negative economic effects of globalisation and a consequent appeal of populist nationalist politics in response to the erosion of 'national sovereignty' or 'national pride'.

The *prescriptive* dimensions of social theory are the ways in which social theory not only tells a story of the way society is, but also tells how society ought to be. Here social theory advances particular normative or value-based arguments, justifications and principles to support its claims about how society ought to be ordered, changed or whatever. This prescriptive aspect of social theory can broadly take two forms. On the one hand, it can seek to justify the present social order, that is, suggest that the way society is is how it ought to be. This may be described as a 'mainstream' or 'conservative' position in which the aim of social theory is to legitimate, defend and justify the current way society is organised, its principles, institutions and ways of life.

On the other hand, some forms of social theory seek to argue that society ought to be transformed, organised along different principles and with different

institutions from those upon which the current social order is based. These forms of social theory may be broadly described as 'critical' in that they are critical of the current way society is organised and seek to provide reasons for why it ought to be changed and organised along different principles or with different institutions. The classical example of a critical form of social theory is Marxism, which criticises the current capitalist, liberal democratic organisation of societies in the 'West' or 'developed' world, suggesting an alternative 'communist' or 'socialist' mode of social organisation. Below are some examples of mainstream and critical forms of social theory which will be looked at in this book.

*Mainstream social theory*

Conservatism

Neo-classical economics

Sociobiology

Social Darwinism

*Critical social theory*

Marxism/socialism

Feminism

Ecologism/green social theory

Postmodernism

While it is nearly always an advantage to adopt broad and flexible, rather than narrow and rigid, approaches to the study of society, such an approach is particularly advantageous (indeed, some would say necessary and not just desirable) when it comes to social theory and the environment. The adoption of an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to studying the relation between society and environment is something that has become a dominant perspective in recent work in this area (Barry, 1999b), and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10. In part, this is due to the rather simple fact that there is not just *one* relation between society and environment (as this and other books in the Routledge Environment and Society series seek to demonstrate). Rather, the relation between society and environment denotes a series of relationships: physical, social, economic, political, moral, cultural, epistemological and philosophical, covering a multi-faceted, multi-layered, complex and dynamic interaction between society and environment. Given the multiple relations between society and environment, it is clear that no one discipline or approach can hope to capture the full complexity of the various relations between society and environment. Hence an interdisciplinary approach drawing on a variety of sources is not only useful, but in some ways is necessary in discussing how the environment has been conceptualised, used and abused within social theory.

With regard to social theorising about nature or the environment (and as indicated below, the two are not necessarily the same), one can trace two other approaches alongside critical and mainstream. These are what one may call 'naturalist' and 'social constructionist' approaches. Naturalist social theorising about the environment generally takes the view that the environment is external to society and exists as an independent 'natural order' outside of society. Social-constructionist

	<i>Critical</i>	<i>Conservative/mainstream</i>
<i>Naturalist</i>	e.g. anarchism	e.g. Malthusianism/Sociobiology
<i>Social</i>		
<i>Constructionist</i>	e.g. Marxism	e.g. neo-classical economics

**Figure 1.1 Social theory and the environment schema**

*Source: Author*

approaches, on the other hand, see ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ as constructions of society, and therefore focus on analysing the internal relations within society. Combining them together, we get a fourfold schema of social theoretical approaches to the environment. This schema may be used as a rough guide to understanding particular social theories and theorists.

## Environment, nature and the nonhuman

One way of starting our exploration of the place or role of environment in social theory is to look at what we mean by ‘environment’. First, we can note that the environment is an ‘essentially contested’ term. The phrase ‘essentially contested’ simply means that the term has no universally agreed and singular meaning or definition. The importance of these issues should of course be obvious when social theorising about the environment and its relationship to human social concerns. One of the first and most obvious issues about the environment and social theory concerns the **fact/value distinction**. This refers to the way in which the environment, and related terms, are used not just in a descriptive sense, that is dealing with the facts, but how they are also used to express, justify or establish particular values or judgements, courses of action and reaction, policy prescriptions and ways of thinking. Thus while the environment is used to simply describe the world, that is, to tell us how the world is, it is also used to prescribe how the world *ought to be*, or making some normative (value) claim about something. For example, the term ‘natural’ carries with it a host of different value meanings, sometimes positive ones of ‘wholesome’ or ‘healthy’ (as in organic food), sometimes negative ones, ‘uncultured’ or ‘backward’ (as in passing judgement on a group’s way of life).

