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Political Ecology I: Where is political ecology?

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Abstract

Political ecology has often defined itself against Eurocentric conceptions of the world. Nevertheless, recent contributions have questioned the ongoing reproduction of an Anglo-American mainstream against 'other political ecologies'. Decentering Anglo-American political ecology has therefore forced a greater recognition of traditions that have developed under the same banner, albeit in different linguistic or national contexts. In addition, thinking more about the situatedness of knowledge claims has forced a deeper questioning of the Eurocentric and colonial production of political ecological research. In this report I begin by reviewing a range of political ecological traditions before going on to look at decolonial moves within the field. I conclude by considering how political ecologists might reframe their practice as one of relational comparison.

Keywords: political ecology, *écologie politique*, decolonization, urban political ecology, relational comparison

Do the theoretical foundations of mainstream political ecology belie a residual Eurocentrism against which the field defines itself? The question appears paradoxical. Indeed, one might assume that a field vehemently opposed to the teleology of modernization theory, that deploys the tools of critical ethnography, and that produces research explicitly focused on grounded, richly contextual understandings of different environments could not be so open to such a critique. Nevertheless, a series of public exchanges around the adequacy of 'Northern' concepts for making sense of contemporary Latin American realities (Gudynas 2015; Martínez et al 2015) alongside a growing interest in: decolonizing geography (Noxolo 2017; Radcliffe 2017); the meaning of land (Li 2015); 'other political ecologies' (Kim et al 2012); epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos 2014); settler colonialism in the global North (Tuck and Yang 2012; Perry 2016); Situated Urban Political Ecology (Lawhon et al 2014); "trans-area studies" (Chari 2016); and postcolonial intersectionality within feminist political ecology (Mollett and Faria 2013) have led to new questions around the origins and foundations of knowledge claims within the field. Often building on longer-standing concerns with the (post)colonial construction of nature as a discrete and separate object (Braun 1997; 2002) recent debates have focused more on epistemological claims while often embedding these in the practices from which they emerge.

In this first of my progress reports I will turn to such questions, beginning with a review of 'other' political ecological traditions that lie outside what Kim et al (2012) refer to as "the Anglo-American citadel". In a short one review I cannot begin to do justice to the range of debates now animating

decolonial/postcolonial debates. I am also deeply conscious of Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of "moves to innocence", my own complicity in relations of domination, and the risk of appropriating the concerns and language of decolonial approaches while failing to "bring about the repatriation of Indigenous life and land" (*ibid*: 1).

Ou est *écologie politique*?

While much of the focus of recent years has been on provincializing political ecology (Lawhon et al 2014) and on learning from the South (Schindler 2016), a significant body of work now points to relations of power that have produced and reproduced Anglo-American political ecology as 'the mainstream' against other – often European – approaches that share the same name. Indeed, if the 'origin myth' of Anglo-American political ecology sometimes suggests a coherent tradition emerging out of a classic paradigm shift, other fields of study have developed in quite different ways under the same moniker. Two of the most important contributions to political ecology in the last few decades, Perrault et al's (2015) *Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* (HoPE) and Bryant's (2015) *International Handbook of Political Ecology* (IHoPE) seek to give due weight to these different traditions. Indeed, as Creighton Connolly (2015) notes in his review of IHoPE, the book's "*raison d'être* is to internationalize and decolonize political ecology". In this respect, the collection builds on Kim et al's (2012) prior collection on "Other Political Ecologies". For the latter, a decentering move necessarily means questioning the solidity of the Anglo-American citadel. Seen from within, this citadel is satisfactory; seen from without, it proscribes and delineates the range of possible political ecological knowledges. Many of the chapters in IHoPE therefore draw attention to Francophone, Lusophone and Spanish debates. As Freitas and Mazine (2015) make clear, 'disorienting political ecology' through emphasizing these different linguistic communities allows one to emphasize the many interconnections that defy north/south dualisms (for a fascinating counter-perspective, see Joshi (2015)).

