

Power Perspective in Political Ecology

Introduction

Power is inevitable at the core of political ecology. In however way political ecology is defined, the role of *power* is at the core of it. For instance, political ecology in the view Greenberg and Park (1994) is a way of creating a synergy between a political economy that aligns *power* distribution with ecological analysis and economic activities in a wider version of bio-environmental relations. Political ecology explained by Bryant (1998) is the dynamic in politics that is associated with "discursive struggle" and material in the environment of less developed nations, showing how unequal relation in *power* makes up a political environment. In the view of Robbins (2004), empirical exploration that shows the changes occurring in an environment in clear connection to *power* is termed political ecology. Political ecology in the case of Wisner (2015) is a societal and environmental study with an emphasis on socio-economic and political *power*.

With power taking the central role in political ecology, there is a need to clarify the perspectives of power and the contributors to these perspectives.

Actor-oriented power perspectives:

According to the actor-oriented power perspectives, power is exercised by actors which are contrary to the presumption of power being perceived as a force likely to pass individuals with no consciousness. Fredrick Engelstad (1999), a Norwegian sociologist explained the concept of power as the combination of relationality, causality, and intentionality. The implication of this is that actors are perceived as power carriers in a significant way by which through action a certain intention (intentionality) is achieved, action occurs between at least two actors (relationality), and intended results are produced by action (causality). Viewing the power perspective from the angle of actor-oriented, Dowding (2008) submitted that power is linked to the agency, and this does not take away the importance of structure. Rather, while seen actor's use of power as a constraint, it is also propelled by structures.

The contributions made by actor-oriented power theory are given by Max Weber (1964) where he explained power to be people's ability to the realization of their wills irrespective of the resistance posed by others. An instance given by Robert Dahl (1957) is the case where actor A exercises power over actor B by getting actor B to execute a task that actor B will otherwise not do. The extreme case of this is when some group of individuals is mandated to carry out the task contrary to their thought or will.

Svarstad, Benjaminsen, and Overå (2018) held that the theory of actor-oriented power help in providing conceptual distinctions with useful insight into the theoretical elements that are vital in studying political ecology. While there are actors who either exercise or try to put power into use in diverse ways, there are also actors who encounter resistance from their oppositions and other

forces. An instance of these forces is the resisting the fulfilment of actors' intentions by other opposition who are more powerful. It can also come in form of institutional structural constraints emanating from the outcome of intended actions.

The use of power by actors who exercise environmental interventions and actors who resist such interventions are oftentimes the emphasis of scholars of political ecology. However, when environmental interventions result in environmental degradations, scholars of political ecology throw their supports to actors who resist such exercise of environmental interventions. Actors exercising environmental interventions include corporate organizations, governmental and non-governmental organizations (Bergius et al. 2018; Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016; Igoe and Croucher 2007) while actors that resist them include groups such as peasants, fishermen, or pastoralists, by exercising counter-power using various kinds of resistance, or active involvement (Gingembre 2015; Holmes 2007; Rocheleau 2015; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015; Wanvik and Caine 2017; Hall et al. 2015).

Neo-Marxist power perspectives

Amongst the foundations of political ecology is the political economy thought of Marxist which centered on the inequalities that emerged from global capitalism. However, the power perspectives of Marx are most likely highlighted even though there are several perspectives of power in political ecology influenced directly or indirectly by Marx (Svarstad, Benjaminsen, and Overå, 2018). The Marxist main focus under capitalism is in relation to class and the stability of reproducing this class relation (Isaac, 1987). Marx also placed human agency as the most important of his power concept with the human agency being socially conditioned as seen in his quote below:

"Men make their history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past (Marx 1852:5)".

Thus, Marx's power theory which formed his perspective of power is the understanding of human agency as being constrained by social structure. As structure produces the potentials and extent for power exertion, the human agency is reproducing the structure. This is illustrated by Isaac (1987) using the powerful David Rockefeller (1915 to 2017). Isaac (1987) is quoted below:

"But a social theory of power must explain what kinds of social relations exist and how power is distributed by these relations, such that it is possible for David Rockefeller to have the power that he has. To do this is not to deny that it is he who possesses this power, nor to deny those personal attributes determining the particular manner in which he exercises it. It is simply to insist that the power individuals possess has social conditions of existence and that it is these conditions that should be the primary focus of theoretical analysis (Isaac 1987: 81)".

Poststructuralist power perspectives

The poststructuralist power perspective is the domain Michel Foucault's work with its application in political ecology. The poststructuralist power perspectives can be in three dimensions such as; bio-power, governmentality, and discursive power.

Bio-power indicates that to secure life, governments have shown concern on the population's qualities of life such as health and means of improving health. Academic studies in areas of public health, social sciences, and demography have emphasized a lot about this. Foucault in his work explained how through the knowledge of power, people have learned how they should behave. In so doing, Foucault separates sovereign power from bio-power. Where sovereign power is termed "take life or let live", the bio-power "make life or let die" (Foucault 1978). While human as specie is continuously elaboration in conformity to nature, the superior one will intervene, acting on the environmental condition if the species of human are to be altered. Therefore, bio-power aim in terms of governance and knowledge is to ascertain environmental issues as core concerns.

Political ecology emphasized that understanding how power works in environmental governance follows Foucault's notation of "governmentality" (Agrawal 2005; Johnsen and Benjaminsen 2017; Fletcher 2010; and Valdivia 2015). Foucault sees governmentality as the means employed by the government to make its citizens behave in line with the priorities of government (Foucault 1991, 2008). Rob Fletcher (2010) separates governmentality into four kinds. First is "discipline" which ensures that the citizens internalize specific manners like ethical standards and social norms. The second is the "truth" which is a way of governing citizens using truth-defining standards like religion. The third is "Neoliberal rationality" which is a motivational structure formed and used to improve outcomes. The fourth is "Sovereign power" used to govern based on rules and punishment for faulting the rules. According to Fletcher (2010), these governmentalities may conflict, work alone, or overlap. Also, the first two are dependent on humans believing government priorities, the second two do not but are seen as of importance.

Lastly, "discursive power" manifest when actors (corporate organization, governmental, and non-governmental organizations) make people or group imbibe and add to the reproduction of the discourses they produce. Unlike in other fields, in political ecology, discourses are studied in line with a critical realist epistemology (Bassett and Bi Zuéli 2000; Forsyth and Walker 2008; Kull 2004; Leach and Mearns 1996; Svarstad 2002). There are instances where the formation of discursive power is traced to a state's colonial era when efforts are made in the appropriation of new territories. Going by the basis of Foucault's political-ecological discursive power, it becomes imperative to mention that, there exist various perspectives to those of Foucault with wider space for human agency.

Comparing between bio-power, governmentality, and discursive power, both governmentality, and discursive power can be regarded as a theoretical perspective with significant importance

while bio-power can be regarded as a topical concern identified by Foucault as the core of modern-day governments.

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