Emplacing sustainability in a post-capitalist world

By Elizabeth S. Barron


1. Introduction

The concept of a post-capitalist world implies a world after capitalism, but it does not suggest a structure for economic negotiations in that world. The ability of a cooperatively based economy to challenge capitalism has been a central part of political negotiations for hundreds of years, with the theoretical debate harkening back to the time of Proudhon, Marx and Engels (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2015). However, too much of this debate has focused on the complete replacement of capitalism. Cooperative, ethically based economies have been proposed as one way of taking the economy back from capitalism, and helping us move into a post-capitalist period in which capitalism is one part of a diverse array of economies (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013).

Rather than waiting for the fall of capitalism, community economies, as theorized by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996), suggests that economic exchange encompasses a wide array of activities, spaces, places, and engagements. Current alternative economies have been gaining traction since the 1980s in developed countries (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2015), were theorized in the 1990s (Gibson-Graham 1996), and are now widespread, from urban community gardens and city bike share programs, to worker and food cooperatives to time banking. As capitalism is also “alive and well”, the idea that we are entering a post-capitalist period clearly does not rest on the end of capitalism, but rather on the recognition of the diversity of economic forms proliferating all around us. The Community Economies Collective (CEC) is a group of scholars who document and theorize this proliferation.

The CEC “seeks to bring about more sustainable and equitable forms of development by acting on new ways of thinking about economies and politics…To try to mobilise social transformation [they] have worked on 1) developing a new language of the diverse economy, 2) activating ethical economic subjects and 3) imagining and enacting collective actions that diversify the economy. For [them], these actions comprise a ‘post-capitalist politics’” (Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective 2017: 1).

This chapter is based on a particular understanding of post-capitalism, as a series of strategies for socio-economic-ecological negotiations. These strategies engage 1) the politics of language, 2) the politics of the subject, and 3) the politics of collective action. Understanding language, subjects, and collective actions as spaces for political engagement is about considering them as processes actively and always under negotiation rather than as fixed objects. Using these strategies I consider the question: what does sustainability look like in a post-capitalist world? Specifically, how can a post-capitalist
politics support and enrich the concept of emplaced sustainability? In other words, is thinking about sustainability as an ongoing, place-based political process, rather than a necessary solution to maintain a world-order based on growth and development, an important building block for a post-capitalist future?

In the following section I unpack the idea of emplaced sustainability by introducing the emplacement framework, a conceptual tool to help scholars and activists organize their discourse. In section three I explore how the foundational tenets of the emplacement framework are enhanced using a post-capitalist perspective. I conclude with some comments on how this work contributes to current conversations in environmental sociology.

2. Emplaced Sustainability

The concept of emplaced sustainability is premised on the emplacement framework, an explanatory framework to facilitate discussion and transdisciplinary engagement. The emplacement framework is premised on four key tenets (Barron, Hartman, and Hagemann under revision), which can be restated in relation to Gibson-Graham’s post-political strategies as: 1) There is a politics of language around how key concepts like sustainability, economy, and community are used and interpreted. 2) Nature and society do not exist independently of each other; thus a politics of the subject must be extended beyond society to include non-human community members. 3) Post-capitalist economies are practiced, made visible, and socially reproduced in places through collective action.¹

The emplacement framework is divided into four domains: displacement, misplacement, replacement, and emplacement (Figure 1). Each domain represents a different entry point into large sustainability problems and questions. The domains provide a structure for engagement and dialogue; they are not exclusive of each other or meant to represent specific disciplines or data types (Barron, Hartman, and Hagemann under revision).

One of the most difficult things in interdisciplinary scholarship is actually getting outside one’s own discipline enough to produce hybrid knowledge, rather than something that is the composite of different disciplines (i.e. sociology + ecology ≠ socio-ecological systems). By providing a simplistic set of terms for different scholars and community members to position themselves around, the value of the emplacement framework is that it fosters and pushes scholars towards interdisciplinary engagement – rather than being grounded in one’s home discipline of sociology or ecology, scholars from these two areas, for example, work on processes of displacement – what and how a sustainable system was disrupted. They bring their own training, literature, and methods to co-create an analysis of processes of displacement.

