GEOG 607: The Science/Policy Interface

Winter 2015   Dr. Katie Meehan
Thursdays 9:00-11:50am   Office: Condon 107C
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Overview

Why does science often fail to influence policy? What accounts for policy divergence in the face of sound, consensus-driven science? To what extent is science truly coherent or value-free? How are environmental policy decisions ultimately crafted and achieved? Drawing on science and technology studies (STS)—an interdisciplinary field that includes anthropology, sociology, geography, history, and policy studies—in this course we will explore core issues at the science-policy interface, including: the relationship between scientific knowledge and political power; how diffusion works and rifts are created and resolved; how science is embedded in institutions, laws, policies, and discourses; and the future role of science in democratic societies.

Some see the science-policy 'gap' as something to hurdle or 'bridge'; others characterize the relationship more as a continuous interaction between science and policy. Most scholars agree that *context*—and its sociospatial and geographic dimensions—is key to understanding rifts among science and policy. While this is a geography seminar, the course locates its intellectual home in STS: the interdisciplinary study of how science and technology shape society and the environment (and vice versa). While STS is a broad field, this course starts with the assumption that science is not automatically coherent or 'right'; and that policy is not inherently efficient or designed to be responsive. Instead, through reading critical theory and empirical studies, we'll transform the 'science/policy interface' into an empirical object to be explored, probed, and interrogated for answers.

The course is aimed at graduate students—regardless of specialty of academic background—who are motivated to think more critically about what we mean by scientific discovery and policy innovation, what counts as scientific knowledge and why, and how science and technology intervene in the wider world. Welcome! This course will be awesome.

Examples of Topics

Topics will include, but are not limited to:
- Historical roots and approaches in the study of science in society; deconstructing the sanitized assumptions of 'linear' science and 'earnest' decision-makers
- Principal factors that characterize a science-policy schism; ways to overcome the divide
- The science-policy gap in real life: deforestation politics in the Brazilian Amazon; climate change adaptation in cities; issues of credibility and trust in U.S. environmental policy-making

Authors and Texts

We will read some of the most influential authors in the field. Example include:
- Robert Merton
- Sheila Jasanoff
- Bruno Latour
- Wiebe Bijker

- Myanna Lahsen
- Susan Leigh Starr
- Mike Hulme
- David Demeritt

- David W. Cash
- Maria Carmen Lemos
- Daniel Sarewitz
- And more!

A detailed syllabus and bibliography will be posted on Blackboard by the first day of class. Students will be given plenty of advance notice for any readings that need to be obtained/purchased (e.g. a book).