

Mapping Common Ground: Towards the Environmental Humanities in Latvia

Anita Zariņa, Artis Svece, Ivo Vinogradovs

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The conceptual framework of “environmental humanities”, interdisciplinary in nature and pluralistic in its theoretical models, is increasingly used to address the current ecological crisis from entangled ethical, cultural, philosophical, political, social, and biological perspectives (Neimanis et al. 2015, Oppermann, Iovino 2016). Also, the notion of the Anthropocene, a term that was coined by two senior geoscientists (Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer), has graduated from being a buzzword to something like a keyword that animates daily discourse in the academic, political, commercial, and public domains alike (Castree 2014: 235). In the context of ecological crisis, enveloped by the notion of the Anthropocene, even the idea of “the environment” itself, not to mention “climate change” and “bio- and geoengineering”, is at the stake considering the living, managing, narrating, and theorizing the local and planetary sustainability and the scope of human-environment interactions. As Bergthaller et al. (2014: 266) puts it, these terms not only refer to distinct material entities, phenomena, and social practices, but they also help shape and guide our understanding of the meaning of human life on Earth.

The environmental humanities (EH) as an interdisciplinary endeavour developed simultaneously in many parts of the world, grounding on the idea that scientists can excel at identifying and explaining environmental issues, but they alone cannot solve them. To solve and communicate these problems and dilemmas, which have been created by industrial society, political and cultural expertise and civic and indigenous knowledge is required as well (Emmett, Nye 2017: 1-7). EH has recently been established at various universities on every continent and is becoming increasingly visible through a lively publication activity (Schmidt et al. 2020: 225, see also, Tüür, Soovik 2020, Neimanis et al. 2015, Emmett, Nye 2017). This movement as a new research field is also gaining its visibility and relevance in Latvia.

Environmental humanities in Latvia: building a common platform

The EH as a platform for interdisciplinary conversations officially announced itself in Latvia in 2018 with the first BALTEHUMS conference¹ that was brought to Riga by a group of researchers from Estonia (KAJAK, the Estonian Centre for Environmental History at the Tallinn University) and Sweden (KTH Royal Institute of Technology). The conference was held at the University of Latvia, Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences and brought together up to 100 scholars, resulting in exchange of ideas and local and international collaborations. Among the Latvian research presented at the conference a variety of thematic topics stood out: studies of military formations of the last century and their instrumental role in the development of nature conservation areas, human-animal relationships in the context of nature conservation and rewilding projects, sustainable living, ethnobotany and permaculture, popular

1 BALTEHUMS conference program: https://www.geo.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/projekti/gzzf/EURENSSA/Baltehums_program_for_print_01.pdf [Accessed 01.12.2021]

enlightenment and environmental history, eco-narratives, and ecological awareness. Altogether they represented a broad spectrum of environmental scholars of various academic disciplines interested in the objectives and imperatives offered by the EH (from philosophy, anthropology, history and folkloristics to environmental science and geography). Besides, the BALTEHUMS' event facilitated relationships that resulted in various international and local collaborations, for example, the University of Latvia's participation in the international research project Cold War Coasts, which explores the role of the military in shaping the Baltic Sea's coastal landscapes since 1945 and its legacies. Another fruitful collaboration emerged between environmental geographers and philosophers of the University of Latvia by engendering wider conversations on nature discourses and environmental management and ethics. This has resulted in a joint research project *Competing Discourses of Nature in Latvia and Ecological Solidarity as a Consensus Building Strategy* (NATURED) financed by Latvian Council of Science. The project aims as well to create a common platform for researchers, practitioners and ecological activists to aspire critical alliances and facilitate discussions on environmental issues through conferences and public lectures and dialogues. For example, the NATURED's collaboration with Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art's transdisciplinary network project "Communicating Difficult Pasts", which focuses on uneasy relations between past and present and their entangled nature, has opened a space for a joint communication and creative art projects on the complex relationships of Latvian society and its environment in the 20th and 21st centuries. Another such a platform event is forming at the annual conference of the University of Latvia within the interdisciplinary section dedicated to the EH and in two years it has attracted already a broad transdisciplinary audience.

