

Nature and culture

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The advances in the understanding of nature in terms of scientific knowledge has been tremendous especially since the mid-1950's with the discovery of the DNA structure, which precipitated more advances in molecular biology, genetics, and biochemistry. However, in the end of the 20th century until now, our modern society has seen more and more debates about how nature has been altered and/or destroyed by our progress in technology, in particular biotechnology.

Yet, one may wonder if the debate over technological progress affecting nature or more specifically, natural laws that govern our existence, does reflect a cultural bias in the general comprehension of technological progress in our society. Consequently, three questions may be asked to completely analyze the problem. First, is there a nature/culture problem to be discussed? Second, if there is, how has it affected our global society with respect to a cultural shift caused by particular developments in science and technology and when? If there is a global effect, is there a tangible effect on our personal life? This paper will deal with each of these questions.

The amazing characteristics that humans possess, is to learn from previous generations, to improve upon their work, and to establish a momentum to human life and culture that has taken our civilization from cave art to quantum physics, and into the space age. In addition, other scientific advances bring about technological progress in our direct environment and society, more so than being in space. Even more so has biotechnology been altering the nature of our humanity, not only in terms of 'programmed' physical changes based on scientific discoveries, but also in terms of environmental changes. Unfortunately, people's understanding of what

science is capable of either to benefit our society or destroy it, has been undermined since the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century.

How do we know that? Simply consider the history of our society until now with the debate over cloning and stem-cell research that have come under fire in our western part of the world. In both cases, a further division has taken place within the world scientific community. Some countries allow the research whereas others do not. Consequently, what can we draw from this chiasm, is it due to a cultural difference? If it is, then do we really understand what the meaning of culture is? If we do, can we reconcile differences? Raymond Williams tells us that there is a great difficulty in even defining the concept of culture. (Williams,) Is it a division of the whole into parts (the individual) like Latour claims or a whole global entity like Tarde thinks? (Latour, *Social in Question*) Furthermore, Williams is not even sure himself of what nature really means. On page 78, he does tell us that there is a general confusion or disparity of what different people mean by nature. Is it either the nature of man (biology), the natural nature of our environment, or both? Latour seems to agree with Williams that there is a problem of defining the context of nature and culture.

Latour uses the illustration of one simple event like using an aerosol can after which people are taken on a journey to Antarctica, to touring scientific labs across the world, and the chemistry of inert gases. (p. 2 *Crisis*) (Latour,) This implies that the complexity of the division is based not only on the science of the natural environment, but also first on how people are affected by the effects of the ozone problem, and second how different people or the world as a single cultural phenomenon perceive the problem.

The conclusion is that the division exists but its very existence is very confusing to any person from any part of the world or the whole world, perhaps minus the scientists. Rabinow's expose supports this idea of confusion when she claims using Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's arguments that there has been a shift caused by this division, particularly on how we as a species comprehend ourselves and our environment. Specifically, on p. 91, she states:

“ In the modern form, finitude establishes a field of life, labor, and language within which Man appears as a distinctive being who is both the subject and object of his own understanding, but an understanding that is never complete because of its very structure.” (Rabinow,)

Toxen is convinced that this magnitude of this shift has actually been more like a revolution with respect to science and technology in our society. (Toxen, 1983) On p. 1, he emphasizes that there is a total reshaping of “ industries, companies, universities, and laboratories to sustain the present mode of production.” He adds that the cause of this shift seems to be linked to a push for biotechnological advances, especially in our time (he wrote this article in 1983).

So, how do this shift and the nature/culture division affect our own existence? Callon speaks of auto engineers in France becoming sociologists in order to manufacture the first electric car. As a consequence, engineers define what society will be like and how it will be changed because of the introduction of such a new mode of transportation. Their resulting conclusions motivate their work while reshaping our ideas or shall we say our

cultural acceptance. (Callon,) In the same vein, biotechnology has been hailed as the only way to remedy problems that our society faces. For example, Lappe and Collins cite the example of how biotechnology is supposed to solve world hunger but people are starving more than ever. (Lappe-Collins,)

An illustration of this idea is cited by Pollan with Monsanto genetically engineering a bug-killer potato that may be hazardous to our health so we would not be able to eat it anyway! (Pollan,). In the context of ecology, Schwartz and Thompson speak of “ Nature benign gives us global equilibrium.” (Schwartz, Thompson, 1990) This idea implies that science and technology cannot help the way that is propounded. The reason is simple: there is not enough comprehension of us as individuals and as a civilization (culture) to solve the mostly self-inflicted obstacles encountered with our nature as a species as well as our environment (nature).

In conclusion, there is a real doubt whether science and technology can help our society. Since there is a fuzzy picture of how we understand the division between culture and nature, science and technology cannot claim that they understand what shapes our society for the better while they certainly do not understand how they can shape society for the worst.

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