

In the woods – Work and organisation in socio-ecological relations and spaces

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Work constitutes a central social and economic activity and relation throughout history. Thus, its organisation is fundamental to understanding both historical and contemporary events, relations, contexts, and inequalities. Forests, forestry, and natural resource management are no exceptions to this. While the social aspect of forests and forestry has been highlighted in recent decades, the attention to work and organisations, from a social perspective, has decreased during the same period – especially in the northern context. Partly due to the restructuring of forestry work, technical aspects have become more dominant in forest-related work science. However, recent research has highlighted the importance of understanding work and organisations, and their specific institutional settings and logics, for transformative change and effective policy implementation. For example, the IPCC has concluded that knowledge is not a sufficient driver for actions on climate change; due to this, the implementation of climate actions to date has been relatively limited. A criticism of the IPCC is that its focus has been on what should happen rather than how this might be achieved/implemented. The labour process – e.g. the division of labour, control, skills, value, resistance, and agency (and their intersection with other dimensions of power) – constitutes the more or less stable battleground of implementation, and is a fruitful source of knowledge.

In a natural resource setting, the socio-ecological relations of work, the structuring of human and natural activities, and the interrelation between social, material, and economic processes and categories (e.g. gender, class, and ethnicity) and nature are fundamental for critically engaging in research. This requires a workable conception of these relations that goes beyond a binary understanding of society and nature. In this, modes of representation and constructions of socio-ecological spaces constitute prevailing articulations of power, which intersect with work and socio-ecological narratives, relations, and agencies in specific ways. A good example of this is the tendency in nature conservation discourses to construct nature as something separate from society and thereby exclude/marginalise labour. When nature is produced as a space for either leisure/recreation or production, through e.g. technologies and narratives, labour is rendered invisible or as the “other” in relation to nature. The structuring of socio-ecological relations in this specific way not only contributes to a false dualism but also causes labour, and its specific relations and forms of interaction with nature, to be excluded as a source of knowledge – (bodily) knowledge and insights that constitute a vital basis for the development of sustainable management and environmental actions and ethics.

Overlooking the ecological and social impact of labour, as well as the implications of political, environmental, and economic actions, undermines narratives and policies on labour, the socio-ecological understanding of the landscape, and its history and relations. The separation and representation of socio-ecological spaces creates territories – symbolic and material spaces – which enables intervention by displacing, enclosing, and commodifying them in specific ways. It also contributes to the separation of environmental concerns from their broader political, economic, and institutional drivers. By trapping the political imagination in a binary reality and rendering environmental issues “manageable” in specific ways, it risks simply reproducing specific socio-ecological relations while concealing inequalities and oppressions. To create new and sustainable relationships with nature, the sustainable common management of natural resources and environmental and social justice need to go hand in hand. This means that the perspective of work and organisation in natural resource and environmental research has a crucial role to play in systematically and theoretically challenging, transcending, and deconstructing both social categories (e.g. gender) and political narratives (e.g. “green”/“bio” economy and sustainability) by engaging with the structures, technologies, and practices of power and their violent production of difference and domination.