

The nature of urban sociology

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“Where are the trees?”

Anne Haila

“Sundered apart, nature and society die in reciprocal conceptual torpor.”

(Smith 2006: xiii).

Into the trees

When Anne Haila visited Toronto at one occasion in 2008, we took her and other visiting colleagues on a tour of the city’s inner suburbs. Standing on a barren parking lot in the inner suburb of North York looking at surrounding high rise rental buildings studded with satellite dishes betraying those buildings’ new immigrant inhabitants looking for signals from a distant elsewhere, Anne asked: “Where are the trees?”. The Torontonians among us were puzzled, some perhaps offended by that question because for one, Toronto prides itself of being a lush and green city, leafy neighbourhoods being the norm. But also, we were in the suburbs which, by some definition, are supposed to be green and full of domesticated vegetation. We locals saw trees all around us.

The impetus to Anne’s observation became clearer to me when I later remembered she had once taken me to Espoo, a suburban city near Helsinki, not unlike those that surrounded Toronto: modern in style and architecture, a layout meant to accommodate the private automobile but, surely, a settlement with more visible green. “Finns believe they live in a forest,” Anne told me then. The notion lingered with me.

This observation raises various questions. What can an urban sociology of nature (or alternatively a sociology of urban nature) be? How do we imagine our societal relationships with nature? Do we see the forest from the city or the city from the forest? What difference does it make? Do those of us who live in leafy

suburbs and, if we are lucky, have country cottages, ignore what Anne saw: that the inner suburbs are denuded of foliage, un-green, lifeless in appearance because we don't see the (missing) trees for the forest of our tree lined inner city streets?

Into Urban Science

My intersection with Anne Haila led yet to a second way of thinking about the urban-nature divide. Between 2003 and 2005, Anne asked me to be a workshop organizer for a European Science Foundation (ESF) Forward Look on Urban Science which she spearheaded. My area of responsibility was the theme of Urban Risk and Environment and the associated event was held in Leipzig, Germany, in 2004. Working on Urban Political Ecology at the time, it came easy to me that an intellectually and methodologically integrated approach to the relationship of urban societies and natures be found. But, not surprisingly, for many different ontological and epistemological reasons – like “they count objective things (meaning natural scientists), we (social scientists) deal with the agency of humans” – most urban social scientists insisted that there was an unreconcilable rift between society and nature and the knowledge systems we muster to explain their dynamics. Still, the report Anne wrote for the ESF (Haila 2008) contained the admission that not only did we have to find ways to talk across the rift. It even encouraged us to think of “ecology [as] one example of an interdisciplinary field of study” (ibid. 37) which “questions the dualistic thinking that has isolated physical and social phenomena” (ibid. 37). And Haila concludes rather emphatically: “Urban political ecology calls for new ways of thinking about cities as socio-ecological hybrids. It regards the ‘urban’ as a complex, multiscale and multidimensional set of processes and builds on notions such as urban metabolism and ecological footprints” (2008, 38). Different from “urban ecology” (Breuste 2001) which understands itself as influenced by human ecology and landscape ecology, urban *political* ecology recognizes more directly the significance of power and capital, but also of race, gender and other social factors in the structuring of the relationships of nature and society in cities.

Importantly, in the climate emergency we are experiencing at this moment, few voices would deny the crucial relevance of coming to terms conceptually and practically with the divide of the urban and the natural. This has now become a major theme in urban research overall which has, among other things led to the question, which is headlining a forthcoming special issue of *Urban Studies*: “Why does everyone think cities can save the planet?” (Angelo and Wachsmuth forthcoming).

The conundrum that Anne tasked me with 15 years ago stuck with me as I kept thinking more deeply about the intellectual project of urban political ecology

(UPE). In this context, I propose – honoring Anne’s magnificent contribution to the discipline of urban sociology – that UPE can be interpreted as a “sociology of nature.” That there is such a thing as a sociology of nature has first been put forth in a classical paper by Phil Macnaghten and John Urry more than 20 years ago in the journal *Sociology*. While the idea was not entirely novel at the time, the paper presented a first comprehensive overview of the sociological literature dealing with nature and environment and it tried to set a scientific agenda which they made out “to decipher the social implications of what has always been the case, namely, a nature elaborately entangled and fundamentally bound up with the social” (Macnaghten and Urry 1995, 218). With this in mind, I turn to Henri Lefebvre’s notion of “completely urbanized society” or “urban society” (2003). What I am proposing here, is that the sociology of nature that UPE presents for urban society as it emerges today, has to be guided by an ontology in which the urban is not alien to nature but the condition of its existence and vice versa. This seems particularly relevant as extended urbanization spreads into heretofore never urbanized territory and the boundaries of cities become perforated thoroughly (Tzaninis et al. forthcoming). The conditions under which the density of socio-ecological relationships, the fabric of the suburbanizing political ecology and the character of the “sociology of nature” in around the urban world reveal themselves to point to the radical diversity of experience in different instances of what I call, channeling Lefebvre, a completely sub/urbanized society. The binary view of historic city and undeveloped nature that underlies much of public and academic discourse on urbanization and nature – here’s the city, there is nature – is a poor starting point for the mobilization of a ‘sociology of nature’ for urban society in the 21st century. Instead, the models we need to use are more complex. The double movement of seeing leaving the conceptual *city* for the conceptual *urban* and of breaking down the ontological divide of urban society and nature immediately makes any “methodological city-ism” impossible (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015).

For critical urban thinkers, it has always been easier to think of spatializing social thought than allowing nature to play a role in how we think about our social world. In his insightful introduction to the 2003 English edition of Henri Lefebvre’s *The Urban Revolution*, Neil Smith noted: “In clear contradistinction to his treatment of space, nature for Lefebvre seems radically closed as a venue of political change” (2003, xv). Certainly, Lefebvre, like many of his contemporaries, condemned the tendency of environmentalists to obfuscate issues of social justice (see on this also typically Enzensberger 1974). But Lefebvre clearly did not give up on nature as a screen onto which critical or even revolutionary thinking could be projected. We know now, and can re-evaluate Lefebvre and Smith in this light, that capitalist accumulation and the politics related to capital switching

into the environmental sector have grown so exponentially since the 1960s that the production of second nature as a form of the production of space was going to be much more important and the basis for much political unrest and deliberation. This reevaluation would happen, a few decades later, through UPE.

What, then, are some of the principles involved in making nature subject to critical urban thinking? It needs to be planetary, extended, plural and decentred. The trope of the *planetary* has received much treatment in urban theory lately. When I refer to it here, I have in mind the fact that the urban can now only be understood in its world-encompassing context. This doesn't mean there is no rural or countryside left, and this doesn't mean we are all in one uniform city. But we live in urban society. Our thinking needs to be *extended* because that urban society is now one of constantly changing peripheries. Yes, the core holds and we need to critically assess its relationships with nature because they reach to the far corners of the world. But we are a suburban planet, and our attention needs to turn to that. Our thinking needs to be *plural* as we have to recognize there is no one way to fight the climate emergency and come out a more just urban world on the other side. We need all the advice we can get and we need to mobilize critical knowledges that have heretofore been marginalized in the academy and in policy. This, lastly means we must be sourcing our theoretical tools in a *decentred* manner – turning away from the city and away from the West – if we want to understand the urban natures that need to concern us today.

This brings us back to the trees. Where will we find them? In the city. But they will not be in the forest. They will be in the urban society that we inhabit together. I am grateful to Anne Haila for making me think more clearly about this question. She asked it for all of us.

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