A practice based approach to forest governance ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

'Forest governance' refers to new modes of regulation in the forest sector, such as decentralized, community-based and market-oriented policy instruments and management approaches. Its main theoretical basis consists of two mainstream models: rational choice and neo-institutionalism. Since these models rest upon problematic conceptualisations of 'the social', this paper proposes a so-called 'practice based approach', which offers a comprehensive understanding of social dynamics related to trees, forests and biodiversity. It tries to go beyond some of the old dualisms in social theory, such as subject and object, human and nature and agency and structure. Three sensitising concepts – situated agency, logic of practice and performativity – are introduced and their application is illustrated by a number of examples from forest governance practices: joint forest management in India, decentralized forest management in Bolivia and the construction of biodiversity datasets in Europe. The paper also addresses some of the criticisms the approach has received.

1. Introduction

A recent review of theories used in forest policy analysis (Arts, 2012) revealed that two perspectives are among the most dominant ones in our field: rational choice and neo-institutionalism. Rational choice privileges an individualistic rationality as driver for human behaviour, whereas neo-institutionalism assumes that people are disciplined by given rules, norms and beliefs in a society. Although both have definitely enriched our field of research, they also exhibit limitations in that they are, in our view, unable to capture fully the relationship between human capacities and creativities on the one hand and collective action and cultural patterns on the other. Moreover, either school adheres to specific forms of reductionism and causality, whereas we prefer an approach that does justice to the complexities and contingencies of social life. Finally, both approaches promote a predominantly anthropocentric model and do not sufficiently factor in the domains of nature and things. For all these reasons, we have developed a so-called 'practice based approach' (see Arts et al., 2013).

This approach is broadly situated in what has been called 'the practice turn' in social theory (Schatzki et al., 2001) This turn has been inspired by developments in sociology (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), interpretative studies in governance (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993; Nicolini et al., 2003; Bevir, 2011) and science and technology studies (e.g. Pickering, 1995; Latour, 2005). Below, a practice is defined as "an ensemble of doings, sayings and things in a specific field of activity." By positing 'practice' as the basic unit of analysis – rather than individuals, systems or structures – both individualism and structuralism in social theory are avoided. Also, non-human organisms, natural things and technological artefacts – as well as the knowledge production about them – are included in the analysis. Practices are considered to be socially and historically contingent ('they could have been otherwise'), although they often show stability and endurance.

This paper has two objectives: (1) summarizing the practice based approach to forest governance as we envision it; and (2) responding to critique on our approach formulated in reviews so far (particularly to Krott and Giessen, 2013; see this issue of *Forest Policy and Economics*). Empirically, the paper focuses on 'forest governance'. According to Agrawal et al. (2008), the term refers to the (partial) move away from centrally administered top-down regulatory forest policies that characterized much of forestry in the 19th and 20th centuries towards the more decentralized, community-based and market-oriented policy instruments and management approaches that we see today. The examples of joint forest management in India and decentralized forest management in Bolivia in this paper exemplify these governance trends and show how our practice based approach is able to highlight the diversity of actors, the multiple connections between formal and informal

practices and the rules that ultimately shape governance. In a similar vein, the third example about biodiversity databases illustrates the value of the approach by highlighting the 'messy' work that is needed for nature to be 'represented' in science and policy. It shows the different types of knowledge that go into the production of databases and the way in which these databases shape our understanding and enactment of forest, nature and biodiversity. We conclude our paper with some final considerations of the approach, taking into account the reviews and critiques our approach has already received.

2. Three models for understanding social life

Theoretically and methodologically, forest governance studies tap from general – and especially mainstream – approaches in political and social sciences (Arts, 2012). These schools of thought can be broadly grouped in three models, with different assumptions about agency, logics of action and social change (inspired by handbooks such as Marsh and Stoker, 2002; Adler, 2009). The first two of these models, those of rationalism and institutionalism, are important models by which natural resource management is often understood. The third one, that of practice, is the approach we advocate in this article.

The first model of rationalism can best be understood by the metaphor of the *marketplace*. This model considers individuals as autonomous rational-strategic agents who aim to obtain the most, or the best, output for themselves against the least input. In natural resource management literature, this line of theorizing is perhaps best expressed in Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968). Hardin assumes that resource users – such as herders in an open meadow or locals in a village forest – are inclined to continue increasing their harvest, thus maximizing their self-interest, while undermining the carrying capacity of the common good in the long run (Hardin, 1968). In this model, people are assumed to base their decisions on individual cost-benefit calculations (maximisation of utility) and on expected consequences (what is in it for me). Most theorists refer to this logic of action as 'rational choice' (Simon, 1959), but some refer to it as the 'logic of consequentialism' (March and Olsen, 1989). According to this logic, social change can be achieved by strategically altering incentives – be it through a market, or a government – so that individuals will change their calculations and, hence, behaviour. The type of human being assumed in this model is the *Homo economicus*.