In a similar vein, contributions by Gautier and Kull (2015) and Gautier and Hautdidier (2015) serve to emphasise the importance of Francophone debates that developed in dialogue with Anglo-American debates across national borders. For Gautier and Kull (2015), three overlapping traditions serve as 'contact zones': Tropical Geography; Hydro-geographies; and Agrarian Systems research. To take the second of these 'contact zones', work on hydro-geographies has flourished in recent years (Blanchon and Graefe 2012; Fernandez 2014), developing in part through a series of exchanges between geographers based in Switzerland (Bichsel 2016; Zug and Graefe 2014), France (Blanchon et al 2017), North America and the UK. Nevertheless, as Gautier and Hautdidier (2015) make clear, there are real intellectual, political and institutional obstacles that have hitherto prevented dialogue: the rejection of Marxism on French campuses in the 1980s came just as political ecologists in the Anglophone world were deepening historical materialist approaches; and the rejection of fieldwork by French geographers in the 1980s was accompanied by a simultaneous surge of modeling, only serving to sharpen differences between Francophone work on human-environment relations and Anglophone research. Analysis of distinct

research traditions therefore requires richly contextual understandings that embed the development of “political ecology” in the institutional, political and social contexts of which they are a part.

Such contextualization is found in Chartier and Rodary’s (2015) analysis of the synchronous but divergent development of *écologie politique* in France and political ecology in Anglophone writings. Less an academic field and more an engaged form of environmental activism that draws on diverse theoretical sources, *écologie politique* refers to the work of figures such as Alain Lipietz (1987) and André Gorz (1990). Given the importance of *écologie politique*, it is somewhat paradoxical that many French geographers have sought theoretical inspiration within Anglo-American political ecology rather than within the former. As Chartier and Rodary (2015) suggest, this turn reflects the institutional security to be gained in framing research as a ‘science’ rather than through the ‘militant’ work of *écologie politique*. Nevertheless, the authors reject the parochialism and “methodological nationalism” associated with a simplistic celebration of a French tradition over an Anglo-American one, arguing that turning inwards would be profoundly inadequate when faced with contemporary challenges. Instead they call for a French *écologie politique* for the global age.

Political ecological research in Spain – *ecología política* – shares conversations, as well as activist and intellectual affinities, with ecological economics, environmental justice debates and, more recently, with the degrowth movement. For many years David Saurí’s research at the Autonomous University of Barcelona has enabled rich conversations with Anglo-American research on the political ecology of water. Some of the distinctiveness of *ecología política* can be found in Joan Martínez Alier’s particular development of political ecology through his reading of ecological economics and a critical dialogue with historical materialist approaches. More recently, the arrival of Giorgos Kallis at ICTA at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the EU funded ENTITLE project has enabled new conversations and a further hybridization of mainstream political ecology and ecological economics, again sometimes in a tense or critical relationship to historical materialism (see the dialogue between Kallis and Swyngedouw (2017) and also Kallis et al 2013)). As in France, research on hydro-geographies – sometimes building on the work of Saurí has produced some particularly rich contributions to the political ecology literature (Otero et al 2011; March 2015; March and Saurí 2017) while often drawing on a more historical approach (Gorostiza et al 2015; 2017). Swyngedouw’s (2015) *Liquid Power* is one of several outstanding contributions to emerge from such an intellectual context. And given Barcelona’s positioning within Smart City debates, it is little surprise that powerful critiques of emerging political ecologies of smart urbanization have also developed (March and Ribera-Fumaz 2014).

Decentering ≠ Decolonizing

To give weight to these diverse ‘traditions’ beyond the Anglo-American citadel – to generate new stories from different storytellers for different audiences as Kim et al (2012) put it – is, however, not the same as decolonizing political ecology.

Neither decentering nor provincializing is the same as decolonizing. In an important piece inspired by struggles against settler colonialism – understood, following Wolfe (1999), to be distinct from other forms of colonialism – Tuck and Yang (2012) challenge what they perceive to be “the ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted” and grafted onto existing frameworks. Against such a trend, they state “decolonization is not a metaphor”. Instead decolonization in settler contexts is fundamentally about Indigenous struggles for sovereignty (on the right to water in Aotearoa New Zealand, see Ruru 2012; on settler colonialism and municipal water supply in Winnipeg, see Perry 2016)

The distinctiveness of settler colonialism makes it difficult to read Tuck and Yang’s claim as a dismissal of the project to chart ‘other political ecologies’; nevertheless, it provides a sober warning of the risk of linguistic slippages and of non-Indigenous complicity in colonial injustices. Such complicity is captured in what the authors (drawing on Mawhinney) refer to as “moves to innocence” through which non-Indigenous peoples coopt the language of Indigenous struggles while assuaging their guilt for the ongoing reproduction of colonial relations. Against such moves they follow Fanon in claiming “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder” (Fanon, in Tuck and Yang 2012: 2).

