Higher Education and Oriental Studies (HEOS) – Vol 2(2): 9 – 15
www.heos.asia/ojs
e-ISSN 2785-9118
http://doi.org/10.54435/heos.v2i2.48

Loss and Return of Ecological View in the Discourse of Political Ecology

NIU JIAN PING
Universiti Sains Malaysia
niujianping220@163.com

ABSTRACT

Ecological and human health conditions are at stake in today's most pressing issue: balancing the needs of the natural world with the requirements of human society. The long-term repercussions of social and environmental changes can be better understood by studying both ecological and political-economic history. Floodplains are a great place to learn how civilisation and nature interact over time in a region. To keep pace with the developments in both technology and society, wetland conditions and social-ecological phenomena are constantly re-engineered. Different land and access regulations simultaneously affect the management and health of wetlands. Among environmental studies, political ecology is a subfield that focuses on social relations and the co-production of the natural environment and human society. Political economy, post-modernism, and agrarian studies are among the sources of conceptual inspiration. This research attempts to evaluate prominent actors (e.g., government agencies and enterprises) and what is assumed in central discourses about environmental issues. The debate over ecology's place and significance in political ecology rage on. Several political ecology initiatives actively deal with biological sciences, whereas others stay within more human scientific sociological theories, where ecology generally pertains to the environment.

Keywords: discourse; ecological view; loss; political ecology; return

INTRODUCTION

Politics of environmental management, rights and control, environmental attitudes, and their consequences on lifestyles and climate-change mechanisms are all addressed by political ecology, a wide range of theoretical and analytical approaches to socio-cultural interactions. Politicians who study the nature–society debate are interested in the essential theoretical and methodological issues that categorise nature–society conflicts. These theoretical approaches and related study methods demonstrate the involvement of political ecologists with these important ontological matters.

Political ecology was born due to the political-economic objections of cultural ecology and ecosystem biodiversity that arose in the 1970s and early 1980s. To understand environmental damage (e.g., soil erosion), the analysis suggested that resource management strategies commonly used by subsistence farmers in developing countries must be placed within the global political philosophy (Blaikie, 2016). Anglophone geography coined the term ‘political ecology’ to describe this convergence of political economics and cultural ecology (Watts, 2017). Many different theories on the nature–society interface sprang out of the political-ecological critique, initially motivated by Marxist agrarian studies. In the field of political ecology, Paul Robbins distinguishes between the ‘destruction’, ‘creation’ and ‘co-production’ of nature as three separate methodological concepts to nature–society interactions (Robbins, 2020).

Nature conservation discourse is concerned with ‘what’ or rather ‘the issue’ justification for policies and PAs (Black et al., 2017): global biodiversity loss. It only seems similarly vital to query the ‘hows’ and ‘whos’ of conserving, in other words, to examine the process by which nature preservation is frequently handled, without dismissing the significance and importance of such problem. It has taken more than a century for conservation regulations to emerge from the constant struggle to keep natural areas distinct from those set aside for human use (Adams,

2017). Political ecologists have critically evaluated such policies to understand better the nature–human interaction involved in establishing the protected regions (Adams, 2017).

The discourse analysis of the philosopher named, Michel Foucault, is directly essential to this post-structuralist section of political ecologists. In his opinion, a 'system of expression' (File, 2016) is created when the factorial knowledge-power interacts. Under the Foucauldian view of discourse, it encompasses words and deeds and actions (Kleinke & Avcu, 2017). To use a term from Foucault, discourses 'do' things: generate meaning, reality and individuality whilst dependent on 'governments of knowing' that limit what is true and false. In these systems, power controls, which type of understanding, can be used and establishes what has been referred to as a 'field of knowledge'. However, the philosopher sees discourse as resolving conflicts between individuals who support different discourse formations tied to other management techniques. Considering that it offers new insights on governance issues, Foucauldian discourse theory decisively reverberates in environmental policy. Following Maarten Hajer's interpretation of Foucault's 'secondary discourse facts', this book includes discourse analysis to reveal the strong linkages between national policies and discourses (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

When studying environmental issues in highly changed or new ecosystems, including the historical dimensions of social, environmental and ecological processes is critical. In these kinds of places, the duties of people are clearly defined, and opposing views often exist about what those jobs are. Some of the most natural systems have been impacted by human creations as demonstrated by critical geographers and other academics. Given that modern political-ecological configurations must be understood as being generated in and through historical processes, transformations and dynamics, we view political ecology as a historically rooted approach that must be defended. The field of political ecology has also asserted the importance of historical analysis as a vital component. However, not all political ecologists incorporate historical analysis into their studies.

