

Political Ecology and Environmental Change Lectures
Geography Department, Masaryk University, Czech Republic
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**Political ecology: the critical study of how
power shapes environmental change**

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The mini-course

- **TITLE: Political Ecology and Environmental Change**
- The two lectures
 - **Lecture 1:** *Political ecology: the critical study of how power shapes environmental change*
 - **Lecture 2:** *A critical study of the relation between climate change and insecurity: the CLICO project*
- **1 credit: the essay**
 - To obtain the credit, you must attend both lectures, read a text and answer a question (see below) in a short essay of no more than 1,000 words.

Lecture 1: Introduce field of political ecology

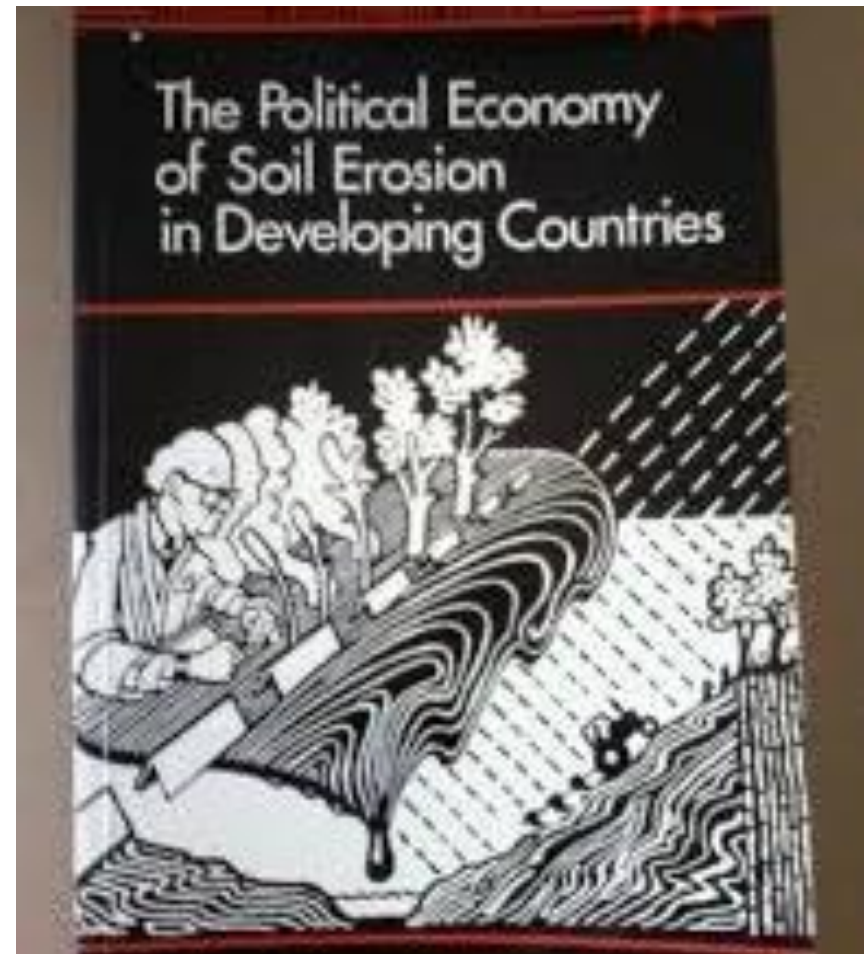
- Explain its key characteristic: power relations shape environmental transformations
- Use examples from case studies in PE to illustrate how various understandings of how power works are used in political ecology

Some basics

- Academic field
- A basic claim: winners and losers
- Themes, subjects of study
- Methods: varied and mixed
- Drivers of change and conflict

Environmental change is political

- Let's take a classic issue: environmental degradation
- Classic political ecology study of degradation: Piers Blaikie (1985) *Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*



Political economy of soil erosion: questions

What Blaikie tries to explain?

- Why, although half a century of policies and (int'l) programmes to deal with soil erosion (reduced productivity of soil), these have failed?
- Usually: it's the farmers to blame

Political economy of soil erosion: findings

What he finds?

