Mapping Political Sociology

Ambiguities and Complexities for Unpredictable Futures

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Introduction: a political sociology of transformative environmental governance

Transforming the way that we live on our planet is an existential issue. Without transformation, the possibility to live in an irreversibly changed climate, and to work towards slowing, halting, and adapting to change, will disappear. Though the scientific understanding of climate change, biodiversity loss, and the complex array of environmental problems of the Anthropocene is the domain of other disciplines, unravelling the way we take decisions about environmental governance concerns social sciences, including political sociology, and our contributions matter (Rosamond et al., 2024). Political sociology can help reveal how power shapes environmental decision-making through discourses that shape the institutions of environmental governance, and thus the actions we take to address environmental problems. It can also show us where transformation is already underway, and where it faces barriers.

My interest in questions of transformation emerges throughout my research journey, despite applying the label of transformation only quite recently. The core of that interest is in *transformative* environmental governance that produces environmental justice. The idea that we need to transform environmental governance is the subject of growing consensus given the failures of our existing models to tackle both environmental degradation and its impacts on life. Scholars from a range of disciplines, institutional actors, and civil society groups alike argue that a transformation is necessary to respond better to climate change, biodiversity loss, and more in fair and equitable ways (e.g. van Oers et al., 2021; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021; Forest Peoples Programme, 2020). It is the call for environmental governance to be fair and equitable in apportioning the advantages and drawbacks that flow from environmental action that helps to define what transformative environmental governance might look like. Fairness and equity point to the social movement and academic discussion of Environmental Justice (EJ). EJ scholars and activists have demonstrated how effective environmental governance is a social justice issue within a global capitalist economy. This system produces unequal experiences of the impacts of environmental

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degradation along cleavages of geography, age, gender, ethnicity, class, and more, both within states and across the globe (e.g. Martinez-Alier, 2003; Agyeman et al., 2016). Institutions must be transformed with attention to EJ, composed of its mutually constitutive and interconnected elements of distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice. Recognitional justice involves understanding and engaging with different groups' viewpoints and knowledge, which is also constitutive of procedural justice as an ongoing effort and dialogue in processes that build EJ through continuous and careful interaction (Whyte, 2013). Those processes alone can produce a fair distribution of burdens and benefits (Wang and Lo, 2021). This is central to the idea of what I mean by transformative environmental governance.

Transforming the way we live on our planet – transforming environmental governance – is in essence a collective action problem, and political sociology can offer a home to unpack power and the functioning of current approaches as well as identify future governance imaginaries that can deliver EJ. In this chapter, I trace some of my own engagement in studying collective action on environmental issues, and how this led, eventually, to reflections on where the impetus for transformative environmental governance might come from. The starting point in the first section is in more classical political sociology, combining attention to how organized civil society groups and social movements together impact policy: how they wield power in complex contexts. Working on this topic with attention to impacts at the EU level and interconnections with national organizations led me to then focus on grassroots, local work, and the global level of environmental governance.

This research, and the attempt to listen carefully, led to what I discuss in the second section – what political sociological approaches can learn from and contribute to the study of discursive and knowledge politics in environmental governance. This work broaches questions of spaces for the inclusion and exclusion of different voices, knowledges, and practices in arenas of environmental governance at multiple levels, and feeds into ongoing work about where inclusive spaces already exist in activist and community practices, and how activists demand their expansion. The final parts of the chapter offer some reflections on the difficulty of studying the politics of local knowledge while trying to avoid extractivism and remain aware of our own limitations. I continue to find this difficult and make mistakes, but continue to believe that political sociology approaches can help to untangle some of this power politics without claiming to understand or speak on behalf of local knowledges. I then wrap up with a few lines on teaching transformative political sociology by drawing students' attention to the assumptions that underpin institutions, and thus to ideas about how they might change and expand them in new directions.

Collective action and its impacts on environmental governance

In this section, I outline some past research and point to how new pathways and constructive contamination from within the discipline can be uncovered during the research journey: through careful listening and learning with participants and colleagues, as well as a bit of serendipity. The focus is on how we can combine

learning from political sociology approaches to the study of organized civil society on the one hand and social movements on the other.

