



Political Ecology and its Engagements with Conservation and Development

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For some time, various commentators have raised concerns about the limited engagement and “impact” of political ecology in the policy, development and conservation worlds (Robbins 2004, Walker 2006, Blaikie 2001, Blaikie 2012). Moreover, the perceived lack of engagement by political ecologists in policy and practice could be seen as a conundrum given the influential role played by Piers Blaikie in the development of the field. Blaikie’s *Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* is very much a critical engagement with dominant narratives in conservation and development (Blaikie 1985). While the field has evolved and diversified significantly since Blaikie’s early structuralist treatments, most political ecologists have a broader conceptual grounding spanning the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities than most social scientists. Such interdisciplinary grounding is what many have argued as needed for improving the “effectiveness” of the conservation and development practices. The question then is why don’t political ecologists have more influence?

This naïve question will undoubtedly cause knowing eyes to roll among the theory sophisticates of ACME readership. I pose it not only because its instrumentalist framing reflects the reactions of most students and policy makers to political ecology but because addressing the questions it raises will allow me to



position and frame this essay. First, its reference to “political ecologists” could be seen as problematic since political ecology is not a coherent approach with like-minded scholars variously embracing the political ecology label (Escobar 1999, Stott and Sullivan 2000, Castree and Braun 2001, Forsyth 2003, Zimmerer and Bassett 2003, Robbins 2004, Heynin et al. 2007). For the purpose of this essay, I am referring collectively to different strands of critical scholarship, which in dialogue with at least some of the works cited above, seek to understand how networks of power, as mediated through a broadly-defined political economy, influence nature-society relations on the ground.

A second question is what is “influence” and why should political ecologists, as defined above, care about “influencing” conservation or development practice. This has proven to be a major area of debate among self-identified political ecologists (e.g. see Escobar 1999, Blaikie 2001, Jarosz 2004, Walker 2006, Neumann 2008, Blaikie 2012). A basic premise of this essay is that as scholars, we (I self-identify with political ecology) are interested in having a positive influence on our social and environmental worlds. A second, less-accepted, premise is that while networks of power shape the production, circulation, and application of the knowledge that underlie conservation and development practice (Goldman et al. 2011), political ecologists should critically engage with, rather than simply write about the truth claims embedded in conservation and development practice (Forsyth 2011). This premise derives from my commitment to what Forsyth (2011) calls “situated science” which is epistemologically resonant with constrained constructivism (Hayles 1995) or even critical realism (Sayer 1984). It also comes from my own personal research experience in one of the most environmentally and economically distressed regions of the world: the Sahel of West Africa. Having formed close ties with a number of disempowered Sahelian communities over the past twenty-five years, it is personally impossible for me to not engage directly with the processes and institutions that are affecting peoples’ daily lives. As Blaikie has argued, political ecologists have a responsibility to consider the effects of their scholarship on people and landscapes (Blaikie 2001 as cited in Neumann 2008). Given the knowledge politics that infuse conservation and development, principled engagement outside of the academy is required if one takes this responsibility seriously (Blaikie 2012). Even so, such principled engagements require careful navigation of the same power dynamics in the global “marketplace of ideas” that have reshaped the less-engaged, published arguments of academics. They will, as developed below, necessarily involve involvement in the equally complex politics within communities enrolled in development or conservation programs. Therefore, principled engagements must be not only ethical but strategic – informed by a political ecologist’s understanding of the multi-layered politics that surrounds peoples’ “access to resources” (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Ribot and Peluso 2003).

The starting point for this essay, as derived by my premises, is that those political ecologists who seek to have a positive influence on the world they study,

need to seriously consider the nature of their engagements within and outside of the academy. I do not measure “influence” by participation of “political ecologists” in different policy forums but by how their full participation as researchers, teachers, practitioners and activists change the actual formulation of policy and practice of conservation and development to protect peoples’ livelihoods, landscapes, and ecologies (e.g. Jarosz 2004, Forsyth 2011, Campbell 2011, Rocheleau and Roth 2007). As will be developed below, such interventions can take many different forms but will likely deviate from the technocratic transformative visions long critiqued by scholars who have influenced political ecology (Ferguson 1994, Neumann 1998, Scott 1998, Goldman 2005).

