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# More than Landscape: Toward Cosmophanic Diversity in Environmental Planning and Governance

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**ABSTRACT**

As a result of the global effort for sustainable management of natural resources, the spatial scale, holistic concept, and/or integrative approach of "landscape" is increasingly used in collaborative environmental planning and governance. However, it is often overseen that "landscape" is just one possible way to see and interpret the human environment—and that it is not understood cross-culturally. What if the unintended misuse of the landscape concept by researchers and, consequently, by practitioners, in cultures where there is no such notion or univocal idea, were an obstacle for managing natural resources sustainably and achieving well-being of humans and nonhumans? We argue that considering the diversity of seeing and interpreting the environment could be a radically new, people-centered, and gender-sensitive ontological approach to planning and governance that has the transformative power to improve the interactions of society and natural resources.

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> For me, a landscape does not exist in its own right,
>
> since its appearance changes at every moment
>
> Claude Monet, 1891

## Introduction

To manage natural resources in our age characterized by highly complex and interconnected socioenvironmental problems (Haraway 2015), the spatial scale, holistic concept, and/or integrative approach of "landscape" (Antrop 2006; on the meanings of landscape[1] see Olwig 1996; for further reading see also Bobek and Schmithüsen 1949; Descola 2013a; Hard 1969; Sauer 1925; Troll 1971) is increasingly used in collaborative environmental planning and governance and has found its way into several research and development topics, from nature conservation to urbanization, worldwide. Examples include the IUCN category of "protected landscapes," the Global Landscapes

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Forum (coordinated by CIFOR, the World Bank, UNEP, and Charter Members), the idea of the UNESCO World Heritage cultural landscapes, and the landscape notion of the International Partnership of the Satoyama Initiative (Beresford and Phillips 2000; Brondízio and Tourneau 2016; Rössler 2006; Takeuchi 2010). In fact, the planning and governance experts' important and valuable effort for "sustainable landscapes" (del Amo-Rodríguez et al. 2010) or "landscape stewardship" (Cockburn et al. 2020), in line with the current *Zeitgeist* and reflecting a certain "human turn" in the natural sciences (see Sayer et al. 2013), takes place globally—even in cultural realms where there is, originally, no such notion or univocal idea of landscape.

Burenhult and Levinson (2008) highlight the cross-linguistic variability in the ontologization of "landscape" terms and van Putten et al. (2020) underline that even within Europe the meaning of "landscape" shows a high variability both within and between languages. Similar results can be observed in Gehring and Kohsaka (2007). If collaborative environmental planning and governance is considered a consensus-building process, where "individuals representing differing interests engage in long-term, face-to-face discussions, seeking agreement on strategy, plans, policies, or actions," (Innes and Booher 1999, 11) should we not first critically compare and align existing modes of thinking environments, ways how the perceived surrounding appears to communities at a local level, before we apply "landscape" concepts? The interdisciplinary environmental humanities and social sciences could make an important contribution in revealing the values, meanings, and practical consequences of the conceptual foundations of collaborative environmental planning and governance, which not always match the mode of thinking of the local communities with which experts collaborate.[2] We argue that landscape is a specific *genre* of cosmophany (from *κόσμος*, "universal order," and *φάνεια*, "appearance"; all ways to see and interpret the environment on our planet *sensu* Berque 2013), a complex concept with a defined cultural history/genesis, and that its global and unproblematized top-down application, in contexts where it either does not exist or only coexists with other cosmophanies,[3] may imply forms of spatioconceptual colonialism.[4] Surprisingly, it seems that many environmental planners apply the concept of "landscape" without sufficient reflection on whether such a notion exists in the ontological contexts of their target regions. Why should a notion that developed in East Asia since the 5th century, and emerged in Europe (in its present form) during the Renaissance (Berque 2013), automatically exist globally? Why should "landscape approaches" be understood worldwide? We know, for instance, that Indigenous people from the Americas see and interpret their environment in a different way; a fact leading to problems, for instance when it comes to planning and governance in diverse periurban interfaces or protected area buffer zones (Chanteloup, Joliet, and Herrmann 2019; Ishizawa 2017; see also Cronon 1983). Not only the absence of the word "landscape" in their (and other) languages questions its global use, but also the absence of a whole idea, which is often a core concept in research. What if the unintended misuse of the landscape concept—originally *bourgois*, individualist, and related to the exercise of power over space (Cosgrove 1985)—by researchers and, consequently, by practitioners, in cultures where there is no such notion, were an obstacle for managing natural resources sustainably and achieving well-being of humans and nonhumans? What if more cosmophanic diversity, adapting collaborative environmental planning and

governance to regional ways to see and interpret the material surrounding, had a positive impact on the well-being of humans, animals, plants, or fungi (perhaps a cosmophany-based "land ethic" *sensu* Leopold 1949; Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015)? Should we not consider environments as they are conceptualized by local communities instead of applying "landscape" globally? Considering the diversity of regional cosmophanies, instead of spreading the vision of "landscapes"—which, without a doubt, appear in certain spatial and temporal contexts—, could be a radically new, people-centered, and gender-sensitive ontological approach that has the transformative power to improve the interactions of society and natural resources.

