

'Samfundsgeografi' and the environmental turn

Bjornår Saether (1999). Regulering og innovasjon: Miljøarbeid i norsk treforedlingsindustri 1974-1998. 281 pp. Institutt for sosiologi og samfunnsgeografi, Universitet i Oslo (the evaluation published in *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift* 55:1 (2001), 50-51)

Bjornår Saether's doctoral dissertation is an important step forward in the humanity/nature studies within Nordic 'samfundsgeografi' informed by realism. I find the book brave and original, as evaluated against the current social geographical fascination attached to imaginary topographies and 'fluid spaces'. Saether continues in the decades long tradition of critical Nordic geography and succeeds in renewing several of the basic questions. He focuses his efforts on those structures, objects and mechanisms of society that are hardly visible from the street level or within everyday life perspectives. Saether's book is historically argued geography of the most central societal questions of our age. It resonates well with the more recent worries about the direction of the social geographical 'avant garde' constructing virtual thirdspaces and, consequently, losing touch to society and its fundamental elements. Anne Buttner, while receiving the degree of honorary doctor in the University of Joensuu in the fall 1999, critically discussed about the threats of geography becoming too sophisticated to be able to deal with the most central topics of our global and local worlds. Saether's thesis is theoretically sophisticated and elegant, and, simultaneously, rich with political economic relevance.

Saether has two major challenges to start his study. Firstly, he tries to specify the necessary corrections of economic geography under the pressures of current ecological alarm. He looks forward to an updated understanding of the interrelations between nature, production and space. Secondly, he aims to open new contacts to entrepreneurial and governmental interests in environmental regulation. Both challenges are of key importance for the renewing geography and its societal credibility.

The ecologically informed economic geography is inspired here by three traditions within geographical nature/society debate, namely, the cultural one derived from the works of Carl Sauer, the historical one based on Paul Vidal de la Blache's writings and the production oriented view inspired by Karl August Wittfogel. From this basis, Saether elaborates his argument critically through Henry Lefebvre, David Harvey and Ulrich Beck, among others, and discusses about the interfaces between material industrial production and risk production. Saether, hence, builds his perspective on the interaction between material practices and lived spaces but, however, emphasizes the concrete industrial metabolism, including its extractive and socio-ecologically harmful side effects, too. This seems necessary, keeping in mind his empirical focus: environmental reorientation within forest industrial processes.

Saether also underlines the role of technological trajectories and 'sunk costs' in conditioning the frames of current ecological turn in forest industry (see Saether 1998, too). By these concepts he focuses on those impacts of history and tradition that limit the scope of alternatives today. Sunk costs are the costs of reorientation in the context of inherited patterns of production. The old machinery and logistics are a limiting factor for the forest industry, and freeing oneself from these historical constraints - e.g., under external pressures - is often a painful process, especially

within such a sector of production as forest industry that is deeply bound to capital intensive solutions. There is no easy way of 'constructing out' these limitations while, e.g., faced with new demands from the side of environmentally aware consumers of paper.

The question of environmental regulation is opened in the thesis by introducing the emerging new dependencies between the internal (företagsinterne) and external interest of regulation where the latter refers both to governmental (statliga) and nongovernmental (icke statliga) pressures of regulation. Saether discusses about the different roles of governments and environmental movements in introducing new initiatives of regulation, as well as the impacts of the changing values of the clients of the companies. Saether's primary subject is the enterprise whereas the rest of the society is taken into consideration as part of the societal networks of the companies. Environmental strategies are integrally linked to strategies of competence and here the life cycles of the products are of central importance.

Saether argues, that the ecological context of the forest industry has remarkably changed during the last years: the shift from place specific and locational problems (of pollution and resource use) to economic spaces of the product cycles and markets has forced the industry to turn from reactive to proactive environmental strategies. Here Saether applies the concept of ecological expropriation, introduced by Ulrich Beck, which refers to unprecedented devaluation of capital and productivity, sometimes taking place without any actual change in the utility or appearance of the end product. Under the pressure of ecological expropriation, the companies have to work hard today to get, and keep, the green label of credibility demanded by consumers and environmentalists, both in terms of material practices and image construction.

Bjornår Saether's thesis is an ambitious piece of work and it covers a larger field of nature/society debate and political economic geography relevant in the context of ecological modernization and governance. Therefore, the few critical comments below should be understood as issues of further interest while getting forward into the direction already addressed.

Firstly, while focusing on the metabolism between industrial production and its ecological base, including the production of new risks and changes in global spatial order, Saether doesn't say much about the impacts of the current restless dynamics of financial speculation on the companies. The biggest of the forest companies are today more and more dependent on the changing rankings of the stock markets and the demands of the share holders asking for maximal profit. The transcontinental forest industry business has to keep itself updated both to material and speculative innovations in paper production and this double dependency has modified its environmental profilisation, too. The Nordic companies, like Norske Skog, Stora Enso and UPM Kymmene (Champion International) have become active in the Tropics and across the North Atlantic and it seems evident the Nordic and North European environmentalism - as a cultural mentality and discourse - is more and more challenged by the Tropical and North American models, remarkably deviating from the regulative norms and measures we in the Nordic countries have become accustomed to.

The companies have become forced to turn more and more sensitive to external tensions based on cultural differences between the partners and their related regional contexts. Due to the more

recent transcontinental mergings and purchases, the competitive setting is rapidly changing and this challenges indeed the Nordic model. We can, e.g., ask, to what degree the Nordic companies are "exporting" the North European model (of deepening environmental regulation) across the seas and continents and to what degree they are mainly adopting the models and cultures of the new target countries? Evidently, it seems, there is a need to further elaborate the transcontinental comparative settings by critically analysing the moves of the companies, including Norske Skog in Southern Korea, Thailand and Canada.

Secondly, it seems, Saether is rather superficial in his interpretation of the nongovernmental actors of environmental regulation. The umbrella like category of nongovernmental actors covers a wide variety of different groups with a remarkable variation in background motives and operational contexts. Environmental movements are taken here as one pressure group, apparently including interests ranging from biodiversity conservation to environmental justice concerns. The problems of such broad categorisation are significant. The explicit dualism locates the governmental bodies on the other side of the dividing line, while positing the rest of the regulatory bodies on the other side, that is, against the governmental ones and as if relational and comparative to the former. However, and especially during the current global networking of civic activism, the variety within the latter is enormous and its organisatory configurations multidimensional, reaching the scopes not easily comparable to governmental ones.

On the other hand, the unification of all environmental activism into one single movement obscures the contradictory motives and arguments of the different groups and, simultaneously, reproduces the popular stereotypes of nature conservation. In general, this kind of cursory conceptualization easily turns to oversimplifications and therefore, serve as a means of confirming the dominating power/knowledges. Discursive inclusions and exclusions have a tendency to predetermine the societal goal formulations and we, as researchers, should indeed be sensitive to these reproductivions of domination and regime formation.

However, the critical points above cannot shadow the strengths of the dissertation. The analysis of the environmental strategies of the Norwegian forest industry is a welcomed work and completes interestingly the geographical picture of the 'Nordic wood order' as a model developed during the last centuries and perhaps containing even something worth exporting to other cultures and continents, too. Most importantly, Saether convinces the relevance of a geographical analysis of forest industrial companies.

Additional source:

Saether, Bjornår (1998). Environmental improvements in the Norwegian pulp and paper industry - from place and government to space and market. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift* 52:181-194.

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