A good way to start thinking about the environment is to list its various definitions and understandings. Often when one is trying to define terms or concepts, a

good place to start is a dictionary and thesaurus. Here are some definitions of 'environment' that can be found:

environment: 'surroundings, milieu, atmosphere, condition, climate, circumstances, setting, ambience, scene, decor' (taken from a computer thesaurus).

environment: 'situation, position, locality, attitude, place, site, bearings, neighbourhood' (*Roget's Thesaurus*, 1988).

environment: 'surroundings, conditions of life or growth' (*Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 1992).

Thus while the environment is often taken to mean the nonhuman world, and sometimes used as equivalent to 'nature', it can take on a variety of meanings. The roots of the term 'environment' lie in the French word *environ* which means 'to surround', 'to envelop', 'to enclose'. Another closely related French word is 'milieu', which is often taken to mean the same as environment. An important implication of this idea of environment is that 'An environment as milieu is not something a creature is merely *in*, but something it *has*' (Cooper, 1992: 169). What Cooper means by this is that environment is not just a passive background or context within which something lives or exists. It is also something that is possessed in the sense that to have an environment is an important part of what the creature or entity *is*. That is, to have an environment is a constitutive part of who or what the creature is, so that one cannot identify a creature without referring to its environment. On this reading, anything that surrounds or environs is an environment. But 'to surround' by itself tells us little. We need to know *what* is surrounded in order to know what *the environment* in question is. That is, without some specified thing to refer or relate to (a species such as humans, or a culture or place) the term 'environment' means very little. Or rather without a referent, the environment can mean everything that surrounds everything that exists. In referring to everything, it also refers to nothing in particular and is therefore of little use as an analytical concept for social theory!

Thus it is important to note that the environment is a *relational* concept or idea in that we need to know what or who is the subject of discussion in order to define an environment. While we may often speak of 'the environment', what is usually at issue is a 'particular environment'. Hence often, but not always, the environment within social theory is defined in relation to ourselves and particular human social relations, and particular historical and cultural contexts. For example, when people in the Western world speak of the environment they usually mean the physical nonhuman environment, such as the countryside, forests, animals, rivers and so on. However, in other cultures the environment may include these things but also include non-physical things such as spirits and the ghosts of one's

ancestors. It is for this reason that it is misleading to equate the environment with 'nature' in the sense of the nonhuman natural world, though this is often how it is understood. For example, the 'environment' can refer to the non-natural environment, as in the human, social or built environment. At the same time, as a relational concept we can speak of the environments of other animals, organisms or planets. It is an interesting and instructive thought to consider that we are part of the environment of other creatures (and of each other in many respects).

However, 'nature' does not only refer to the nonhuman world, but is, as Raymond Williams noted, 'perhaps the most complex word in the language' (Williams, 1988: 221). This is because 'nature' can and does refer to both 'human nature' and nonhuman nature (understood as natural environment), thus crossing the boundary between that which is human and nonhuman. Indeed, the complexity and power of 'nature' has to do in large part with the fact that it can be used to unite (as well as separate) the human and the nonhuman. Here are some meanings of nature:

Nature: 'Nature comes from *nature*, OF [Old French] and *natura*, L [Latin], from a root in the past participle of *nasci*, L [Latin] – to be born (from which also derive *nation*, *native*, *innate*, etc.)' (Williams, 1988: 219).

nature: '1. The essence of something . . . 2. Areas unaltered by human action, i.e. nature as a realm external to humanity and society. 3. The physical world in its entirety, perhaps including humans, i.e. nature as a universal realm of which humans, as a species, are a part' (Castree, forthcoming).

nature: 'n. inborn or essential character or quality; temperament, disposition; instinct; universe, especially of living things, collectively; unspoilt wild life, scenery, and vegetation; the original unaltered or uncivilised state, especially of man [*sic*] . . . [Latin. *natura*, from *natus*, past participle of *nasci*, to be born]' (*The Children's Dictionary*, 1969: 398).

These definitions point to the way in which 'nature' can refer to both human and nonhuman issues, properties, processes and entities. Thus we can say that every living thing (both human and nonhuman) has its particular 'nature', as in a more or less determinate set of innate dispositions, characteristics and impulses. At the same time, nature can also simply refer to the totality of the nonhuman world, making it synonymous with the natural environment.

