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POLITICAL ECOLOGY

READING DIARY

IDA4230: Research in Political Ecology

Lecturer: Bruce Missingham

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Week 2: Power, Institutions and Actors

Political Ecologists seek not only to answer the four big questions for political ecological research, but also to challenge the conceptual frameworks of apolitical ecologists' claim of ecoscarcity and modernization by proving that they are both political in nature as they call for the distribution and control of resources. It also challenged the Determinists' claim by asserting that human had altered the environment not vice versa. It is essential to acknowledge that Political Ecologists are not involved in criticism per se; their work might be viewed as the lens to understand community decisions in regards to the natural and political environment, economic pressure and social norms. In short, they are both skeptical by focusing on the impacts power inequality in the society has on the environment and constructive by contributing to a better environmental governance. As Robbins put it "Political ecology is both the hatchet and the seed."

Reference:

Robbins, P. (2004) [*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapters 1 & 2, pp. xv-40

Week 3: Ideology, Discourse and Knowledge

Political ecology is a combined result of three main factors such as failures of cultural ecology and other related positivist human-environment social sciences in addressing important questions about environmental change; insights emerging from critical theories including common property theory, green materialism, peasant studies, feminist development studies; and acceleration of contradictions and feedbacks in global ecology. Environmental construction, one of political ecologists' main focuses, examines both the way claims about environmental systems become rooted in the political economic systems that produce and sustain them, and the non-conscious way in which state managers, local people and international agencies hold different normative ideas of the environment. Robins suggests five main strategies to deal with the challenges faced by political ecologists in conducting empirical research and analysis on environmental construction hypothesis. The main point here might be the articulation of language in understanding, communicating and interpreting the participants' conceptual knowledge of the environmental and political processes.

Reference:

Robbins, P. (2004) [*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapters 3 & 6, pp. 41-70, 107-126

Week 4: Scale and "Chains of Explanation"

This week readings examined two of the most significant conceptual tools for political ecologists. The first tool *progressive contextualization*, as defined by Vayda, is

the procedure that focuses on significant human-environment interactions and then explains these interactions by placing them within progressively wider or denser contexts. It is important to realize that the method mainly focuses on what the actor does within the actor's context and the consequences in a time and space that can be different from the original time and space. In other words, progressive contextualization explains the phenomena by answering the questions of "who is doing what?", "why are they doing it?", and "what are the consequences?" Despite the supposed advantages that Vayda proposed, it was rather disappointing that the actual methodologies to conduct progressive contextualization in any attempt to analyse environmental issues were not in discussion. The second tool that stood out from the reading, the *chains of explanation*, as Blaikie and Brookfield named it, was a cross-scale commitment to explore marginalized communities in the perspective of a broadly defined political economy. While there are several advantages for political ecologists to utilize this conceptual tool, one of the drawbacks includes the difficulty in selecting the suitable variables and appropriate scales to begin with.

References:

- Robbins, P. (2004) [*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapter 4, pp. 71-83
- Vayda, A.P. (1983) "Progressive Contextualization: Methods for Research in Human Ecology" *Human Ecology* 11: 265-81

Week 5: The Common Property Theory

According to Wantrup and Bishop, theory of common property resources otherwise known as the tragedy of the common held that unless the commons are privatized or directly controlled by the government, it would lead to socio-environmental ills including but not limited to depletion, pollution, and poverty. Although Robbins states that success of collective management is a result of the fact that such commons are commonly held property, Wantrup and Bishop claim that common property with the institutional quotas regulations is capable of satisfactory performance in the management of natural resources in a market economy. While Diets, Ostrom and Stern suggested a constructive list of what constitutes successful governance of the commons through adaptive governance, Gleick argued that political corruption will continue to force the public or private authorities to line the pockets of the politically powerful elites at the expense of the communities. Thus, I believe the debate on better governance of the commons should initially begin with the main focus on political corruption and the power imbalances before moving on to adaptive governance.

References:

- Ciriacy -Wantrup S.V. and R.C. Bishop (1975) "[Common Property' as a Concept in Natural Resources Policy](#)," *Natural Resources Journal* 15(4): 713-727.
- Dietz, T., E. Ostrom and P.C. Stern (2003) '[The Struggle to Govern the Commons](#)' *Science* (302) 5652 p.1907-14.

