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# Political ecology as ethical practice

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#### Abstract

Pedagogy is not an issue generally addressed in discussions of ethics in political ecology. These discussions commonly focus upon research agendas and methodology and do not consider teaching and learning political ecology as ethical and political practice. This paper argues that public scholarship can make political ecology's approach more concrete for students, because it focuses upon problems of inequality and resource access in their own communities and can foster ethically informed research projects useful to state and nongovernmental organizations while opening new research venues for students, teachers and community members. The paper's argument consists of three parts. In the first, I provide an overview of ethics in geography. Next I discuss the relevance of radical pedagogy to critical human geography and to political ecology and rework radical pedagogy's definition to include a consideration of public scholarship. Finally, I demonstrate how political ecology as an approach to public scholarship may spark and sustain student activism and value-driven forms of learning and teaching in an undergraduate classroom.

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Questions of moral obligation and responsibility, good and bad and right and wrong are deeply tied to geography's "ontological project and epistemological process" (Proctor, 1998: 8). Moral and ethical assumptions encompass the ways that our research is conceptualized and practiced, the structures and contents of many of our courses, our teaching philosophies, and our sense of professional obligations and responsibilities. Topics such as poverty and inequality, racism and sexism, the politics of food and famine, and questions of environment-society relations are of interest to many geographers. Substantive questions concerning space, place and

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ecology in their relation to socioeconomic and environmental justice, human rights, and compassion and concern for other people and places continue to inform scholarship and pedagogy within our discipline (Bryant, 2000; Proctor & Smith, 1999; Merrett, 2000; Heyman, 2000). These concerns resonate throughout the discipline's diversity of fields. This essay grapples with two questions with examples drawn from political ecology: (a) How do we manifest our ethical positionalities, knowledge and action in scholarship and through teaching? (b) How do we encourage an ethically informed self-criticality in our research and teaching? The paper's argument consists of three parts. In the first, I provide an overview of ethics in geography. Next I discuss the relevance of radical pedagogy to critical human geography and to political ecology and rework radical pedagogy's definition to include a consideration of public scholarship. Finally, I demonstrate how political ecology as an approach to public scholarship may spark and sustain student activism and value-driven forms of learning and teaching in an undergraduate classroom.

# Ethics in geography: research and public scholarship

Recent discussions of ethics in geography have pivoted around issues of self and other and our obligations and responsibilities to "distant strangers" near and far (Corbridge, 1993; Cloke, 2002; Smith, 2001). Marc Auge (1998) asks two key questions in this regard: "How do we retain a sense of the other and a sense for the other in terms of environments and the societies living within them? How do we understand ourselves and others in critical and compassionate ways?"

Sayer & Storper (1997: 1) encourage a normative 'turn' to critical geography that pays attention 'to how things ought to be different'. John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice and Carol Gilligan's ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) are examples of influential approaches within normative ethics that emphasize the moral bases of human thought and action. Following Smith (1997),

Normative ethics is focused upon the solutions to moral problems. It accepts the universality of certain grand moral values (humanity, social and environmental justice, human rights and animal rights).

Within (but not limited to) critical development studies and political ecology, normative ethics have focused upon particular philosophical, theoretical and political positions informed by work on socioeconomic and redistributive justice, ecological sustainability, and human rights (Pulido, 1996; Peet & Watts, 1996; Rocheleau & Thomas-Slayter, 1996). Emerging from Marxian critiques of the political economy/ecology of rural development in the Global South and examining the failures of modernization theory's market-led development models, work in this vein demonstrates an increasing commitment to issues of values and moral obligations (Wisner, 1989; Peluso, 1993). This 'turn' is marked by (1) the emergence of public scholarship within political ecology, other fields of geography and other

disciplines; (2) transformations in education as radical pedagogy continues to inform critical human geography; (3) a dynamic reciprocity among community service and social activism, research and teaching activities.