My own interest in political sociology came out of direct experience. I had long been interested in the EU, and curious about why it seemed so distant to others around me growing up in the UK. Some work experience in the European Parliament showed a few of the ways citizens interact with the EU: through protest, through NGOs, through trade union membership, or directly. It also revealed the extent of the inter-relationships between those interactions and their complex impacts. My first forays into research tried to untangle this complexity to understand when and how citizens could shape EU decisions. To work on this question, political sociological tools from the study of social movements and collective action, where more work reflecting on how citizens impact decision-making had been undertaken, seemed the best suited. The early 2000s were also a moment when scholars were adapting these tools to transnational social movements and protests, for example, in Della Porta, Kriesi, and Rucht's edited volume *Social Movements in a Globalizing World* (1999). The focus in this work was very much on social movements and contentious action, and adaptations of political process, framing, and discourse approaches to the analysis of impacts. It concluded that the spaces available for protest to shape the EU were outside its institutional borders, since its architecture encouraged the institutionalization of movements (Marks and McAdam, 1999). What is more, there were no transnational movements focused on EU decisions to mirror those of the global justice movement, but rather heterogeneous networks clustered around issues and domesticated protests pushing for EU-level change (Imig and Tarrow, 2001), sometimes in coalition with organized Brussels-based groups (Ruzza, 2004).

To understand citizens' impacts on EU decisions thus meant taking a finer-grained approach and adapting tools to the EU context. I developed a map of the political and discursive opportunity structures of the EU as a set of discrete institutions with their own separate logics, traced the ways that key groups (both organized civil society groups and movement groups) campaigning on the same issues built and shared frames, interpreted political and discursive opportunities and threats at different levels, and ultimately impacted decisions (Parks, 2015). What emerged confirmed existing findings about the institutionalizing effects of EU institutions (Marks and McAdam, 1999) and the complex and conjunctural nature of impact (e.g. Amenta et al., 2010), but also revealed new spaces where closed EU opportunities drove both domesticated and EU-level protest. Where the Commission was open, civil society networks tended to rely on their institutionalized components with extensive and technical knowledge of the EU, and to have less impact. Where the Commission was closed, civil society networks tended to rely on social movement groups and to turn to protest, ultimately with more impact. Thus, there seemed to be a dichotomy between less impactful 'technical' campaigns and their more impactful 'political' counterparts (Parks, 2015).

This work on the EU also revealed that the most meaningful impacts appeared in cases where local actors and actions loomed largest, and that the impacts of these campaigns were delimited in time and scope. In a campaign concerning

genetically modified (GM) crops, for example, it was local farmers' and local authorities' declarations that they would not allow GM crops on their lands that had actual impact – not on any EU decision within the short timeframe I analysed, and not in any legal sense since these were purely political declarations – but on the lived reality of GM crops in European farming. Yet my focus on disentangling EU impacts meant that I could not really understand the potential impacts of this local, concrete action on the EU decision-making *system* over time. How might these actions redefine discourses about GM farming with eventual impacts on how the EU makes decisions in this area in the longer term? This pointed to a need to do research in two new directions: comparative approaches to better understand the cumulative convergence of demands in local level action, and looking at a broader range of impacts from citizens' actions on governance systems over time. I sought to follow these leads in a project on local communities and their interactions with international environmental law on benefit-sharing. Rather than looking from the top down, as I had in my EU work by tracing networks out from the Brussels level, I now worked from the bottom up, beginning from local action. In addition, this research shifted the focus away from an understanding of impact as strictly tied to decision-making processes, and towards a freer exploration of the experiences of local communities in their environmental stewardship and their understandings of what was needed to make more just governance systems.

