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EDITORIAL

What is environmental sociology?

Environmental sociologists have a long-held ambition to transform sociology – to outgrow our sub-disciplinary niche and redefine the mainstream. Many of us firmly believe that environmental sociology requires us to rethink the foundational principles of sociology and indeed the very concept of 'social sciences'. We believe such a rethinking is critical to the ongoing relevance of the social sciences in an era of global environmental change. But have we ever settled on what environmental sociology actually is?

A defining paradox

It is generally accepted that environmental sociology is concerned with the reciprocal relationships between environment and society. It is also generally accepted that this is, in important ways, different to a 'sociology of the environment' based on the application of mainstream sociological concepts to environmental conflict, politics, movements and knowledge claims. Environmental sociology, so the argument goes, problematizes neat conceptual distinctions between society and environment and thus requires a fundamental reformulation of social theory and method.

This leaves us, however, with something of a logical paradox – defining environmental sociology as the study of environment–society relations while simultaneously rejecting the idea that environment and society can meaningfully be understood as distinct analytical categories. Whilever we do the former, it is necessarily more difficult to do the latter.

There is, as I have argued before, nothing wrong with using well-established sociological concepts to unpack environmental disputes (Lockie 2015). Recent work on the shaping of beliefs about climate change through political networks and media discourses, for example, is both interesting in its own right and of tremendous practical relevance to policymakers and activists (e.g. Dunlap 2013; Jasny, Waggle, and Fisher 2015). This work demonstrates that climate change and other environmental issues are, in important ways, the symbolic products of institutions and discourses. It demonstrates, in other words, that environmental issues are socially constructed in ways that need to be understood if effective and just strategies for dealing with them are to be found. At the same time, it goes without saying (I would hope!) that environmental issues are also the material products of ecosystem processes, production and consumption patterns, human metabolic functions, etc. It should also go without saying that environmental issues are materially apprehended through a combination of systematic observations enabled by science and technology, the lay knowledge and embodied experiences of people exposed to them, and other means.

One would be hard pressed these days to find a sociologist willing to expound the contrary proposition that environmental issues exist somehow only within discourse (i.e. to defend the so-called 'strong programme' in social constructivism). Of course, environmental change has material dimensions. Of course, the pollution that makes some people wealthy makes other people sick, threatens their livelihoods, and increases their risk of injury and displacement. The problem is, according to Dunlap and Catton (1994), that when sociologists restrict the focus of their research to those dimensions of environmental issues most readily understood with mainstream sociological theory and method, the material dimensions of those issues are often treated as beyond the scope of analysis. The more nonsensical propositions of the strong programme may be rejected but a weak kind of social constructivism prevails.

Dunlap and Catton (1994) go on to argue that conceptualizing environmental sociology as the study of environment–society relations enables a shift of analytical focus from the symbolic construction of environmental problems to material explanations of their causes, consequences and potential solutions. This may be true, but it is not a shift in focus that, by itself, requires any fundamental rethinking of social theory and method or any substantive progression from sociology of the environment to environmental sociology.[1] We keep our feet on safe sociological ground simply by, for example, locating the causes of environmental problems in relations of production; explaining the distribution of consequences in terms of racial, gender, class and geopolitical inequalities; and exploring the ways in which political institutions and social movements shape environmental policy. There is no shortage of familiar/conventional/mainstream 'social facts' we can use to explain 'environmental facts' identified and explained, for the most part, by our colleagues in the 'natural sciences'.

There is, again, nothing wrong with applying well-established sociological theory and method to apprehend the causes and consequences of environmental problems. And there is nothing wrong with treating the knowledge claims of our peers in other sciences with respect. The importance of doing so seems obvious enough when we

consider problems as serious in magnitude and consequence as anthropogenic climate change. However, it should be equally clear from a host of other environmental issues that treating the knowledge claims of our peers in the natural sciences with respect does not mean we should always take them at face value. Many a scientific claim has proven wrong, partial and/or value-laden.[2]

So how are we to know when, as environmental sociologists, we should be deferring to our colleagues in the natural sciences and when we should be challenging them? When do we just accept that an environmental problem is real and when do we interrogate the asymmetrical power relations, interests and values embedded in knowledge of that problem? Is it a question of scale and probability? Or a question of consensus among natural scientists? Each of these answers is unsatisfactory. Unless sociologists are able to bring theoretical and methodological rigour directly to bear on the production of environmental facts, we risk making arbitrary and ultimately indefensible decisions about those facts we will consider reliable and those we will treat with suspicion.

Some may argue that sociology lacks the conceptual and methodological tools to participate directly in the production of environmental facts. They are wrong. Many of the most dynamic debates within contemporary sociological theory are those in which biology, technology, geography and ecology are treated as core constituents of the social realm (Lockie 2015). And while there is much more to be done, it is important to acknowledge the often groundbreaking ways in which environmental sociologists are operationalizing such ideas to produce knowledge in which no easy distinctions can be drawn between what is natural and what is social, what is material and what is symbolic.[3]

This raises an interesting question. Should we be defining environmental sociology simply as what environmental sociologists do?