However, sometimes nature opposes environment. For example, one of the enduring debates within social theory concerns the 'natural' or 'innate' causes of human behaviour as opposed to its 'environmental' or 'external' causes. This is the common 'nature versus nurture' debate one finds within social theory and everyday discourse. Here 'nature' refers to 'human nature' understood as some

'given' or unalterable *internal* essence of human beings, while 'environment' refers to the *external* social environment within which humans are brought up and socialised. This issue is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 8. Thus both environment and nature are extremely complex, contested as well as very flexible terms.

## Social theorising and the environment

In common usage, the environment usually refers to the physical world which environs or surrounds something. Most commonly of all, in modern parlance, the environment is often thought of as synonymous with the 'natural world' or 'nature'. That is, the environment is often thought of as something that is objective rather than subjective. This is another way of understanding the fact/value distinction in that to say the environment is objective means it is a factual reality independent of our subjective value judgements. As objective reality, the environment just is. Closing one's eyes or mind to one's surroundings does not mean that they disappear. This is something most of us learn as we grow older; young children often believe that simply closing one's eyes is sufficient to make their environment (and all it contains, such as angry adults!) go away. Now while I do not wish to suggest that the environment does not or cannot refer to 'nature' (meaning the nonhuman world and its processes and entities), a less restrictive understanding of the environment is a more fruitful approach to take when relating the environment to social theory. That is, thinking about the environment as something that can and does mean more than the 'natural world' can both help us in thinking about the natural world as well as revealing the complexity of social theorising about the environment.

One of the problems in social theorising about the environment has been that the latter has been viewed by the former as essentially something that is both nonhuman and also beyond human society and culture. So, for example, the environment has been understood as the 'natural world' or nonhuman nature, something which surrounds us and is also beyond human culture. This is the view of the environment which one gets from popular nature programmes on television, such as the excellent natural history programmes produced by the BBC (e.g. David Attenborough's 'Life on Earth' or 'Planet Earth' series). The point is not to reject these understandings but to widen how we think about the environment so as to incorporate these and other possible meanings. Using the term 'environment' as simply another way of speaking about 'nature' or the 'natural world' within social theory is understandable, but one needs to be aware of the danger of missing something important about the environment if we define (and thus confine) it so narrowly.



Particularly in modern everyday language and in modern social theory (Soper, 1995), there is a marked tendency simply to equate the environment with the 'natural'. Often one finds the two terms used interchangeably. An example is O'Brien and Cahn's statement that 'the study of nature, and the relationship between human civilization and the environment, have always held a prominent position in social and political inquiry. Humans have long been interested in discovering our place in the hierarchy of nature' (1996: 5). The point is not that we should never equate the two concepts – indeed it is very difficult to consistently distinguish 'nature' from 'environment' – but rather we should be aware that distinguishing between them is required in critically analysing the concept of environment within social theory. As in many forms of human inquiry (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) part of the process of theorising about something involves making distinctions between different concepts, terms, relations and processes.

One important distinction which may be drawn is between 'nature' as conveying an abstract, almost neutral sense of the nonhuman world, and 'environment' as associated with a more local or determinate sense of a nonhuman (or human) milieu or surrounding. That is, 'nature' is often understood as referring to the conditions of life (for both human and nonhuman species) and all that exists on this planet as a whole, while 'environment' is often associated with a particular subset of these conditions, a subset defined in relation to a particular organism or entity. Thus we can speak of 'nature' without referring to any particular organism or entity, but 'environment' implies the environment of some particular organism, species or set of these. As Ingold puts it, nature is the 'reality *of* the physical world of neutral objects apparent only to the detached, indifferent observer' while the environment is the 'reality *for* the world constituted in relation to the organism or person whose environment it is' (1992: 44). Or as Cooper expresses it, 'an environment [is] a field of significance' (1992: 170), that is, significant for someone or something. Even when both nature and environment are used in reference to the nonhuman world, 'nature' is often associated with an abstract, universal sense of the nonhuman world, referring to the totality of the latter. In contrast, 'environment' refers to a particular, less abstract and more local and determinate part of the natural world.

Like many of our concepts and terms, environment and nature are formed in contrast to their opposites. As well as consulting a dictionary or thesaurus, another good way to get a sense of what terms mean is to seek out their opposites. At least at an initial stage of inquiry, one can find out quite a lot about a concept by seeing with what it is contrasted. This dualistic form of analytical inquiry simply means that we compare a particular term with its opposite. It is important to point out that this form of inquiry will not capture the full complexity of an issue, since

thinking about something cannot be reduced to simply specifying something and then discussing its opposite, but it is a useful way to start. So to what do these terms 'non-environment' and 'non-natural' refer? What do they mean?