When political ecology was first developed in the 1980s, it used theories and procedures from the political economy to study environmental issues. Environmental change cannot be explained without looking at the political and economic systems and institutions in which it occurs. Understanding the nature–society relationship is essential as a starting point. The initial theoretical impact was provided by Marxian political economics; whilst following developments in social theory, such as post-structural political theory and non-equilibrium biodiversity, provided innovative concepts (Moragues-Faus & Marsden, 2017). Multiscale analysis, politico-economic analysis, economic analysis and ecology are the only methods used in political ecology study. Ecological field investigations are also included. Nature–society interactions have been tightly correlated in political ecology's perspective to nature–society ties at a different time and spatial contexts (Tzaninis et al., 2020). Economic growth and conservation projects have spawned a wide range of critical assessments, notably in material and discourse elements of land ownership. Recent research developments include an increasing focus on urban political ecology, acute reactions to ecological sustainability theory and ethics and a focus on the ecosystem and identity.

To address what are considered as substantial environmental issues, global solutions were sought after in the 1990s as the discussions on global environmental change took centre stage. This phenomenon may be partly due to scientific advancements in detecting global environmental experimenting with different efforts, such as changing climate and the rise of world-scale research initiatives (Hansson, 2020). Other motives may be linked to the globalisation of the economy and culture. Global environmental change's dominance is called

into doubt by Leipold et al. (2019) in a new study. A new dominating worldview, according to Goldman, sees the management of the commons as a panacea and a cure for all challenges. He contends that interests that aspire to occupy and exploit from global commons that were previously solely locally owned drive the developing global House of Representatives paradigm. It has come to mean a variety of things in different contexts (Hajer, 2020).

Owing to its diverse nature and the rapid spread of the concerns of the emission reductions in the economic structure, climate change is at the forefront of arguments on climate change. Governments worldwide concluded at UNCED that the possible consequences of climate change necessitate international coordination through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. However, owing to the growth of this global environmental challenge, the effects of climate change and the social mechanisms and processes necessary to adapt are being overlooked. Managerialism and wastefulness are prominent themes in the current debates in this field. International action is suggested to remedy the managerial narrative that blames climate change on systemic failure and population expansion. Excess consumption is cited as the root contributor to global warming in the reckless spending discourse, and it is said that only addressing this issue can prevent global catastrophes.

The climate change debate is dominated by managerial discourse. The ultimate root of the problem, according to this argument, is the failure of institutions and policies. Over-exploitation of carbon sinks, such as forests, has been caused by energy controllers' lack of knowledge about their role in carbon capture. The marginal costs of climate warming consequences and the marginal costs of climate change mitigation can be used to determine a tolerable degree of climate change based on welfare economic analysis (Fragomeni & Rizzo, 2020).

FINDING

CONFLICT BETWEEN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL WORLDS

The ecologic dynamic explains soil erosion and vulnerability to market shocks in terms of the social connections of production and circulation. Structuralism and positivism are combined in these social and environmental views. The best examples are political and economic challenges of land degradation and starvation in the developing world (Hewitt, 2019; Kertész, 2017). Neo-Marxist (under)development theories are used as a theoretical foundation for this approach to the subject matter. Both Hewitt and Kertesz use Bernstein's ‘simple procreation squeeze’ to explain the political economy of soil degradation in Africa and Southeast Asia; for instance, farmers and pastoralists use resource production (e.g., cotton or livestock sales) to fulfil their fundamental needs for home reproduction, such as soil mining or overgrazing of pastures. If input costs rise but market prices for micro products stay the same or drop during times of bad trade terms, small farmers abuse resources, realising that doing so will lower output. As a result of the interplay of political, economic and ecological factors, environmental contamination has occurred. Agricultural yields decline due to degraded lands, which in turn contribute to the occurrence of poverty. When it comes to habitat destruction and society, instead of the colonial or traditional view that puts the blame on illogical or primitive and overcrowding as the causes of ecological issues in a habitat, the variety of training takes a different approach (Blaikie, 2016). Farmer behaviour is widely accepted to be sensible in the face of complex political and economic constraints.