Decolonial thinking as it has emerged in Latin America provides a further political and epistemological challenge to relations of domination emerging in Europe. Given the fecundity of such work, Enrique Leff (2015: 45) is able to make the powerful statement that “Latin America...has a fair claim to being the most important region in the history and development of Political Ecology”. For Leff, this claim is grounded in both empirical studies themselves and in the influence of broader Latin American debates, in particular the radical praxis of José Martí, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and Josué de Castro; the influence of the Dependency School (on the work of Wolf (1982) and Bunker (1985)); as well as the decolonial thinking of Lander, Mignolo and Quijano. Such an approach requires careful attention to concrete practices and situations and for Ulloa (2015) enables a rethinking of ‘development’ from a political ecology perspective: Latin America provides the fertile ground in which to make such a move. And for Alimonda (2015), grappling with concrete situations in this way requires considering the history of the extractive industries on the continent as well as a direct engagement with questions of coloniality and the enclave political ecologies that have resulted.

This question of how political ecologists and geographers should analyze and conceptualize the resurgence of extractive industries across the continent framed the public exchanges between Eduardo Gudynas and some members of the now-defunct National Centre of Strategies for the Right to Territory (CENEDET), which was established in Quito by David Harvey and Miguel Robles-Durán, following an invitation from the Ecuadorean government. These debates centered on the adequacy of ‘northern’ conceptual resources for interpreting diverse material conditions. Thus, Gudynas (2015) accused the CENEDET researchers – Harvey included – of developing a form of “friendly colonialism”.

Gudynas' criticism was based on what he considered to be the extensive application of the 'trendy' concept of accumulation by dispossession and he went on to suggest that Harvey's trendiness in Latin America provided ideological legitimation for pseudo-Leftist governments, permitting them to hide behind an anti-capitalist façade. Members of the team at CENEDET responded by pointing to Gudynas' misinterpretation of accumulation by dispossession while demonstrating its applicability in a Latin American context (Martínez et al 2015). While defending Gudynas, Joan Martinez-Alier (2016) accepts that the former's understanding was indeed limited but he goes on to call for Harvey to learn from post-extractivist perspectives, which he argues have triumphed across Latin America. It is worth pointing out that much of the research produced by CENEDET was incredibly effective at engaging with context and the fruits of these analyses are likely to have a significant influence on political ecological work in coming years: nevertheless, as Wilson (2017) now concedes, Gudynas' claim that CENEDET was being used by the Correa government may well have had some truth to it.¹

Against typologies

The force of postcolonial critique has undoubtedly been felt more strongly in work on Urban Political Ecology (UPE) than elsewhere in the field. Indeed, the number of contributions around Situated UPE (Lawhon et al 2014) is testament to the growing interest in locating knowledge production within the complex quotidian ecologies of the global South. Heynen's (2015) progress report on UPE therefore chimes with Derickson's (2015) report on urban geography: both distinguish between two forms of theorizing (Derickson) and two waves of conceptualization (Heynen). According to such typologies Urban Geography 1 along with a first wave of UPE are said to have drawn more from Marxist scholarship; the second wave of UPE and Urban Geography 2 are more situated and therefore more open to a postcolonial project. Chakrabarty's (2000) contrast between History 1 (the process of abstraction associated with an unfolding capitalist logic) and History 2 (the subaltern resistances that puncture the abstractions of History 1) is often transposed to such typologies (see Derickson 2015) in order to sharply juxtapose bodies of work.

I am deeply uncomfortable with such typologies. To inflict them on the broader field of political ecology (first wave bad/second wave good) would be to do a profound damage to the field. Indeed, as Leff (2015) demonstrates – and as a series of exchanges through the decades attests – political ecology has developed through continual exchanges with decolonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial perspectives. A chauvinism for the new leads to a neglect of these crucial dialogues. Sundberg's (2015) brilliant essay on ethics provides a fundamentally different take that delves into a deep personal history of researching political ecologies. The burning question for Sundberg is “what does it mean to start from a place of entanglement, as scholars situated in and often beneficiaries of the very politico-economic systems under consideration in our research” (2015: 117). In order to explore such questions, she draws on Spivak's notion of “homework” and Katz's reading of critical and counter topographies, reformulating the project of political ecological research “in terms of walking

with differently situated others in intersecting, yet distinct and unequally constituted struggles” (*ibid*: 123). It strikes me that Sundberg’s longer-term perspective provides a more nuanced starting point enabling a far greater understanding of solidarity – albeit a solidarity never divorced from complex relations of power (cf. Tuck and Yang 2012).

