Scandinavian Journal of Management (2014) xxx, xxx–xxx

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: http://www.elsevier.com/locate/scaman

RESEARCH NOTE

Climate social science—Any future for 'blue sky research' in management studies?

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KEYWORDS
Blue-sky research;
Climate change;
Climate social science;
Environmental humanities;
Management;
Post-disciplinary

Summary The environmental humanities call for post-disciplinary approaches to meet the vexing problem of climate change. However, scholars have not scrutinised how management and organisation studies (MOS) could contribute to such an endeavour. This research note explores common surfaces of contact between the natural and social sciences, with the goal of unravelling the legitimate positions to speak from about climate change. The findings suggest that scholars in MOS are exposed to ecological reasoning, which undergirds underdog heroism, disciplinary confusion and a debasement of political subjectivity. As a counter strategy, I suggest that we affirm a 'blue-sky research' approach that would support alternative research paths and a more traditional will to know—to advance 'climate social science'.

'Blue days, all of them gone
Nothing but blue skies from now on
Blue skies smiling at me
Nothing but blue skies do I see'
(Lyrics by Irving Berlin, 1926)

Introduction

Scandinavia is one of the regions where front-line science on climate change is conducted. An ongoing topic for discussion is how this knowledge production could be extended to other fields, since solutions to potential disasters must be designed with the help of knowledge about the human. It has accordingly been eagerly suggested that environmental humanities is 'one of the most dynamic fields in the human sciences' that could help meet global challenges (KTH, 2013). The World Social Science Report (ISSC, 2013), moreover, 'issues an urgent call to action to the international social science community to collaborate more effectively with each other'. Social scientists are challenged to transform social science and become 'bolder', 'better' and 'bigger' by working both with colleagues from other scientific fields and with the users of research to 'deliver solutions-oriented knowledge on today's most pressing environmental problems'. By extension, this also means that social science has to become 'different'—for example, 'in the way it thinks about and does research that helps meet the vexing sustainability challenges faced today'. The World Social Science Report calls for post-disciplinary approaches 'informed by science' to accomplish this enlargement and application of human and social knowledge (ibid).

A similar discussion about bridging the natural sciences and the humanities raged in the 1950s. In his 1959 Rede Lecture 'The Two Cultures' (Snow, 1959), the scientist and novelist Charles Percy Snow articulated his worries about a polarisation of the literary 'intellectuals' and the physical

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2014.10.004

Please cite this article in press as: Skoglund, A. Climate social science—Any future for 'blue sky research' in management studies?. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2014.10.004

scientists, who were not considered as 'intellectual'. He strongly argued for fewer privileges for the humanities and increased grounding of social and political solutions in the natural sciences. Shifting relations between 'nature' and philosophy are of course ancient, and have now reached a point where we see cross-sector collaborations between academia, business and public authorities, in an enlargement of natural scientific reasoning offered to the citizens. There have, for example, been calls for democratic participation and inclusion of us as 'citizen scientists' (Justmeans. Business. Better, 2010); these calls have invited citizens to send in reports about invasive species, that is, weeds of foreign origin. Management of the biosphere is thus pursued with the aid of participative knowledge tools (see further Marres, 2012). This is a testament to the well-known shift towards the applicability and co-production of science. For a long time, the modern scientific endeavour of creating knowledge was conceived as an end in itself — as Hannah Arendt put it, 'the scientist made only in order to know' — though the scientist's production often resulted in applicable by-products (Arendt, 1958/1998, 297). Since we now see efforts to invite citizens in the co-production of scientific knowledge, it is difficult to determine what the means and ends are. Science may have become a means, treated as a mere by-product, whilst the production of applicable technologies and the shaping of participative citizens, have become the new end.

A similar hunt for the applicability and co-production of knowledge to achieve a change of the human, or the 'system' we are assumed to live in, is visible in social science perspectives on climate change (examples in Barry, 2012; Dryzek, Norgaard, & Schlosberg, 2011; Shove & Spurling, 2013; Urry, 2011). Since climate change is coupled to acute changes around the world, researchers in this field are seldom asked, 'So what?' The answer to the 'so-what question' is already given — potential disasters — and has been applied especially to fashion people living in the global South as vulnerable subjects (Evans & Reid, 2014). Because of this state of alarm and articulation of emergency, funding is mainly offered for inter-, cross-, trans- and post-disciplinary approaches, and sometimes even for post-doctoral 'discipline hopping' to ensure that social scientists 'gain natural science expertise' (NERC, 2014). Climate change, when taken as a problem or crisis to address as a challenge, is thus understood to demand a kind of knowledge that better connects the human (social sciences/humanities) with nature (natural sciences/climate science), much alike Charles Percy Snow's wishes.

The objective of this research note is to scrutinise the ways that this ambitious knowledge formation about climate change poses limits for social science on climate change. Focusing on management and organisation, I explore the *surfaces of contact* between the basic assumptions made within the natural and social sciences to show how climate science affects our research possibilities. I begin by describing and problematizing the legitimate positions from which it is currently possible to speak about climate change. I then turn to neighbouring fields to illustrate some alternative research positions and possibilities for future research. I conclude by outlining a constructive rupture to counter the taken for granted wish for post-disciplinarity and its applicability: I offer a 'blue-sky research' approach for a 'climate social science'. This approach, I argue, will threaten neither the climate itself nor the scientific study of it.

Legitimate positions and surfaces of contact

In this section, I describe several positions from which researchers commonly speak about climate change, with an emphasis on the specialist vocabularies shared by researchers in the natural sciences and MOS. I address climate materiality, changeability, uncertainty, complexity and resilience, although several other legitimate positions exist.

Climate materiality

Many approaches to climate change take their point of departure from discourses on materiality, that is, descriptions of physical conditions in the atmosphere and their effects on the biosphere, established by organisations such as the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). The reader may be introduced to the subject with the help of scientific facts about the rising global temperature and the potential natural and social disaster at hand. Climate change is made real and relevant through science-based evidence, as exemplified by how facts are presented in *Nature*:

> 'There is now ample evidence of the ecological impacts of recent climate change, from polar terrestrial to tropical marine environments. The responses of both flora and fauna span an array of ecosystems and organizational hierarchies, from the species to the community levels.' (Walther et al., 2002)

There is no direct link to social science in the quote; the 'organisational hierarchies' and the 'community' are strictly coupled to ecology. Hence, we have in this quote no direct surface of contact between the natural sciences and the social sciences. Nevertheless, there is an indirect surface of contact in the 'organizational hierarchies' which are said to exist for flora and fauna. Going further back in time, Czarniawska explores the historical link of biology and ecology with management and organisation. She shows that new theories in biology and ecology have transformed the possibilities for discussing 'environment' in relation to 'organisms' and 'organisations' (Czarniawska, 2013). The intermingling of ecological systems theory with social systems theory is fundamental here. Inspiration from ecology has also been accentuated with the recent embrace of 'complexity' in organisation and management studies (e.g. see Stowell & Welch, 2012; Tsoukas & Dooley, 2011). Climate research and MOS thus share an ecological specialist vocabulary.

Changeability

Changeability is another position from which it is possible to address the climate in relation to the human; this position emphasises vulnerability and adaptive capacity (Perdinan & Winkler, 2014). The climate variability position builds on assessments that construct the climate as a physical reality in constant change. In this case, we see a family resemblance to management and organisation studies' vocabularies of

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