Geoforum 91 (2018) 57–60

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Critical review

Geoscience and sustainability – In between keywords and buzzwords

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Sustainability science
Anthropocene
Neoliberal universities
Use of concepts
Political ecologies of reference making

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how scientists entangle themselves in between keywords and buzzwords when they make use of concepts like sustainability. It sketches out theoretical distinctions between keywords and buzzwords. Then it turns to the concept of nature discussing the paradox that nature embraces the same fuzzy, slippery and contingent character as does sustainability, yet the former has a deep ontological status, the latter does not. The paper explores a related paradox: natural sciences claim we live in the Anthropocene, in which humans have transformed geochemical cycles, e.g. of methane and carbon dioxide as much as they changed between glacial and interglacial periods. Yet, science favors (external) nature as a keyword, sustainability as a buzzword. This should cause deep reflections on how scientists make use of the power of reference in between keywords and buzzwords – as well as critical reflection on the institutionalization of such concepts.

1. Introduction

In 2004 Naomi Oreskes claimed that scientific consensus on climate change exists to the extent that 97% of research articles in high-impact factor journals, like Science and Nature, confirm the thesis that climate change is fundamentally anthropogenic (Oreskes, 2004). The planetary crisis, on which scientists seem to form a common consensus platform does not imply a new era of 'consensus science'. Rather it imposes challenges to 'classical' socio-natural epistemologies. Consensus situates anthropogenic climate change as a 'scientific fact', this have the conjoint capacity to assemble scientists, non-human and human natures in ways that affect one another.

While the inculcation of sustainability and academic governmentalities individualize and institutionalize the use of keywords and buzzwords, the paper raises concern over the political ecologies of reference making and the "commodification of nature" (Loftus, 2015) from within academia. As for the academic work in general and for concepts like sustainability, nature, circular economy, resilience or the Anthropocene in particular, they display a number of tactics in the search for grands, academic reputation and publication records (Grindsted, 2015). Yet, different notions of sustainability both mobilize neo-liberal interests and accelerate thinking of universities as marketable entities. At the same time sustainability is a source for critical intervention (Maxey, 2009).

2. Distinguishing keywords from buzzwords

According to Castree (2014) three characteristics distinguish keywords from buzzwords. First keywords do not come and go, tend to be stable and are more or less unaffected by economic, cultural or ideological changes. Keywords tend to be unaffected by political pressure or changes in funding mechanisms. Although academics lean towards key concepts and the power they inhere, they do not in general signify 'state of the art'. Keywords are immune to quick fixes as the power of referencing, funding mechanisms or 'politico-ecological winds'. If one considers the use of sustainability in geography, it becomes apparent that the concept does not meet the first criteria. Nevertheless, the concept has been preached for forty years and seems to be one, that will not go away neither in academia nor in civic society.

Secondly keywords are used widespread and frequently in all sorts of contexts. Keywords are familiar within or even beyond a given academic episteme. Sustainability is a great example of a fuzzy concept used in all sorts of contexts in academia and beyond. It is heavily used in the rhetoric of political discourse and hard to avoid as a human geographer. It is precisely the widespread use and the 'use' of its diffuse character that provides the concept with its capacity to 'go around the back' to legitimize a given agenda (Harvey, 1996). In academia sustainability seems to make space for external activism, while it gains little space for internal activism due to its low status (buzzword), e.g. in geography (Grindsted, 2015).

The third characteristic concerns their 'social force' (Castree, 2014), which is the degree to which the receiver accompanies the meaning and argument using such concepts. In academia, the 'social force' of sustainability does not make it a keyword. Hearing sustainability, a 'real academic' will immediately 'wrinkle his/her nose' and associate criticism attached to it. By contrast, keywords possess the ability to sort our

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.02.029
Received 30 December 2017; Received in revised form 4 February 2018; Accepted 25 February 2018

mode of thinking, give direction and draw upon the distinctive power that lies in giving reference to something or somebody of general acceptance.

Whereas keywords are used unimpededly, sustainability is scrutinized because of its lack of definition, its capacity to legitimize 'nearly everything'. This gives rise to a paradox. It may be equally difficult to clarify the word of nature. Raymond Williams notes how nature "may be one of the most complex word in our language since the idea of it contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history…(…) both complicated and changing as other ideas change" (Williams here quoted in Harvey, 1996, p. 26). Williams examines how nature, this complex, fuzzy, slippery concept, holds power that is normalized by ways in which it governs and directs our thinking. At this point I claim nature is a keyword, sustainability a buzzword and yet both are extraordinarily fuzzy, slippery and contingent. Keywords produce imaginative geographies that lead the audience into a desired direction. The imaginary geographies comprehend and encompass huge amounts of tacit power, with quite different political ecologies as a result. Disciplines and departments carrying sustainability in their name have only recently begun. Whereas the former finds nature to be external, the latter recognizes that 'nature cannot pre-exist its construction' as Haraway puts it.