¹ Tenet 3 & 4 are combined here as both relate to collective action.
**The Domains of the Emplacement Framework: A Sustainability Perspective**

- **Displacement** brings together research and data on events and processes that have historically or are currently displacing or disrupting sustainability.
- **Misplacement** brings together research and analysis that helps us understand the states of uneasy being created when things are out of place, when sustainability is invisible.
- **Replacement** addresses change, objects and actors that have come into a place to help it change to a more resilient state, which may or may not represent sustainability.
- **Emplacement** encompasses research that is in line with our key tenets, exploring new ways of articulating a place-based sustainability.

Figure 1: A summary of the domains of the emplacement framework

The domains are most readily accessible through a brief (and admittedly oversimplified) example. People have historically fished in the Fox River and Lake Winnebago (in east central Wisconsin, USA) for their livelihoods and personal enjoyment. These were local sustainable practices that connected people to place: local residents’ bodies and energy originated quite directly from river fish (among other sources). However, the Fox River was heavily polluted in the late 19th and up through the mid-20th century by the logging and paper milling industries located on the banks of the river (Summers 2006). Many people stopped fishing because they rightly worried about toxins in the water and the fish. This sustainable practice in the local economy was displaced as people increasingly bought their fish at the store. They had more trust in the food safety of a commodity from the grocery store (likely from very far away or of unknown origin) than in fish from their own waterways. Their connection to local economies and ecologies was therefore misplaced through this process. Area residents increasingly spent their energies making money to buy fish at the store from faraway shores rather than spending their time catching their own local fish or working to rid their local environment of toxins and reclaim their waters and their practices. This process of misplacement enrolled them into capitalist practices and economies and into larger networks of resources and capital. On a basic level, concerns over having enough money to buy fish replaced concerns over no longer being able to fish in their own place. But importantly, some people still fish in the Fox River and Lake Winnebago (Van Auken et al. 2016). This is a potentially sustainable practice obscured in mainstream environmental and economic narratives. Who are the people that are still fishing, why do they do it? For the Hmong people displaced from Laos during the Vietnam War, fishing in the Fox River allows them to reconstruct cultural landscapes and maintain social identities tied to traditional practices. Through the continuation of traditional fishing practices and culture, Hmong people are becoming emplaced in the Fox River area, contributing to its sustainability and their own (Van Auken et al. 2016).

Though this example is oversimplified (no broad conceptual frameworks can fully encapsulate the nuances of reality), hopefully its usefulness is evident: such a framework easily unites the work of historians, toxicologists, economists, aquatic biologists, sociologists, and geographers. Parallel examples might incorporate still other disciplines, from geology to philosophy to anthropology. By using the dynamics of place, multiple perspectives converge.
3. A post-capitalist politics of sustainability

Discourses of difference and alternative imaginaries are place-based (Escobar 2007). The Community Economies Collective works to develop a new critical research paradigm focusing on difference, and on place-based practices and politics. Taking inspiration from these scholars, we seek to extend the notion of ‘reading for difference’ to the politics and practices of place-based sustainability.

To ‘read sustainability for difference’ is to look for sustainability practices and processes that are often hidden because they are different than what we normally think of as sustainability. For example, the impacts of a “living wage” or “political correctness” are not generally thought of in relation to sustainability, but if you consider the long-term effects of the choices people make when they are living in poverty or oppressed by everyday dialogue, the true complexity of sustainability starts to become more visible.

Reading sustainability for difference means to identify, document, and make visible practices as sustainable and those that are unsustainable, so that sustainability may be fully realized as a diverse and complex concept. Reading sustainability for difference means looking at the present and seeing sustainability now, perhaps hidden, perhaps unstable, perhaps diffuse, but at least minimally made up of elements from the present. This approach creates change here and now, in place and in interconnection with other places, in order to address urgent environmental problems. A more nuanced focus on the environmental and social impacts of the current wage structure in a particular place, for example, highlights the interconnectedness of what’s happening now, in a place, rather than focusing on a more amorphous future in which sustainable development has enabled targets and social configurations that do not yet exist and which require changes which are not identified in much mainstream sustainability work. The politics of language, subject and collective action are strategies for reading for difference.

