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Collective troubles: Transforming neoliberalism through interactions with nonhumans



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ABSTRACT

During ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a National Wildlife Refuge in the United States I observed numerous instances in which staff members were adjusting to neoliberal policies and the actions of nonhumans as they went about trying to manipulate the Refuge environment. In addition to illustrating the impacts of neoliberal policies for (non)human beings at the Refuge, in this discussion I develop the concept of *collective troubles* to highlight how interactions with inorganic materials, plants, and animals complicated and transformed the everyday practices of staff—including how they experienced and implemented a neoliberal shutdown and budget cut. Drawing from scholars that have focused on how nonhumans affect political-economic processes more generally, I make an important contribution to the neoliberalisation of nature literature by illustrating how nonhumans have the capacity to continually affect the manner in which such policies are experienced and implemented in addition to and in accordance with the historical, political, cultural, and institutional specificities of place. Beyond illustrating the empirical and analytic implications of these findings, I contribute to the important process of overcoming the humanist focus in political-ecology and related disciplines.

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1. Introduction

Located in Northern Missouri in the central United States, Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is a 15.5 square mile parcel of land comprised of lakes, wetlands, prairies, bottomland forests, and crops. Established by Executive Order 7563 in 1937 with the primary objective of providing habitat for migrating waterfowl, it is currently one of more than 560 refuges administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). Notably, it served as the primary destination for migrating Canadian geese in the interior of the United States from the 1950s until the mid to late 1980s (Raedeke et al., 2006). While Canadian geese no longer use Swan Lake NWR in any significant number, staff members still intensively manipulate the Refuge environment in order to provide an important resting place for mid-continent lesser snow geese and a variety of ducks during their fall and spring migrations.

In mid-September 2013 I met with the Refuge Manager at Swan Lake NWR, and we agreed that I could begin fieldwork there starting October 1st. At the time, the national media in the U.S. had noted that a government shutdown would begin the 1st of October if Congress failed to pass a budget. Consequently, the Refuge Manager warned me they could be closed as a result due to the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service being part of the U.S. federal government. His warning turned out to be prophetic, and the gates remained shut at the Refuge until the government was reopened on October 18, 2013. The primary reason Congressional officials were unable to approve a budget was because of a dispute over the Affordable Care Act, which was propagated by Republicans' pursuit of a neoliberal agenda that included rolling back as many public programs as possible (O'Keefe et al., 2013; Peters, 2013; Weisman and Parker, 2013). To be clear, this policy stance was informed by neoliberalism precisely because slashing and/or trying to slash state services and oversight while attempting to privatize as much as possible is the hallmark of this free market ideology (Harvey, 2007; Hackworth, 2007; Somers, 2008; Stiglitz, 2012).

While I conducted fieldwork at the Refuge over the next five months the shutdown was just the first of many instances in which I observed policies linked to neoliberalism impacting how staff members were going about trying to manage the environment at Swan Lake NWR. The consequences of the 2013 federal budget sequester were especially notable in this respect. The sequester, which took effect in March of 2013 because of the Budget Control Act of 2011, resulted in across the board budget cuts in the U.S. federal government. At Swan Lake this led to a reported \$41,706, or 38%, reduction in funds available to work on the Refuge environment in 2013 as compared to 2012, which directly hindered the ability of staff members to work on and manipulate the Refuge

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environment. This had variably (dis)advantageous results for different plants and animals, and often facilitated a considerable amount of frustration and anxiety from staff members because they were unable to do all they wanted or needed to do in order to realize their primary institutional objective of providing habitat for migrating waterfowl (Exec., 1937; United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 2011). Considering the neoliberalisation of nature literature that has drawn attention to how neoliberalism has affected conservation practices (e.g. Castree, 2008; Brockington and Duffy, 2010), it is not altogether surprising that these policies had important consequences for humans and nonhumans at the Refuge. Nevertheless, these effects are still noteworthy because they illustrate some of the very personal and dramatic consequences of neoliberal policies such as the U.S. government shutdown and sequester for state conservation officials and nonhumans.

Although the impacts of such policies were notable, equally as prominent were the numerous instances in which I observed inorganic materials, plants, and animals actively affecting how staff tried to (re)create the Refuge environment. For example, water continually eroded roadways and levees, willow trees grew in undesirable places, squirrels tore up wood duck nesting boxes, and raccoons broke into and wrecked the inside of a building. Nonhumans even directly impacted how neoliberal policies were experienced and instituted. Ducks, for example, undermined the complete shutdown of the federal government during the October closure. While scholars have illustrated how a range of nonhumans have actively affected how other political-economic projects have been experienced and implemented in other contexts (Ogden, 2011; Barua, 2013), this insight is still important because it draws attention to how the everyday articulation of neoliberalism has also been actively affected by nonhumans. Consequently, neoliberalism is reconceptualized as a political-economic project that emerges through the coconstitutive interplay of humans and nonhumans, as opposed to being a political-economic project that is articulated by people and then cast upon the environment. This is a point that has gone largely unaccounted for in the academic literature, and is significant for how we continue to conceptualize and then study the interrelations between neoliberalism and the environment.

