

## COMMENTARY

# Emancipatory Political Ecology Pedagogy In and Out of the Classroom

Simon Batterbury\* and Denisse Rodríguez\*\*

**Abstract:** In this brief commentary, we reflect on two aspects of contemporary political ecology scholarship: The first is a reflexive assessment of socio-political relational positionalities as a necessary condition, not only to challenge but also to act upon socio-ecological injustices. Second, we examine the effective delivery of cross-cultural pedagogies of care that inform the development of self-reliant political ecology (PE) scholars and/or activists within the constraints of neoliberal education. We argue that both issues are relevant to position PE as an emancipatory pedagogy and praxis in a decolonizing world.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As this special issue of *Ecology, Economy and Society* notes, political ecology (PE) has sustained interest from students and critical scholars as a framework to interrogate intersecting injustices resulting from unequal access to resources, that is, the “relationships between environmental change and political, economic, and social processes” (Meek and Lloro-Bidart 2017, 213). Political ecology today has a much broader geographical and linguistic spread than in previous decades; it circles the globe—including South Asia and Latin America—and intermingles with other progressive frameworks and scholarly approaches that were not envisaged 30 years ago. It is an interdisciplinary field by nature, with roots in Marxism and critical thinking in the social sciences. Despite this, it does not ignore environmental processes. It tackles the injustices and power inequalities that lead to ecological and social inequities, along with challenging

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‘apolitical’ explanations. Political ecology has explanatory power, some of which is harnessed by social movements, critics of capitalism, and grassroots organizations. Speaking “truth to power” and exposing injustice does not always receive a warm reception in more mainstream scholarly and policy environments. Another challenge—especially in the search for adequate pedagogies—is that PE is difficult to pin down in terms of methodology. Political ecology entails critical praxis, but there is no standardized way of “doing political ecology” (Batterbury 2015).

In this commentary, we discuss two issues that inspire us to think of the future of political ecology in a decolonizing world as a form of emancipatory pedagogy and praxis. We explore the relational positionalities emerging from practising political ecology, and the frictions unfolding from including political ecology pedagogies as decolonial praxis in a curriculum determined by the neoliberal university. We also discuss the affective labour of pedagogies of care that are capable of supporting students in this process. We conclude by highlighting how these PE pedagogies contribute to blurring the separation between teaching, research, and action through service or engagement, activism, advocacy, etc, as increasingly promoted by academic institutions or desired by scholars and students.

We write as authors with different positionalities. Both of us are based at the University of Melbourne in Australia. Simon Batterbury experienced the excitement of thinking with PE to understand the multi-scalar driving forces of land degradation in the tropics, as a British graduate student in a radical PhD programme in the USA in the 1980s. He then conducted “classic” political ecology working with Mossi farmers and a Western development project in Burkina Faso, and later worked in Niger, Timor-Leste, and New Caledonia-Kanaky (Batterbury 2018). He has been fortunate enough to have edited the *Journal of Political Ecology* for 20 years. Denisse Rodríguez, an Afro-Ecuadorian early career researcher and political ecologist interested in post-extractive futures, is committed in her pedagogical role to decolonial approaches to teaching, in order to overcome the cognitive injustices reproduced by Western and Westernized neoliberal universities (Grosfoguel 2013; Santos 2008, 2018).

## **2. SYNTHESIZING POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THE NORTH AND SOUTH IN EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGIES**

Rodríguez’s experience of learning and then teaching PE in two Australian universities contrasts greatly with her initial experience studying PE at

*Instituto de Estudios Ecológicos del Tercer Mundo*<sup>1</sup> and assisting in the early stages of planning a new masters in Political Ecology and Alternatives to Development<sup>2</sup> at *Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar* in Ecuador. At the risk of generalizing, in Western education institutions, it is common for PE to sensitize students to the struggles and inequalities experienced in the Global South by exposing the prevailing power asymmetries that determine unequal access to resources, but the PE “from the South” is rather different, with an innate emancipatory purpose (Leff 2015). It offers grounds for local people afflicted or potentially affected by socio-ecological conflicts to diagnose their issues and to mobilize and resist processes of dispossession, their marginalization from the governance of resources, and neglect of ontological differences (Escobar 2016; Meek 2020). So, the focus, frameworks, and methodologies diverge, but the pedagogical objectives in both regions challenge students, scholars, and activists to reflect upon and assess their socio-political positionalities and ontologies, which will determine how they interpret and engage with the conflicts and issues identified.

This leads us to recognize the potential of PE as emancipatory pedagogy and praxis because a commitment to doing PE as a teacher, student, or practitioner entails an awareness of the relational positionalities developed in the process of studying, researching, and/or acting politically on socio-ecological injustices (Crossa 2012). This was largely missing in the early political ecology taught three decades ago in Western universities, where the focus was much more on scholarly analysis of complex problems, which was not guided by decolonial thinking.

Political ecology—viewed as emancipatory pedagogy and praxis—also entails a transformation of the role of the pedagogue, who, instead of instructing, encourages critical thought and self-reliance—letting students run free, through a pedagogy of care in and out of the classroom. She or he “would seek a less rigid, less hierarchical, more convivial, and more embodied teaching style” (Dunlap *et al.* 2023, 11). The pedagogue also adopts an active role in subverting the geopolitics of knowledge (Lander 2000; Walsh 2010) by introducing students to diverse epistemologies, ontologies, and knowledge-holders. The main constraint to this pedagogical challenge, however, is that it conflicts with the priorities of neoliberal

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<sup>1</sup> An institute where ecological thought and praxis are developed by and for epistemologies of the South (Santos 2016) with a greater focus on supporting socio-ecological resistance movements and their defense of nature and territories, according to their stated mission and actions over the years (See <https://www.estudiosecologistas.org/>).