The contributions on research collected in this special issue (SI) of *Letonica* is part of the NATURED's activities aimed at mapping the common ground of the EH research in Latvia. What are the historical and contemporary "hot topics" in environmental research and thought? How can the EH contribute to environmental research urgency in Latvia? What discourses and study areas have the EH brought together in the context of this special issue? The articles submitted and accepted for this SI will showcase only a few examples from the research activities and initiatives that takes place in Latvia. However, they already mark the zones of interest that have been outlined in the last decades by various academic research, initiatives and projects. We will trace and discuss the broader topics within which the enclosed SI articles are situated.

Nature and struggles over values and power

About two decades ago Latvian-American political scientist Katrina Schwartz published a series of articles and later also a book (Schwartz 2006) focused on the environmental politics, national identity and globalization in post-Soviet Latvia, a book that is an important conceptual contribution to environmental history in Latvia. Although much attention in her research was directed towards the analysis of the two main competing discourses: agrarian nationalism

and pro-European internationalism, which were subjects of debate in the transition period in the 1990s and 2000s, the book discloses the issues that are still not resolved in the modern-day Latvia. These are: the struggle over land uses of denationalized land property and the struggle over power and values related to the politics, management, and conservation of nature. Among the many examples brought up in this context, Schwartz (2005; 2006) described the idea and initiative to preserve the pre-agricultural landscape shaped by natural processes that would include the nature-based tourism as a way to “export” wilderness and biodiversity to Western Europe. This was the Nature Park *Pape*, where the first introduction of semi-wild Konik horses to further enhance wild nature through their grazing brought in with the help of Dutch consultants took place in Latvia, creating heated debates among locals and nature conservation experts favouring the conventional agricultural landscape instead of such an unfamiliar wilderness. The Nature Park *Pape*, however, continued with the rewilding projects bringing in heck cattle and bison as well. Zariņa et al. (2022, this issue) discuss the twisted fate of Pape’s bison who due to the unpredicted conjunctures escaped their fenced enclosure in 2008 and gradually became the wild animals still roaming in the surroundings of Pape. This event brought up a few important issues related to the wild grazing ideas and practices (see also Reķe et al. 2019), as well as the human-animal relationships that has a potential to overcome the Nature-Society divide. The idea of such a wilderness entails in its essence the gradual deconstruction of fences (and here we would like to stress not only material but also metaphorical meaning of the word) thus dissolving the boundaries between the tamed and the wild and, as Lorimer (2015: 4) asserts, catalysing modes of “stewardship” based on nature that is always-entangled with humans. As several rangers of Latvia’s nature parks have admitted, Latvian society is not ready to have wild nature outside protected areas’ zones yet.

Similar issues are raised by Reķe (2022, this issue), who analyses the discourses surrounding the human-wolf relationships as they are portrayed by public media in Latvia. The analysis discloses the struggle for power in wildlife conservation politics and the role of biopolitics of agriculture and forestry in creation of hunting favouring discourses. This is one of the cases that show the populist politics grounded in the cultural representations of the fear of wolves having direct effect on wildlife management policies (e.g., Schmidt et al. 2020). And the problem and its solution of the aforementioned examples and alike is not only instrumental here, that is, refers to the subsidies, the status of a protected area or schemes of financial compensations, but it lies in the absence of understanding of what is at stake in living in and after the Anthropocene, what are our contemporary social-ecological predicaments. The communication towards this understanding, certainly, is the task for the EH.

