

Environmental justice or justification of environmental policies: a scaled discourse analysis for China's urban planning system

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Abstract

This paper explores environmental discourses in planning, with special reference for China's Pearl River Delta. The environmental situation in China is rapidly developing into a crisis. Analogous to its speedy economic growth, various forms of environmental problems have worsened so quickly that incumbent officials are often unable to handle them. This is particularly evident in the rapidly developing coastal regions where rigorous economic policies are adding stress to their eco-systems which have been severely damaged in many instances. For many of them, the need to sustain economic growth at the same time as repairing environmental damage embodies a real policy dilemma. This imposes tremendous pressure on the urban planning system – the key policy tool for reconciling competing aspirations over the use of urban space.

Indeed, the past three decades have witnessed the growth of an expansive use of environmental discourses in planning, ranging from the globally stylish terms such as climate change and global warming to the locally practicable narratives such as eco-cities and sponge cities. The rising usage of these discourses may signify a growing government awareness of environmental issues. Yet, it is in no way indicative that Chinese planning has already established a role for itself as a key site, function, and orchestrator of ecological conservation. Ideas such as developing eco-cities and avoiding the use of land with ecological significance sit uneasily with the emerging role of planning as a vital means of shaping urban economic prosperity. The serious gap between policy narratives and their implementation is receiving the attention of a range of insightful theoretical attempts. However, these existing accounts have evident theoretical inadequacies. For example, they have a tendency to apply a technically oriented approach to the neglect of the social construction of discourses and they have a lack of scale perspective to the ignorance of forces working at multiple scales in discursive production.

In this paper, I intend to go some way towards meeting these deficiencies in academic inquiry. On a theoretical front, the 'scaled discourse analysis' will be used as a construct to 'denaturalize' the notion of discourses being technically articulated to tackle local environmental problems and/or to accomplish demands imposed from upper level governments. To this end, I combine the merits of both the political-economic tradition and the post-structuralist approach to argue for a more circumspect inquiry into the material production and the epistemological construction of scale in understanding environmental discourses in planning. Most of current scholarly work mainly focuses on western cities. This paper will be an interesting addition to the Asian context. Empirically, by using selected cities in the Pearl River Delta as case studies, the paper will assess the process of the inclusion or exclusion of particular environmental discourses in their master plans. A twofold dimension will be emphasized. The first dimension relates to the material production of scale in discursive processes. It invites us to consider how notable scalar agents invent political projects and initiatives to influence and control the scalar relations regarding environmental governance in planning. The second dimension probes deeply into the epistemological construction of scale – the strategic deployment of scale by various actors to justify their social practice.

This paper concludes that the surfacing and the ensuing reconfiguration of a particular discourse in planning is the outcome of a discursive contest between an assortment of political actors at multiple spatial scales. It also reveals that these discourses acquire their persuasive power through mobilizing scale to frame and institutionalize how the world should be observed.