Title of the symposium:

Social theory and landscape ecology – Interpreting, explaining and modeling landscape management practices and decision making in the Anthropocene

Responsible

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Symposium abstract

Human dominated landscapes are complex socio-ecological systems in which land use management is influenced by composite arrays of anthropogenic and natural factors. Farmers and foresters are the primary agents in most such landscapes. Through their daily practices, they realize the decision making patterns of society as patterns of land use, materializing the combined impact of policy, markets, dreams, visions, needs and other aspects of the social world as biophysical landscape change. Gradually but directly, this is what changes the state of the terrestrial environment. In terms of general concepts and theory, it is currently rather poorly understood how this takes place. Little is known about how decision imperatives reach the primary agents, how they are received and expressed, resisted or replaced in processes that eventually crystalize into decisions and action. Even less is known about how such processes are mediated and organized among agents, and about how decision making is situated within the socio-ecological context of the landscape itself. This is surprising since in our view these questions are central to landscape ecology.

With respect to these issues, the landscape sciences seem to be in a strange dilemma. On the one hand, a wealth of case studies and regional surveys exist which contain rich descriptions of sociocultural aspects of landscape management. On the other hand, this knowledge is rarely synthesized into concepts that are useful outside specific local or regional scale settings. In comparison, the social sciences have a long-standing tradition for formulating what is called "middle range theory" (Chen, 2017; Merton, 1949), whereby arrays of cases are compared to systematically build increasingly precise theoretical vocabularies that are useful across well-defined sets of contexts (Mills, 2000 [1959]; Sica, 2006; Welch et al., 2011). While this approach falls short of producing general theory, which in our view is unlikely to be feasible when dealing with human decision making processes (which are inherently inventive), it could well produce conceptual models that are useful as tools to understand key processes within broad arrays of landscapes. We believe the landscape sciences in general could profit from such efforts. Conversely, we believe that landscape researchers are in a position to provide exactly the kind of perspective on biophysical aspects of social processes that are lacking in fields such as sociology and social anthropology. Here current approaches have proven to be unsuccessful in providing relevant perspectives on the biophysical structuration of society (i.e. its landscapes and environments). As such, it may be time to consolidate years of socio-ecological research within the landscape sciences into more mature theories of the social processes which constitute landscape management. We believe this can best be achieved through a closer integration between landscape ecology and perspectives from social theory.

On the basis of this perspective for landscape ecology we aim to discuss:

(1) How cross-contextual insights into landscape management processes can be consolidated into middle range theory in the form of concepts and conceptual models describing key aspects of landscape management.
(2) How the landscape sciences may profit from a closer integration with research within the field of social theory, where nuanced models of situated decision making have been developed which may be applicable within the landscape sciences.

We invite papers which discuss how to synthesize empirical material into concepts and theory within the landscape sciences or papers which test existing theory across cases. The aim of the symposium is to share and discuss perspectives on how to draw out the generally interesting from specific samples of data. We expect to conclude the symposium by mediating a discussion amongst the participants about how to further approach the formulation of middle range theory within the landscape sciences based on the examples presented.

Why your symposium will improve landscape ecology science?

In the era of the Anthropocene, one of the main scientific challenges will be to overcome the disciplinary boundaries that were set up between natural and social science in a time when social and natural phenomena could be more easily disentangled from each other than today. In a situation where few research objects can be said to exist completely outside the action space of human societies, distinctions between natural and social make little sense and have in some cases become potential hindrances for correct and relevant analysis efforts.

In many ways these are established conclusions, but the problem persists. Most of the concepts currently used to describe social processes which occur within landscapes still reflect a legacy of division between social and natural phenomena. Concepts such as agents, drivers and (eco)systems - which were inherited mainly through the natural sciences - differ for example from concepts such as culture, ideology, polity and place, which do not presuppose a biophysical landscape system (Antrop and Van Eetvelde, 2017). As William Outhwaite has expressed it, social theory is typically formulated based on the assumption that society is "made and imagined, and not the expression of an underlying natural order" (2000). In many ways, the difference between these two perspectives is reflected in the concepts used to describe social phenomena within the landscape sciences (Christensen et al., 2017). In a way, our concepts seem to have become seriously outdated, given that they still relate to an opposition between two traditions of thought, balancing between an aspiration to: (1) Describe and explain landscapes from an objective, desituated perspective; and to (2) Interpret and understand landscapes based on a subjective, situated perspective.

We may need to become more precise in our way of approaching what it means to be human in Anthropocene landscapes, and what the distinction between agency and landscape is, including how that can be observed and measured.

It is our hope that by basing the formulation of new descriptive concepts on comparative interpretations of fresh empirical cases, we may be able to gradually transgress the use of established concepts and approach a clearer more contemporary theoretical vocabulary. That will hopefully be one contribution of this symposium: To go one step further towards defining a common conceptual ground for investigating socio-ecological processes of landscape management.

Free Keywords

Socio-ecological system, theory building in the landscape sciences, social theory, empirical research and theory, planning, decision making, middle range theory, case study research.

Notes

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