



Principled Engagement: Political Ecologists and Their Interactions Outside the Academy Introduction to a Set of Short Interventions

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At the 2011 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) in Seattle, we convened a panel discussion on the work of political ecologists outside of the academy. We framed the discussion in terms of *principled engagement*, attempting to highlight the challenges of making a critical perspective “stick” in the world of mainstream environment and development practice. Featuring six participants, the session grew out of a call for papers that had generated a number of interested and supportive responses, but few commitments to actually dive into preparing a twenty minute paper and presentation. We opted instead for a panel discussion with six scholars who are all involved – in the



different ways illustrated below – in the practice of political ecology outside of academia.²

As conveners, we asked participants to reflect on an engaged political ecology that was simultaneously ethical and strategic. We framed this in terms of three sets of questions posed in our original call for papers: (1) Where is an overtly normative perspective more useful, and when is it a hindrance? What sorts of normativity work well outside the academy, and what sorts do not? (2) When do specialized discourses – such as those frequently associated with post-development or post-colonial theory – bring something useful (or even essential) to the table? When is terminology simply received as jargon? (3) What are the tradeoffs between direct involvement (e.g., via research consultancies, collaboration with NGOs or government agencies, or community-based Participatory Action Research) and the independence afforded by more classically “distanced” scholarship? When is it worth signing away one’s intellectual property in order to have the opportunity to influence others, and when does doing so represent too high a price to pay?

These questions, and the panel that they inspired, were, in an immediate sense, a response to Piers Blaikie’s provocation in Washington D.C. the previous year. In his inaugural lecture sponsored by the AAG’s Cultural and Political Ecology Specialty Group, Blaikie (2012) had asked whether at least some political ecology should be useful. We thought it telling, on the one hand, that this question could still be posed in 2010. Even if Blaikie was being polemical, his talk spoke to the fact that the debates about what political ecology is (and what it should be) had not subsided in the years since various authors had tried to address (and in some cases reconcile) the gap between the critical realists and the post-structural second wave that had opened up in the 1990s (e.g., Watts 2000; Forsyth 2003; Zimmerer & Bassett 2003; Robbins 2004; Pete & Watts 2004; Neumann 2005). On the other hand, Blaikie’s intervention was, to us, narrowly utilitarian, and worse, it reinforced an already polarized debate. It called for being useful – rather than, say, ethical or strategic or effective – and it did so in terms that appeared to leave the “useful to whom” question unanswered, and thus undisturbed from its *de facto* answer of policy-makers in the traditional sense. So on one level, our call for a discussion on principled engagement was a follow-up to Blaikie: we were sympathetic to a point, yet we were also hoping to further probe opportunities and framings gestured to by earlier scholars (e.g., Forsyth 2003; Walker 2006) but left largely untouched in Blaikie’s recent (2008, 2012) interventions.

² Panelists presented for ten minutes each prior to a wider discussion with members of the audience. In order of presentation, the panelists were: Ian G. Baird (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Philip Hirsch (University of Sydney), Kiran Asher (Clark University), Rebecca Lave (University of Indiana), Matthew Turner (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Jesse Ribot (University of Illinois-Champaign) (the only panel member who was unable to contribute to this collection). Michael Dwyer was a co-organizer (with Ian G. Baird), but not a panelist.

On another level – and arguably more importantly – Blaikie’s interventions were a jumping off point for a set of issues that struck us as distinctly new. Even as political ecologists revisited questions that had haunted us since the 1990s, academia itself had changed. The prevalence of consulting as a mode of external engagement (Baird, below), along with rising pressure to focus on “relevant” topics (Lave, below), gestured together to what one of our panelists described as the “ruthless structural adjustment” that has been visited on the American academy (and elsewhere) during the last decade (Asher, below). As environmental discourse had evolved in tandem – in some cases absorbing critical perspectives, yet often rehearsing old simplifications (Turner, below) – political ecologists had come to find themselves confronted with a difficult mix of opportunity (Hirsch, below) and adverse complexity. In this political moment (dare we call it neoliberal?), we wanted to discuss and debate principled forms of engagement that were trying to address these new developments head on.

The special section that follows is an exciting and varied collection that speaks in a few different ways to the questions that we posed above – and to one another. The confluences and tensions in the five pieces below are the result of both a lively conversation in our original panel, and of the format we used to bring them to publication. Panelists drafted their interventions *after* the discussion, and were given the opportunity to read each other’s pieces and re-edit their own prior to the peer review process.

In the first intervention, Matt Turner draws on three decades of working in the Western Sahel to ponder the question of why, despite numerous interventions by critical scholars (and by political ecologists in particular), simplistic explanations of environmental problems and social conflict remain entrenched. Turner offers a few reasons, critiques what he describes as *reactive* modes of participation, and offers two examples of more proactive modes of engagement that, while hardly recipes for success, offer opportunities for political ecologists’ affinities for place-based complexity to act as an advantage rather than a hindrance.

Second, Kiran Asher’s intervention challenges the opposition between “real world” and “theoretical” engagements that appears in many calls for a “useful” political ecology. Drawing on her own trajectory from professional development work to critical post-development and beyond, Asher suggests that we need a deep engagement with critical scholarship in order to begin to address the legacies of colonialism and capitalism that pervade our research sites, as well as our disciplines and institutions. Hers is not simply a call to apply “theory” to the field – Asher reminds us that some of the most-quoted critical passages are the least understood – but to apply the principle of deep immersion and reflection to both the field and the text equally.

Ian Baird then uses his experience as an NGO social and environmental activist and occasional consultant in Southeast Asia to call for a principled engagement by political ecologists outside of academia based on intellectual

independence, strategic considerations, and new and innovative approaches to engaging outside of academia without significantly or overly compromising one's ethics. He suggests that there are many ways of potentially engaging apart from simply signing away one's intellectual property to companies and others when conducting consultancies.

Fourth, Rebecca Lave argues for deep intellectual collaboration by political ecologists with environmental scientists – an engagement she calls critical physical geography. Her intervention is based on the realization that natural scientists are among the most powerful of academics when it comes to impact, and that, given the real world's interdisciplinary nature, what they think about topics like colonialism, accumulation by dispossession, epistemology and oppression matter immensely. "Asking a scientist to dance" is no easy matter; while geographers are well positioned to do it, Lave's call challenges political ecologists to reflect critically on their own analyses of natural science – to see it, that is, as not just the sword, but potentially the plowshare as well.

The final intervention is by Philip Hirsch, who directs the Australia Mekong Research Centre (AMRC) at the University of Sydney. Hirsch describes the AMRC's work as an example of principled engagement that, notwithstanding the challenges of working in the lower Mekong region, has been fairly successful. Focusing on the university's (and the AMRC's) mandate of engaged internationalism and scholarly independence, he emphasizes the advantages of creating sustained dialogue over "wearing one's heart on one's sleeve", and explains how this commitment has let the AMRC become a key place of "refuge and rehabilitation" for activists and development professionals from the region.

Collectively, the five interventions below converge thematically, wrestling with questions of scholarly independence (Baird, Hirsch); the outsized authority that natural science continues to carry in policy-making arenas (Lave, Hirsch, Turner); the importance as well as the challenges of critical interdisciplinary engagement (Asher, Lave, Baird); and the powers and liabilities of place-based, historically informed scholarship (Turner, Asher, Baird). While the pieces offer numerous examples and a few provocations, they are not recipes: principled engagement is an ideal, not a formula. We hope that readers will benefit from the experiences presented here, and will take the time to "put in the work" themselves as well. Only with a mix of engagement and reflection can this conversation stay current, and worth continuing.

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