

Affirmative and engaged political ecology: practical applications and participatory development actions

Simon Batterbury

Chair of Political Ecology, LEC, Lancaster University, UK

Principal Research Fellow, School of Geography, University of Melbourne, Australia

simonpjb@unimelb.ed.au s.batterbury@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract: Academic critique drives most political ecology scholarship. An engaged and affirmative political ecology, however, is practiced in scholarly, everyday and activist communities. Many academic political ecologists, including some founding figures like Piers Blaikie, take an interest in the ‘relevance’ of their work and wish to remain ‘engaged’ with the communities and policy actors that their research identifies as vital for positive social and environmental change. A biographical approach provides clues to what makes ‘affirmative’ scholarship important and viable. Research engagement, and particularly activism, is desirable but often deemed to be nonconformist by the research culture of Western research universities and organisations. I argue for a more affirmative political ecology, illustrated with examples from research work in an international development project in West Africa. The use of participatory research techniques can reveal injustices, but in this case it was less successful at redressing power imbalances. The more general conclusion is that strong engagement can be effective and satisfying. As environmental problems and injustices worsen, it is essential.

Introduction

In scholarly work named as, or associated with, political ecology there is a gulf between the production of ‘research, theory and explanations’, a task common to most academic social scientists, and ‘advocacy, policymaking, and direct interventions’. Those, depending on the national context, are generally perceived to be occurring outside universities or institutions with a research agenda.

This article assembles some thoughts and evidence on bridging this divide. I

argue that relevance and engagement matter hugely for scholars, and specifically those interrogating the political ecology of human-environment relationships. For those in academic professions, it is increasingly hard to escape, ethically or practically, from considering some form of engagement with those outside the usual audience of other academics and students (Hale 2008). Genuine collaborations and partnerships are available to political ecologists, but many of these are of a different character to those required by neoliberal university and funder protocols

across the Western world that require or reward ‘impact’ stemming from research projects.

In some areas of the academy, to widen the terms of academic work to include ‘advocacy, policymaking, and direct interventions’ does not pose many problems. Linking to an “outside” network of policymakers and practitioners is already hard-wired into professional practice for the health and medical sciences, or in applied social sciences like social work, project and programme evaluation, education in schools, and law. But in most of the social sciences and humanities, where political ecologists sit, it is less common (Ali & Barsky 2006). Working with a ‘research partner’ may be encouraged, but only if this is formalised, resulting in research grants, or joint publications. In the field of political ecology with its hundreds of academics and students spanning many countries¹, common research topics are also “applied” in nature – they include risks from anthropogenic climate change, toxics, gendered and raced environmental injustices and threats, corruption, authoritarianism and exploitation (Walker 2007). It makes sense that addressing these issues results in partnerships with, and assistance to those most affected (Turner 2014; Osborne 2017). Political ecologists are not alone in studying such issues, but there is some professional obligation in this field to prioritize tackling the inequities and injustices that research reveals.

¹ The POLLEN conference in Oslo, June 2018, was attended by 450 people. The *Journal of Political Ecology*, which I co-edit, receives thousands of visits a week and has over 250 articles published. ‘Handbooks’ of political ecology totalling over 1,300pp were published in 2015.

I begin with a short autobiographical note to illustrate how the goals of scholarship, and in particular my own discipline of geography, may quite easily *include* a commitment to pragmatic questions of policy and advocacy. Then I address the more specific contributions that political ecology can make in international development work, an area where the relationship between the guardians of academic disciplines, and policymakers and implementers, is often tense. The relationship between academic political ecology, broadly conceived, and making social-environmental relationships more just and sustainable, is not straightforward. This is because although many would wish there to be closer linkages between research and practice, and are frustrated by their absence, there are personal and structural reasons why the links remain tenuous or problematic.

An autobiographical note

And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it - Bob Dylan - A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall (1962, issued 1963)

My own engagement with issues of social relevance was mundane. I was born just after Dylan recorded the lines above, but the radicalism and hope of those times had faded somewhat by the early 1980s. I was studying geography as a British undergraduate at the University of Reading in the UK. One assignment was to write an essay on the relevance of geography to public policy (Batterbury 1984). I gave this

more thought than is normal in preparing such an undergraduate assignment. After spending weeks in the library and talking to two of my lecturers, I found many examples where geographers themselves, or the key techniques or concepts that they developed, had influenced the work of urban and regional planning bodies and parts of the British government (Bouwer 1985). At this time, Britain was experiencing major industrial restructuring, the death of manufacturing and mining, and growth of a new corporate service sector. Planning departments in the local political authorities of South-East Britain (the nexus for national growth in the service sector) were anxious about the future of regional development, and becoming proactive in supporting it.