Since a whole book could be taken up in exploring the full range of issues involved in this task (see Soper, 1995), what I intend to do is highlight some of the more obvious ways in which our understanding of these terms can be advanced by comparing them with their antonyms. In the binary set of concepts below, we can find out quite a lot about the meaning of the environment (qua 'nature').

environment/nature	<i>opposite of</i>	human society/culture
nature/nonhuman	<i>opposite of</i>	human
naturally occurring	<i>opposite of</i>	human-made/artificial
nature	<i>opposite of</i>	nurture

One of the first things we should note about 'nature' and 'environment' (when used as referring to the nonhuman world or processes) is that they are viewed in opposition to human society and culture. In this respect, whatever is environmental or natural is something which is separate from and independent of human society. And in some respects this seems to be, at least intuitively, true. For example, trees grow and ecosystems function independently of human society and culture. At this very basic level nature or the 'natural environment' does not depend on humanity. Indeed, the opposite would seem to be the case: that is, humans in common with every other living species depend on their environment to survive and flourish. So on this first analysis: the environment is something that is separate from human society. *However, this separation does not mean that humans do not have a relation with their environment.* Since they depend on their environment, and exist within the environment, they are obviously related to their environment. But to say that humans are related to and depend upon the environment is not to say that they are the same as the environment. Like any other species, humans exist in a condition of separation from but at the same time a relationship to and with their environment.

Second, there is also another dimension to the relationship: that between 'nature' and the 'natural environment' as 'nonhuman' in contrast to 'human'. 'Nature' as 'nonhuman' may thus be used to define what is 'human' or what is properly human. In this way, nature as nonhuman is an extremely important concept, one might say a foundational concept, in social theory, in that it defines what is the human, or properly human.

Third, we see that the 'environment' can refer to that which naturally occurs, in contrast to that which is human-made or artificial. Indeed, this final set of

opposing concepts – between the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’ – is one of the most central ways in which humans have and do think about the environment. We commonly think of the environment as entities (rocks, rivers), species (bears, lions, foxes) and processes (carbon cycles, hydrological cycles) which are emphatically not the products of human society. Thus the environment here is that which occurs without human intervention, and many natural processes and entities pre-date humanity and human society. Here we have a notion of the environment *qua* nature which is one of the oldest and most enduring conceptions humans have of the environment. This particular conception of the environment resonates with the idea of the environment as something nonhuman, the external and eternal natural and naturally occurring surroundings which envelopes both humans and nonhuman entities.

In some ways, it finds an echo in the Christian doctrine of the environment as ‘God’s Creation’, that is, the environment as something which is not of human origin or design. One can also appreciate the distinction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’ when one considers the difference people perceive between certain foods and goods which are ‘natural’ and those that are ‘processed’. Added to a factual distinction between what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘artificial’ are a whole range of evaluative positions in which one or the other is seen as ‘superior’ or ‘better’ than the other. For example, Goodin (1992) suggests that a ‘green’ theory of value rests on the claim that naturally occurring processes have a particular value precisely because they are not the work of human hands. As he puts it, in answer to his question ‘What is so especially valuable about something having come about through natural rather than through artificial human processes?’ is that ‘naturalness [is] a source of value’ (Goodin, 1992: 30). That something is ‘natural’, of nonhuman origin, and existing independently of human actions or interests, is held by many people to be something of value. According to Goodin, a ‘natural’ landscape is more valuable than a ‘humanised’ landscape, in the same way as a ‘fake’ or reproduction is never as valuable as the original (Elliott, 1997). Placing such stress and importance on the value of ‘natural’ and naturalness is a distinctly ‘green’ position, though one which many non-greens may share.

However, on the other hand, there are those for whom the ‘artificial’ is superior to the ‘natural’. Here we can think of arguments in which whatever is human-made or produced is viewed as more valuable than whatever is naturally created. An extreme example of this is what can be called the **technocentric** position which holds that human creations are vastly superior to natural ones, so that it can not only ask ‘What’s wrong with plastic trees?’ (Krieger, 2000), but answer that there is nothing wrong with them, and indeed they are superior to natural ones. One can see some of the origins of this view of the superiority of the human over the natural in the ‘perfectionist’ justifications for human transformation

of the natural environment that were prevalent in pre-Enlightenment Western Christianity, as discussed in Chapter 2.

