BOOK REVIEWS

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Towards a perma-sociology? Laura Centemeri on permaculture as a social movement and a way of life

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Permaculture, a portmanteau of 'permanent (agri-)culture', is, first of all, an approach to cultivation. Practitioners of permaculture seek to meet human subsistence needs by increasing, rather than reducing, the diversity of any given ecosystem. They do this by learning from existing self-regulative and regenerative processes and minimally tweaking them, always trying to remain open and attentive to unexpected developments rather than trying to force their natural environment into a fully controlled state.

As a movement with its own philosophy, permaculture started in Tasmania in the 1970s thanks to the efforts of biologist Bill Mollison and environmental designer David Holmgren. Gradually merging with similar approaches developed elsewhere, such as Masanobu Fukuoka's idea of 'natural farming', it has spread worldwide through a growing system of local, national, and transnational associations, conferences and 'convergences', mutual trade and aid networks and, perhaps above all, codified educational practices. Permaculture has stimulated fifth-generation farmers, urban transplants, and city dwellers to redesign everything from tiny gardens to large territories. It has hybridized with a wide variety of other environmental philosophies and ways of thinking about social justice, and in practical terms has inspired both land rehabilitation schemes and migrant integration or post-conflict reconstruction projects, exemplified by Rosemary Morrow's 'post-disaster permaculture'.

Given these decades of history, the multitude of applications, and a diverse and self-reflexive literature produced by the movement, the dearth of sociological or anthropological studies of permaculture may come as a surprise—all the more given the intense general interest in environmentalism. Since the 1980s at the latest, investigations into varieties of nature protection movements played a constitutive role for certain types of social movement studies in Western Europe (Brand, Büsser and Rucht, 1986; Dalton, 1994; Diekmann and Jaeger, 1996) before being extended to other countries, and historians have studied the origins of environmentalism in countries as different from each other as the Soviet Union (Weiner, 1999) and the

United States (Kline, 2011) as well as the rise of a global environmental movement (McCormick, 1995; Radkau, 2011; Guha, 2014).

Yet for all its recency, the emerging scholarly literature on permaculture seems off to a good start. The few publications to have appeared in recent years are sympathetic yet balanced. They largely eschew large-scale survey methods that appear particularly ill-adapted to understanding a movement that deeply prizes non-scalable local knowledge and feedback loops: trying to reformat engagements with permaculture as a set of individual opinions is a sure way to gloss over the discussion, controversy, dynamism, experimentation and self-transformation that define the phenomenon.[1] Perhaps most importantly, they do not limit themselves to studying permaculture in the English-speaking world, instead drawing on case studies from a variety of countries, including Latvia (Aistara, 2013), Japan, Switzerland (Chakroun and Linder, 2018), India (Fadaee, 2019), and, in the case of Laura Centemeri's study, Italy.

Centemeri's is the first book-length study of the phenomenon, and neither permaculturists nor sociologists could have hoped for a better overview. In a slim yet immensely rich volume that grew out of two lectures at the former French National Institute of Agricultural Research, Centemeri provides a brief history of the movement before analysing it as a new form of ecological critique, based on learning, that she sums up as an 'art of reinhabiting'. She examines how permaculture develops an approach to 'earth care' through environmental reflexivity; how it acknowledges incommensurable modes of valuation; and how it creates ecotones, or hybridization zones, that facilitate encounters between, and shared exploration by, those from a wide variety of different backgrounds. Indeed her book can itself be read as an effort to create such an ecotone by putting permaculture into resonance with some of the most promising recent developments in sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and the life sciences. This includes Anna Tsing's anthropology of global connectedness, friction, and non-scalability (Tsing, 2005, 2015); the debate in social movements studies about prefigurative politics (Yates, 2015); science studies in the vein of Bruno Latour and Annemarie Mol; French pragmatic sociology's approach to the study of critique (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), of regimes of engagement (e.g. Thévenot, 2002, 2011, 2014) and of social and environmental transformation (e.g. Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2017); Serge Audier's (2017) philosophical genealogy of environmentalism; and advances in plant neurobiology (Mancuso and Viola, 2013). In a sense, the book is a work of permacultural design in its own right: without ever idealising her subject, she orchestrates a veritable dialogue, demonstrating not only how insights from these fields can inform an account of permaculture but also how permaculture's own principles can be made fruitful for advancing the social sciences.

The distinctiveness of the permaculture movement, the reasons why it has often been overlooked, and Centemeri's contribution to its study can perhaps all be understood best in contrast.

