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Notes and queries

Ecology & Anthropology: A Field Without Future?

Dr. Gerald SchmidtPositive Ecology Project (www.positive-ecology.org)

Many disciplines take part in the discourse on sustainability. Sustainability science tends to focus on the side of nature and to misunderstand the human condition; social sciences tend to focus on their respective specialties and on “nature” as concept, but rarely take ecological reality into account. Environmental and ecological anthropology as disciplines that address both sides are in a peculiar position. They move beyond the dualism of nature-culture to a holistic view on ecological and cultural realities in their intrinsic connectedness. Their input will become more important as sustainability is considered in abstracted discussion (e.g. academic and activist discourse), but not in individually and (inter-) culturally relevant terms, as sustainability discourse looks towards practice as an issue of “the economy” and technology, but not as an aspect of culture (as world view and as normal way of life, of which the economy is only a subset).

Like conservation biology, eco-anthropology tends to be a crisis discipline. However, whereas it is species threatened with extinction that make up the crisis that requires conservation, ethnoecologies are the ‘threatened species’ of ecological anthropology. The challenge that the “objects” of eco-anthropology present is even more complicated than that of species conservation. After all, we encounter both forms of traditional environmental management that appear to be sustainable and forms of management that do not appear to be so – where there is a willing motion towards a Western, “modern” way of life and resistance to such development(s) – as well as combinations thereof. Whatever the exact situation, the result is that the crisis discipline provides a detailed chronicle of the problems, but not much more. As such, it could not have a future, certainly not a very interesting and important one. For example, it shares this fate with linguists’ studies of languages in a world of ever-decreasing linguistic diversity.

Environmental(ist) analyses, focusing on sustainability as a global issue, have led to expanded fields of anthropological inquiry. Yet prominent eco-anthropological studies rarely address situations outside of traditional anthropological settings. Research meant to inform potential futures, in particular, is hardly ever undertaken – the more salient lack of “future” in the discipline. For ecology, Palmer et al. (2004) have argued that the discipline could no longer be the science of nature without human involvement, but needs also to be the science that informs sustainability, i.e. shows how we can manage nature in ways that do not threaten ecological functioning. Their “ecology for a crowded planet” still misses the necessity of considering how humanity can ‘manage itself’ in order to achieve a transformation to sustainability. After all, we cannot only manage the environment while placing ever-increasing demands on it.

Anthropological and psychological findings will also have to be brought to bear on how we approach the cultural change of humanity towards sustainability (culture meant in its inclusive sense, from what are considered normal ways of life and of making a living to economics and technology, and the accompanying cognitive shifts). Eco-anthropology could greatly contribute to the analysis and actions towards such a transformation, in regards both to aspects of nature (local environmental management) and to aspects of culture (“cultural resources for sustainability,” ways of living and of making a living). After all, it is a discipline that has been analyzing both of these sides, but only in terms of what has been going on heretofore. It will yet be necessary for eco-anthropology to expand its perspective towards “futures.”

The relevant backdrop to this argument lies with the question of motivation for change. Or, put the other way around, it lies with the two challenges that support business-as-usual: First, the issue of denial versus involvement – the question “What do I need your environment for?”

(I have actually been asked that) – and secondly, the issue of positive visions of sustainable futures.

Denial is apparent in how environmentalist issues are oftentimes considered to be separate from the normal affairs of – “modern” (Western) – daily life. (As the “Cartesian” dualism of nature-culture, this separation is foundational to Western thought.) Each individual’s personal role and responsibility, as well as other stakeholders’ involvement, fall prey to denial as well (Opotow & Weiss 2000). In contrast, a transformation to sustainability will involve everyone, requiring deep cultural changes as involvement progresses. Secondly, on the flip side of denial as described above, environmentalist issues are considered a luxury that only the “modern,” well-off can afford to concern themselves with. ‘Developing’ countries supposedly needn’t pay attention to them, and if you wanted to be rich(er), you shouldn’t either. Actually, in varying configurations, sustainability is an issue that involves both ‘modern’ and ‘developing’ societies – it is ultimately a necessity for the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002).