The second model of institutionalism can be described through the metaphor of the *game* (football, chess, billiard, etc.; North, 1991). This model argues that a certain set of 'rules of the game' (i.e. institutions) serves as collective restraints for a specific set of individuals and/or groups who pursue their respective projects (Goodin, 1996). Within natural resource management, one of the most influential authors that uses this model is Eleanor Ostrom. She critiques many of the assumptions behind the rational choice model (Ostrom, 1990) by arguing how institutions can work to prevent a tragedy of the commons. Within this logic of action, institutions do not directly steer, but rather impact behaviour through rules, norms and incentives (Ostrom, 1992). Accordingly, individuals and groups have some room to manoeuvre, i.e. they have the capacity to modify, challenge or ignore the rules. Yet this capacity is constrained by the risk of being excluded from their community if they go too far. March and Olsen (1989) call this the 'logic of appropriateness'. Indeed, the successful cases of management of the commons in Ostrom's work refer to situations in which people conform to rules of regulated access to and use of natural resources. From such a logic of action, it follows that social change can best be induced by altering the rules of the game, or introducing new ones. This is the approach most often followed by governments: designing or changing laws, rules and regulations to foster public aims. The type of human being assumed in this model is the *Homo sociologicus*.

The third model of practice can best be understood through the metaphors of *play* or *performance* (theatre, dance, music) (Goffman, 1959; Nash, 2000). This model considers social processes and society-nature interactions to be guided by a script and directed by a (limited) number of generative principles. However, actors and groups do continually (re)interpret these scripts and might perform these principles in new ways. Within natural resource management studies, Cleaver (2012) uses a similar perspective to critique institutional models. She shows that communities do not simply follow rules, but instead reshape them in practice through processes of *bricolage*, or reject them on the basis of socially-embedded beliefs and conventions (de Koning, 2014). Within this model of practice, processes and interactions are thus the results of interpretation, improvisation, and performance, and this is done through bodily movements, discursive and emotional expressions, and things and artefacts 'on the stage' (Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002). The interaction between the performers and their audience in specific sites is also crucial. A play performed night after night will constitute a different practice at every single occurrence. Hence, outcomes are inevitably situational, and therefore unpredictable. According to this perspective, social change is rather difficult to steer or predict, not only because the scripts and principles cannot be changed overnight, but equally because human improvisation largely escapes control. Thus, such a logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) offers a less optimistic and arguably more realistic model for understanding human behaviour and social change. At the same time, it does – in our view – do a better job in explaining *why* certain changes do not occur, or why *other* outcomes result than incentives and rules seem to predict. The type of human being assumed in this third model is the *Homo practicus*.

3. Core definition and concepts

Within the social sciences, the concept of practice has served as key in efforts to move beyond problematic dualisms in social theory, including those of object and subject, actor and structure, power and knowledge, mind and body, and nature and society. For Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984), the concept of practice serves to make clear that social structures such as rules and institutions do not simply 'exist' or influence actors 'from the outside', but are produced and reproduced in practice, in the interaction between actors and structures. Foucault (1994), being concerned with the role of power in society, used the concept of practice to move away from actor- and state-centred models of power (Clegg, 1989). Power, according to Foucault, is decentred; it works as a productive force in subject formation, and it operates through a plethora of social technologies and discourses. Latour (1993, 2005) focuses on the dualism between subject and object that exist in what he calls the 'modern constitution'. In this constitution, nature and society are considered separate entities and the only possible mediators between them are scientists, by virtue of their authoritative knowledge. Latour challenges this modern constitution and its knowledge claims and, instead, argues that nature, science and society are performed in socio-material networks of human and non-human agencies (Latour, 2005). Hence, nature and society are not separate entities, but co-produced in practice.

Although theoretical concepts of practice vary to some degree, there are a number of basic, shared characteristics:

1. The basic unit of analysis is practice. Analytical focus is neither placed on the social system nor on individual agency, but rather on the entwinement of agency and structure in practice (Schatzki et al., 2001).
2. Social structures such as rules and institutions do not simply 'exist' or influence actors 'from the outside', but are produced and reproduced in practice (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). As such, policy implementation is not understood as a linear application of a set of external rules, but as an internal and dynamic process of interpretation and negotiation of policies in specific sites (Fischer and Forester, 1993).