Making Tracks: Maurits Ertsen

18 November 2014
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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“When Not a Tree Hugger, Is One a Tree Hater?” (paraphrasing Doug Coupland)

by **Maurits Ertsen**

I am not an environmentalist. Don’t get me wrong, this doesn’t mean that I don’t care about environmental issues, or that current agricultural or other production systems should continue irrespective of their environmental and social costs. What I mean is that my work does not consider the environment as a threatened category, or that my motivation for studying the dynamics of human-environment interactions in water systems originates from worries about deteriorating lakes, rivers, or seas. I just want to know how to understand those dynamics.

I am the kind of person who welcomes the mountain hut within the overwhelming nature of high mountains. Signs of human agency are fun, and the many types, sizes, and shapes that the results of this agency can have are interesting from a scholarly perspective. The human species might have been able to manipulate its direct environment on a scale that other species may never consider, but that does not make us humans anything other than natural species manipulating their environment.

The natural–human divide is not terribly interesting, if you ask me. In theoretical terms, the divide is highly problematic. Pristine nature—a nature without humans—is not a relevant category anyway. Once nature is entered by humans, it is not pristine anymore. If nature is discussed by people, any pristine reality is at best a social construction. Debates within historical ecology suggest that different opinions exist about what might be the original vegetation of an area. Furthermore, ecology shows how value-laden the assessment of species richness is.

There are obviously many claims about nature, desired environments, and natural processes. A closer look, however, suggests that any claim about nature is in the realm of social relations between agents. That does not suddenly make biology, chemistry, or fluid mechanics a political science, but it does suggest that their findings cannot simply be used to determine “the natural.”

A recent initiative in the hydrological community is to study “socio-hydrology,” which is the recognition of the importance of human actions for hydrological processes. It brings social relations on board as well, as those influence what type of hydrological interventions are realized. Now, laudable as including human agency when studying processes that were clearly changed by that agency may be, let’s think about the word “socio-hydrology” a little more. Does the word not imply—as do socionatural, sociotechnical, and other associates—that the “social” and the “natural” are (still) two distinguishable categories that are to be linked? This might just be playing with words, but apart from strategic reasons to suggest to others a new concept is defined, I see no need for socio–anythings once we have established there to be no theoretical distinction between social and natural. Everything is natural.

In my work, I focus on actions taken by human agents, the way these actions change certain processes in the material context (in my case irrigation systems), and how actions and changes together provoke/encourage/enable other actions. Basically, I try avoid using “nature,” “environment,” and “social” as concepts in my analysis. I am always happy to use the simpler words that hopefully have a better determined meaning—and yes, I do realize that the concept of “agency” is heavily debated upon. I tend to avoid applying “waterscapes” and “foodscapes” as well, does anyone know what these are?

It is amazing that I still work on irrigation, considering that most of my fellow students from Wageningen University in the Netherlands are working on anything but water. It is even more amazing when one considers that the main reason for which I shifted from soil science to irrigation was because all the people I liked were going to study irrigation. Once I did have a position at a university—Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands—I decided I wanted to stay, and started a PhD project combining the discipline I was trained in (irrigation) with the discipline in which I was interested—history—and actually had little experience in.

After finishing the PhD project and being able to secure a staff position in the Water Resources group in Delft, I came into contact with archaeologists who were as interested

as I was as to how ancient irrigation might be conceptualized, and what had actually happened. My interest in short-term human agency and long-term outcomes linked very well with my historical work. The scholarly community interested in feedbacks between human actions and material contexts is my new social network, and it has brought me into contact with many new scholars, amongst others through fellowships at Durham University and the Rachel Carson Center in recent years.

In Durham and Munich, I worked on my book project on irrigated agriculture and rural society in the Gezira irrigated area in twentieth-century Sudan. The typical image of Gezira is of a centrally planned effort by British colonialists, who favored control of tenants and production. That is certainly a compelling image, but many Gezira planning efforts were debated and changed by various people and institutions, resulting in a process I can only describe in terms of the strategy of (Captain) Jack Sparrow from the Walt Disney movie series “Pirates of the Caribbean.” Gezira was all planned out and made up as one went along.

My Gezira book should show how the abstract concept “development” is shaped by daily actions by people on the ground—in government offices and muddy fields. Such actions are used in political debates on “development,” and are continuously re-interpreted as symbols to support different views on what “development” should be. Much colonial development rhetoric proposes smooth planning and the inevitable execution of imperial development, but smoothness and inevitability is a human construct. Looking back to Gezira’s history, the inevitability of it seems to grow with time. Development activities are not successful or unsuccessful just like that; they might become so over a while for some.

A colonial project like Gezira is best understood in terms of continuous negotiations of different kinds. These include official negotiations between different governmental agencies, but will also show how tenants and field staff negotiated new realities on the irrigated fields every day. This work should be relevant for those thinking about agency and structure. When taking up the concept of development itself, I wanted to link it to notions of actor–network theory. Gezira’s development was constructed within networks of negotiation that were continuously (re-)created by human actions engaging with other acting humans, often through non-human intermediaries. In my career, Jack Sparrow meets Bruno Latour.