Grounding politics on nearness?

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Abstract

This paper starts with a sympathetic critique of Andrew Dobson’s argument for an intellectual obligation for justice in a globalising world (Dobson 2006). He suggests that one way of getting round the motivational vacuum between an intellectual commitment to justice and a determination to act is to focus on what he calls ‘thick’ cosmopolitanism, which is a type of post-national obligation based on the material connections between cause and effect, on the specific materialities of connections. In this paper, I discuss one example of the constitution of new political spaces based precisely on such material ties, using the example of the creation of transboundary protected areas – or national parks, biosphere reserves and the like – constructed around shared features such as large-scale ecosystems, charismatic megafauna and other ‘natural’, material objects. I argue that this example points how a pernicious fetishisation of materiality can lead to things being considered not to unite unproblematically, but instead to contain, embody and reflect particular spatialized political scenarios of division. The […]

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1 Introduction

Heidegger famously suggested that “the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness, for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance” (Heidegger 1967, 165). It is commonplace to state that while contacts between certain different places and some people are facilitated in a globalised world, others still remain fundamentally Other, and therefore distant even if – or perhaps at times especially when – they live close by. The challenge of identifying and constructing nearness between people therefore remains a central problem for social justice. This is especially true if the idea of nearness is to be translated into concrete action and an obligation to justice. Do I owe more to someone who lives close to me? Do I automatically share something
more with this person? Or should this nearness be thought of in less explicitly spatial terms? Instead, can this issue of obligation be thought through material ties operating at a distance? Andrew Dobson, a political scientist, suggested that these paradoxes of nearness and distance are at the heart of the challenge facing cosmopolitanism. “In a felicitous phrase, what we are seeking to do is to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’ […] the distance that separates us one from another and that makes obligations seem supererogatory rather than strict. Unlike obligation, nearness is not a term one often comes across in the canon of political theory, and it has not been subjected to the same rigorous analysis as other concepts. Yet, I seem not to be alone in thinking that it might have some bearing on our subject” (Dobson 2006, 167).

There have been a number of recent engagements with the political ideas underpinning cosmopolitanism (review in Kramsch 2007) associated with a reappraisal of universalism in critical social theory within the particular context of a globalised world of macro-independencies, in which there is “an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates” (Rabinow 1986 in Kramsch 2005, 2). Yet, as Dobson convincingly points out, many of these fail to make a compelling case for actual action, in particular because they do not convincingly address or rethink this question of nearness. Thus at a time when cosmopolitanism is enjoying something of a cautious revival in the social and political sciences, making the case for action is far from benign. Any attempt to translate the ideal into a concrete obligation is therefore to be welcomed.

Dobson sets up his case by arguing that cosmopolitanism sets itself up against communitarianism within which norms are seen to be relative to specific communities, cultural identities and ways of being (Dobson 2005, 4) by offering an alternative intellectual obligation for justice in a globalising world. Rather than remaining a fuzzy and abstractly comforting idea, obligations of justice are concretely extended to all, including those with whom neither kinship nor country, neighbourhood nor nation are shared (Dobson 2006). Dobson suggests that one way of getting round the motivational vacuum between an intellectual commitment to justice and a determination to act is to focus on what he calls ‘thick’ cosmopolitanism, that is a type of post-national obligation based on the material connections between cause and effect, on the specific materialities of connections. Postulating that we are more likely to feel obligated to a concrete (if still somewhat rhetorical) neighbour than to a perfect (or imperfect?) stranger, Dobson suggests emphasising nearness. Taking his cue from ecological politics, he emphasises a space of potential obligation based on the materiality of a pre-existing “network of effects that prompts reflection on the nature of the impacts they comprise” (Dobson 2006, 10). In order to do this, the embodiedness and embeddedness of human beings are called into play in the constitution of political space. Because “we are organisms whose production and reproduction depends on the adequate provision of environmental goods and services. This metabolistic relationship with our non-human natural environment constitutes the ineluctable frame within which our non-political projects are carried out” (Dobson 2006, 10). The emphasis given to situated, embedded and embodied moral reasoning is of course problematic for cosmopolitanism, in that as Dobson points out it “seems to put us in communitarian territory” (Dobson 2006, 11). His response is to emphasise the nature of the obligation to do justice that follows from these ties, as reframed material nearness implies the need to act to redress the identified injustice.