In this essay I argue for a more proactive, self-organized, and therefore, potentially agenda-setting engagement by political ecologists. My argument is developed in three steps. First, I argue against the common conflation of participation, engagement and influence within the international development and conservation communities. Second, I review the constraints facing those political ecologists who seek to influence these communities. These constraints are multiple but generally stem from political ecology’s normative commitments to social justice and its methodological commitments to place-based research (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, Robbins 2004, Forsyth 2008). Building from this discussion, I argue for a more proactive rather than reactive stance by political ecologists using their relationships with communities or like-minded NGOS to affect change in novel ways outside the constraints of institutionalized development and conservation.

Limited participation within development and conservation organizations and institutions is often taken as a measure of political ecologists’ limited engagement in practical, policy-oriented work. To me, ‘engagement’ is a measure of the mental, emotional and physical commitment/struggle taken by someone toward a particular goal – in this case, changes in the practice or policy in conservation and development to improve the situation of people and landscapes. As described above, such engagement can take many forms with only some in the employ of international development/conservation and government institutions.

Engagement (principled or otherwise) is a necessary but insufficient condition for influence. An instrumentalist conflation of ‘engagement’ with ‘influence’ has led some to assume that limited influence results from limited effective engagement. Political ecologists are portrayed as overly theoretical, ideological or critical to effectively engage with development or conservation realities. As a result, they are portrayed as theoretically-motivated ideologues who seek to destroy current conventions without constructive contribution. While the broad diffuse field of political ecology certainly has its share of theory-driven academics, I would say its adherents show much greater ‘engagement’ with these practical concerns than such portrayals given their close connections to the people and ecologies in the places they work. In fact, many contributors to the field of political ecology are engaged with practical, on-the-ground efforts but choose to

not label these “political ecology”, despite the fact that they are guided by political ecological sensibilities and frameworks, reserving that label for their more academic work.

Whether or not these engagements are seen as “constructive” depends on one’s perspective and the dominant frameworks that shape conservation (e.g. conservation biology) and development (e.g. economics) practices. Whether labeled ‘constructive’ or not, presenting arguments that run counter to dominant viewpoints is “engagement” which may or may not have an influence on practice. An important example is Rod Neumann’s early critical engagement with wildlife conservation and national parks in East Africa (e.g. Neumann 1998) – work that was not seen as ‘constructive’ by conservation biologists in the region but has contributed to changing how conservation biologists seek to protect biodiversity in the region.

Clearly political ecologists’ engagement in the conservation and development arenas occurs within a broader material and knowledge politics. Historically, political ecology’s dominant normative commitment to social justice (Robbins 2004) has been inconsistent with the preservationist and rational choice efficiency commitments common in conservation biology and economics respectively. These differences in normative underpinnings often animate multidisciplinary forums, workshops, consultancies etc. Not only may they not share the normative commitments that often dominate international economic development and conservation programs and policies but their arguments have been often disadvantaged due to their hesitancy to generalize from the findings of their place-based research. In this way, their methodological commitments to place-based research have worked to hamper their influence in forums that have consistently tended to seek common solutions across a wide array of social-ecological contexts (e.g. Ferguson 1994).

Growing recognition of the failure of generalized models to work in particular conservation and development contexts has led to an embrace of “interdisciplinarity” and potentially, tailored solutions to particular contexts. This has opened more room for place-based researchers, such as political ecologists, to more effectively engage in these interdisciplinary forums. In such forums, political ecologists are well-placed to contribute effectively given their broader training across the social and natural sciences. Still, the prior barriers still remain -- the relevance of political ecologists’ arguments is still assessed through the normative and methodological frameworks of economics and conservation biology.

In such contexts, “principled” engagement from a political ecology perspective, is not straightforward and must be strategic -- weighing the potential for influencing positive change with one’s ability to maintain an ‘engaged’ independent voice. This “weighing” is highly context-specific, driven not only by one’s structural position but by one’s social relations with those associated with program, project, or policy formation. For this reason, while I feel strongly that

political ecologists need to engage, I am uncomfortable making broad statements about what types of engagements are principled or not. Instead, I will speak of the judgments I have made in the context of my own work.

