

The Environmental ‘Self’.

Comparative analysis of the discourse of ‘environmental’ ideas and identities within British Botanical Gardens

Modern British society has, without question, embraced ideas of environmentalism and adopted a sense of ‘planetary consciousness’.¹ So much so that many individuals now recycle out of habit, feel internal guilt when they require single-use-plastic, and often shame others for living ‘unsustainably’.² Being aware of one’s influence on the environment and to be seen as committed to sustainable practice have become significant measures for defining ‘self’: as David O’Toole notes in his article in ‘The Great Debate’, environmentalism in Britain is “the moral code of the twenty first century”.³ This cultural adoption of environmental ideas and their evolution into identity-construction has affected change across business priorities, political agendas, and individual relationships; therefore there cannot be a true understanding of this society without understanding how it conceives the natural world. I see the MPhil in Modern British History as an opportunity to explore the discourse through which the national context of environmental care has diffused into the ideas and identity of British imagination over the past 100 years.⁴

Although British Environmental History has yet to become a fully established discipline, there has been an effort since the mid twentieth century to place nature within historical investigation; with most studies thus far focusing on the *physicality* of nature, the human impact on local and global environments, and the practice and activism of sustainable living – often telling the story of capitalism’s upheaval of sustainable societies.⁵ Additionally, the *abstract* aesthetic and moral value associated with the natural world is explored through studies on the English landscape which draw out key ideas within the theme of identity construction.⁶ More significantly to this proposal however, is the recent thread of thought championed by Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Solin which looks at the *imagined ideas* of the ‘environment’ and exposes limits to the existing narrative by contextualising society’s relationship with the natural world. The research set out in this proposal intends to add to the current literature by combining them to a certain extent. It will not only explore the concept of the ‘environment’ through the dialogue of hitherto uncharted sources within a specific national context, but it will also identify where these ideas have been translated into identity-construction; it will ask whether these forms change as the context changes, and perhaps comment on how we can use this information to better understand both environmental and cultural history.

¹ For an extensive view on British Environmentalism see Benjamin Steel, Matthew Paterson, Brian Doherty, *Direct action in British Environmentalism* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Planetary consciousness quoted from Paul Warde, Libby Robin, Sverker Solin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea*, (John Hopkins University Press: 2018).

² David Uzzell, *Psychology and climate change: collective solutions to a global problem* (British Academy, 2010).

³ David O’Toole, “The New Moral Code,” *The Great Debate: Development and Sustainability*, (2003).

⁴ Warde, Robin and Solin advocate that ideas of ‘environment’ came into consciousness from the late 1940s however I would like to undertake a comparative analysis that includes pre-war sources before supporting this, therefore a century has been chosen as the initial time period for source analysis. As the research progresses a more appropriate period of comparison may reveal itself.

⁵ Recent examples are Beth Gardiner, Gary Fuller (national, specific subject matter) Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (global, thematic).

⁶ For studies on how nature has been used in cultural self-definition see David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998) and Readman, Paul, *Introduction: Storied Ground* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Botanical gardens with their deliberate environmental agenda seem the best place to begin identifying this discourse. Leading historians, who have employed museums as both examples of and active contributors in shaping cultural identities, have shown that 'spaces of knowledge' act as vessels where ideas and agendas can flow through to the general public: this research will accept their premise.⁷ The archives within Britain's botanical gardens, and their wealth of resources related to public campaigns, exhibitions and displays, offer an opportunity for a qualitative method of analysis that explores the dialogue of environmental care presented by these institutions.⁸ The analysis will adopt a 'thick description' method to all available marketing material and internal documents on each campaign; incorporating the context, symbols, and meaning around the content.⁹ It will explore ideas of environment and constructions of identities which reveal themselves through this exchange, acknowledging a global, national, or local view where appropriate, and drawing on existing historiography to place them the context of British environmental thought. The restrictions of length have consequent limitations for this project which I hope to address through a future doctorate study; more detailed analysis into the institutions themselves, and widening the cohort of sources across all realms of public display will, in time, give a fuller view of the nuances within British environmental ideas and identities.

Cultural identities have always been the key to my fascination with history. It is a topic that spans physical and imagined states, global, national, regional, individual, external and internal definitions of self; it can be translated through ideas, symbolism, exposure to new knowledge, adoption of new practice, evolution of language, or change in social expectations (codified or implicit): it is a topic which will always support the idea of 'applied history'. Nonetheless, any subject on 'ideas and identity' is always difficult to navigate. It requires understanding of multiple theoretical analyses and necessitates interdisciplinary thinking. This research in particular must draw on science and botany, environmental studies, political theory, psychology, marketing, and economics. With [REDACTED] as my nominated supervisor, whose work on the environment as an 'idea' forms the foundation of this research, as well as taking opportunity to learn from the economically-focused Sustainability module and the public lectures the University hosts, I believe Cambridge will offer the tools for this project to span disciplines outside the Modern British History MPhil, and allow me to contribute a new lens into British 'Environmental History'.

⁷ See works on numerous subject matters by Samuel Alberti, Abigail Lustig, Robert Jones, Bruno Latour, Donna Jeanna Hawarway and Keith Thomas

⁸ I see availability of the Cambridge's Botanic Garden's archives is an important benefit of completing the MPhil at Cambridge.

⁹ 'Thick description' taken from Geertz

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