

It's All About Economics –The Urban Ecology in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to reveal a social-economic pattern within T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a Modernistic post-apocalyptic poem, in which the inner self of the modern urbanite is fragmented by the post-war reality of the beginning of the last century. The main space in which the human being dwells is the city, a culturally constructed place of conflicting psychological, social, economic and natural energies. The urbanite's interior conflict is objectified toward the social otherness and, further, over the natural other, in this way, a hierarchy of power between the social human and the natural environment having been established. This collision between incompatible and unnatural agencies is mediated by the transformation of nature in urban space through means of economic and cultural production and consumption. The sterile land represents the direct aftermath of the over-exploited, over-consumed and over(re)produced nature, which has become a social waste.*

Key words: *The Waste Land*, oikos, city, social ecology, production of space

J.E.L. classification: A14, Q57, X80, Z13

1. Introduction

From an ecocritical point of view, the city has been always situated within the binary opposition of Nature and Culture, the latter being consubstantial to the urban medium. Weather deconstructing or, on the contrary, preserving this dichotomy, the urban environment and its urbanites have generated multiple, eclectic and rhizomatic threads of economic, financial and commercial patterns and paradigms. As a social science, *economics* does not exclusively deal with money and, in this respect, it ought to be apprehended within a larger context, that of social structures from which it originated. Its etymology relates to *oikos*, which means house, and *nomos*, which means custom or law and should be understood as a relationship of stewardship and management between an individual and one's property, or between specific individuals, regarding various exchanges. A cognate term is *ecumene*, stemming from the Greek *oikoumene*, which means inhabited and it may refer to a dwelt space of civilizational, cultural and political management. Another cognate is the word *ecology*, which stems from *oikos* and *logia/logos*, meaning house-environment and word/study/science.

All these three cognate terms have the environmental *oikos* as a semantic and pragmatic carrier of the idea of nature as home. Furthermore, this sense of natural or built-urban home is reinforced by its *logos*, namely its multiple *logoi* which unite the urbanite with the urban structures. In the poem, this dynamic interrelatedness takes shape through the agency of the logical-cultural-economic circulation of capital. Within this fluid space, the boundaries of the untamed nature and the economic city are blurred and their inner oppositions are continuously renegotiated. Hybrid and postmodern approaches, such as ecological economics, green economics or environmental economics, may be taken into account when scrutinizing the natural-social continuum. "The ideas of "urban" and "natural" thus represent one of the last great Western dualisms that needs to be bridged or dissolved: urbanature. This apparent opposition—nature versus culture, the natural versus the artificial, man versus nature—is all one and the same. Here is a final reason why.

Urbanature already exists”. (Nichols, 2011, p.203)

2.1. The Historical and Economic Context

“If there is a difficulty describing T.S. Eliot’s economic context, it is that it spans micro-economic events far larger than any individual. Eliot’s relationship to economics involves the monetary struggles of a single newlywed couple, the fate of small circulation, almost voluntary literary journals and the serendipity of a personal career, as well as the rise and fall of national currencies, the emergence of labour politics effecting the decisions of the British parliament, the post-war dismantling of Germany’s economy, the severe economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s and Britain’s long historical movement from an agrarian to a manufacturing and then a consumer society” (Harding, 2011, p.275). The poem belongs to the Modernist Geist, but this literary movement ought to be embedded into the larger paradigm of Modernity. This post-war period is one of social, political and economic changes and these events are caught within the poem. The fixity of the Victorian Empire is replaced by a more flexible vision of society, in which the authority of the state gives place to Fordism and local-negotiable economic status. *The Waste Land* reveals a post-apocalyptic and damaged place of eclectic histories, politics, economically disrupted states of consciousness. The mythical past is incorporated into the severe and unreal substance of the present, this aesthetic perspective giving the reader a synchronic and, at the same time, a fragmented perception of reality.

