



Gramsci in green: Neoliberal hegemony through urban forestry and the potential for a political ecology of praxis

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ABSTRACT

The US Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources coordinate the distribution of urban forestry grants to nonprofits and citizen groups. These granting agencies increased state funding during a period of neoliberal, fiscal austerity in order to channel ecosystem services provided by urban forests. Increased funding is an instance of rollout neoliberalism whereby the fiscally austere state builds market capacity to harness these services as part of an ecologically modernist agenda. A Gramscian perspective and data gathered from 20 in-depth interviews with foresters are used in this paper to theorize how rollout policy is deployed through urban forestry to extend market hegemony to new geographies. This is anything but a smooth process because the public's perception of urban trees is highly varied. State bureaucracies must build civil sector capacity to educate people about the ecosystem services trees provide as market commodities. In doing so the state's market-oriented regulatory legitimacy is consolidated through the apparently benign act of promoting urban forestry. This dialectical process limits participation in urban forestry because markets are inherently selective. Yet it potentially gives rise to an alternative political ecology of praxis beyond market ideology when grant recipients participate in the production of urban ecology and recognize their relationship with nature.

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1. Introduction

Trees are documented to provide numerous ecosystem services in urban settings (Nowak and Dwyer, 2000). Studies demonstrate urban trees provide relief from the urban heat island effect while decreasing costly energy consumption, for example (Heisler, 1986; Heisler et al., 1995). Other studies suggest urban trees increase in situ storm water retention (Sanders, 1986) and ameliorate air pollution (Nowak, 1994). Yet others determined urban trees also provide socio-psychological benefits like attachment to place (Chenoweth and Gobster, 1990) and the mitigation of environmental fatigue (Pitt et al., 1979). All of these ecosystem services provided by urban trees supposedly contribute to the market value of urban private property (Morales et al., 1976; Anderson and Cordell, 1988). Wolf (2005) and Joye et al. (2010) even go so far as to propose shoppers spend more money in business districts lined with mature trees. These studies assign real dollar values to the 'work' trees do in urban settings. Therefore the potential values of ecosystem services provided by trees have no doubt captured the imaginations of policy makers – particularly in an era of urban fiscal austerity.

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It should not be surprising then that environmental regulatory agencies operating in the US are keen to promote the cost-saving ecosystem services of trees to local governments and citizens alike. The Chairperson of the Wisconsin Urban Forestry Council interviewed for this study described why it makes economic sense to promote trees in the city. He said:

Urban forestry... can be considered a dynamic green infrastructure. Hard-scape infrastructures, even with maintenance, tend to devalue, or decrease in value as they age. Trees actually increase in value with age if they are maintained properly. If you spend ten dollars today on tree maintenance, as a property owner or municipality, you are likely to reap the investment back, plus interest into the future. Often, that does not happen with solid infrastructures.

This quote and the studies thus mentioned promote urban forestry as a market-based environmental practice justified on the assignment of prices to separate aspects of the ecosystem services trees provide in cities (see also Robertson, 2004). The pricing of ecosystem services through urban forestry is really an ecological modernist approach to regulating the relationships between people, the economy, and the environment.

Hajer (1996) and Desfor and Keil (2004) define ecological modernization in part as a technocratic project designed to green

capitalism in ways that mediate the tensions between market-based society and its inevitable environmental degradations. It is posited as a win–win situation where ecological solutions are built into capitalist market mechanisms in ways that promote, rather than hinder, economic development. Services provided by urban trees, in this sense, are used to facilitate consumption by supposedly mitigating the negative effects of consumer culture, for example (Cohen, 2004). But as Desfor and Keil point out (2004, p. 58), the success of various forms of ecological modernization “is linked to the degree of sustainability in the social modes of regulation in which they are embedded.” This means ecological modernization, including the promotion of ecosystem services by urban trees, is a normative political project that seeks to (re)establish the social regulatory role of the state (see also Christoff, 1996). Thus, for example, state-sponsored ecological modernist projects are deployed that use urban trees to teach marginalized urban residents how to more fully participate in market-based society (Perkins, 2009a).

Urban forestry has not been funded comprehensively by Federal and state governments in the US despite its normative potential as an ecological modernist approach to market expansion. Public funding for urban trees is traditionally a localized and varied process, instead (Conway and Urbani, 2007). But closer scrutiny of the history of government funding for urban forestry in the US reveals a meager level of Federal funding for urban forests was established in 1978 and increased modestly in 1990. At first glance it appears paradoxical that US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service expenditures on urban trees were increased (NUCFAC, 2004) during the time when other Federal programs for social and material infrastructures were diminished (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). More Federal funding for urban forestry likely is an instance of what Peck and Tickell (2002) refer to as ‘rollout’ neoliberalism whereby government support is increased for programs that profitably build market capacity into various service provisions (see also Peck, 2004). It would be, however, an oversimplification to leave the story of funding for urban forestry at that.

