



Introducing new feminist political ecologies

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ABSTRACT

Political Ecology is firmly established as an important area of enquiry within Geography that attends to many of the most important questions of our age, including the politics of environmental degradation and conservation, the neoliberalisation of nature and ongoing rounds of accumulation, enclosure and dispossession, focusing on access and control of resources, and environmental struggles around knowledge and power, justice and governance. This short introductory paper considers how feminists working in this field of enquiry consider the gender dimension to such issues, and how political ecologies might intersect with a feminist objectives, strategies and practices: a focus for early iterations of a promising sub-field, labelled Feminist Political Ecology. It considers a number of epistemological, political and practical challenges that together may account for the relatively limited number of works that self-identify as feminist political ecology. Whilst this has made it difficult for Feminist Political Ecology to gain purchase as a sub-field within the political ecology cannon, this introductory piece highlights fruitful new ways that developments in feminist thinking enrich work in this field, evident in a flowering of recent publications.

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1. Introduction

Political Ecology is now firmly established as an important area of enquiry within Geography. Its strength in part lies in its capacity to direct attention towards many of the most important questions of our age: poverty, social justice, the politics of environmental degradation and conservation, the neoliberalisation of nature and ongoing rounds of accumulation, enclosure and dispossession. Increasingly pluralistic in its conceptual moorings, the aims of Political Ecology include understanding 'the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of...access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods' and explaining 'environmental conflict especially in terms of struggles over 'knowledge, power and practice' and 'politics, justice and governance' (Watts, 2000, p. 257). For feminists working in this field, a key question has always been to ask in what sense is there a gender dimension to such struggles, and how might these intersect with a feminist objectives, strategies and practices?

In the 1990s, Feminist Political Ecology (hereafter, FPE) was being heralded as a promising sub-field that sought to join feminist and political ecology scholarship 'from the ground up' (Rocheleau et al., 1996, p. xv).

In their landmark volume, Dianne Rocheleau and colleagues invited political ecologists to extend their analysis of power to include gendered relations, and to extend their consideration of

scales of analysis to include the household, thus complicating arenas of assumed common interest: 'community', 'local', and 'household' (Rocheleau, 2008, p. 722). Rocheleau et al. (1996) offered a refreshingly open ended and loosely configured framework that treated gender as 'a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for "sustainable development"' (Rocheleau et al., 1996, p. 4), and that focused on three key themes: gendered environmental knowledges, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, and gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism. Since the publication of *Feminist Political Ecology*, there has been an almost seismic shift in theoretical approaches to gender in the social sciences more generally, as poststructuralist and performative approaches in feminist theory (e.g. Butler, 2004) have challenged role-based and relational approaches to gender that rest predominantly on fixed notions of the autonomous subject, and that focus on men's and women's differentiated access to and control of environmental resources and socio-political processes. Moreover, the intervening period since *Feminist Political Ecology* was published has seen an intensification of economic reform programmes that favour market-led approaches to natural resource management, whilst at the same time most rural populations are marked by heightened geographical mobility; and each of these have reconfigured patterns of natural resource use, heralding new forms of intervention and environmental governance. These processes are themselves not innocent of gendered power relations: they are inflected with gender discourses that set in

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motion differentiated and unjust life opportunities and exclusions. At the same time, feminists working in cognate fields (e.g. development studies) have expressed some disquiet that, amidst efforts to mainstream gender into natural resource management interventions and into development policy more broadly, gender has lost its critical and politicised edge, having been institutionalised into a series of tools and techniques that are far removed from the transformatory potential of gender as a feminist concept (Cornwall et al., 2007).

With all of this in mind, this special issue offers a timely consideration of new feminist political ecologies: new in part because each paper considers the implications for gender-environment research of recent, embodied, performative and/or post-structural theorisations of gender, and new because of the extraordinary conditions in which contemporary gendered lives and livelihoods are being reworked. The papers here draw together rich empirical material with engagement with feminist theories in order to explore how gender subjectivities, ideologies and identities are produced, employed and contested within and around the governance of environments and livelihoods in urban and rural contexts within the Global South. The aim is twofold: collectively we have sought to invigorate debate in this area at a time when social theory offers profound challenges to gender and environment approaches, and as wider political economies of natural resource governance invite a vigorous analysis of gender and gendered socio-natures across multiple sites and scales. We have also sought to signal the immense potential offered by exciting new intersections between Feminist Geographies (and feminist theory generally) and developments in the wider field of Political Ecology that enrich, animate and illuminate new political ecologies in research and practice.