## Public scholarship in geography

Geographers are integrating new modes of teaching and course design into undergraduate curriculums around the country, which bring ethics into geography in teaching, learning and research (Cohen & Yapa, 2003; Jarosz & Johnson-Bogart, 1996). This can have very positive implications for faculty and student research and for classroom dynamics. Research and teaching come together in public scholarship. Public scholarship is "the application of scholarship by faculty and students in their teaching and learning, research and service to the civic, cultural, artistic, social, economic and educational needs of the community" (Cohen & Yapa, 2003: 5).

Public scholarship can enhance students' classroom study and research about global social issues such as poverty and equality through direct engagement with the problem at the levels of their communities in settings and situations outside the classroom. Recent work in political ecology has been emphasizing 'First World' locations as opposed to or compared with those in the 'Third World' (Walker, 2003; McCarthy, 2002; Bryant, 2000; Robbins, 2002) and thus recent research trends make this approach particularly suited to public scholarship in relation to the broader issues of globalization, poverty and development.

This paper argues that public scholarship manifests political ecology's ontological project and epistemological process more concretely and directly for students while fostering critically informed inquiry, analysis and interpretation within community-based research venues for both students and teachers. For example, students can design a farmers market feasibility study, conduct a survey exploring local farmers' challenges and successes of sourcing locally grown food into schools and universities in their communities, conduct oral history projects at senior centers, or volunteer at a local food bank as a part of their research projects. Encouraging self-critical reflection necessitates an awareness and acknowledgement as to the researchers' positionality, privilege, power, and the partial, situated ways in which knowledge is produced, legitimated and consumed (Limb & Dwyer, 2001). This self-critical awareness is specifically informed by feminist methodology (England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Katz, 1992).

Social and political awareness and education require figuring out which differences matter when and where and constructing alliances among differently situated social actors to work toward meaningful change (Katz et al., 1998). Respecting difference while recognizing its potential for divisiveness is a particularly challenging goal. As geographers (Katz et al., 1998) have previously pointed out, identifying, understanding and navigating these contradictions are crucial for any kind of collective political project. Identifying, understanding and navigating these contradictions is central to both research and teaching. A self-critical awareness of these contradictions reveals how knowledge is partial and situated and how

subject positions matter in understanding and navigating the contradictions those differences—near and far—pose. Navigating socio-cultural and economic differences may include working in a homeless teen center and overcoming stereotypes about 'street kids' or developing a research relationship with an elder Native American living in a shelter. The challenge involves linking coursework, experiential learning and community based research projects. This integration can challenge stereotypes about poverty and hunger, poor people and marginalized places and result in creative and complex student projects that involve working with state and non-governmental organizations. Similar ethical and self-critical positions emerge from work linking radical pedagogy to critical human geography.

# Radical pedagogy and critical human geography

Within human geography, the most substantial portion of current writing on radical pedagogy has emerged from critical human geography. Although as Merrett (2000) points out, geographers such as Peter Kropotkin were advocating this approach in geography over a century ago. Critical human geography is a diverse set of ideas and practices committed to emancipatory politics within and beyond the discipline, the promotion of progressive social change and the development of a broad range of critical theories and their application in geographical research and political practice (Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, & Watts, 2000). It involves: opposition to unequal and oppressive power relations; the development and application of critical social theories; and a commitment to social justice and transformative politics. The subject matter of political ecology and its own commitment to these broader principles reflects the broader project within critical human geography (Peet & Watts, 1996).

Radical pedagogy refuses to treat students as consumers and knowledge as commodity. It aims to destabilize the role of teacher as authority and contests the idea of knowledge as instrumental. Radical pedagogy is about facilitating dynamic forms of open-ended knowledge seeking and production, which incorporate ethics of justice, liberation, and progressive social change with learning, thinking, speaking, writing and doing. Radical pedagogy unites learning and doing and is student-centered rather than driven by the instructor. There is an acknowledgement that learning and teaching are political acts as well as intellectual endeavors (Giroux, 1988; Hooks, 1994; Freire, 1972).

