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Introduction: Why a political ecology of the U.S. South?

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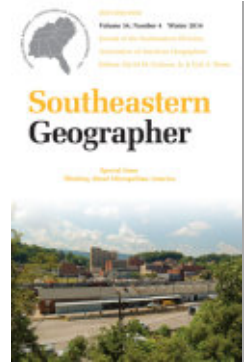
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Forum on Political Ecology of the U.S. South

Introduction: Why a Political Ecology of the U.S. South?

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POLITICAL ECOLOGY IN/OF THE U.S. SOUTH?

Management challenges related to the relationship between nature and society are nothing new in the U.S. South. Technical studies of rural sprawl (Wear and Greis 2002; Cho et al. 2003), coastal development (Allen and Lu 2002), environmental change (TNC 2005; Early 2006), and conservation have, at some level, addressed such challenges. So, too, a number of geographers have explored the role that particular human-environment relationships have played, for example, in urban development in New Orleans and the distribution of environmental risks (Colten 2005). What then, is the purpose of calling for, and writing on, a political ecology in the U.S. South? We argue that political ecology is more than a new term for nature-society studies (though the nebulosity of the contemporary literature might suggest otherwise), but fundamentally about the relations of power and knowledge that emerge in the context of particular nature-society relationships. This is not to say that the studies cited above do not engage with issues of power, authority and legitimacy, but to point out

that previous considerations often have come in the context of separate literatures and concerns, aimed at different audiences, journals and conferences, and therefore do not truly speak the same language. While such intellectual heterogeneity can be an important opportunity for innovation, the absence of an integrative conceptual framing across these literatures creates a situation where studies in one literature contain moments of incommensurability with studies from other literatures. In these moments, something gets lost in translation between, for example, a study of rural sprawl and a study of the politics of conservation.

It is this outcome, these moments of incommensurability that led us to think about a political ecology of the U.S. South. By linking these papers under the heading political ecology, we are able to see how they speak to issues much larger than the cases raised in each individual paper. In this sense, we can move beyond illustrative independent case studies and move toward a broader understanding of the issues and processes that shape the outcomes of socionatural relationships, both in the South and in broader contexts. This sort of systematic linking is necessary, if

research on nature and society in the U.S. South—or political ecology more broadly—is to do more than put out fires under particular subdisciplinary headings, or in the context of particular problems. For example, studies of rural sprawl are generally focused on larger economic drivers of this development and its impact on the environment and local populations. However, we see little concern for the construction of knowledge and authority that prioritizes certain kinds of development over others and often has the effect of framing debates about these impacts in ways that may intensify social inequalities or erode the unique social relations that constitute these places (i.e. Sackett 2007), though the sets of knowledge produced about these issues are central to the outcomes of particular debates in particular places. Likewise, studies of community conservation, while often recognizing the struggles over meaning that shape policy and land use outcomes, rarely examine how these struggles are shaped by relations of power and knowledge linked to a larger political economy, even though these relations define the contours of what, at first, appear to be local discursive struggles (Hurley and Walker 2004; Robbins 2006). Thus, in this issue we have two South Carolina studies that, though they have emerged in what appear to be distinct intellectual realms, are addressing very similar issues.

Taking a critically-informed, broadly political ecological approach to diverse socio-natural relationships in the U.S. South, these papers illustrate the value of such integration and the larger issues of power and knowledge that it brings to the fore. Further, such an approach presents the opportunity to move past the narrow con-

sideration of problems and management solutions or best practices, to recognition that particular local problems are tied to much larger issues that must be considered if that solution is to be lasting, more than the mere treatment of a symptom. Some authors (Nononi 2005; Peacock 2005) have recently suggested that we are moving from an understanding of the U.S. South as exceptional, to one that sees the South as reflecting, embodying and leading trends in diverse arenas of globalization, for better or for worse. This newer identity, borne out of the region's *most recent* experiences with a global political economy, will require different framings of the socio-natural events and challenges that accompany this region's increasing engagement with these political and economic structures, if we hope to address and manage such issues. Specifically, the U.S. South requires analytical tools that can identify and address the multiple sources of these challenges without recourse to tragic narratives of defeat at the hands of external forces. In doing so, we see the potential to better address Neumann's (2009) recent call to see regions as constructed through historically contingent processes that characterize the simultaneous transformation of society and nature. While a political ecology of the U.S. South allows us to link particular challenges to the regional and global processes and structures that produce them in the contemporary context, it also allows us to find the commonalities among different challenges that characterize the region. The diversity of issues raised in these papers should not be seen as an impediment to thinking about and addressing larger issues of political economy, power and knowledge, but instead a reflection of the

multiple ways in which these issues are materialized in particular places. Therefore, it is in the development of such tools that we see the potential to answer Nononi's (2005, p 262) call for a place-based politics that can push back against unwanted economic and environmental changes that may result from the increasing (or as some might suggest, a renewed) globalization of the region.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY IN NORTH AMERICA

