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Negotiating sustainabilities in applied geography: treading an uneven path

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the ways in which geographers have engaged with the concept and practice of sustainability and the lessons that we might learn from commentaries on the application of geographical ideas in the field of public policy. First, the essay highlights the need to question our academic relationship with a 'slippery' concept such as sustainability. Second, it examines the role of geographers in generating impact for sustainability causes and what we might expect to be our role. Third, the essay argues for a revitalized 'scholar-activist' approach that draws upon the vocational role of geographers in local environmental contexts.

KEYWORDS

Geography; sustainability; applied research

The emergence of sustainable development as a formally defined and institutionalized term (United Nations, 1992; WCED, 1987) represented a form of 're-set' for research in applied geography, which had traditionally been concerned with human-physical dimensions of a range of individualized ecological problems, environmental pollution, uneven economic development, social inequalities and health concerns (McCormick, 1989). We ought not to underestimate the importance of this moment in the early late 1980s and early 1990s, where the global political initiative of Agenda 21 was launched to render environmental concerns knowable and apparently resolvable through the term sustainability (Eflin, 2004; Pearce, 1988). The result of such a high-profile initiative and its inscription in national and local government strategies through Local Agenda 21 (Selman, 1998), adopted by 178 governments at the 1992 Rio Conference, has led geographers to become entwined in the sustainability agenda in multiple ways and at different scales, through both their research and teaching (Fu, 2020; Liverman, 2018; Moseley, 2018). In the UK context, alongside these developments have come the accelerated pressures (and opportunities) associated with the rapid evolution of research impact agendas (Research Excellence Framework, 2021), the re-configuration of government funding initiatives to promote interdisciplinary funding on sustainability (UKRI, 2021) and resultant re-organizations of university research themes and institutes to respond to this shifting landscape.

In this essay, I examine three contemporary challenges for geographers working in the field of sustainability from the perspective of key commentators on applied geography

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and those from critical geography who have more provided salient learning on the opportunities and pitfalls of researching sustainability. I begin by tackling an issue that Ackerman (1962), Robinson (2004) and latterly Moseley (2018) highlighted, which concerns the intellectual integrity and ethics of sustainability from a critical geography perspective. I then engage with the insights of Owens (2005) on the nature of 'influence' and explore how impact agendas frequently demand rapid and verifiable 'results' that pull researchers into projects that specify outcomes (e.g. 'helping to deliver on the *Net Zero* agenda for climate change'). Finally, and reflecting on these issues, I consider the possibilities of working locally (Banks & MacKian, 2000) through the position of the scholar-activist (Burgess, 2005) and what geographers have more recently demonstrated about the opportunities of collaborating with publics.

I start with the challenge of whether we ought to even be adopting the narrative and implications of sustainability in our research. This goes to the heart of how geographers make decisions about what they do, what they take responsibility for (Boyle et al., 2020) and how they may need to reconcile strongly held ecological values with the practical messiness of exerting influence (Pacione, 2004). Despite its foundational importance, this is an issue that is less often debated as a substantive point. Rather, sustainability is a 'given' in the lexicon of most applied geographers, featuring in many university research group names. To illustrate the point, in the inaugural article of the *Geography and Sustainability* journal, Fu (2020, p. 1) echoes a call made some sixteen years earlier by Eflin (2004) that the characteristics of geography lead naturally to an active engagement with sustainability. Moreover:

Geographers have the responsibility of promoting the discipline as the key pathway for carrying natural and social sciences towards sustainability.

At one level, this statement appears unproblematic because of the saturation of sustainability as normalized discourse. Yet we need to unpack this assumption in several ways. First, we should acknowledge the ways in which geographers have critiqued the notion of (sustainable) development from a variety of perspectives (Watts, 1993), highlighting the role of power relations, rhetoric, discourse and narrative in formulating the normative assumptions around developmental agendas. More recent interventions have explicitly critiqued the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) and their reincarnation in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Liverman, 2018; Moseley, 2018; Sultana, 2018), with Nightingale (2018) arguing for a critical appraisal of the social, political and ecological consensus surrounding their SDG's and a recognition of the lived experience of humans beyond the statistics of development metrics.