This research also allowed me to apply the insights I had slowly built up on multilevel opportunities and threats, discursive contexts, and frames of activism, to try to understand how communities frame issues of benefit-sharing in global environmental governance and act accordingly. The project was not centred on what we commonly understand as activism, but began instead from communities who wished for and acted to try and secure recognition of their contributions to environmental stewardship. Rather than beginning from the international level and looking for activism, we wanted to start from local experiences to guide our work in a more grounded and organic way (Parks and Morgera, 2019). This shift also led me to use approaches from participatory action research in a conscious effort to centre listening and observation, and to try to work with communities and their allies to find the right research path to uncover their agency and power to broader audiences (Parks and Morgera, 2019). I also wanted to look for ways in which different communities, not necessarily connected through any formal civil society network, might converge in their claims and action, by using a most-different-systems design. The resulting work included research with traditional pastoralist communities in Ikaria in Greece; with traditional medical practitioners adjacent to the Kruger National Park in South Africa; with Khwe San wildlife stewards in Bwabwata National Park in Namibia; with rice growers and community members in Bario, in the Kelabit highlands of Borneo, Malaysia; and with communities of the Salinas Grandes acting to shape decisions about lithium mining in Argentina (Parks, 2020).

This more exploratory approach to local action, combined with the tried and tested political sociology approaches to collective action and its impacts, allowed me to engage more deeply with the specificities and experiences of communities while still drawing some higher-level comparisons. Engaging with communities was

hard, and there were clear limitations in this work that had much to do with our rootedness in a particular project framework, the amount of time we could spend in communities, and most importantly, the impossibility of really understanding the action and knowledge at work from a position outside the community (Parks and Morgera, 2019). Despite these drawbacks, drawing comparisons rooted in political sociology approaches to collective action guided findings on how power played out in asymmetrical ways between local communities, citizens, and authorities at different levels. This pointed to core questions about justice, but also revealed the role of local knowledge and agency in environmental governance.

This section points to how political sociology approaches to organized civil society and social movements contribute to our knowledge of citizen action and influence in the EU and beyond by revealing the agency of these different actors and mechanisms for change, as well as the limitations and injustices stemming from power asymmetries. In the next section, I discuss how this more classical collective action research led to constructive contaminations with scholarship on political ecology, environmental justice, and more, and reflect on these issues further.

Constructive contaminations: spaces for knowledge politics from the local to the global

In the previous section, I traced a journey from research based in classical approaches to collective action from the study of social movements, adapted to the study of broad civil society coalitions and impacts on EU decisions, through to the study of heterogenous local communities and their framings of environmental stewardship and benefit-sharing. That rather smoothed-over account pointed to the importance of local knowledges in the conundrum of impacts on decision-making systems. In reality, that journey was tangled and difficult and led in many different directions. One of those directions stemmed from the idea about the 'real world' impact of local action – impact on the actual lived experience of environmental governance beyond regulatory decisions. To navigate this, literature that can loosely be placed in the spheres of political ecology and environmental justice was key. This work teaches us about local knowledge of different kinds – about land, about communities, about ecosystems, and more – often rooted in worldviews, cosmovisions, or ontologies that deviated from the more 'usual', prominent, Enlightenment-based Western discourses around development, progress, and science (e.g. Agyeman et al., 2016, Escobar, 1998; Martinez-Alier, 2003; Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2020; Uggla, 2010; Ulloa, 2019; Whyte, 2013). Local communities in Argentina, for example, constructed their action around lithium mining around their worldviews and knowledge of the cycles of salt formation on their land, while traditional healers based their claims on the sustainable nature of their knowledge and harvesting of medicinal plants, and Greek pastoralists on their unique understanding of climate change on their island ecosystem and its culture (Parks, 2020).

The importance of knowledge rooted in different worldviews as constitutive of local community action and claims stretched across these disparate communities, as did the fact that many of the problems they experienced were rooted in a lack of