In a slightly different iteration of the 1 and 2 typology, UPE has often been contrasted with the broader field of political ecology – the former being seen as more narrowly “Marxist” and the latter more situated and therefore intrinsically open to epistemologies of the South. Lawhon et al (2014) are most explicit in their critique of what they perceive to be UPE’s problematic “structuralist” leanings, citing Zimmer (2010) to argue “UPE draws its theoretical lineage primarily from Marxist urban geography not political ecology”. In order to produce a more heterogeneous urban political ecology they therefore call for a study of everyday practices that might provide “a conceptual inversion”: theory would thereby emerge from the bottom-up. In other iterations of such a position, Zimmer (2015) suggests that UPE might gain from engagements with South Asian urban studies, Lawhon et al (2014) call for a conversation with African urbanism, and Cornea et al (2017) argue that a shift towards “poststructuralist perspectives” – and away from Marxist urban geography – opens up the possibility for new conversations between UPE and anthropological research on the everyday state and everyday governance.

Chari (2016) avoids such a sharp contrast between Marxism and poststructuralism/postcolonialism. Nevertheless, he finds within his own experience of political ecology at the University of California Berkeley a Third Worldist position that is distinct from the “extremely metropolitan (both Eurocentric and city-centred) 1970s tradition of ‘radical geography’”. Given the roots of UPE within this “extremely metropolitan” radical geographical tradition, Zimmer’s (2010; 2015) critique finds some indirect supportⁱⁱ. There is a risk, however, that these distinctions once again rest on caricatures, obscuring more than they reveal. Indeed, Situated UPE’s critique of structuralist residues is wide of the mark: structuralist Marxism has exerted almost no influence on UPEⁱⁱⁱ, and if Althusserianism’s influence can be felt anywhere it would perhaps be in Watts’ richly generative *Silent Violence*, which only serves to add further complexity to Chari’s (2016) Third Worldist/radical geography binary. And just as Chari’s (*ibid.*) work points to a diverse range of Marxisms within trans-area studies, it seems wrong to reduce radical geography (or UPE) to a caricatured metropolitan, Eurocentric type. That same radical geographical tradition is utterly dependent on conversations with feminist standpoint theorists (Hartsock and Smith 1979), comparative historical sociology (Arrighi 1994) and at its best seeks to situate practices within a given context (Harvey 1996). While a degree of Eurocentrism might be unavoidable (although see Dikec (2010) on the “mere name-calling” sometimes associated with the term) radical geography often seeks to make the same move as Chari (2017) thereby producing richly contextual understandings of lived realities (on some of the difficulties, see Ekers and Loftus (2013)).

If framed as an open exchange, there is, nevertheless, clearly much that political ecology can gain from Chari's (2017) trans-area studies and from the critique of Occidentalism as the condition of possibility for Orientalism (Coronil 1996) that helps to frame it. As an ensemble of representational practices Occidentalism has influenced and been shaped by a diverse range of conceptions of the world and it is intriguing that Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* – often thought of as a challenge to Eurocentric histories – comes to be included for the manner in which it “unwittingly obscures the role of non-Western peoples in the making of the modern world, subtly reiterating the distinction between Other and Self that underwrites Europe's imperial expansion” (1996: 61). Coronil's critique of Occidentalism therefore serves as a caution to political ecological research. Indeed, I suspect that Coronil's third modality of Occidentalism (the destabilization of Self by Other) serves as a crucially important caution to more simplistic celebrations of ‘Southern Theory’, as well as more crude interpretations of provincialisation:

“While in the previous two modalities of Occidentalism, non-Western peoples are either dissolved or incorporated by the West, in this third form they are presented as a privileged source of knowledge for the West...[T]he use of polarized contrasts between cultures that are historically interrelated has the effect of exalting their difference, erasing their historical links, and homogenizing their internal features, unwittingly reinscribing an imperial Self-Other duality even as it seeks to unsettle colonial representations”^{iv} (1996: 68)

Practising political ecology as relational comparison

Gillian Hart's (2006; 2016) development of relational comparison provides a complementary perspective to both Chari's (2016) and Coronil's (1996): in so doing, Hart provides a profoundly useful starting point for thinking through a non-Eurocentric political ecology that is attendant to the production of uneven geographies of race, class and gender. Although intended in part as an intervention into “sharply polarized urban studies and subaltern studies debates cast in terms of Marxism vs. poststructuralism/postcolonialism” (those touched on above) Hart (2016) speaks directly to the questions posed – to political ecologists – at the outset to my report. Against the simplistic elision of postcolonialism and poststructuralism (and the Hackneyed counterposing of Marxism and postcolonialism) Hart develops “an alternative spatio-historical Marxist post-colonial approach, in which relational comparison can be used as a practical tool of analysis”. Crucial to such an approach is a non-teleological dialectics understood as a philosophy of internal relations^v. Thus, Hart's postcolonial Marxism, while apparently promiscuous, retains a fidelity to historical materialism for interpreting the different determinants of contemporary and historical political ecologies.