3.1 A politics of language

The first tenet of the emplacement framework is: there is a politics of language around how key concepts like sustainability, economy, and community are used and interpreted. For space reasons, in this section of the paper I focus on the politics of the language of mainstream sustainability and briefly on the closely related field of global environmental change, and critiques aimed at opening it up.

A politics of language suggests that language is an iterative process of negotiation, rather than a strict set of defined universals. Instead, language includes recognition of the other, opportunities for reframing meaning and questioning representation. Activating a politics of language to dislocate the dominant language of sustainability begins with closer attention to the normative ways in which sustainability is often framed, and then substantiates alternatives to dominant narratives.

Criteria for interdisciplinary sustainability is to some extent enshrined in the three-pillar model, encompassing environmental, economic, and social equity dimensions often visualized as a venn diagram of three interlinked circles. In the mainstream science literature sustainability research frequently prioritizes the environmental pillar. The
established field of sustainability science exemplifies this tension: “Sustainability science emerged as the intellectual umbrella for addressing human-environment problems and practice arising from those research communities closely aligned with global climate and environment change” (Turner II 2010:570). This umbrella covers what Turner II (2010) calls the “three foundational pivots” of sustainability science: coupled human-environment systems, environmental services and tradeoffs, again in another venn diagram of interlinked circles. Importantly, the language used by Turner II is that of science, and expressly not that of politics or ethics.

Research under the “sustainability science umbrella” (Turner II 2010) purports to engage with the challenge of finding balance among the tradeoffs between natural processes that create and maintain earth’s systems, and those identified as the “constituents of [human] well-being,” including basic material for life, good social relations, and freedom of choice and action (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). However, 15 years later the goal of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work remains only partially realized (Reid and Mooney 2016). In practice, research focuses on structural challenges like social and ecological scale mismatches (C.f. Cumming, Cumming, and Redman 2006; Cash et al. 2006), or on achievable goals like designing environmental mitigation projects or the greening of wage labor jobs.

Like sustainability, global environmental change has been constructed using the language of the natural sciences, and emphasizing environmental crisis (Lövbrand et al. 2015). Castree (2016) argues that the ‘new social contract’ in global change research emphasizes accountability, interdisciplinarity, and responsibility. However, he contends that it falls short in realizing its own grounding in knowledge and economic hierarchies, which effectively hamper the quest for change. In other words, the normative language of global environmental change, like sustainability, does not address inequities in epistemology or capitalism in its language or actions.

Reading sustainability for difference, i.e. looking for other ways to talk about sustainability issues, draws attention to the political nature of discourse because it becomes noticeable that any discussion of politics and ethics is missing. The privilege and power to frame national and international science and policy around major environmental crises is not right and reasonable, it is a choice and a privilege. Many social theorists agree there is a fundamental problem with taking a scientific approach to sustainability: it means attempting to use the same institutions, governance regimes, knowledge regimes, economic systems, and social conditions that led to the current environmental crises (Fricker 1998; Lövbrand et al. 2015; Brand and Görg 2013; Castree 2016).

The critical social sciences reject the language of coupled systems, ecosystem services, trade-offs, and transitions (c.f. Turner II 2010) in favor of their own language: post-natural, post-social, eco-social, socioecological futures and transformations (Stirling 2015; Lorimer 2006; Braun 2015). These terms highlight the interconnectedness of nature and society. They suggest that our language must adapt to our new ways of knowing (i.e. epistemologies). For some this means that sustainability is only in the intersectional point
of the three-pillar venn diagram rather than in the fact that they are connected (the left image in figure 1). For others, these terms suggest a sort of collapsing of the venn diagram, where environment-economy-equity cannot be understood without each other (the right image in figure 1).

Figure 1: Two different perspectives on the relationality of ecology, economy and equity in sustainability discourse

This perspective engenders a level of interdisciplinary dialogue where multiple representations, values, and hopes for the present and the future are recognized as constitutive of sustainability for scholars, decision makers, policy leaders and the public (Castree et al. 2014). The emplacement framework is attempting to provide structure for this dialogue.