Permaculture and sustainable development

Superficially, permaculture might sound like an implementation of "sustainable development." On some level there is indeed overlap between the two ideas. Advocates of sustainability sometimes look to past ways of engaging with the environment for correctives to more recent wastefulness, but their main concern is for the future: present-day behaviour should be such as to depend on replenishable resources. Likewise, permaculture draws inspiration from traditional agricultural practices: the very term 'permanent agriculture', as Centemeri points out, was coined by early 20th century US agronomist Franklin Hiram King in a book about traditional East Asian agriculture, *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (King, 1911). However, modern permaculture does not seek simply to replicate how things have been done in the past; it is driven by a desire to find a way of life that can be imagined to continue for thousands of years in the future. The notion of 'reinhabiting' that Centemeri chooses for the title of her book expresses this: the idea is not to inhabit a milieu *again* the way it was done in traditional societies, but to inhabit it *differently*.

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[1] To be fair, the authors of the one survey-based inquiry into permaculture are careful in acknowledging some of the limitations of their methods (Ferguson and Lovell, 2015).

But this is where the similarities end. The idea of a sustainable yield goes back to the late 17th century Saxon mining industry with its insatiable appetite for fuelwood. Its author Hans Carl von Carlowitz, a mining administrator and possible crypto-Spinozist, saw nature as God's gift to Man (Grober, 2010, 2012). If forests and other natural riches had to be treated with care and replenished in time, it was because they were resources whose purpose was to serve human flourishing. Rooted in a cameralist belief in centralized state administration, sustainable development has always been a top-down approach. It is predicated on taking stock of the entirety of different resources available in a given area in order to plan their sustainable use. This implies measurability, hence quantification, hence commensurability. Historically, all of this has often been achieved through a focus on money as a means of valuation: most recently, the Boston Consulting Group has determined that "the estimated total value of the world's forests is as much as $150 trillion—nearly double the value of global stock markets" (Kappen *et al.*, 2020). But even where it has repudiated purely financial measurements, "sustainable development" has consistently displayed a propensity for the use of statistical indicators. The "development" in question is thought of as a kind of growth or improvement of human communities—growth that need not be expressed in monetary terms but can only be understood by being quantified. Another aspect of the same logic is scalability: from its beginnings the concept of "sustainable development" took the perspective of an entire early modern German state rather than, say, a single forest, and today its advocates often think on a planetary scale—hence its predilection for ambitious mega-projects such as the Great Green Walls that are being planted in China and in the Sahara and Sahel zone. In its current use by governments and international organizations, sustainable development could be described as a more environmentally-aware form of modernization theory.

The practice of sustainable development, then, has many of the typical features of economies of scale. This means it also suffers from the typical problems of top-down approaches. When local communities get in the way of sustainable development indicators, they can be treated as nuisances. The Netherlands-based African Parks Network, brought in by the Ethiopian government to manage Nechisar and Omo National Parks, soon pulled out again, claiming that 'sustainable management of the Ethiopian parks is incompatible with "the irresponsible way of living of some of the ethnic groups".' (Blonk, 2008)

Permaculture, in contrast, is at its core a bottom-up or rather locally-specific approach. Its essence is to be fluid, adaptable, and non-scalable. Instead of submitting local contexts to overarching goals, it seeks to discover and learn from regenerative processes already in place in a given setting. But this is not just a way to optimize yield in the long term by building a more complex model of the environment that takes the micro-level into account. Rather it is a radical move away from valuing the environment for its utility and towards a notion of care. Permaculturists do not typically believe in a fixed natural order that humans tend to disrupt to nefarious effect; instead, they see the world as being made up of a variety of beings in a constant state of reassembling. The environment, on this view, is not a large network of communicating (eco-)systems that can be in equilibrium or out of sync. It is made up of milieus that have a history and, by extension, a future—a thought that Centemeri connects with current awareness of our age as an Anthropocene (p. 72).

This means that, unlike sustainable development, permaculture is not about generating a set of techniques, identifying a toolbox of best practices, or reverse-engineering individual species' capacities to improve human technologies. Practitioners of permaculture like to think in terms of patterns, yet those patterns are not fixed, calculable and transferable models, but ways of organizing local complexity. This is most readily evident in the way permaculture divides gardens, plots of land, but also living habitats into zones based on frequency of use and levels of attention required, ranging from an intensely cultivated internal zone to an unmanaged outer zone—a wild area open to completely unexpected processes and hybridization with the surrounding environment. Rather than an actual set of concentric circles, the topography of these areas will be specific to each location, depending on the habitual pathways of the place's human and other inhabitants. The twelve basic permacultural principles formulated by David Holmgren start with an injunction to approach any place through all of one's senses in order to observe the processes already at work there, instead of starting to interact with it right away and treating it as a set of resources. Another rule is to remain attentive to feedback processes and modify one's behaviour accordingly.

