



Do cows belong in nature? The cultural basis of agriculture in Sweden and Australia

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Within the now extensive recent literature on cultures of nature, agriculture has received less attention than might have been expected given its threshold role in transforming human relations with the earth and with plants and animals. The concept and practice of agriculture can be understood as central to the emergence and maintenance of the culture/nature dichotomy within Western thought and practice. In this paper we use the comparative cases of Sweden and Australia to examine the differential and contingent positioning of agriculture with respect to that which is understood as nature. Broadly speaking, some parts of agriculture are understood to belong to nature in Sweden through a long history. This is not the case in Australia, where the short agricultural history is positioned in contrast to nature. This affects the way in which biodiversity and environmental protection takes place – in Sweden as part of farming, – in Australia in spite of it. We argue that these cultural differences have been more important than generally recognised in debates over multifunctional agriculture. We discuss the environmental management implications of the two different models in a context made more dynamic by climate change.

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1. Introduction

Recent decades of scholarship have increasingly shown how the division of reality into nature and culture is in fact all but natural. According to critical perspectives based on anthropological and historical research, the understanding of the world as consisting of two separate spheres, one that is influenced by humans (i.e. 'culture') and another one that is not (i.e. 'nature') is far from universal. Rather, this is a culturally specific world view that is today widespread due to the influences of Western thinking (cf. Latour, 2004). While increasingly problematised within academia, the concept of nature still persists as a basis for human thought and action in the modern world. In daily activities within a wide range of contexts, people continue to interact with, use, perceive and define something they call 'nature' (Castree, 2004, 191). Understanding the continuing power of the discursive practice of nature is important for researchers approaching environmental issues, particularly in an era of climate change. In order to

deal with contemporary environmental challenges we need to elucidate how such practice influences processes of everyday boundary making, how it varies geographically, and how it has outcomes in biophysical landscapes.

Notwithstanding key studies such as Anderson (2003), agriculture has not been prominent in conceptual debates over nature, perhaps because of the practical orientation of much agricultural research. It is also the case that recent debate in agricultural research has been more concerned with the productivist/post-productivist dualism than the nature/culture one (Wilson, 2001, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008). Yet there is hardly a field where human interaction with, and dependence on, the biophysical world is more apparent than farming. Farming is inevitably carried out through networks of human practices, tools and discourses in complex interaction with plants, animals, soil, water, machines and many other actors (Whatmore, 2002). It thus presents a prime example of practices dismantling the nature/culture divide. In this paper we discuss farming as a mode of cultural involvement in nature, and analyze the ways in which nature is delineated in relation to farming. We do this through a comparison of conceptual boundary making relating to farming and nature in Sweden and Australia, illustrating the contingencies of such practices, and their outcomes in the biophysical landscape.

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Our point is not to suggest that political and economic factors, such as the centrality of production for export in Australia, or the EU context of Swedish agriculture, are unimportant. But these have been discussed extensively in the literature. Our purpose here is rather to revisit the cultural underpinnings of agriculture itself and of its different geographical expressions. Our argument is that the interaction of these cultural framings with policy decisions has received much less scholarly attention.

Williams (1972) is often quoted for claiming 'nature' to be one of the most complex words in the English language, and the same can indeed be said about the word '*natur*' in Swedish. The dichotomy between nature and culture has its Swedish equivalent in the words *natur* and *kultur*, with the same etymological roots and corresponding connotations as their English counterparts. On the other hand, when it comes to another couple of related words, the English 'landscape' and the Swedish '*landskap*' – both often used in connection to the matters discussed in this paper – there are significant differences between the two languages, as has been demonstrated by Olwig (2002). However, our main undertaking in this paper is not to discuss concepts themselves, but rather to explore and compare the contemporary use and effects of the words nature and agriculture in two geographically separate contexts.

