Introduction: Reflections on Nature, Society, and Geography

The relations of people in Britain to trees and forests are changing. Towards the end of the twentieth century—perhaps because of the doom and gloom prophecies inspired by the millennium, perhaps because of guilt about global deforestation and concerns about global warming—forests have become a socio-ecological utopia. This utopia is based on a vision of forests as multi-purpose—forests that provide a variety of benefits, are sustainable, and biologically diverse. Through its multi-purpose forest policy, the government hopes to fulfill the dream of an expanded timber and woodland resource, contribute to an aesthetically pleasing countryside, and create a diverse and distinctive rural and urban landscape. Forests should enhance and conserve wildlife habitats; revitalize derelict and degraded land; provide job opportunities and possibilities for economic diversification; help reduce carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere; and improve the quality of life in and around cities (FA 1998: 1). And as if this was not quite enough, multi-purpose forests should alleviate problems of social exclusion and poverty in remote rural areas. In order to realize this vision and turn it into a material reality, processes of reality construction have already been set in motion, such as the drafting of regulations and guidelines, and the putting in place of funding mechanisms. Many of the initiatives that have been launched to produce multi-purpose forests—such as community and urban forests—heavily rely on community participation. They are financed by complex networks of public and private support. Examples include twelve community forests that are being established in the vicinity of towns, a National Forest of 320 square kilometres that is being constructed in the Midlands, and a Central Scotland Forest of 1,600 square kilometres that is being produced between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Tree planting has also taken on a new form. It is no longer exclusively the activity of expert foresters, private landowners, or ardent gardeners, but has become the pastime of the general public. Tree planting seems to satisfy a deep-seated need to create something lasting in a time of rapid socio-economic and cultural change. In the midst of flux and transformation, trees convey a sense of stability. During the Tree Council’s National Tree Week in November 1999, over a million trees were planted by the public; 400,000 more than in 1988. Since 1995, the petroleum company Esso has sponsored this event. Together
with the Tree Council, Esso also co-ordinates Esso’s ‘Walk in the Wood’ project. Many of the trees planted during national tree weeks are cared for by 6,500 volunteers who belong to the National Grid Tree Warden Scheme. Since 1990, this scheme has been funded by the National Grid Company plc, who owns and operates the high voltage electricity transmission system in England and Wales. The Tree Council itself grew out of the National Tree Year in 1973. It was formally founded in 1974 with support from the Department of the Environment, and in 1978 became an independent registered charity. Other initiatives supported by the Tree Council and launched in the last few years of the twentieth century were the ‘Trees Love Care Days’, a ‘Seed Gathering Sunday’, the ‘Family Tree Scheme’ (which provides twenty-three sites across Britain for commemorative tree planting), and the ‘Trees of Time and Place’ project, which last year encouraged the gathering of seeds that were planted to celebrate the millennium.

A mere eighty years ago, a very different forest vision held sway: that of forests as a ‘strategic reserve of timber’. This vision underpinned the formation of the Forestry Commission (hereafter FC) in 1919, and led to a transformation of the British landscape on a scale that only urbanization and agriculture have matched. When the FC was set up, Britain had hardly any trees left, nor did it have a centrally organized and trained body of foresters (foresters worked either for the colonial forest service, or for private estates). Its objective was to produce both as quickly and economically as possible, and it set about this task with vigour. Largely due to the efforts of the FC and private landowners, tree-cover in Britain now stands at roughly 11 per cent, while at the time when the FC was established, it had dwindled to a mere 4 per cent. The FC’s way of doing ‘things’, developed as a result of the ‘strategic reserve of timber’ ideal, soon manifested itself in the ‘things’ it produced: its even-aged, even-spaced, monocultural, coniferous plantations. These forests were resented by the public as soon as they became a visible component of the countryside. People in Britain were accustomed to broadleaved trees, open spaces, and scattered pine woods, which constituted their familiar surroundings. To this day, a distinction is commonly drawn between woods and forests, where the former refers to small areas of land covered primarily with native broadleave trees, and the latter refers to large tracts of land covered primarily with non-native conifer trees. Plantation forests evoke a complex set of emotions that is partly bio-physical, partly historical, and partly cultural in nature. They are perceived as dark, dead, and unfriendly places, and are often portrayed as ‘alien’ invaders that ‘march across’ the countryside ‘blanketing’ whole hillsides. They symbolize all sorts of fears and phobias, including totalitarian state power, while other concerns relate to their bio-physical impacts, such as river acidification and changes in ground water levels.