Narrating and representing environment of the Soviet and post-Soviet

One of a pivotal topics in the post-Soviet country such as Latvia is the stories of the Soviet past and the environment itself is central to telling these stories. And very often these stories convey

the dark political agenda of communist rule that destroyed the environment in the pursuit of military and economic power (e.g., Peterson 1993, Agyeman, Ogneva-Himmelberger 2009, Barcz 2020). Indeed, the Soviet period coincided with the era of modernist transformation of rural and urban space in Latvia by massivization of the agricultural lands (Melluma 1994), transformation of wetlands (Zariņa, Vinogradovs 2019), militarization of various societal and natural domains and Soviet housing mass constructions (e.g., Gentile, Sjöberg 2009). These processes culminated in the 1970s and the beginning of 1980s with the hyper industrial projects setting into motion, yet subtly, the environmental movement. Bunkse (1979), for example, already in 1970s addressed the rational, socioeconomic solutions of urban development in Riga, which largely ignored local factors and the needs of individuals, questioning the assertion by Soviet urban planners that their goal is to create a humane environment. Matvejs (2022, this issue) adds to that analysing the portrayal of urban residential outdoor space in films of the Soviet era, showing that only in the mid-1980s filmmakers shed lights on existing flaws of the residential neighbourhood of *micro-rayons* in Riga.

The transformation of cultural landscapes at the time and the destruction of the environment, signified, by many, the destruction of homeland (Schwartz 2006, Galbreath, Auers 2009). The Great Tree Liberation Movement, which emerged during the mid-1970s, led by a praised Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis with the goal of registering great trees as national monuments to protect them from both undergrowth and reclamation that was associated with agricultural intensification and farmstead liquidation (Schwartz 2006, Steger 2009, Ūdre 2019). Also, environmental protests challenging a threat posed to the Latvian cultural and ethnic landscape by Soviet land-use planning, the development of grand infrastructural projects and immigration of the workers from other parts of the USSR took the form of an anti-dam and anti-metro movement in the 1980s (e.g., Schwartz 2006, Grava 1989). As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, this ushered the era of Green Awakening led by the Environment Protection Club in Latvia (cf. Ūdre 2019), which held on to the idea of synthesis of environmentalism and national identity or as Guattari (1989: 18) has put it—ecology and separatist demands.

Having all this in mind, Galbreath and Auers (2009: 334) state that “Latvia is an interesting case of overlap between environmentalism and nationalism”; and this has eventually led to some bizarre forms of political alliances of the post-Soviet era, especially in the context of Western politics, for example, alliance of conservative and agriculture lobby-party Latvian Farmers’ Union with Latvian Green Party, resulting in politics where “green” is mere colour of logo. Nationalism still plays an important role in environmental and nature conservation discourses, however, there are still a myriad of issues to be critically reassessed and communicated in relation to the Soviet environmental heritage through overcoming the conservatism of idolized ethnoscape and the notion of Soviet era as all-encompassing evil times. For example, Zariņa et al. (2018) has discussed the evidently endless struggle over land uses between nature protection agencies and conventional domain of agriculture in the reclaimed wetland spaces of Soviet agro-industrial heritage (agro-polders). Krumberga (2022, this issue) draws attention to the diversity and hybridity of spatial relations involved in the geographical meaning-making and production of the coastal landscape where the socio-political problematics

arise not because of the military legacy but from the contemporary discursive attempts to separate the Cold War's past from its geographical context and to present a purified (hi)story of the coastal environment. Kozlovs and Skulte (2022, this issue) study how people living in the city are re-imagining the reorganization of urban space by positioning signs for an alternative reading of urban environment. At the same time Āboliņa and Zilāns (2022, this issue) question the possibility of “being at home” and the struggle for the “urban commons” within the neighbourhoods located next to the industrial Freeport of Riga, which bears the spatial imprints of Soviet urban planning in the context of contemporary neoliberal urban developments and environmental impacts of industrial business-as-usual.

Expanding the subject of biophilosophy

The notion of biophilosophy is mostly used to name an area of research that could also be described as the philosophy of biology (Mahner, Bunge 1997). It concerns methodological issues of biology and ontological puzzles like the possibility of reductive explanations of life, or the ontological status of taxonomical systems. The term “biophilosophy” on its own does not preclude a broader application of the word, and certainly there are other issues that concern the subject of life and are relevant for philosophical reflection. And there are authors who try to expand the notion of biophilosophy by bringing into the analysis of life a whole spectrum of relationships (Thacker 2015), including the social practices (Žukauskaitė 2013), and ethical issues (Köchy 2008).

