



# **The Doers and the Done For: Interrogating the Subjects and Objects of Engaged Political Ecology**

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## **Abstract**

Political ecology as a field emerges from its critical engagement with contemporary social and environmental problems. As engaged scholars, political ecologists think about the relevance of their work for those outside academe. Indeed, in response to the environmental crises and social challenges of the day, many of the field's framers and practitioners posit, "Enough reflection, it's time for action." I share the field's concerns and its ethical commitment to struggles for justice. However, I argue against privileging either practice or theory. In this intervention, I suggest that we pause to consider why engaged scholarship often takes utilitarian or functional forms, and reflect on the relationship between the "doers" and "the done for" that it sets up. I contend that part of our responsibility as engaged scholars is to be persistently critical, including about how we represent and relate to those outside the academic-university complex.



... deconstruction does not aim at *praxis* or theoretical practice but lives in the persistent crisis or unease of the moment of *techñe* or crafting. Spivak, 1993

I hope it is clear that I have no interest in keeping the subaltern poor. To repeat, it is in view of Marx's hope to transform the subaltern—whom he understood only as the worker in his conjuncture—into an agent of the undoing of class apartheid rather than its victim that this effort at educating the educator is undertaken. (Spivak 2008: 27-28)

At the 2011 AAG panel entitled “Principled Engagement: Political ecologists and their interactions outside the academy,” the organizers Ian Baird and Mike Dwyer asked us to grapple with the question “How to ethically and strategically engage with the environmental challenges of today.” I cryptically, but seriously replied: “Read the work of Gayatri Spivak.” I also invoked Spivak at the 2010 AAG to argue for a more critical reading of the challenges of “gender and environment” (Hawkins and Ojeda, 2011), including the need to pay particular attention to how we constitute the subjects and objects of our research and intervention.<sup>2</sup> Here I elaborate on my position and contend that a principled political ecology must be persistently critical of how the question of engagement is posed. I write not as a political ecologist but as a fellow interdisciplinarian, a teacher of environment and development studies, and someone who allies with the field's ethical commitment to social justice, which I see as necessarily linked to critiques of colonialism and capitalism. It is in my efforts to articulate an ethico-economic response to persistent inequities that I find myself repeatedly reading Spivak.<sup>3</sup>

I begin with a brief discussion of the concerns and questions that inspired these remarks: Pier Blaikie's 2010 keynote lecture for the Cultural and Political Ecology (CAPE) Specialty Group and the 2010 AAG panel on gender and the environment mentioned above. These two citation-studded interventions (Blaikie 2012, Hawkins and Ojeda 2011) provide excellent overviews of the debates within the field and underscore some of its key themes, including: the intersections among various fields of inquiry and categories of analysis (for example, ecology and politics, environment and gender, development and society, among others); the diversity and plurality of methodological and conceptual approaches; the role of power in the production of knowledge; and the social responsibility of academics.

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<sup>2</sup> Those who heard Professor Spivak's Antipode lecture at the AAG 2012 may already have a clue as to why I urge geographers to engage with her work.

<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Spivak is the *only* critic of colonialism and capitalism, nor that we should engage with her work to the exclusion of other writers. No. However, I find Spivak to be among the most responsive and responsible contemporary writers in that she subjects her own work to the same critical scrutiny that she brings to the thought of others. Here as I discuss elsewhere (Asher, forthcoming), I part ways with both the critiques of Spivak's work put forth by Latin American decolonial thinkers and their positions, and suggest that one cannot not read her.

They also raise thorny questions about how the field's political and conceptual positions should translate into engagement with the field's constitutive outside.

Blaikie's question, "Should some political ecology be useful?" which is also the title of his keynote address is a representative one. In the published version of his talk, he notes that engaging with academe's many outsiders should be a central and *instrumental* goal of political ecology (Blaikie, 2012). While acknowledging the value of critique and the position of those who "resist" utilitarian arguments, Blaikie ultimately dismisses "discursive analysis" and "deconstruction" in favor of "critical realism." He explains that

To interrogate development plans, to destabilise and unsettle their assumptions, to prise open their silences, to throw light on metaphorical ruses and expose partisan assumptions – all this is intellectually enjoyable, often quick to perform, and favourably received by academic promotion committees, relative to the task of negotiating the means to promote environmental justice. ... Nor are these two sets of activities necessarily mutually exclusive, but the latter ("what should be done and how do we help getting it done?") may be less attractive to those academics who prefer to remain within campus. (2012: 234)

He concludes his remarks with a resounding "YES" in answer to his question and reiterates the imperative for some political ecology to pragmatically address "real world" problems.

