

TES Special Issue on

Power, Development and Environment: An Introduction

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This special issue of TES is the fruit of an initiative taken by a number of Ph.D. students at Roskilde University working with issues concerning the environment and development. Although coming from different academic backgrounds and being engaged in a variety of research topics, their work had taken them to the point where they felt that the concept of power had to be part of their analysis if they were to really understand what was going on – a problem they all needed to deal with in their practical work. A Ph.D. training course was then organised in Nexoe on the Danish Island of Bornholm in June 2004 with presentations and discussions of concepts, theories and methodological aspects of power and empowerment in relation to development and environment. The idea was to give some hands-on analytical frameworks and methodological handles through which they could capture the power relations imbedded in their respective research problems. Selected presentations from lecturers and participants were subsequently worked into the five articles, which have been published in this issue of TES.

Social and Natural Science

Ecological crises, environmental degradation, and resource scarcity resound through the media as central contemporary concerns. However, when academic disciplines try to grapple with these issues, the old division of labour between the natural and social sciences all too often makes communication between disciplines difficult. Even amongst different disciplines within social or natural sciences, interdisciplinary communication represents an important challenge.

Our ambition with this collection of articles is not to promote a truly holistic perspective on the man-nature nexus. It is more modest. The ambition is to promote communication between disciplines from a social science point of view, thus demonstrating how insights from the social sciences may enable us to understand phenomena such as environmental change. Although the contributions in this volume are indeed quite different, they share a broad empirically-based political ecology perspective emphasising the importance of institutions and institutionalisation.

Political Ecology

Political ecology was a term coined in the 1980s to signify efforts to combine the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined perspective on power relations focussing on the dialectic between society and natural resources (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987, p. 17). Political ecology was a refreshing new theoretical perspective on man's relations to nature. First of all, it argued that peoples' use of natural resources was not merely a question of knowledge, and ignorance did not suffice as an explanation for degradation. Instead, social relations, access to and control over resources and power to control institutions were brought into the picture as areas for analysis. What was hitherto seen as a technical problem begging technical solutions was now seen as highly political as well. Later works have built on this perspective and broadened the scope even further. Thus, Peet and Watts (1996) and Bryant and Bailey (1998) made significant contributions linking the question of power to theories of state, social movements and discourse.

Institutionalisation

One of the disturbing contributions from social science to the study of the environment is multiple truths. Sometimes this is caricatured as 'anything goes', but it is more complicated than that. It is not the case that any statement or any perspective is as good as the next one, but rather, that different forms of knowledge compete. A classical controversy between different perspectives of knowledge about the environment exists between Malthus' and Boserup's positions. Basically, Malthus argues that increased population pressure leads to the depletion of resources, famine and the decimation of the population. Boserup, on the other hand, argues that population increase leads to innovation and agricultural transformation. The point is that while both theories may direct our attention to interesting hypotheses, it remains largely an empirical challenge to dis-cover the combination of dynamics at play.

In recent years, the competition between 'scientific' and 'local' knowledge (in the sense of for example contextualised knowledge or experiential knowledge for want of better terms) has been keenly investigated. Two of the newer classics, Tiffen, Mortimore and Gichuki (1994) and Fairhead and Leach (1996), demonstrate how the ecological histories of two areas in Kenya and Guinea defy the predictions of 'scientific' knowledge. However, different forms of knowledge are more and less compatible with policy requirements and thus fare with more or less resistance. Certain 'truths' – though proven false through evidence – die hard. Thus knowledge construction is not merely a cumulative enterprise; it is rather a battlefield (Long and Long 1992). While people's actual organisation of the use of the environment may differ from what certain sciences may prescribe, it need not be anarchistic. It is often based on some knowledge, a particular understanding, it follows certain regularities and constitutes a system. This is not to romanticize particular forms of knowledge. Knowledge may be false, the understanding flawed, the regularities detrimental and the system moribund. But people's relationship with nature and resources is not haphazard and accidental. The relationship is guided by social rules and norms. However, rules and norms have an attractive ambivalence about them. On the one hand, social institutions constitute the fixtures of society, delineate boundaries and limits and signify the 'predictable'. On the other, these very institutions, limits and fixtures are in a sense the primary terrain for efforts directed at change and rearrangement. This tension between people's efforts to solidify, entrench and render social institutions predictable, and efforts to challenge, contest and evade them – and through innovation institutionalise yet others – is not only the generator of social reproduction and change but one of the central puzzles in social theory and analysis (Benjaminsen and Lund 2002).

The fact that some institutions, rights and social relations appear to endure and remain stable or clear is not a sign that nothing is happening. On the contrary! Various actors, individuals and organisations are actively reproducing these social relations.