These recent interventions have much in common with the seminal critique of sustainable development provided by Robinson (2004, p. 376) who noted the profound challenges for geographers seeking to work with a concept that is politically implicated and employs a discrete set of values that favour forms of ecological modernization and a renewed focus on economic growth narratives:

The concern here is that sustainable development is seen as reformist, but it mostly avoids questions of power, exploitation, even redistribution. The need for more fundamental social and political change is simply ignored. Instead, critics argue, proponents of sustainable development offer an incrementalist agenda that does not challenge any existing entrenched powers or privileges.

Accordingly, in taking responsibility for what we do, we must be mindful that the concepts with which we work are value-laden and that 'carrying towards' sustainability is not without consequence (Pacione, 2004). As I was reminded in a recent anonymous review of a journal article, sustainability is deeply implicated with the maintenance of capitalist economies and the internal and external inequalities these perpetuate (Nightingale, 2018). We ought not to avoid, as Robinson (2004) notes, of asking whether we are perpetuating incrementalist narratives through an uncritical adopting of sustainability and in this way we can draw on the rich interventions provided from critical geographical perspectives (see the article forum in *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Volume 8, Part 2, 2018).

To illustrate this point with a contemporary example, we can learn from commentators on the role of geographers working on the latest manifestation of sustainability as ecological modernization: smart systems and urbanisms (Kitchin, 2016). Smart cities have many facets but one that connects to geographical debates on applied geography is highlighted by Bulkeley and Castán Broto (2013) who discuss urban experimentation as sites of sustainability innovation, many of which seek to engage publics in diagnosing urban metabolisms and testing new technologies. Indeed, before the rise of the smart cities concept, Cummins (2003, p. 222) commented positively on the possibilities for experimental geographies as:

... a fertile hunting ground for countering claims of geography's irrelevance in policy terms and [which could] open up areas of research that makes a difference to policy debate.

Yet geographers working in this field encounter a series of tensions and anxieties that have much in common with the warnings issued by Beaumont et al. (2005) about clientelistic relationships, in which researchers may (inadvertently) be used to legitimize politicized efforts to deliver a particular vision of the urban. This has arisen because of the particular manifestation of smart city initiatives that present technologically utopian views of the city (Cugurullo, 2021) and the 'engagement' of publics through atomized and rational actor paradigms (Barr et al., 2021). Navigating this terrain is tricky and in response to these concerns, Kitchin (2013) has built on Beamont et al.'s (2005) pragmatic argument (and echoes Ackerman's (1962) sentiments) through arguing that there are opportunities for engagement that need not lead to a wholesale dis-engagement with the new data sciences underpinning smart cities. Specifically, Kitchin (2013) frames geography's role specifically as a constructive critic of how 'big data' are used through reflecting on epistemological, methodological and ethical questions in data science. These stem from concerns about the narrow logistical positivist assumptions underlying the conceptualization of human behaviour in urban contexts, the representation of such behaviour through quantitative models, and the positioning of publics as passive consumers of information. As Kitchin (2013, p. 266) notes:

Given the philosophical debates within human geography over the past 60 years, the discipline is well positioned to engage in such reflection and to plot a path forward that draws on thinking in critical and qualitative GIS, radical statistics and mixed-method approaches.

If, as Liverman (2018) has compelling argued, geographers are able to chart a pragmatic path as a 'constructive critic' of modern incarnations of sustainable development, much of the daily work for researchers lies in the production of impact from their discrete

projects and the engagement of a variety of potential users. The emergence of research impact as an essential component of UK Government research funding (REF, 2021) has created new narratives of influence, measurement and metrics for sustainability research that arguably privilege certain kinds of research practice; for example, the delivery of rapid impacts with high-profile stakeholders through quantifiable measures (Khazragui & Hudson, 2015; Watermeyer & Hedgecoe, 2016). Indeed, these have become progressively prescribed by research funders, who have defined particular categories of impact (UKRI, 2021) and systems for accounting for these (Research Fish, 2021).

There are two issues at stake for geographers. The first was identified by Phillips (2010) who articulated the dangers associated with geographers' interpretation of impact agendas that appear to prioritize and create false tensions between forms of pure ('curious') and applied ('practical') research. Rather, he argued for contributions that were derived from our intellectual curiosity and as such were constructively critical of what impact might mean. Yet this is a lesson that has sometimes gone unheeded as geographers working on sustainability are frequently swept along in the tide of policy-driven initiatives and the pressure from universities to gain research income and demonstrate impacts that are deemed verifiable.