The conversation about the critical tradition and challenges of "gender and environment" necessarily supplements Blaikie's remarks in that it highlights the centrality of gendered (and raced) dimensions of power in development and environmental politics.<sup>4</sup> And at least one contributor to the gender and environment panel, Joni Seager, echoes Blaikie's concerns and question. She writes

I come first with a worry: We are really smart and nuanced about 'capitalism' and 'the social production of nature' and 'the alienation from the natural world' and 'the perception of nature' and the 'sexuality spectrum' and 'semiotics' and 'identity', and then you go to Mozambique to help them deal with climate change and all of that means relatively little. If the Minister of the Environment of Mozambique were sitting here she would most likely be distressed that this is what we are talking about in a gender and environment session.

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<sup>4</sup> The contributors to the "gender and environment" discussion were Kiran Asher, Brigitte Baptiste, Leila Harris, Sharlene Mollett, Andrea Nightingale, Dianne Rocheleau, Joni Seager and Farhana Sultana. Diana Ojeda and Roberta Hawkins convened the panel for the 2010 AAG and subsequently engaged in the editorial labor to turn the exchange into a publication. Blaikie's remarks make scant reference to gender or to feminist political ecology (except to Dianne Rocheleau's work).

Not that intellectually it's not of interest, not that there is no value in this theorizing, but it can seem enormously indulgent and in some ways imperialist to put theorizing at the front edge, to front-load theorizing as our gender and environment agenda. ...I'll reframe it as a question: *to what extent do theoretical approaches to problems actually help us in the face of real-world, urgent environmental issues?* (p. 11).

In short, both Blaikie and Seager ask: What is to be done? Of course, they are not unique. Such questions appear with predictable regularity in political movements and interdisciplinary social science discussions.<sup>5</sup> What I wish to flag here is the operation of explicit and implicit binaries in these two texts (and more generally in such conversations) — by *us* for *them*, theory vs. practice, critique vs. praxis, power vs. resistance, discourse vs. materiality, structural violence vs. agency, deconstruction vs. construction, doers vs. done for — that operate within this form of articulating the question of academic engagement. The relationship between the pairs mentioned above is oppositional or teleological, and academics are situated as active subjects in (grammatical) relation to the objects of their action. This too is not an original observation, and I hope evidence of postcolonial lessons well learned. But it begs the questions, are interrogation, “deconstruction,” and critique really quicker and easier to perform than promoting environmental justice, as Blaikie claims? Do we really have the smart and nuanced understanding of capitalism that Seager suggests? I am not so certain.

Perhaps we could answer these question in the affirmative, but only if those terms of analysis and action are understood through recourse to citational authority and sloppy thinking rather than through the difficult and unguaranteed intellectual labor of close reading (which is ostensibly part of our job as academics). Spivak's remarks about “strategic essentialism” are a case in point. Among academics struggling to mobilize postcolonial insights constructively, this term has gained much traction. But Spivak warns, “... the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem” (1990: 63). That is, “strategic essentialism” cannot be translated as a license for scholars and advocates “to represent” or “speak on behalf of” someone. Rather Spivak (1999) urges us to be persistently skeptical about representing subaltern voices and to keep alive the question of representation—as an impossibility and a necessity—as part of the struggle to address the “real” problems of poverty and inequality. By my reckoning, the “products” or “outcomes” of close reading and critique are as unguaranteed and intangible (especially in the short term), as those of struggles for

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the question “What is to be done?” is an imminently modern one, linked to concerns over progress and development for the betterment of humanity, and to a focus on humans and the social that emerged during the Enlightenment. But Claudia Chierichini, a friend and a scholar of the Italian renaissance tells me that poets and philosophers have struggled with this question long before the Enlightenment.

social and environmental justice. Reading in this context does not refer *sensu stricto* to literacy nor yet to a simple revelation of subaltern “agency.”

Let me be clear. I share Seager’s concern over self-indulgence and imperialism, but I am against privileging theory or practice. Surely such terms of engagement are over-determined by the history of our fields and our spatial locations, inside or outside academic institutions.<sup>6</sup> And surely colonialism and capitalism have something to do with both “urgent real world problems” and the recommendation that we formulate policy responses to them? And at a time when the western academy, as much as the spaces in which we wish to usefully intervene, is undergoing ruthless structural adjustment, might not a degree of skepticism about measuring the value of academic work (and university education) in terms of utility be in order?<sup>7</sup> What I am suggesting is that we heed the lessons of our critical scholarship even as we mobilize them “in service of the outside.”

With respect to the latter, my co-panelists’ contributions to this volume (Baird, Turner, Hirsch) reveal the dilemmas and ambivalences of policy-engaged work. Their insights and those of many others (including Blaikie) should give us pause before hitching our expertise to policymakers’ bandwagons in the name of relevance. With respect to the former, Rebecca Lave (this volume) and I may be on the same page, though in different registers. Lave notes, “Perhaps even more fundamentally, we would need to rethink, or at least broaden, our epistemology and training,” and calls for engagement with both critical theory and the physical sciences.