These rules can have (very literally) down-to-earth applications, but they can also easily veer into mystical ideas of oneness with nature and a rigid belief system. Internal debates sometimes pit flexible 'smart' against orthodox 'cult' permaculture and 'brown permies' with a penchant for the technocratic against esoteric-leaning 'purple permies'. This is relevant to permaculture's ability to spread beyond rich countries such as Australia and Japan and outside Western Europe and North America. There have been attempts to implement its principles in Cuba, Brazil, India, and Central and Eastern Europe, and associations have been set up elsewhere. Centemeri acknowledges not having been able to study these in depth, but notes that there is often a clash between the spiritual approaches by Westerners trying to foster permaculture and traditional practices by local peasants, even though some of these might be compatible with permaculture principles (p. 123). Because of the approach's very insistence on the specificity of the local, it is not something that can be implemented as a top-down principle by international organizations and global foundations. It always has to be articulated with the political context, individual farmers' livelihoods, and issues of just distribution.

Permaculture as a social movement

Such tensions are of course familiar from other settings, such as the global justice movement or environmentalism. Does this mean, then, that permaculture can meaningfully be described as a social movement?

Seen from a perspective that equates social movements with 'contentious politics', it probably appears as more of a set of agricultural and gardening principles and lifestyle choices—this is part of the reason it has so far been understudied. As Centemeri points out, the fact that permaculture is often seen as an apolitical set of traditional techniques is in part testimony of a successful strategy. This is because it is a prefigurative rather than a contentious movement, one that intends to enact transformation by doing rather than by making claims on others. In the words of one journalist, 'permaculture is revolution designed as organic gardening' (Richards, 2015).

Some of the new scholarly literature on permaculture makes a deliberate effort to frame permaculture as an environmental movement. Centemeri notes the influence of the alter-globalization movement (as well as the Internet) in the global spread of the idea, and that of national and local political cultures in the specific shapes it takes. As with other green ideas, the resulting ideologies can vary quite considerably, and Centemeri points to examples of far-right environmentalists such as the Italian eco-nationalist Giannozzo Pucci (p. 110).

But understanding phenomena such as permaculture as social movements requires us to rethink what counts as political, and what is a social movement. Fadaee (2019) does this for the Indian case by linking local variants of permaculture with debates about the peculiar characteristics of social movements in the Global South, where such movements are shaped by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes and informal politics to a greater extent than in established northern democracies. Centemeri goes further in rethinking the conceptual apparatus of social movement studies to account for permaculture and other forms of the 'new environmentalism of everyday life' (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016).

Not unlike champions of sustainability, social movement scholars have often automatically adopted a language of 'strategies', 'resources' and 'opportunities', the implication being that strategic resource use is a prerequisite for something to even be considered a social movement, but also that the movement's organizational form is in a sense more important than its content. Another version of the same idea is the Bourdieusian notion that people pursue strategies in different 'fields' by drawing on different types of (financial, cultural, symbolic) 'capital'. Drawing on pragmatic sociologist Laurent Thévenot's work on form-giving (Thévenot, 1984) and regimes of engagement, Centemeri points out that treating one's environment as a set of resources to attain a certain objective is only one among several possible ways in which actors process information about the situation in which they find themselves—one that Thévenot calls the regime of planned action. What makes permaculture particularly fruitful for social movement studies is that its very principles advance alternative ways of engaging with one's milieu.

The other regimes identified by Thévenot and his collaborators are all in evidence in permacultural practice. Thus, the principle of listening, learning and constantly remaining open to the unexpected is a paradigmatic example of the regime of exploration. The intense habitual engagement that defines the inner zone of permaculture's concentric circles can be read as a regime of familiarity, as can the notion that, as humans, we are not just 'part of nature' in a general way but embedded in particular natural cycles in our specific local milieu. Most importantly, perhaps, permaculture forces us to rethink the regime of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991, 2006) in which action is justified with reference to a common good that will ultimately benefit all. The idea of a 'green order of worth' was suggested early on as an addition to the six *cités* described in Luc Boltanski's and Laurent Thévenot's classic *On Justification*, precisely as an alternative to the modernization discourse that underlies philosophies such as sustainable development (Latour, 1995, 1997). It differs from the other orders of worth in that the collective which is supposed to benefit from the pursuit of 'green' goods extends beyond humankind to other living species. Attention to this green good is a major part of permacultural practice and of its internal tensions and controversies. The result is something which, following the turn to non-human actants that has grown out of actor-network theory and similar approaches, has been called an 'eco-commons' that humans share with other species (Papadopoulos, 2018). In her book as well as a separate article in English (Centemeri, 2018), Centemeri usefully specifies this idea by treating this commons not simply as a pool of resources shared between different species, but as a space where multiple different modes of valuation coexist.