“The most common answer to the question “why be a cosmopolitan?” is ‘because we are all members of a common humanity’. This answer is expected to do an enormous amount of work; and, in the end, I believe it collapses under the strain. It is expected to suffice as an answer to the question at the level of principle (why believe in cosmopolitanism?) and at the level of motivation (why do cosmopolitanism?). At the level of principle, the answer is an effective one – so effective, indeed, that even supposedly implacable opponents of cosmopolitanism, such as communitarians, often feel bound to agree with some of its implications such as
In response to this difficulty, Dobson assumes that proximity, real, tangible nearness can be made to lead to a kind of social nearness. This stage of his argument is examined critically here and unpacked, with the objective of contributing to the debate on thick cosmopolitanism, specifically by removing a possible objection to its spatial underpinnings. But the comment by Heidegger that Dobson draws upon concerns the question of closeness more widely, and this too has been debated, but perhaps less than one might expect in geography. In economic geography most prominently, and in particular within the French tradition of géographie économique the idea of nearness has been explored at length, and increasingly specifically linked to environmental issues. In other fields the question of distance has also been addressed, such as within geographical information systems (Worboys 2001) or economics (Arthur 2002), but I will not consider these here. I briefly explore below what conception of nature and materiality these economic geographers have relied on, mapping out more clearly how my geographical approach differs from these approaches, and indicating how this also sheds light on the concept of materiality and nearness Dobson mobilises in his argument on thick cosmopolitanism.

2 Thinking through nearness

André Torre and other economists and geographers have been interested in the question of nearness and proximity since the 1990s, building on work on industrial and regional economics. This has focussed on linking explicitly spatial dimensions with organisational and institutional issues, at a variety of geographic scales. Nearness is two-fold here: concerning both geographic proximity, or closeness – be it for neighbouring actors, negative externalities, perimeters of protection policies or rules on a local level – as well as what they call organised proximity (proximité organisée) which concerns shared concerns and accepted results of common deliberations (Torre/Zuindeau 2006). The latter, of course, has differing material implications, despite the spatial dimension remaining pertinent. The focus towards the environmental dimensions of these forms of nearness is however more recent, focussing principally on the conflicts generated by actors being located near to negative externalities, trying to access the same natural resource, or divided by neighbourhood conflicts. There is also an emerging strand of literature that explicitly attempts to study nearness as a way of resolving conflicts, in particular by increasing the distance from something identified as a problem and the actors impacted by it; or in studying how different groups mobilise and negotiate nearness within conflict resolution. There is a strong focus on conflicts related to nearness, and an interest in the materiality of the physical ties between actors, as tensions and conflicts are seen to be generated around close physical features such as the earth, water or air (Caron/Torre 2006). In all these approaches, the materiality of the objects considered is never questioned, and it is taken for granted that all actors perceive this in much the same way. It is this taken-for-grantedness of the materiality of nature that seems problematic here, as I explore through the example that grounds my argument.

It seems to me that Dobson’s engagement with nearness and spatiality is not entirely satisfactory, and seems at odds with Heidegger’s own conception of space as historically contingent (Elden 2003). His discussion of thick cosmopolitical nearness assumes two stages in the conceptualisation of space. I would argue, gently, that the second of these is problematic. First, by using the metaphor of the ecological footprint as a reflection of “the likelihood that the bioproductive areas required to support the consumption […] are scattered all over the planet” (Quoting Chambers 2000 in Dobson 2005, 10), he builds his argument of globalised connectedness. His argument is convincingly fresh and is a very appealing way of presenting
the thickening of ties that bind us to strangers. The assumption that nearness is not a mere function of distance but instead is the result of the density of relations between non-congruent areas is in itself interesting. Yet Heidegger’s hesitation about nearness requiring more than the abolition of distance cannot be discarded quite so easily by appealing to materiality to overcome the tyranny of distance. In his subsequent discussion, therefore, Dobson’s concept of space seems to assume a material exteriority that appears at odds with the way critical geographers might think.