3.2 A politics of the subject

The second tenet of the emplacement framework is: nature and society do not exist independently of each other; thus a politics of the subject must be extended beyond society to include non-human community members. This framing of the interdependency of human and non-human nature, or humans and their environment, is foundational to much of environmental geography (Castree and Braun 2001) and environmental sociology (Pellow and Brehm 2013). There are several terms present in the literature to reference other organisms that live on planet earth: plants and animals, the biota, non-human, more-than-human, and earth other represent a range of terms. I use earth other here to attempt to avoid hierarchies, but briefly address some of the others to provide context for comparison.

Hawkins et al. (2015), drawing on critical science studies scholars such as Latour, Haraway, Lorimer, and Whatmore, seek to extend human social relations to include the “more-than-human” in “experimental and emergent futures” of shared political engagement. Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg (2015), similarly seek a path to sustainability through envisioning and enacting multi-species worlds, freed from the epistemologies of what they disparagingly call neoliberal postnatural conservation. Extending this type of thinking to a reframing of sustainability science, we might rephrase: “how do we balance human needs with ecosystem health?” into “how do we re-
envision society and nature as connected, and so seek synergies and mutual well-being?”

Furthermore, possible “solutions” may be expressed in a language of “socioecological transformation”, “abundant futures” or “emplaced sustainability” where humans and the environment are one interdependent system, and where being open to uncertainty and new approaches is required.

When considering the problematic separation of nature and society, community economies scholars focus on what they see as the false separation of economy and ecology. Political engagement in a post-capitalist community economy draws heavily on human connections with earth others to build new economic communities. Miller (2012) reminds us that the conceptual separation between economy and ecology is a social construction, one where everything that ‘counts’ is inside the economy, and everything that does not is in nature. This maintains nature as ‘other’, a place of extraction, exploitation, or even destruction, in the name of economic growth. Miller rejects this othering of nature in favor of the connection and creation possible in an economy premised on solidarity with the natural world.

In the emplacement framework we might consider this false separation of economy and ecology as a problematic misplacement of economy as outside of nature, which leads similarly to nature being understood as something to be used, rather than part of the world to work with. In a community economy, the political engagements among human communities and earth others are central to sustainability. Again, Miller provides a framework for thought:

A new politics of ecological livelihood is calling us;… to directly confront not the question of jobs or environment,” but the absurd structure of the trap itself. This, then, is the work of defending our livelihoods and our ecological communities while, at the same time, imagining and building forms of life in which our economies and ecologies are no longer placed in opposition (emphasis in the original). (Miller, 2012: 26)

One way to re-imagine the relationship between economy and ecology is as econo-ecologies (Barron 2015). Econo-ecologies “foreground everyday economic practices and choices into not only the social dimensions of natural resource use, but the ecological dimensions of the natural resources themselves,” (Barron, 2015: 174). They replace and re-center the interconnectedness of human and earth-other practices, processes, and livelihoods. They cultivate new subjects through a performative notion of knowledge (Barron et al. 2015), and intervene in dominant knowledge-production by ‘emplacing’ knowledges in local economic and cultural practices (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009). Spatially, the concept of econo-ecology is place-based because it is grounded in the ecological relationships of a specific place, where processes of economic exchange are deemed valuable only if they help sustain that place (Barron 2018).

communities and resituate non-humans in ethical terms” (p. 703). Using the environmental humanities literature, they situate human economic activities within an ecological context, to consider interactions between humans and earth others as ethical negotiations with economic outcomes. Once the economy is seen in ecological terms, it becomes possible to consider how resilience theory may aid in preparing for uncertain ecological-economic futures. Again, drawing from the ecological humanities, they further reframe resilience to be about “more than human community flourishing” (p. 706), thus adding support for the merging of nature and society/economy and ecology by translating the language of resilience to include a wider range of subjects including people, plants, animals and fungi (i.e. the community as identified in tenet two of the emplacement framework).

In all three cases, the politics of the subject is negotiated and furthered through a politics of language. I turn now to the final strategy, a politics of collective action, to discuss how these political activities may foster new forms of research and community engagement.

3.3 A politics of collective action
Research in sustainability often shares an aim to integrate knowledge from a range of disciplines (e.g. Chapin et al. 2010, Turner II 2010). Scholars broadly agree on the importance of the goal: academic disciplines must collaborate in new ways to address social and ecological problems (Stock and Burton 2011). Some actively aim to reorganize traditional disciplines in new constellations (Kates et al. 2001; Miller et al. 2008; Baerwald 2010; Vincent, Roberts, and Mulkey 2015).

