

Political Ecology Has Come Of Age

Political ecology is by no means a new concept. As a theory it produces a complex framework of understanding into the relationships between political, economic and social environments and the effect these relations have on environmental development and protection, developing common ground where disciplines can intersect (Greenburg and Park (1994)). The nature of political ecology can be so broadly defined that as a field of research has developed, no one definition has been substantiated in order to fully characterise the assertion towards collective considerations of society and nature. Although the adaptation and expansion of this body of knowledge continues to create a broader sub-context in which geographic and development studies are practiced, creating greater obstacles in its theoretical classification, Robbins (2004) defines political ecology as, 'empirical, research based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit considerations of relations of power'. The emphasis placed on political ecology is to provide a sense of connectedness within a field that traditionally sees the sum of its parts divided into different areas of definition and implication. As the study of the importance of political ecology by Stott and Sullivan (2000) has shown that by identifying the political circumstances that forced people into activities which caused environmental degradation, in the absence of alternative possibilities, there is a need to illustrate the political dimensions of environmental narratives and in deconstructing particular narratives, to suggest that accepted ideas of degradation and deterioration may not be simple linear trends to predominate.

This approach to geographic thinking provides the academic field with a further dimension of theoretical application but as to whether its use has truly 'come of age' remains a contested issue within academia and the wider world of representative approaches to environmental conservation and positive action towards sustainability. This essay will concentrate on deconstructing whether this critical approach to human-environmental relations has broken the barriers to understanding political, human and environmental interactions in a wider social context. This will be achieved through the examination of critiques within the approach, taking into account the important questions of whose history and whose knowledge is being represented and elements of contested theory and implication that cause problematic outcomes on the global stage of development. Whilst developing this argument, also being taken into consideration will be the contribution political ecology has had within and towards development and development studies, in order to establish what the role and emphasis is of resulting work that the approach of political ecology has in the ever expanding field of critical development, evaluating, as noted by Muldavin (2008), 'where 'we' have been in the past, where we are today, and where we may be going in the future' and whether political ecology can ever manifest itself within a structured and conclusive framework or whether the approach will only suffice to be 'all things to all people' (Blaikie, 2008).

The field of political ecology is vast, through which the addition to theoretical impact through the development of effective frameworks creating limitless boundaries toward disciplinary input where the flexible and adaptive form found within political ecology has allowed new and diverse currents of thought within a positivist framework. When considering whether political ecology has come of age, although there are continual debates over the theoretical and methodological implications towards the approaches undertaken by the academy, overlooking these momentarily, it becomes clear that in an age where environmental protection, conservation and the development of long term 'green' policy is the most predominant topic on policy makers minds, it would be clear to identify the intermediate coming of age of the discipline, despite its continual critique. Arguably, although the approach itself, suffers from what Muldavin (2008) describes as 'boundaries of ignorance' that allow unruly practices to be maintained and reproduced, the controversial subjection of theory and practice leads to a continual critical reassessment of the approaches implications to form continually renewed policy, although criticised for its lack of engagement with practical problem solving (Walker, 2006). The issues of multi-discipline connectedness and the increasing need for social and environmental synergy brings the issues undertaken by aspects of political ecology to occupy the central stage (Peet and Watts, 2004) of global environmental politics and civil society debates. In order to overcome institutionalized system of knowledge the issues raised in the expansion of political ecology debate has allowed for the production of space for thought, opening up discussion toward how discourse formation and representativeness in the present and towards the future to shape policy and practice in order to drive political ecology to form positive regulation of global commons.

Developments within the field of political ecology have been vast over the last forty years, with particular emphasis being placed, in the last decade, on what Bebbington (2003) terms 'theorizing up' (Walker, 2006). As previous environmental narratives are questioned, the ability to 'theorize up' seek ways to ascertain the significance of such studies in broader development concerns, (Walker, 2006) where the approach to political ecology represents an integration of environmental knowledge and social justice that is not yet fully adopted or understood in all environmental debate (Forsyth, 2008). Through this stand point the ability to create suitable space in which to consider social participation in environment development and conservation through the implementation of local initiatives can be utilized. As argued by Simon (2003) for the need of balanced integrated attention to the biophysical/environmental and social political realms at different scales, in order to appropriately analyse the formulation of discourse.

Much work has been undertaken to deconstruct commonly assumed environmental narratives and the diversity within the field through interdisciplinary connection and 'hybrid' knowledge or 'discourse coalitions' (Latour, 1993; Hajer, 1995; Blaikie, 2008) that have allowed the formulation of theory and methodology to remain lucid and adaptable to change. However, although as argued by Watts (2003) the diversity of political ecology should be celebrated, its position in the world outside the academy of [political ecologist] thought provides a bleak landscape of complex terminology and

distant solutions bound in red tape. Many political ecologists argue the concept of 'non-equilibrium ecology' (Forsyth, 2008) as the production of long term policy solutions made due to space-time factors. With this in mind the assessment of political ecology developments dealing with issues such as access, the effect of institutions on vulnerable societies and the increasing emergence of women in development studies need to be taken into consideration.