The first of Dobson’s assumptions is that material spaces exist within a wider network of physical relations (of production, of exchange) that link these up to other non-adjacent spaces. While it is indeed possible that a clear articulation between spaces and networks “does not reduce networks to being either material frameworks or else, on the contrary, to being abstractions removed from the notion of distance” (Levy 1999), Dobson’s simple assumption that the spaces emerging and engaged within these networks are material things remains problematic. It may well be that I am shooting a sitting duck here. My hesitation about thick cosmopolitanism’s spatial assumptions may simply reiterate existing critiques of communitarianism and moral parochialism, missing Dobson’s point of nearness creating moral obligation. Yet while he clearly latches on to the spatial changes within political communities in discussing the “membership of […] non-territorial and overlapping communities” (Dobson 2006, 12), his appeal to materiality is not entirely convincing. Commenting – in a different context – on such an assumption, Lussault suggested that rather than considering space to be overwhelmingly material, the existence of complex networks can only assume space to be fundamentally and intrinsically social: space is neither considered a neutral container of functions, nor is it a surface on which social relations are projected; but then neither is it a simple political attribute. Instead, it is dynamically and continually constructed by a variety of actors. Thus the usual habit of separating that which relates to space (too often reduced to simple material shapes) and that which relates to society is replaced by an understanding of the consubstantiality of both (Lussault 2003, 867).

This idea of a consubstantiality of space and society is closely related to the wider and sustained debates on the production of space that have taken place within geography, drawing in particular from Henri Lefebvre (1974), and introduced into a number of national contexts by authors such as Claude Raffestin (1980), Doreen Massey (1992) or Belina/Michel (2010), within critical traditions within geography. It is in this assumption of the taken-for-granted materiality of space that economic geographers such as Torre quoted above make the same mistake: assuming that the physical world is but a container, the backdrop or basis for social and economic interaction. The second step that Dobson seems to be implicitly making in his concept of nearness assumes that this material proximity directly leads to social nearness. It is this particular stage of his argumentation that is examined critically here, with the objective of contributing to the debate on ‘thick’ cosmopolitanism by removing a possible objection to its spatial underpinnings.

Dobson grounds his discussion on a number of well-chosen examples, ranging from global warming to ecological footprints: a rhetorical choice to (literally) ground his argument. I will take the same risk of appearing to choose a particular situation that allows me to justify my own specific point of view. I therefore introduce an example of material nearness that appears to point in a somewhat different direction. Dubious links between materiality and politics – from theories of natural boundaries to naturalised discourses on race, for example – have such a long and problematic history that the risk of basing politics on a fetishised type of materiality cannot be overlooked. Yet I wish to specifically explore the links between materiality and politics within a very concrete empirical example. The point is to discuss the constitution of new political spaces based precisely on material ties and nearness. The creation of protected areas – or national parks, biosphere reserves and the like – constructed around shared features such
as large-scale ecosystems, charismatic megafauna and other natural, material objects offers such an example. Protected areas are interesting spatial entities within which to examine laborious assemblages due to their intrinsically messy nature. Although lines on maps, or shaded green areas spanning large sections of a variety of political jurisdictions may suggest coherent, unquestioned entities, situations on the ground often reveal coexisting, conflicting and coextensive entities. This is particularly true within transboundary protected areas, that enjoyed a huge vogue on the international conservation scene (Fall 2005). I argue that this example points how a pernicious fetishisation of materiality can lead to things being considered not to unite unproblematically, but instead to contain, embody and reflect particular spatialized political scenarios of division. By using these examples of political spaces created around shared ecological features – in other words directly sympathetic to Dobson’s framework of ecological politics – I explore how the assumption of nearness can lead not to increased cosmopolitan awareness but instead to a return of communitarian reflexes. I suggest that ironically some of the shortcomings of the projects discussed here came about specifically through perverse links made between materiality, nature and the neighbouring Other. While this does not lead to a refutation of thick cosmopolitanism per se, something that I would indeed be very unwilling to do, it does point out the difficulty of assuming unproblematically that nearness overcomes the tyranny of distance enough to create spaces of obligation.

3 The materiality of environmental politics

By focussing on concrete examples of ecological politics emphasising connections between adjacent areas, the link between materiality and politics can be teased out. In order to explore precisely how specific spatial discourses locating the other are invoked within protected areas, this article draws on material collected during interviews with managers working in transboundary biosphere reserves, combining various protected areas under one larger entity spanning parts of at least two countries1.