Permaculture, Centemeri argues, treats the milieu as a multi-species commons that we actively co-maintain with other animals and plants and not just as a mere 'environment' for human activity. Rather than making sure the soil continues to provide the resources humans already know they need, it forces us to consider the needs of the other beings who co-inhabit this space with us and to adapt to these needs, finding common ground through a milieu design that encourages cross-pollination and hybridization. This implies that one has to transform one's own self rather than just changing the environment. The result, ideally, is what Centemeri and other students of permacultural practice (Chakroun and Linder, 2018) have called a 'mesological self' shaped simultaneously by its own needs and those of its surroundings, drawing on geographer Augustin Berque's idea of 'mesology' as the study of milieus (Berque, 2014). Thus, despite its emphasis on the local and its association with related phenomena such as the ecovillage movement, permaculture is in a sense the opposite of autarky or self-sufficiency, be it at the individual level or that of the entire species. Its ambition is to be both local *and* holistic, in ways that echo the alter-globalization movement while being even more resistant to upscaling local solutions.

If this sounds harmonious, that does not mean either that permies are a bunch of tree-huggers, or that permaculture as a social movement is conflict-free. In particular, the marriage between a concern with environmentalism as a problem of social justice and an awareness of ecological interdependence between humans and their multi-species milieu has not always been an easy one. Drawing on her observations in Italy, Centemeri shows that those driven by the former tend to be less sensitive to the latter, and vice versa (p. 105), and that permacultural activists tend to specialize *either* in denouncing the existing socio-environmental order *or* in prefiguratively enacting alternatives. Nor is permaculture free from the widespread modern tension between rootedness and liberty (p. 15), but Centemeri argues that at least it offers practical ways to reconcile these seemingly contradictory imperatives by acknowledging that one and the same good can be valued according to different logics in different contexts. Thus she points to the example of authentic enthusiasts who engage in permaculture because they value their local soil for its own sake, but see no contradiction in then selling their produce to restaurants at high prices (p. 90). She notes, however, that such compromises never fail to generate controversy within the wider movement, and that attitudes towards capitalism vary widely among the permaculturists she has studied—ranging from 'pro' to 'against' and 'in spite of'. Beyond the use of produce, these controversies also extend to the status of labour at permacultural farms: is reliance on unpaid volunteer labour justified because the volunteers ('woofers') seek exposure to an alternative lifestyle rather than remuneration, or does the permacultural philosophy rather call for mutual aid at a local level (p. 101)?

Regardless of the specific answer given to such question in each setting, making space for different coexisting logics of valuation is a powerful motif in permaculture, and Centemeri draws on her fieldwork to describe permacultural training sessions as a form of 'evaluative awakening', through collective brainstorming exercises, to the plurality of such modes, among which she identifies universalist, instrumental and sensory or exploratory logics (p. 83f). Even when collaboration with local governments and other public institutions pushes permaculturists towards a logic of standardized production, it is their multi-dimensional relationship with their milieu that makes their practice distinctive.

Towards a perma-sociology?

Beyond analysing the permaculture movement itself by bringing to bear some of the most interesting recent developments in sociology, Centemeri's study has stimulating implications for how permacultural principles might serve as a lens through which to understand wider social practices. Thus, for example, she interprets mayor Domenico Lucano's famous refugee integration programme in Riace as an example of permaculture, even though he didn't use the term. She also stresses how the inter-species alliances central to permaculture's approach to cultivation have wider significance for human-animal interaction, especially in the form of encounters between different species' 'diplomats' in the open ecotones at the margins of cultivated land. This is elegantly illustrated in Frédéric Keck's (2020) anthropological study of human interaction with 'sentinel species' in East Asian 'avian reservoirs' that act as early-warning systems for zoonotic disease outbreaks.

More generally, her analysis of ecotones and of the principles of 'good enough for now', 'safe enough to try' and reversibility (p. 108) provides a handle on wider experimentation and exploration processes, which remain undertheorized in sociology and underpracticed as sociological methods in a scholarly culture increasingly governed by hypothesis-testing and quantitative standards. A perma-sociology might be one that remains open to different modes of scholarly valuation, one that explicitly relinquishes the illusion of control over some of its material to leave space for the unexpected (Goldberg, 2015), one that cultivates ecotones of hybridization with other knowledge cultures. This would allow us to go beyond the kind of interdisciplinarity where sociologists expect colleagues from other fields to provide answers to questions that sociology has already formulated. Instead, we would need to have the courage to step into marginal zones not usually considered proper domains of inquiry for sociology or one if its subfields (gardening as a social movement? forests as objects of sociological analysis?) and engage in an open-ended dialogue with practitioners of other disciplines where the very questions fit to be asked are not known in advance.

To me this is an exciting prospect, and one to which Laura Centemeri's book points the way.

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