The papers in this forum speak to a growing field of inquiry in political ecology, the examination of nature-society relationships in the Global North. It is worth briefly examining this evolving literature to place our concerns, and those expressed in these papers, in their intellectual context. Although political ecology is more often associated with critical research in the area of environment and development in the Global South, attention to areas of the Global North—within advanced capitalism—within this subfield has blossomed over the past decade (Schroeder et al. 2006). Indeed, Walker (2003) and, more recently, Neumann (2009) have argued that political ecology must go beyond the Global South-Global North binary. Yet, now that the debate over the validity of using political ecology's tools in the Global North has ended (Schroeder et al. 2006), it is fair to ask: where, geographically and thematically, has the field's examination of North American cases¹ led us? And what issues have been left unexplored?

Since its early focus on the American West, political ecology in North America has grown to include exploration of topics, such as community and enclosure in New

England fisheries (St. Martin 2001, 2005), the production and consumption of chemicals associated with lawns in Ohio and the wider U.S. (Robbins and Sharp 2001; Robbins 2007), and economic development issues in rural Pennsylvania (Che 2006). In this special collection, we explore the ways political ecology is illuminating struggles over the environment in the U.S. South, while suggesting the ways that this research in the U.S. South might influence political ecological explorations outside the region.

Initially, there was some concern over the applicability of political ecology to the study of nature-society interactions in the First World or advanced capitalist contexts. However, McCarthy (2002) quickly pointed out that a number of critical themes common within political ecology were also prevalent in the United States: 1) access to and control over resources; 2) the marginality of particular groups within a community; 3) livelihood considerations; 4) property rights and claims to resource access; and 5) the framing of local histories, meanings, and cultures in terms of resource use. In the years that followed, additional elements of a North American political ecology have emerged. First, Robbins (2002) argued that greater attention needs to be given to the role that the central institutions of power play in environmental outcomes. This means combining analyses of the micro-politics of place, or informal political arenas, with the realm of formal politics. One particular area of interest under this concern is that voiced by Walker and Fortmann (2003), who suggested that planning arenas represent a meso-scale arena of power that is central to understanding the environmental struggles in First World

places. Second, Schroeder et al. (2006, p 163) have suggested that three common processes are important to any political ecology of the so-called "First World": 1) examination of the linkage of globalized production and consumption, 2) "the partial coincidence of deindustrialization" and the restructuring of agricultural policy in ways that have led to "Third World conditions" in the hearthlands of North America and Europe, and 3) the emergence of migration streams that have brought sizable Third World populations from "Latin America, Africa, and many parts of Asia" "into the spatial heart of capitalism."

Writing under the American West regional heading, political ecologists have provided important insights into the conflicts over the environmental practices of extractive industries (McCarthy 2002; Sayre 2002; Brogden and Greenberg 2004) and the prospects for new environmental management regimes (Reed 2007a, b) in areas where former extractive economies are being replaced by real estate development (Walker and Fortmann 2003; Brogden and Greenberg 2004; Hurley and Walker 2004; Robbins 2006). Walker and Fortmann (2003) demonstrated that community changes in Nevada County, California associated with amenity in-migration resulted in competing rural capitalisms that prioritize the aesthetic qualities of landscape. Historically, the county's rural economy was tied to landscapes of extraction, while a newer form emphasizes the protection of natural landscapes through planning and development decisions. Related work by Hurley and Walker (2004) demonstrated how fear over the potential negative impacts of biodiversity conservation efforts on real estate

prices could be used to mobilize political opposition to county-based conservation efforts through conspiracy theory discourse, constructing some types of knowledge, namely those grounded in the science of conservation planning, as "outside" influences in local matters. Similarly, Robbins (2006) demonstrated that particular natural resource constituencies—including those with intimate knowledge of the ecologies that contribute to the persistence of the resources valued by both long-time residents and newcomers—may be silenced by powerful discursive alliances associated with social and economic changes in gentrifying communities (Robbins 2006). In one of the first comparative studies of environmental management in the American West, Reed (2007a; 2007b) demonstrated the ways in which regional economies, ecologies, and cultures in Canada lead to uneven environmental management in the protected areas of British Columbia and Alberta.