In the past access and control of resources in environment conservation continues to produce a divide in the politics of knowledge production in the global North and South. Although the work of political ecology seeks to understand and further develop the connections between social networks and the natural environment through its interaction with government and non-government lead organisations, the approach has been problematic from its beginning. Peet and Watts (2004) identify a fundamental flaw through the polarization of the "haves" and the "have nots", where an emphasis on the effects of poverty on environment impact has been inherently linked to the causes of degradation in vulnerable areas in need for conservation, focusing heavily on third world and developing countries, which sees negative impacts on the environment fall into a 'blaming the victim' approach within social scientific concerns (Peet and Watts, 2004). This approach arguably reinforces post-colonial/post-structural ideologies of power and control over resources, through the reproduction of authority where knowledge toward global environmental management is encoded through institutionalised forms of knowledge rhetoric. These theoretical stand points allow for the rationalization of certain types of conclusion or outcome, whilst justifying change to traditional interaction with the environment including enclosure, exclusion and displacement of particular groups within a society. The implication of this ideological, knowledge certification sees the privilege of particular forms of knowledge and power through which policy and practice toward further environmental trajectories are planned and applied. Although the production of knowledge and policy is important on a global scale, within particular western frameworks of progressive development policy, questions that should be consider include to whom does the policy speak? Whose history, whose science is being institutionalised and privileged and why?

Although it is clear certain material impact push particular bands of knowledge into the foreground of discussion; the discourse of development and political ecology, the issues of scale and region variability inevitably become blurred within a colonial sense of restriction and a prescribed vision of what nature and environmental 'wilderness' should be, rather than development. Due to the nature of power allocation within development, diverse actors tend not to provide solutions but continue to allocate blame to local land users, with institutional development moving towards alleviating and helping the poor rather than supporting them through long term policy implementation, what Vayda and Walters (1999) argue produces a limitless capacity [for political ecologists] to neither verify their subject of scrutiny nor to have understood the complex and contingent interconnections of factors whereby environmental changes are produced (Forsyth, 2008).

Through the consideration of access to resources and institutions, the notion of privileged knowledge assertion and limited access toward political production and resource affirmation, a major development to be considered within conservation management and political ecology is the role of women in development (Jewitt and Kumar, 2004; Robbins, 2004). Women are traditionally depicted to have a close, maternal connection with nature. Though this connection women's closeness to nature aids the development of comprehensive agro-ecological knowledge and environmental management practices (Shiva, 1988) that are restricted due to reduced mobility within society and ecological theory production and more disadvantaged by development programmes (Jewitt and Kumar, 2004) and disproportionately represented among the poor, as a homogenous group. Theory toward the construction of a special relationship between women and the environment has previously been detrimental to the development of consistent policy construction toward scale of social movements in ecological conservation, in this sense, the deconstruction of environment narratives by examining wider inequalities in the division of labour towards 'discourse sensitivity' (Jewitt and Kumar, 2004) to support and collaborate (Rocheleau, 2008). The example of Joint Forestry Management in India by Jewitt and Kumar (2004) of the possible developments political theory could bring to development strategies is positive but also there are empirical problems that are interwoven in this collaboration with political ecology as a whole, including the lack of assessment toward whether theory can be effectively put into practice on the ground and whether their effectiveness through diverse communities can be achieved.

Although the implications political ecology brings to the surface are very urgent and relevant, toward the development of necessary development and conservation policy, issues which are at the heart of present political, economic, cultural and social debate, its inherent complexities provide problematic understanding and expansion as to whether although in terms of its importance and theoretical distinction, the approach has become more grounded and come of age within academic discussion. On the wider, more global stage its concepts of development and conservation theory, although poignant, fail to provide a consistence material solution to aid positive outcomes for conservation development. As argued by Robbins (2004) political ecology is too focused on the broadly defined 'underdeveloped world' and posits the environment as a finite source of basic unchanging and essential elements, which set absolute limits for human action. However intuitive, this assumption has proven historically false and conceptually flawed.

When considering the implications of political ecology as a critical approach to human-environmental relations, although it is important to consider the approach as a construction of meaning and justification for social and cultural implications on a multilayered scaled, the approach consequentially leads to complexities and problematic understanding. These inconsistencies begin with the problem of a definition that can be transformed to fit different meanings, inevitably creating obstacle to development and environmental justice. The inability to connect with the wider world due to the diversity of complex notions of theory, devalue the benefit of the

connectedness to other disciplines as the pool of thought is limited to a few. Although keen to move toward grounded engagement with the production of integrated social and environmental knowledge toward consistent policy (as seen through the work of Blaikie) 'the dependency on single stories (in local level research analysis) reduces the likelihood of influencing many bodies (Bebbington, 2003; Walker, 2004). Although the emphasis on cultural value is present in research, scaling up solutions from snap shots of research data can see many issues lost or lessened. Despite trying to diversify land based initiatives e.g. through donor site programmes, changes have seen movement away from policy based initiatives.