Although depersonalized and aesthetically abstracted from the poem, Eliot’s authorial voice is simultaneously immanent and transcendent to London’s reality: “over London Bridge... up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours” (Eliot, 1922, lines 62, 66-67). This spatiality is impregnated with London’s banking system symbols and is associated with the British financial center from the twentieth century. It is also the place where Eliot worked as a banker and wrote the poem. “Eliot carrier as a London banker and his migration from Saint Louis to the metropolitan crossroads of London were the catalysts for his modernist attempt to nurture the idea of a global culture. As the cultural goods flowed through London, he attempted to order and transpose them into a single textual space, *The Waste Land*, a work we now might see as the foundation myth of the global village” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 169). Until the last century, the historical process of globalization was continuously centered and decentered, according to the contextual and temporal body politic. After the Great War, from a poststructural perspective, the political dynamics of globalization begins to be deconstructed in terms of overcoming the prior hierarchies of power between politicians and those who do not have political authority. In other words, the globalization begins to stem from economic interests and the body politic begins to function in terms of economic needs. Nevertheless, the democratization of globalization brought other hierarchies, not political, but social-economic, as seen in the poem.

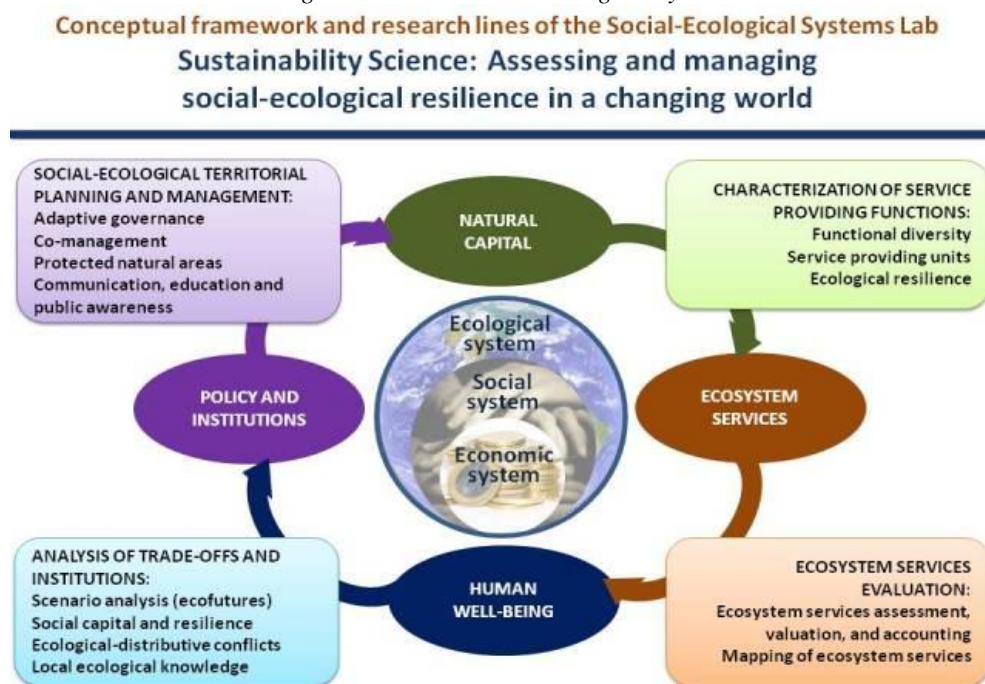
2.2. Social Ecological Premises

“People, as well as commodities and capital, were becoming increasingly international and cosmopolitan as cultural identity like currency, became less fixed and more variable” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 171). As inferred, the transition from political to economic globalization preserved the prior hierarchical and societal threads; after all, the power has been always negotiated in terms of property or money. From a social ecological point of view, “the very domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (Bookchin, 1982, p. 65). This inter-human domination is conceptualized as having economic, ethnic, cultural and gender roots, from which hierarchical dualities function as means of exerting power. The apex of the ecological conflict is fully achieved in the modern and capitalist society, where nature becomes a commodity and urban environment replaces organic space. Heretofore, there is an inner social hierarchy, which has economic roots because all the societal exchanges are mediated by needs, property and goods. This hierarchy is objectified into nature in terms of establishing a pattern of identity and alterity between the human being and the “othered” environment. These two types of hierarchy are rooted within the very essence of the human, especially the modern and capitalist urbanite.