The comparison between Sweden and Australia is not an obvious one, but we have found it very instructive in order to elucidate a number of different variations of human relations to nature (Saltzman, 2008). Even though located far apart, with considerable differences when it comes to physical geography, climate and history, there are in fact a number of relevant similarities between Sweden and Australia. Both countries have advanced economies and are relatively sparsely populated. In Sweden, population is concentrated in the south, and in Australia it is concentrated around the coastal fringe, particularly of the southeast. This leaves in each country significant areas of remote country (arctic and arid/tropical respectively) for more extensive land uses including pastoralism, national parks and indigenous land. In each country farming has an important place in the national biography and in national identity, running in a somewhat parallel narrative to the valuation of 'wild' nature. As in many Western countries there is anxiety about processes of rural decline in marginal areas, with decreasing rural populations and weakening social networks in rural communities (Beesley et al., 2003). In both Sweden and Australia there are narratives about growing (conceptual) distances between city and country. At the same time there is an increasing difference between the peri-urban countryside and more remote areas, in terms of land use interests, with a counter trend of amenity migration to rural areas accessible to large cities (Burnley and Murphy, 2004; Hugo, 2005; Amcoff, 2006).

In terms of numbers, contemporary farming is certainly a much larger business in Australia than Sweden. The total agricultural area in Australia is 445 million ha, or about ten times the entire Swedish territory (FAO, 2005). The proportion of arable land, on the other hand, is nearly the same in the two countries, about 6% of the total area. Most Australian 'agricultural' land is used only for extensive grazing of cattle or sheep. In the Swedish case, agriculture is often combined with forestry, which gives a significant return to the private farm economy. Sixty-six percent of Swedish farms also include forest land (Statistics Sweden, 2007).

A number of recent authors have found Australian/European comparisons with regard to agricultural policy instructive (Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008; Dibden et al., 2009; Dibden and Cocklin, 2009). A common theme in these papers is the weak development of, or active resistance towards, multifunctional agriculture in the Australian context, in comparison to Norway (Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008) or other parts of Europe where

there is strong government protection for agricultural landscape values and for biodiversity protection in agricultural contexts. This combination of farming and nature protection is indeed particularly developed in Sweden, as shown by the large share of environmental measures within the national application of the EU's Common Agriculture Policy, compared to the other member states (European Commission, 2005). In Australian agricultural contexts, by contrast, governments have attempted 'to improve environmental management *without subsidising* landholders' (Cocklin and Dibden, 2009: 10, emphasis in original).

In this paper we add to the comparative discussion by elucidating a more deep-seated difference than that of current government policies, i.e. the issue of the relationship between agriculture and what is understood to be 'nature' in different jurisdictions. Dibden and Cocklin (2009: 170) briefly discuss the differences between New World or settler understandings of this relationship, for example in Australia, New Zealand or North America where agriculture was introduced relatively recently, compared with Old World or European understandings based on a much longer agricultural history. In Sweden, but not in Australia, agriculture and animal husbandry are commonly accepted as practices that have long contributed to the making and maintenance of environmental values, such as biodiversity, in the rural landscape. Consequently, it is quite possible to regard farming as a means for nature protection in the contemporary Swedish context. In our view the implications of these profound cultural differences have not been sufficiently discussed and are somewhat taken for granted. They underpin much of the cultural context in which policy decisions are framed and debated.

As an example, we have found the question whether cows¹ belong in 'nature' to be quite an instructive illustration of different approaches to 'nature' in Sweden and Australia. In Sweden a photo of a cow in a pasture is used on the website of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency in order to illustrate methods for "protection and maintenance of valuable nature". In contrast, cows are definitely understood as something that do not belong in Australian nature, which is usually thought of as the plants and animals that existed there before European colonization in 1788. Farming is generally seen as a practice connected to the colonial transformation of the country, a process that is understood as having damaged nature rather than enhanced it. In Australia cropping and pastoralism has fed the nation, but it has also been responsible for considerable biodiversity loss and land degradation. Hence for the Australian researcher in Sweden, it is very strange to be taken to a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and see a flat grassy field full of cows. To learn that the natural values of Kristianstads Vattenrike Biosphere Reserve 'are dependent on cultivation such as grazing and haymaking' (Olofsson et al., 2005: 211) is a profound challenge.

In this paper, we introduce the ways agriculture and farming have been placed in the culture/nature debates. Second, we present overviews of agriculture in Sweden and Australia. This is informed by both insider and outsider perspectives, building on our research in each other's countries. Third, we use two lenses of comparison, each of which is about a particular axis of boundary making:

- Origins and belonging – boundary making around species and spaces involving questions of time and identity
- Humans in the landscape – boundaries between humans and the nonhuman world

¹ We use the English vernacular term cow here to refer to cattle generally, rather than females only.

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