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Evolution, Place, and Identity: Facing Global Crisis with a New Identity as Earthly Residents

Writing Process

This assignment is the first assignment for my Eng 200 class and we are asked to write about "place and identity." As a psychology major, I love thinking interdisciplinarily. Therefore, I decided to talk about evolution, place, and identity.

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Evolution, Place, and Identity: Facing Global Crisis with a New Identity as Earthly Residents

Yu Zhao

In 2015, the highest religious leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, released his encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. In this letter, Pope Francis appealed to the entire human society to rethink humans' relationship with our living place, Earth, and pointed out how environmental challenges affect everyone, especially the poor (12). However, calling every nation to work together toward the common goal of protecting the environment is not easy, especially when countries with power have to meet this goal at the cost of some of their original privileges. Rose insists that when a group of people realize their sense of place could be jeopardized, it could incite their aggressive emotions (qtd. in Easthope 131). Place and identity have been studied and discussed in terms of their relationships and working definition in global social contexts (Easthope). However, limited studies have been conducted from scientific perspectives (Lengen and Kistemann 1168). Therefore, this article looks at place and identity from a scientific evolutionary view and provides possible insights to form a new identity. Forming a new global identity as Earthly residents would embrace diversity and integration for improving global challenges.

The place and the life matter within this space have continuously interacted and evolved, even before human existence. The earliest fossils that biologists could clearly find to show evidence of life on Earth are approximately 3.5 billion years old (Reece et al. 520). The physical environment of the early Earth was a combination of extreme conditions such as volcanic eruptions, lightning, and collisions with rocks and ice chunks in the solar system. Based on findings from laboratory experiments, scientists hypothesized that first life was formed in this

extreme environment. Because of the interaction of space and matter, our place, the Earth, gave birth to the first life form. Human geographer Tim Cresswell defines place as a scale-unspecific term, which could range from a piece of furniture to the entire Earth. Besides its physical location, a sense of place should also contain meaning (134). Nevertheless, the word “meaning” itself is relevant to humans’ subjective feelings, and this meaning evolved among animals from group interactions throughout the history of evolution. Group interactions and place are interconnected.

Charles Darwin believed animals were greatly benefited by forming groups, which protected them from dangerous environments and enhanced the possibility of survival and reproduction (qtd. in Van Vugt and Schaller 1). As a consequence, group living might have helped humans to evolve psychologically and mentally. Evolutionary psychologists Van Vugt and Schaller discuss how human brain evolution played an important role in forming contemporary group dynamics (2). According to Lengen and Kistemann, the complex environment on Earth created a variety of different places, and the interaction of early human ancestors with these places led to the cognitive development of human existence. They state, “this cognition includes memories, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, behavioral concepts and experiences ... [it] defined the existence of personhood” (1162). They further point out how emotional bonds with places have constantly been constructing humanity’s understanding of social, cultural, and historical context in space. Emotion, regulated by the amygdala in the brain, significantly impacts the encoding (memorizing process) and decoding (memory retrieval or recognizing process) of place information. Neuropsychologists Herwig et al. found when visual stimulations of the place itself are presented, emotions associated with the place are represented by the activation of the amygdala (qtd. in Lengen and Kistemann 1168). The natural selection processes allowed the individuals who were more social to have a higher chance of surviving. Therefore, the place once again determined the selected group, and humans, the “chosen” ones, influenced the place throughout the history of civilization while continuing to evolve.

Evolution is not a history, but an ongoing, ever-changing process (Delio). As humans are constantly evolving in the society, the understanding of the world has deepened. Place is now being perceived as a social construct that includes social, economic, political, and physical environments (Easthope 128). Stewart, an evolutionary theorist, looked at the big picture of evolutionary history and predicted that the evolutionary trend is moving from the directions of increasing

diversification to increasing integration for “all living processes on Earth, including humans and human organizations” (27). On the large spectrum, life started from the simplest single cell form and was limited to using an extremely small amount of energy. As evolution unfolded, life forms have greatly diversified and adjusted to a huge range of environments. The integration trend began with “the integration of self-reproducing molecular processes into cooperative organizations” (28). The trend carried on into human evolution and is mainly expressed through the processes of cultural revolution as opposed to genetic adaptations. For instance, small family groups form communities, which were then integrated into cities, and cities in turn have been integrated into countries and nations. Both evolutionary trends revealed how evolution, the byproduct, shows the interaction of places and life forms (identity). Stewart further elaborated the possible benefits of integrating humanity for overcoming cooperation problems on a “planetary scale” (35). This means that unless nations, states, and countries act together, humanity will not be able to sustain itself through global challenges such as climate change or war, as these challenges are beyond any individual group and demand global coordination (35). Therefore, the trend of evolution requires humans, as a species, to adjust, evolve, and cooperate with each other so that humanity may continue to succeed in evolutionary terms and avoid being eliminated by nature.

Why bother learning evolution? With an understanding of the theory of evolution, we know that the sense of place, which was sometimes merely defined as racial and national ideologies, is not enough to improve the global crisis we are facing. On the contrary, the ideology of race and nation has caused hatred and damage throughout history. Additionally, the space where we consider home, or “our place,” is a human-created, imagined community which reflects our emotional and biological needs from evolution. According to Stewart, cooperation problems emerge as a byproduct of evolution. When two groups compete for limited resources, the groups with more power, or the “ability to influence without being influenced in return,” would gain the most benefits in the end (30). These false images have gradually made humans increasingly anthropocentric and unconcerned for other creatures (Pope Francis 50). The environment has been greatly polluted due to human activities, and the poor and most vulnerable groups are affected the most. These facts reflect that cooperation problems and our false images of ourselves led the ecosystem to a breaking point due to rapid

degradations. Pope Francis called upon all nations and individuals to reach to a universal communion, which includes all life forms on Earth.

Accordingly, humans could possibly survive global crisis by forming a new global identity as Earthly residents. With a life-centered identity, people respect everyone from all nations and take all life in the place into account. As opposite to anthropocentric identities, humans are not considered the ruler and controller of nature. This new identity would help people to reform their attitude towards social, economic, and political issues as they would respect the dignity of every life.

However, this new identity could not be formed without changing many aspects of the current society and system. As Pope Francis mentioned in his encyclical letter, “there is no one path to a solution.” We must integrate all disciplines and develop comprehensive solutions. Earthly resident identity demands all humans to cooperate and take all life processes into account (44). Indeed, Earth was here before humans. Without humanity, Earth will still exist, but humans will become the future fossils waiting to be revealed.

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