

The Political Eco-

W
e
a
t
h
e
r

l
w
nomy

n

of Soil
e

t

S
c
a
p
e
g
o
a
t

i

e

8

v

r

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of Piers Blaikie's book The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries, and since it was published in 1985 it has become a foundational text of political ecology. Its explanation of how material things like the weather and the soil are co-produced in the sphere of economy and politics is now recognized as a general method of analysis—a Blaikian one. Scapegoat sat down with Piers Blaikie to find out what has happened in political ecology since the publication of his book thirty years ago.

Scapegoat

So what is political ecology, and how has it developed over the last three decades?

Piers Blaikie

Political ecology (PE) is the constantly renewed and reflexive relationship between what people do with “nature,” or what they care to define as environmental resources, and why they do it. I say reflexive because the history of how people use resources has a current bearing on things when you're trying to find out what the problem is now. History is very important, and it is constantly emerging, so political ecology is about the constantly emerging relationships between environment and politics. For the past twenty years or so it has broadened its epistemological stance from a structural basis for explanation of these relationships to a more postmodern one, where interpretation and communication about ecological issues are key. Political ecology was

first written about as a self-defined set of issues in development studies, and fieldwork was located almost exclusively in Africa and Asia. (See, for example, Michael Watts's Silent Violence, my book The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries, Harold Brookfield's and my Land Degradation and Society, and Bryant and Bailey's Third World Political Ecology). In the late 1990s, political ecology was “repatriated” to Anglophone countries, especially the USA and U.K. with lively literatures in both French and German academic publications. Since then there has been an astonishing flowering of PE as it has engaged with a wide range of other disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, medical sciences, policy studies, biology, ecology, the politics of science, and urban geography, to list a few. This has meant that political ecology has long been a “border product,” having to negotiate across intellectual boundaries in the face of seemingly incompatible theories, epistemologies, and disciplinary etiquettes. Thus, PE constantly reveals new connections, new challenges, and new worldviews, but with these great opportunities come serious challenges.

Scapegoat

How did you originally come to the subject of the political economy of soil?

Piers Blaikie

I came out of a geomorphological, physical geography background. I did my Final Dissertation on pebble

size and river channel morphology in a Scottish river. That was very interesting, and I was lucky enough to have some brilliant positivist teachers at Cambridge: Peter Haggett, a quantitative human geographer, and Dick Chorley, a geomorphologist. But I came out feeling very much a scientific, positivist, quantitative person who had to prove my way in the world by doing good statistics. Then I came to this place (The School of Development Studies, as it was then called, at the University of East Anglia). I worked with a lot of different people with different political views and disciplinary backgrounds, and I got interested in what it might mean to politicize geomorphology. Then a couple of colleagues and I went to Nepal on a large research project studying the impacts of road construction, and boy! There I was talking to farmers in their own language about how they saw their own geomorphology. That was completely fascinating.

Scapegoat

You've worked quite extensively in Nepal. Has the understanding of soil erosion changed there at all since the 1980s?

Piers Blaikie
I think there's been quite a lot of technical advances and progress made by throwing out a lot of previously held broad-brush approaches and generalizations. Way back in the 1970s, E.P. Eckholm wrote a book called Losing Ground, with a chapter on Nepal. If you go to Nepal even now

you'll see a lot of lost ground, a lot of sheet erosion, gullies eating away at hillsides, and not much forest in certain areas. In the 1980s, the typical reaction was "My God, it's probably down to the usual causes: farmers' ignorance, and population growth." In 2013, our understanding of what's happening is totally different. This idea of environmental degradation caused by human action has capsized like an iceberg in summer. The rate of anthropomorphic (or human-induced) erosion is now thought to be much less serious than previously stated. The rate of deforestation—and there is an enormous debate about this—is seen to be very much less than had been thought previously. If you compare photographs from mountaineers climbing the Himalayas in the 1920s with ones from today, in many places there's actually more forest now. It turns out that the farmers know what the hell they're doing, and what they're doing is a kind of subaltern science, handling natural erosion on the whole very well indeed. What is crucial to understand is that erosion is a natural condition on these mountains. I've talked to farmers at length about what they're doing, and it's quite clear that the natural rate of erosion in the Himalayas in certain locations is very high. This is what researchers in the past didn't understand. So, a completely different view prevails now. The natural science research into environmental degradation until the 1980s looked so convincing, and you know, there are volumes of it, like