recognition, appreciation, or understanding of their knowledge (e.g. Whyte, 2013; Rodríguez and Inturias, 2018; Forest Peoples Programme, 2020). It was this that led me towards literature on political ecology and environmental justice, as sources for the constructive contamination of my understandings emanating from key political sociological approaches. Summing these up in a few words is impossible, but some of the central themes are as follows. First, a uniting thread across critical scholarship is that a hegemonic worldview rooted in capitalism and colonialism underpins environmental governance from the local to the global. This places economic gain before other values, and colonialist relationships forged around market purposes damage local approaches – knowledges – about social organization that do not privilege economic gain (e.g. Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2020). The capitalist worldview is equally rooted in the nature/culture divide: the understanding of 'nature' or 'the environment' as separate from 'society' or 'culture', and thus as an inert set of resources rather than more-than-human life (e.g. Escobar, 1998; Uggla, 2010). This contrasts with holistic worldviews and accompanying traditional ecological knowledge systems that are relational and bound up with culture, and inclusive of multiple forms of life (Uggla, 2010; Whyte, 2013; Ulloa, 2019). Knowledge looks very different in the hegemonic approach. It is linked to culture as separate from nature, and the scientific method originating in Enlightenment thought traditions (e.g. Long Martello and Jasanoff, 2004). This type of knowledge is seen as linked to an over-reliance on technological fixes in environmental governance, as well as the view that current models can be tweaked to allow for sustainable development, green economies, and the like. Following representatives of Indigenous and local communities, 'Overcoming dualism, separation and imbalances in relationships between humans and nature is central to addressing the biodiversity and health crises, including the rise of zoonotic diseases and pandemics. . . . Indigenous ways of knowing and being evoke and inspire new narratives and visions of culture and nature working together within a living and sacred Earth" (Forest Peoples Programme, 2020).

A real understanding of local knowledge was of course beyond my abilities as a European, white, political sociologist. Where I felt I could make some small contribution was by investigating multi-level political and discursive contexts to expose where ontological clashes were playing out, and where there was some space for different worldviews, at the international level. Though the picture painted in the critical literature described in the previous paragraph suggests almost insurmountable power asymmetries for local knowledges, socio-legal and legal scholarship, another source for interdisciplinary contamination, points to spaces for the potential disruption of these power-laden discourses. For example, the contributions of Indigenous and local community actors have been acknowledged in sites of global environmental governance since the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, potentially creating spaces for different types of knowledge (see, e.g. Schabus, 2017). The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) stands out in this respect, since it contains a specific article on the respect and recognition of traditional knowledge and is a key source on benefit-sharing and the recognition of local practices (e.g. Uggla, 2010; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021; Forest

People's Programme, 2020). It has long been a site of activism and advocacy by local communities and Indigenous Peoples to leverage in national and local struggles. Digging into the Convention's decisions to map its fast-changing discursive landscape, and the spaces, siloes, and limitations posed on local knowledges and worldviews was thus my next step. While others had of course tackled these questions, I wanted to take a comprehensive approach, using findings about the issues highlighted across the local studies I had carried out as the basis to map the discourses underpinning decisions on local communities and Indigenous Peoples. By analysing all the relevant decisions taken by the CBD since its beginnings, I was able to see where ontological clashes might take place, how the landscape had changed over time, and more. In short, I wanted to see where worldviews came into contact, and the potential changing conceptualizations of knowledge, and thus forms of decision-making, that might come about over time in a global governance arena. While socio-legal work provided overviews of the legal impacts of advocacy and activism (e.g. Marion Suiseeya, 2014), this approach allowed a political sociological overview of discursive impact driven by the views of communities.

The analysis revealed a great deal of rhetoric on recognition and participation (Parks, 2020). These were key elements raised by local communities and in the literature on EJ. The analysis also pointed to backpedalling after ground had been given in these areas, however, and to very limited spaces for the expression and acknowledgement of alternative worldviews (Parks, 2020). A nuanced view of the CBD emerged from a political sociology-inspired approach: one where some spaces were available to local knowledges, albeit in a curtailed way. Nevertheless, the amount of text devoted to ideas of participation was striking. To unpack this further, I conducted an inductive frame analysis – drawing again from key theories and tools in political sociology – to parse out the different meanings attached to it by the Convention. This revealed a plethora of meanings that had not been considered in other work where attention to the meanings attached to words and actions, and the ways that meaning can evolve over time, were less central. Two definitions of participation turned out to be steadily present over time – participation defined as local actors providing information about their knowledge directly to the Convention, and a view of local community actors and Indigenous Peoples as crucial in implementing biodiversity conservation. Attention to meaning and discursive space in an arena of global environmental governance thus revealed the potential of local knowledge to find some space, and maybe to wield some power.