Beyond its focus on the American West, North American political ecology has had a strong thematic interest in both urban contexts and alternative economies. First, the theoretical development of urban political ecology has benefitted greatly from work in North America (see Keil and Bell 1998; Keil 2005; Heynen et al. 2006). Exploring the inequitable distribution of greenspace in Indianapolis, Heynen (2006) lays bare the relationship between environmental change and class as well as other power relations in cities around the world. In his work on urban parks in Philadelphia, Brownlow has questioned the extent to which local environmental control becomes a mechanism for social control and exclusion of particular groups, such as women and children (Brownlow 2006a).

Brownlow's work also explores the influence of "inherited fragmentations," or the processes of political devolution and the rescaling of social relations that result from new neoliberal forms of urban governance (Brownlow 2006b). Byrne et al.'s (2007) historical approach to park development in Los Angeles reveals the entanglement of "political, economic, ecological, and institutional factors" with race, poverty, and greenspace allocation that produced the Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, a local park where an oil field once stood. Although not explicitly urban, Robbins' (2007) investigation of "lawn people" highlights the important role that both political and moral economies, specifically the creation of product demand by the lawncare industry on the one hand and those concerned with property values on the other, play in perpetuating this once peculiar American land cover so often associated with suburbia. Robbins' analysis traces the changing practices of industry and landowners, demonstrating the global economic imperatives for manufacturers of lawn-care products to work tirelessly to sell a particular aesthetic: the neighborhood monoculture lawn. Yet, there is certainly a need for greater attention to regional distinctions and issues surrounding, for example, the ecological management of public landscapes, in the form of urban parks, or ordinary landscapes, such as the suburban lawn. Indeed, alternative lawn aesthetics and associated practices, such as the historic lawn aesthetics and associated practices among rural African Americans in the South (see Westmacott 1992), point to potentially fruitful ground.

Second, political ecology has been at the forefront in acknowledging the per-

sistence of subsistence activities within the rural spaces of advanced capitalism (Emery and Pierce 2005). Whether it's a need for food, medicinal, ritual, or craft-related resources (or assets; see Brown 1995), the existence of specific natural landscapes, and the access to the resources these produce, are an integral part of the livelihood strategies and cultural identities of rural resource users (Brown 1995; Emery and Pierce 2005) as well as a set of practices that are increasingly being acknowledged by political ecological scholars (Robbins et al. 2007). In doing so, this work both points to and raises questions about the potential of local livelihood practices to exist outside of national and global markets. It also challenges the ability of existing conservation regimes and knowledges to recognize the legitimacy of these practices. But there is much work left to be done on this issue within North America, given the growing awareness that gathering practices are perhaps more widespread than once imagined.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, it is fair to say that political ecology has taken root in research on the environment in North America. We are encouraged by recent trends at the Association of American Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting. Of the 91 papers sponsored by the Cultural and Political Ecology specialty group at the 2008 AAG meetings, 16 papers focused on political ecology in North America.² A number of these continued common themes of inquiry, such as Walker's (2008) examination of planning contests in Oregon and Richmond's (2008) exploration of knowledge and power in Alaska's fishery commons. Likewise, Gabriel's (2008) work continues an important trend in excavating the eco-

conomic and ecological relationships of urban gatherers with NTFPs in Philadelphia parks. However, several of these papers suggested a geographic and topical broadening of PE's use within North America. For example, Wilson et al. (2008) brought PE's critical focus to bear on South Central Pennsylvania, asking whether there is a New East and exploring how this place is similar to or different from the "New West," while Cidel (2008) expanded the field's consideration beyond natural resources narrowly confined in her exploration of LEED building standards. Likewise, Stuart's (2008) focus on *E. coli* outbreaks in California's spinach and lettuce industry demonstrate the relevance of political ecology to key food issues in the U.S. From this sampling, it appears that the importance of political ecological research in North American contexts has moved well beyond an intellectual debate within Geography and its allied disciplines to wider examination and illumination of important policy issues.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY IN AND OF THE U.S. SOUTH

