
15. Gender, nature, body

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INTRODUCTION: GENDER, NATURE, BODY

The need to link together uneven gender relations with the exploitation of nature and the abuse of bodies deemed ‘other’ is now well established, yet often overlooked in scholarship about rural economies and extractivism. In this chapter, we examine contemporary thought on gender, nature and body to suggest how these debates can push the boundaries of critical agrarian studies in exciting new directions. We argue that when the co-production of genders, natures and bodies is taken seriously, critical agrarian studies can more readily engage beyond staid debates about sustainability and neoliberalizing economies to think through wider transformations. By expanding concerns for rural economies and extractivism towards the emancipatory politics of life-worlds, research can shift to the more-than-human entanglements that promote justice, equality and alternative forms of knowing and acting in the world (Hall et al. 2015).

Gender is a misused word in agrarian studies, too often associated with ‘just’ women’s issues or confined to intra-household dynamics. In this chapter, we draw from feminist theorists who use gender as an analytical apparatus to capture how the exercise of power differentially subjects men and women, and intersects with other forms of marginalization to produce multiple subjectivities (Butler 1990; Young 2002; Nightingale 2011). As such, we do not associate gender with women, nor feminism with specific social movements. Rather, by examining how intersectional subjectivities circumscribe access to, control over and the distribution of resources and knowledge-making about agrarian change, this kind of analysis illuminates the connections between social injustices and the uneven material conditions of people’s lives (Elmhirst 2011; Nightingale 2011, 2014). It demonstrates how power-laden economic and social relations within agrarian and environmental agendas subject diverse bodies, environments and ways of being. Such relations promote an ‘othering’ of people and nature, and an exclusion of anything that does not fit into a neoliberal model of growth, productivity and efficiency (Laurie and Bondi 2006; Harcourt and Nelson 2015).

We thus argue that uneven gender relations and their entanglements with bodies and natures are of concern for critical agrarian studies at a more fundamental level than simply uneven access to and control over resources. *Gender* is an excellent starting point for analysing the operation of power from the scale of the body to the global political economy. Additionally, too often domination of other humans goes hand in hand with the domination of nature. *Nature* is a term we use to encompass the entangled relations of cultural, social and economic processes, species, and objects that constitute the world. Society is constituted within nature, not separate from it, something captured conceptually in the term ‘socio-nature’. A focus on transformation refers to cultural, social and economic relations, as well as more-than-human relations, to provide a fuller accounting of the costs of extractivism and the neoliberalization of rural economies. As a powerful site of cultural meaning, social experience and political resistance, *the body* is an important scale wherein dimensions of power are played out. Attention

to the body has significant implications for critical agrarian studies by allowing research to recognize how corporal and emotional relations shape rural transformations. Feminists conceptualize the body as the first place or scale where exposure to risks and labour demands are experienced, as well as where ‘global capitalism writes its script’ (Mohanty 2003, 235). Therefore, body politics has looked at how different social, cultural and/or environmental struggles have been fought on the body, making visible the hidden implications of political economies (Harcourt 2016). By taking corporal experiences more seriously, scholars can show how the everyday lived experiences and emotional dimensions of rural transformations are constitutive of resulting political economies.

THINKING THROUGH GENDER, NATURE, BODY

Within agrarian studies, Carmen Diana Deere and others argued decades ago that gender and race need to be considered alongside class when evaluating uneven relations of production and reproduction among peasant households (Deere and Léon de Leal 1981; Radcliffe 1990). Feminist political ecology subsequently added an explicit focus on how uneven social relations resulted in differential access to, distribution of, control over and knowledge of natural resources (Rocheleau et al. 1996). Since the 1990s, this analysis of how the operation of power through intersectional relations of gender, race, class, ethnicity and other social relations of difference shape transformations in nature, societies and economies has been a central contribution of feminist scholarship to agrarian questions (Elmhirst 2002, 2011; Tsing 2005; Nightingale 2006, 2014). In contrast to mainstream agrarian studies therefore, taking gender-nature-body as core concerns places multi-scalar questions of knowledge, neoliberal capitalism, the management of natural resources and sustainability at the forefront of questions of class, agriculture, ecology, politics and economics. These concerns insist that we ask about whose knowledge counts when defining how resources should be managed, and how access to and control over resources produce uneven social and ecological effects. We now turn to a more careful consideration of the concepts – gender, nature, body – to show how these concerns help focus agrarian research on social justice and emancipatory questions.