2. Feminist political ecology: a disappearing subject?

In reviewing the wider literature associated with the theme of this special issue, I have been struck by the difficulty in uncovering work that self-defines as ‘feminist political ecology’. This is not to say that there is a paucity of research on substantive themes that are of interest in feminist political ecology: far from it. Research bearing a ‘family resemblance’ (Watts, 2000, p. 271) to feminist political ecology may be found across a range of disciplines, focusing on substantive issues ranging from gendered resource access and property rights (water and land) to the dynamics of gender in policy discourses, collective action and social movements. Few of the contributions associated with these areas of concern carry the label ‘feminist political ecology’: a point which is explored further below. At the same time, as Political Ecology has matured as a sub-discipline in Geography, a recent wave of edited collections and text books have been published, setting out the ‘cannon’ as it stands. Yet with a couple of exceptions (Peet and Watts, 2004; Paulson and Gezon, 2005), recent texts have made little headway in showcasing feminist political ecology as a sub-field (e.g. Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Neumann, 2005; Robbins, 2004; Tuck-Po et al., 2003; Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). Within these volumes, certain texts become markers for FPE (e.g. Schroeder, 1999; Carney, 1993; Rocheleau et al., 1996) and are noted in discussions of social movements or resource conflicts scaled at the domestic level, but surprisingly, in most cases FPE itself barely warrants an index entry. From Rocheleau et al.’s promising opener in 1996, what accounts for the disappearing subject of FPE? Whilst various observations might be hazarded regarding the embodied challenges of (and to) academic positionalities and pedagogies that are posed by a *feminist* political ecology in political ecology more broadly, there are profound challenges that herald from within feminist research and praxis more generally, and that find parallels in other sub-disciplines of Geography.

The first point to make is that there is a considerable body of research (and practice for that matter) that might be regarded as FPE but is not named as such. This includes work on gender and resource access, where the gendered effects of land titling, alienation of common lands, decentralised governance and resurgent ‘traditional’ or pluralistic tenure arrangements unquestionably deserve at least the attention they are getting (e.g. Razavi, 2003). Similar debates around resource access are being heard with regard to water in both urban and rural settings in the context of neoliberalisation processes, as attested by a recent collection of articles in the journal *Gender, Place and Culture* (O’Reilly et al., 2009). Analysis of gender dynamics in community-based institutions (Agarwal, 2001; Colfer, 2005; Tsing et al., 2005), gendered environmental knowledge (Jewitt, 2002; Howard, 2003; Momsen, 2007; Walker and Robinson, 2009); and the dynamics of gender in policy discourses and within environmental departments of development agencies (Leach, 2007) also connect with what Rocheleau et al. (1996) envisaged as FPE. Moreover, the field of environmental justice includes contributions that demonstrate the productive ways feminist thinking may be brought to bear on research and activism (Buckingham and Kulcur, 2009; Gabrielson and Parady, 2010). Work on the gender dynamics of power across and within socio-natures is alive and well, even if it does not always bear the FPE label. While many of the works cited here self-describe as ‘feminist’, if not as ‘political ecology’, it remains that in some instances, the label ‘feminist’ in gender and environment research carries unhelpful resonances and unwanted political meanings (Wright, 2008). This is particularly so in some contexts in the Global South, where both postcolonial critiques (Mohanty, 1988) and new conservatism (religious or otherwise) complicate everyday understandings of feminism’s meaning and intent (Cornwall et al., 2007), in ways that may prove unhelpful in engagements with the varied participants and audiences of research.

A second and related account of FPE’s lack of visibility relates to the profound changes seen in social theory more generally. Since Rocheleau and her colleagues outlined the principles of feminist political ecology in the early 1990s, poststructuralist approaches to power, subjectivity and women’s agency have grown in influence, placing the ‘de-centred subject’ at the heart of many debates (Butler, 2004; Radcliffe, 2006; Elmhirst and Resurreccion, 2008). In such work, ‘gender’ is destabilised as a central analytical category; instead, emphasis is given to an exploration of multi-dimensional subjectivities where gender is constituted through other kinds of social differences and axes of power such as race, sexuality, class and place, and practices of ‘development’ themselves. In gender and environment research, the practical significance of these developments is all too clear in the unintended consequences associated with the representational strategy adopted during the negotiation of international agreements around sustainable development. Strategies focused on building bridges between women globally, articulating a centred Third World woman subject in order to press for women’s inclusion in emerging sustainable development agendas (Mohanty, 1988; Saunders, 2002). Such strategies were followed by a range of initiatives that targeted women as a homogeneous and undifferentiated social category, charged with ‘care’ for degraded environments, resulting in the exacerbation of social and gender injustices in a number of documented instances (Leach, 2007). More nuanced strategies are now evident within the myriad activist networks that focus on environments and social justice, where it is understood that there are instances where the ‘privileging’ of women and gender transformations may be strategically important (Friedman, 1998; as cited in Sharp, 2009).