Although the FC tried to accommodate and address these issues and conflicts as they arose, its general attitude was historically one of defence. It always hoped that people would one day come to understand that it was doing
the right ‘thing’. Its vision of a strategic reserve of timber and the way this was translated into practice—in other words, into plantation forests—had long since become the FC’s taken-for-granted world. It was unable to acknowledge that there was anything wrong with its plantations. But human beings do not act in a vacuum, and when alternative forest visions gradually began to gain power nationally and internationally—and the reasons for this will be explored in this book—the FC began to be seen as an organization unable and unwilling to change. A government review committee in the late 1980s thus came to the conclusion that the FC’s outlook on the world had become too deeply ingrained in its organizational set-up, and, as a result, the FC was restructured in 1992. Since then, it has lost some of its power and influence, and its future role in British forestry is still uncertain. Indeed, the forestry industry’s journal Forestry & British Timber (hereafter F&B T)(3 Dec. 1999: 52) has recently staked a bet that the FC will not survive the millennial year. This pessimistic attitude is a reflection of the fact that the FC can no longer exclusively support its traditional clientele, the timber industry and private landowners, and has to cater for new stakeholders with a diverse range of interests (such as nature conservationists, urban communities, farmers, and many others). There is no doubt: Britain’s forest vision and its forests are changing.

This book investigates the relations between visions of the world and the practices that come to be associated with them, and considers the radically different reality formations to which they can lead. It questions how particular visions become prominent through symbolic power struggles and how they are transformed into material realities through practice. It also looks at how, in time, they come to be mistaken for reality per se. The book then considers how change can come about, both in terms of how reality is perceived and in terms of how it is produced. These questions are addressed in the context of state forestry and plantation forests in Britain. Ryle (1969: 11), in his account of the first forty-five years of the FC, observed that a dry history lacking analytical study of the developments and changes which occurred during those eventful years, without anecdotes or even candid criticism, would fail to give a true picture of an organization which has always been nonconformist in its ways. An effort has, therefore, been made to paint a picture rather than to write a history.

The same can be said of this book. Although the picture to be painted of state forestry and the FC in the following pages is undoubtedly historical, the book’s aim is not to provide a history, and certainly not a History. Rather, it tries to grasp the dreams, hopes, and fears that are at the bottom of practice. In the pages that follow, the reader will find stories of war and of trees turned into battleships; s/he will stumble across hillsides where trees have been swept away by winds in the prime of their life, and look in vain for saplings that have been eaten by deer and rabbits. Processes that turned human bodies into efficient planting machines will be unearthed, and the ways in which trees became
powerful symbols of terror and salvation investigated. In this drama of life and death, the reader will also discover forests that were used by people to escape from the pressures of everyday life, to relax in and enjoy ‘nature’, and to lose themselves in a world that since time immemorial has inspired them with awe. The objective of telling these stories and tracing these processes is to search for a better understanding of how human beings socially and bio-physically construct and transform their worlds and themselves in continuous interaction. In that way the book hopes to show that certain visions of the world and their associated practices will inevitably lead to greater social and environmental domination and injustice, and that we need to be constantly vigilant of the fact that once they become institutionalized, change can be very difficult to effect. The approach adopted to achieve this objective is one of critical geography.

Geography has long been interested in society–nature relations, and recent shifts in how these relations are conceptualized in the discipline offer ample scope for work that goes beyond a traditional focus on nature as a resource, a setting, or a factor in climate change. Geographers have not been alone in problematizing the society–nature dualism, and social scientists in many disciplines have begun to question the representations of reality that it has induced. In order to overcome this dilemma and the conceptual divide between society and nature, notions such as ‘cyborg’ (Haraway 1991), ‘quasi-object’ (Latour 1993), and ‘thing’ (Harvey 1996) have been proposed. These notions are increasingly employed by geographers as metaphors for the products of socially produced nature (see Demeritt 1994; Swyngedouw 1996, 1999; Fitzsimmons and Goodman 1998). Socially produced nature is a form of socio-nature that embodies material, cultural, chemical, symbolic, and other processes and relations. All three of the above-mentioned notions attempt to overcome the society–nature divide by incorporating non-human actors in the analysis of produced reality, although the mode of analysis differs in each case. Haraway uses the notion of ‘cyborg’ (a ‘hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’ (Haraway 1991: 149)) in imaginative ways to analyse how human and non-human actors mutually construct ‘artifactual nature’. Latour’s quasi-objects (symmetrical processes of nature–culture interactions that produce hybrids which are ‘simultaneously real, discursive, and social’ (Latour 1993: 64)) are part of a formal analytic framework centring on the notion of translation or network. According to Latour, the idea of ‘network’ is ‘more supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity’ (1993: 3). Quasi-objects are mobilized and assembled into networks and the associations of humans and non-humans are referred to as ‘collectives’ (1993: 4). For Harvey (1996), who takes a dialectic, process-orientated approach, a ‘thing’ should not be seen as a self-sustaining substance but as a constantly changing permanence that is part of a structured, heterogeneous system that can itself appear as a ‘thing’. To understand ‘things’ so
defined, one has to understand the flows, processes, and relations that create, produce, and sustain them, and the structured systems—or bounded fields, as he otherwise calls them—of which they form a part. Harvey’s ‘things’ are thus produced at two interactive levels and in that sense are akin to Latour’s quasi-objects, which are the temporary products of collectives assembled through networks.