In the poem, the fragmented human psyche symbolically coincides with the generic post-war

anxious mind. The urbanite dwells within a fragmented city and this spatial environment oppressively interact with one's mind, this act of psychological and urban association causing interior fragmentation. This disruption equals to an alienation both from the perceived other or even oneself. For example, the intimate relationship between two lovers actually relates to an act of inertial and mechanical alienation: "His vanity requires no response, /.../ She turns and looks a moment in the glass, / Hardly aware of her departed lover;" (Eliot, 1922, lines 241, 249-250). The personal damaged behavior has external-social consequences, especially within a post-traditional society, wherein the patriarchal patterns are still preserved. The male lover, apprehended as a virtual money maker, feels that he is in power and has a superior attitude toward his female partner: " Bestows one final patronising kiss," (Eliot, 1922, line 247). Thus, the idiosyncratic otherness has led to a social alienated other, in which the male-variable from this binary opposition has the power. Furthermore, this hierarchy extends to the natural other, perceived as an object of economic exploitation. The interplay between the urban self and the environmental other potentially transforms the latter from a space of living to an infected place of wastes: " The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends" (Eliot, 1922, lines 177-178). The social ecological approach seeks to find an ecological equilibrium between the social human being, one's economic needs and structural constraints, the political system and the ecosystem in which one lives. In other words, the transition from the previous state of nature to the modern state of culture ought to be made without damaging the fragile natural-psychological-social-economic continuum.

Figure no. 1. The social ecological system



Source: <http://catalog.ipbes.net/assessments/50> [Accessed 1 May 2016]

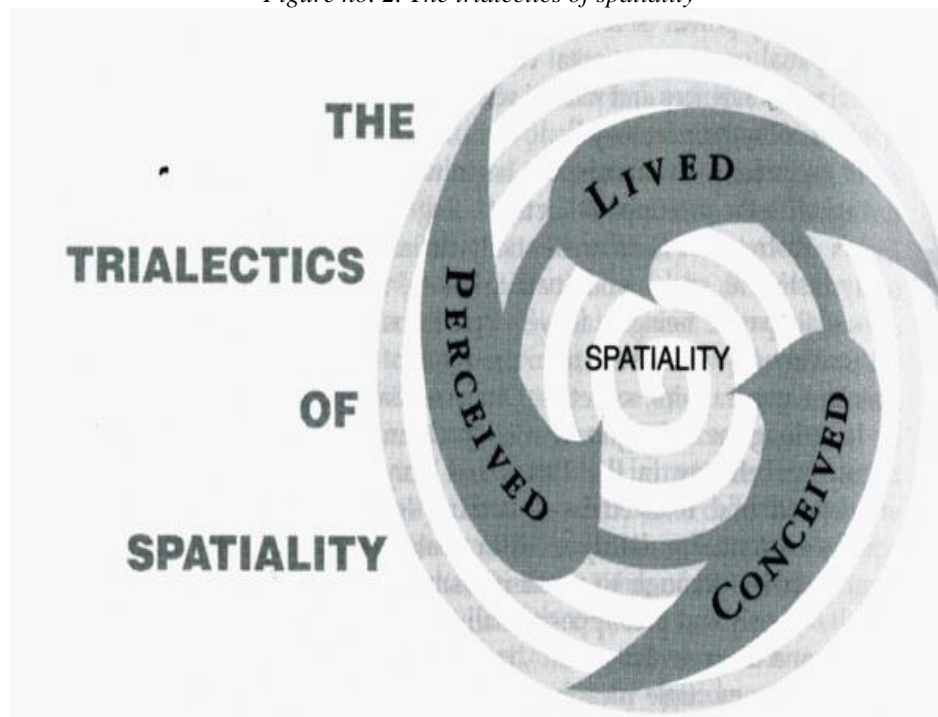
2.3. The Production of Urban-Economic Spaces