- Root causes of soil erosion: not at site where land degradation occurs (Hertford, 1985)
- Capitalist production encourages mining of soils (Robbins, 2012)

Political economy of soil erosion: politics

- **Politics = central for understanding soil erosion**
(understand why policies to deal with it are unsuccessful)
 - “a major determinant of the response to soil erosion is the degree of **economically-derived political power** of the classes and groups involved” (Hertford 1985)
- **“Solution”**: **effectively deal with erosion** (Hertford 1985)
 - Only if threat to accumulation possibilities of powerful is substantial, soil conservation practices may be successful (implemented)

Politics in Political Ecology

- Politics as power relations
 - Power (Hornborg, 2001): “social relation built on an asymmetrical distribution of resources & risks”
- How power operates? Paulson et al. (2003)
 1. Pressing from the outside
 - Study: how power circulates among and between different social groups, resources, and spaces

Power pressing from outside

Political Economy of Soil Erosion (Blaikie, 1985)

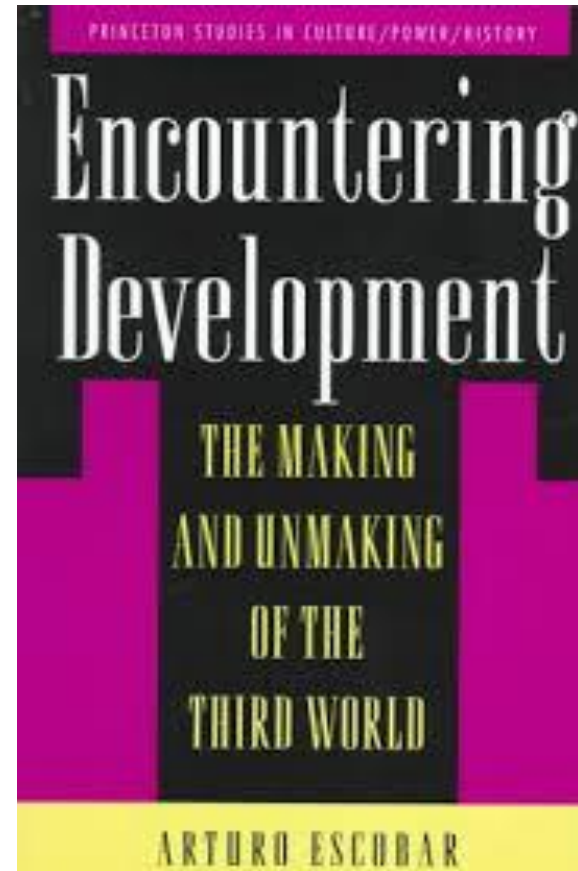
- Who presses?
 - Multi-nat'l corporations, state, local (nat'l) elites, agricultural extension workers and programmes, etc.
- How do they put pressure?
 - Specific practices: price-setting power (nat'l and multi-nat'l intermediaries), state policies for transforming into cash crops, colonial enforced (even violent) modernisation of agriculture, etc.

How power operates? Paulson et al. (2003)

1. Pressing from the outside
2. But power does not only function as external coercion or force
 - Power can work “from the inside”

Another classic

- Arturo Escobar.
1996.
*Encountering
Development*



Motivation: the question

- Why development is unquestionably the desired pathway for “Third World” nations?
 - magic formula for nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia for catching up with industrialised nations of North America and Europe
- More so (paradox):
 - Development has failed in those nations: socio-economically (e.g. poverty still there); environmentally
 - Increasing opposition to development by popular groups in the Third World (presumably: those who would benefit from it/ those it seeks to benefit)

A note

- When Escobar did his study, he did not explicitly call it “political ecology”
 - It was more of an anthropological study of development
- Nevertheless,
 - Escobar himself claims to work on political ecology (and collaborates with political ecologists)
 - His study has inspired subsequent work in PE and is integrated as a crucial reading in the field

The argument: Escobar's finding

- The “Third World” did not exist before mid-20th century
- It has been produced by the discourses and practices of development since their inception in the early post–World War II period
 - Third World poor populations (poverty) and environments (degradation) have been produced by those discourses and practices

Historical emergence

- The emergence and consolidation of that discourse can be traced historically
- Truman's inaugural speech (1949)
 - A “fair deal” for whole world
 - US and world should solve problems of “underdeveloped areas”
 - Envisage “a program of development based on concepts of democratic fair dealing”
 - “Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace”

Reasons for invention of development

Historical conditions: finding new markets

- WWII: neutrality of Latin America
 - production geared towards US market
- 1945: US in economic and military prominence (Brit Empire before)
- 1945-1955: consolidation of US hegemony; need to
 - expand market for US products
 - find new sites to invest US surplus capital
 - Access cheap raw materials to support growing capacity of US industry (esp. nascent multi-nat'l corporations)
- Rivalry with USSR
 - Int'l development: grand strategy to extend political and cultural influence (to secure resources)
 - “Development” to combat communism: If poor countries are not rescued from their poverty they would succumb to communism