Reading's Department of Geography happened to have expertise in applied and policy-relevant research, well after the quantitative revolution had crested, and before the postmodern turn really hit the social sciences. Sir Peter Hall, who was to become Britain's premier exponent of applied research in urban planning as well as a public intellectual, was shuttling between lecturing in Reading and the University of California, Berkeley. Amidst these two not insignificant responsibilities he advised governments and planners on urban infrastructure improvements, the necessity of spatial planning to guide the uneven growth and decline of city-regions, and how to manage the emerging 'high tech' industrial sector. He helped to develop the Enterprise Zone concept, a politically centrist economic strategy to provide incentives and tax breaks to firms to locate in declining industrial

regions that still had good infrastructure (Hetherington 2007). Through him and the planner Prof. Mike Breheny I learned of the work of the London think tank, the Centre for Environmental Studies (CES), funded by the government's Department of Environment. Its left-of-centre analysis of regional development and environmental issues included the work of a young Doreen Massey and Richard Meegan, both of whom developed great reputations after they moved into academia. And elsewhere in the environmental field, Tim O'Riordan at the University of East Anglia was beginning to make an impact analysing British conservation failures, particularly in the Norfolk Broads, alongside his earlier work on environmental thought (O'Riordan 1999). This strand of his work had a relatively straightforward normative goal, informed by fieldwork and theory: better conservation practice.

All of these arguments and approaches to geographical practice impressed a youthful geographer. The idea that the discipline could be 'useful' stayed with me. I began with a false start, plucked from university to work for two years for clients in the commercial property industry in the UK. PMA (Property Market Analysis) was a small consultancy set up by Richard Barras (formerly of CES) and David Cadman, and it still undertakes research for commercial and government clients wanting advice on the viability of present or future real estate investments. My own understanding of how research could influence policy was naïve at this time. I had not developed an understanding of how powerful actors conducted their business (Pollard *et al.* 2000). I did not see how analysing the viability of

commercial office developments, business parks and proposed shopping centres could be serving corporate, capitalist ends – in this case assisting these interests to hone their business models for out-of-town US-style retail parks, superstores, and business developments that they planned to inflict on the British landscape. In our work at PMA – and the staff actually included a few radical scholars and alternative thinkers who knew of the connections I was missing – we were rarely able to critique the rationale for the developments we were providing research advice about, and we were not able to publish our commercially sensitive (and thorough) research in the public domain.²

A short article by Peter Knight (1986), published a year before I quit PMA, and just after *The political ecology of soil erosion* (Blaikie 1985) was published, changed my path. Knight wrote a short and aggressive plea for academic relevance. I decided to go to graduate school in the USA to refocus on African development and self-help initiatives. I studied some Marx and Giddens alongside the rudiments of cultural and political ecology at Clark University (one of the birthplaces of radical geography, and *Antipode* journal), and my understanding of how the world works was significantly strengthened. Subsequently I did PhD fieldwork explicitly using a political ecology approach, while affiliated to a development project in Burkina Faso, West Africa, as described below. This began with a still-naïve desire to conduct useful research and given the radically different

social, environmental and linguistic context, it involved a very steep learning curve.

But after twenty-five years further work in Africa and elsewhere, I am a lot more confident about combining academic scholarship with practical engagement.³ Since then I have spent most of my time teaching at research-focused universities, but some of my work has been conducted with international development agencies, with local community organisations, and it has occasionally moved across into activism, particularly where my research skills have merged with a personal conviction (Batterbury 2003). The line between extra-curricular support for causes and projects, and “academic work” has become extremely blurred and as this *Nordia Yearbook* shows, this is a common position that university “based” scholars find themselves in (Batterbury 2015).

A final personal observation is that life-stages and positionality matter for committed academics – the relative freedom enjoyed while a PhD student seems to diminish quickly with the job search, then it suffers with increasing age and responsibilities. Given confidentiality clauses, I found it disappointingly small when working as a consultant researcher. Becoming frustrated with injustice, however, seems to increase in middle age, if you feel nobody has been listening. In an academic career, except if tenured, the main constraint is that you could lose your job by failing to produce conventional scholarly outputs like articles and books, or if you have no success with

² David Cadman himself later left PMA to found Upstream, a consultancy concerned with sustainability in the building industry, and has written widely on spiritualism and ecology. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Cadman_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Cadman_(author))

³ Supporting Matt Turner, “To me, ‘engagement’ is a measure of the mental, emotional and physical commitment/struggle taken by someone toward a particular goal” (Turner 2014: 480).

grants (since most university employers remain *deeply* conservative about what constitutes scholarship). Not everybody has the freedom, or time and money, to do the kind of “public intellectual” scholarship often associated with the work of people like Edward Said, Peter Singer or Noam Chomsky (who were beneficiaries of North American-style tenure). Nor can we always retain a practical and applied focus, if an employer defines scholarship in such a way to exclude it.

A diversity of engagement

Much has changed in terms of disciplinary priorities and the role of the social scientist since my undergraduate days, which ended some thirty years ago. There is still constant debate and dissent in many disciplines around “relevance”, “engagement”, “policy applications” (Fuller & Kitchin 2004; Gillan & Pickerill 2012), and what the editors of this issue call *affirmative* political ecology (Sirviö & Alhojärvi 2019). I provide a few examples in this section to illustrate the breath of responses taken to scholarly engagement.