Many aspects of the relatively new field of sustainability science, including the even newer field of transition management, are focused on adapting to and planning for the future. Expert planning, rather than collective action, is the focus. J.K. Gibson-Graham views a futuristic perspective as problematic because it detracts from the value of the present. In A Postcapitalist Politics Gibson-Graham (2006) reviews a range of economic work they and others have done over the years that demonstrate the transformative potential of activities, institutions and scholarship that already exists, in the present.

The focus on the transformative potential in the present is inherent in the politics of collective action:

A politics of collective action involves conscious and combined efforts to build a new kind of economic reality. It can be engaged in here and now, in any place or context. It requires an expansive vision of what is possible, a careful analysis of what can be drawn upon to begin the building process, the courage to make a realistic assessment of what might stand in the way of success, and the decision to go forward with a mixture of creative disrespect and protective caution (Gison-Graham 2006, p. xxxvi, emphasis in the original).

A community economies approach can be used to theorize collective action regarding ecology and environmental crises. Gibson-Graham and Roelvink (2009) are concerned with thinking through how to live in the Anthropocene, in a world re-envisioned through
community economies, where those communities are opened up to consider the interconnectedness of all living beings. They draw on the sociology of science and post-humanist literatures to develop the concept of econo-sociality, where the economy is reclaimed as a site of ethical decision-making and economic exchange is visible in everyday practices and engagements. Econo-sociality encapsulates key aspects of the community economy: the being-in-common, the interconnectedness of all living things and the explanation of their interactions as economic moments. They conclude with examples of ethical economic projects that demonstrate this perspective. Importantly for understanding this work as collective action, they conclude: “Theory has taken on a new relation to action – to understand the world is to change it” (p. 342).

Building on Gibson-Graham and Roelvink’s work on econo-socialities and learning to be affected, Barron (2015) presents examples of transdisciplinary\(^2\) collective action. She develops the idea of econo-ecologies based on case studies with wild products foragers. By re-telling the gathering stories of individuals from the U.S. and Scotland, she shows how the gathering of wild products for personal use and exchange in the informal economy is a livelihood strategy that supports people and buffers them from the ups and downs of wage labor employment. Econo-ecologies emphasize working relationships among people, plants and fungi, where different organisms work collectively to eat, reproduce, and move (Barron 2018). As Barron points out, “econo-ecologies highlight relationships that cannot be easily quantified, categorized, or regulated, but are real and worthy of nourishment and protection” (Barron 2018: 388).

Miller (2012) works to push community economy theory forward, with a slightly different interpretation of collective action and interconnectedness. Finding inspiration in the Occupy Movement of 2011, he sees an opportunity to transition away from a focus on economy and towards a focus on livelihoods. Livelihoods draw attention to communities of life, to the interconnections of nature and economy rather than their separation, and to everyday opportunities for connection, creation and solidarity.

In “Cultivating Community Economies: Tools for Building a Livable World” Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective (2017) present the community economy collective’s key commitments, conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, and a review of several projects. This piece demonstrates the power of collective action to engage in political spaces and for academic work to assist and further political action. Several action research projects are reviewed, such as a community development project in the Latrobe Valley in Australia (Cameron and Gibson 2005) and the reclaiming of marine commons through participatory mapping (St. Martin 2005).

Finally, Gibson-Graham, Hill, and Law (2016) demonstrate interdisciplinary collective action research between CEC scholars and others by incorporating resilience thinking into the work on building more than human communities. Like the other work in this section, their work in Monsoon Asia is premised on a politics of the subject where all life

\(^2\) Transdisciplinarity connotes engagement across disciplines and with people and/or organizations outside academia.
forms are interconnected and in constant negotiation for short and long-term success. It furthers a politics of language by finding “transformational ecological-economic relations in the present – i.e. in cases that are experimenting with resilience right now” (p. 714).

This overview of CEC work demonstrates how collective members are practicing a politics of collective action in their scholarship. In regards to furthering the concept of emplaced sustainability, all the work reviewed here is very intentional about interconnectedness and the interdependency of nature and society. Indeed, as evidenced in the previous section, many community economies scholars do not accept what they see as an artificial separation of society from nature. Thus, a politics of collective action in the community economy is inherently and fundamentally also about being connected to place, and the places where community members live.