The experiential alternative

Answering the question of what environmental sociology *is* by describing what environmental sociologists *do* is relatively straightforward. We do investigate the social causes of environmental problems, unpack the political and economic interests at play in environmental conflicts, highlight inequitable exposures to pollution and natural resource decline, evaluate the impacts of environmental policy, and so on. Nothing terribly controversial here. But does this offer us a more satisfactory definition or guide to the field?

It could be argued that defining environmental sociology as what environmental sociologists do is to take, in fact, a very sociological approach – the discipline thus conceived as a product of the academic networks and institutions that associate most strongly with it. Certainly, it would be difficult to sustain the opposing argument that an academic discipline is not the product of academic networks and institutions. Nonetheless, the problem with defining disciplines more or less exclusively in terms of what their practitioners do is captured in the innocuous little phrase, 'and so on'. Hidden within 'and so on' lie the work and insights of innumerable people who either do, or could, make important contributions to the field. When we describe what environmental sociologists do, we are forced to simplify and aggregate. We edit, filter and prioritize. We draw attention to research problems and theoretical perspectives already prominent within the field (or with which we have a particular affiliation) and we encourage other scholars to defer to these when conceptualizing and positioning their own work.

Defining any discipline according to what its practitioners do is potentially conservative and exclusionary. In a global knowledge economy dominated linguistically by the Anglosphere and geopolitically by the US and Europe, there are self-evident risks in such an approach: first, that potentially useful perspectives from outside the linguistic and geopolitical cores will be marginalized; and second, that problem framings and conceptual frameworks dominant within Europe and the US will be imposed elsewhere, regardless of their adequacy. We risk allowing the debates of Europe and North America to be treated as essential points of reference for those seeking to understand the transformations of Asia, Africa, Oceania and South America while the reverse will seldom be true. And we risk allowing vital new research problems, disciplinary innovations and transformational opportunities to be missed.

Re-defining environmental sociology

Environmental sociology is better defined, I believe, as the application of our sociological imaginations to the connections among people, institutions, technologies and ecosystems that make society possible.

In formulating this definition I am, of course, making numerous assumptions about the practice and conceptual basis of environmental sociology. I am assuming, for example, that:

(1) Sociology, as a discipline, is fundamentally concerned with relationships; that is, with the ways in which our experiences as individuals and members of groups shape, and are shaped by, our connections with other individuals and groups. The literal definition of sociology as 'the science of society' can just as adequately be expressed as the science of patterns, associations, networks, configurations, and so on;
(2) Neither the drivers nor consequences of environmental change can be explained in exclusively human terms. Social sciences based on neat distinctions between the social and the natural, the human and the non-human, society and the environment, necessarily limit their ability to understand and inform key dimensions of

contemporary social change. As the configurations we recognize as society change, so too do the ecosystem processes and technological infrastructures embedded within, and at times threatening, these configurations;

(3) The practice of sociology is a collective enterprise in which knowledge is created through interactions among professional sociologists, their collaborators and research subjects, and others (for environmental sociology, these 'others' are of particular importance). This does not mean all knowledge claims are equally valid. It does mean that sociologists need to be aware of their own prejudices and awake to the dynamic and potentially reflexive nature of the social realm;

(4) The practice of environmental sociology, more specifically, is an enterprise that requires more than passing knowledge of other sciences such as ecology, biology, physics, chemistry or engineering. The particularities of this requirement should not be narrowly codified. They will vary across people and topics. However, the expectation that environmental sociologists will bring a degree of scientific and ecological literacy to their work should be no more shocking than the expectation an economic sociologist might know something about economics.

In contrast with definitions based on the investigation of environment–society relationships, this definition of environmental sociology makes no attempt to treat environment and society as reciprocally related but analytically independent categories. Nor does it treat one as the context for the other. Thinking in such terms reproduces the idea that societies are made up of people and environments are made up of everything else. The definition offered here assumes instead that enduring associations between people (the things we recognize as society) are enabled and constrained by a much broader web of relationships, all of which constitute the subject matter of environmental sociology.

It follows that environmental sociology does not require us to abandon Durkheim's (1938) foundational maxim that social facts must always be explained with other social facts, nor the project this informs of contesting the naturalization of exploitation and inequality among people. Environmental sociology requires, rather, that we adopt an altogether more catholic understanding of what a social fact might be.[4] The inability of water, ecosystems, chemicals, plants, animals, microbes and machines to exhibit agency in the manner of people and institutions does not make them any less important in the production and reproduction of the social realm.[5]

I am sure I am making many more assumptions besides those listed here. I am equally sure some readers will be looking into my definition of environmental sociology for evidence of a leaning towards one theoretical school or another (a quick search of any major publication database should confirm whether their preliminary conclusions are correct!). Nonetheless, I would suggest that applying our sociological imaginations to the connections among people, institutions, technologies and ecosystems that constitute society calls necessarily for theoretical and methodological pluralism. In fact, I suspect that the need for theoretical and methodological pluralism in the practice of sociology more generally is in no small way responsible for the ongoing popularity of the 'sociological imagination' metaphor.

