

Reading Response: "Politicized Environments, From the Nation-State to the Household"
JGE321: Multicultural Perspectives on Environmental Issues
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Bryant's article outlines the assumptions and tenets of political ecology as a theoretical framework for understanding environmental issues in the third world. Through analysis of the international political and economic institutions that influence allocation of natural resources on both global and local levels, scholars seek to bring to light the structural forces that create politicized environments. Environmental access and degradation are not seen as natural or neutral processes, but rather the effects of political relations and dynamics.¹ Particular attention is paid, especially in neo-Marxist analysis, to the unequal and exploitative economic relationships between the global North and South that threaten local access to sustainable livelihoods.² These global systems of resource extraction and economic coercion are understood as remnants of imperial structures first established during European colonization of the global South.³

Peluso uses this framework to discuss the politics of conservation in Kenya and Indonesia. International agreements concerning conservation have been ratified by many states, and international conservation agencies often augment the capacities of developing states to adhere to these agreements.⁴ In Kenya and Indonesia, this assistance has led to the increasing militarization of state conservation forces and the physical coercion of marginalized groups in ensuring conservation. In both cases, access to local resources is determined by economic and political structures at the domestic and international levels, and is reinforced by the use of force.

The use of force is not the only capability possessed by the powerful to allocate environmental resources. As discussed by Bryant, the power of the West is also

manifested in structures of knowledge that simplify complex political-economic processes and justify grave inequalities.⁵ The power of such knowledge structures is demonstrated in Peluso's case study of Kenya, wherein the racialized dimensions of wildlife conservation in Kenya and the historical relationship of the Maasai to their ecology are both overlooked in Western conservation discourses.⁶ International observers are presented with a sterilized account of the conflict in which "poachers" are always the bad guys."⁷ In this way, dominant discourses serve to normalize the unequal access to environmental resources.

In the article by Rocheleau and Edmunds, politicized environments are explored on the micro-level of the household. Whereas the other authors display a masculinist understanding of power ("power over"), Rocheleau and Edmunds look at politics and power from a perspective of both conflict and complementarity.⁸ The authors problematize traditional understandings of private property by demonstrating the nested and overlapping rights of women and men that exist in tree tenure.⁹ Despite these degrees of complementarity that exist between women and men, the social and political marginalization of women is manifested clearly in physical marginalization as they are allocated marginal lands and resources on which to subsist. It is thus important to recognize that patriarchal power structures create politicized environments in the household, and that these unequal gender relations are enacted on the local, national and international levels.

The chapter by Rees and Westra demonstrates the results of politicized environments on a global scale. As the gap between rich and poor grows, the globe becomes divided by structures of eco-apartheid, which the authors define as the "growing

ecological segregation ... along economic and racial lines.”¹⁰ Rees and Westra cite the causes of this development as the capitalist drive for growth, Western cultural values, and rampant consumerism, which culminate in the destruction of livelihoods in the developing world.¹¹ The authors argue that the relationship between needless Western consumption and structural violence against marginalized peoples in the developing world creates a moral and ethical imperative for privileged Westerners to reform their lifestyles.¹²

These articles raise a variety of questions for me. Feminist political theorists have criticized the assumptions on which private property regimes are predicated, claiming that these regimes are based upon the lived experiences of white, propertied males.¹³ Such men have long accrued vast social, economic and political benefit from these regimes, to the detriment of those who do not fit into these social categories. The increasing privatization of land in the developing world has had a marked effect on the livelihood of marginalized and landless peoples, particularly poor women. Based on these histories of exclusion, is it possible to organize private property regimes in ways that do not exert structural violence on marginalized peoples?

As the historical trajectory of capitalism has been intimately entangled with the phenomena of globalization and colonialism, is it possible for global market capitalism to be greened or democratized? Marxist critiques of the capitalist state have questioned the capacity of this political form to do anything but contribute to environmental degradation on increasing spatial scales.¹⁴ In an international system comprised (almost entirely) of capitalist states, is it possible to move beyond this form of political organization?

While the critiques of the capitalist market and state are well-founded, this political form is embedded in “sticky” domestic and international institutions that make radical transformation difficult. As Rees and Westra assert, mere reformism may obscure how deeply injustice – economic, political, social and ecological – is embedded within these institutions and practices.¹⁵ Given the immiseration of billions of people and widespread environmental degradation today, it is difficult to assess just how extreme global circumstances must become before such radical change is initiated.

Word count: 1, 044

¹ Raymond L. Bryant, “Power, Knowledge and Political Ecology in the Third World: A Review,” in *Progress in Physical Geography* 22/1 (1998): 80 – 81.

² Ibid., 81 – 82.

³ Ibid., 85.

⁴ Nancy Lee Peluso, “Coercing Conservation? The Politics of State Resource Control,” in *Global Environmental Change* 3/2 (1993): 199.

⁵ Bryant, 87.

⁶ Peluso, 205.

⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁸ Dianne Rocheleau and David Edmunds, “Women, Men and Trees: Gender, Power and Property in Forest and Agrarian Landscapes,” in *World Development* 25/8 (1997): 1351.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William E. Rees and Laura Westra, “When Consumption Does Violence: Can There be Sustainability and Environmental Justice in a Resource-limited World?” in *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*, ed. Julian Agyeman, Robert D. Bullard and Bob Evans (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 100.

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

¹² Ibid., 110.

¹³ Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, “Alternative Approaches to International Relations Theory,” in *The Globalization of World Politics*, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 182.

¹⁴ John Vogler, “Environmental Issues,” in *The Globalization of World Politics*, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 365.

¹⁵ Rees and Westra, 100.

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