Despite an explosion of interest in political ecology as an approach to human-environment interactions in the Global North, political ecological research has remained largely (and suspiciously) absent in the U.S. South. Notable exceptions include Nesbitt and Weiner's 2001 exploration of conflicts between exurbanites and long-time locals in non-coal mining areas of West Virginia, Colten's work on both the uneven distribution of vulnerability in New Orleans (2005) and the myth of permissiveness in pollution regulation

(2008), and others (e.g., Bullard 1990; Barry 1997). In the first instance, Nesbitt and Weiner's analysis may speak more to Appalachia as a region than it does to "The South" more broadly, but its focus on the role of exurbanites, conservation organizations, and federal land management signal key actors and histories. In the second, Colten's exploration "New Orleans" highlights the dramatic efforts taken to control nature and their grounding within particular scientific frameworks that likely were pervasive throughout the South, while his analysis of water pollution enforcement highlights the historical privileging of natural resource protection over public health concerns.

Still, the seeming lack of wider attention to the politics of environment and development within this region, we suggest, is particularly surprising, given longstanding racial and social inequalities (e.g., the ongoing struggles over social, economic, and political positionality by groups such as African Americans, Appalachian Highlanders, and Native Americans), historic as well as more recent trends in natural resource use and management (e.g., mountain-top removal and forestry issues), dramatic transformations in agriculture over the past few decades (e.g., agricultural restructuring, Contained Animal Feeding Operations), and ongoing social-demographic changes related to immigration and immigration (see, for example, Emery et al. 2006). In short, the themes of political ecology identified by McCarthy (2002) and Schroeder et al. (2006) are emergent within the U.S. South. Without a systematic means of examining the various nature-society relationships in this region, we risk perpetuating a dis-

aggregated literature that can do little to speak to the broad processes and structures that play out in particular places. Such a fragmented literature can do little to link particular cases together to address issues of justice and/or sustainability in a manner that fosters a coherent community or movement.

Walker (2003, p 7), like Neumann (2009), has argued that political ecological research might benefit from more explicitly regionally focused studies, given that regions are useful “in revealing the importance of local-scale social dynamics while situating these dynamics within broader” processes. New work focused on situations common to, if not endemic in, the U.S. South appears to be answering this call. Of the 16 North American papers at the 2008 AAG Annual Meeting, five focused on the U.S. South. One of these appears in this issue (Finewood), while another represents an offshoot of the paper by Halfacre and Hurley. Work by Massey (2008) also examined the discourse surrounding new legislation on mountain-top removal, while Watson (2008) explored the role of NTFP users’ knowledge in Florida in formulating natural resource policy. The papers in this forum expand on these trends, moving some of the nature-society challenges facing the U.S. South under the microscope of political ecology. In so doing, they illuminate how challenges as diverse as the management of invasive species, the maintenance of non-timber forest product (NTFP)—based livelihoods, and coastal development are all manifestations of processes that create/perpetuate symptoms of what is commonly labeled “The South.” If The South is sometimes thought of, or thinks of itself, as a victim of

history, then these papers and the larger movement of political ecology into the U.S. South that they lead show the region may have good reason to decry what is happening to it in the present.

THE PAPERS

The papers in this forum speak to a diverse set of nature-society interactions in various parts of the U.S. South. Each references some, if not all, of McCarthys’ five themes of political ecology in the Global North. Thus, each case addresses the framing and management of a particular challenge, and how those efforts privilege some actors while constraining others. Taken together, these diverse cases highlight the common issues of power and knowledge that emerge across the south in the context of its most recent experience with globalization. From just three papers, we can begin to draw together some threads of a place-based politics that might challenge dominant narratives about the South and its place in the world, and in so doing provide a foundation for action that can transform the region and its identity to the benefit of those living there.