As far as the Latvian philosophers have applied this term, they have chosen the second approach, and have used the term “biophilosophy” in the broader sense—as a philosophical reflection on living nature, human involvement in it, and the natural, physical, and biological conditions of human existence (Bičevskis 2020, see also Stepiņš 2020, Sauka 2020). The concept highlights the relationship between the society and the biological character of human existence and positions this relationship for philosophical and ethical research. That also means that the natural, the physical and the biological are seen as inseparable from their social, political and technological contexts, their social presentation and the resulting ethical consequences. Basically, biophilosophy raises the question of how to think of humans as biological, bodily beings, without reducing this effort to some biological determinism, or opposite—without discarding the biological and the natural as irrelevant, or just social constructions. Ultimately, it is a question of how we should think about life, body, or nature within the humanities.

From the perspective of philosophy this SI addresses several important biophilosophical issues. Both Sauka and Bičevskis (2022, this issue) analyse the contradictory nature of modern discourses, and demonstrate the way these discourses construct the meaning of life, nature, and body in contemporary Western society. Although both authors emphasize the self-deceptive and alienating character of some of these discourses, they do not demand for

rejection of modernity but rather invite us to notice in these contradictions the potential for a substantial reimagination of ourselves, our being, and our environment. This potential for thinking and living differently are hidden under a complex network of ideological, including metaphysical, assumptions and dispositions but they are still there. Both authors express doubts about the attempts to think of nature and society separately, and Sauka in particular focuses on the necessity to develop a new kind of ontology that overcomes this and other dualistic structures that are ubiquitous in our discourses and practices and invite us to take seriously the processual ontology as a promising approach to understanding environmental, social and ethical issues. In fact, the analysis and criticism of dualistic structures has become an integral part of post-humanist project and the debate on the Anthropocene. So, it is not surprising that this topic keeps returning in SI, and that includes Neikena's (2022, this issue) research of representation of violence in media. Writing from a perspective of an anthropologist, she focuses on the problematic but widely encountered practice to use animals for marking the Other, but just like many authors of SI, she also notices that the representations of nature, in this case animals, often are ambiguous and contradictory. That creates a space for new and more imaginative discourses on nature and environment that would better suit our situation of living in the Anthropocene.

Concluding remarks

One of the challenges for EH and that includes EH in Latvia is a difference and certain tension between two tasks of the EH project—"on the one hand, the common focus of the humanities on critique and an 'unsettling' of dominant narratives, and on the other, the dire need for all peoples to be constructively involved in helping to shape better possibilities in these dark times" (Rose et al. 2012). Researchers in EH cannot ignore any of the two but "dominant narratives" can turn out to be more effective, at least in a short run, for environmentalism agenda. Another related issue is the international character of contemporary research and the local issues of environment protection and nature conservation including the conflicts that emerge among the variety of stakeholders and that are often articulated using these dominant narratives.

As to the local context, it is evident that the contemporary talking points in environmental research and thought in Latvia are embedded in the situation that still deals with the institutional and environmental legacies of the Soviet past. It relates to urban structures and environment, post-military developments, nature conservation issues and practices, as well as the politics of the Natural in general. One of the important challenges for the EH in Latvia is to construct a bridge between local environmental issues and those of the global scale for overcoming the dominant ethno-national discourses, which in Latvia manifests not only in the environmental and nature conservation domains but also in the issues related to various social inequalities. Thus, on one hand, the EH must "speak in the local language" in order to make any difference in policy decisions which means that one of the tasks of EH is

to “translate” theoretical reflections and research results in a way that can be communicated in the local cultural and discursive context. On the other hand, the EH is instrumental in recreating those local cultural and discursive contexts by reimagining of ourselves, and our environment that would allow “better possibilities in these dark times” to emerge.

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