Process

Two points must be made here. First, social institutions such as property regimes are not ‘things’ which are there or not, they are what people do. Practice is, as it were, a continual interpretation and reinterpretation of what the rule really means. This means that when studying the social organisation of resource use, we need to see organisation not only as a structure of rules and means, but as a process of organising. And second, institutions are only as robust, solid and enduring as the ongoing reproduction or re-enactment which enables them to persist. One might lose sight of this when talking about ‘old’ institutions as if they were perpetuated by some mysterious force. They are no more solid than people make them. Consequently, securing rights or getting access to resources is not a ‘single-event’. On the contrary, we are dealing with ‘life-time-arenas’. One does not acquire land e.g. tenure security once and for all. Or establish clear rules once and for all. Much of the social science literature demonstrates how rights depend on social relationships and how they, in turn, must be cultivated to continue to yield the various rights (Lund 2002). This is hard work. It often entails conflict. To persevere requires stamina, power and organisational knowledge.

A social science perspective on power, environment and development must engage the dynamics of establishing rules, enacting and transgressing them, building structure and circumventing it, creating symbols and manipulating them. This dynamic can be found in virtually all aspects of the social, in the operation of organisations, in law, in social movements, in government policy, etc. The imagination with which strategies to these different ends are pursued seems boundless. Economic power, political acumen, organisational dexterity and mastery of discourse only hint at the activities undertaken by people to secure, improve or defend their dealings with the environment.

The Contributions

The selected contributions illustrate the basic point about the multiple perspectives as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary social science epistemology.

Monique Nuijten has been working with the concept of power due to her interest of land use and development. Her article *Power in Practice: a Force Field Approach to Natural Resource Management* explores the importance of land in political struggles (power struggles). Nuijten has developed a ‘force field’ approach towards power that conceives of power as “relational” and the result of the working of multiple, intertwined institutions. She claims that the role of land is not just related to the productive use of the land, but also to its ideological or symbolic meanings. Her study is inspired by the Foucauldian concept of power, and provides a hands-on example of translating the rather general concepts of Foucault into empirical research from agrarian communities in Mexico and Peru.

Mike Parnwell’s article *The Power to Change: Rebuilding Sustainable Livelihoods in North-East Thailand* is focussed on the power relations between local communities and central government (or the “development state”) in Thailand. Like Nuijten, Parnwell adopts a Foucauldian inspired perspective on power that sees power as a shifting network of alliances of a shifting terrain of practice and discursively constituted interest. His paper describes how a cluster of rural communities in North-East Thailand has managed to reverse more than two decades of environmental degradation that had resulted from relentless pursuit of modern economic development, resource exploitation and ecosystem transformation. The paper identifies the key actors and factors that lie behind this ‘power shift’, and sets these against a background of democratisation processes and localist discourse in post-crisis Thailand.

Franz von Benda-Beckmann’s article is an attempt to explore the conceptual and empirical relations between law and power in disputes about natural resources and land rights. In *Pak Dusa’s Law: thoughts on Law, Legal Knowledge and Power*, the author examines the ways in which law, legal knowledge and power become involved in social interaction taking place within actual and imagined power fields. Illustrating his thoughts by narrating the experiences of Pak Dusa, a villager on Ambon in Eastern Indonesia, von Benda-

Beckmann argues that the main difference between constructions of law in legal decisions of courts and by other actors outside courts lies in the courts' legally constituted position to exercise power, more than in the participating actors' knowledge of the law. But the Pak Dusa case also shows that court decisions enter a wider power field in which they may lose their legally constructed significance, and where self-constructed, unauthorized legal claims from a contesting actor like Pak Dusa may carry the day.

The last two articles return to issues of sustainable natural resource management. In *Conjunctions of Governance: the State and the Conservation-Development Nexus in Southern Africa*, **Bram Büscher and Ton Dietz** examine the role of the state in issues of governance and power over the conjunction of natural resources management and development in Southern Africa. After some decades of discourses moving from the 'fortress conservation paradigm' to the 'community based conservation paradigm', powerful actors on the conservation scene in Southern Africa now claim that local people in Africa have not been able to effectively conserve their wildlife and biodiversity. Therefore, a more 'enforcing style' of conservation, separated from local people, is needed again, they argue. The article uses this changing discourse in the 'environment-development nexus' as a starting point for an analysis of governance practices in South Africa through a case study on how different states (Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) jointly try to manage the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park.

Heini Vihemäki's article on *Politics of Participatory Forest Conservation: Cases from the East Usambara Mountains, Tanzania* addresses governance at another level. The article explores the gap between formal institutional rhetoric about participation and actual practices of participatory approaches to forest conservation. It illustrates how the implementation of participatory conservation strategies is shaping and shaped by the power relationships between State and community actors. Economic and political interests of the actors involved as well as the history of state-people relationships intervene in the participatory processes and make forest control a much more complex, fragmented and dynamic issue.

In conclusion, although treating different issues at different levels, the articles converge on having an inclination towards a Foucauldian perspective on power. In this perspective, the social construction (and deconstruction) of discourse used by social actors to give meaning to their practices is a core element of study. Underlying this process of construction is the notion of 'govern-mentality', our accepting to live in societies where we are governed (disciplined) by someone else 'for our own good'. The social dynamics evolving from this is one of the important keys to understand the linkage between power, development, and environment.

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