Politics and economics have increasingly grappled with positivist ecologies that dispute the idea of a single ‘benchmark’ or ‘steady-state’ in ecological systems (Kowalewska, 2019). This type of ecology known as ‘non-equilibrium ecology’, is characterised by soil erosion studies concerned about environmental degradation's spectrum (time and space). Degradation is

measured concerning an initial state, which can shift over time as the scope of an ecological analysis expands or contracts. As part of their critique of governments and aid donors that base their models and actions on stability conceptions about the natural world, the ecologic dialectical works in political ecology included non-equilibrium ecological principles in their analysis. To prevent environmental deterioration, governments and assistance donors sponsor 'new enclosure movements' that aim to contain and manage the destruction of the environment through territorial conservation methods (Kowalewska, 2019). By contrast, territorial approaches are typically ineffective because they fail to account for the spatial and temporal elements of environmental change mechanisms (Kowalewska, 2019).

Analyses of environmental degradation, such as soil chemical loss and shrub infiltration, are combined with household surveys of agricultural systems and personal finances in the ecologic dialectic approach. Small farmers' decision making to overwork the farm is the focus of this investigation. Understanding the interrelationship between resource users and the larger political economy is a frequent approach to providing explanations. Using a multiscale approach, these studies focus on the importance of the authorities and other players (e.g., merchants) in sustaining economic stagnation in families and communities.

CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO THE ECOLOGY

Environmental constructivists use thread perspectives to environmental–society issues. An argument for this method is that citing examples of environmental change (e.g., forest loss in West Africa) validates statements about socio-ecological relationships, which in turn validate the exercise of power (Fairhead & Leach, 2020). Accounts that reduce complex causal links, assign blame, build competence and stabilise ambiguous abiotic factors are common in these scenarios (Forss, 2008). Discourses about the environment reinforce rather than exert dominance. Many studies use discourse analysis to demonstrate how sustainable construction and social order are co-created (Buttel, 2020).

Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker have recently advanced the environmental constructivist method in political ecology in their research on the politics of environmental knowledge in northern Thailand, which is a similar approach to Fairhead and Leach. In this case, they question the scientific validity of the depictions of ecological change, such as upland deforestation and downstream floods and water shortages. The process of 'problem closure', as described by Buttel (2020), demonstrates the close connection between scientific awareness and environmental, absolute concern formulation. They look at the relationships among competence, problem-solving and the incorporation of knowledge into ecological stories. Ecological explanations generally ignore 'local' conceptions of environmental systems, as Fairhead and Leach show, and it harms theoretical basis and land users who are frequently blamed for their resource management strategies.

In ecological systems, simplistic descriptions typically rely on exaggerated assumptions about their complexity and unpredictability. States and aid organisations are drawn to nature–society optimisations because they offer relatively simple principles of management. Reconstruction of and involvement in an ecological system thought to be impeding the return to a 'stable level' is justified by the 'steady-state' narrative. Ironically, these (mis)representations of climatic change legitimise state and aid donor actions because they have the exclusive capacity and ability to manage environment–society concerns. When it comes to solving problems, formulating policies and putting those policies into action, the state and aid donors, according to Forss (2008), (re)produce together.

Environmentalism is not only about dismantling narratives and proposing new ones, it is also about constructing new narratives. The goals are to increase scientific knowledge of biophysical alterations and eventually open this analysis procedure to individuals such as small

farmers whose expertise and insights have traditionally been devalued. People's participation in governance systems is linked to institutional systems that prioritise democratic institutions, openness and openness in managing natural resources based on political ecology (Acheampong, 2020).

