

Affirming political ecology: seeds, hatchets and situated entanglements

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There is no denying that we are in a mess. This is the starting point, the ecological, social and political devastation to affirm in order to cultivate “arts of living on a damaged planet” (Tsing *et al.* 2017; see also Gibson *et al.* 2015). But wait: are *we* in a mess? Political ecology steps in here, asking who the “we” is in each specific situation; why messes become and how they profit some while dispossessing others; how each mess bears differentiated effects based on intersecting forms of oppression, violence and normalisation; and what we can do about it (and again, who “we”?). This issue of *Nordica Yearbook*, devoted to what we call *affirmative political ecology*, concentrates on questions of response-ability amidst the devastation: How are we to respond to the messes we are in, to the ruins that we find around and within?

The contributions gathered in this issue provide different definitions and perspectives on affirmative political ecology. For us, affirmation starts with *acknowledging* (intellectually and emotionally) the devastation through *critically* bearing witness to what is happening as lifelines get seriously disturbed. It remains necessary to acknowledge with utmost care the political-ecological violence, dispossession and devastation taking place around the world. To call *for* political ecology in any situation is to call for analyses that “disrupt normal expectations,

undermine inherited assumptions, and do not deny the inevitable political roots of all environmental knowledge” (Robbins 2012: 98). Affirming what Paul Robbins calls the “hatchet” of political ecology – the critical edge that “that aggressively dismantles” politically reactionary and hierarchy-intensifying explanations of environmental stress (*ibid.*) – is to start from admitting the *necessity of critique* as a continuous exercise for political and intellectual renewal. Lest our gesture be interpreted as trying to *overcome* critique or move *beyond* negation, it needs to be underlined that this is *not* what is at stake here. To call for political ecology in these times is to adhere to a tradition of hatchets and, furthermore, to the necessity of constantly reinventing the tools of political-ecological critique (hatchets get blunt in use and, besides, they can only get us so far...).

This said, critique is not *all* we need to affirm. To acknowledge the pain and devastation, to accept ruins as the environment from which we are inseparable, to bear witness to political-ecological violence (and its academic apologies) – yes, yes, yes. But then, as crucially, moving on to try and repair what is still possible to repair: unfolding forgotten counter-histories of survival, cooperation and flourishing; exploring opportunities in the present to crack open spaces for agency; working unapologetically for

liveable, abundant, heterogeneous futures. This side of political ecology, what Robbins calls its “seeds”, is just as necessary as the hatchet. Thus, the affirmation we propose here proclaims no “turns” or “ruptures” from what we have learned to know as the critical endeavour of political ecology (see Braun 2015). Quite the contrary, it invites us to consider how critical positions have been motivated by the desire for alterity – even if the “alternatives” implied by critical political ecology (e.g. Peet et al 2011) have not always been at the forefront. Beside and within critique (not beyond or after it), there will have been engagements *for* other worlds.

Political ecology might indeed be understood as a sort of *text* profoundly marked by contradictions, winners and losers, humans and non-humans, natures and claims about natures, as Robbins (2012) argues. In this case, texts-as-hatchets will be needed as long as there are texts (which is, to cut the metaphors, as long as there are hatchets). Yet, we have too often counted on seeds to appear and sprout with the invisible help of friendly winds and assiduous critters, assuming such happenstances to be unworthy of textual caretaking. In order to thrive, seeds will need a host of care-full practices, versatile critters and luscious soils (see Collard *et al.* 2015) – and their entanglements as texts. As explicitly as ever, political ecology is needed to crack open possibilities for other realities. It is thus the task of piling up “a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures” (Haraway 2016: 57) that we engage with here.

When we sent out the call for papers for this theme issue of *Nordia Yearbook*, these relationships of affirmation and critique were amongst our primary concerns. In

addition, we proposed a turn-away from nihilism (*of* and *towards* capitalist political economy, for example) and towards affirming the inessentiality of the world as a domain of possibilities. In political ecology, this general formulation is best understood as the contingency of politics: to describe some situation or conflict as “political” implies that its outcome is uncertain and unknown. Unlike the sort of contingency that marks the existential precarity of life in “capitalist ruins” (Tsing 2015; Watts 2015), this is a contingency of the always inhering possibility for political alterity. Widening the scope of action is necessary. For instance, this can mean transforming how environmental conflicts are perceived or seizing specific political moments to grab the initiative and roll things in a desired direction. It can mean revealing the emptiness of signifiers like “sustainability” or “green economy” – *and* resignifying them in unsettling and uncompromising ways. It can mean working closely with the contradictions of transnational policy initiatives and state strategies for the purpose of their fundamental redefinition, as recently suggested by Ahlqvist and Sirviö (2019) in the context of the Finnish bioeconomy strategy. Whichever situation we find ourselves in, affirmation encourages political engagement instead of turning away in resentment.

Affirmative political ecology then means the critical (in both senses of the word) task of understanding politically differentiated ecologies *and* the need to accentuate, explore and foster research and activism for other worlds. Again, rather than propose ruptures from previous work in the field, we want to acknowledge the good company

we are in (see e.g. Burke & Shear 2014; Battersbury 2015; Paulson 2017). Much crucial work has been accomplished and more will need to be done in this vein. The collection of articles and essays featured in this issue testifies to the creativeness of situated work to foster liveable worlds. When we invited contributors to think through different forms of affirmative political ecology, we had no idea just how diverse, interesting and politically acute contributions we could expect. The hatchets and seeds of political ecology, in all the messiness of their positioned entanglements, are explored here through six contributions. Each of them provides a different perspective to what affirmative political ecology is or could be. The contributions cover a variety of approaches and contexts, but they share an intensive interest on *method*, understood not just as valid ways of acquiring knowledge, but even more importantly, in terms of practical orientation of understanding *and* change-making.