Anthropologists, in particular, have conducted long and vitriolic debates about the worth of the international development sector and its role in social change. They have identified examples of inappropriate professional activities, that might, for some, appear to have been ‘relevant’. Hagberg and Ouattara summarise the possible lines of anthropological engagement in development processes (Figure 1).

One area that stretched ‘action research’ was when a few anthropologists provided

information on cultural, religious and social norms for military operations (including in Afghanistan in Human Terrain teams, a US military program that was wound up only in 2014). In the Cold War years, some connived with CIA investigations into their progressive and politically engaged colleagues, as did those in other disciplines (Price 2004).

Journals including *Human Organization* maintain an explicit “applied” anthropological focus that is less controversial, as do several academic units including the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (BARA) at the University of Arizona with a longstanding commitment to practical involvement and fieldwork programmes. Out of choice or through necessity, many anthropologists have deployed their skills within non-academic environments. For example, public anthropologists like Alex de Waal, now a professor at Tufts University, began his career unravelling the human dimensions of famine in Darfur for a PhD in social anthropology. This led him towards a sense of moral outrage and commitment. As he revealed (during a talk in Melbourne in April 2007), one Janjaweed militia leader in Darfur was the son of one his first PhD informants. His intimate knowledge of the region and its politics has allowed him to participate in brokering peace deals with some authority, even working with the Sudanese government as well as militias, the UN and African Union mediation teams.

Some reserve has been expressed about linking anthropological – and geographical, legal or sociological – skills to their ‘application’ in applied work and advocacy of different types. To summarise, disagreement has come from two main

Fieldwork	Each anthropologist must be engaged, with a moral commitment when working in local communities.
Research focus	On pertinent development and societal problems
Practical involvement in development	Where anthropologists participate either in the form of project personnel, programme officers, or as advisors at ministries or in organisations
Action anthropology	Where the anthropologist turns into an advocate or a developer as part of commitment to justice or politics
Action research	As a professionalised endeavour, e.g. employed by a development organisation, a government agency, or a private consultancy company

Source: Hagberg and Ouattara 2010, introducing the findings from a meeting held in Ouagadougou in 2010 of the Euro-African Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development (APAD)

Figure 1. The six dimensions of engagement for anthropologists.

angles:

1. From those who argue that concerns with ‘relevance’, in particular, come from some sort of obsessive compulsion to appear useful, outside the classroom and the world of research. As such, university academics are worrying unnecessarily about relevance when teaching and researching, and intellectual pursuit of knowledge is clearly enough to fill a working week. Geographers Noel Castree (2002) and Don Mitchell (2004: 23) espoused these views some time ago, I suppose arguing instead for *better* academic analysis, rather than demanding that scholars devote time to a variety of causes outside the university.⁴
2. From those claiming that scholarly work is ‘tainted’ and ethically or practically compromised by any close relationship with policy makers, and particularly with corporations and the neoliberal state. This can extend to non-profits (NGOs). There is the related accusation that, particularly in science and engineering, academics refuse to challenge their funders, some of whom are too profit-driven, and overlook violence or injustice in their zone of operations (Suzuki 2006).

The implication of the first point is clear: do not be concerned about relevance. It is an easy one to refute. Many academics do far more than ‘pure’ scholarship, and with great success: it has not hindered their careers. There are so many examples of those who base their scholarly practice around practical actions, some with radical intent. Consider Richard Falk,

⁴ Mitchell (2004: 23) says “sometimes what activists and other non-academics most need is thorough academic analysis. To make a difference beyond the academy it is necessary to do good and important, and committed work, *within the academy*”. He and Castree went on to do so, in different ways.

emeritus professor of international law and practice at Princeton, whose reflections on his own path to “engaged citizenship” document normative concerns, activism and advocacy addressing human rights, foreign policy aggressions and planetary despoliation (Falk 2016). He documented rights abuses and UN Charter breaches by the US during the Vietnam War, supported Palestinian self-determination (some of it as Special Rapporteur, UN Human Rights council, Occupied Palestinian Territories) and was a founder of Friends of the Earth in the USA. In-between times he taught for 45 years, produced over seventy authored and edited books, and hundreds of other outputs. He argues that “citizen pilgrims” are needed to map out an environmentally and politically just future. Another engaged scholar, Anna Kruzynski, a professor at Concordia University in Quebec, is a “member of a neighbourhood-based antiauthoritarian affinity group, *la Pointe libertaire*, working towards the self-management of all aspects of community life.” And her academic work is combined with practical involvement: it “aims to help activists and organisations document, analyse and reflect on their activism” using participatory methods (Kruzynski 2008). Similarly Steve Striffler at UMass Boston has devoted considerable time to projects with activist aims, two with corresponding academic outputs – a study of the poultry sector in Arkansas, and labour at Colombia’s largest coal mine (Striffler 2015).