Gender

Gender is fundamentally a relational concept that helps to explain how social difference based on presumed biological sexual characteristics arises and is perpetuated over time and space (Butler 1990; Young 2002). Following Butler (1990), we advocate for a performative conception of gender. By this we mean that the political, cultural and social meanings and practices of gender are not static, but are rather continually reproduced, challenged and transformed as power is exercised (Nightingale 2006, 2011). This insight is crucial. A narrow focus on the gendered division of labour fails to capture how these relations change over space and time, with significant consequences for the exercise of power.

To take a current example, women in Nepal have started ploughing fields after generations of only men doing such work. This change is the result of the out-migration of men in search of wage labour (Adhikari and Hobley 2015) and other social-cultural changes. Conceptions of gender that begin from a more fixed understanding of gender differences emphasize the extraordinary act of women ploughing and assume that their work burdens must have

increased. This has been the focus of the so-called feminization of agriculture discussions in South Asia to date (Bieri 2014). While such issues are important empirical questions for research, a performative conception of gender raises additional questions about the consequences for self-determination, the control over production, the ability to assert needs and desires within the household and other aspects of so-called ‘women’s empowerment’ that a shift in the symbolic meaning of gender opens up (Nightingale 2006). From a critical agrarian studies perspective, therefore, more profound questions need to be asked about how power relations between men and women change because of the pragmatic need for women to plough, and *also* about the implications of such changes in the symbolism of ploughing and gender in terms of access to resources, control over production and transformations in agrarian environments. The most important consequence of women ploughing is not necessarily that their work burdens have changed, but rather how such changes shift the operation of power within agrarian societies.

This approach to gender relations in agrarian contexts insists that power is never refracted through gender alone. Race, class, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality and other embodied aspects of social difference intersect to shape how power operates to produce inequalities and hierarchies within societies. Conceptions of intersectionality draw from Butler’s (1990) performative understanding to think about subjectivities rather than individuals or identities (Nightingale 2011). The subject is an abstract concept that captures how power operates to subject individuals and populations in particular ways, and as such is not reducible to individual identities. These forms of subjection often manifest in the labels we find so convenient (gender, race, etcetera), though they are in fact contested and re-performed in everyday life. Dimensions of social difference continually shape each other, which means that multiple, overlapping subjectivities are the norm. For example, Horvorka (2015) shows how women, chickens, gender relations and class relations all transform together as new forms of production are embraced (poultry rearing) in rural Botswana.

Such studies illuminate not only how gender is inadequate on its own to understand uneven access to and control over resources in agrarian societies, but also how gender itself is always embedded within race, caste and class (Nightingale 2006). Gendered identities make no sense outside of their racialized dimensions, a point which is valid well beyond households and communities (Mollett and Faria 2013). For example, Juanita Sundberg shows how not only are gender and class relations challenged in a women’s non-governmental organization associated with a conservation area in Latin America, but also that relations of race and the geopolitics of conservation and development interventions shape how social relations and ecologies transform the rural political economy (Sundberg 2004; see also De La Cadena 2010). Feminists thus argue that the current form of the global economy, and agrarian societies by extension, have been produced by relations of power that are simultaneously racialized, gendered and classed: indeed, they argue that gender-race-class are foundational.

Gender relations must therefore be analysed as operating on different scales (Harris 2008) – from the body to the global – creating specific meanings of femininity and masculinity, affective more-than-human relations, as well as differential access to material resources. As processes of enclosure and dispossession accelerate and extend across the world, taking a performative perspective on gender opens up a broader set of questions for critical agrarian studies. Class, race and gender differences can profoundly affect which crops are planted, who is responsible, the kind of technologies used to prepare fields and conduct harvests and how products reach markets (Carney 1996; Freidberg 2001). While some scholars have taken up

these issues, the ways in which these intersectional relations are entangled in changing ecologies has been largely neglected. These more-than-human questions also suggest the need to open up our second concept: nature.