It is the aim of this perspective article to present an alternative viewpoint on the use of "landscape" in environmental planning and governance, making a case for recognition of a cosmophanic diversity and recognizing that "landscape" should not be assumed to have universal applicability and meaning. Therefore, we discuss the importance of ontologies in environmental planning and governance, explain the Berquean notion of cosmophanies, and hypothesize potential arguments against the consideration of regional cosmophanies in practice.

## Ontological Dimensions

Challenging our ontological assumptions in collaborative environmental planning and governance might be a radical but necessary endeavor: Global environmental change and globalization (Leichenko and O'Brien 2008) force us to drastically rethink our daily practices, working toward a structural change in our relations with the environment, for the dominant economic-cultural model is no longer viable. In this sense, an increasing part of the scientific community aims at formulating proposals for transformative change; without one single dominating *Weltanschauung* but considering the plurality of worlds on the planet (Escobar 2017; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Researchers interested in Indigenous people have already stressed the need for considering sovereignty, traditional knowledge, and ethical issues in collaborative environmental planning and governance (Brondízio et al. 2021; Sandercock 2004). Yet the latter needs to go beyond social, economic, and environmental justice, emphasizing the need for ontological fairness, where diversity—of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture—represents the basis for a new "world" in which many worlds fit: a pluriverse (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; see also Latour 2010 who refers to James 1909).

According to Escobar, this "ontological dimension" is part of the defense, resistance, and affirmation of the environment by local communities against attempts to implement a world that seeks to homogenize others (Escobar 2015). A consequence of industrial capitalism and neoliberal modernity, this is based on what has been called a "naturalist" (Descola 2013b) or "dualist" (Escobar 2015) ontology; a vision of "the existent" built on dichotomies such as nature/culture, individual/community, or woman/man. This way of inhabiting the world pretends to be the only form of civilization and rationality (supported by economic and cultural power), silencing all other forms of seemingly "irrational" or "premodern" being, which are often based on a distinctive relationality regarding the environment, the humans, and nonhumans[5] in a given space (Blaser 2009). Far from being exclusively Indigenous ontologies, also in Western

societies "there are expressions of non-dominant relational worlds"; (Escobar 2015; translated by the authors) examples include feminist movements or environmental activists. In relational ontologies, the "landscape" is (to varying degrees) a space-time shaped not only by the community of people but also by the world of nonhumans, where everything exists from the moment it is in relation to the other elements. Contrary to modern ontology, the environment is not only the material basis of economic reproduction or a natural resource to be exploited, but part of a broader network of relationships, in which nonhumans are also political actors, for instance mountains in the Andes (de la Cadena 2015; Tola 2018). Phenomena such as uncontrolled extractivism are forms of destruction of the relational worlds, of their specificities, and of their biotic and abiotic balances, and the struggles to defend the environment become ontological struggles to "defend the many worlds that dwell on the planet." (Escobar 2015, 29; translated by the authors)

Against this background, it seems unavoidable to question whether it is possible to extend a spatially and temporally determined notion such as "landscape" to any culture and period (Descola 2013a). In other words, is "landscape" an anthropological and geographical universal? We presume this is not the case, given that (1) the very notion of landscape is far from univocal (since several disciplines developed their own theoretical perspective on landscape; see Selman 2008; Förster et al. 2012) and (2) there is no uniform way of experiencing, inhabiting, and perceiving environments throughout all geographical contexts (Bloch 1995; Lai 2000). Applying this supposedly universal notion across the globe may lead to out-of-context and inappropriate planning and governance for local environments, because local ways of seeing and interpreting cannot be standardized: their complexity, ambivalence, conflicts, and convergence points must be understood to plan in and for plural and diverse environments. In this sense, we should seek to embrace not only the ecological, economic, and sociocultural dimensions of a certain space, but especially its ontological elements (Escobar 2019). This would be quite radical because (1) it challenges a notion that is taken as universal by proposing that approaches must be adapted to local contexts to prevent collaborative environmental planning and governance from being inappropriate to local worlds; (2) it relies on a theoretical-political framework that is based on ontological diversity; (3) it considers that we live in sex-gender systems, and recognizing and valuing gender diversity is not an option but a necessity to overcome dominant visions of the realities.