Accordingly, gender is seen neither as analytically central nor as the end point of critique and analysis (Fraser, 2004). People are conceptualised as inhabiting multiple and fragmented identities,

constituted through social relations that include gender, but also include class, religion, sexuality, race/ethnicity and postcoloniality, as well as in multiple networks for coping with, transforming or resisting development (Nagar et al., 2002; Lawson, 2007). Of interest in much contemporary gender environment work is how racialised/ethnic or religious subjects are co-produced as gendered, and how such complex subjects of development are formed and act in relation to the exercise of power. The importance of this kind of approach lies in its power to problematise naturalised and undifferentiated categories of people and social relationships (men, women, gender relations), and critically in this context, relationships between people and the environment.

Just as the 'subject' within FPE has been de-centred by new waves of feminist thinking, Political Ecology as a field has expanded its own conceptual horizons alongside wider theoretical developments in Geography and beyond, where the influence of, for example, actor-network theory and work on geographies of affect go even further in challenging notions of human subjectivity, let alone gendered subjectivity. Yet as a number of commentators have noted for Geography more generally, there is a danger associated with such developments that in unsettling understandings of the 'human', the 'unmarked, disembodied but implicitly masculine subject' is unwittingly reinstated (Jacobs and Nash, 2003, p. 275; Sharp, 2009). Rather than retreat to simplistic understandings of gender divisions and singular gendered power relations, the challenge ahead is to revitalise efforts around a re-politicised recognition of gender as an optic for analysing the power effects of the social constitution of difference (Cornwall et al., 2007), and to demonstrate the myriad ways that feminist theorisations and new understandings of gender can be taken forward within and through the permeable boundaries of an open-ended *feminist* political ecology.

3. Opening up new feminist political ecologies

The papers in this special issue respond to a pressing need to engage with feminist theory when tackling the issues that animate Political Ecology more generally, and to recognise the benefits of adopting a more avowedly 'feminist' political ecology approach. Whilst there are many possible directions such an engagement might take, the papers here address three specific themes. First, the papers illustrate the power of feminist conceptualisations of scale, which not only highlight less visible scales (the body, the household) but stress their interconnections (Katz, 2001; Christie, 2006). Papers by Elmhirst (2011), Ge et al. (2011), Nightingale (2011) and Truelove (2011) all focus on the connecting of scales, from the intimate to the national. The politics of migration and natural resource management is a focus for Ge et al. (2011) where the linking of scales and spaces is analysed to reveal the resilience of gender norms as these are reiterated in everyday practices around water in rural China. Linkages between scales is evident in Truelove's analysis of everyday practices of water access in Delhi, which demonstrates the relationship between bodies and cities, and the production of multiple social differences (Truelove, 2011). A second theme reveals the power of a corporeal feminism in feminist political ecology (Grosz, 1994): conceptualisations of embodiment, in its material and emotional dimensions. Feminist ideas around intersectionality – subjectivities wrought through the intersection of gender, 'race', ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on through spatial practice – provide the inspiration for Nightingale (2011) who makes a powerful case for focusing on the explicitly ecological materiality of space in producing gendered subjectivities in Nepal where hierarchies of 'caste' and spatialised 'purity' powerfully illuminate the links between the symbolic and the material in embodied everyday practice. A different, albeit related perspective

on embodiment is used by Sultana (2011) whose work on the politics of access around degraded water resources in Bangladesh demonstrates the interpretive power of emotional geographies in revealing the experience of hardship and the power of emotion within struggles over environmental injustices. A third theme, which combines feminist understandings of scale and embodiment alluded to above, invites political ecologists to take seriously feminist conceptualisations of politics and subject formation in political ecology, and to see gender as a constitutive force at all scales of analysis. Rather than aligning gender with closer scales (bodies, households), work in this vein in cognate sub-disciplines (i.e. feminist political geography) recognises that it is frequently at the level of the intimate that national and international power relations are produced and sustained (Wright, 2010). To a large degree, all of the papers in this special issue are concerned with recognition, citizenship and power, as these are produced at scales from the intimate to the global. As one example, feminist and queer critiques of 'normal citizenship' are drawn on to show how the politics of migrant resource access in Indonesia link intimate and national renderings of subjectivity (Elmhirst, 2011). These three themes do not offer exhaustive coverage of how political ecology might productively re-engage with feminist theory in a revitalized Feminist Political Ecology. Certainly, the 'epistemological debt' (Wright, 2010; Sharp, 2007) that political ecology already owes in terms of its genealogical connection to feminist ideas should attune us to future productive possibilities (examples of which include Sundberg, 2004; Harris, 2006; Hovorka, 2006; Nightingale, 2006; Mollett, 2010). Many important avenues are currently being explored as new feminist political ecologies are being articulated: the papers in this special issue contribute to the continued flowering of this revitalised and important area of debate.

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