Putting politics first:  
the political ecology of sustainable development

Ecological change is imbued with political meaning. Global warming, forest degradation, soil erosion, biological simplification, and growing land, water and air pollution, reflect but also modify, political processes at the local, national and international level. Increasingly, ‘our common future’ will be mediated by political-ecological forces in unprecedented ways (Kearns, 1991).

And yet, the study of political ecology is still in its infancy. Certainly, the natural and social sciences have advanced our understanding of ecological change, and of the need for ‘sustainable development’. Such research, however, tells us very little about the politics of ecological change. Indeed, the political dimension typically is ignored, and ecology de-politicized. This brief commentary explores several problems associated with this de-politicization, and then advocates a political ecology approach.

Although it is an integral part of human–environment interaction, much writing on sustainable development is curiously devoid of politics. One scholar, for example, has suggested that sustainable development means

the strategies which are being formulated and implemented are environmentally sustainable over the long-term, are consistent with social values and institutions, and encourage ‘grassroots’ participation in the development process . . . In general terms, the primary objective is reducing the absolute poverty of the world’s poor through providing lasting and secure livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption, and social instability (Barbier, 1989: 185).

In this techno-managerial perspective, strategies are ‘formulated and implemented’, seemingly without conflict. But who formulates and implements these strategies, and in whose interest?

How may environmentally sensitive strategies be made ‘consistent’ with social values and institutions riddled with political contradictions? What does ‘grassroots’ participation mean, and is not the aim of poverty reduction politically problematic?

Such research thus fails to address political issues that are vital to the success of sustainable development strategies. Rather, assumptions are made about the state and societal actors that obviate the need for political analysis.

Many have assumed, for example, that the state will support suitable policies when acquainted with the ‘facts’. And indeed, states have shown a greater concern for ecological issues, even incorporating environmental criteria into the planning process. It does not follow, however, that because a state is overtly sensitive to ecological issues, it is automatically committed to changing basic political and economic practices. Government and business elites deriving power from processes (e.g. industry, dam construction) often contributing to ecological degradation, are typically ill-disposed toward any changes that may threaten their power. Indeed, is it not more plausible to assume that such elites, when pressured by international or national forces (e.g. World Bank, NGOs, media), will only tinker at reform, cloaking such efforts in environmentalist rhetoric?
Even if a state is receptive to the sustainable development argument, it may still be unable to implement reform. The literature often assumes that states are somehow omnipotent, and can easily ‘deliver’ the ecological goods. This assumption can be questioned on several grounds. First, the nature of the state itself, its structure and historical development, may militate against effective policy action. This weakness is particularly important where ecological issues, typically embracing a wide variety of policy areas and actors, are concerned. In Sri Lanka in 1986, for example, twelve ministries and thirty-eight government agencies held responsibility for soil conservation alone (Belshaw, Blaikie & Stocking, 1991: 81). Such a multiplicity of actors, all with their own priorities and practices, make concerted action difficult, even in those countries which have the requisite coordinating mechanisms.

Correspondingly, how legitimate is it to assume that the state can effectively manage, and centrally coordinate social activity? Although this potential should not be underestimated, there is scant evidence to suggest that it will not be circumscribed in numerous ways, particularly in the Third World. As Migdal (1988: 9) notes:

States have become a formidable presence in their societies, but many have experienced faltering efforts to get their populations to do what state policy makers want them to do. States are like big rocks thrown into small ponds: they make waves from end to end, but they rarely catch any fish.

If the state’s capacity to achieve designated goals is thus limited, then its ability to promote sustainable development is similarly affected.

These comments are not intended to suggest that the state is powerless to effect change. Rather, by illustrating some of the ambiguities of state power, they underscore a major weakness in the sustainable development approach: it makes sweeping assumptions about precisely those political issues that most require investigation.

In contrast, a political ecology approach embraces such issues, and may be defined as an inquiry into the political sources, conditions, and ramifications of environmental change. Unlike the sustainable development literature, it focuses on the interplay of diverse socio-political forces, and the relationship of those forces to environmental change.

Embracing different social and ecological scales, political ecology addresses at least three distinct, but inter-related research areas (Bryant, 1992). First, research into the contextual sources of environmental change examines the general environmental impacts of the state and its policies, interstate relations, and global capitalism. In a world of increased political and economic interdependence, these topics signal the growing social and ecological influence of national and transnational forces.

A second, and complementary research area, investigates the location-specific aspects of environmental change. The study of conflict over access affords insights into how contextual actors impinge on specific socio-ecological conditions and relationships. More importantly, however, such research documents the resistance of the relatively powerless (poor peasants and urban dwellers), as they fight to protect the environmental foundations of their livelihood.

A third research area addresses the political ramifications of environmental change by assessing the effects of such change on socio-economic and political relationships. To what extent are environmental costs borne by socially disadvantaged groups, and how does this unequal burden affect existing socio-economic inequalities? Under what circumstances does unequal exposure to environmental change lead to political confrontation (e.g. environmental movements)? Examining
Studies in the vulnerability of the poor to both episodic (drought, flooding) and everyday (soil erosion, salinization, deforestation) forms of environmental change, this research highlights an important theme in political ecology — namely, that the impact of environmental change is rarely neutral, and may well reinforce prevailing socio-economic inequalities.

Political ecology thus takes politics seriously, recognizing that if sustainable development is to transcend mere rhetoric, political questions must be central to analysis. Assumptions about the state and society must be avoided if they obscure political and economic truths. After all, it is only when such truths are acknowledged that effective action commensurate with the scale of the present ecological challenge will ever be possible.

By taking political questions seriously, political ecology also rejects facile assumptions about environmental change and human welfare, that ecological degradation, for instance, is a universal evil affecting rich and poor alike. Rather, it explores how such change is incorporated into concrete political and economic relationships, and the ways that it may then be used to reinforce or challenge those relationships. It exposes the inequities of such relationships precisely to suggest ways in which sustainable and equitable development may then take place.

By examining the politics of environmental change, political ecology acknowledges that environment and development, wealth and poverty, are inextricably linked; and, that there is little point in discussing inter-generational justice, if even intra-generationally, it cannot yet be realized. It is indeed premised on the assumption that radical social change is an essential prerequisite for truly sustainable development.

If, as Frankel (in Wolf, 1985: 146) observes, ‘we have acquired evolutionary responsibility’ for the fate of our planet, then we must move rapidly to appreciate the complexities of that responsibility, and encourage political action consonant with this understanding. I would suggest that a political ecology approach represents a vital step in the process. Will those keen on sustainable development now rise to the challenge, and put politics first?

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REFERENCES


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