



Contested boundaries, contested places: The Natura 2000 network in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Nature–society boundaries
Naturalness
Natura 2000
Nature conservation
Protected areas
Hybridity
Relationality
Hybrid agency
Uncertainties in environmental
decision-making

Where to draw the boundary line between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ has perplexed sociologists, ecologists and geographers through the ages. This paper was inspired by environmental sociologist, Alan Irwin, who suggests that we shift our focus from asking ‘where to draw the line’ between what is considered ‘natural’ and ‘social’ to exploring the ‘very process of line-drawing’ as it occurs within specific socio-ecological contexts (Irwin, 2001). Nature conservation initiatives in the form of “protected areas” provide remarkable insights into attempts to devise and manage conceptual and spatial-geographic boundaries between nature and society. Here, I discuss Ireland’s contribution to the Natura 2000 network of protected ecological sites. I show how line-drawing in Natura 2000, from EU right down to local levels, is a highly contingent, contested and uncertain process; how both ‘nature’ and ‘society’ can frustrate attempts to draw and maintain these boundaries and the conflicts, uncertainties and dilemmas thrown up in the process. The paper ends by considering the extent to which this “boundary-work” analysis provides an insightful, though incomplete picture of the experiences of and challenges posed by Natura 2000 on-the-ground, while posing some more philosophical questions about nature–society boundaries and the challenges they pose to nature conservationism.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual and geographic boundaries

The longstanding debate as to whether environmental problems are ‘real’ or ‘socially constructed’ has run its course. Environmental sociologists and human geographers are exploring new models of human–nature relations, seeking non-dichotomous frameworks that acknowledge the active, material presence of nature without downplaying the diversity of ways in which it is understood and experienced by humans (Castree, 2010; Whatmore and Hinchcliffe, 2008; Franklin, 2002). Insights from Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and non-representational theory reveal how all understandings of ‘nature’ are relational achievements (Thrift, 2008; Whatmore, 2008; Cloke and Jones, 2001). “Things” are only definable in relation to other “things” (whether beings, actants, entities, networks or spatial formations), all of which have an inherently hybrid quality. Hybrid and relational understandings of nature–society thus challenge the existence of any real boundaries between the two. The “conjoined materiality” (Fitzsimmons and Goodman, 1998) of social–ecological systems makes it impossible to alter nature without simultaneously altering society and vice versa: each

is continually co-constructed (and re-constructed) through the other.

Alan Irwin, drawing inspiration from a sociology of scientific knowledge approach also draws heavily on the notion of ‘co-construction’ although here the emphasis shifts from ontology to epistemology. Irwin takes the co-constituted ontology of nature–society as given, while urging us to explore the co-construction of these epistemological categories. He suggests this for two reasons: first because irrespective of the hybridity and relationality of social–ecological life, boundaries between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ are continually drawn and re-drawn; and second, the manner in which these are drawn (i.e. by whom, for what purpose, based on what grounds and on the basis of whose knowledge) has important implications for both people and nature. We must, as Irwin argues, explore these processes of line-drawing in order to reveal the human values, judgements, assumptions, choices and power dynamics that inform them.

While Irwin attempts to move beyond a strict realist–social constructionist divide, his approach has been criticised for being more social constructionist than realist (Sutton, 2004). Because both environmental and social problems ‘draw upon the same nature–culture nexus’, the ‘social’, Irwin argues, constructs *not only* the ‘natural’ *but also* the ‘social’ (2001: 175). It can thus be argued that Irwin fails to give sufficient attention to non-human agency: the ‘effectivity’ (Sutton, 2004) of the natural on the social is left invisible. This point is particularly pertinent given the recent

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“material turn” in the social sciences (and elsewhere) acknowledging the creativity and vitality of animate and inanimate “things” and distributed human–nonhuman agency (Bennett, 2009; Whatmore, 2002; Latour, 2004a). And yet hybrid agency as a ‘relational achievement’ (Whatmore, 1999) obscures the variegated and distinctive capabilities of *specific* nature–cultures, whether human or not. Thus while hybrid assemblages precariously “hold together”, they are always vulnerable to unpredictable “lines of flight” – the “pulling away” imperative of beings, objects and processes that withhold, withdraw, escape or simply refuse to enrol (Bennett, 2009; Murdoch, 2006).

Taking the example of the Natura 2000 network in Ireland, I want to show how an analysis of nature–society line-drawing, when explicitly premised on a hybrid and relational understanding of social–ecological life, can provide useful insights into nature–society relations (their uncertainties, ambiguities and complexities) without losing sight of the specific agencies of human and non-human actors. In doing so I raise some fundamental questions about the utility and significance of boundaries in nature conservationism and nature–society relations more generally. Drawing on research conducted in the Irish context, I do this by looking at how Natura 2000 boundaries (conceptual and geographic-spatial) are devised and negotiated at EU, national and local levels. First, I look more closely at the two types of boundaries discussed in this paper.