This connects to a second issue that the impact agenda raises for sustainability research. Owens (2005, p. 291) argued that the apparent urgency to 'see results' should not overshadow a broader understanding of the knowledge exchange process:

If we look for 'direct hits' and short-term action generation, we must not always but often conclude that our efforts bear little fruit. If, on the other hand, we acknowledge the potential for subtle effects, and pay attention to the processes through which ideas come into good currency, knowledge 'creeps' into policy, and what is thinkable begins to change, we see that academic endeavour, alongside other factors, can indeed 'make a difference.

We should therefore consider it worth reflecting on the ways in which we as geographers write our impact plans and design our metrics of influence without due recognition to the organics of creeping policy change. In other words, we need to evaluate what we define as an influence (which might be as much about a process as much as deliverables) and how we can evaluate the role of such influence (which may come in forms that are qualitatively discernible rather than objectively measurable).

My final argument is about where we may be able to have the most rewarding influence but where the scalability and measurability is less clear. This seeks to learn the lessons provided by a group of geographers working on environmental controversies, drawing initially on Banks and MacKian's (2000) and Burgess's (2005) reflections on 'influence'; the part we can play in local situations and where our contributions may therefore be vocational rather than instrumental as 'scholar-activists'. In this way, we need to consider the role that academics might play through organizing, curating, motivating and synthesizing in the context of local controversies. Banks and MacKian (2000) were responding to Peck's (1999) frustration at geography's lack of apparent influence and highlighted that much of our work is about working intensively alongside publics, local authorities, charities and voluntary interest groups to develop situated knowledge and approaches to sustainability. This kind of work has to some extent been overlooked in the rush towards the 'reach and significance' of impact generation that funders and employers require. Yet the point is that this is where we might, as geographers working in place-based institutions, have the most effective role. Consider for a moment the work of Lane et al. (2011) and Whatmore (2009) in their involvement in a local flood prevention controversy in Pickering, Yorkshire. This involved an intense engagement with publics and scientists that was deliberately *not* about adding to extant technical knowledge or testing a model on a community; rather, it was concerned with managing, negotiating and helping others to curate understandings through:

... ways in which the creative potential of 'knowledge controversies' can be positively harnessed in the practice of interdisciplinary public science. (Lane et al., 2011, p. 16)

Such forms of enablement (Barr & Woodley, 2019) deploy geographical expertise through contesting the very boundaries of established knowledge, hierarchies and practices that may have reduced our influence with publics in the past through reinforcing knowledge hierarchies and lines of intellectual authority. In this way, we might as geographers also learn to become more comfortable with ourselves as scholar-activists and advocates (Sultana, 2018) who are able to follow the evidence and arguments 'where they lead' (Burgess, 2005). This requires us to appreciate that our influence can be both deep and profound at the micro scale, based on cultivating trusted relationships that can lead to transformational understandings within localized communities of practice. Such work requires us to not only use our academic training but also to develop skills in facilitation, negotiation and hospitality to provide safe and creative spaces for collaboration.

To conclude, this excavation of commentaries on applied geography and sustainability raises three concerns that researchers need to reflect upon. The first is that we take the politicized and institutionalized narrative of sustainability seriously through our work (Robinson, 2004), noting the important contributions and reservations highlighted critics of (sustainable) development discourse (Moseley, 2018; Watts, 1993). Kitchin (2013) and Liverman (2018) have both proposed the idea of being a critical influence on the trends from other disciplines and political influences that might unquestioningly adopt the sustainability as a form of ecological modernization. As geographers, we have a responsibility to be present but not to be silent. Second, in the milieu that surrounds grant applications, tenders, bids and impact statements, we should recall the advice of Phillips (2010) and Owens (2005) that it is our geographical curiosity and the insights which arise organically from our scholarship that may have the longest impact, even if this does not 'fit' the instrumental metric of transient impact agendas. Third, we ought not to forget the rewarding nature of being embedded as a scholar-activist in our local setting (Burgess, 2005; Sultana, 2018), where our involvement may be more vocational than instrumental - as facilitator, curator, organizer, supporter ... and perhaps tea maker!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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