We have organized the contributions under three broad themes. The first section, “Feeling, knowing and performing affirmative political ecology”, begins with Kelly Dombroski and Huong Thi Do discussing embodied knowledge in local level monitoring of climate change effects in the Vietnamese province of Thai Binh. Based on Huong Thi Do’s long-term work in the region, the article highlights crucial reasons for the inadequacy of distanced and dismissing forms of critique in development practice. Concentrating on multiple knowledges and the potentials of embodied monitoring and evaluation, the authors call for a care-full political ecology that reinvents the tools of development practice.

In the next article, Tero Mustonen charts differences of recognition of indigenous peoples’ oral histories in the circumpolar North. He concentrates on the *Delgamuukw* ruling of the Canadian Supreme Court in 1997, a legal case that set a precedent for Indigenous rights and the role of oral testimony in land settlement. It marks a success for Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations in the territory also known as British Columbia. Comparing this case with processes of oral history collection of the Sámi in Jokkmokk, Sweden, Mustonen builds a wider argument for the relevance of oral accounts in making invisible Indigenous histories visible.

Mustonen’s postscriptum (added at the last stages of the editorial process) makes clear the continuing need for political ecology’s critical hatchets: as we write these lines, the settler-colonial violence of the Canadian state has effectively allied itself with the interests of fossil capital, bulldozing the defence lines of Wet’suwet’en Nation to allow for an oil pipeline. Their struggle accentuates the necessity of both making such incidents public and of (re-)interpreting their meaning. In the context of the climate change, it is not the Wet’suwet’en who are clinging to “outdated” habits and practices: on the contrary, the pipeline project and the misuse of state authority in its support appear not only corrupt but also distinctly foolish. Prospective fossil landscapes and questions concerning the ways of seeing are at stake also in the third contribution in this part, namely Massa Lemu and Emmanuel Ngwira’s account of their “thinkivist” art project *Row* at the shores of Lake Malawi. This project, performed by Ozhopé collective, centres on the dugout canoe and other

lakeshore practices and materials, weaving together a complex artistic performance scrutinising the risks of oil prospecting in the region. Simultaneously, the authors explore the potentials of creative, situated and collaborative art practices for resisting racial capitalism and for expanding the capacities of art and aesthetics for other worlds.

The second theme of the issue, called “Mundane practices: food politics and self-sufficient households,” sets off with Elisabeth Skarðhamar Olsen and Rebecca Whittle’s article exploring the political foodscapes of the Faroe Islands. Most explicitly of all the contributions in the issue, this text takes up the separation of critique and affirmation – and methods helping us to move in practice beyond such sticky binaries. Olsen and Whittle highlight how participatory action research can help researchers to engage with the diverse economies of food and to work with the all-too-easily taken-for-granted separation of critique—affirmation, capitalism—noncapitalism, and growth—degrowth. What emerges is a hands-on approach to exploring what affirmative political ecology (beyond unhelpful binaries) is and could become. In the next paper, Eeva Houtbeckers presents her ethnographic fieldwork amongst post-growth oriented households striving for self-sufficiency in Finland. She discusses one basic need of self-sufficiency – the availability of *land* for dwelling, cultivation, firewood etc. – and how households negotiate the frictions between degrowth requirements, scarce availability of capital and wage labour, and the need for land. Houtbeckers’ contribution highlights the pressing need to continue researching the

diverse forms and relations of land-use, ownership and rent.

The final theme, “Seeds and weeds: movements, applications and engagement,” contains two elaborate articles: First, Susan Paulson explores the potentials of mutual learning between continents, social and Indigenous movements, and alternative postdevelopment concepts such as degrowth, *buen vivir* and the pluriverse. This broad brush approach comes together as Paulson explores her collaborative work for connecting political ecologists across continents and different worldviews. The text describes the interplay of very practical networking task and the immense stakes of pluriversal dialogue between different modes of being and knowing. Affirmative political ecology, from this perspective, means a constant effort of mutual learning in order to support radical shifts in societies. This *Yearbook* concludes with Simon Batterbury’s partly autobiographical account on what it means to tell, think, speak and breathe political ecology in the intersections of scholarship and activism as well as in fieldwork. Batterbury charts his own journey to a truly *political* ecology by describing various academic attempts at societal “relevance” and recounting his own fieldwork in Burkina Faso. Since its inauguration in the 1980s, political ecology has been eager to “make a difference.” Providing a nuanced account of some of the frictions around that notion, Batterbury makes an argument for an engaged political ecology in quest for more agile activism, while simultaneously retaining the need to remain critical.

To end this introduction, we want to highlight just what is at stake here in

addition to the questions of life and death that political ecology deals with. To have made this *Nordia Yearbook* an example of highly diverse, timely and engaged work in political ecology is all thanks to the contributors: our marvellous authors, obviously, but also the peer reviewers as well as the readers and disseminators of these texts. As also Batterbury's (2017) work with the *Journal of Political Ecology* testifies, academic capitalism is always only part of the picture. There are alternatives, diverse economies and ecologies of publishing, to promote and foster. "Non-capitalist political ecologies" (Burke & Shear 2014) exist, and some of them are under our very eyes. Thank you for contributing to our common entanglement.

"Wherever we are located, entanglement as an ethical practice attends to interlocking power relations at multiple sites. Ultimately, an ethics of entanglement calls on political ecologists to be accountable for our political position by unlearning imperial epistemologies and making knowledge production a means of collective transformation." (Sundberg 2015, 124)

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