



(online) = ISSN 2285 – 3642

ISSN-L = 2285 – 3642

Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People

Volume 4, Issue 1, 2015

URL: <http://jedep.spiruharet.ro>

e-mail: office_jedep@spiruharet.ro

Book Review “*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction,* *2nd Edition*” by Paul Robbins

Mădălina Epure ¹,

¹ School of International Development, University of East Anglia

Paul Robbins is the director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he oversees world-leading research in rapid global environmental change. His years of experience as both researcher and educator focus on specializing interactions with nature and the politics of natural resource management, spanning topics ranging from environmental studies and natural resource policy to social theory. His work has addressed many topics spanning conservation conflicts, urban ecology and environment as well as environment and health interactions.

While his written work contains a diversity of books and articles aimed at interdisciplinary audiences and the broader public, my opinion is that his most notable work to date remains the foundational textbook “*Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*”. First published in 2004 and currently revised into a second edition as of 2011, it remains one of the few notable textbooks that try to address the burgeoning field of political ecology as a whole discipline, with content ranging from the introduction of core concepts and central thinkers to the major works in political ecology and the arguments and challenges that it yet faces as a developing field of research and study.

Political ecology originated in the 1980s as a result of the advance of development geography and cultural ecology, and primarily sought to understand the political dynamics and power relations that lie behind struggles over the environment in the third world. It is an most notably an interdisciplinary approach to understanding environment and development issues, whose conceptualization has always been transformative and which has allowed researchers to eschew old fixed scientific truths in order to better understand society-nature relations.

In the words of one of its major proponents, Piers Blaikie, political ecology has been a liberating movement that seeks to provide insights into diverse, local and subjective worlds. However, its strength is



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also its weakness: this innovative and all-inclusive thinking is often charged with incoherence. The popularization of political ecology in Anglophone universities has led to an increasing stability and legitimacy in the field, but it made it increasingly apparent that since political ecology work is very complex, there is a pressing need to pay attention to its theoretical coherence and perhaps even its political purpose.

This is where “Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction” by Paul Robbins comes in: it establishes itself as an important and much needed primary “handbook” for those first tackling the field of political ecology, as well as an essential reading for those seasoned veterans in the research field who wish for a panoramic look at the discipline. Thus, the book describes and explores key arguments and contemporary explanatory challenges facing political ecology, it provides a full history of its development and theoretical underpinnings over the last century and finally considers the major challenges facing the field in the present and future.

Written in an engaging and accessible style by a single author, the book is one of the first to address in an integrated manner the multitude of themes, theories and methodologies used by researchers operating in the field of political ecology, both officially and unofficially. Robbins divides the book into four parts, with the first and last parts being essentially an introduction and conclusion to the overview of major developments in the field from a theoretical, methodological and practical viewpoint as extracted from emblematic case studies in the fields of geography, anthropology, ecology and political economy.

Part I. What is Political ecology? In Part I Robbins begins with a comprehensive review of the varying schools of thought within political ecology to attempt to define what I consider an elusive concept. The ways in which political ecology is defined vary as much as the aims and methodology used within its realm of research. However, by comparing and contrasting political ecology in the light of views from prominent researchers in the field dating back to 1979, Robbins is able to arrive at an explanation of political ecology as the politicization of formerly apolitical studies within the realm of economic, social, environmental and ecological fields, a discipline with infinite possibilities to explore the relations of power behind conflicts in both rural and urban areas throughout the world. The problem remains however that all definitions of political ecology posit the environment to be a finite source of basic unchanging and essential elements, which then set absolute limits for human action. Therefore the problem of resource scarcity is carefully presented, not only from environmentalists’ point of view but also from the perspective of market „optimists”.



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Nevertheless, readers and particularly those that dabble in interdisciplinary research will find this part very useful as it is truly an inspirational text which really broadens one's horizon. By providing a brief review of the intellectual history of the field and common practice in research, Robbins is thus able to pinpoint the location of political ecology at the crossroads of interdisciplinary research.

What caught my attention is the deconstruction of political economy research into: degradation and marginalization, conservation and control, environmental conflict and exclusion, environmental subjects and identity, political objects and actors. The author discusses the relevance of each topic and concludes that the goal for political ecology is „the rational management and amelioration of risks, defined as the calculable likelihood of problematic outcomes of human actions and decisions”. Readers will discover that political ecology is like a tree, with „deep roots” that researchers can draw on to analyze the management of conflicts in economic, political, social, environmental and ecological arenas.

Part II. Conceptual and methodological challenges, is the meatiest part of the book, where the author delves into the main challenges of political ecology at the conceptual and methodological level. Each major challenge currently facing the field in Ecology, Social Construction and Explanation are carefully analyzed and presented via relevant case studies which explore human impact alongside with defining and measuring environmental degradation. The most significant point for the reader is the methodological imperatives in political analysis of environmental destruction.

Part III Political ecology, makes reference to the current level of knowledge in the field by discussing the most representative case studies and research conducted in recent years. Robbins thus provides compelling evidence on four major topics: degradation and marginalization, conservation and degradation, environmental conflict, environmental subjects and identities and finally, political objects and actors. Degradation and marginalization are seen as a „regionalized phenomenon conditioned by trans-regional patterns of accumulation” while conservation is painted as state territorialization “that depends on particular constructions of “wilderness” and the disruption of localized historical forms of social ecologies”¹. Therefore, when it comes to analyzing conflicts the researcher's attention turns to responsibilities, access to resources and property regimes strongly articulated via social inclusion/exclusion based on ethnicity, class, gender or religion.

¹ Teo Ballvé - <http://territorialmasquerades.net/political-ecology/> posted on June, 29, 2011



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Part IV Where to Now? Boasts a very intriguing title, through which the author raises the universal question regarding the future of us and our planet through the prism and study of political ecology, emphasizing that it is through its challenges that we may move forward and progress. The most notable criticism I would levy here is that what is an otherwise outstanding effort to summarize a vast and growing field of research is that it mostly pays attention to political ecology within the confines of academia. Political ecology and its subject matter lives outside, in the wider dispersed state. Interaction between political ecology and development policy and practice therefore should not just take the form of criticisms levied at development plans or other means to promote environmental justice. I believe Robbins could have made a good case for how researchers could potentially actively engage with institutions, NGO's, charities, social movements and the very subjects of political ecology research, so that society can be improved as a result and so that political ecology becomes more than a long record of arguments which are not enacting social and political change. In his own words, to avoid "research as theft", political ecology should always strive to be more.

Acknowledgements

Please acknowledge collaborators or anyone who has helped with the paper at the end of the text.

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