I work in Sahelian West Africa, a part of the world that elicits global interest not for its extractable resources but as a case of the juxtaposition of extreme poverty, resource scarcity and environmental degradation. Development and conservation interests are focused on issues of climate change adaptation, market integration, decentralization, and conflict management. State resources and power are extremely limited with much development and conservation work dependent on, and strongly shaped by, bilateral and multilateral donors. Given the pro-poor rhetoric that surrounds development and conservation in the region, the social justice arguments made by political ecologists are more likely to be recognized in these forums compared to those in other regions. The methodological barrier however may be more pronounced as the ecological and social complexities of Sahelian places are ignored as common diagnoses and solutions are recurrently offered and pursued by cash-strapped international programs. Political ecologists have played important roles in exposing the limitations of the treatment of Sahelian ecologies and societies as homogeneous (e.g. Carney 1992, Schroeder 1999, Ribot 1998, Bassett and Zueli 2000, Turner 1999b, Benjaminsen 1997, Fairhead and Leach 1996). Moreover, they have exposed the impacts of such simplifications on the people and ecologies of the region (Carney 1992, Schroeder 1999). The results of such work have been presented in a wide range of venues from the literature, conferences, workshops, websites, and film (e.g. Faye and Ribot 2010, Sorensen 2002).

I have contributed to these efforts over the past twenty years. Reflecting on the impact of these engagements, I have several troubling observations. The first is that despite our critiques, the same common knowledges circulate and the same mistakes are made. The desert margin is marching south. A denuded landscape is degraded. Climate change alone produces vulnerability. The social unit of analysis is the “household.” The village chief represents the interests of his constituents. The overstocking of the range is driven by herders’ cultural veneration of cattle. Privatization is the solution to the mismanagement of commonly-held resources. Social conflict is caused by resource scarcity. Unmanaged boreholes are still being dug.. The list goes on and on. The persistence of these simple ideas, despite repeated critique by political ecologists and others, demands explanation. Can their persistent circulation be explained by them serving particular interests? By pointing to particular cases, we could answer affirmatively. Still, this alone provides an inadequate explanation of the broader level of ignorance that persists. Certainly it reflects a failure of development and conservation institutions and in addition, the manner by which engaged scholars are educating development and conservation professionals. Professionalization within these institutions is seen as training and experience that transcends the peculiarities of particular ecologies and peoples. With notable exceptions, an appointment in a Sahelian country is low

status and seen as a hardship for government and non-governmental internationalists. For country nationals and those foreigners with longer-term commitments to the region, the high turnover within these placements produces a seemingly unending supply of naive collaborators. These novices may discount local expertise by connecting it with the history of repeated development failure despite the fact that those with experience often have had highly circumscribed input into the development and conservation programs promoted by naïve professionals in the past.

Political ecologists treat development and conservation programs as inherently political projects – necessarily involving multiple players with different interests and powers to influence the program’s outcomes. I should be clear – most political ecologists, despite some portrayals (Vayda and Walters 1999), don’t consider these politics as existing solely between state and local interests. Political ecologists have been at the forefront of analyzing the “micropolitics” that surround these programs – a treatment of politics that addresses not only local-extralocal dynamics but also the politics within communities and households (e.g. Moore 1993, Turner 2006, Ribot, Lund and Treue 2010, Carney 1992, Schroeder 1999, Bassett 1988, Bassett 2005). From this perspective, development and conservation initiatives, must not ignore but seek to understand these politics in order to be effective. In other words, these should not be simply seen as initiatives to transfer technology, train local people, or build local capital but as strategic interventions that seek specified conservation and development goals within highly politicized contexts. Open recognition of these politics grates with technocratic visions that often dominate within development and conservation circles (Ferguson 1994).