Harvey’s drawing of a boundary between a ‘thing’ and a structured system, while at the same time claiming that ‘things’ are process-based, temporary achievements of multiple flows and fluxes, seems, at first, to defy his purpose. However, he is careful to point out that there are no fixed a priori boundaries around a system. Rather, the drawing of a boundary is seen as a major strategic consideration in the development of concepts, abstractions, and theories that will radically alter their nature (Harvey 1996: 53). This argumentative shift from ontology—the nature of existence—to epistemology—the nature of knowledge—is a reminder that the notion of ‘thing’ is first and foremost a heuristic device for understanding socio-material reality rather than an essentialist explanation of it. It does not tell us that relations are essences of ‘things’—although they constitute the forces that lead to their production—but aims to make us aware of the political nature of the act of ‘drawing a line’. Drawing a line is not only an analytic necessity that enables us to grasp processes which would otherwise be too complex to comprehend, but is also intentional and value-laden. It is therefore important to ask of categorical boundaries: Who benefits from the drawing of a line? What will the implications of the line be and for whom? Who will gain and who will lose because of being on one side of the line and not the other? Struggles over the delineation of concepts and categories will surface again and again in the analysis of forestry in this book. Whether a ‘forest’ is delineated as a plantation forest, a Royal Forest, or a community forest will radically affect the way it is perceived and produced. However, in spite of the analytic ability of the notion of ‘thing’ to denote the metamorphosis of a constant state of flux into an apparent state of permanence, its usefulness as a heuristic device to enquire into complex, durable, and socially meaningful phenomena is limited. The reason for this is that while the notion of ‘thing’ can make us aware that certain sets of relations can, at times, take on a thing-like, seemingly unchangeable appearance, when using it in relation to Royal Forests, plantation forests, or other constructed socio-natures like cities, nature reserves, theme parks, and so forth, it is misleading due to its strong connotation of material fixity. Similarly, the concepts of cyborg and quasi-object seem to refer to a singularity; a temporal end-product of society–nature relations rather than the spatio-temporal manifestation of ongoing processes of reality formation.

In this book, an approach to society–nature relations is developed that can be described as critical geography. Lees (1999: 377) has pointed out that:
The name ‘critical geography’ is somewhat ambiguous, because it means different things to different people . . . But speaking broadly of the movement, critical geographers have been concerned with general questions about the practice and purpose of academic research and knowledge.

More particularly, critical geography has been concerned with issues of power, domination, and social and environmental justice, and with questions of activism, especially in the form of community engagement to empower the ‘researched’. In fact, the division between researcher and researched no longer makes sense in many critical geography studies, as the geographer is not simply a participant observer, but plays an active role in the community he or she is engaged with and supports its common cause. Critical geography as understood here takes on a slightly different meaning but shares the concerns about empowerment expressed above. Critical geography here is seen as a way of investigating the multiple processes and relations that converge and diverge in co-emergent space and in the co-production of realities. It considers how human beings envision reality (as forests, nature reserves, cities, and so forth), institutionalize certain visions (in the individual through socialization and in ‘things’ such as codes of practice, laws, organizational structures, and the like), and begin to mistake them for reality per se. To turn a vision into reality necessitates corporation and the achievement of complex sets of relations between human and non-human beings. A critical geography as proposed here enquires into whose visions are realized, what purposes they serve, how they (and material reality) change over time, and what their implications are for the beings that are mobilized in trying to bring them about. In other words, it investigates the multiple events and processes that commingle over time and in space to manifest in what will be called meaningful, composite formations, and the formative contexts that enabled their production (such as social relations, relations of production, bio-physical processes, and so forth). It does so from different angles, drawing on different heuristic devices, of which ‘meaningful, composite formation’ and ‘formative context’ themselves are part.

