

Feminist Political Ecologies – Situated Perspectives, Emerging Engagements

Ecologías políticas feministas: perspectivas situadas y abordajes emergentes | Rebecca Elmhirst

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Feminist Political Ecology has grown into an expansive and open-ended field that embraces and contributes to diverse theorisations of social relations of power associated with natures, culture and economies. Whilst FPE embraces a diversity of approaches and subject matters, there is a shared (if often implicit) commitment to feminist epistemology, methods and values, where dominant, masculinist conceptions and practices of knowledge and authority are recognised and challenged, and where emphasis is given to research and practice that empowers and promotes social and ecological transformation for women and other marginalized groups. Recent efforts to map out the terrain of Feminist Political Ecology, and the debates that have followed these, demonstrate the situatedness of knowledge claims that these kinds of mapping exercises involve. As an anglophone academic feminist political ecologist writing from the perspective of critical development studies, my own stock-taking reviews have emphasised work in FPE that relates to empirically-driven debates around dispossession, resource access and control in global South contexts (see for example Elmhirst 2015), and therefore reflect my engagement in specific transnational networks of thought and practice in FPE. Others narrate feminist political ecology from somewhat different networked positions, as highlighted for example, in the collection edited by Wendy Harcourt and Ingrid Nelson, which gives greater emphasis to FPE as “a process of doing environmentalism, justice and feminism differently”, including through engagements with queer and post-humanist ecologies (Harcourt and Nelson 2015: 9). Furthermore, contributions by scholars who are explicitly seeking to decolonise the academy and to challenge hegemonies of white, Anglophone, colonial, Western knowledge practices and politics (Sundberg 2014), have opened up more radical possibilities for engaging with other world views, and other ways of knowing, thereby bringing other kinds of networks of thought and practice into conversation with FPE.

Here, I provide a commentary on recent work in Feminist Political Ecology that I have found resonant in my own research practice, teaching and everyday life. This is, necessarily, a partial view that is restricted by my linguistic competencies (Anglophone), white European privilege and gendered experience. I discuss the development of feminist political ecology in four related strands:

(i) FPE and the gender dynamics of resource access and dispossession; (ii) post-humanism, bodies and matter in FPE; (iii) Sufficiency, commoning and a feminist ethics of care; and (iv) decolonial feminist political ecology, with the aim of showing the kinds of questions and concerns that each of these threads raises. For each of these areas, a very rich literature is developing, but here I make reference to a small, illustrative selection of articles which provide entry points to emerging debates.

(i) FPE and the gender dynamics of resource access and dispossession

To date, much FPE has centred on questions of resource access and control, drawing on political ecology's Marxist heritage and extending it to consider closer scales in which politics play out, i.e., within households and communities. Conceptual weight is given to the ways in which capitalism transforms and produces nature, and as these processes of transformation intersect with gender hierarchies at different scales, patterns of enclosure and marketization are seen to have important gender effects. Such studies seek to illuminate "the crucial role of family authority relations and property relations in structuring the gender division of labour and access to rural resources" such as land and labour (Carney 2004: 316). Work has detailed the gender-specific impacts of ecological change and/or environmental interventions, and how these are shaped by existing household divisions of labour and differing resource rights of men and women. More recently, this kind of work has been taken forward in studies of the gendered impacts of nature's neoliberalization (as showcased in the collection edited by Resurrección and Elmhirst 2008) and has been given added impetus by attention on the gendered impacts of dispossession and land/water grabbing in the global South (Behrman et al. 2012).

A similar line of reasoning is opening up through studies of the gendered impacts of climate change, where FPE is usefully put to work to look not only at how climate change has gender-specific impacts, but also how knowledges, policies and practices that coalesce around climate change adaptation bring gendered effects (Arora-Jonsson 2011). For example, market-based approaches to ameliorating climate change through 'payment for ecosystem services' schemes, which reward resource users for avoiding deforestation, are based on formulations of property rights that may erase pre-existing informal modes of resource access on which women and other marginalized groups depend, thus deepening gender disadvantage in unanticipated ways. A common theme is that men and women hold gender-differentiated interests in the environment and natural resources through their distinctive roles, responsibilities and knowledge within household/family divisions of labour. Gender is thus understood as a critical variable in shaping processes of ecological change and the pursuit of viable livelihoods (Elmhirst and Resurrección 2008: 5).

This strand of FPE has also considered household and community *gender relations* as a critical and often overlooked site for politics, particularly where environmental interventions have brought about gender conflict within households (and across conjugal partnerships) generating in turn ecological effects. Carney's (2004) work in the Gambia documents the intra-household conflicts that arose following interventions to enhance the productivity of wetlands. Women's customary access to rice land, a key source of income, was undermined by donor-sponsored irrigation schemes and horticultural projects, which also brought new demands by men on female labour, both of which were widely contested within households and communities (Carney 2004).

