

The rise of disingenuous nature and neoliberal stealth unknown–knowns

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In this intervention, I introduce two concepts – *stealth unknown–knowns* and *disingenuous nature* to animate and clarify key research and policy developments at the nexus of environmental governance, neoliberalism and environmental change. I use these concepts to (a) briefly distill important insights from geographers, political ecologists and other critical scholars of the environment who have explored neoliberalism as an interrelated ‘set of coherent ideologies, discourses, and material practices’ (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004: 276) and to (b) illuminate the complex and power-laden nature of knowledge production and management under an increasingly hegemonic neoliberal environmental governance doctrine. I argue that critical engagement with each concept is important for evaluating the construction and implications of environmental knowledge claims made by powerful market actors that ultimately shape how we come to understand and manage environmental change in diverse settings.

Neoliberal sensibilities as stealth unknown–knowns

Stealth unknown–knowns pertain to the tacit ideas and beliefs that inform our interpretation of the world, and that may influence efforts to privilege or disavow certain information within environmental management contexts. These ideas and logic frames linger outside of our conscious awareness yet are always active, exertive and at play. They structure our understanding of the world without us readily acknowledging their influence. Unknown–knowns are the suppositions and beliefs, as Žižek notes, ‘we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values’ (2004, 1). He continues, ‘they are the things we don’t know that we know—which is precisely, the Freudian unconscious, the “knowledge which doesn’t know itself,” as Lacan used to say’.

For political ecologists, *neoliberal* stealth unknown–knowns and their furtive influence are best characterized as underlying capitalist and market-based values and belief systems that privilege nature’s enclosure, efficient use, private sector management, market commensurable valuation, techno-centric treatment and profit maximizing potential. Over the past several decades these values have soaked into the core fabric of mainstream environmental governance. The now engrained nature of neoliberal sensibilities has steadily increased, marking a transition from overt market triumphalism (Peet and Watts, 1993) to more mundane and standardized applications where capitalist logic and governance operates implicitly as assumed best practice (Goldman, 2006) – including programs targeting sustainable forestry, energy conservation and climate change mitigation (see below). And although they are underlying and typically non-controversial viewpoints, they are

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also profoundly influential as they circumscribe what knowledge and practices are possible. *Stealth* neoliberal logic within development practice is therefore important to reveal because its enactment by market actors arises oftentimes at the exclusion of other affected development subjects. Neoliberal sensibilities are thus stealthy not because they are performed in intentionally covert ways, but rather because they are achieved, oftentimes without hindrance, through hegemonic and taken-for-granted practices.

The production of disingenuous natures

This brand of surreptitious rationality is not without consequence for environmental governance. As the brief example from India below suggests, the application of neoliberal ideologies and beliefs oftentimes undergirds the production of faulty information in order to justify capitalist interventions. In an effort to make nature legible to the market, this process leads ultimately to the creation of ‘disingenuous natures’ that are understood and managed seemingly without controversy. Disingenuous natures are the management interventions and coinciding social-ecological conditions that emerge from faulty science, partial data and erroneous environmental narratives. They are *disingenuous* because – despite being constructed by surreptitious knowledge – they are understood and managed as if they were a legitimate, authentic and thus genuine depiction of social-ecological conditions (Simon, 2010). Acknowledging the disingenuous nature of certain environmental beliefs and imaginaries follows insights by Ferguson (1990) and Goldman (2006) who each note how particular representations of social-ecological ‘realities’ are useful to powerful entities not in their veracity or ability to effectively address pressing issues, but rather for their capacity to advance – through ‘green science’ at the World Bank for example (ibid) – the development agendas of State-led and market based development actors.

Unsurprisingly, when observed through a neoliberal looking glass, our view of environmental problems leads us to see market compatible answers. This means defining problems and solutions that are commensurate – indeed optimally aligned – with the commodification, marketization and financialization of nature. Here, market entities construct a series of socio-environmental ‘ends’ that necessitate a set of neoliberal policy and management ‘means’. For example, Thompson et al. (2011) note that programs such as REDD+ provide ‘a particular framing of the problem of climate change and its solutions that validates and legitimizes specific tools, actors and solutions while marginalizing others’. Ultimately this process of neoliberal shoehorning may lead, as Forsyth (2003) suggests, to ‘land-use policies that have either simplified the underlying biophysical causes of apparent problems, or even imposed restrictions on the livelihoods of local people’ (p. 50).

My own research in Andhra Pradesh, India provides a nice illustration of this process. Here, carbon market investors are using tens of thousands of improved cookstoves to mitigate (supposedly) household-driven deforestation from fuelwood collection activities. This long-standing narrative and disingenuous nature articulating ‘backwards’ forest communities as a threat to forest health was first espoused by colonial foresters as a scapegoating tactic to obfuscate their own extensive timber extraction activities. It was later utilized as a paternalistic management strategy by state forest agencies in order to create a series of local ecological exigencies that only well-resourced and authoritative bodies, such as the Indian Forest Service, would be able to manage (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). For more than a century now this fictional forest disappearing at the hands of irresponsible households has proven to be an administratively convenient problem frame.

Today, market investors are repurposing this forest fiction, arguing that if ‘irresponsible’ households are driving deforestation due to woodfuel collection, then providing stoves that use less wood should curb rates of forest loss and, as a consequence, increase forest carbon sequestration potential (Simon et al., 2012). In rural India, this has become a convenient problem narrative precisely because it serves the offset requirements of the first-world driven carbon market, thus representing a neoliberal strategy described by Bumpus and Liverman (2008) as ‘accumulation by decarbonization’.