Poverty as a problem

- Development = solution to a problem: poverty
- Emergence of 3rd World poverty: post WWII
- Before 1940s (colonial times)
 - Although “natives” could be enlightened by colonisers, not much could be done about their poverty because their economic development is pointless
 - Their capacity at science and technology (= basis for economic progress) was zero

The globalization of poverty

- The construction of 2/3 of the world as poor
- Almost by fiat, two-thirds of the world's peoples were transformed into poor subjects in 1948 when the **World Bank defined as poor** those countries with an **annual per capita income below US\$100**
- And if the problem was one of insufficient income, the **solution** was clearly **economic growth**
- Development would be constructed as the best way **to achieve growth** for those who lagged behind

Why development?

- Because it is strategy best placed to deliver:
 - **Modernisation**: only force capable of destroying archaic superstitions and relations at any cultural, political, social cost
 - **Industrialization and urbanization**: inevitable and necessarily routes to modernization
 - Social, cultural, and political **progress** can be achieved only through **material advancement**

Development: how?

- **Capital investment** = the most important ingredient in economic growth and development
- Underdeveloped countries:
 - trapped in a “vicious circle” of poverty and lack of capital
 - good part of “**badly needed**” **capital** must be **from abroad**
- Absolutely necessary that **governments and international organizations** take active role in promoting and orchestrating necessary efforts to overcome general backwardness and economic underdevelopment
 - States and int’l orgs: active agents for development

Development: how? Practices

Professionalisation of dvpt.

- Developed world major universities
 - “Development Studies” programmes
 - Research on int’l development)
- A will to know everything about the Third World
 - Experts landing to measure, investigate, theorise about Third World societies

Institutionalisation of dvpt.

- Starting in mid-1940s:
 - Int’l organisations (e.g. WB), nat’l planning agencies, int’l aid agencies (DFID), local development agencies, community development committees, private voluntary agencies, NGOs
 - Conferences, international consultant services, local extension practices, etc.
- Development **business**:
 - poverty, illiteracy, hunger
 - basis of a lucrative industry for planners, experts, civil servants

Development: results

- All those orgs + business sometimes benefit poor
- But: failed to solve the basic problems of underdevelopment
- Success:
 - create a type of underdevelopment that is politically and technically manageable
- Popular groups:
 - Discord between institutionalised development vs. situation (conditions) of Third World popular groups

Development: results

- Without claiming that development has only done harm
- Some major harm has been done in the name of development
- E.g. environmental harm
 - Big dams: e.g. the Narmada Dam, India



Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>

Discourses: tools of power

- What does it mean to say development has functioned as a discourse:
 - *Created a space in which only certain things could be said or even imagined*
- Discourse has made possible that development has become an one-way solution
 - To deal with poverty (low GDP)
 - Achieve progress and modernisation
 - With capital from abroad
 - With int'l orgs, agencies and governments facilitating it
 - With developed world unis providing knowledge for making it achieve
 - With businesses delivering it
 - Even though poor may not always escape the poverty trap
 - Even though environmental impacts may be tremendous

Power in political ecology

2. Power from the inside: power as forming subject (Butler, 1997): desire

- *“We are used to thinking about power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates.... This is surely a fair description of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence”.*

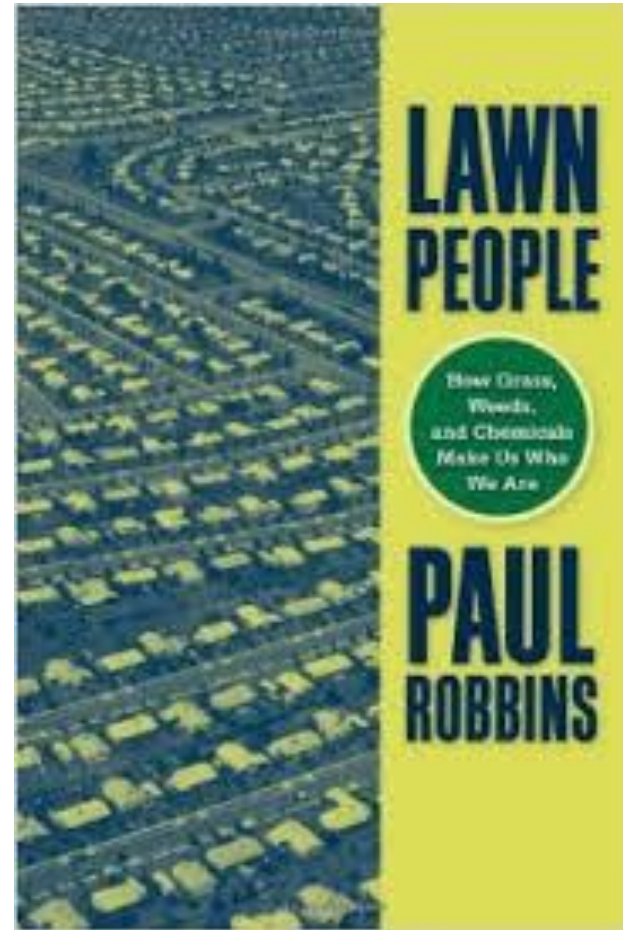
- So, development =
 - Desire: what is desirable for and by Third World countries
 - Forming spaces: interventions in the name of development
 - What we depend for our existence: without development there is no existence
- Those types of PE studies investigate how natural resources, people, and places are constituted (Paulson et al., 2005)