The establishment of protected areas is considered here as part of the social construction of spatiality, or social spatialization (Paasi 1996) implying a variety of actors struggling to put forward their own spatial discourses (or “spatial scenarios”; or “ideologies”: Paasi 1996; “imaginations”: Gregory 1994) based around divergent combinations of biophysical and societal arguments. Scientific discourses, such as those surrounding the design of protected areas, is taken to be “vulnerable to critical scrutiny only by getting up close and tracing its (un) making through the laborious assemblage of interpretative communities, ritual words and phrases, documentary precedents and professional protocols; performative achievements that are always partial, contestable and incomplete” (Whatmore 2002, 61). This partial and contestable nature implies power, and implicit or explicit negotiation between unequal actors. Here, I am sympathetic yet cautiously critical of the political implications of recent attempts to create hybrid geographies (Whatmore 2002) that involve and claim to consider human and non-human elements in the construction of space. As Wainwright has written, while such approaches claim to politicize practices that naturalize – in line with the objectives of this paper – they rarely address the thorny problem of power, leaving open the question of whether it is possible to weave this approach with practices of a nuanced, historically informed approach to power (Wainwright 2005, 6).

I therefore try to focus on the question of power by specifically discussing the struggles of the actors involved in dealing with boundaries and materiality within five border regions in Europe spanning international boundaries, designated Transboundary Biosphere Reserves by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). These are considered appropriate spatial entities within which complex spatial discourses can
be explored, providing spaces within which to discuss issues of insider/outside. Throughout, the discussion explores the messiness of spatially complex entities by reflecting on the materiality of the arguments invoked to construct them.

Examining the specific role of competing imagined spatial discourses involves not only struggles to represent the materiality of physical geographical objects but also “the equally powerful and, in a different manner, the equally material force of discursive borders between an idealized Self and a demonized Other” (O Tuathail 1996, 15). After a brief explanation of the biosphere reserve programme, the first section on the invocation of materiality within protected area planning is laid out. This is presented to ground the exploration of the laborious assemblages that enshrine specific spatial discourses dealing with naturalized embedded and embodied discourses. I explore how the particular spatial anxieties of individuals working with spatial messiness lead to a fetishisation of materiality and a rejection of – not a nearing to – the neighbouring Other. This is important in the context of thick cosmopolitanism as it questions the material basis of the concept of nearness.

4 Invoking material ties

Within the protected area movement, the terms used in much of the literature are often highly normative. Thus political boundaries are bad, specifically because they are “not natural”, that is to say taken to be against the order of nature. In contrast, appeals to boundlessness abounded, as the following quote might illustrate:

“nature does not recognize political boundaries. In many cases, ecosystems have been severed by arbitrarily drawn political boundaries, while species continue to migrate across those borders as they always have, oblivious to customs regulations” (Zbicz 1999, 15)

At first, such a quote seems to reflect commonsense. Of course animals ignore political divisions; of course they wander about oblivious to human designations. But this is far from politically benign, and calls upon potent geographical myths. Boundless, passive nature is brutally severed by political boundaries, almost violated in its holiness; arbitrary international boundaries directly threaten nature’s integrity; and the home territory of animals is violated. This draws heavily on the image of nature as primitive, untouched, and subsequently brutalised by politics. Yet, paradoxically, there is scant suggestion that protected areas, themselves spatial entities based on defined boundaries, are in any way performing similar acts of violence on nature by deciding where to locate the wild. Nature, in these discourses, is inevitably seen to be boundless.

The idea that political boundaries are bad is widespread, specifically because these are thought of as not natural. Thus the fact that political boundaries are defined through a political process is viewed as negative, implicitly hinting that it would be more appropriate for political boundaries to be based around biophysical features. The term “artificial” appears repeatedly and almost systematically in such discourses:

“You cannot divide a river, a mountain, a forest, a wetland in two or more pieces, following an artificial political boundary” (Rossi 1998, 21) (emphasis added)

This idea that certain boundaries are more natural than others has a very direct link to deterministic discourses linking up materiality with appropriate political scenarios. If embraced unproblematically, such an approach risks calling for (naturalized) spatial scenarios through the fetishisation of a particular conception of nature taken as unproblematically material. This idea that nature contains within it an appropriate political scenario that can be identified by a suitable rational process is far from dead (Fall/Egerer 2004, Fall 2010, Debarbieux 2010), creating a link between a certain conception of the nation and its inscription within a particular spatiality. The invocation of the seemingly unproblematic materiality of nature’s boundlessness and the corresponding naturalness of protected area boundaries is ubiquitous in literature on transboundary protected areas. Rather than being innocent or coincidental, it was instead unam-
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biguously done to naturalise the (subsequent) specific project:

“Protected areas that share common borders share common problems. [...] Areas of natural or cultural significance shared by two or more countries or other resource owning jurisdiction lend themselves to transborder protected areas” (Hamilton et al. 1996, 1) (emphasis added)