These scholars, and many others, counter the first view outlined above. Pursuing ‘relevance’ or ‘affirmation’ includes good critical work and analysis, scrutiny of that

analysis, and support to, but not necessarily participation in, radical alternatives to the existing global order. Arturo Escobar’s anthropological post-development critique is often cited; for him, Indigenous and place-based social movements have designed a starkly different society away from corporations and the state, and it is these grassroots actors that should receive our support, analysis, and perhaps assistance, although the latter should avoid patronage relationships (Escobar 1991, 1995). Some of geographer David Harvey’s work includes thinking through what would happen if society reorganised itself along the lines of his extensive Marxist critiques, in *Spaces of Hope* (2000). Although the book was less well-received than his magisterial critical analyses and he admits he is not a practical, grassroots activist. The extensive Community Economies project begun by J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008) explores new economic models and spaces, and it documents their work with alternative organisations.⁵ Projects around this theme explore the degrowth society, firmly based in a political ecology tradition (Burke and Shear 2014; Gezon and Paulson 2017; Paulson 2019).⁶ David Graeber’s wide-ranging contributions include anarchist writings, protests and actions (Shukaitis & Graeber [2007] is a useful edited volume), while Cassie Earl (2018) develops a ‘political pedagogy’ through experiences with the Occupy movement.

⁵ See also <http://www.communityeconomies.org>

⁶ For other political ecologists, linking to policy has led to some disenchantment, or a feeling that many forms of consultancy and planned development are managerialist, tending to convert painstaking research into sound-bites and simplistic lessons, or are simply too politicized in the negative sense of the word (Baird 2014).

On the second criticism, external or corporate control of a research project may be irksome, but it is not necessarily a basis for compromise. The overtly political focus of many studies actually funded by, or linked to, powerful actors suggests this. For Paul Robbins, political ecology can be used as ‘hatchet’ and ‘seed’ (Robbins 2004). The ‘seed’, of interest here, might involve fresh and useful ideas, perhaps changing a widely-held but politicised narrative, and which *might* cascade through into direct advocacy and activism. Piers Blaikie (personal communication 2007) talks of a

“stand-off between academic PE and policy matters, due to fears of incorporation, compromising terms of reference for policy work and abandonment of critique and ideological purity. However, by remaining pure and uninfected, university authors also remain safe from responsibility for what they say and can be disregarded, even if policy makers ever get to read their work.” (Blaikie personal communication, 2007)

So if one is taking a particular ethical stance in formulating a personal ethics, what should it be? Bryant and Bailey hint, in concluding their summary of political ecology in the late 1990s, that activist-scholar political ecologists – while few in number when they were writing – could play a role in an ‘engaged political ecology’ that is more closely tied to progressive social change, although the complexity of situations does not mean that kneejerk support to the grassroots is always desirable (Bryant & Bailey 1997). They did not elaborate further at that time, but the sentiment has had wider impact, as shown above and below.

It is not always possible to choose allies and partners with confidence. For example, Indigenous scholar and public intellectual Marcia Langton has persistently and controversially argued that in terms of the massive social inequity they face, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples consistently receive a better social and economic deal from mining companies, in terms of support programs, infrastructure and employment than they do from the post-colonial state, which still denies them any true sovereignty over their ancestral lands and the subsurface (Langton & Mazel 2008). So with whom should activist-scholars work? The mining companies that so many political ecologists deride? Australian political ecologists have generally refused to do this, but Langton and others have argued strongly for even better benefit agreements and employment opportunities in the ‘actually existing’ and very powerful mining sector, and this has had support. There has been vigorous public debate over whether expansion of mining on Aboriginal land should be constrained in future, or instead held to account through better Indigenous employment policies and royalty payments (Langton 2013; Altman 2014). Both arguments seem valid, but a more radical option – Indigenous control of major mining operations, has yet to happen in Australia. New Caledonia provides the only major case and Kanak mine ownership has a very particular geopolitical importance and has attracted interest from engaged geographers (Kowasch 2014).

In sum, these examples build a picture of engaged and relevant research in and beyond political ecology. The argument for supporting engagement has, I believe,

been won. Ethical and practical questions remain. Some of these are explored in the next section.

The search for ‘relevance’

In dryland West Africa, where I first conducted fieldwork from 1992–3, later in the 1990s and again in 2001, the nature of political organizations and groupings is less than obvious to the Western outsider. Making allegiances in the rural sector without understanding this social and economic complexity would be foolhardy. In Burkina Faso there was a radical, even Maoist leadership in the late 1980s (under a young army officer, Thomas Sankara) and he had succeeded for a couple of years in mobilizing the masses in large-scale anti-imperialist projects (thousand participated in state-building through digging a new railroad, building maternity clinics, schools and other infrastructure). A lot of this was antithetical to traditional leadership and customary organizations among the established population of farmers and herders, who felt disenfranchised and hostile to the social revolution directed from the nation’s capital, Ouagadougou. Also, Western aid agencies were supporting some well-intentioned and successful initiatives, that I have described elsewhere (Batterbury 1998, 2005). These include grassroots forms of soil and water conservation and the building of contour stone lines (*diguette*s) – tackling land degradation was a critical issue for the survival of the rural peasantry after the punishing droughts of the 1970s and ‘80s. So deciding who to affiliate research with, who to share findings

with, and how to design an affirmative program of political ecology research that gave something back to local people, was not simple.