4. Conclusions
Sustainability is foundational to the continuation of the everyday practices of socially reproducing the connections between nature and society in different places. The emplacement framework fosters the concept of emplaced sustainability by relating existing case studies of the key tenets through the language of displacement, misplacement, replacement and emplacement. This seemingly simple act furthers a politics of language, which supports interdisciplinary scholarship and can also be extended to collective actions and transdisciplinary engagement.

A post-capitalist sustainability is theorized and envisioned as emplaced sustainability by drawing on the work of Gibson-Graham and the Community Economies Collective, through a politics of language, politics of subject and politics of collective action (Gibson-Graham 2006). The CEC understands these political engagements as “strategies for cultivating community economies…to broaden the horizon of economic politics so that ethical economic practices might multiply” (Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective 2017: 8). Much of this work is premised on the inseparability of human and non-human natures, a key concept shared between the community economies, the emplacement framework, and the environmental sociology literatures.

In this chapter, I adapted the CEC’s ethical political strategies framework to further develop political dimensions of the key tenets of the emplacement framework. The first strategy activates a politics of language to dislocate the dominant language of sustainability: ecosystem services, coupled systems and trade-offs (Turner II 2010), to make space for a language emphasizing place-based sustainability and described through the domains of the emplacement framework. The second strategy is to cultivate a new politics of the subject. For emplaced sustainability research this means considering the political engagements among human communities and earth others and how they are linked in different ways depending on the questions we ask. The third strategy of collective action, in accordance with the goal of the emplacement framework, is to identify and foster radical transdisciplinarity in sustainability research and community engagement. This means looking for emplaced sustainability in the present, rather than focusing on creating it or simply waiting for it to emerge, in the future.
The political strategies discussed here are not dependent on each other, but they do go hand in hand. Engaging in a politics of language is a starting point for fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and awareness, but openness and awareness of other perspectives is not enough. It is both emotionally and intellectually challenging to move beyond the work on language and into the actual reframing of who and what are actants (subjects) in political engagement and negotiation – meaningfully considering plants and fungi as part of our communities along with our human neighbors and domesticated animals! A politics of collective action relies on the work of a politics of language, and fosters the remaking of subjects as actors in new configurations. Taken together, these negotiations remain grounded in place through a politics of place: the building of new economic subjects that can transform political and economic conditions in places.

In his review of the role for place in sociology, Gieryn (2000) asks: “Is there anything sociological not touched by place? Probably not,” (p. 482). Gieryn (2000) suggests that place has agency because it exerts force on social life, it is “more than just another independent variable” (p. 467). He posits “the task ahead is to see all social phenomena as emplaced, as being constituted in part through location, material form, and their imaginings” (p. 467). One could make a similar case for sustainability, given its conceptual breadth and reach in the present. For environmental sociologists, environmental challenges due to instabilities in resource use seem to be the key entry point for sustainability (Mol 2007; Bell 2011; Pellow and Brehm 2013). Applying Gieryn’s thinking, environmental sociologists may begin to consider all social phenomena linked to the complexities of place-based sustainability. Indeed, Pellow and Brehm (2013) suggest that environmental sociology can expand into new areas and become more robust through interdisciplinary engagement.

The emplacement framework can contribute to environmental sociology by answering these calls for greater attention to place and interdisciplinarity. The very goal of the emplacement framework is to foster interdisciplinary work on sustainability. It facilitates the incorporation of a holistic sense of place. It has already been used successfully to theorize environmental sociology research on the cultural and environmental transitions of Hmong refugees in Wisconsin (Van Auken et al. 2016). As scholars with joint matters of concern: ethics, integrity, sustainability, there is room for more interaction among these scholarly communities. This is certainly a good thing, because in the area of sustainability in the present and the future, there is plenty more work to do.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Laura Hartman and Frederik Hagemann for thoughtful conversations and prior collaboration, which informed this paper. I also thank the authors of this handbook, for reaching out to the Community Economies Collective regarding our work, and their belief in its ability to inform and contribute to environmental sociology.
Literature Cited