Furthermore, relational comparison requires attention “to the spatio-historical, articulatory, and denaturalizing aspects of translating practice” (Kipfer and Hart 2013: 323). This denaturalizing move that is so fundamental to political ecological research prompts a recognition that ‘learning from the South’ needs to be understood relationally, and not as the simple transfer of discrete political

ecological knowledges. Translation, for Kipfer and Hart (*ibid*), draws from Antonio Gramsci's linguistic concerns, as well as the Sardinian's interest in how knowledges and practices travel (Thomas 2009; Morton 2013). Above all, they provide a means of framing a political practice around "the formidable work that remains to be done to translate Gramsci's political ambitions into an economically integrated but sociospatially segmented neo-imperial world order where ecological questions are crucial and where aggressive, even fascist nationalisms remain powerful"^{vi}. As well as such formidable challenges, translation remains crucial to some of the more mundane aspects of how political ecological research is published and circulated as seen in the remarkable editorial efforts in IHoPE and HoPE.

Reflecting on some of these more practical problems of translation Chartier and Rodary (2015) relate it to their own concern for a dialogue between *écologie politique* and political ecology, Thus,

"Having the *political* will power to achieve social fluency in two languages, a vernacular language and a vehicular language would appear to be the sole way of being in the game...on both levels. Being situated without being isolated, being connected without being acculturated, involves above all having the multifaceted linguistic capacity for communication" (2015: 557)^{vii}

This linguistic challenge can also be viewed as a broader challenge for practicing political ecology as a form of relational comparison. If we are to follow Sundberg in reformulating political ecological research "in terms of walking with differently situated others in intersecting, yet distinct and unequally constituted struggles" it requires understanding how practices are "situated without being isolated, are connected without being acculturated". As I hope to have emphasized in my review, political ecological research is currently particularly fertile ground for thinking through such questions and for providing more nuanced interpretations of what it means to theorise from situated, relationally understood sets of socio-ecological practices.

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ⁱ CENEDET's venture into *doing* political ecology and thereby addressing the perennial question of where the policy in political ecology lies (Walker 2006; and for a novel take focused on Latin American realities see Bebbington 2015) is one of several in Latin America at present (see also WATERLAT-GOBICET and Justicia Hídrica). These ventures often demonstrate the importance of what Katie Meehan describes as 'trench work', engaged political ecology, often overlooked within the pages of the scholarly journals but profoundly important for conceptual and policy development.

ⁱⁱ While many aspects of Chari's (2016) approach provide exciting ways forward, framing "oceanic humanities" as "an environmental humanities appropriate to 'interdisciplinary Asian studies in the age of the Anthropocene'" only seems to cede the periodization of political ecologies to the "muscular mode of geography as 'science'" that he elsewhere rejects. Indeed the uncritical adoption of the language of the Anthropocene –in part through the 'ontological turn' across the environmental humanities – undermines the more nuanced historical reading made possible through the agrarian studies tradition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although the criticism of structuralism is often levelled at Harvey, his work is most influenced by readings that emphasise the philosophy of internal relations at the heart of Marx's project and which are therefore developed in opposition to what are commonly understood to be structural Marxist readings. Hence Harvey's quip that he spent more time reading *Capital* than *Reading Capital*.

^{iv} In an interesting chapter in IHoPE, Joshi cautions against the *de rigueur* challenge to binaries (after Said) focusing instead on the way in which such binaries have been used strategically in India's climate politics.

^v Hart therefore provides a helpful counterpoint to the crude understandings of dialectics that circulate amongst both critics and proponents within geographical research (see also Harvey (1996) for such clarity).

^{vi} For an allied effort to make the case for a gramscian political ecology (after Said) see Wainwright (2005)

^{vii} In a similar vein, writing from prison Antonio Gramsci urged his sister Terasina to let her son, Franco, speak Sardinian: "It was a mistake, in my opinion, not to allow Edmea [Gramsci's niece] to speak freely in Sardinian as a little girl. It harmed her intellectual development and put her imagination in a straightjacket. You mustn't make this mistake with your own children...it is a good thing for children to learn several languages" (1994: 89).