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Social theory and empirical findings in European landscape ecology

Symposium organised by

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Summary

This symposium will explore the social theoretical concepts that have become embedded in many of the academic practices defining landscape ecology. The symposium will discuss the implications of the way social theory is used in landscape ecology, with an explicit focus on European cultural landscapes.

Description

Landscape ecology has always held the study of coupled human-environment systems to be one of its main topics of research and policy advice. Social theory has been an important tool in this endeavor. Especially when research has been concerned with cultural landscapes, where landscape ecology has prospered in part by integrating and implementing social theory harvested from disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. The description, explanation and prediction of human practice in landscape contexts have thus become a cornerstone of European landscape ecological research, and social theoretical concepts for explaining human practice and reasoning, have become embedded in many of the academic practices defining landscape ecology: (1) Modelling, where assumptions about social practice

inform predictive models of future landscape change, (2) Case study research, which in many cases explain landscape change by way of social analysis, in order to inform theory and policy advice, and (3) Monitoring, where land cover and land use change is interpreted in relation to social and technological changes assumed to impact landscape systems.

The aim of this symposium is to discuss the implications of the way social theory is used in these contexts, with an explicit focus on European cultural landscapes. Monitoring, case study research and modelling integrate with social theory in very different ways (based on different sets of theoretical assumptions), and we see a need to combine and integrate these approaches more closely in order to grasp the social complexity of cultural landscapes. While monitoring and case study research generally integrate with social theory through conventional modes of inductive and deductive reasoning, modelling stands out as a break with part of social theory, since it assumes a measure of predictability in the functioning of human agency. This conflict within landscape ecology stems partly from the fact that landscape ecology developed as a confluence of formerly separate fields of research, which relied on different concepts for landscape analysis. Concepts such as agents, drivers and systems - which were inherited from the natural sciences - conflict for example with concepts such as culture, ideology and place, which do not presuppose a landscape system and which are not easily assimilated into current modeling and prediction paradigms.

The need to discuss these theoretical tensions relating to the place of social theory in landscape ecology has become increasingly explicit in recent years, as it has become clear that empirical findings challenge current conceptual models for spatial social analysis. Much effort has been put into grasping the complexity of European landscapes by developing models, monitoring systems and indicators for analysing landscape change and related ecological consequences, even at European continental scales. But the processes of change in European landscapes are becoming still more complex, especially in the densely populated northern part of Europe, where processes of intensification, peri-urbanization and recreationalization coexist, creating patterns of change which often relate directly to the perception of landscapes in local or regional contexts by agency within social groups, which share different ideologies.

The session will seek to explore ways of explaining human decision making in cultural landscapes across scales in order to highlight differences in the conception of how human agency functions as part of cultural landscapes today. Many different approaches to the understanding of the place of human agency in cultural landscapes coexist in current research, but although theory in landscape ecology has made tremendous progress in understanding natural processes and interactions in landscape systems, such efforts are still lacking in respect to the understanding of how humans can or cannot be included in the type of modeling and theorization prevalent in landscape ecology. The session will discuss this based on empirical examples from European cultural landscapes in order to investigate the fit between theoretical constructs and empirical data relating to the above mentioned themes.

We invite contributions which, preferably based on empirical examples, illustrate ways of grounding and developing explanations of landscape change in landscapes dominated by human decision making. Contributions should address or challenge one or more of the following guiding questions:

- Do the social theoretical concepts embedded in current landscape ecological research on cultural landscapes allow for a sufficient degree of conceptual precision and understanding of social processes, when compared with empirical findings?
- What are the similarities and differences between explanation of social practice in cultural landscapes, in models, in case studies and in monitoring within landscape

ecology?

- In what way can the type of social theory currently employed in landscape ecological modeling of land change processes be improved to better comprehend human agency?
- To what extent does current monitoring systems and tools need to be adjusted to grasp the consequences of new processes of human decision making in rural areas?



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