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Section 4.14 **Political ecology** Simon Batterbury

Political ecology (PE) is concerned with how humans relate to the biophysical world. Political ecologists have investigated the many environmental challenges that vulnerable communities across the world must face. These include the unequal impacts of global warming on different societies, the health effects of environmental toxics in food, air and water, the environmental crimes of corporations and syndicates, tropical deforestation, wars over control of natural resources, land grabbing, and urban environmental injustices. Political ecology has been important in explaining such phenomena, and particularly the social and political inequities both causing them and mediating their impacts (Bryant, 2015)

. PE is interdisciplinary and most closely associated with the disciplines of geography, anthropology and development studies. PE's distinguishing feature is tracing environmental problems and human vulnerabilities to inequalities in power, although many political ecologists also carry out analysis of environmental processes. In general, political ecologists believe that the human struggle for resources and healthy environments is strongly influenced by how much power societies, and individuals hold, and how they use it.

Access to resources

Inequalities in 'access to natural resources' is a central theme of political ecology. Consider the widely reported acquisition of African land by investors, foreign governments and corporations wanting to grow biofuels and conduct agribusiness in the 2000s. This saga of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2004) peaked in 2011–2012, but has major effects on access to land and water. In SW Cameroon in West Africa, deals were made with government that permitted vast tracts of land to be occupied legally by offshore industrial corporations for palm oil plantations, including the US-based Herakles Farms. Tens of thousands of hectares of gallery forests and farmland has been cleared and replanted for palm and other monocrops. Political ecologists identify the process as political, since although SW Cameroon has suitable environmental conditions for palm, that is not why companies have gained a foothold in this particular place – rather, there is weak and sometimes corrupt governance, outdated and undemocratic land tenure rules, as well as divided communities who are poor and vulnerable to demands for land

Foreign investors have exploited these conditions at different scales. Worse affected are rural women, who lack a political mandate to speak out collectively. A further inequality is that the loss of land is not compensated by the few agro-plantation jobs and minor financial returns from palm oil production. And, because this region is geopolitically marginalised and in conflict with the state, legal challenges to land grabbing are going unanswered. The political ecology of land access remains central to the region and its people (Batterbury & Ndi, 2017).

Hatchet and seed

So, a broad-ranging political ecology investigation is required to understand such complex environmental issues, and particularly to reveal inequalities and injustices. For geographer Paul Robbins, political ecology can be used as 'hatchet' and 'seed' (Robbins, 2004). In this case, the first is an exposé of power inequities, and the effects of deforestation and palm cultivation. Empirical research may be useful in defending the rights of local residents. Indeed in other locations, the 'green economy' of conservation reserves, biofuel plantations or renewable energy installations also closes down access to resources. Sometimes this pits political ecologists against conservation biologists and large environmental NGOs (today, sometimes in partnership with business) anxious to preserve habitat, at the expense of local livelihoods (Adams, 2017).

'Seeding' involves generating fresh and useful ideas that may find a home in direct advocacy, legal challenges, or activism. PE has supported better environmental governance, and efforts to 'fight back'

against injustice. Most directly, PE practitioners have not just researched the origins of injustice, but tackled it, with constituencies including local scholars and community organisations. There is an 'environmentalism of the poor' involving political coalition-building, an Environmental Justice Atlas, and concerted action against tough opponents, (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). While some struggles are international and combative, others are more localised community efforts to capture or sustain access to resources.

Political ecologists note that persuasive narratives skew our judgements about human–environment relationships. The 'power to convince' is important in explaining how land was ceded in Cameroon for example; local chiefs were persuaded that benefits would result from palm oil plantations. This is a common story; narratives embody power, and can have tangible effects on environments and people (Adger et al., 2001; Escobar, 2008). The 'post-truth', pro-business, anti-environmentalist narratives rolled out by the 2017 Donald Trump administration in the United States are not supported by scientific analysis of climate change and other environmental phenomena. This is a struggle for truth, which for political ecologists and their ilk involves "resisting truth claims that lead systematically to unfreedoms and objectionable practices" (Sullivan, 2017: 234). There are potential alliances here between the objectives of climate science, political ecology and global coalitions of activists and affected communities – and of course, many questions to be resolved about the values and justice claims that are adopted.

Methods and theories

Methodologically, political ecologists use a wide range of approaches, to illuminate exactly how political and economic activities influence the fate of ecosystems and local cultures, and how institutional arrangements and organisations are (or have been) responsible for these outcomes. Geographer Piers Blaikie and colleagues were the originators of a distinctive 'regional PE' approach which analyses processes that operate at different scales, but are interlinked. Blaikie identified a "chain of explanation", or a cascade of effects, linking soil erosion to changes in land use practices, caused not by poor local land management but by poverty and denial of access, even arguing that "soil erosion in lesser developed countries will not be substantially reduced unless it seriously threatens the accumulation possibilities of the dominant classes" (Blaikie, 1985: 147).

This type of explanation has been applied in other contexts, including lifting the gaze to global issues like carbon emissions and the new 'green economy' (Peet et al., 2011). PE draws upon a range of theories to explain human–environment relationships (Bixler et al., 2015). Theorists including Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, show how inequalities are embedded in capitalism, and in the subjugation and control of entire populations through monitoring and categorising. There are rational underpinnings to environmental struggles that create winners and losers (Bixler et al., 2015; Hornborg, 2017). Bruno Latour's work is rather different, used by some political ecologists to look closely at relational networks or 'assemblages' involving objects (like trees, and genetically modified seeds) as well as people (Latour, 1991). Feminist political ecology sees power as gendered, focusing on the marginalisation of women but also their vital role in maintaining livelihoods and in struggling for access to resources (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Anthropologist Arturo Escobar's work, based on the Pacific Coast of Colombia, develops unique theories of resistance to modernity and development (Escobar, 2008).

Conclusion

Political ecology addresses political and economic agendas that have real effects on resources, environments, and people. Its practitioners dig deep, exposing these agendas but also the practices of those who survive in an unequal world. This work is important in the world of 'post-truth', in which 'facts' seem negotiable if they are unwelcome to powerful interests. 'Received wisdoms' can too easily direct bad policy. In the current, desperate context where unscientific narratives are imperilling everybody's environmental future, political ecology has come of age as a necessary dimension of environmental studies.

Learning resources

The following offer rich resources written by political ecologists:

Journal of Political Ecology (free access) <http://jpe.library.arizona.edu>

POLLEN (political ecology network) <https://politicalecologynetwork.com>

ENTITLE – collaborative writing on PE <https://entitleblog.org>

Environmental Justice Atlas <https://ejatlas.org>

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