This multifaceted knowledge of socio-ecological dynamics and ecological history necessitates the use of a variety of methodologies. Archives, trip journals, policy documents from aid donors and historical aerial photos/maps are some of the approaches used to conduct a thorough investigation into the past (Fairhead & Leach, 2020). Focus groups, structured interviews with key informants are all examples of field methods. Oral histories can be collected, lawmakers from different institutions and funding agencies can be interviewed and researchers can work with other professionals to perform biophysical and socio-economic science research. The need to 'read narratives both "in and out of their settings" throughout the design process' (Fairhead & Leach, 2020) is essential to reconcile competing perspectives.

NATURE AND SOCIETY ARE MUTUALLY REINFORCING

Co-production of culture is the most contemporary political technique for examining socio-ecological connections. It is based on two multi-disciplinary study belief systems: Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The study into socio-natural interactions has three theoretical frameworks: scientific understanding is a component of cultural practice; researchers' objectives shape their conduct, the behaviour of political forces encompasses a wide range and biological operations are actively involved in socio-ecological connections. Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the associated sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) are the conceptual underpinnings for the first two of these three concepts. Experts in these disciplines emphasise socio-cultural aspects of scientific knowledge development and dissemination. Scientific knowledge is a socially and historically influenced picture of the physical universe, which is a common feature throughout these frameworks' theories.

Political ecologists have been inspired by the emergence of markets in ecosystem services to examine how ecological principles are reflected in market-like situations. This research reveals that the usage of rapid environmental assessment methods to determine the potential economic worth of wetlands is dependent on how familiar persons are with the identification tools they are using. In other words, the fast ecological evaluation approach is not an entirely objective tool for determining the worth of plants. 'Social accomplishment' is a better term for the process by which scientific data are gathered and used in a variety of social contexts to depict the economic importance of flora (natural resources) (Bennett, 2018).

According to Nogueira (2017), not all political ecologists agree that those who provide an option are full-fledged individuals. As essential as objects' biological features may be to some political environmentalists, the idea that nonhumans acquire agency in the same manner as institutions such as capitalism is largely rejected (Peyton & Franks, 2015). According to political environmentalists, the biophysical features of resources actually 'oppose', 'help' or 'redirect' political-economic privileges, particularly those studies on ecosystem services and urban ecology. Throughout these studies, the necessity of 'openness' to the material world's implications of social action is often emphasised. A 'dance of agency' that is 'rooted in a decentralized and open-ended emerging of the human and nonhuman' is Pickering's way of describing this interaction with people (Pickering, 2010, p. 7). In other words, as the behaviour of the assemblage's components varies, the human–nonhuman interaction does as well. Consequently, no certainty exists that a relationship can be 'undone' or 'returned to' because future conduct by humans and nonhumans will determine the future character of the relationship (Pickering, 2010).

Ecologic synthesis and environmental constructivism methods to socio-cultural research are two examples of co-production methodologies. By contrast, co-production theory expressly aims to break the fundamental differences between science and the rest of the world. According to this theory, scientists are not merely generating knowledge for society's sake; they are doing so in a specific socio-cultural framework that impacts the aims of the community. When examining the impact of scientific knowledge on federal policy, we look beyond the methodologies that rely simply on the forceful use of scientific evidence to legitimize political agendas.

CONCLUSION

Climate change is projected to have a significant impact on people's lives around the world, and this radical change is likely to have an adverse influence on the lifestyle of many people. Understanding the interplay between nature and civilisation intertwine is essential for adapting to a rapidly changing world. Political ecology-informed adaptation thinking is a viable technique for managing resources for transformation and guaranteeing that ecosystems strive to give environmental services and productive lifestyles for the users who depend on them.

REFERENCES

Acheampong, M. (2020). " Critical Ecosystems" as a concept in political ecology–developing a comprehensive analytical framework. *Journal of Political Ecology, 27*(1), 190-212.