Understanding this step in reasoning is central to my critique of Dobson’s ‘thick’ cosmopolitanism. Here, as in his demonstration of a naturalised space of obligation, the assumption is made that material connections automatically have a political consequence. This fetishisation of materiality, in which things are called upon to enshrine particular (spatial) political scenarios, might not seem in itself particularly dangerous. It is, after all, based on relatively progressive ideals. Larger protected areas do make sense in terms of ecological management, as is reflected in the increasing literature of large-scale regional planning and the rescaling of politics, expressed for example in the diversity of speakers in the recent workshop on Regional Environmental Governance (http://www.reg-observatory.org).

However, such a return to a form of biophysical determinism tends to re-inscribe the fundamental exteriority of nature as an uncontroversial and apolitical thing. Thus such appeals to materiality are couched as being essentially apolitical. This, I would suggest, is a far from trivial step, and while it does not directly justify exclusionary politics per se, it does set dangerous precedents for relying on the biophysical to justify potentially exclusionary politics, as I argue in the latter part of this paper.

5 Reified and naturalized spaces: embodied and embedded material ties

Because of the messiness inherent in each national context and despite the existence of material linkages between adjacent areas, it was rarely obvious to those involved who the actual Other was on the other side of the international boundary. This is important for discussing thick cosmopolitanism since, despite the apparent simplicity of the situation, it was often impossible to assume who, if anyone, could be the object of an obligation to justice. The conception of nature and space adopted here has wider implications for the study of spatialised difference as the (human) other is metaphorically and discursively constructed simultaneously to the (non-human or ‘natural’) other, a point well-argued in the literature on social nature (Castree/Braun 2001).

This has obvious significance in the emergence of obligations of justice to someone. Because the entities considered are linked to nature conservation, a topic usually discussed and examined by natural scientists, the temptations of grounding arguments in ‘reason’ and ‘objective science’ were manifold for those involved. Grounded in natural arguments purporting to be value-free, such environmental discourses have a perverse tendency of taking on a life of their own, instrumentalised within reactionary politics.

The next section explores how the specifically messy laborious assemblages of ritual words and phrases, interpretative communities, documentary precedents and professional protocols as well as the physicality of bodies, plants and animals are mobilised to enshrine and construct (Whatmore 2002) these transboundary spaces. Figures of transgression, bodies transgressing accepting bounds, are used to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space, echoing Cresswell’s attempt to explore the “discursive attempt to create and maintain normative geographies (where everything is in place)” (Cresswell 1996, 9).

Nature and space are intrinsically discursive constructions, drawing on specific myths made flesh and performed by a variety of actors (Whatmore 2002, 14). These embodied myths draw on figurative speech and metaphors, using metaphors encapsulating contradictory spatial characteristics. Much like the biophysical features mentioned in the first section, specific animal ambassadors have been called upon repeatedly within the global conservation community to uphold the myth of boundless nature.
Discourses repeatedly called on flagship species as illustrations and embodied performances of the boundless status of nature. Chosen species such as the ibex became icons literally incarnating spatial myths and performing a transgression of boundaries, “crossing lines […] becoming matter out of place” (Philo 1995, 656). The dichotomy between nature’s boundaries on one hand and political boundaries on the other was emphasized. During the fieldwork in these transboundary spaces, in addition to the iconic figures of boundless nature such as the lofty ibex wandering through the mountains, specific icons incarnating difference were also referred to. Bark beetles, small insects that attacked coniferous trees, were referred to repeatedly in the Tatras, embodying and performing another potent spatial discourse:

“There is a problem with the management of the bark beetle. In Slovakia, they cut the trees when they are infected, but in Poland we have decided that in the strict nature reserves we will not do this because we want to observe the process. There is a strong conflict about this. The Slovaks say we are breeding the beetles” (Jurek, Tatra National Park, Poland)

In Slovakia, where the forests were managed by the Ministry of Forests, bark beetles were defined as pests. The sheer number of them meant they were no longer simply an unproblematic part of nature. The accusation that the Poles were breeding the beetles was interesting: it assumed that they had symbolically domesticated them, bringing them into the realm of the cultural, removing them from wild nature. Their existence was deemed unnatural. These cultural differences were not necessarily nation-specific but rather overlapped or were compounded by divergent professional practices. In many countries, there was a more or less overt conflict between nature conservationists and foresters, often working in separate ministries, as both held radically different views of what constituted nature and therefore what was appropriate management. However, while the differences between professional approaches may well have been substantial, these were not referred to as emotionally as those occurring with neighbouring countries.

