

RESENHA

Political Ecology: a critical introduction

Paul Robbins

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ROBBINS, Paul. **Political Ecology: a critical introduction**. 2. ed. [S.l.]: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

‘Political Ecology: a critical introduction’ (2012), by Paul Robbins is the only textbook available in the field of Political Ecology, at least in English. It is far from being the first political ecology book. However, it is likely to be the first and only one to address in an integrated manner most of the themes, theories and methodologies used by political ecologists. Beginning in 1980s, many edited collections, ethnographies and hundreds of articles have been published under the rubric of political ecology. However, since the first edition of ‘Political Ecology: a critical introduction’ (2004) until its second edition came out in 2012, Robbins's book remains unique and stands alone as the most comprehensive and reader-friendly introduction to the field.

Robbins effort to summarize major developments in the field from a theoretical, methodological and practical/applied standpoint is outstanding. The book is full of emblematic case studies from which the author draws evidence to support the themes, arguments and theories that concern political ecologist the most. As I see it the book was written to serve as an introductory

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textbook, and perhaps because of it, the book should not be read as new directions in the field, let alone as a cutting-edge guide on how to conduct research in the field. The material presented in the book is a concise summary of long-standing and vast number of research papers and books in geography, anthropology, ecology and political economy. It is also a well-thought out personal account of the political dimensions of people-environment relations research.

The book is divided into four parts, each containing many short chapters. Part I describes how political ecology came into being, how it used to be and what it has become. The author lays out the main questions and themes that have been dealt with by political ecologists over the past three decades. In doing so, he reconstructs the development of the field, which in summary is an outgrowth of the encounter between geography, anthropology, development studies, political economy and ecology.

In part II, he addresses how political ecologists "construct" their objects and subjects of research, the methodological and conceptual premises and challenges one may face when trying to look at human-environmental relations through both positivists/objective and interpretative/symbolic lenses. In part III, the author presents his own interpretation on what political ecology is about. Robbins argues that there are four main themes or problems that drive most political ecologists' research agendas: (1) degradation and marginalization, (2) conservation and control, (3) environmental conflict, and (4) environmental identity and social movement. After discussing these four intertwined areas of research, their underlying assumption and thesis, case studies are presented as grounded evidence for these arguments. In part IV, he concludes by critically evaluating the status of the field, while pointing out potential (topical and conceptual) areas where there might be further expansion and development. Robbins argues that what distinguishes political ecology from other approaches toward human-environment relations is the way issues usually neglected are taken into account. Among them are power relations in conservation and development schemes, inequality and poverty, class, ethnicity, and racial claims as they relate to processes of legitimization and conquest of territories, nature conservation and degradation.

By reading the book one feels delighted with its quality and compelled to engage in the dialog. However, sometimes, Robbins contribution to the field of political ecology itself seems to over-shadow his attempt to contribute a novel pedagogical/educational textbook. There are tradeoffs between publishing an original contribution to political ecology and publishing an introductory textbook. It seems that Robbins tried both with relatively high success. For instance, a limitation is that, readers who have not been introduced to a denser anthropological, ecological and political economy literature are unlikely to grasp subtleties and nuances embedded in the history of field by simply reading Robbins' own understanding and construction of it. Therefore, "political ecology: a critical introduction" can be seen as an "introduction" to the students already familiarized with many academic disciplines from which political ecology has historically depends on, such as anthropology and geography.

One may also argue, to the contrary, that these two apparently disconnected tasks are hardly separated, since synthesizing involves translation/reinterpretation, which in itself brings about novelty and originality to the work, even if it was meant to be an introductory textbook. He clearly makes an effort to bring high level theory down to Earth, so that it can reach wider audiences that include practitioners, policy-makers, students and researchers alike. One of his strategies, not usually found among political ecologists, is to explicitly avoid the use of academic jargons as much as possible.

After reading the book, I thought that despite his impressive work, Robbins could have summarized it even more, perhaps spending less time on the origins of the field and more on what the field looks like today. To make it read even more like an introductory textbook, it would also be extremely useful (although toilful) to include a glossary of academic terms at the end of the book. The book also lacks a summary for each of the chapters. It would have facilitated the understanding of the material by highlighting the main point beforehand. It is also reasonable to think that more visual aid (photography and other visual clues) would help readers to better grasp examples and concepts.

The book should also include more examples from the developing world, as well as build an explicit dialog with scholars doing cutting-edge socio-

environmental research in countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Bolivia to name a few in Latin America alone. Besides the language barrier, the absence of such engagements hinders widespread adoption of this amazing work as an introductory book in Political Ecology for countries in this region.

To date, despite shortcomings, in my opinion, the book represents an unmatched effort to put together apparently unrelated knowledge into a concise introduction to an expanding, interdisciplinary and dynamic field. Some have claimed that political ecology is an area of inquiry facing identity crises, mostly for situating itself at the cross-road of the natural and social realms and for being explicitly problem-oriented, rather than discipline-driven. In this regard, Robbins has taken the challenge of trying to bridge these realms with mastery, while producing a very important textbook that adds much to pressing socio-ecological debates whereas it also addresses the need for a better definition of the scope and aim of political ecology. As a Brazilian scholar doing problem-oriented research in the field of political ecology, I strongly recommend Robbins' book to anyone concerned with current debates on sustainability, and more specifically for those with a clear focus on research and teaching in the field of human-environmental relations.

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