Researching farming systems and the political ecology of land degradation, in 1992 I stumbled into a close association with a German development project building soil and water conservation structures, finding this satisfied practical adequacy and ethical research practice. I also spent a great deal of time in two remote farming communities. In my initial meeting with project bosses I bravely presented the PATECORE project with Piers Blaikie’s ‘chain of explanation’ as I saw it playing out in the region, and how I could report on the reasons for project success and failure. I never saw through the implementation of recommendations I made in 1993 about *diguette* construction and gender imbalances (I had to leave early for health reasons), but a return visit in 2001 revealed that some recommendations had been taken on board.

My belief from this early experience was that it is possible to operate professionally, as a scholar, through conducting research and teaching, while remaining relevant to the concerns of people and organizations outside the university sector. ‘Relevance’ is of course a social construction whose meaning varies between individuals⁷, and Castree (2002) is right to suggest that teaching and writing can be relevant too. Political ecologists, many of whom share some basic beliefs about redressing

⁷ Dictionary definitions of the term suggest it means ‘important to the matter at hand.’ Academic relevance means scholarship important to the rest of society, usually in a proscribed field or (as in my case) trying to promote positive change. One thing is certain: nobody wants to be called ‘irrelevant.’

inequalities in access to natural resources, tend to support those lacking enough power to control that access, but it is not always as simple as this. Academic incentive systems do not help: Piers Blaikie said (personal communication, 2007) that

“academic political ecology (PE) is shaped by particular rewards and penalties which discourage a more applied and engaged PE with ‘policy makers’ in the widest sense. Funding, rewards and penalties in academic career development depend on innovative ideas, critique, radical stances, and often good value in terms of publications per unit time of research. Current styles of political ecology (post-structuralist, deconstruction of powerful narratives and a skepticism of quantitative data) often put powerful policy makers, senior bureaucrats and politicians in the frame for criticism.” (Blaikie personal communication, 2007)

Many political ecologists are driven primarily by these ‘current styles’ – theory-building and interrogation of complex nature-society interactions, without intervening in these interactions or advising those that control them. Walker reminds us that “we should remember that critique by itself is not engagement” (Walker 2006: 392). Policymakers, on the other hand, just want answers. Communities want better lives, freedoms, and sometimes more security than they have.

For other human—environment researchers like Gilbert F. White and his student Bob Kates, a concern with relevance was very important. In the USA, geographer White’s work on natural hazards was consistently policy-focused,

and a biography published just before his death illustrates his profound belief in the idea of ‘relevant’ research (Hinshaw 2006). White’s perspective, in summary, was that although natural disasters cause deaths and property is lost, much of this is avoidable. Policymakers have failed to protect people and property adequately, or they have closed off options for people themselves to escape harm from hazards. The task of analysis, he reasoned, was to advise them using research skills and findings, and prod them, sometimes aggressively, into seeing common sense and doing a better job. His work was led by an ethical commitment and a Quaker faith – research should play a role in easing the suffering endured by others (Hinshaw 2006).

These ideas and sentiments are present in subsequent work that has linked the effects of disasters to economic and social inequality – in other words, identifying multiple forms of vulnerability to hazards (Cutter *et al.* 2003; Wisner *et al.* 2004). Political ecologists have made major contributions here, as well as informing UN and national agencies. In addition, Tony Bebbington (2014) reminds us that while we debate the role of academics in Anglophone countries, the Latin American scholars he works with have to operate between scholarly jobs, public service, and activism and do so with much greater ease (and with more job insecurity). It is worth saying again that many other scholars work in disciplines or in universities and colleges where ‘applied’ research is the norm rather than the exception.

The problem facing many of us, particularly angry middle-aged academics, is uncertainty about how to proceed. Alain

Lipietz, whose brand of political ecology involved political practice as Green Member of the European Parliament (MEP) in Europe, said in 2000 that:

“The basic problem is not so much the shortcomings of Marx’s conception of the political (quite apart from the false debate between ‘revolution’ and ‘reform’). Much has been written on this problem, no doubt largely responsible for the criminal thrust of so much of 20th century Marxism. But the identical weakness can be found in the political ecology of today. We simply do not know how to conceptualize and still less how to handle the connection between a critique of the existing order, on the one hand, and, on the other, a political practice - truly humane, a fortiori ecological - aimed at abolishing this order of things. We do not know how to wed materialism, ethics, and politics. We did not know how to do this as Marxists; as ecologists, we still don’t know.” (Lipietz 2000)

Wedding materialism, ethics, and politics would seem to be a worthy aim for much political ecology, given its very widespread, and strong, focus on social and environmental justice. There is absolutely no reason why this cannot be done. In a world of ‘post-truth’, political ecology can talk truth to power⁸ (Neimark *et al.*, in press).