“Forestry is much more intensely managed in Slovakia. Also, they shoot deer and feed them in the strictly protected areas. In Poland we do not do this. And also one of the bears disappeared when it went over into Slovakia…” (Krzysztof, Tatra National Park, Poland)

These tacit accusations of malpractice reflected obviously different definitions of nature. Feeding animals, hunting deer and bears were seen to be perverse cultural incursions into the domain of nature. Poles were accused of breeding beetles and bringing wild pests into the realm of culture; Slovaks were accused of denaturalising wild deer. The story of the bear was particularly interesting in that it cropped up several times in different places and in different guises. In the East Carpathians, the same story was told of a bison wandering into Ukraine. The animal was implicitly considered to belong to the side of the person telling the tale, specifically placed in relation to the other. In a delightfully moral twist, the implied transgression of the animal that crossed the boundary to the Other Side ultimately led to its death. More than anything else, this tale served to illustrate the naturalized differences between the two sides, in that transgressive acts prompt reactions that reveal that which is “considered natural and commonsense” (Cresswell 1996, 10).

In suggesting that it was ‘less natural’ on the other side, nature was instrumentalised to further define self and other. In the Alpi Maritime / Mercantour, a similar story was told of the lammergeyers – a type of vulture – being progressively reintroduced in the mountains. One bird was released each year, in alternate countries. The birds were given either a French or an Italian name, depending on the country where they were released. French managers repeatedly noted that even the ‘French birds’ inevitably went to live in Italy. Although this was always told tongue-in-cheek, the recurrence of the tale indicated something of its symbolic strength. The different versions hinted either at the nature-knows-no-boundaries myth (the birds ignore political designations) or else, more
tellingly, as boundaries reflect fundamentally different natural conditions (boundaries are natural). For the French managers, this implied that the neighbours had in practice stolen the French birds; for the Italians this meant that the birds preferred to live in Italy because of essential differences, because nature was ‘more natural’ there. Birds, bears and beetles were not the only animals used as icons of difference. In the Mercantour / Alpi Marittime, the wolf was returning, migrating into France from packs on the Italian side. Again, this iconic animal served to highlight differences in the way nature was constructed. Again, the animals were symbolically attributed a nationality:

“It’s difficult when there are prickly subjects such as the wolf that we have in the parks, because this isn’t an easy subject and so is really quite polemical. […] And in addition the wolves came from Italy, so it’s not easy” (Chloé, Parc National du Mercantour, France)

Thus not only were the wolves a problem in themselves, but they were additionally problematic because they were associated with ‘the other side’. This comment referred to the difficulty in convincing French shepherds that the wolves were natural and were not, literally, part of a foreign invasion. The usual accusation heard in offhand comments and debated in the local press, was that ecologists had covertly released the wolves, threatening the local practice of keeping sheep in unguarded flocks on the high pastures. The idea that the wolves had been reintroduced, like the lammergeyers, was pervasive among shepherds and local politicians eager for their votes. One local mayor referred to the threat the wolf posed to the ‘indigenous fauna’ (faune indigène), a populist appeal to biophysical imagery serving political ends. The wolves, not only unnatural but also foreign, were presented as having no place in the French mountains. This tale served to denaturalise them, making them legitimate targets for destruction in an area where hunting was prohibited.

On the ground, individuals struggled with the various notions, tempted by images of science-based boundlessness and yet distracted by the difficulties of implementing common policies. The performances of the animals were presented as self-evident, sufficient arguments for upholding a specific myth of boundless nature. After all, the argument went, how could you contest something that exists in the flesh? This intrinsic corporeality of animals as figures of embodied otherness gained further performatve value when, in one administration, animal nicknames were applied systematically to individuals they were trying to work with across the border. One German protected area manager was for example referred to as le Blaireau (the badger), a highly abusive term when used in this way in French, allegedly because of his pet dachshunds (Dachs in German means badger) but more simply as a plain insult. Even if animal names are “often harmlessly applied to individuals and typically invoked in jest” (Anderson 2001, 310), quite creatively in this case, the “essential animality on which such superficial allusions rely reveal the potential for more significant boundary efforts. […]” Discourses about animality have regularly found their way into institutional life and collective efforts at exclusion, the interrogation of which clarifies [how] they relate to European racist formations” (Anderson 2001, 310). The essential otherness of the other was reinforced by referring to innate bestiality, placing people as doubly Other: beyond the bounds of humanity and beyond the (naturalised) political boundary.