A related but slightly different illustration of how power works from within to achieve the results desired by those powerful without them having to apply force and through voluntary compliance of those victims from environmental change

INTERNALISED POWER

A more recent work

- Paul Robbins.
2007. *Lawn People*



The US Lawn (Robbins, 2007)

- Total area roughly the size of state of 1920s Czechoslovakia, the lawn is one of largest and fastest growing landscapes in the USA.
- The lawn also receives more care, time, and attention from individuals and households than any other natural space.
- Inputs into the lawn—in time, labor, money, and chemicals—have never been higher
- U.S. home- owners spent a total of 1.2 billion dollars just on outdoor insecticides in 1999.
- Total U.S. consumer sales on lawn care (separate from gardening and other outdoor investments) topped US\$ 9 billion (1999)

US Lawn: urban ecological problem on a vast scale (Robbins, 2007)

- Chemicals of lawn maintenance: significant contributors to nonpoint source water quality problems that continue to elude solution (almost 30 years after passage of Clean Water Act)
- Lawn pesticides are applied on a scale to rival agricultural toxins
- Actual care, feeding, and reproduction of this vast expanse of greenery is the business of countless, **independent, individual** people

The question (Robbins, 2007)

- Why lawn managers who are **more aware** of the environmental impacts of chemicals, and are **more socially involved and concerned** about their communities, are those who **apply more intensively chemicals** on their lawns
 - Why do they do this to themselves and their environment?

The answer (study findings)

- Middle-class lawn maintainers (“lawn people”) end up using chemicals which they know that are harmful not only for the environment but also to their own health, because:
 - Hectic lives: no free time
 - Economic/ instrumental logics: housing values
 - The **good citizen**: moral responsibility to the community

Beyond instrumentalism: community

- Despite risks, using chemicals
 - Sign of a **good character**
 - Sign of **social responsibility**
- **Ecological character** of lawn problems: if you eliminate plague it can move next door, so next door needs to apply same level of care
 - Disregard for lawn care: free-riding and **moral neglect**
- Most **important driver** for lawn chemical use:
 - Sense there is a “neighborhood **norm**” (rule) to maintain an aesthetically pleasing lawn
- Decisions about lawn chemical use in terms of something that they **owed** to their **neighbors**
 - “I wouldn’t insult my neighbors by not keeping my house up”

Lawn people: power shaping **subjects**

The argument (Robbins, 2007):

- *Maintenance* of lawn yard landscapes through environmentally harmful lawn chemicals: **internalized** environmental *practice*...
- ...which is:
 - Rooted on **socially enforced** environmental aesthetic
 - That **associates** good citizenship with **environmentally harmful activities** (use of chemicals)

Lawn people: power **shaping** subjects

- Such behaviors **benefit** the corporate entities that produce, package, and market the goods and services that maintain such an aesthetic
- But it cannot be said that these companies **forced** anyone, in any simple way, to act as they do
- Rather, the exercise of **power** is enacted **internally**
- Through **production** of a certain kind of “**subject**,” whose identity as a **good citizen** is **associated** with a set of specific **environmental activities**

☐ The LAWN PEOPLE

Bibliography: main studies

- Blaikie, P., 1985. *The political economy of soil erosion in developing countries*. Longman.
- Escobar, A., 1995. *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of development*. Princeton University Press.
- Robbins, P., 2012. *Lawn people: How grasses, weeds, and chemicals make us who we are*. Temple University Press.