My view is that political ecology is entering an end-game – the point at which major lessons have now been learned about topics as diverse as struggles over water and minerals, environmental and socio-political impediments to action on climate change, and how to organize

against urban environmental injustices. We have amassed millions of words on the evils of land grabbing, the seemingly innocuous attribution of blame to peasant farmers now deemed not guilty of serious land degradation, greedy advances into the Amazonia rainforest by businesspeople, ranchers and soy farmers fuelled by profit, and the social inequalities generated by protected conservation areas. Lessons have been learned. Many hybrid research techniques have been deployed which have expanded the knowledge base, and these advances continue.

The range of potential applications of these techniques is staggering. Just in Australia, hybrid geospatial investigations uncovered the true origins of the tragic bushfires of 2009 that resulted in hundreds of deaths (Nicotra 2009). The failures of the Australian Federal Government to engage with international environmental treaties or to tax its mining sector fairly are not surprising given the billions of dollars at stake, nor the huge difficulty in securing strong Indigenous land rights (Altman 2014). We have done the research. These and many other issues now require activism and advocacy. Cam Walker, for over twenty-five years the Director of Friends of the Earth Australia and a publisher in his own right of succinct, political ecological analysis, applies social and environmental justice criteria to multiple, practical campaigns against coal seam gas mining, forest loss, and the fossil fuel sector (Walker 2009). Bans on fracking and some logging have been the result of his and FoE’s work.

It is frustrating that just as environmental crises (material and existential) worsen,

⁸ The phrase is Said’s (1994).

university scholars are beset with neoliberal exhortations to perform better, with greater value for money, and without much recognition of ‘ethical’ research and publication strategies (Batterbury 2017). This can easily take us away from the purpose of good scholarship – as Edward Said argued, this is about opening up ideas for reflection alongside empirical investigation, and also challenging the system where analysis reveals this to be necessary, just, or helpful (1994). This need not be personally disruptive - to move beyond critique into “a mode of thinking and practice that is generative, experimental, uncertain, hopeful, and yet fully mindful of the material and discursive violences and promises of the long history of development interventions” (Gibson-Graham 2005: 6) is the ultimate challenge. Practically, this means

“addressing different audiences outside the academy, accepting some possible penalties in promotion, working with policy makers of all kinds (sometimes for long periods), re-processing practical work into publication for the academy, having some control over terms of reference for commissioned research, prepared to take risks with one’s job, negotiating freedom to publish and to finding a wide readership and accepting responsibility for what engaged political ecologists actually do.” (Blaikie personal communication, 2007)

Moving engaged political ecology forward

This is a tough agenda. It seems impossible, for today’s nascent academics hoping for

a window of opportunity or any type of rewarding job. But I do want to reinforce once more that the search for ‘relevance’ is not particularly unusual or exceptional in academic life. For Noam Chomsky, it is a duty, borne of the privilege of authority, time, and access to information enjoyed by scholars. Chomsky also argues that academics can be self-serving and can refuse to recognise their responsibilities (Merod 1987; Chomsky 2003). The late Howard Zinn (1969) reminded us:

“Thanks to a gullible public, we have been honored, flattered, even paid, for producing the largest number of inconsequential studies in the history of civilization: tens of thousands of articles, books, monographs, millions of term papers; enough lectures to deafen the gods. Like politicians we have thrived on public innocence, with this difference; the politicians are paid for caring, when they really don’t; we are paid for not caring, when we really do.” (in Ali & Barsky 2006, my emphasis)

Being “paid for not caring” will not be overcome with an obsessive concern with publications and research grants, or “working with industry”, the things forced upon us by the neoliberal Western university system that prioritises rankings and metrics, at several scales including that of the individual (Batterbury 2017). As Blaikie put it, supporting my earlier sentiment above (personal communication, 2007):

“The idea that research is ‘truth talking to power’ (and power had better listen to our PE truths) is hopelessly unrealistic. Deals have to be done, although they must not (and need not in practice) compromise reportage of unpleasant or scandalous results. (...)

Working with a variety of other engaged people outside the academy can open up opportunities for both access to policy making and formal and informal involvement in policy process.”
(Blaikie personal communication, 2007)

So while the argument for an applied and engaged political ecology is convincing, the question remains as to how this may be brought about in specific research projects and in specific forms of ‘engagement’. There are many examples of ‘agile’ activist writing (Rocheleau 2008; Boal *et al.* 2012; Derickson & Routledge 2015). There have been PhD theses on political ecology and environmental education and support for monitoring and evaluation of NGO activity in Central America (Lynch 2001; Hostetler 2006). Others, including Burke and Shear (2014), are clear scholar-activists.

