

Political ecology and the epistemology of social justice

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Received 9 June 2006; received in revised form 11 December 2006

Abstract

Piers Blaikie's writings on political ecology in the 1980s represented a turning point in the generation of environmental knowledge for social justice. His writings since the 1980s demonstrated a further transition in the identification of social justice by replacing a Marxist and eco-catastrophist epistemology with approaches influenced by critical realism, post-structuralism and participatory development. Together, these works demonstrated an important engagement with the politics of how environmental explanations are made, and the mutual dependency of social values and environmental knowledge. Yet, today, the lessons of Blaikie's work are often missed by analysts who ask what is essentially political or ecological about political ecology, or by those who argue that a critical approach to environmental knowledge should mean deconstruction alone. This paper reviews Blaikie's work since the 1980s and focuses especially on the meaning of 'politics' within his approach to political ecology. The paper argues that Blaikie's key contribution is not just in linking environmental knowledge and politics, but also in showing ways that environmental analysis and policy can be reframed towards addressing the problems of socially vulnerable people. This pragmatic co-production of environmental knowledge and social values offers a more constructive means of building socially just environmental policy than insisting politics or ecology exist independently of each other, or believing environmental interventions are futile in a post-Latourian world.

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Keywords: Political ecology; Social vulnerability; Epistemology; Science studies; Soil erosion; Nepal

1. Introduction

One of the most distinctive themes in the writings of Piers Blaikie over the years is a strong political imperative and desire to correct social injustices. On the first page of *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, Blaikie (1985, p. 1) wrote: '[this] is not a neutral book. It takes sides and argues a position because soil erosion *is* a political-economic issue, and even a position of so-called neutrality rests upon partisan assumptions' (emphasis in original).

Yet, despite such statements, it has become almost accepted wisdom that Blaikie's early work was somehow underpoliticized. Reviewing this famous book in 1997, Michael Watts (1997, p. 77) wrote, 'the distinctively political content of political ecology was (and is) sadly missing in much of Blaikie's work...'

What does this statement mean about the application of 'politics' in political ecology? At one level, this comment refers to the generally uncomplicated analysis of political processes in Blaikie's early work – a criticism Blaikie later acknowledged (Blaikie, 1997, p. 79). But at a wider level, this statement also indicates differences in opinion concerning the normative objectives of political ecology versus its analytical procedures. Blaikie clearly expressed political intentions in his work, but Watts believed his methods were insufficient.

This paper argues that Piers Blaikie's writings on political ecology should not be dismissed as being underpoliticized, but instead be seen as important first steps for a new and engaged focus on the politics of environmental epistemology (or, what we know about environment, with whose inputs, and with what effects). Rather than seeking to demonstrate how a particular approach to 'politics' could be applied to predefined notions of 'environment,' Blaikie sought instead to demonstrate how social values and envi-

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ronmental knowledge are co-produced. Moreover, he tried to show that changing these values, or diversifying the social framings of environmental analysis, may result in more socially just environmental knowledge and policy.

But at the same time, Blaikie's own approach to achieving these objectives changed over time. In the early 1980s, he and his collaborators relied upon a generally structuralist Marxian analysis of environmental and social change. After this period, Blaikie rejected structuralist analysis and instead sought more locally-determined, discursive and participatory approaches to environmental crisis and social vulnerability. These different approaches, and their implications for how environmental knowledge is made, have raised further challenges for providing a socially relevant direction to physical environmental science and policy.

This paper assesses Blaikie's contributions to political ecology, and in particular his approach to the co-production of environmental knowledge and social values. The paper starts by reviewing Blaikie's (and his collaborators) work during the early 1980s, and then moves on to summarise Blaikie's proposed alternatives to structuralist analysis. After this, the paper considers the criticisms and dilemmas resulting from this and political analysis of environmental epistemology in general. The paper concludes by arguing that Blaikie's approach to reframing environmental knowledge in the terms of social justice also offer insights for wider debates about the politicized collection and use of knowledge in environmental analysis. Insights from critical science and the sociology of scientific knowledge may provide useful ways to build on Blaikie's work.

2. A new paradigm?

The writings of Piers Blaikie and his collaborators in the 1980s represented a significant turning point towards seeing environmental changes in social and political terms. My own experiences as an undergraduate offer one small example of how these were seen. Some fellow students and I were planning to undertake research in Nepal. When reading about the country, we came across *Nepal in Crisis* (1980), co-authored by Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon.

Nepal in Crisis was different. Most writing about Nepal described the distinctiveness of its cultures and landscapes, or portrayed Nepal as a passive recipient of aid. *Nepal in Crisis*, however, adopted a structural global political economy approach to explain social marginalization and environmental degradation simultaneously. Indeed, the image of combined economic and ecological decline was both urgent and worrying:

Nepal is now in a state of crisis, fundamentally rooted in a failure of productive organization associated with its economic and political underdevelopment. Already there are frequent famines, and the processes of erosion and ecological decline, coupled with continuing population growth, will contribute to an

increase in apparently 'natural' disasters in the future (Blaikie et al., 1980, p. 5).

It is worth noting that today, these and other authors now criticize this vision and especially the so-called 'Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation' – in which population pressure and commercialization may lead to a downward spiral of deforestation and land failure (Blaikie et al., 2002; Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004; Ives, 2004). But for we callow students at the time, this was exciting stuff. To date, we had only studied 'soil erosion' as a dry geomorphological subject, where the writings of scientists such as Schumm or Trimble highlighted presented erosion in terms of thresholds or tradeoffs of biophysical surface processes. In the writings of Blaikie and his colleagues, however, erosion was a symptom of dysfunctional societies and economies, and impacted mainly on the poorest and most vulnerable people.

This approach was later expanded in Blaikie's single-authored book, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985). This work both elaborated the political discussion of erosion's causes and impacts, and recognized the diverse social contexts in which erosion is considered problematic. Crucially, the point behind Blaikie's work seemed to be a radical approach to epistemology – suggested by works such as *Radical Geography* (Peet, 1977) – that empiricism itself was political, and researchers should not accept orthodox explanations of problems from physical science or expert agencies uncritically. Unlike orthodox approaches to soil erosion, Blaikie's work suggested that researchers had the opportunity to create new and more socially just worlds by refocusing scientific research in line with development objectives. Rather geekishly, we wondered: Is this a paradigm shift occurring before our eyes?

According to Blaikie, this was a paradigm shift. He wrote: '[it] is not just a question of a comprehensive and intellectually satisfying method for studying soil erosion. The approach here is in direct conflict with both the dominant conventional wisdom about soil erosion... and with the institutions charged to deal with it' (1983: 29). And that paradigm shift was decidedly political. The final chapter of *Political Economy of Soil Erosion* pointed to vested interests in both creating and measuring erosion: 'a principal conclusion of this book is that soil erosion in lesser developed countries will not be substantially reduced unless it seriously threatens the accumulation possibilities of the dominant classes' (Blaikie, 1985, p. 147).

But by this stage, it was also clear that these approaches were being questioned. *Nepal in Crisis* and other works (Blaikie, 1981, 1983) adopted an approach decidedly rooted in structural Marxian political economy. *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion*, however, began to acknowledge more diverse root causes of degradation, and examined the social and institutional influences on environmental knowledge itself. These alternative influences became more prominent in Blaikie's writings after the 1980s.

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