detailed stuff on the shape of leaves in the forest and the size of droplets and the velocity of those droplets from a certain tree falling to the forest floor and causing degradation, etc.—papers with an index of 300 references! That body of science identified what it saw as widespread evidence of human-induced accelerated erosion. Well, nowadays the credibility of that science has been seriously undermined. It was missing an understanding of how landscapes are constantly emerging phenomena, and that they emerge in partnership with human culture throughout history. Now, there are places in Nepal where people do exacerbate soil erosion. I know a few specific areas in Nepal where it's really quite a big problem, because the land is just very vulnerable to natural erosion. Where the most recent uplift of mountains has taken place, in the Siwaliks for example, there are areas of very recently uplifted hills with unconsolidated sands, gravel and stones lying around and you farm that at your peril. There are a few other places in Nepal where there's accelerated erosion, but in general the farmers always know it's a problem that they are coping with (or attempting to cope with) rather than heedlessly causing it. They consider it simply a condition they have to run with.

Scapegoat

And if we keep following the movement of this loose soil in the Himalayas down the mountain, we find that over the last few million years it's been filling up the Gobi desert, and then blowing east across

China every spring in massive dust storms. A portion of this material forms the Loess plateau, which is roughly the size of France, hundreds of metres thick, and composed entirely of eroded material deposited by the wind. Now of course the fear is that this soil, which is entirely the product of erosion, will itself erode. The Loess Plateau has been called “the most highly erodible soil on earth,” and it's a major breadbasket for China. Here again we have farmers trying to farm highly erodible soil, and again we have a geological explanation that stretches back into deep time for why that's hard. To what extent is the political economy of soil always an account of the conflict between fixed property and moving ground?

Piers Blaikie

Well, understanding anthropogenic soil erosion in any specific instance is usually a complex process requiring a long historical perspective on the reflexive relationships between landscape and human action. In short, it requires a detailed, time-based understanding of the agrarian political economy. A list of issues would keep this interview going on all night, but a sample might include: land tenure systems, land distribution, government policy, the evolution of technical knowledge and practices (for example, tree coppicing, composting technologies, ploughing practices, stocking density, agricultural terrace design), and so on and so on! In short, the management of soil touches the deepest and most fundamental ways a society works.

Scapegoat

Yes, even though your book ostensibly confines itself to the political economy of soil erosion in developing countries, looking at farming for instance, I think you make it clear the extent to which everything a society does and makes passes through the soil at some point. It makes the project of writing the political economy of soil in general seem like an impossibly large project! How has political ecology research on soil developed over the last thirty years?

Piers Blaikie

The political approach taken by my book and others written at that time, broadly labeled “political ecology,” has really grown. Most recently, the book Ecology, Soils and the Left by Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), for example, has a bibliography of about 500 references. There have also been recurring challenges, sometimes ill-addressed, involving successfully crossing the boundaries between the technical and political—you have to be knowledgeable and fluent in both. If soil science and social science are regarded as independent from each other, then political ecology’s claim to new insights as a border product remains unfulfilled. And the acknowledgement of political ecological approaches to environmental issues by public bodies (the World Bank, FAO, or the Global Environment Facility) has been either absent or trivially brief. No surprise there, hey!

Now, I think that an attempt to trace (and claim) a direct intellectual

ancestry of a book upon current academic debate is pointless (and, if attempted by the author, vain and self-glorifying). For sure, counting bibliographic references, as some electronic research networks such as Research Gate do, gives some indication of impact, but the more important aspect of political ecology should invite more attention is its impact on public consciousness, the popular press, social movements, political parties (especially green politics), governments, international meetings, school curricula and other avenues of public life. Has political ecology and specifically the political ecology of soil arrived there yet? Not quite ... yet.

Other political ecological debates on climate change, sustainability and global food security have been more successful on the international scene. However, at some stage all these mega-debates have to route through the issue of soil—its continuing management of fertility, yield maintenance, enhancement, and degradation. These more recent issues are attracting more attention, although still not enough! Naomi Klein’s book, This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus the Climate, broadly inhabits the same political ecology as The Political Economy of Soil Erosion. Broadly, her assertion is that it’s not climate change that’s the root problem, it’s capitalism. Her book also shows a practical and technical grasp of what might be done outside the ivory towers of academia. Yet it’s the audiences of Naomi Klein’s book, its networks, access to the media,

The Political Economy of Soil

her frequent interviews, and personal commitment that drives what impact her writing may have upon global consciousness.

Scapegoat

So, where does that leave The Political Economy of Soil Erosion?

Piers Blaikie

Well, the production of political ecology is—oddly enough—political.