However, it also needs to be remembered that there is a continuum between the two poles of the 'natural' and the 'artificial'; there are of course many intermediate positions between them. As will be seen throughout this book, this distinction between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' and their relative evaluative weightings (superior/inferior) is something that shadows much social theorising about the environment and our relationship to it. One can trace many of the origins of the debates about the relationship between society and the environment through looking at how, at different times and places, different values are attached to the 'natural' and the 'artificial'. For example, whereas nowadays there is a premium attached to things 'natural' (and not just for health reasons, as in organic food), not so long ago, natural produce was regarded as 'backward', 'uncivilised' or not advanced; a sign of socio-economic and cultural inferiority. For example, in the last century, to live 'close to nature' (either in hunter-gatherer communities or rural-agricultural settings) or consume natural produce, meant one was not as advanced or cultured as those who did not live close to nature (but in urban areas and cities) and who enjoyed 'artificial' and 'processed' goods and services. Thus there is no determinate or singular, agreed or fixed reading of the natural and the artificial; they mean different things and are given different evaluations in different social and cultural settings and in different historical periods. The point of social theory is to make us aware of these evaluative distinctions, to try and understand them, and if possible suggest explanations for them and to critically interrogate and perhaps challenge them. In this way we can say that there are no 'value-neutral' readings of the environment as nonhuman nature. That is, when one describes the environment as nonhuman nature, implicit in those descriptions are certain value judgements and normative positions. This is partly because 'nature' and the 'natural' carry with them various meanings and express a variety of evaluative judgements (ranging from the good/positive to the inferior/negative). And as will be seen later on, in discussing the 'reading-off' hypothesis, when social theories 'read' the 'environment' they often project or map particular ways of thinking and values on to the environment rather than simply offering a 'neutral' or 'objective' account.

At a very basic level one can intuitively grasp what it means to say that the environment is **socially constructed** by noting how different societies, different ways of thinking and social theorising display distinct ways of thinking about and perceiving the environment. For example, while the environment for a typical city-dweller may mean the houses, buildings, waste spaces, parks as well as 'nature' (meaning the nonhuman natural world), for a country-dweller the environment may mean fields, domestic and wild animals, hedgerows, stone walls

and the seasons, as well as ‘nature’. Thus environments differ and depend upon that to which one is relating the environment in question. At the same time, this example shows that while there may be different conceptions of the environment, they do not necessarily have to be contradictory. This is due in part to the relational character of the environment – that is, the environment is that which surrounds something, some entity or someone (including collections and groups). My environment (however I construct this) does not necessarily have to contradict your environment (however you construct it). The map (the representation), after all, is not the territory (the physical reality), but a particular ‘reading’ or representation of the territory. As Foster notes, “‘The environment’ . . . is something upon which very many frames of reference converge. But there is no frame of reference which is as it were “naturally given”, and which does not have to be contended for in environmental debate’ (1997: 10).

Alongside this discursive or conceptual sense of the ‘social construction’ of the environment, there is a *material* dimension to the ‘construction’ of the environment which refers to the real, material, physical production and transformation of the environment by the human species. Such transformations of the environment by humans include agriculture, the creation of particular landscapes by human practices different from the environment if left in its ‘natural’ (i.e. untransformed) state, the creation of hybrid species of plants and animals as a result of human intentional selection and cross-breeding (which includes modern biotechnological techniques and the human manipulation of genetic information).

## The uses and abuses of the environment in social theory

Conceptions of the environment differ, sometimes dramatically. In some cultures, or within particular worldviews (ways of thinking), the environment can include the dead, one’s ancestors and/or other entities from the ‘supernatural’ realm, such as gods, goddesses, spirits, angels, ghosts and so on. Thus the environment, as that which environs, depends not only on something to environ, but what constitutes the surrounding environment. Hence the environment does not necessarily refer to the physical environment (whether natural or human-made).

The full complexity of the social construction of the environment can be seen if we examine how we think about the environment. ‘The environment’ as a term of social discourse (that is, as a part of human language, thinking and acting) is of course a human concept. It is difficult to imagine that other species see or construct their environment using the conceptual tools which humans do. Indeed, the vast majority of other species do not ‘conceptualise’ their environment at all