## More than Landscape

Drawing on five criteria that define the existence of landscape notions, French geographer Augustin Berque elaborated a theoretical framework that can serve to overcome the imposition of a unique concept by "provincializing" (Chakrabarty 2000) the notion of landscape. In 1848, Charles-Philippe Robin (1821–1885) coined the term *mésologie*. Under a new light, this idea was taken up by Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944), whose fundamental conception was considering living beings not as objects but as subjects who interpret the world. In doing so, von Uexküll established a distinction between *Umgebung* ("surrounding," in French *environnement*) and *Umwelt* ("environment," in French *milieu*). In his concept, the first is the objective, material surrounding without

meaning; the latter is a subjective[6], species-specific reality, "valid only from the point of view of the being concerned, and dynamically coupled with the constitution of that being." (Berque 2019) Another important source for Berque is the *œuvre* of Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsurô (1889–1960), especially *fûdo* (Watsuji 2006). Watsuji elaborated a "human mesology," *fûdoron* or *fûdogaku* (what von Uexküll called *Umweltlehre*). He introduced a theory whose principles are close to von Uexküll's, namely, that *fûdo* (*milieu* or *Umwelt*) has to do with the subjective component of a certain community in relation to its surroundings, while the *shizen kaukyô* (the *Umgebung*) is the physical surrounding. Therefore, Berque's *milieux* are relational ontological communities in which environmental perception is the result of local dynamics and ways of dwelling. It is in this sense that cosmophanies emerge, a set of notions (e.g., "landscape") that influence environmental perception. As a result, the "landscape" ceases to be that universal valid everywhere and becomes one of many possible cosmophanies, coexisting or not with other forms of seeing and interpreting the environment, as prompts montological research on and with Andean Indigenous people and environments (Sarmiento 2020; Haller and Branca 2020).

In the central Andes, where there exist both a more Renaissance European landscape vision (the environment as an "aesthetic painting," a *bourgois* notion) and an Indigenous perspective on the environment (as a "generative earth being," a more agrarian idea) (Tola 2018, 36), in addition to syncretic views, notions of the environment cannot be reduced to the conventional category of "landscape." (as underline Branca et al. 2021; Branca 2020, 23–24) For example, in the main native language of the Andes, Quechua, there is no precise translation of the concept of "landscape," but only possible approximations. The concept of *pacha*, in Quechua (and, by the way, also in Aymara), is a multisemantic concept that includes Western categories of space and time, a whole that is dwelled by humans in a close network of mutual and everyday relationships with nonhumans, such as the spirits that constitute the places (Canessa 2012; Allen 2019). From a modern ontological and naturalist perspective, this might be read as nothing more than an accident of "landscape," a natural resource to be exploited, at most having a certain cultural value, yet in the Andes it is understood as a being with its own interiority and physicality, (Descola 2013b) which, although different from those of humans, is connected to them through a complex network. The mountain, for instance, is part of the history of a place, a powerful spirit, and an ancestor. Hence, while *pacha* is a way of seeing and interpreting the environment, it is not exactly a "landscape,"[7] and that is where the imposition of an inadequate, disrespectful, and colonial form of planning and governance fails.

## Outlook

When it comes to the application of cosmophanic diversity to collaborative environmental planning and governance, at least three potential critiques, reasons why that would not work from a practitioners' viewpoint, can be imagined:

1. In times of crises triggered by global environmental change and globalization, we might need global categories that are understandable everywhere. The category

of "landscape" is one of them, not only used and widely acknowledged by specialists but also by lay people. In any context, environmental planners work with local communities and respect their ways of seeing and interpreting the environment. Hence, an atomization of cosmophanies, rather than improving communication between scholars, could complicate communication between researchers and other sections of the population. Global challenges might need globally applicable recipes and answers, not exaggerated regionalization. Yet should we not link existing regional visions to global concepts to overcome "dichotomies of scale" that hinder mutual understandings? The environmental humanities and social sciences should challenge hegemonic spatioconceptual discourses, unraveling the narratives that shape our ideas of environments, and trace the "pathways" on which the landscape concept trickles down from global to local scales, where, in fact, an inclusive climate of empathy is needed between planners and local communities (see Haller 2017) to fully grasp the needs of humans and nonhumans.