The importance of gender in family authority structures and conjugal relations in shaping resource access and control is perhaps most clearly seen in settings where the ability to derive benefits from resources is contingent on social relationships that constrain or enable the realisation of such benefits (Ribot and Peluso 2003). In much of South Asia, hierarchical social norms and practices associated with the conjugal partnership place women in a situation of dependence on male kin, who become a central conduit for access to resources (including land, labour and capital), and this creates gender-specific vulnerabilities for those experiencing marital breakdown or widowhood (Agarwal 2003). FPE provides the conceptual tools necessary for revealing intra-household power dynamics of this kind. By problematising the assumed division between public and private spheres, work has shown how gendered discourses and practices associated with national and international policies bleed into the reproductive realm. FPE is linked to a wider critique of the impacts of neoliberalism and marketization in Africa and parts of Southeast Asia where kin or community-based tenure systems are transferred into commoditized and individualized systems of resource tenure, which reduces women's access to land (and water) as community members (Doss et al., 2014; Zwarteveen 2009). Where large scale, transnational investments in land are being made for mono-cultivated agro-fuels (e.g. palm oil), FPE is developing a critical feminist engagement with such processes and their implications for food security. Further nuance is added with an intersectional analysis of subjectivities (Nightingale, 2011), which, in studies of the expansion of oil palm in Southeast Asia, demonstrates the interplay between gender, ethnicity, age and landscape in shaping the differentiated impacts of and responses to enclosure and commodification of resources (Elmhirst et al. 2017). More than ever, as processes of enclosure and dispossession accelerate and extend across the world, the importance of this kind of analysis lies in how it can highlight differentiated impacts and response, and thus provide the knowledges needed for political interventions that bring justice and empowerment to marginalized groups.

(ii) Post-humanist ontologies, bodies and matter

Whilst recent FPE has provided a renewed focus on subjectivities in understanding gendered resource access and control, there is also a current of thinking which seeks to reconsider how “nature” is understood, not simply as an objectified backdrop against which social relations are played out, but through a posthumanist relational ontology. Within new material feminism, as explored in the collection edited by Alaimo and Hekman (2008), the modern nature-society dualism is replaced by ontologies that reconceptualise nature and bring into question human dominance over non-human or more-than-human natures. As these ideas take hold, there is a sense in which some of the earlier tenets of ecofeminism are being reworked and reintroduced into FPE, after a long hiatus during which this body of ideas was rejected amidst charges of “essentialism”. Instead, a distinction is drawn between essentialism and an “acknowledgment of embodied, material connections with the environment” (Gaard 2011: 42).

An intersectional theoretical approach has been expanded to examine how the experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age and so on often take shape through species-ist ideas of humanness vis-à-vis animality (Hovorka 2012). Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway’s (2004) work on companion species, the focus in this line of work is on the doing and becoming of social identities across species boundaries. Feminist post-humanist thinking is used in an FPE context to consider the ways gender and species hierarchical arrangements work, materially, symbolically and through technologies of security, development and conservation, in a range of diverse settings.

Ideas around a posthumanist relational ontology are also being taken up in what might be described as feminist political ecologies of the body. Such work goes beyond the idea of bounded, interacting bodies to instead consider the flows between and through organisms, and between human and non-human natures. Those working in FPE have drawn on this kind of conceptualisation to analyse the metabolic flows associated with food, making important links between the ecologies underpinning neoliberal globalised food systems, production and consumption practices, and the more traditional feminist terrain of gendered bodies (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). The seepages of pollutants and carcinogens across and between human and non-human natures are seen as spatially uneven and associated with racialized and gendered processes of social and spatial marginalisation (Guthman and Mansfield 2013).

An example of this kind of work in FPE concerns analyses of activism and pedagogy around food security, principally amongst relatively marginalized communities in North America, where school garden and cooking programmes have been developed to encourage healthy eating habits in children through hands-on sensory experiences in gardens and kitchens. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013) propose a political ecology of the body (PEB), that involves an assessment of

structural forces (the political economic forces that produce social inequalities in relation to food access), knowledge production and meaning-making (food and health discourses produced by people and institutions), and a relational ontology (showing the importance of the relationships between social and environmental systems and how these materialise in the affective, emotional dynamics of embodied everyday life). This extension of feminist political ecology into a relational ontology that takes seriously the emotional, affective dimensions of food and eating points to a promising avenue for gender and development work more generally: taking seriously everyday embodied practices and affective/emotive relationships “as processes in and through which broader political economic forces take shape and are constituted” (ibid: 88). This kind of work not only contributes to an embodied FPE centred on linking the intimate to wider scales of analysis, but also connects FPE with work on gender and environmental justice (Tschakert and Machado 2012), thereby inviting promising synergies for future work.

(iii) Sufficiency, commoning and a feminist ethics of care

Also linked in part to a revisiting of ecofeminism, recent work in Feminist Political Ecology has explored how a feminist ethics of care can reimagine a post-capitalist alternative to neoliberal forms of natural resource-based development. Embracing a transnational perspective on environment and development, and the links between production and consumption world-wide, insights from FPE are being used to analyse practices of ethical consumption and cause-related marketing, and to problematize the ways in which such practices constitute the subjectivities of (women) consumers in the North, and human-environment relationships between and across the global North and South. Hawkins (2012) links FPE to studies of ethical consumption to show how cause-related marketing tends to constitute everyday lives in the North as separate from natural environments except through consumption choices. This has the effect of suggesting the market is the only route for caring, and environmentally responsible actions, notions which are presented in highly gendered ways. Within my own FPE collaborations around oil palm, this type of analysis has been useful for revealing the contradictions of commodity activism in the context of palm oil development, where an ethics of care coalesces around nature (represented in images of threatened forests and endangered orang utan), whilst care for dispossessed forest-based communities is elided in the messaging around corporate commitments to sustainable oil palm (Elmhirst et al. 2017).