- Gleick, P. H. (2006). *The world's water, 2006-2007 : the biennial report on freshwater resources*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Robbins, P. (2004) [*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapter 3, pp. 43-45

Week 6: Gender, Development, and Environment

Though the authors in both readings agree that it is important to increase women's participation in an effort to improve their living conditions, their focus were rather exclusive yet complementary. Whereas Peet and Hartwick attempted to relate feminism to development in a theoretical approach, Meinzen-Dick, Brown, Feldstein and Quisumbing constructed a list of suggestions for policy makers to reduce the gender asymmetries in property rights by designing the policy that recognizes the full range of users and uses of a resource, looking beyond legal rights so as to remove gender-based constraint to other services and rights which limit women's access to property, and providing women appropriate infrastructures to exercise their rights. One important lesson from this reading is that although it is an utmost desire from development agencies or policy makers to encourage community participation, it is important to be cautious of the equal participation from both gender groups because policy affects different gender group in a different way. It is also interesting to note that it seems to me like the authors had utilized political ecologists' tools to come up with the suggested list.

References:

- Meinzen-Dick, R.S., L.R. Brown, H.S. Feldstein and A.R. Quisumbing (1997) '[Gender, Property Rights, and Natural Resources](#),' *World Development* 25(8): 1303-15.
- Peet, R. and E. Hartwick (1999) 'Feminist Theories of Development,' in R. Peet & E. Hartwick [Theories of Development](#). Pp. 163-94. New York: The Guilford Press.

Week 7: Forest Management and Conflict

Robbins' degradation and marginalization thesis states that the degradation of the environment is caused mainly by either the marginalization of the local community through overexploitation of natural resources by the market system, or the changing production systems intervened by the state development agencies. The evidence was illustrated in the Amazonia deforestation case where the disempowerment of marginal communities resulted in the loss of tree cover in the region. Alternatively, looking beyond the three exciting mythical discourse of swidden agricultural practices in Indonesia that Dave busted, this case study could be used to reinforce Robbins' thesis by demonstrating that because of those myths that those communities were left undisturbed by the state, and thus were able to sustain themselves. However, it is important not to conclude that Robbins is an anti-state development advocate, because the main point that he was trying to make is that state development agencies need to

take into consideration several factors that constitute a community before decisions should be made.

References:

- Dove, M. (1983) '[Theories of Swidden Agriculture and the Political Economy of Ignorance](#),' *Agroforestry Systems* 1 (2): 85-99.
- Robbins, P. (2004) [Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapter 7, pp. 127-146

Week 8: Water and Sustainable Development

According to Meinzen-Dick and Bruns, privatization, the first model of water governance, is argued to be the antidote to the tragedy of the commons and the difficulties of collective actions. The UNDP's report further outlined that the establishment of private water property rights has the potential to allow adjustments to the increased competition to take place through the market with the price mechanism ensuring that water flows to its most productive use. The second model focuses on the structural reforms of the government institutions involved through decentralization and the devolution of authority. The report called into attention the importance of participatory approach as one of the measures to increase the related authorities' responsibility for water management, transparency, and performance. However, the criticism is that not only the pro-market governance model of water does not take into account the socio-economic inequality of the different social groups, the political and institutional structures that govern the establishment of those private property rights also need to be considered as these might have the influence on the inequality of getting access to water. In short, it is clear to see that although participatory approach is desirable in the efforts to better the governance of water, particular attentions need to be focused on the different gender and cultural group representation in the decision-making process.

References:

- Meinzen-Dick, R. and B.R. Bruns (2000) 'Negotiating Water Rights: Introduction,' in B.R. Bruns and R. Meinzen-Dick, eds. *Negotiating Water Rights*. Pp. 23-55. Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute. Available at <http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/books/negwaterrights.htm> [accessed 10/2/08]
- UNDP 2006 *Human Development Report 2006 Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*, Chapter 5, pp. 173-200. Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006/> [accessed 10/2/08]

Week 9: Political Ecology of Rivers, Dams, and Irrigation

A large dam, as mentioned by McCully, is conventionally built to bring a river under control, to regulate its seasonal pattern of floods and low flows, to increase the

agricultural production via irrigation, and to generate hydroelectricity. Some of the negative impacts of dams as identified by McCully include the inundation of important archaeological and cultural sites, the spread of diseases from the mosquitoes living in the reservoirs, the alteration of the river's temperature and chemistry, and the destruction of one-fifth of the world's freshwater fish. Besides these negative impacts, the motivations behind the construction of a large dam are rather captivating. For example, the Khong-Chi-Mun dam in northeast Thailand represents a great deal of issues that could be explored using the political ecology tools such as common property, chain of explanation, and power relations. First, this KCM dam provides an excellent evidence showing how powerful the wealthy individuals in Thailand could be when it comes to the enclosure of the common land, water and forests of the politically weak community. Second, this dam is more than just a dam itself because it has been manipulated by the national government and local politicians as a poster child for development when in fact it is more about winning political popularity contest.