Handley and Alderman’s paper examines how particular discursive framings of kudzu as an alien invasive species by those living in Missouri draw upon and reproduce various Southern narratives, and in so doing condition how people view this species and its control. For example, they note that Kudzu is constructed as a “Southern Curse,” a species that was out of place anywhere but the South. Under this construction, they note that the incursion of Kudzu into Missouri is read as taint on Missouri’s identity, some sort of a deg-

radation that is not purely ecological, but also social—the fear is that Missouri is becoming more like the South. Unspoken are the characteristics of the South that Missourians fear, for as Handley and Alderman point out, there is no specific characteristic that is feared. Instead, it is a fear of the South as other, as somehow exceptional in the U.S., that drives this discourse. Here then, we see how the effort to control an invasive species reproduces a narrative of Southern exceptionalism, where by implication problematic weed species run rampant in a semi-tropical environment because “that is what happens in the South.” Yet kudzu, as Handley and Alderman point out, is as much an invasive species in the U.S. South as it is in Missouri. There is nothing “natural” about the association of this species, or an exotic, dangerous ecology, with the U.S. South. As this region continues to develop global connections such as those that brought kudzu to the region in the late 19th Century, the opportunities for new incursions from exotic species will increase. This is not an inevitable outcome of “southernness,” but a process that can be understood through an engagement with global political economy and its intersection with regional and local ecologies. The degradation of the southern environment is not inevitable or natural.

Halfacre and Hurley’s work on sweetgrass basket making in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina explores the challenges facing a traditional livelihoods activity in the context of rural gentrification. Using the concept of environmental justice as a touchpoint, they examine how changing property rights and claims over resources associated with rural gentrification have

changed basketmakers’ access to and control over the various resources, such as sweetgrass, needed to make their crafts. They link this changing access to the marginal position of these basketmakers within the expanding Town of Mount Pleasant, and illustrate how this loss of access challenges the livelihoods of these basketmakers and reframes these livelihoods activities from central parts of a community identity to outlying activities that promote problematic, if not illegal, activities to gather needed resources. Thus, they highlight how the shifting fortunes of these basketmakers are not the products of a uniquely Southern approach to race, identity or property, but instead embody shifts seen among other communities, in other parts of the United States and the world. By reframing the issue of justice away from a focus on the local community and its values, and toward a larger political economy that drives rural gentrification and its associated changes, Halfacre and Hurley provide a platform on which basketmakers might build a politics of place that draws in other members of the community, instead of placing themselves in opposition to the people around whom they live and to whom they sell their wares.

Finally, Finewood’s paper addresses the disconnects between science and policy that contribute to ongoing tensions between conservation and development along South Carolina’s coast. Where many actors involved in conservation and development issues are aware of the breakdown of communication between scientists and policymakers, they tend to ascribe such breakdowns to individual personalities. Such explanation subtly references the parochialism and anti-intellectualism

that have been used to set off the South as exceptional from the rest of the United States, and therefore marks the problems that emerge from this breakdown of communication as an inevitable outcome in the South. Finewood challenges this narrative, arguing that these communication problems stem not from a uniquely Southern issue, but from the more universal incommensurability of capitalist expansion and environmental reproduction. In so doing, he reframes the challenges of conservation and development that trouble many coastal areas in the South from an inevitable product of a uniquely Southern attitude toward science and planning to a manifestation of larger issues of political economy that are not inevitable, and to which Southerners must respond. Further, this reframing highlights what Nononi (2005) and Peacock (2005) describe as the end of Southern exceptionalism. These conflicts over development and conservation are a manifestation of global challenges played out in different arenas throughout the world. Rather than lagging behind the cutting edge of change, these challenges demonstrate that the South is, for better or for worse, at the leading edge of globalization and its challenges.

CONCLUSION

All three papers, while addressing diverse issues and contexts, share an effort to rethink and reframe issues at the intersection of environment and society in a manner that enables a reconsideration of causes, and a rethinking of opportunities for a politics of place that can empower communities and individual in the U.S. South to address challenges as they

emerge, rather than see them as somehow inevitable products of life in this region. Each represents “unique moments” that highlight the political ecological terms under, and conditions in, which different forms of environmental change, disparate knowledge, and changing management approaches intersect to shape changing societal norms, ideas, and everyday lives. They are a powerful argument to extend political ecological investigation in this region. They also suggest the importance of complimentary and comparative attention by independent scholars working on specific cases within a particular region. The opportunities to contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities in this region are many, and engagement with the issues important to this region (or others through similar work) provide new opportunities to develop “liberation ecologies” (Peet and Watts 2004) that illuminate the contemporary nature-society challenges facing the South today, and provide the foundations for a politics of place that can improve the lot of those living in this region.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the U.S. and Canada in the North American context.

2. Another 5 papers could arguably be thematically relevant to North American issues, but here we only discuss those whose fieldwork is explicitly based in U.S. and Canadian contexts.

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