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Environment and everyday life

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Intellectual and social context

The relationship between the environment and everyday life has not received the attention it deserves within either environmental scholarship or activism. In recent years, nevertheless, a critique of everyday life, a theorization of its conditions of possibility, and a growing recognition of the empirical complexity to researching everyday life has begun to emerge. In part, these three concerns reflect the influence of the environmental justice movement on dominant environmentalisms as well on geographical perspectives on the environment. In part, they also encompass a view that mainstream environmental movements have made catastrophic mistakes: in contrast rich possibilities might be found within a critique of everyday life.

Major dimensions

Environmental justice

As indicated above, the recognition that everyday life is crucial to the practice of an environmental politics comes through most clearly within the environmental justice (EJ) movement. For Whitehead (2009, 664) the EJ movement “reflects the apotheosis of second-wave

environmentalism, combining as it does a concern with questions of nonhuman environmental justice alongside a strict focus on the everyday spaces of city life.” Here the environment has been understood as that which is lived and practiced, that which is breathed, cycled over, and played upon. Rather than focusing their energies on the preservation of green spaces for the benefit of a narrow elite, activists have demonstrated the ways in which environmental injustices are produced and reproduced at an intimate, everyday, and bodily level through the perpetuation of structural inequalities. Thus, for Pulido (2000) the ongoing reproduction of hegemonic white privilege within the United States ensures the continued exposure of raced communities to toxic waste. Pulido explores the everyday aspects of such environmental racism through a focus on the geographies of Los Angeles.

The roots to the environmental justice movement are often traced back to antiracist and working class struggles within North America. Perhaps the two sets of events most readily cited in relation to the genesis of the movement are the struggle against toxic waste in Warren County (Bullard 1990) and the struggle for relocation among homeowners sited on the toxic dump known as Love Canal in New York state. When told solely from these two North American narratives, accounts tend to overlook the importance of environmental justice as a force within locations across the Global South. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, the environmental justice movement has been one of the most important sources for alternative political imaginaries over the last twenty or so years. For McDonald (1998, 2004) EJ activists

were able to effectively position the delivery of basic services as *the* central post-apartheid environmental question. In one of the most profound reinterpretations of environmentalism, many South Africans began to view the environment less as the National Parks from which so many were excluded or displaced under apartheid but rather as the sewage being handled by the municipal worker, the garbage being reclaimed by men, women, and children from the municipal dump, and the contaminated air being breathed by the asthma sufferer in a landscape liberated from, but now reinscribed by, the injustices of apartheid. Myers has noted that an overemphasis on the successes of the South African EJ movement can lead to a neglect of the unevenness of a movement which is still notable for its absence in many sub-Saharan African countries, nevertheless EJ has had an active presence within many Latin American and Asian struggles over the last three decades.

Against the abstractions of the global

Environmental justice activists are not the only ones to challenge the more abstract, global concerns of mainstream environmentalism. Illich (1973), Schumacher (1973), and Mander and Goldsmith (1996) have all in very different ways made a case for the importance of the *local*, very often positioning this against a universalizing and abstract environmental politics. *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher's paean to "enoughness" in the face of claims that "bigger is better" has been seen as the basis for an understanding of "intermediate" or appropriate technologies. The development interventions of NGOs such as *Practical Action* have sought to build on such a philosophy and construct a model of sustainable development informed by existing practices of everyday life in historically and geographically specific

contexts. Local Agenda 21, one of the key policy innovations to emerge from *Our Common Future* and the subsequent Rio Earth Summit provided a more formal recognition that achieving global environmental sustainability would require shifts at a local scale, and that many of the key actors in environmental sustainability had not been adequately recognized. Through Local Agenda 21 the abstractions of the global became something experienced at a far more humble level. Environmental interventions needed to ensure improvements in the spaces that people cycled or walked. The resurrection of a canal towpath thus came to represent the movement for sustainable development at a far more mundane, everyday level. Nevertheless, even if such interventions are experienced most directly at the level of the everyday and are informed by a more nuanced scalar politics than prior manifestations of environmentalism, the everyday is rarely discussed explicitly within such work. Instead, local institutions, civil society, communities, and small-scale entrepreneurs become the key actors within what can sometimes become an atavistic and romanticized counter to the modern abstractions of the global.