References:

- Kamkongsak, Erdsak and Law, M. 2001 '[*Laying waste to the land: Thailand's Khong-Chi-Mun Irrigation Project*](#)', *Watershed*, 6 (3) p.25-35.
- McCully, P. (2001) '[*The Power and the Water*](#),' in *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams*. London: Zed Books. Pp.1-28

Week 10: Political Ecology of Fire and Rangelands

Scoones' paper mainly focuses on the paradigm shift in the equilibrium notions of the ecosystem before and after the 1970s. This paradigm shift has resulted in the development of new fields of study in ecology disciplines such as ecological anthropology, political ecology, environmental and ecological economics, and the nature-culture debates. Unfortunately, according to Scoones, the hindrances for these new fields of study to expand themselves in both the academic and popular realms are embedded in their different language use, frames of references, and methodological approaches. It was interesting to see how Turner utilized political ecology as a research discipline to understand the relationship between livestock and grazing-induced environmental change in the Sahel region. From this pastoral case study, Turner concluded that political ecology, with its analytical emphasis on political ecological integration and attention to spatial and organizational scales, is appropriately suited to develop combined policy initiatives that incorporate a greater understanding of changes in local livestock population and their seasonal distribution across rangeland. This indeed reminded me of Robbins' definition of political ecology as both the seeds AND the hatchets.

References:

- Scoones, I. (1999) '[*New Ecology and the Social Sciences*](#),' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28: 479-507.
- Turner, M. (2003) 'Environmental Science and Social Causation in the Analysis of Sahelian Pastoralism' in K.S. Zimmerer and T.J. Bassett, eds., [*Political Ecology*](#):

Week 11: Environmental Movements and Liberation Ecology

In contrast to week 7 degradation and marginalization thesis, the environmental identity and social movement thesis suggests that exploitations of the politically weak groups might otherwise lead to the drawing together of these disparate communities into collective awareness, and thus collective actions. This brand of political ecology is rather different from the other three because it argues that the fundamental ways that abstract human experiences and social processes like identity, ethnicity, and political agency are grounded in the most common material things such as fertilizers, drinking water, and trees. That is because people make an identity as they make a living, and thus any threat to this livelihoods would potentially result in resistance from the local communities. In addition, it is comforting to see Robbins concluded the book with quite a careful debate on the rigor of political ecology as a research discipline, and yet left behind a convincing message that the theories in political ecology recognizes human/non-human relationships to be linked through dynamics that may yield unpredictable consequences better than its counterparts.

Reference:

Robbins, P. (2004) *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Chapter 10-11, pp 187-201, 203-216.

Week 12: Oxfam and Waterkeepers Australia

It is not so surprising to see Cornford and Simon labeled the Asian Development Bank as one of the most powerful actors responsible for the threatening of livelihoods, wellbeing and future opportunities of rural communities in the Mekong region. That is because the Bank has repeatedly undermined the rights of rural people to a sustainable livelihood and adequate standard of living. Therefore, the burden for Oxfam Community Aid Abroad to get involve in this business was because of the fact that not only has Australia been one of the key supporters of the ADB, it also has an important role in the governance of the bank. The book mainly challenged the operation of the Bank and its so-called “development projects” with its “Fighting Poverty in the Asia-Pacific” catch-phrase. The arguments in the book mainly pointed out that the operational structures of the Bank unfortunately benefited only the small elite segments of the societies, and thus need restructuring. In regards to the fieldtrip, it was highly relevant to the topics that had been discussed throughout the semester and very much appreciated. One of the things that I achieved from the fieldtrip was a sense of reassurance of both the positive impacts and limitations that applied political ecology have in terms of trying to bring together grassroots social movements in the hope of bridging the inequality gaps in the society.

References:

Cornford, Jonathan & Simon, Michael 2001 [*Breaking the banks: the impact of the Asian Development Bank and Australia's role in the Mekong region*](#), Oxfam, Melbourne.

Week 13: Conservation Politics

Contemporary conservation, according to Robbins, not only pushes traditional residents and users to the margins, but also produces unsustainable results. In addition, a quick overview of the history of conservation is rather disturbing because instead of showing a simple tree protection and plantation, it revealed the struggles for political power and resistance between and among the elites and the socio-economically weak communities. Thus, Robbins suggests that before the emergence of alternative conservation models, based on the lessons learned from applied political ecology, particular attentions need to be focused on the entrenched system and coercive character of territorialized environmental control. Agrawal, in same vein, argued that efforts to bring about change in the community need to focus on the divergent interests of multiple actors within groups, the political interactions in which these interests emerge, and the institutions that influence the outcomes of political processes.

To sum up, based on the readings and discussions in and outside the classroom, I think Political Ecology is an interdisciplinary research discipline that utilizes political and economic theory to study the problems of environmental control and ecological change.

References:

Agrawal, A. (2000) "[*Community' and Natural Resource Conservation*](#)," in F.P. Gale and R.M. M'Gonigle, eds. *Nature, Production, Power: Towards an Ecological Political Economy*. Pp. 35-55. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Robbins, P. (2004) [*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*](#). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ch. 8, pp 147-171.