My own efforts began during the PhD research referred to above, in the same communities, and straddled ‘action’ and ‘practical involvement’. I found myself in a remote Mossi village in northern Burkina Faso in 1993, conducting participatory rural appraisal (PRA, as it was then called) in a remote community that I already knew quite well. My purpose was to understand shared environmental and social knowledge. There were three groups of older men, younger women and women present, clustered around maps of the village, which they were beginning to draw on the bare earth outside the mud brick compounds of Ibi Palaga. Vigorous debate, laughter, and insults shot across three groups. This was the first time anybody in this community had experienced anything close to what Western social scientists might term ‘participatory research’.

After much prompting the head of the village’s women’s group ‘grasped the stick’, without much confidence, and began to sketch out a visual representation of the world as it appeared to her, including huts, fields, and tracks. Eventually other women in the group joined in, or shouted corrections. Somebody, getting the hang of things, fetched a few props - twigs and leaves to represent trees, soil conservation structures, and huts. After half an hour, this and the maps produced by the other two groups, were inspected by everybody and a further debate ensued between men and women, young and old, about which map was the most accurate reflection of the community. Gendered differences in spatial relationships were apparent, particularly the extensive representation of more distant communities visited much more frequently by older men, while the women’s map instead highlighted the well, 1.5 km distant, from which all water was obtained (by women). The rest of the day was spent on other ‘textbook’ PRA exercises including reconstructions of rainfall histories using stones placed in bar charts (which correlated with rain gauge data I had been collecting), the identification of soil types and vegetation through field walks, and assessing the possibilities for future interventions by the very limited number of external agencies supporting ‘development’ in the community. A day of work concluded with a celebration, with dancing and singing.

This exercise was conducted as part of my own doctoral research, but several weeks earlier the development project to which I was attached, PATECORE, had commissioned a week-long training exercise for its staff, which included a two-

day data-gathering exercise in a nearby village, in which similar PRA techniques were carried out. This was one of the first times that such work had been seen in rural Burkina Faso. Such exercises were kept up for several years, linked to the use of air photos for soil and erosion analysis by farmers. In my own work, I went on to use this participatory style in subsequent investigations in Burkina Faso and Niger of how farmers benefited from, and participated in, soil and water conservation work based on improvements to traditional stone lines (Batterbury 1998).

Other aspects of this tale have been told elsewhere, but the central message was that *diguettes* discussed in such forums and backstopped by the project worked well from an ecological perspective, improving water infiltration and crop yields (Batterbury 1998). They also acted as a focus for villager's own efforts at self-advancement, working as a magnet for other development projects offering different types of services. One village, for example, has benefited from extensive construction of *diguettes* on the fields surrounding it, but returning there in 2001 I saw a school and a deep tube well there too, both highly prized and normally well beyond the means of the community to construct. It had been the village's earlier participation in soil and water conservation, including the high-profile PRA exercise that convinced the local state, and some European donors, to invest in *this* community instead of neighbouring ones. Having worked on those *diguettes* back in 1992, I could only smile at their mastery of a 'development narrative'.

The PATECORE project was innovative in that it had a number of researchers, both

local and European, working alongside project staff. While I would regard my own PhD as the one most squarely pinned to political ecology, other German and Burkinabe students worked on related topics; the project was keen to integrate research into its daily operations. I was also able to expose the gendered labour input into *diguettes*/terracing construction, which left women with the majority of the hard labour. This involved hauling stones to construct the contoured *diguette* systems. This research finding proved useful to the project team, although social relations of Mossi society were resistant to change.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. Participatory research is now 'institutionalised' worldwide, frequently represented in the work carried out by development consultants and development project staff. Handbooks, training courses, and websites elucidating participatory methods are extensive. Few development projects can get away without some form of participatory analysis in the early stages of project design, in the implementation phase itself, and in evaluation and monitoring phases.

This would suggest that the arguments of Robert Chambers (1993, 2005), Gordon Conway, and other architects of participatory research and participatory development – and our own paltry efforts back in the early 1990s in a specific context, along with hundreds of others worldwide – have been accepted in many organizations, especially development agencies. When the World Bank issued a PRA sourcebook, published its *Voices of the Poor* project (Narayan *et al.* 2000), and redesigned structural adjustment packages with a little

more local input, many felt that participation had truly ‘arrived’ in the corridors of power. There it has, by and large, remained, for good or ill. The early efforts to involve local people and their knowledge in all phases of planned development, and indeed research, were essential.

It may seem naïve, but I still hold to their sentiments. Chambers, in particular, had long expressed his anger that ‘normal professionalism’ ignored local knowledge and opinion when designing and doing ‘development’ (Chambers 1993). In particular, Chambers attacked ‘pure’ and ‘extractive’ research conducted without concern for the people being researched. Going further, he decried the use of standardized surveys to obtain data to guide project planning, since they missed a ‘moving target’ of local social and economic realities. He believed the needs of the poor move fast, and thus PRA played a vital role in gaining *some*, practically adequate (if not theoretically or historically rich) understanding. His assessment of how accurate and useful such techniques really are have softened over the years, but he remains committed to the participatory project (Chambers 2005). To come back to Walker’s point (2007), in Chambers’ work – and my own – there was more engagement (or affirmation?) than critique.