This process of transformation represents a transition from a supposed natural state of spatial reality to a fabricated one, in which the dialectics of nature-city is sublimated toward a space of economic production and consumption. "The same dialectical process leads from primary and primordial nature to a "second nature", from natural space to a space which is at once a product and a work, combining art and science within itself. The coming to maturity of this second nature is a slow and laborious process: its motor is automation, which is constantly pushing forward into the vast realm of necessity – the realm that is to say, of the production of things in space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 409). The second nature or the city represents an urban-natural continuity of nature, but, at

the same time, it is articulated with artificiality and automatic means of production. Having inferred that there is a consubstantial continuity between the personal, the social and the natural environment, people's actions aesthetically reveal the mechanical-psychological problems of the urbanite from *The Waste Land*. After consummating the intimate act of love, the feminine character's behavior is similar to the whole economic-social structure, namely meaningless, automatic, fragmented, dissociated from her lover and herself: "Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." / .../ She smooths her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone." (Eliot, 1922, lines 251-252, 255-256). The mentioned device is an iconic image of the unreal aspects of the economic society, in which life and the subjective experiences are simulated within the complex web of urban production.

The production of urban-economic space and the realization of the second nature are philosophically apprehended through a spatial trialectics (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). The first is the perceived-natural spatial practice, which is associated with daily routines or routes between places. The second is the conceived-mental representation of space, which is associated with scientific planning or technocratic work. The third is the lived-social representational space, which is associated with the urban inhabitants or their symbolic codes of communication. This post-dialectical approach is recurring in terms of its non-fixed and non-linear character. Thus, nature represents a space of constructed perception, wherein the border between the social nature and the social city is blurred: ""You gave me hyacinths first a year ago; / "They called me the hyacinth girl." / -- Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden," (Eliot, 1922, lines 35-37). Furthermore, the conceived space of the psyche is fragmented, according to the fragmented economic-social space, and the urbanite's mind tries to reconcile the happier past with the cruel present, and the conceptualized pure nature with the infertile city: "Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain. /.../ Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee / With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade," (Eliot, 1922, lines 3-4, 8-9). The social space is one in which the urbanite dwells and subsists, seeking to find a logical order within the social fragments of the city and an inter-personal means of communication: "My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. / "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak. / "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / "I never know what you are thinking. Think."" (Eliot, 1922, lines 111-114). There is a flux between these cultural incompatible media, which links the urban psyche with the first and second natures.

Figure no. 2. The trialectics of spatiality



Source: <http://olivaeninde.over-blog.com/article-13585692.html> [Accessed 1 May 2016]

3. Conclusions

There are many hypostases in which the social-economic reality of British society, especially concerning the city of London, is displayed within the poem. The “waste-landers” try to accommodate their lives within the fluidity of existential and geographical circumstances in which they live, especially in “London as a crossroads of empire and global capitalism where products, peoples, and styles from around the world are brought into contact ... As information and capital flowed in and out of London, they were constantly being compared, exchanged, translated and converted” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 169). The iconic cosmopolis, geographically and symbolically situated within the flux of commercial and cultural exchange, has many instances in the poem, such as: the crowd, possible commuters flowing over London Bridge (Eliot, 1922, line 62); the reference of King William Street, the financial and banking center of capitalist power; the mention of the economic hierarchy (Eliot, 1922, line 180); the displaying of allowing commercial documents (Eliot, 1922, line 211); the reference of business hotels Metropole and Cannon Street Hotel (Eliot, 1922, lines 213-214); the allusion to a fish market, in Lower Thames Street (Eliot, 1922, line 260); the mention of Moorgate, another financial symbol (Eliot, 1922, line 296); reference to another hotel, near Margate (Eliot, 1922, line 300).

The direct or subtle economic allusions within *The Waste Land* reveal an unreal city, embedded with cultural, historical and political symbols and which does not have merely aesthetic and poetic implications. The “unreality” of this fictional space is connected to the reality of the perceived urban medium. The author’s depersonalized voice mediates between the real and the unreal, past and present, the environment and the city, the virtual unifying logos and the displayed fragments of society. The psychological, social and natural antinomies, which alienated the urbanite from other and from oneself, may be overcome through a re-appropriation of the oikos. This ought to be performed by seeking the ecological-economic logos of the world, meaning that the economic mechanisms must be apprehended through a non-hierarchical and inter-agentive interplay between the ecologies of mind, society and nature. Toward the urban development, from the initially perceived nature, the production of space is to be associated to a post-productive and post-consumerist paradigm, wherein the environment does not become waste. The ecocritical perspective seeks to bridge the segregated economic realm of society and the culturally constructed realm of nature.

4. References

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