Adams, W. (2017). Sleeping with the enemy? Biodiversity conservation, corporations, and the green economy. *Journal of Political Ecology, 24*(1). https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20804

Bennett, G. (2018). *Environmental impact assessment: Wetland mitigation banking*. The Wetland Book. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9659-3_260

Black, R., Gull Laird, S., & Perez-Mujica, L. (2017). Using residents' attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors to improve biodiversity conservation in an Australian rural-urban landscape. *Rural Society, 26*(3), 197-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2017.1364473

Blaikie, P. (2016). *The political economy of soil erosion in developing countries*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637556

Buttel, F. H. (2020). *Ecological modernization as social theory.* In The Ecological Modernization Reader (pp. 123-137). Routledge.

Fairhead, J., & Leach, M. (2020). *Webs of power and the construction of environmental policy problems: forest loss in Guinea*. Routledge.

File, K. A. (2016). Book review: Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland (EDS), the discourse reader and Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Wodak (EDS), the discourse studies reader: Main currents in theory and analysis. *Discourse Studies, 18*(2), 230-233. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445615624278c

Forss, M. J. (2008). Review: Forest guardians, forest destroyers: The politics of environmental knowledge in northern Thailand by Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker. *Electronic Green Journal, 1*(27). https://doi.org/10.5070/g312710768

Fragomeni, F., & Rizzo, R. (2020). The Economic Impact of Climate Change in Italy. *Cracow Review of Economics and Management, 4*(982), 95-109.

Hajer, M. A. (2020). Ecological modernization as cultural politics. In *The Ecological Modernisation Reader* (pp. 80-10). Routledge.

Hansson, S. O. (2020). Social constructionism and climate science denial. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science, 10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-020-00305-w

Hewitt, K. (2019). Climatic hazards and agricultural development: Some aspects of the problem in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. *Interpretations of Calamity*, 181-201. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429329579-10

Kertész, Á. (2017). The effect of land degradation on ecosystem services. *In Ecosystem services of headwater catchments* (pp. 207-213). Springer, Cham.

Kleinke, S., & Avcu, E. (2017). Public discourse beyond the mainstream media: Intercultural conflict in socio-political discussion fora. *Discourse, Context & Media, 19,* 49-57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.02.003

Kowalewska, A. (2019). Non-equilibrium landscapes and nature conservation in the Białowieża forest. *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies, 2*(4-5), 107-114. https://doi.org/10.14746/pls.2019.4.5.10

Leipold, S., Feindt, P. H., Winkel, G., & Keller, R. (2019). Discourse analysis of environmental policy revisited: traditions, trends, perspectives. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 21*(5), 445-463, https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908 X.2019.1660462

Moragues-Faus, A., & Marsden, T. (2017). The political ecology of food: Carving 'spaces of possibility in a new research agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies, 55*, 275-288. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.08.016

Nogueira, F. D. (2017). Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory, Oxford university press, 2005. *Formação (Online), 1*(25). https://doi.org/10.33081/formacao.v1i25.5251

O'Riordan, T., & Jordan, A. (2019). Social institutions and climate change. In *Politics of Climate Change* (pp. 65-105). Routledge.

Peyton, J., & Franks, A. (2015). The new nature of things? Canada's conservative government and the design of the new environmental subject. *Antipode, 48*(2), 453-473. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12179

Pickering, A. (2010). From Science as Knowledge to Science as Practice. In *Science as practice and culture* (pp. 1-26). University of Chicago Press.

Robbins, J. (2020). Properties of nature, properties of culture: Ownership, recognition, and the politics of nature in a Papua New Guinea society. *Reimagining Political Ecology,* 171-192. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388142-009

Tzaninis, Y., Mandler, T., Kaika, M., & Keil, R. (2020). Moving urban political ecology beyond the 'urbanization of nature'. *Progress in Human Geography, 45*(2), 229-252. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520903350

Watts, M. (2017). Political ecology. *A Companion to Economic Geography,* 257-274. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405166430.ch16

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Niu Jianping is a PHD student at the Universiti Sains Malaysia. Niu Jianping mainly focuses on research fields that involves Marxist theory and Political ecology.