We should still be critical

This is not to overlook Escobar’s critique of the colonial discourse of development (1991, 1995) and his support for grassroots ontological positions and alternatives. Of course critiques of PRA, participatory

research, and participatory development have been vigorous and sustained. The fundamental lesson from critical thinkers is that nothing is as simple as it seems. Anthropologists and local people argued that a couple of days spent elucidating local worldviews and “needs” through mapping and other such techniques, could be no substitute for painstaking ethnographic research or deeper local knowledge. In particular, power relationships, and the complexities of social relations and histories, cannot be understood successfully through ‘quick and dirty’ PRA techniques. Anthropologists like Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan argue for rigorous comparative work, employing traditional ethnographic techniques to analyse the same range of popular expertise and practices that Chambers wishes to uncover (Olivier de Sardan 2005).

Further critiques include the view that participatory approaches are too routinised – such that practitioners and local people now go through the motions (Stone 2002). Consultants get lazy, and local people get tired of continuing requests for ‘participation’, which means they do not really ‘participate’, or they use such requests as political tools in their own struggles. There is a consistent argument that power differentials are concealed, not illuminated, by participatory research in which it is too easy for ‘group’ or ‘consensus’ responses to conceal internal struggles and difference (Chambers 1997; Cooke & Kothari 2001).

Nonetheless, the conundrum raised in recent literature and still facing development practitioners remains - is participatory development ethically ‘right’, and yet, often less than enlightening in practice? This

debate faces academic political ecologists who have chosen to adopt a participatory reflexive stance to their research, especially those who have employed PRA and other techniques.

More optimistically, there are now other ways to handle the issue of shared research and practical action, as Diane Austin shows in her work on ‘partnership, not projects’ in Ambos Nogales, Sonora Mexico, which combines learning with action (Austin 2010). Local organisations are equal players with academics in this work. Political ecologists have also shown that environmental justice organizations and their networks have introduced several concepts to scholars - including ecological debt, environmental racism, climate justice, ecocide, and food sovereignty - and they demonstrate how academic scholarship and activism can be mutually reinforcing (Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2014). The idea that we should abandon participatory styles of engagement is hardly tenable now that they have been refined (PyGyRG nd.; Thornton *et al.* 2018) – the trick is to deepen them, as Goldman and Milliar (2014) also argue in their work with customary Maasai community forums, *enkiguena*. They argue that the Maasai have much to teach Westerners. *Enkiguena* bring together people to make a joint decision on an issue that concerns them all equally, or to arbitrate a legal dispute that requires resolution. Consensus is achieved through wide participation and debate.

Conclusion

I have argued that scholarly political ecology can have practical applications and guide

participatory development actions, and there are examples from all over the world where this is happening. This sentiment is not suggesting other academics are ‘paid for not caring’. But it does suggest using critique to work affirmatively (Gibson-Graham 2005: 6). The examples from international development in West Africa showed that while a move to make research more participatory has great value, it was partially successful at best, given the social relations and political aspirations that it can also conceal. Practicing political ecology in or alongside organisations holding power, means remaining alert to the needs of those who have less power. The insistence on a *politicised*, rather than *apolitical*, examination of environmental and social issues is challenging to many established interests. Individual academics can suffer professionally when they ‘talk truth to power’.

More importantly, I also argued that empowerment through participatory actions working directly with the poor or the marginalized, is also ‘affirmative’. It is what scholars of ‘degrowth’ and environmental justice, for example, are beginning to do (Shukaitis & Graeber 2007; Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2014). If a detailed political ecology analysis revealing widespread social or environmental injustice receives wide dissemination or support, it could put corporations or nefarious organizations out of business, or get politicians unelected and even kicked out of office. Used wisely, political ecology is a valuable tool (Osborne 2017).

The current worldwide attention on environmental concerns has re-focused energy on the biggest one of all, the

necessity for action on human-generated climatic change. There has been a cascade into widespread acceptance of global environmental crisis, where ‘nature’, as Ulrich Beck pointed out, is unleashed from our control, and billions of dollars are being poured into reducing CO₂ emissions (Beck 2009). The publication of the IPCC report on 1.5 °C global warming (IPCC 2018) should focus renewed efforts by political ecologists to identify the losers and winners from climate change, alongside immediate vulnerabilities and inequalities. In other words, relevance and affirmation are back, big-time and transcend critique (Walker 2006; Osborne 2017). The academics and writers among us should no longer find it ‘strange’ to be agile and active participants in changing a messy post-truth world (Batterbury 2016). We need to be participating in policy processes; keeping up our teaching; sharpening our media skills, and reaching out rather than inward. An affirmative political ecology requires agile activism; ethical scholarship; and partnership. Not just ‘telling it and thinking it’, but also ‘speaking it and breathing it’.

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