That such crosstraining is hard but necessary was a lesson I began learning while doing research on ungulate ecology in a small forest reserve in a semi-arid region of western India. I was trying to understand the problem of managing dwindling numbers of endangered black bucks (*Antelope cervicapra*), and preventing them from wandering into surrounding fields and damaging crops. The methodological challenges of finding appropriate census methods to count the animals, and assessing the extent of “crop damage” were compounded by the fact that both fauna and farmers seemed oblivious to the invisible markers between the insides of the reserve and the outside. Antelope wandered beyond “protected areas” and people regularly wandered in. I was forced to acknowledge that the ungulate problem had as much (or more) to do with history, political economy and

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in “The geographies of political ecology: after Edward Said,” Joel Wainwright (2005) prompts geographers to reflect on the relationship between political ecology and its spaces of analysis, and to ask “...what precisely constitutes a ‘context’ of, and for, political ecology? How does something come to be a space or region that calls for political ecology? How do we know where the context of our research lies? Is the inquiry into this knowledge itself part of doing political ecology?” (p. 1033-34)

<sup>7</sup> I am sure that any academic reading these remarks can provide examples of how this restructuring is affecting them and their institution. I am also sure that they can cite publications from their disciplinary journals, university reports, or professional newsletters where this issue is being debated. At the time of this writing, I was reading an excellent piece in the London Review of Books (Woods 2011) about the British academy. I believe it applies, with only a few adjustments, to the US academy, which is my professional home.

bureaucracy of colonial and post-independence India as with ecology. But I bemoaned my inability to understand or regulate these illegitimate border crossings, and put it down to India's insufficient modernity and gaps in my educational training.

I made my way to the Americas, and to interdisciplinary work, to address these technical gaps. I did not realize it then, but the politics of the Cold War subsequently shaped my choices of field sites and subjects of research. Piers Blaikie was one of the key figures accompanying me as I bridged the natural and social science divides. It was while reading Blaikie and Brookfield (1997) that I was introduced to the political economy of development and its relationship with environmental "degradation." That such an introduction did not lead to a Marxist critique of capitalism certainly had something to do with the ideological and technocratic orientation of US social science in general, and of development studies in particular.<sup>8</sup>

I am also implicated here. Inspired by ideas of sustainable development and new social movements, I entered the field to study resource use among grassroots Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia and advocate for their ethnic and territorial rights. Asking pragmatic, even political, questions about Afro-Colombian subjectivities and rights, my responses were in terms of being "for" black communities, and "against" the state and development. Though struggling to come to terms with the ferocious onslaught of capitalist and state violence, and to understand the differences and contradictions among black movements, I framed the latter as upholding the possibility of a peaceful and sustainable future (Asher 1998). As with many other scholars, my position was inspired by post-developmentalism, with its rejection of Eurocentric modernity and its promise of non-western utopias.

But extended fieldwork with social movements obliged me to grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which such movements are constituted by and against capitalist development (Asher 2009). This insight also obliged me to see that, while necessary, post-developmental critiques of capitalism and colonialism are incomplete. One, they sidestep Marx (as Eurocentric) and thus do not offer any serious critique of capitalism. Two, they continue to pitch the "West" *against* the "Rest" and do not deal adequately with the complex relations between the two. And to repeat, a critical engagement with any contemporary issue, whether climate change or cultural rights, requires an understanding of their relations to colonialism and capitalism.

The exigencies for urgent interventions often leads us to mobilize the most well-recognized but least understood quotes as slogans rather than grappling with

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<sup>8</sup> Political ecologists have been drawing on Marx but it is only recently that they are going beyond essentialist, scientific or romantic interpretations of his work.

the dense prose and complex ideas of critical thinkers.<sup>9</sup> What Cornwall et al. (2007) note with respect to the pressures of feminists facing development, may well apply to political ecologists aiming to engage in policy relevant work:

The institutional and organizational forms of international development, as bureaucracies with their own politics of agenda setting and requiring co-operation and alliances in global fora, produce pressures for simplification, sloganizing and lowest common denominator consensus. (p. 16)

Substituting sound bites when making the case for or against critique is neither good scholarship nor particularly useful when working with the heterogeneous and messy realities of community struggles or “urgent problems.” Having said that, I will end with a sound bite: if you are interested in a persistent critique of capitalism and colonialism, read Spivak. She teaches us that any kind of radical “doing” requires patient reading and long-term commitments—both by the doers and the done for.

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, we yield regularly to such a temptation. Besides Spivak, Marx, Gramsci, Said, Derrida, Butler, Foucault are among the names often invoked among contemporary political ecologists and feminists. Yet most references to their works do little beyond marshalling their names without any discussion of the context within which the authors elaborate their ideas. I need hardly mention Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” about philosophy and change.

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