Nature

Current discussions of nature take two related but somewhat separate tacks. First, political ecologists draw attention to the importance for critical agrarian studies of what ends up in the category 'nature'. Claiming something as natural (or unnatural) is a powerful mechanism to deflect attention from the constructed divide between society and nature. This divide is never innocent, as it shapes which people, species, ecosystems and agrarian practices are considered important topics of investigation. Research in conservation, for example, has highlighted how concerns for biodiversity and habitat preservation overprivilege large, charismatic mammals at the expense of worms, insects and microorganisms that are equally important to overall ecosystem health and function (Lorimer 2006).

Second, socionature theorists frame nature as a socially constructed, dynamic domain, both biophysically and in terms of what it is imagined to be (Haraway 1991; Castree and Braun 2001). The concept of 'socionatures' retheorizes nature and society to take both as contingent, dynamic and linked materially and symbolically: in short, co-emergent. By beginning with the intrinsically political character of power and difference, socionatural approaches include equity and justice issues in environmental change processes (Sundberg 2014). Numerous case studies in agrarian contexts have shown how gender, race, class and other intersectional social differences take on meaning, and how they change in importance as environmental and resource conflicts erupt (Nightingale 2006; Harris 2008). Similarly, struggles over intersectional subjectivities and the exercise of power often underpin the emergence of resource conflicts (Peluso 2009). 'Environmental issues, therefore, are not simply about environment, with perhaps some unfortunate social justice implications. They are foundational to how inequality is conceptualized and [reproduced] within societies and across scales' (Nightingale 2014, 10). Society and nature are thus not separate interacting domains, but are rather constituted by, and make sense analytically only in relation to, one another.

Agricultural production always involves substantial realignments of what belongs and what needs to be excluded or even eradicated. How seed selection is done, the types of inputs used, pest and weed control measures are all rooted in particular socionatural relations and carry real consequences. For example, Susanne Freidberg (2004) shows the entanglements of ecologies, colonial histories, plant types, global supply chains and consumer health by looking at the production and consumption of French green beans. She shows how differing consumer choices in Europe shape the kinds of ecologies and production practices that exist in former British and French colonies. Rather than green beans being simply beans, she shows how their emergence as commodities is dependent on socionatural relations that are not easily pried apart. These relations result in food scares and differing perceptions of what good food is. Such insights demand that critical agrarian studies consider more than simply the global circulation of capital, but also the transformation of more-than-human relations through agrarian production.

Body

Understanding the social and material transformations of agrarian environments requires a grasp of race, class, gender and nature, and also embodiment and emotion. Not only is power often exercised on bodies, but the body itself offers a powerful site of resistance and transformation (Harcourt 2009; Mollett and Faria 2013). Of particular relevance for critical agrarian studies, feminist political ecology scholars show how interlinked changes in agrarian economies, environments, production and other rural transformations are often felt first, and most profoundly, on and within the body. The effects of changes in global food chains show up on bodies as work burdens or changes in access to food, and new chemical inputs cause cancers or other health hazards. In understanding the body as a location of resistance and agency, the interconnections of intimate, emotional and embodied relations become important topics of research to understand economic changes in agrarian production.

Bodies are central to the construction of subjectivities, and their ‘grammar’ are spaces in which peoples’ relations to others and nature are reiterated as well as contested, with tangible consequences for emancipatory social movements, resource management, changes in agricultural production (like the Nepal example above) and the circulation of capital in agrarian economies. In search of alternatives to dominant discourses on water governance and neoliberal development more broadly, Leila Harris draws attention to the ‘everyday, embodied and emotional relations to resources and natures’ (Harris 2015, 158). She looks at the social and emotional tensions produced by water governance based on market-oriented water use, which belie the embodied aspects of everyday hydro-social relations. This focus on everyday, embodied and emotional relations to water opens up political and analytical imaginations for counter-logics. Such insights drive critical agrarian studies research to attend to scale, to link between body, household, community, nation and globe and to show how everyday, intersectional, socionatural relations produce uneven relations of production, exchange and resource management, as well as resistance to extractivism and neoliberal agrarian change.