Transgressing the boundaries between research, teaching and community service in accordance with the "principles of social justice, critical citizenship and participatory democracy...breach(es) the walls that have been artificially erected between theory and practice" (Heyman, 2000: 302). The classroom becomes a site of political engagement as well as a place of learning and teaching (Hay, 2001; Heyman, 2000). Students may participate in this engagement at any number of levels. A commitment to public scholarship within a specific classroom setting must be voluntarily made as part of a set of options that include more conventional types of research projects relying on bibliographic sources and interview data, for example. It

is vital that public scholarship as linked to a class, for example, be one of several options for fulfilling class requirements so that every individual in class will be able to complete the course.

Research uniting radical pedagogy and critical human geography rightly claims that classrooms can be cultural and political sites of domination and oppression (Hay, 2001; Heyman, 2000). This argument calls for self-reflexivity on the part of teachers and students as they critically rework the parameters for group and individual obligations and responsibilities to the class. Radical pedagogy demands the integration of theories taught with classroom practice. Recently, geographers, among others, have been examining the power-laden spaces of the classroom and questioning modes of authority between teachers and students that define conventional forms of pedagogy (Hay, 2001; Heyman, 2000; Merrett, 2000; Freire, 1972; Giroux, 1988; Spivak, 1990).

The conscious creation of connections between research, teaching and community service within a course's structure and content is one means of integrating the principles of radical pedagogy with the approaches of a liberatory political ecology (see Peet & Watts, 1996 for an elaboration of this term). This involves the construction and maintenance of an active engagement, a series of conversations with the 'other' as landscape, as individual, as group through projects and classes that blend learning, teaching, research and community service (Howitt, 2001). It means that teaching, research and community service continually inform one another whether through writing, teaching, or interaction with broader communities near and far. The challenge is integrating community service with a course through a research project within a 10- to 15-week class so that the study and application of political ecology to a research problem or question merge through public scholarship while informing studies at national and world regional scales.

### Public scholarship and the political ecology of hunger

Political ecology raises difficult and necessary questions about politics, ethics, and social justice in relation to human activity and environmental change (Lipietz, 1996). As the interest and discussions around First World and Third World political ecology increase, Paul Robbins (2002) argues for methodological symmetries between the two through relational comparisons which examine the contradictions between nature and society and development and environmental change across scale, distance, and difference in examining not only the workings of power but also the discourses of surrounding process, structure and history.

Key themes such as critiques of Malthusian inspired analyses of poverty and resource degradation (Williams, 1995), the unequal ownership and access and distribution of resources and the struggles over their distribution control continue to hold a central place in political ecology. Current themes encompass urban ecology and rural restructuring in the USA (Robbins & Birkenholtz, 2003; Myers, 1999; Walker, 2003; McCarthy, 2002).

Political ecology appears in graduate and undergraduate curriculums that emphasize globalization and/or international development and the world regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is taught across the social science disciplines, in geography, anthropology, political science, history, agrarian and environmental studies, women studies and medical and health courses.

Hunger and poverty, both near and far, are social problems of pressing importance as well as a moral and ethical dilemma rightly posed within the contexts of globalization and neoliberalism. The growing numbers of over and under nourished people around the world are currently estimated at nearly two-thirds of the globe's population (Gardner & Halweil, 2000). In a course called World Hunger and Resource Development that I have taught over the last ten years, I have attempted to integrate my research and teaching with community service as a way to foster social activism among my students (Jarosz & Johnson-Bogart, 1996). I try to give a community-based place and face to hunger and poverty, as well as providing a study of hunger and poverty in other world regions through the lens of political ecology. Course topics include: ideological approaches to world hunger, colonialism, agrarian transformation and hunger, social movements and hunger, the politics of food and the globalization of agriculture, working in the global food system, hunger and poverty in America, and responses to the problem of world hunger. Examples of topics and assigned readings are:

The impacts of colonialism on food security
Social movements and hunger
Hunger and the globalization of food
The politics of hunger in the Americas
Responses to world hunger
Biotechnology and alternative food networks as responses to hunger

Warnock, 1987; Shields, 1995

Boucher, 1999; Raiz Forte (video), 2001: Landless Workers Movement in Brazil
Goodman & Redclift, 1991; Arce & Marsden, 1993; Young, 1999;
Pilcher, 2002; Magdoff, Foster, & Buttel, 2000
Hellin & Higman, 2003; Schlosser, 2001; Poppendieck, 1993; Collins, 1996; Real Change: Seattle's Homeless People's Newspaper
Rahnema, 2002; Williams, 1995; http://www.oxfaminternational.org
Allen, 1993; Lambrecht, 2001; Norberg-Hodge, Merrifield, &
Gorelick, 2002; Deconstructing supper (video), 2002

As we study and discuss the political ecology of world hunger, students have engaged in a number of community-based projects aimed at challenging their stereotypes about poor people, poverty and hunger while examining agricultural modernization, the emergence of globalized agro-food and the promise of alternative food networks. It is crucial that departments and institutions support this sort of integration by helping to find appropriate community placements and providing administrative assistance to faculty. I have worked with staff of the Edward E. Carlson Leadership and Public Service Center, which coordinates placement at homeless shelters, teen feeding centers, and senior centers. I also develop my own

projects through my research-based contacts in the community and in response to needs of nongovernmental organizations that contact me. Projects have included:

Organizations	Service learning projects
Pike Market Senior Center	Oral history project
City of Wapato	Farmers market feasibility study
Woodinville Farmers Market	Community garden feasibility study
Vashon Island Growers Assoc.	Phone survey of consumer food shopping
	Habits and awareness of local food
University of Washington	WTO and Hunger Issues: A primer on the
	eve of the WTO meetings in Seattle
Seattle Women's Refugee Alliance	English language tutoring
Seattle Tilth	Children's urban garden assistant

I prefer projects that result in some sort of product or outcome that students can finish by the end of a 10-week quarter or that can be carried on by other students in the following year or quarter in the context of another course. Public scholarship also necessitates changes in the course focus. Rather than strictly focusing upon hunger and poverty in the Global South, I also focus upon hunger and poverty in the USA, Washington State and Seattle. Studying the production and reproduction of spaces of vulnerability and hunger in our own backyards and learning about local and regional food networks has infused the class with concrete problems to solve and opportunities for community service and involvement. This has also increased my interest in the political ecology of food and agriculture in Washington State and has fueled three separate research projects on agriculture and rural poverty. Over the years, I have noticed that not only does my research shape what I teach in the class, but the class also shapes my research agenda. For example, last year's class conducted research directly related to my funded research agenda not by my conscious design but rather informing it and expanding its possibilities. I find that teaching this class provides valuable community connections and inspiration for my research agenda. The drawbacks are that due to the emphasis on the political ecology of hunger and food in the USA, I must cut back on extent I grapple with hunger issues in other world regions due to time and space constraints. For example, my coverage of the political ecology of famines is not as extensive as it is when I do not integrate community service with the course.

There are advantages and disadvantages to integrating public scholarship into this class. The advantages include the opportunity for students to go where they may not have been before, whether it's taking a bus across town to work the evening shift in a homeless shelter or compiling an oral history of a Native American elder. As Birge (2003: 56) notes,

Inserting community based learning into the formula of traditional teaching practices is, at best, messy. Doing so requires flexibility in teaching practice and course content, creative thinking, and the ability to connect theory to application. Not all faculty are able or willing to adjust their teaching style

to accommodate public scholarship practice and community based learning. And not all students are capable of understanding the social applications of such a disciplined inquiry.