<sup>2</sup> The masters programme is currently running (See <https://www.uasb.edu.ec/programa/ecologia-politica-y-alternativas-al-desarrollo/>).

universities and sometimes with the precarity of their academic staff (Pascoe *et al.* 2020). There is normally little incentive to guide students towards assuming a role in socio-ecological change themselves. On the one hand, universities “focus on immediately inserting into the labour market graduates who conform with the system, instead of aiming at transforming it” (Rodríguez 2022, 116). On the other, there is an inherent prioritization of knowledge that discourages an engagement with diverse knowledge systems that challenge “incontestable” notions of progress and development (Hall and Tandon 2017). This is despite being at the expense of plundering resources and territories, and further marginalizing certain communities and their lifeways (Rodríguez 2018). In consequence, a commitment to these PE pedagogies becomes a sort of unrecognized affective labour—as we will discuss in the following section—and shows a responsibility to decolonize education at the margins, subverting the marketization of graduates as individuals and the knowledge learned in a university environment.

### **3. PEDAGOGIES OF CARE IN AND FOR A DECOLONIZING WORLD**

The divergent epistemologies and commitments behind PE pedagogy in Western institutions and PE in the Global South cannot easily be reconciled. Nevertheless, we have proposed “pedagogies of care” as a potential bridge between them. One approach to a general pedagogy of care is to treat the university classroom as a garden, but not as an assiduously curated and managed one. Political ecology students are nourished and encouraged to experiment, grow, and develop their symbiotic relationships based on mutual investigation and support. As a thought experiment, seeing a field of study like PE as a garden means helping its components to flourish interdependently. There are teams of gardeners for sure, diverse and with different positionalities, backgrounds, and experiences (Mintz 2018). The “gardener”—the political ecologist or pedagogue—gains some satisfaction from the material and aesthetic qualities of a garden, but there is a commitment to see that the class of students continues to grow, evolve, and form its own networks. In parallel, the more common “seeding” metaphor in PE (Robbins 2019; Pitts *et al.* 2022) has been used to refer to nourishing and supporting social movements and activism rather than pedagogical inquiry itself. To follow the analogy, we hope that “seeds” are cast well beyond the garden. Pitts *et al.* (2021), reporting on their participation in a political ecology class at the University of Alabama, say that “seed-work...can reveal pathways towards environmental justice and the dismantling of forms of structural oppression” (303), and they used their class to “imagine ways to create new spaces of resistance” (304).

The opposite of this approach to teaching is to preach, instruct, or fill students with knowledge in classic Western university mode—about the evils of capitalism, transnational corporations, mining pollution, and so on (Freire 2000). While an interrogative “hatchet” (Robbins 2019) should be part of our teaching, to explore these processes, using it for ideological control should not (Mintz, 2018). Political ecologists need to deliberate, explore, and help create better-decolonized worlds and environments. This normative commitment is a critical challenge for our century as we engage with planetary crises in post-pandemic times.

More concretely, while the components, sequences, and foci of our syllabi might diverge when presenting an overview of PE themes or narratives in class (Robbins 2019), our main aim as “gardeners” is to encourage students to choose their own topic of interest and then explore it in greater depth through a research-based task. From our experience, open PE assignments like this balance “thinking” with engagement, as long as the pedagogical approach benefits from enough time and commitment on the part of the “gardener”. As a result, students are nurtured through the learning they obtain from independent study, but then they scatter, propagating new plants or forests autonomously or in collaboration with others. Students from the Global North and South leave the class and develop their own projects and ideas with better—but of course never complete—knowledge of the world they are stepping into, as evidenced in Batterbury’s list of research students going back to the 1990s. They illustrate diverse pathways into activism, advocacy, further study, and professional success.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Political ecologists working in universities and colleges adopt a multifaceted role, commonly constrained by the neoliberal politics of education that prioritizes their personal research programmes over teaching and engagement activities. Therefore, they partition their professional lives, setting clear boundaries between them, and in Western universities, even belittling successes in activities other than research while measuring teaching by evaluation scoring, class numbers, and (in some systems) fee incomes. However, a commitment to *doing* political ecology in and out of academic institutions entails resisting these corporate practices (Dunlap *et al* 2023). Inevitably, politics is enacted through pedagogies (Meek and Lloro-Bidart 2017), and for PE scholars, it is fundamental to teach, engage, stay agile, and resist.

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<sup>3</sup> See Batterbury’s list of postgraduate and honours students supervised here; <https://www.simonbatterbury.net/simonbatterburystudents.pdf>

Our loose adoption of a gardening metaphor describes some ways in which teaching in PE may be envisaged, but there is of course more to do in order to defend against destructive resource governance and attacks on sustainable livelihoods and diverse lifeways. PE itself is a movement. It is lived and breathed. As one of us argued that we “...need to be participating in policy processes; keeping up our teaching; sharpening our media skills, and reaching out rather than inward. An affirmative political ecology requires agile activism; ethical scholarship; and partnership. Not just ‘telling it and thinking it’, but also ‘speaking it and breathing it’.”<sup>4</sup> (Batterbury 2018, 127).

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4 Reference is to the words of an early Bob Dylan song: “And I’ll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it” – Bob Dylan – “A Hard Rain’s a Gonna Fall” (1962, issued 1963).

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