A focus on body also draws attention to persistent binaries of masculinity and femininity and their roots in heteronormativity. Holding onto binaries of nature-culture or nature-society limits the ability to understand how agrarian political economies entangle life-worlds for humans and non-humans alike. New lines of inquiry open up when agrarian studies analyses go beyond an implicitly heteronormative focus on social reproduction to look instead at how sexual as well as gender and race politics shape rural livelihoods. Drawing from the emerging field of queer ecologies (Sandilands 2016), the complex socionatural linkages between the operation of power through sexuality, race, class and gender, and the problematic conceptual and material framings of (for example) hybrid seeds, and the polluted and exposed bodies of our exploited landscapes, are revealed. Giovanna Di Chiro (2010) analyses how discourses by environmentalists about toxic pollution in the United States use a heterosexist language which appeals to fears about endocrine disruptors disturbing the normal gendered body of humans and non-humans through chemical castration. She points to how otherwise progressive environmentalisms ‘mobilize the knowledge/power politics of “normalcy” to enforce a social-environmental order based on a dominant regime of what and who are constructed as normal/natural’ (Di Chiro 2010, 199). By analysing how these fears reproduce problematic norms around sexuality and ability, she shows how environmental and political responses are constrained. Scholarship in this vein allows critical agrarian studies to link ecological change and environmental justice politics to agrarian political economies.

GENDER, NATURE, BODY IN CRITICAL AGRARIAN STUDIES

In this chapter, we have shown how gender-nature-body are critical sites for multi-scalar power and politics, which result in uneven access to and control over resources. Rather than externalities or unfortunate social injustices, intersectional socio-natural relations are shown to be foundational to key critical agrarian studies' concerns around class formation, resistance, extractivism and land grabs. Understanding agrarian conflicts as the material and emotional outcomes of embodied, differentiated responses to enclosure and the commodification of resources and livelihoods links the global economy to on-the-ground lived realities in rural areas. The formation of subjectivities in socio-natures have profound implications for how production, reproduction, extractivism and ecological transformations occur and the possibilities for collective action in response. A feminist political ecology approach is able to account for these material, emotional and corporal threats of neoliberalism and marketization, and show possibilities for emancipatory action.

Nightingale (2013), for example, has explored how the economics and politics of fishing on the west coast of Scotland are embodied, intersectional dynamics that change throughout the socio-natural spaces of fishing. Adherence to regulations and desires for collective action shift rather radically from fishing boats, to processing the catch onshore, to meeting rooms with policymakers. These shifts are both products of, and constitutive of, the supply chains and political economy of fishing. As fuel prices rose, fish stocks declined and new management structures were introduced from 2002 to 2015, new associations emerged in Scotland to help advocate for inshore fishers at the national and European levels. Many critical agrarian studies scholars assume that markets in southern Europe overdetermine the class relations and the political economy of fishing in small Scottish coastal communities, but such an analysis misses the power-laden, creative and emotional relations through which fishers decide which companies to sell their catch to, how they interpret regulations and the associations that emerge to represent fishers' geopolitical interests.

Similarly, Harcourt (2016) has explored how agricultural livelihoods are changing in the region of Tuscia around the Lake of Bolsena in Italy, with a study on three different types of eco-tourist enterprises. The cases are attentive to the daily needs, embodied interactions and labours of the women and men adjusting to changes in state provisions and economic possibilities. In analysing their everyday lives and struggles in, for example, ecological soap production, Harcourt traces efforts to build diverse ethical economic and ecological relationships in an economically challenging yet vibrant socio-nature.

Situating the complex relations of gender-nature-body within analyses of political economic accounts of class relations and agrarian change can be challenging. Not only do they require deep, qualitative investigations into everyday politics and practices, such as those we describe in our work, but they also demand that researchers attend to the geopolitics of race, gender and sexuality (Mollett and Faria 2013; Sundberg 2014). These geopolitics combine with political economic processes to circumscribe who controls agrarian production and who is caught in uneven relations of exchange. The methodological task of linking processes across scales, and recognizing how they serve to constitute these scales (Massey 2005), can be a research agenda within itself. Yet we argue that it is vital that critical agrarian studies scholars embrace these challenges in order to open up new understandings of how agrarian transformations can occur, and by extension, new possibilities for collective action. By attending to the ways in which subjectivities and social differences such as class, race and gender intersect and are produced

through changing ecologies and agrarian and environmental transformations (Nightingale 2006, 2011), critical agrarian studies scholarship can push beyond narratives of dispossession and environmental decline within neoliberalizing environments to understand more clearly the spaces of transformation and hope.

FURTHER READING

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