Their overt recognition of these politics coupled with their place-based commitments that inhibit facile abstraction and generalization have tended to sideline political ecologists from gaining agenda-making influence. This is true even in the Sahelian region where political ecology’s normative social justice commitments do not strongly contradict official commitments by development and conservation programs. Instead, political ecologists are recurrently called upon by development and conservation interests to comment on, evaluate and document already formulated programs and priorities. Given how long we have been doing this, one could say that the nature of our input is somewhat predictable – commentaries pointing to the potential danger of enacting programs based on simplistic diagnoses made in willful ignorance of local realities. In this way, our engagement is inherently reactive because of our positions relative to existing agendas. Our reactions, found in the grey and academic literatures, smack of complexifying academic handwringing and as such, are less than effective in changing the views of “can do” developers and conservationists. A cynical view would be that our predictable responses are invoked strategically by protagonists doing battle within conservation and development bureaucracies to thwart rather than change certain programs.

As I near the end of this essay, one can rightfully ask whether I have written myself into an inescapable cynicism with no way forward. One of a number of ways forward is to adopt a proactive rather than reactive stance with respect to development and conservation programs and policies. Such a strategy is consistent with the early call by Emory Roe back in the early 1990s (Roe 1991) of creating counter-narratives to those that dominate conservation and development practice. Rather than simply react to the agendas and narratives of others, political ecologists would do well by proactively constructing their own agendas. A major problem with a counter narrative approach is that one might simply be replacing a simple narrative with another. This is especially problematic if one accepts, as many political ecologists do, that conservation and development programs operate within a historically-embedded politics (Rocheleau 2008). In West Africa, arenas of policy-relevant research that are more conducive for an explicit recognition of these politics are the decentralization in environmental governance and the management of resource-related conflict.

Jesse Ribot's work on decentralization is an important example of a proactive, agenda-setting work informed by political ecology (e.g. Ribot 1999, Ribot 2002, Ribot et al. 2010). His work has contributed to the training of a new generation of African scholars in environmental governance – a very important role that political ecologists should play in affecting policy. Moreover, Ribot's active engagement has helped to develop more sophisticated engagements with the multi-layered politics surrounding environmental governance in a number of policy circles.

Conflict prevention and management is another explicitly political subject of interest to both development and conservation programs and projects working in the region. Political ecologists and others have provided important critiques of the environmental security (Peluso and Watts 2001) and depictions of social conflicts as simply common property institutional failures (Peters 1994, Turner 1999a). These critiques have followed the typical pattern described above -- political ecologists reacting to underlying narratives and approaches to conflict management and prevention – critiques that to a policy maker or practitioner may be interpreted as simply “its more complicated.” This is neither a compelling “counter narrative” nor a framework for action. “Action research” provides a possible option for those political ecologists having strong relationships with local communities to work with them to develop solutions for the prevention and management of conflicts. Such work would claim agendas through results and the development of action frameworks – outputs that arguably have greater potential to influence development and conservation practice.

I am currently involved in such a project focused on the prevention and management of farmer-herder conflicts in a local district (commune) in central Mali where I have worked since 1987. This work is less about identifying the causes of these conflicts – I and community members are well aware of these. The work is more about facilitating and encouraging the difficult negotiations required

to address longstanding political stalemates that have blocked action. These stalemates are highly interlinked – change in one arena has to be matched by change in others through negotiations where interested parties must give on some issues to gain in others. Political ecologists are well-placed for such work. It is too early in the project for me to point to success or failure. In fact, the project has been slowed after its first year due to the war in Mali. Still, I can say that I have learned much during the first year of the project. While “applied”, such work reveals deeper layers of politics than can be revealed through standard research methods. Moreover, it has forced me to seriously address the requirements of power and authority that were too easily passed over in my previous political ecological work. More importantly, it has introduced a new problem-solving platform, seriousness of purpose among local leaders, and modes of interaction that have led to greater political engagement by villagers.

In sum, the principled engagements by political ecologists have proven to be highly structured and constrained in conventional conservation and development. Due to their position with respect to the normative and methodological frameworks that dominate these fields, political ecologists have necessarily taken a reactive stance with less than desired influence on these fields. More proactive, agenda-setting initiatives by political ecologists show promise for providing new channels for increasing the effectiveness of our principled engagements.

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