According to C. Wright Mills (1959), the sociological imagination grasps the relationships between personal biography and collective history, private troubles and public issues, individual preferences and societal values, psychology and politics. While Mills argued that analysis of social structures, institutions and privilege characterize the very best social studies, he also argued these cannot be understood independently of the inner life of men and women and the decisions they make. Neither, he argued, can order, structure, institutions and privilege be understood independently of the ways in which power is enacted and contested.

For environmental sociologists, Mills' integration of micro- and macro-level theory and his illustration of this approach through analysis of anomie and other problems of modernity resonate with contemporary experiences of environmental injustice and a host of other ways in which individuals and communities are caught up in environmental issues at a variety of scales. But the idea of the sociological imagination also speaks to the possibility we might do more than simply document such problems. Conceiving sociological practice as the exercise of a particular kind of imagination suggests creativity, the relevance of sociological insight to broader publics, and the possibility of social change (see also Morgan 1998). The sociological imagination suggests that environmental sociology ought to be as focused on questions of *what could be* as it is on questions of *what is* – not as an exercise in wishful thinking, but as an exercise in understanding and informing the ways in which future social and ecological relationships are assembled, contested and reassembled (see Lockie 2014).

Conceiving sociology as a kind of imagination is evocative (inspiring even) in a way that literal definitions of sociology as the science of society clearly are not. Nevertheless, if exercising our collective imaginations is to contribute to more just and sustainable societies, it is also worth recalling some of Mills' other reflections on the practice of sociology. In particular, it is worth recalling Mills' critique of 'grand theory' and 'abstract empiricism'; of formal models so obtuse they are immune to testing and falsification, on the one hand, and studies so focused on what practitioners believe to be 'scientific method' they ignore anything that cannot be measured, on the other. Fetishizing concepts and methods, respectively, both grand theory and abstract empiricism lose sight of the integrative role Mills envisaged for sociology and fail, all too often, to offer convincing analyses of specific empirical problems or

to communicate their insights to those affected by these problems. While the specific examples of 'grand theory' and 'abstract empiricism' Mills discussed seem outdated (does anyone still read Parsons?), there are plenty of latter day corollaries.

I will not comment on specific latter day corollaries here. Neither will I claim this is the final word on how environmental sociology should be conceived, either within the pages of this journal or elsewhere. Pluralism demands openness and I look forward to alternative conceptualizations, just as I look forward to interesting new ways in which environmental sociologists trouble the boundaries between social and environmental facts.

Notes

1. It is important to acknowledge that Dunlap and Catton do propose a conceptual model for sociology, the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP), that addresses what they see as the ecological blind spots in mainstream social theory (Catton and Dunlap 1980). The NEP articulates the consequences for human societies of their embeddedness in ecosystems and establishes the pertinence to sociology and other social sciences of environmental issues.
2. I am thinking here of issues such as toxic waste disposal and movements they have spawned such as environmental justice and popular epidemiology (Brown 1997).
3. Take, for example, Brown's (1997) work on popular epidemiology, Jorgenson (2009) and colleagues' work on ecologically unequal exchange, and York, Rosa, and Dietz (2003) on the STIRPAT model for analysing anthropogenic drivers of environmental change. It is also worth noting the relationships between these approaches and work at what Goldman and Schurman (2000) refer to as the margins of environmental sociology – more specifically, ecological Marxism, political ecology, materialist feminism and social studies of science.
4. Durkheim's (1938) attempt to carve out a distinct sphere for sociology in explaining the social world independently of the biological and physical sciences is frequently blamed for a perceived reluctance among sociologists to consider ecological issues and for a focus, where such issues are concerned, almost entirely on matters of discourse, politics, behaviour and attitudes (Dunlap and Catton 1994; Murdoch 2001). This is an argument I have reproduced on numerous occasions myself. However, as I go on to argue in Lockie (2012), the alternative to accepting that social facts may be explained by facts other than social facts is to accept instead that the social may not be the exclusive province of humans. This brings the role of ecosystem processes, technologies, etc. in the constitution of societies very much into the domain of sociology.
5. Just as all forms of matter and life are of potential relevance to this list, so too are non-cognitive aspects of human experience. As other sociologies have shown (sociology of gender, the body, affect, etc.), the social is in no small way a reflection of metabolic and emotional relationships which interact with, but cannot be contained within, the spheres of language and rationality (see, for example, Fox 2015; Morgan 1998).

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