During the establishment and spatial definition of these bounded entities, specific engagements with materiality therefore lead to two forms of reification linked to the naturalization of discourses on space. The first type of reification is based on biophysical arguments and on appeals for the definition of ‘natural boundaries’, leading to a classical form of biophysical determinism; the second concerns the naturalization of discourses of embodiment, and the concurrent danger of naturalizing belonging and exclusion. Both of these scenarios stem from a pernicious fetishisation of materiality in which things are assigned values and are called upon as though they contained or reflected particular spatialized political scenarios: birds ‘ignore boundaries’, rivers make ‘ideal frontiers’ and nature ‘has a
plan’, to take three simple examples. Equally, both approaches rely on material things – considered ‘objective’ and politically ‘neutral’ – to construct and underpin specific political scenarios.

The inevitable messiness of these spaces, partly linked to unclear juridical and institutional frameworks, set the conditions within which naturalized arguments offer seductive solace to individuals struggling to make sense of socio-spatial complexity. Instead of being clearly endowed with authority, these individuals experience intense spatial anxiety, and are unnerved by the increasing spatial messiness of the entities they are associated with professionally. Faced with unsettling situations and new scales of work, the protected area managers struggle to maintain their position as legitimate stewards by appealing to materiality, to ‘natural’ divisions of space. Their attempts to draw on uncontentious material things implies a paradoxical yet opportunistic appeal to both embedded (rational, objective, material and stable things) and embodied (living, moving, incarnating, resisting) arguments to enshrine particular conceptions of space.

Yet the invocation of materiality in the construction of space has the perverse tendency of biting back, leading not to the creation of shared interdependent and unproblematic spaces linked by material ties but instead spaces of naturalized exclusion in which the political (human) Other is identified with a natural (non-human) Other. Thus in contrast to what Dobson suggested, the embeddedness, embodiedness and situatedness of politics motivated by material links does not participate in unproblematically reinforcing obligations of justice to their ‘neighbours’: instead, the inherent spatial insecurities of the managers lead them to retreat into reactionary and communitarian discourses.

6 The naturalised Other

Taking nature to be constructed supposes recognising the contingency of social practices. It requires “an insistence that the physical opportunities and constraints nature presents societies with can only be defined relative to specific sets of economic, cultural, and technical relations and capacities. In other words, the same ‘chunk’ of nature – say the Amazon rainforest – will have different physical attributes and implications for societies, depending on how those societies use it. In this sense, the physical characteristics of nature are contingent upon social practices: they are not fixed” (Castree 2001, 13) (emphasis in original). In the Vosges du Nord / Pfälzerwald, for instance, managers attempted to establish a strictly protected forest reserve spanning both sides of the international boundary as a shared core area for the biosphere reserve. It was to be the first tentative step in creating a shared zonation, envisaged as a confidence-building operation. Instead of spreading goodwill, it became a minefield. One manager attached to a forest research station working on the project in Germany said that it was problematic to agree on a common definition of what the climactic vegetation was:

“It was not so easy to agree on what the ‘natural vegetation type’ is” (Kathrin, Pfälzerwald, Germany)

Scientists within different countries had distinct definitions of what constituted the wildest form of nature in one area, what the forest would look like in the absence of human management, what constituted nature in both countries. In most parts of Europe, actively managed landscapes are often described as correspondingly richer in fauna and flora, valued in themselves as natural/cultural constructs. When protected area managers defined the most valuable parts of the landscape that deserved to be defined as core zones, culturally-specific definitions came into play. In transboundary situations, these distinct representations of nature conflicted. Perversely, the emphasis on material ties did not lead to increased nearness. Instead, these differences led to a form of naturalized rejection of the Other. What was the point of working together, the argument went implicitly, if they didn’t even know what nature was?
The problem was that at any given time there were at least two different natures, two different forests being constructed simultaneously, making sense of the materiality. These discourses did not reveal or hide the truths of nature or space but, rather, created their own truths: “whose discourse is being accepted as being truthful is a question of social struggle and power politics. Furthermore, many nature discourses become so deeply entrenched in both lay and expert ways of thinking that they themselves appear natural” (Castree 2001, 12). The negotiation in the creation of a shared space was heavily impeded by the fact that what needed negotiating was seen to be non-negotiable: expert ways of thinking were couched as being natural and differences were naturalized and essentialized, making the emergence of common criteria for creating shared boundaries particularly unlikely. To ignore this cultural and constructed status of nature or space, as many natural scientists did, was to miss an important dimension of the political nature of the process of creating transboundary spaces. It was as though, while seeking universality, the managers initially preferred to ignore cultural differences since these were seen to be divisive elements, which like political boundaries introduced divisions into what was constructed as naturalised, homogenous space.