The reproduction of knowledge as power, the allocation of privileged theory and the reproduction of poverty and inequality still remains challenging, as argued by Robbins (2004) who states the assertion that superior environmental knowledge originates in the global north for transfer to the global south is problematic due to the reproduction of colonial knowledge and discounting of indigenous knowledge and participation of local communities. Also within this framework of 'knowledge as power' is the production of 'wild' landscapes working towards conservation initiatives under the initiative of nature as a commodity, which introduces new levels of ambiguity and problematic methodological within the field of development studies and political ecology practices. As cited by Marx, 'even society as a whole, a nation, or all existing societies put together, are not owners of the Earth. They are merely its occupants, its users; and like good caretakers, they must hand it down improved to subsequent generations' (Peet and Watts, 2004). Although, in many instances the commodification of natural resources e.g. the introduction of private parks has created conservation zones, the ethics and highly problematic issues attached to this type of land acquirement has produced environmental conflict. Commodification of land and nature are arguably an expansion of the colonial state, which see the development of an argument where people are removed by state intervention [inherently linked to political ecology (Peet and Watts, 2004)] leaving land to be managed by external structures and nature to be socially constructed causing problems for indigenous groups. Although political ecology approaches are trying to provide a mode of explanation towards engaging nature and political dimensions between human environment relations, they very rarely accomplish a distinctive and workable solution.

In conclusion, although the body of knowledge that political ecology produces is highly relevant in modern perceptions towards the urgency of resource dilemmas, the seclusion of the theoretical approach which is confined to non-material based responses to environmental conservation is highly problematic. Although it is argued political ecology has come of age, in definition, the unity of the approach with wider debate still remains marginal to the broader field of development. Blaikie (2008) argues the importance of stabilising political ecology through a more aggressive institutionalization at college and university level. This could be argued as contradictory considering the need and importance of transition to a more decentralised applications of knowledge, through the further inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems and the compromise of researchers and theorists to accommodate the needs of local individuals

in order to not displace the values and priorities of communities on the ground considering the need to further institutionalise theory as stated by Blaikie to make political ecology 'work'. Therefore, it could then be stated that unlike the rediscovery of geography (Muldavin, 2008), political ecology still has many complexities to consider and overcome in order to promote positive impacts towards future environmental development that would result in greater representativeness of the approach in the global arena.

References:

Agrawal, A. (2008) The Role of Local Institutions in Adaptation to climate change. Social Dimensions of Climate Change, Social Development Department, The World Bank, March 5-6

Blaikie, P. (2008) Epilogue: Towards a future for political ecology that works. *Geoforum* 39, 765-772

Forsyth, T. (2008) Political Ecology and the epistemological of social justice, *Geoforum* 39, 756-764

Greenburg, J.B. and Park, T.K. (1994) 'Political ecology', *Journal of Political Ecology* 1

Hajer, M. (1995) in Forsyth, T. (2008) Political Ecology and the epistemological of social justice, *Geoforum* 39, 756-764

Jewitt, S. and Kumar, S. (2004) 'A political ecology of forest management: gender and silvicultural knowledge in the Jharkhand, India in Stott, P., Sullivan, S. (2000) 'Political Ecology: Science, Myth and Power'. Arnold: London

Latour, R. (1993) in Forsyth, T. (2008) Political Ecology and the epistemological of social justice, *Geoforum* 39, 756-764

Marx, *Capital*, vol.1 in Peet, R., Watts, M. (2004) Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements. Second Edition, Routledge: Oxon

Muldavin, J. (2008) 'The time and place for political ecology: An introduction to the articles honouring the life work of Piers Blaikie'. *Geoforum* 39, 687-697

Peet, R. and Watts, M. (2004) Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements. Second Edition, Routledge: Oxon

Pepper, D., Webster, F. and Revill, G. (2003) Environmentalism: Critical concepts. Routledge: London

Robbins, P.(2004) 'Political Ecology: A critical introduction'. Blackwell Publishing: UK

Rocheleau, D.E. (2008) Political ecology in the key of policy: From Chains of explanation to webs of reaction. *Geoforum* 39, 716 - 727

Shiva, V. (1988) cited in Jewitt, S., Kumar, S. (2004) 'A political ecology of forest management: gender and silvicultural knowledge in the Jharkhand, India in Stott, P., Sullivan, S. (2000) 'Political Ecology: Science, Myth and Power'. Arnold: London

Simon, D. (2008) 'Political Ecology and development: Intersections, explorations, and challenges arising from the work of Piers Blaikie. *Geoforum* 39, 698-707

Stott, P. and Sullivan, S. (2000) 'Political Ecology: Science, Myth and Power'. Arnold: London

Vayda, P. and Walters. (1999) Against political ecology. *Human ecology*, 27 (1) 1-18 in Peet, R., Watts, M. (2004) *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements*. Second Edition, Routledge: Oxon

Walker, P. A. (2006) 'Political ecology: Where is the Policy?' *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (3), 382-395

Watts, M. J. (2003) For political ecology, unpublished manuscript, University of California, Berkeley in Walker, P. A. (2006) 'Political ecology: Where is the Policy?' *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (3), 382-395

Zimmerer, K.S., Bassett, T.J. (2003) *Political Ecology: An integrative approach to geography and environment development studies*. The Guildford Press: New York