The actual fallacy of such denial is easily, and has repeatedly been, shown (although it is not very popular to admit it, let alone reconsider economics on that basis). A case in point (particularly interesting because of its futuristic tinge): Were humanity to attempt longer-term space exploration (or terraforming, for that matter), it will require knowledge of ecological functioning and a ‘co-evolution’ of technology and ecology to provide for the astronauts’ needs. Both NASA and the ESA actually do have departments performing ecological research.

Staying on earth, examples for the inextricable linkage of human beings to this world abound. At the most basic level, the provision of basic sustenance stands in a dynamic relationship between ecosystem services, agriculture, and biodiversity. Water availability and quality is influenced by land cover and usage, not only geophysical conditions (and even these are influenced by life). Even for cultural identity, an increasingly important issue as globalization encroaches upon it, natural features play a role. Anthropology has been contributing to suggestions for futures by analyzing the conditions surrounding a civilization’s survival or collapse. In many cases, environmental factors do

appear to have played a large part alongside societal reactions to their change (Diamond 2005).

Motivation by positive, sustainability-oriented, visions for futures is a more complex issue still. The sustainable alternative, or rather: set of alternatives (e.g. with differential cultural and local-environmental ‘fittedness’), is not commonly presented as modern, progressive, and promising – in contrast to the alluring, even if “virtualist” (Carrier and Miller 1998), vision of cornucopian economists. Rather, it appears to entail the abandoning of amenities of modern life (for ‘developed’ countries) or the inability to ever attain them (for ‘developing’ countries), in favor of “the planet,” “the next generation(s),” or the like, thus fomenting de-motivation (Kaplan 2000).

Anthropology, at the very least, points out the diversity of salient aspects of life supported by different cultures. As Trouillot (2003:138f.) concludes, the capitalist(-only) ideology is “actually a choice” rather than a necessity, and “we owe it to ourselves and to our interlocutors to say loudly that we have seen alternative visions of humankind ... and that we know that this one may not be the most respectful of the planet we share, nor indeed the most accurate nor the most practical ... not the most beautiful nor the most optimistic.” Among other things, elements of Western culture as well as of other cultures support non-material aspects of a good life that may yet become instrumental in a shift away from consumerism, to ways of life which could easily be more conducive to happiness, as well as more amenable to sustainability (Kasser and Kanner, 2004).

Points such as this lie at the core of a possible “positive ecology” (Schmidt 2005), an approach oriented on the synergies between human long-term survival, short and long-term chances for a good life, and ecological sustainability, that arise with the deep relationships between human needs and global ecology. These make for the likelihood that sustainability-oriented ways of life – humanity in coexistence/coevolution with a biodiverse, sustainable ecosphere – are actually not detrimental to quality of life, but promising.

Analysis of only such relations is not enough. Their utilization in engaged science will be necessary as well. The danger of becoming (seen as) obsessed with control, of science for

sustainability turning into a political rather than a scientific endeavor, certainly is inherent in such a call. The approach, however, is not to give up the orientation on the scientific method, but rather the opposite: to consider empirically – but also inform the practice of cultural change with – the width and depth of relations between human beings and (or rather: within) 'nature,' between survival, a good life, and sustainability.

Even the monist/contextualist perspective that eco-anthropology has been moving towards has hardly made its mark in sustainability discourse. It would be a valuable input nonetheless, as essentialist perspectives are still holding sway. It seems questionable, for example, whether human beings and biodiversity could coexist at all. The answer given is usually either “yes” or “no,” but a more truthful answer would be that “it depends.” The suggestion that eco-anthropology – ideally in a transdisciplinary way – consider what (future) “cultures of sustainability” could look like in different environmental and cultural contexts has scarcely been explored. Ultimately, however, the discipline may hold a key to its own and indeed to humanity’s future, as we all needed to move towards conditions more like those eco-anthropologists have been studying, i.e. at home in this world ecologically, culturally diverse, but united by our common humanity.

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