A Gramscian perspective is thus deployed in this paper to demonstrate state funding for urban forestry is an ecological modernist attempt to extend market-based, neoliberal hegemony where it previously has not existed. It is argued in the following sections of this paper that: (1) the public’s perception of urban trees is anything but uniform and ubiquitous. Therefore the integral state hires its own intellectuals to educate people about the ecosystem services trees provide as market commodities; and (2) the ethical state’s regulatory legitimacy is consolidated by consent and coercion based aspects of civil sector capacity building in urban forestry. This dialectical process limits, yet potentially gives rise to, an alternative political ecology of praxis that can build socio-natural hegemony without capitalist, market ideology.

These findings result from qualitative data collected during 20 in-depth interviews with urban foresters, government forestry officials, and representatives from nonprofits concerned with urban trees. The interviewees were chosen on the basis that they work primarily to promote urban forestry. All the interviewees were asked to describe: how trees compare to other forms of infrastructure, the goals of their respective organizations in promoting urban forestry while educating the public, the ways public forestry dollars flow through different levels of government, and also how those public monies are in turn redistributed into the civil (non-profit and for-profit) urban forestry sector. A simple scalar approach was used to categorize interviewees according to the spatial extent of their influence.

Interviewees at the national level work for agencies that primarily distribute Federal monies for urban forestry efforts to the state level. They include a Program Leader from the USDA Forest Service-Northeast Region, an Urban and Community Forestry

Program Coordinator from the USDA Forest Service-Northeast Region, and a representative from the nonprofit *National Alliance for Community Trees*. The latter organization assists other agencies in applying for and utilizing urban forestry dollars the USDA Forest Service distributes. Interviewees at the state level include the Urban and Community Forestry Manager for the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, five Regional Urban and Community Forestry Coordinators from the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Chairperson of the *Wisconsin Urban Forestry Council*. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources receives USDA Forest Service funds and works closely with the *Wisconsin Urban Forestry Council* to facilitate the expenditure of public forestry funds at the local level. Interviewees at the local level have applied for and received public funding from the Wisconsin Urban and Community Forestry Program. They include a Forestry Service Manager for the City of Milwaukee, the Parks and Forestry Supervisor for the community of Wauwatosa, WI, the foresters for the City of Waukesha, WI; Village of Fox Point, WI; Village of Shorewood, WI; City of Appleton, WI; City of Green Bay, WI, and a representative from the nonprofit urban forestry organization *Greening Milwaukee*. A representative from *Greening of Detroit* was also interviewed as that organization was the model for starting up *Greening Milwaukee*.

2. The integral state, pedagogy, and neoliberal hegemony

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist, is perhaps best known for his work concerning hegemony while interned in a Fascist prison. He was a student of Marxism who engaged the writings of Lenin and was interested in the relationship between ideology, material practice, and political power. In particular, Gramsci believed a proletarian revolution like the one in Russia was not possible in states in the West, because “...there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks...” (1971, p. 238). He thus conceived of an ‘integral state’ in the West as a dialectical unity of political and civil societies where hegemonic power of the ruling class is diffused across multiple classes, thereby making typical revolutionary wars with overt acts of force improbable (1971).

Hegemony in the integral state is extended in part by juridical institutions of political society that sanction an ‘ensemble of organisms commonly called private’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). Gramsci goes on to suggest these organisms in the civil sector include churches, schools, trade unions, and the like that work to (re)organize ‘common sense’ among society’s non-ruling classes. Hegemony is based on Gramsci’s expanded definition of common sense that includes consent for ‘proper’ ways of organizing the social and material world. Thus common sense is also the ideology or conception by which people validate their day-to-day, functional position in any given political, economic, and cultural system. Common sense, though necessarily incomplete and often contradictory, is deeply rooted in folklore and influenced by philosophy, religion, and science (Crehan, 2002). Thus the integral state never completely dictates its own form of common sense among non-ruling classes, but must instead work through civil sector organisms to (re)construct and/or harness it to the greatest extent possible. However, in dialectical relation with consent, coercion by the juridical arm of political society is reserved for classes that resist prevailing modes of common sense, and by extension, ruling class hegemony.

Gramsci also wrote that hegemony’s basis in consent and coercion is fundamentally a pedagogical relation (1971). Here Gramsci says the integral state must necessarily be an ‘ethical state’ defined by its ability to molecularly garner consent/power through its civil

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