More radical possibilities for expressing an ethics of care has emerged from FPE engagements with ecofeminism, degrowth and sufficiency narratives and what Wichterich (2015) refers to as a search for good living, secured livelihoods and the ‘sustainability of life’ (p.83). This reflects an intersection between the care economy, commons and commoning, and a critique of globalized consumption,

and has emerged largely in response to the precarity that has been wrought by capitalist exploitation and austerity politics across the world (see Harcourt and Nelson, 2015). Jarosz, for example, examines the motivations of women farmers involved in community-supported agriculture in the USA and concludes that these are expressive of an “ethics of care” that involves a sense of them nourishing themselves and others, nurturing people and the environment, as part of “an ethical positioning that challenges the processes of privatization, unfettered capital accumulation, competition and discourses of personal responsibility for inequality and poverty, which construct individuals as neoliberal subjects” (Jarosz 2011: 308). Jarosz is careful to avoid an essentialist connection between women and care for the environment and distant others. She suggests that, through their care work in community supported agriculture, the women in her study reveal motivations that are not primarily economic, but rather, are associated with social goals and desires to live a work-life that is satisfying and meaningful.

(iv) Decolonial feminist political ecology

In recent years, FPE has gained also from an engagement with feminist science studies and decolonial theorising, both of which offer the conceptual language for both recognising the situatedness of knowledge claims, and for tackling the kinds of epistemic privilege and authority that exist within Political Ecology (and beyond). These kinds of concerns provided impetus for much earlier iterations of feminist political ecology (e.g. Rocheleau et al., 1995). Decolonial thinking goes beyond a postcolonial provincializing of Western knowledges and instead encourages re-thinking the world from Latin America, from Africa, from Indigenous places, and from the marginalized academia in the global South (Radcliffe, 2017:329) in order to challenge universalizing claims that subordinate other ways of knowing.

Two related strands are surfacing within this theme. First, there has been a critical response to the ways post-humanist political ecology theory, with its emphasis on more-than-human agency, has lacked reflexive consideration of Anglo-American authorial privilege, and thus not recognised other ways of knowing, particularly those associated with indigenous world views (Sundberg, 2014). Many indigenous perspectives are relevant to ontological questions about nature and culture. For example, Kim Tallbear (2011) draws attention to the potential points of connection between the languages of post-humanist political ecologies and what have been referred to as American Indian metaphysics, or, more appropriately, the ontologies of Dakota/Lakota peoples (see also Collard et al., 2017).

Secondly, feminist political ecologists are embracing a decolonised environmental politics. In white settler contexts, such politics reverberate around indigenous struggles for sovereignty, and are

manifest in various environmental justice struggles, for example, the climate activism of the group Idle No More in Canada (Di Chiro 2015). For some FPE scholar-activists, decolonising feminist political ecology means working collaboratively, or as Sundberg puts it, 'walking with differently situated others in intersecting, yet distinct and unequally constituted struggles' (Sundberg 2014: 123). FPE scholars acknowledge that this is a solidarity beset with complex power relations, and examples in practice are rare. Di Chiro provides a fascinating examination of linking FPE environmental justice research, teaching and new forms of expression to "dance a new world into being" (Di Chiro 2015: 221), whilst Tallbear outlines her own feminist-indigenous approach to inquiry (Tallbear 2014). There is much to be inspired by, and signs that other ways of doing feminist political ecology are emerging through the topological links between differently situated feminist-environmentalist scholar-activists.

Conclusion

FPE in all its iterations begins from the premise that environmental change is not a neutral process amenable to technical management but rather, arises through political processes. FPE directs attention to various forms of political agency that arise from complex subjectivities (gender, race, class, sexuality), including those of academics, policy makers, practitioners and activists. By providing the tools for a nuanced and reflexive analysis of these political agencies, FPE offers a way past policy approaches commonly associated with gender and development in environmental contexts that foist ecological care upon those already burdened and disempowered women.

As a policy arena the environment is always subject to struggles around divergent and competing objectives, and FPE research can be used to legitimate courses of action far removed from the intentions of the researcher. Closing the gap between academics, policy makers and activists has been one approach to mitigate this risk: as explored earlier, a hallmark of recent FPE work is its commitment to collaborations with other engaged people that span the worlds of academia, policy, practice and activism, where a feminist perspective requires self-reflexivity, an openness to multiple truths and more marginalized voices, and where feminist ethics guide everyday practices of research, engagement and "impact". Many important avenues that align with what Braidotti (2009) has described as 'affirmative politics' are currently being explored through new feminist political ecologies: the themes covered here are just part of a continued flowering of this revitalized and important realm of transformative debate, politics and praxis.

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