2. The landscape concept questioned in this perspective article is only one of many that have been elaborated throughout history. Several other disciplines understand landscape in ways that are closer to purely objectivist system approaches.[8] From the perspective of (post-)positivist environmental planning and governance, landscape is already understood as an integrative arena or boundary concept used by many disciplines to analyze and assess spatial processes, including measurable relationships between humans and nonhumans. Given the heterogeneity of definitions, reducing the subjective components in landscape approaches, and working toward an improved objective "landscape" understanding might make more sense. Adding just another cosmophanic *genre* might be dispensable. Yet should we not indigenize landscape concepts to create a widely understood language, instead of neglecting the perceptual and interpretative dimension of our surrounding? The environmental humanities and social sciences, with their nuanced historical understanding of local sociocultural contexts, should help making the existing diversity of cosmophanies visible, strengthening the voice of alternative ontological positions, figuring out where and how different cosmophanies clash and what the spatioconceptual imposition of "landscape" means for nonlandscape thinkers and their environmental kinships and other relations.
3. Environmental planning and governance might require spatial cosmophanies that are operable in practice, that is, they need to be tangible and spatially explicit to be delimitable. Regional cosmophanies, like the Andean *pacha,* as well as exclusively humanist understandings of "landscape," include emotional dimensions and might bear the risk of being far from applicable, since it goes beyond Western rationality and positivist thought. Yet should we not leave purely positivist approaches, which (despite a certain "applicability") have demonstrated their incapability to solve today's environmental problems in large parts of the world, behind us? The environmental humanities and social sciences should foster the practical implementation of new forums of ontological debate to overcome the seeming dichotomy of matter and mind, or the tangible and the intangible. Alternative forms of communication, including visual and performing

arts (see Floress and Sachdeva 2019), could represent creative approaches of expression and should extend prevalent forms of exchange still dominated by argumentative dialogues between "experts" and "nonexperts."

We are convinced that understanding the diversity, values, and meanings of cosmophanies, such as "landscape," are key to adequately manage natural resources and reach human and nonhuman well-being in our age—"a time that is, for certain, a thick [ … ], queer [ … ], non-linear [ … ], multispecies and ethical [ … ] time that can hardly be said to have a universal subject or one Grand Narrative to accompany it" (Neimanis, Åsberg, and Hedrén 2015, 69). Moreover, we acknowledge landscape ecologists' and planners' calls for place-based research considering the local communities' conceptual perspectives. (Balvanera et al. 2017; Opdam et al. 2013) Yet it seems necessary to challenge the global hegemony of landscape, which, despite efforts to "objectify" it, is far from being univocal. Nor are purely subjectivist points of view, like the one by French artist Claude Monet quoted at the beginning, a viable alternative. Going beyond landscape, linking matter and mind, and creating consciousness for cosmophanic diversity, could indeed break new grounds in collaborative environmental planning and governance—strengthening the active involvement of local communities—and highlight the relevance and applicability of environmental humanities and social sciences in practice.

## Notes

1. In a sense, three major groups can be identified: territorial ("landscape" as possession), scenic ("landscape" as painting), and synergetic ("landscape" as ecosystem) meanings. These groups are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive ("landscape" approaches may combine elements of all three meanings). Others contrast Vidalian ("landscape" as essence) and Cosgrovian ("landscape" as way of seeing) approaches (Minca 2007).
2. According to Hirsch "[t]here is a relationship here between an ordinary, workaday life and an ideal imagined existence, vaguely connected to, but still separate from, that of the everyday. We can consider the first as 'foregrounded' in order to suggest the concrete actuality of everyday social life ('the way we now are'). The second we can consider as a 'background', in order to suggest the perceived potentiality thrown into relief by our foregrounded existence ('the way we might be')." (Hirsch 1995, 3). Hirsch was among the initiators of an "anthropology of landscape." For the author, "[a] principal aim of this volume follows from these two related ways of considering landscape: the conventional (Western) notion of 'landscape' may be used as a productive point of departure from which to explore analogous local ideas which can in turn be reflexively used to interrogate the Western concept." (Hirsch 1995, 2)
3. "For example (to oversimplify), oil is only a resource as a fuel if you have invented the internal combustion engine; otherwise, it is just a fact of geology—the raw material of the surrounding, which in itself is not a resource and ultimately does not exist for the society concerned. The oil of the Arctic, for example, did not exist for the Inuit for thousands of years. In short, it was there for nothing." (Berque 2017, 521; translated by the authors)
4. With respect to the concept of culture, a quite similar proposal comes from de la Cadena and Blaser: "[D]eploying culture to explain differences that emerge in collectives that do not make themselves with such categories would enact culture and explain away, or block, the possibility of difference as it might emerge if the situation were allowed to display itself without categories awaiting it. There would be knowledge of difference indeed; but that knowledge would be of cultural difference: knowledge enabled and delimited by the practice of the category deployed (culture)." (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 7)

5. Few scholars underline the need to integrate nonhumans into a "denaturalized" environmental planning (for notable exceptions see Castree 2019; Metzger et al. 2019; Jon 2020).
6. While von Uexküll considers *Umwelt* to be subjective, Berque calls it "trajective," linking object and subject.
7. For instance, *pacha* does neither adopt the meaning of "territory" nor is it a "scenery" or "synergy."
8. Despite objectivism, notions on the "scenic beauty" of landscapes still play an important role, as shows research on "cultural ecosystem services" and the aesthetic value of landscapes. (e.g., Schirpke et al. 2016)

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