The fact that humans cannot escape their socio-natural embeddedness made 'nature' a keyword to Williams – one that performs political action and analysis (Harvey, 1996). Conceptions, abstractions and the ways in which academics refer to the (socio) natural write new environmental geographies. The three characteristics do not only distinguish key concepts from buzzwords, they are also defined out of time-space configurations; the time scales given, the spatial organization and through their historical and contextual differentiation. Moreover, they co-produce mental geographies with specific connotations to the socio-natural.

3. Practicing discourses and discourses of practice

Originally coined by Foucault the term governmentality refers to the self-government, whereby individuals undertake work in the interest of the principal. Governmentality describes how subjects are involved in projects of their own, while their freedom is dictated by others. Academic governmentalities refer to the process of self-governance within academia, seeking to capture the ways in which university governance and knowledge management affect how one navigates in that work. Thus, academic governmentality holds a critical attitude towards the freedom to conduct research by addressing a number of implicit structural layers of power, with reference to symbols, codes of conduct, tacit norms, and tactics (Berg in Castree et al., 2006). Power of reference connotes how academics make reference, both as a process of self-governance within academia and in a broad sense how academics make reference (to references) when representing cultures of nature(s). Shaping the social valuation of excellence work, describes how these processes come to justify theories, methods, assumptions, themes or concepts, while they at the same time make reference to nature. Thus, the power of reference is an academic form of governmentality that shapes social practices and the habitual power in representing a given scientific problem, paradoxes or phenomena in a certain way that simultaneously produce layers of hidden (tacit and tactic) knowledge yet authoritative truth.

Academics do tremendous work on deconstruction and reconstruction, produce genealogies, develop new concepts, theories and ideas that wonderfully spiral into manifestations and strategies embracing huge amounts of tacit knowledge. In our individual work, we take a theoretical framework, and blend them into a number of related theories. In so doing we spend great effort in framing our work as new (Harvey, 2005). For young researchers, it is a well-known strategy to kick-start their career attacking well-known researchers hoping for response to the critiques given (Sheppard in Castree et al., 2006). Again, with an underlying caution to promote one's own stand. In finding one's place to undertake research for better, more accurate and valid scientific knowledge, one needs to find a space to shape a career platform, hence enter into the fight over symbolic and reputational capital.

In this fight, one can hardly ignore policy agendas and university governance under which universities are managed, to secure external funding and the highest possible publish record, the neoliberal management schemes under which scientists' work (Editorial Collective, 2007). In finding and shaping place in academia, spaces of work have huge effects to govern-mentalities of that work. This applies in geography and beyond. However, practicing power of references is both shaping and is shaped by the scientific climate with effects on the sustainability of the work environment itself, as well as the governmental forms under which socio-natural concepts like sustainability develop, is orchestrated and theorized (Mansfield, 2009). Academic governmental(ities), then, are filled with presumptions and statements concaving huge amounts of tacit knowledge, which is why the power of references becomes a problem particularly when refereeing to fuzzy concepts like nature or sustainability, assembling the socio-natural. The following explores five dimensions of the power of reference.

4. Power of reference

(1) The practice of quoting is essential. In selecting any theory academic work has developed on the basis of outstanding literature that includes an immense body of related theories that, in turn, has been developed from previous work. While producing a hidden critique, it is all framed within layers of tacit knowledge, though never explicated, of course. The powerful layers of silence, however, continue. In choosing superb work by Michel Foucault, Michel Callon, Bruno Latour or Phillipe Descolar (geographies of choosing French, opposed to Anglo-Saxon cultures of theory), there are also huge amounts of organized power involved. Likewise, sustainability or the Anthropocene is highly Eurocentric (Chakrabarty, 2009). 'Power of references' certainly has a geographical dimension (Paasi, 2005).

Choosing famous theorists has also the tendency to produce authoritative arguments. Leading figures represent authoritative 'truths' within research communities that serve the body of shared cultural references. What icons say have impact on dialogues within that episteme. Icons have an impact on regulative practices of how we conceive the world (Castree, 2014). Harvey and Castree are such icons, even academic brands with canonical effects (Thrift, 2006), with a market for them that in turn performs that market. Whether it is suitable that a scientific community incorporates a language of sustainability or not, epistemic work produces asymmetric power relations with effects on the condition of sustainability (equity) as well as on inclusion and exclusion of features, themes or approaches (Castree, 2014).

(2) 'Power of reference' is organized within and between disciplines. Massey (1999) wonderfully depicts the 'envy of physics' whereby 'soft sciences' make reference to 'harder sciences' to bolster one's argument. It may be cultural geographers who appeal to urban geographers, who in turn may plea to physical geographers. This habit appeals to an implicit imagination that affects the hierarchy of disciplines.

This higher authority converts into suspect reference strategies. The irony to Massey (1999) is that physics have moved on which has deep implications to the interdisciplinary dimension of sustainability and climate changes, and how these problems are organized under a given episteme. By way of illustration climate change modelling is dominated by 'hard sciences' and economics, reducing human behavior to a matter of instrumental rationality (Grindsted, 2014).