Between the marvelous and the mundane

Elsewhere, geographers have borrowed from both actor network theory and science studies to better understand the more mundane – but no less important – politics of urban wildlife. Seeking to attend more closely to the intermingling of human and nonhuman within urban environments, Hinchliffe *et al.* (2005) have emphasized what Stengers refers to as cosmopolitical experiments. Practices that are "unnoticed by urban politics and disregarded by science" become central to an analysis that

is more sensitive to the myriad ways in which urban ecological assemblages come to be produced within everyday encounters. Others, such as Michael (2006) have stressed the relationship between technoscience and everyday life and sought to think through an environmental politics that is more explicitly concerned with such interrelationships.

Less theorized accounts of environmentalism and the everyday are abundant – one needs to make only the briefest of searches on YouTube – but these are often premised on a simplistic reading of the idea that change needs to come from the individual, an unproblematic reading of the subject and a complete divorce from the broader contextual factors that provide opportunities and obstacles to an environmental politics in differing historical and geographical contexts. In the effort to shift attention from spectacular manifestations of environmentalism, the result is often a bland appeal to the micro and an individualistic claim that the acts of many single actors will add up to the change necessary for an environmental revolution.

These more naive claims to the everyday, or to a politics of the grassroots, have, not surprisingly, attracted criticism from a range of different quarters. While deeply sympathetic to many aspects of environmental justice activism, and seeking to learn from the organizational success of movements to organize across raced, classed, and gendered constructions, David Harvey (1996) has questioned the ability of the environmental justice movement to move beyond a militant particularism in order to achieve the “global ambitions” that it often seems to set itself. Elsewhere, Harvey (2008, 29) writes that “Paul Hawken ... in ‘Blessed Unrest’ makes it seem as if social change in our times can only emanate from the practical engagements of millions of people seeking to transform their daily lives in creative ways (a position that is sometimes taken in the works of

Gibson-Graham and Escobar).” Instead, Harvey calls for a dialectical approach that is attendant to how social change works across and through several different moments simultaneously: everyday life is one of these moments alongside relations to technology, relations to nature, social relations, and relations of production and ideas.

Whitehead (2009) considers these questions in more explicit reference to the manifestations of environmentalism in the contemporary moment. Although heavily influenced by the environmental justice movement, Whitehead notes his disappointment at the *inability* of the environmental justice movement to live up to its own claims to be shifting the practice of environmentalism to a more intimate sphere. Instead, as he notes, the focus has often been on the spectacular manifestations of environmental injustice, the most extreme cases of poisoning from toxic waste and the most devastating health consequences of environmental racism. In becoming increasingly preoccupied with such catastrophic events EJ becomes increasingly *divorced* from the very intimacies from which it claims to emerge. Paradoxically, it speaks less to those affected on a day-to-day basis by ongoing environmental injustice and environmental racism. Whitehead’s response is to develop a far more rigorous “critique of everyday life.” In an early take on such everyday environmentalisms, he explores the meaning of such a politics in the post-communist city of Katowice (Whitehead 2005). Claiming that environmentalism often finds itself caught “between the marvelous and the mundane” or rather between spectacular claims around a looming apocalypse – often used as the basis for large scale environmental summits (Death 2008) – and a more banal claim that everyday acts, such as turning off the light switch will make all the difference, Whitehead seeks to develop an alternative basis for an everyday environmentalism. Such a critique requires a

thoroughgoing analysis of the conditions of everyday life and a critique that emerges immanently from the processes, relationships, and paradoxes through which that everyday life is practiced. Thus, Whitehead (2005, 2009) turns to a more thorough reading of Henri Lefebvre, whose three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* provides one of the most far-reaching theorizations of the conditions of possibility immanent to a practice of everyday life. In a more recent paper, he sees such an immanent critique of everyday life emerging in disadvantaged groups' engagements with the Black Country Urban Forest in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom.