There is a wealth of social science literature on the contested nature of boundaries in all areas of life (see Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Whether symbolic/conceptual, social, cultural, spatial, material or anthropomorphic – boundaries proliferate as they endlessly move, blur and fold in space-time (Mol and Law, 2005; Barker, 2008). In our (human) struggles to clarify, classify and control the messy, hybrid and heterogeneous assemblages and associations we co-construct and inhabit, all manner of boundaries are built up, torn down, patrolled, defended, contested, assembled and disassembled across a range of institutions and spatial locales. In this paper, I attend (and limit my focus) to two ‘types’ of boundaries that are highly significant and contentious in environmental governance; namely conceptual/cognitive boundaries between ‘nature’ and ‘society’ and spatial-geographic (or place-making (Gieryn, 2000)) boundaries.

Conceptual boundaries (e.g. natural–social/human–non-human/native–exotic) construct meanings through simple dichotomies based on a process of ‘othering’. Differences across the ‘border’ are accentuated as identities are forged through negation and risks are envisaged by threat of ‘contamination’ with the ‘other’. While Western concepts of nature and society as essentially separate, bounded ontological realms enjoy a long history, Franklin observes how the late modern period has seen ‘nature and society shift[ing] position as principal sources of risk’ (Franklin, 2002: 54). The need to protect societies from the vagaries of a harsh, untamed nature has been replaced with an emphasis on the need to protect a sublime, fragile nature from the excesses of societal developments (primarily in the shape of industrial development). Anxieties about these illicit boundary crossings are well versed in contemporary debates about biosecurity (Hinchliffe and Bingham, 2008; Barker, 2008; Curry, 2007) where concerns ranging from invasive species to foot and mouth epidemics perform needs or desires to disentangle or purify these illegitimate couplings (Latour, 1988).

Spatial or geographic boundaries demarcate and delineate spaces and places. Post-structuralist thinking, and Thrift’s non-representational theory in particular, challenge traditional understandings of geographic boundaries where Euclidean spaces are mapped in terms of fixed co-ordinates, points, lines, and contours (Murdoch, 2006: 12). This pre-occupation with ‘pointillism’, as Doel argues (1999:120) obscures a multiplicity of space-times. The stabilization (or relative “permanence” (Harvey, 1996)) of spatial

boundaries and assemblages is always provisional and contested. Here, boundaries and structures are an *effect of manifold relations* where space is ‘a verb rather than a noun’ (Doel, 2000: 125 cited in Murdoch, 2006, my emphasis). Boundaries, whether conceptual or spatial-geographic, like places then, are relational and always ‘in the process of becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980).

As regards the nature–society dichotomy, conceptual and spatial boundaries connect and overlap in the sense that ‘nature’ is often located ‘here’ rather than ‘there’, e.g. ‘natural places’ are more frequently housed in rural, as opposed to urban locales, (or ‘peripheral’ as opposed to ‘central’ locations) (Green, 2005) and their protection, as I show in the case of Natura 2000, is often considered dependent on their demarcation from the non-natural, or the social realm (Lien, 2005; Milton, 2000). Once ‘special’ nature is unravelled from the entanglements of life (Ingold, 2008) it must at all costs be kept in its ‘proper’ place (Lavau, 2011, drawing on Milton, 2000).

1.2. Natura 2000

Protecting biodiversity ‘the variety of living organisms on earth’ (O’Riordan et al., 2002: 9), is now a significant aspect of international environmental policies. For the European Union and its Member States, biological diversity is considered a key route to sustainable development. Natura 2000, a network of ecologically important places across European Member States is the most ambitious EU biodiversity initiative to date. The network includes a wide diversity of terrestrial and aquatic habitats, encompassing an area of land and sea larger than any single Member State. Sites range from vast tracts of forestry, bog and coastal zones right down to small family farms or areas of scrubland.

The network is the outcome is two EU Directives, the Birds Directive in the 1970’s establishing Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for wild and migratory birds and the Habitats Directive in the 1990’s which broadens out to include ‘Special Areas of Conservation’ (SACs) for species and “habitats types” considered to be “of Community interest”. These sites (SPAs and SACs) are collectively known as the Natura 2000 network which is the cornerstones of the EU’s biodiversity/nature conservation policy (Keulartz and Leistra, 2008).

The 1979 Birds Directive was the first piece of European legislation enacted to halt the decline in species, in this case wild and migratory birds. Under this Directive, Member States are obliged to take measures to maintain a sufficient diversity and area of habitats for the 175 species of birds listed in Annex 1 of the Directive. While the Birds Directive lays down a range of protective measures for the protection and management of all wild birds, a key element is habitat protection. Member states must designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for Annex I birds utilising their territory in sufficient quantities (Council Directive 79/409/EEC). The Habitats Directive of 1992 had wider ambitions. Focussing on all manner of species and their habitats, it set out to establish an ecological network with a uniform legal framework for all sites. The Directive identifies over 200 habitat types and 700 species of plants and animals considered of ‘Community interest’: Annex 1 lists natural habitat types (e.g. from blanket bogs to coastal lagoons) and Annex II lists animals and plant species (e.g. from the bottle nosed dolphin to the Killarney fern). These are further divided into priority and non-priority species and habitats (priority meaning those in immediate danger of disappearance). On the basis of these lists, Member States are obliged to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and to maintain them ‘at favourable conservation status’ (Council Directive 92/43/EEC; see also Keulartz and Leistra, 2008).

Both Directives then effectively create protected areas or designated places of ecological significance. While the latter Directive supercedes the former in many respects, both follow same

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