I develop the concept of *collective troubles* in this discussion to draw explicit attention to how interactions with nonhumans complicated and transformed how staff members went about their jobs; including how they implemented the budget cut and governmental shutdown. Using Latour's (1993, 2005) concept of the collective, I illustrate how staff members' practices emerged through their mutually effected interactions with a range of nonhumans. Drawing from Butler's (1990) concept of trouble, I illustrate how the need to continually (re)articulate policies lead to points at which such policies could be complicated and transformed, or troubled, by the very acts through which they were articulated. Combining the two terms, I use *collective troubles* as a double play. As I use it, *collective troubles* refer to interactions between humans and nonhumans that (1) create problems for people and/or (2) complicate and transform how political-economic projects such as neoliberalism are realized in everyday practice. By combining *collective* with *troubles* I seek to draw explicit attention to the manner in which implementing neoliberal policies in complex contexts that include nonhumans creates potentials for change in which neoliberalism can be and is complicated and transformed. As I will illustrate, while such transformations can facilitate outcomes that are beneficial to neither humans nor nonhumans, at times *troublings* of neoliberal policies can also be and are beneficial to both.

Throughout this discussion I speak to two primary questions. First, how did a federal budget cut and governmental shutdown

that were linked to neoliberalism affect how staff members went about trying to (re)create the environment at Swan Lake NWR? Second, how did the specificities of place impact how they experienced and implemented these policies? My two primary arguments are as follows. First, neoliberal policies hindered staff members' ability to carry out habitat manipulation. This facilitated a large amount of anxiety from staff members, and benefited some nonhumans while exposing others to new risks. Second, in accordance with the historic, political, cultural, and institutional specificities of place, nonhumans actively complicated and transformed how staff members (re)created the Refuge environment generally and implemented these policies specifically.

My discussion possesses both theoretical and empirical significance. By illustrating and drawing explicit attention to how the articulation of neoliberalism was affected by nonhumans in the nation-state where its proponents have been the strongest (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Stiglitz, 2003; Fourcade, 2009), I hope to encourage scholars focusing on the neoliberalisation of nature in other contexts to more fully account for the manner in which nonhumans are actively affecting the implementation of the political-economic project. After all, if we wish to understand how political-economic projects such as neoliberalism are realized in context, and how such realizations then affect the environment, it will be necessary to account for how inorganic materials, plants, and animals in that environment intricately affect how these projects are articulated in the first place. Beyond the methodological implications, by drawing attention to another set of beings that have the capacity to challenge and transform the articulation of neoliberalism my discussion adds a degree of hope to future prospects of transforming the political-economic project in ways that can provide more beneficial outcomes for both humans and nonhumans. More broadly, my discussion is directly applicable to assessing the theoretical relationship between society and the environment that sits at the heart of political-ecology (Escobar, 1999). Specifically, by focusing on how a range of nonhumans actively affected the everyday articulation of neoliberal policies I continue the important process of bringing the ecology into political-ecology (Nygren and Rikoon, 2008; Barua, 2013) and related disciplines such as political geography (Robbins, 2003; Hobson, 2007).

Because neoliberalism has been and continues to be the most influential political-economic project since Keynesianism (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004), I also provide an immensely important empirical contribution by continuing to add to the corpus of knowledge that illustrates its variable implementations and effects for humans and nonhumans. In particular, I provide illustrations of the emotion laden consequences of the federal budget sequester and governmental shutdown for conservation officials in the United States. Acknowledging these emotional experiences is important precisely because they speak to the manner in which implementing neoliberal policies can lead to very personal consequences for state officials as they try to adapt to a changing relation with an environment they have been tasked with manipulating. Regarding nonhumans, I illustrate how the effects of neoliberal policies were variably (dis)advantageous for different plants and animals vis-à-vis how they were situated in relation to the primary institutional goal of the Refuge. My focus on the U.S. has the added benefit of continuing the important process of overcoming the relative lack of attention given to political-ecological issues there (McCarthy, 2002, 2005; Rikoon, 2006; Robbins, 2006).

I proceed in the following manner. In section 2 I situate my discussion within the emerging neoliberalisation of nature literature. I then relate that literature to a number of works that provide important insights regarding how human–nonhuman interactions have related to and affected the articulation of political-economic projects more generally. A number of these works have come from

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