‘Meaningful, composite formation’ is a concept that describes reality formations that depend on their achievement on the activation of a complex web of social and bio-physical processes and the establishment of certain relations between living and non-living entities. Such formations are subject to time and space constructions and are deeply suffused in time-space. These two distinct notions of time and space need to be considered separately while not forgetting that they constantly interact with and shape each other. On the one hand, there are abstract notions of time and space—nations constructed conceptually, negotiated socially, and employed strategically in everyday life such as clock time, calendar years, metres, hectares, Hoppus feet, and so forth (Harvey 1990a and b). For example, the hour was an invention of the thirteenth century, followed in the seventeenth century by minutes and seconds (Harvey 1990a). On the other hand, there is the expression of time in space, or better, the mani-
festation of time in the material world. This manifestation of time in space is what is meant by time-space. It encompasses processes such as growth, maturation, decay, and death which no living and non-living being can escape (Lefebvre 1994). Both interact with and change each other in complex ways (Harvey 1990a, 1996; Adam 1995; Gerber 1997). Time and space in the formative context of capitalism order and subjugate time-space so as to produce ‘things’ quicker; hence the use of fertilizers and genetic manipulation to speed up tree growth in forestry.

Furthermore, for a composite formation to become meaningful—and hence, differential—in other words, for it to become a Royal Forest or a plantation forest, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (hereafter SSSI) or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (hereafter AONB), London or Manchester, requires the successful mediation of ideological and symbolic representational practices which will render it meaningful and justify its existence as that and no other formation. The becoming of a meaningful, composite formation necessitates that ‘spatial elements—the body, limbs, eyes—are mobilized, including both materials (stone, wood, bone, leather, etc.) and matériel (tools, arms, language, instructions and agendas)’ (Lefebvre 1994: 71; emphasis in the original). Meaning-making and knowledge construction and the power relations they embody and express are not separate from material processes but are part and parcel of the production of particular, meaningful reality formations. They impose form and order and hence discontinuity on an otherwise continuous stream of being, becoming, and passing away. The same holds true for the formative contexts within which they can occur.

The term ‘formative context’ is used here to denote the role played by surrounding conditions in the achievement of meaningful, composite formations. It is a dynamic concept that implies that it is not at any time or in any place that Royal Forests or plantation forests could have been achieved. Such formations are never disinterested but always suffused with power relations. Both meaningful, composite formations and formative contexts are deeply rooted in a a historical-geographical process of perpetual metabolism in which ‘social’ and ‘natural’ processes combine in an historical-geographical ‘production process of socio-nature’, whose outcome (historical nature) embodies chemical, physical, social, economic, political and cultural processes in highly contradictory but inseparable manners. (Swyngedouw 1996: 70)

A third concept that is of importance in the analysis of processes of reality production employed in this book is that of ‘co-emergent space’. Co-emergent space is the space where meaningful, composite formations take shape. It refers to a site of reality production where everything from living beings to objects, signs, and symbols is juxtaposed. The notion of co-emergent space highlights that meaningful, composite formations are as much a work of bio-physical processes as they are a product of labour. In other words, it implies that they are
as much an imaginary construct as they are the material manifestation of a vision or idea. No matter whether defined as ‘Royal Forest’, a ‘Site of Special Scientific Interest’ (SSSI), or ‘London’, every meaningful, composite formation is a form of co-emergent space that is natural, social, and cultural at once. This is the conceptual framework that underpins the analysis of forestry presented in the following chapters. Although geographers have long been interested in society–nature relations, they have—with some exceptions—curiously neglected the complex relationships human beings have with forests. Where forests are mentioned in traditional accounts, they are either treated as an economic resource, or portrayed as a factor in climate and environmental change. However, our relationships with forests and our constructions of them as meaningful, composite formations such as Royal Forests, plantation forests, community forest, urban forests, and so forth are infinitely more complex and interesting than these accounts suggest. A critical geography approach as outlined above offers a fresh opportunity to reinterpret these relations and mend the neglect.