When discourses and myths of space sediment, discourses of belonging and identity become associated with particular places, evolving into autonomous components of the everyday stock of knowledge which is taken for granted by a society (Paasi 1996). Through sedimentation, myths such as that of boundless nature come to have lives of their own, detached from the original act of mythmaking. There was often a turning point during interviews when following a relatively straightforward description of local features, landscapes or wildlife, a comment about culture would interrupt and change the flow of the discussion. Suddenly, in what was a conversation about materiality, an emotion marking the boundary between Us and Them emerged.

7 Conclusions

In all these cases, the protected area managers were experiencing different spatial anxieties. Despite the material linkages between adjacent areas it was far from obvious who was meant to be doing what, and where. As they saw it, their own role of designated, legitimate managers could only be reinforced by appeals to materiality, moving away from unofficial management into formalised stewardship based around uncontroversial things and clearly defined boundaries. In response to this, many managers wanted the boundaries to the biosphere reserves to be defined and institutionalised as much as possible. However, it quickly appeared that what constituted this uncontroversial materiality was in fact highly contested. This added insecurity led, unsurprisingly to a rejection of the Other, to classic communitarian retreat. In their more angry moments, the managers dismissed the Others on the basis that they bred beetles, domesticated deer, logged the wrong trees, and were no better than "badgers": unnatural aberrations who didn’t even know a forest when they saw one.

What must be learnt here is that the existence of material linkages between spaces, between a Self and an apparent Other do not, in themselves, create sufficient conditions for a coherent space of obligation to emerge. Furthermore it is often unclear, even in cases of apparently clear material linkages, who the Other might be. Nearness, even rhetorical nearness, even within a material network of relations, on its own is not enough. The material force of the discursive borders between an idealized Self and a demonized Other take over, and spaces that are constructed through relations of power are naturalized and therefore depoliticized. The embeddedness, embodiedness and situatedness of political spaces motivated by material links do not always participate in unproblematically reinforcing obligations of justice to proverbial neighbours. Instead, the inherent spatial insecurities of individuals can lead them to deploy reactionary and communitarian reflexes. Because, as Heidegger wrote, “nature is not to be understood as that
which is just present-at-hand, nor as the power of nature. The wood is a timber forest, the mountain a rock quarry; the river water-power, the wind is wind ‘in the sails’. As the ‘environment’ is discovered, the ‘nature’ thus discovered is encountered too” (Heidegger 1967 in Elden 2001, 21). Thus a thick cosmopolitanism will have to engage with the constructed, experiential nature of materiality, as well as with the subtleties of the connections between individuals and spaces, if it is to create a convincing case for actual action. Otherwise, unproblematic appeals to materiality, rather than foster and illustrate further interdependence, perversely risk fostering a knee-jerk return to sterile communitarianism.

References


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1 The fieldwork was undertaken between 1998 and 2002, and consisted of a series of interviews of individuals involved in transboundary cooperation in various capacities, in the East Carpathians Biosphere Reserve (Poland / Slovakia / Ukraine); July – August 1998 and May – June 2000; the Tatry / Tatra Biosphere Reserve (Poland / Slovakia); May – June 2000; the Pfälzerwald / Vosges du Nord Biosphere Reserve (Germany / France); September 2000 and May – June 2002; Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (Romania / Ukraine); May 2001; the Parc National du Mercantour / Parco Nazionale delle Alpi Marittimi (France / Italy); March – April 2002. Names of interview partners are replaced with pseudonyms in order to guarantee the confidentiality promised during the fieldwork. In some cases, translators were used informally during interviews. Subsequently, all quotes are translated into English by the author (see Fall 2005).

2 Comment noted during the Expert seminar in Entracque (Italy) and Menton (France) on ‘Un park Européen pour le 21ème Siècle’ (‘Un Parco Europeo per il 21° Secolo’), 14/15 October 1999.