Students who do not have the time or inclination to participate in these projects are encouraged to pursue other avenues. For example, one student interviewed her farm family members in order to explore the difficulties wheat farmers face in adopting environmentally sustainable production practices within globalized agro-industry. For many students, meeting this challenge infuses their writing with vitality; it leads to questions about ethics, morality, responsibility and power and deepens our inclass discussions. It means that the room is buzzing with conversation about readings, events, and research progress before class formally begins. It means I lecture less and listen more. It means I facilitate and direct rather than simply transfer research results and theoretical debates, although I still do that too but not exclusively.

Contradictions frequently emerge when good ideas are put into action. For example, students' goals to include community youth and Latino residents into farmers market planning were attenuated by Anglo political and economic community leaders. An effort to conduct a campus based food drive floundered as it became mired in food bank and university bureaucracies. In oral presentations, students are encouraged to speak to challenges, obstacles, problems and failures since we learn from failures and successes.

Thinking hard about what it means to be poor and how othering poor people sidesteps difficult ethical and political questions frequently means unpacking the notion of 'poor' by working with and talking with refugees, homeless teens, food bank and shelter directors throughout the length of the course. It involves the uncomfortable process of confronting one's own stereotypes and expectations about poverty and definitions about poor people. Through an oral history project, one student learned how a combination of individual decisions, divorce, governmental policy changes and economic restructuring contributed to poverty and vulnerability for a college graduate now in his late fifties. Students working in food banks—both conventional and left-leaning—concluded that food banks are short-term solutions that do not address the structural problems of hunger and poverty in our city and our state such as lack of a living wage and escalating housing, childcare and healthcare costs and deepening rural poverty. Washington State, home of some of the wealthiest individuals in the world also has the distinction of having the some of the largest numbers of hungry people in the United States (Governor's Task Force on Hunger, 1998). Students establishing community gardens wanted to reach out to all members of the community—something that their supervisors did not often think about. They learned about working together collaboratively and cooperatively; they set their own goals and came to their own conclusions. As one student put it, "At a deeper level, I think we were all motivated because the work became meaningful through the vision of social inclusion behind it. Perhaps that was the most important life lesson we learned: that work can be meaningful, and when it is, it brings forth the highest quality results stemming from within our value systems".

But it also means that we cover less international content in the classroom. I have developed a political ecology of hunger and food in the USA and in Seattle to help link class readings to community work. The course also brings up the vexed question of assigning grades for those working in the community and those who choose to do library research papers. Grading in a course such as this is difficult because as I relinquish authority in the classroom, final grades demand I reestablish it once more when evaluating student work and assigning numerical grades. The efforts at decentering my authority are contradicted by the act of grading and being graded. In group work, there is always the problem of the 'free rider', the student who puts out a minimal effort and yet is upset when his or her grade differs from the others. Students who enjoy lectures and professorial authority are impatient with this class, because they cannot simply take notes and rely on lectures. They need to bring their research and themselves more directly into the discussions and actively forge the link between their research projects and the course's content. Clearly, the class cannot meet all needs for all levels and all individuals, and I have found it works best if the enrollment is under 45 and limited to seniors and advanced juniors and participation in community service is optional.

A political ecology course taught in this manner increases faculty workload due to the administrative tasks involved in developing and managing community service projects. Therefore encouragement and support at both the departmental and institutional levels is critical. This is probably the major reason more people don't do it or can't do it consistently in all of their undergraduate courses. This is especially true in colleges and universities where resources are shrinking while classes and workloads increase. Out of the four classes I teach, I can only manage to do one in this particular format since the teaching objectives and course goals of the other courses do not specifically lend themselves to this approach and time constraints make it difficult. In some years, due to my service and advising loads, I must skip the option. Course content also needs to be appropriate and amenable to this approach.

Public scholarship, critical reflection and linking community service to course content are particularly suited to political ecology's wide ranging literature and approach. It is yet another way to bring ethics into geography, bind research to teaching and expand the dimensions and practice of ethically informed scholarship within political ecology.

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