Over time, then, a political sociology lens on how power unfolds in different arenas allowed me to see how political and discursive opportunities were evolving. Constructive contamination with other disciplines led to a better understanding of the power asymmetries faced by local knowledges in global environmental politics. This brings the journey to current work on transformation: transformation is needed, and transformative governance can produce EJ. How can we get to this destination? One impetus lies precisely in activism and building spaces for diverse knowledges. In ongoing work along with colleagues, we seek to push this further by looking at how different types of collective action that 'demand' and 'do' environmental governance in different ways can push for transformative change.[1] The

'demanding' path builds on the findings of social movement campaigns, illustrated here in the work on EU impacts, while the idea of 'doing' builds on the findings from local community research and about the importance and difficulties for local knowledges in the CBD. This work is ongoing, but so far points towards some promising findings. First, it reveals the agency of Indigenous Peoples and local communities obscured by the discourse analysis on CBD decisions, which focused on CBD discourse without looking at corresponding advocacy and activism by Indigenous Peoples that was shaping it. It is the long-term political advocacy of Indigenous Peoples that underpins the opening of discursive space in the CBD, including a recent discursive turn towards recognizing rights and other worldviews in stronger ways (Parks and Tsioumani, 2023). CBD decisions should cascade into effects on national and local opportunity structures, though the evidence for this is still scattered and needs further unpacking to see how meanings and spaces for action change. This research is a small but hopefully useful contribution at a time when environmental defenders are under great threat across the world: from violence and intimidation, or from a more general repression of environmental protests (Global Witness, 2024). This is an important time for political sociology to underline the crucial role of all kinds of civil society in constructing democracy, rights and freedoms, and to point to the need to listen carefully to and elevate different types of knowledge in the search for a just way through planetary crisis.

Discomfort, destabilization, and teaching a political sociology of transformation

Writing this kind of brief reflection on how our discipline of political sociology can move us forward to untangle the ever-new ways in which political power plays out in environmental governance institutions lends itself to a smoothed-out, selective account. Looking back helps us to see the logic in our research journeys, but it is also tempting to hide the mistakes, the messiness, and the many difficulties we encounter. To begin this brief reflection on how some of the findings I have presented here could speak to teaching practices, I want to explicitly acknowledge that. The research I have done over the years has been a great privilege, but aspects of it remain extractivist in the sense that it was not co-created and could have been better tailored to the needs of those that I worked with. I have sought to discuss this publicly in reflections with colleagues (Morgera et al., 2020), and to publish freely accessible research that unpacks the exercise of political and discursive power and points to spaces for change. This is perhaps where the broader contribution of political sociology is clear: its approaches allow us to uncover nuance that more formal accounts of governance may not grasp by taking a relational view of the ways that the powers wielded by different actors encounter and affect one another. Nevertheless, building research alongside those we work with, in particular less powerful actors, is the more just way forward, and this takes time and consideration. Looking back over this period of research also reminds me of the serious time and effort that constructive contamination takes, particularly where we need to engage carefully with disciplines that are new to us. Slow academia, it seems, is

necessary to understand, reflect, acknowledge where we have made mistakes, and think through ways forward.

The need for time to reflect and to engage with new knowledges is also key to the findings about transformation presented very briefly here. This is something that political sociologists can and should bring to their teaching, by seeking to destabilize some of the assumptions inherent in the knowledge of ourselves and our students in constructive ways that can lead them to reflect on the power of institutions. As political sociologists, we often teach students that have received an education in the classics of political theory and international relations, many of which depart from an idea of humankind as naturally unkind, uncooperative, and violent: a Hobbesian sense of the poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Opening to different worldviews and knowledges – including those acknowledged and incorporated into classical studies of civil society – can destabilize these assumptions and reveal the powerful ways they shape institutions (Graeber and Weingrow, 2021). Bringing greater varieties of knowledge into our teaching, helping students to sit with the discomfort and uncertainty this brings, and then allowing them to figure out how to make spaces for different kinds of knowledge, is one way of teaching a transformative political sociology.

Note

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