The resources to be put to work from Lefebvre's three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* are numerous. Outside of these three volumes, Lefebvre made an effort to distinguish between some of the elements of his critique: "daily life" (*la vie quotidienne*), everydayness (*la quotidienneté*), and the everyday (*le quotidien*). Whereas daily life has always existed as the rhythm that structures humans' existence (permeated with historically and geographically specific cultures, myths, and values and deeply rooted in connections with nature), the everyday marks the movement of daily life into the era of modernity (Lefebvre 1988, 89). Everydayness becomes the bland homogenizing effect of this entry and the disciplining of a variety of patterns into a more mundane repetition. The everyday, however, remains open as a space from which critique might be possible. Thus, for John Roberts (2006, 67) "if everydayness designates the homogeneity and repetitiveness of daily life, the 'everyday' represents the space and agency of its transformation and critique." One might think of the disciplining effects of the alarm clock or the daily commute and yet one might also think of the situated knowledges emerging as an emancipatory critique within a worker's understanding of her labor process. This crucial

category of mediation permits a way out of the trap that Whitehead identifies in which environmentalism is trapped between the marvelous and the mundane. A radical critique becomes possible within the homogenizing of everyday practices.

Everyday environmentalism

Lefebvre is one of several theorists who figure prominently in Loftus's (2012) *Everyday Environmentalism: Creating an Urban Political Ecology*. Loftus begins with a recent perspective on the nature of the environment. Eschewing the kind of dualistic understandings that have been propagated within mainstream environmentalism, Loftus seeks to develop an environmental politics as it emerges from the practices of everyday life. Criticizing mainstream environmentalism for the disempowering way in which apocalyptic visions are so frequently precursors to the ceding of power to technocratic elites, Loftus seeks to grasp the fragmented and incoherent environmental knowledges that emerge from historically and geographically specific practices. Although it is now commonplace within academic writings to reject dualisms, the implications for a critique of everyday life have not been explored. However, if the practical activity of everyday life is seen to be woven out of and weaving together particular socio-natural constellations, conditions of possibility begin to emerge not only for a fundamentally different environmentalism, but also for a broader transformative project.

Loftus's empirical examples are drawn from very different contexts. First, he draws on the everyday practices of provisioning a household with water in post-apartheid informal settlements and formal townships. These acts make and remake what many have referred to as the "waterscape" and within them the conditions of possibility are forged for a critique of both the

practices and the produced environment – or waterscape – itself. Thus, a rapprochement becomes possible between the kinds of scholarly critique developed within urban political ecology and the wellsprings of anger that have been tapped when waters run dry, when environmental injustices are reproduced in the post-apartheid period and when everyday access to the means of existence are frustrated by the mediation of the exchange abstraction. Second, Loftus draws from the practices of artists in London as the socio-natural fabric of the city becomes the material out of which alternative urban futures come to be forged. In both London and South Africa, everyday environmental praxis comes together to provide conditions in which new worldviews are incubated and also the materials and practices out of which new environments might be forged.

The theoretical resources that might be drawn upon within such a praxis-based understanding are many, ranging from geographical thinkers such as Harvey and Smith to feminist writers on situated knowledges. What unites these thinkers is a recognition that the quotidian acts of producing and reproducing the world contain within them conditions of possibility for thinking about that world differently. Ontology and epistemology are thus seen to be related, just as theory and practice come to be identified in a mutually symbiotic manner.

Future directions

If there has been an increasingly explicit discussion of the ways in which everyday life matters for an environmental politics – building on what had been an implicit recognition previously – there is still much work to be done on how this might be put to work in generating new understandings of the possibility for more just and democratic

socio-ecological relationships. First, more empirical work is needed to analyze the relationship between historically and geographically specific acts of making distinctive environments and the forms of environmental knowledge implicit within these acts. Second, the relationship of such research with actually existing environmental movements needs to be considered in far more depth. Distinguishing everyday environmentalisms from more mainstream environmentalisms, Cooper (forthcoming) suggests further research on nonenvironmental environmentalism. Others have pointed to the need for a more explicit recognition of the identities that emerge within such everyday environmentalisms. For those seeking a more explicitly normative agenda, there is the possibility of considering how such environmentalisms might be shared among different communities and the ways in which they might provide a basis for future possibilities. Overall, a new field is being defined and the potentials for a new environmental politics to emerge on the basis of such discussions are great.

SEE ALSO: Environmental (in)justice;
Production of nature

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