In this contemporary context, the problem of household driven deforestation is a disingenuous nature devised administratively by the Fair Climate Network with technical assistance from the Indian Institute of Science; substantiated empirically using Gold Standard carbon monitoring methodologies under the Clean Development Mechanism; financed by international corporations and faith based organizations aiming to fulfill corporate social responsibility obligations; and legitimated discursively by the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves (a subset of the United Nations Foundation) tasked with educating the public and investors alike about the social and ecological virtues of clean cookstoves. As this vast network of actors suggests, this is a decidedly *first-world problem* at variance with more localized environmental accounts. Local forest users are not causing widespread forest loss. A long history of commercial forestry, urban and agricultural expansion, and many decades of logging under the British Raj suggest a decidedly different forest story. But for global carbon markets, and in order to manufacture a carbon market compatible problem, local forest loss *must necessarily* be driven by stove user forest demands. This brief case illustrates how explanations of contemporary environmental degradation in India, and the multi-scale carbon market constructed to manage it, are informed by a taken-for-granted and hegemonic (read: stealth unknown-known) neoliberal sensibility resulting in *de facto* ‘best management practices’ (read: disingenuous nature) that foreclose other ways of understanding or responding to such landscape changes.

Insights from critical scholars of the environment

This type of disingenuousness is certainly not new. Examples abound throughout history where ‘reifications...create actual “permanences” in the social and material world around us’ (Harvey, 1996: 81). The notion of ‘permanences’, refers to regulatory, planning and material instantiations that are durable and that reinforce and deepen our acceptance of the ‘reifications’ over time; a process normalizing erroneous knowledge and reproducing public acceptance of, in this context, market-centric explanations of environmental change.

The concept of disingenuous nature reflects findings from other scholars who have underscored the way powerful interests committed to neoliberal tenets may generate incomplete and distorted, yet seemingly credible and enduring depictions of social-ecological systems. For example, scholars have demonstrated how recent efforts to chart ‘sustainable’ and ‘green’ transitions are imbued with capitalist overtones, including initiatives like the millennium development goals (MDGs) (Sheppard and Leitner, 2010) and post-MDG programs (Kumi et al., 2014). Researchers have also assessed specific market-based strategies like payments for ecosystem services (McAfee and Shapiro, 2010), reducing emissions for deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) (Osborne, 2015) and carbon offset markets (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008), to name but a few. Here, investigators have demonstrated how engrained and institutionalized neoliberal sensibilities lead us to manage disingenuous environments in a manner that reflects market compatibility, resource efficiencies and profit maximization priorities over other more democratic, intrinsic and eco-centric concerns.

Unsurprisingly, this privileging of certain environmental problems/histories and solutions/futures leads to ‘widely known definitions and explanations of environmental degradation are, in actuality, uncertain, highly contested, and misleading’ (Forsyth, 2003: 25). These misalignments, labeled elsewhere as ‘maladaptation’ or ‘malmitigation’ (Marino and Ribot, 2012), connote situations or ‘fictions’ (Peet and Watts, 2002: 26) (i.e., disingenuous natures) where landscapes are managed and maintained in ways that are compatible with market solutions but not necessarily the needs of effected communities.

The concept of disingenuous nature therefore acknowledges a dissonance between intrinsic/use and exchange/market values of nature. Smith (1984), identifying these two modalities as first and second nature respectively, notes that ‘the same piece of matter exists simultaneously in both natures; as physical commodity subject to the laws of gravity and physics it exists in the first nature, but as exchange-value subject to the laws of the market, it travels in the second nature’ (p. 79). Political ecologists and others have shown how *de facto* ‘second nature’ capitalist values lead institutions to manage social-ecological conditions as ‘fictitious commodities’ (Polanyi, 1944) that do not reflect other intrinsic meanings – including those held nearby human and non-human actors.

To some, these incongruences suggest that neoliberal environmental policies are fundamentally ill equipped to bring about just and equitable social-ecological changes (Klein, 2015). This is because market-based pathways offer a set of solutions that emanate from an ideational space and policy context that is internal to the problem; an imaginary of ‘capitalism as the solution to, rather than progenitor of, uneven development’ (Sheppard and Leitner, 2010: 185).

Reclaiming environmental governance, excavating disingenuous natures

Critical engagement with neoliberal stealth unknown-knowns and disingenuous natures is as important as ever. As Castree (2013) suggests, throughout history nature has been ‘made sense of’ both ‘by us and to us’ (p. 6). And in this contemporary ‘post truth’ policy environment – riddled with entrenched filter bubbles, and knowledge silos, and a dizzying barrage of alternative and redacted environmental information – *evaluating the construction and implications of environmental knowledge claims made ‘to us’ is particularly urgent* (Lubchenco, 2017). This is especially the case with ingrained neoliberal ideologies, which have a surreptitious influence on environmental governance that reinforces its legitimacy while obviating other ways of knowing and managing nature.

Indeed, as Lave (2015) and others have highlighted, the past several years has witnessed ‘a deep shift in the character and organization’ (p. 245) of control over the production of environmental expertise towards those in powerful positions. Given these developments, critical environmental researchers must assist diverse citizens, scientists and institutions to recover and redistribute environmental science, management and policy authority in more progressive, just and diverse directions. This goal will be achieved, in part, by slowing the spread of disingenuous natures – that is, by excavating knowledge distortions and biased information while also grappling with the local exigencies they produce.

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