



# Political ecology I: From margins to center

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## Abstract

Some epistemologies remain marginalized in political ecology. Here I demonstrate why it is important to learn from various relational margins to further advance the field. Insights and critiques from feminisms and decolonial theories have enriched and expanded political ecology in nuanced ways, yet they continue to remain relegated to the margins. I contend that it is vital to engage and advance different forms of intersectional, interdisciplinary, and international feminist inquiries to address ongoing socioecological crises at the current conjuncture. Different epistemological, methodological, pedagogical, and praxis insights show-case how and why representation matters if we are to pursue decolonial futures and solidarities.

## Keywords

epistemologies, feminisms, margins, political ecology, praxis

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. (hooks, 1984: xvi)

## I Introduction

Political ecology (henceforth PE) examines environment-society relations and struggles over access to natural resources. While it is an interdisciplinary and international field, the historical canon is still predominantly masculine and white. PE has been largely produced within, and remains bound to, colonial or settler colonial spaces of knowledge production and consumption. Nonetheless, while creating uneven geographies of knowledge globally, the breadth and reach of PE is slowly including new voices and diverse communities in a continually expanding field (Bryant, 2015). So that other ways of knowing and being in the world may be fostered and forged, we must first recognize and name the problems of margins and centers

in PE. As renowned scholar bell hooks argued, to be in the margin is to be aware of *both* margin and center (hooks, 1984, 1989). This way of seeing ensures seeing the whole, fostering a consciousness of oppositional world views, and seeing differently. In my first progress report, I foreground what is often marginalized in PE. This seems warranted given our current planetary crises and global injustices, the increasing calls to pluralize our epistemologies and cosmologies, and the growing determination to decolonize academia and challenge what counts as ‘the canon’ in academic knowledge.

Insights and critiques from feminist political ecology (henceforth FPE) have vastly enriched and expanded PE in nuanced ways, yet continue

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to remain relegated to the margins. I contend that it is vital to learn from and advance different forms of intersectional, interdisciplinary, and international feminist inquiries to address ongoing socioecological crises at the current conjuncture. My goal here is not to overview all of FPE but to draw out key insights that resonate with other strands of relevant scholarship, to showcase synergies, overlaps, and possibilities.<sup>1</sup> I signpost recent scholarship and strands that can be investigated in greater detail by the reader. A focus on the importance of relationally bringing the margins to the center and prioritizing different ways of knowing demonstrates how and why representation matters if we are to pursue decolonial futures. Such an approach is perhaps not unexpected in the first progress report on political ecology in its decades-long history by someone who is a woman, a person of color, and a person from the Global South. Since FPE scholars are bold in sharing their positioning and feminist politics (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996), at the outset I acknowledge my own location, lived experiences, and situated knowledge.

### *I Epistemological shifts, advancements, and engagements*

While PE can be thought to be a boundary field, mutable and plastic, yet signifying some coherence in meaning and understanding across uses, it can be similarly debated whether there is an epistemic community called FPE and what its fuzzy boundaries are. Nonetheless, FPE does have a foundational ethos and some epistemologies have become identifiable while they continue to be more refined and nuanced over time. FPE is politically committed to transformative politics and tenets, deploying different feminisms and feminist critiques. FPE advances PE to better understand the everyday, embodied, and emotional aspects of nature-society relations (Elmhirst, 2015; Harris, 2015; Sultana, 2015; Sundberg, 2017). FPE renders visible and

valid what is often obscured or overlooked, and encourages understandings in more rich and complex ways. FPE provides not a single focus on women or gender nor a fixed set of ideas but ‘a work in process (not progress) and hopefully on a path, however circuitous, to decolonization’ (Rocheleau, 2015: 57). The situated mappings of FPE show various rooted networks in operation, all of which stretch and deepen what we come to understand as FPE. Commitments to equity and justice are common undercurrents, taking critical stances on capitalism, patriarchy, globalization, extractivism, enclosures, colonialism, development, and various forms of interconnected oppressions and injustices (see also Federici, 2018). FPE generally is critically self-reflexive, underscores situated knowledges and partialities, reveals positionalities of knowledge-producers, and identifies fractures and fissures but also their interconnections across space and time.

Drawing insights from a wide array of critical social theories and bodies of work, FPE emerged in the 1990s influenced particularly by ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist science studies, feminist critiques of development, post-colonial feminism, and post-structural critiques of political ecology. The main contributions of early FPE work were critiques of the failure of mainstream PE scholarship to attend to gender and uneven power relations in environmental struggles, gendered environmental knowledges, rights, and practices, as well as gendered environmental movements and collectivities (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Analyses of gendered access to, control over, and management of natural resources as well as household relations and community politics are important insights that demonstrate complexities of households, communities, regions, and nations. Scalar analyses from the body to the nation are underscored and the interconnections that create complex power relations and relational privileges are foregrounded, showing the connections but also the impacts

across multiple spaces, multi-species, and through everyday practices (Elmhirst, 2015). Attention is paid to tensions across scales, from the cellular to planetary, with careful readings of resultant complexities. Greater emphasis is increasingly given to issues of intersectionality, subjectivities, embodiment, emotions, commoning, situated knowledges, post-humanism, deconstructing theory-practice binaries, ethics of care, and decolonial FPE. Since FPE stresses relationality and multiplicity, it traces issues of difference to explain a more complex world and world-making (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015). FPE thus continues to evolve by drawing from a range of theoretical bodies of work, such as post-colonial theories, decolonial scholarship, science and technology studies (STS), transnational feminisms, post-structuralism, and new materialism, to name a few.

Praxis has been central to FPE from the outset, whereby praxis is generally understood to be theory in action, or practice and theory that inform each other (cf. Freire, 1970). Drawing from feminist ethics that foregrounds research processes, politics, outcomes, and impacts, rather than deploying the universal god trick of seeing from nowhere (Haraway, 1988), FPE is cognizant of praxis and power relations. The production of knowledge and systems are questioned and unraveled in FPE while at the same time exploring new forms of solidarities and collectivities (Harcourt, 2019; Jarosz, 2011; Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019). Studying and working with collectivities and movements have been central to FPE scholarship. FPE also provides various tools for analyses that are not only theoretical but pragmatic. Some feminist political ecologists often work outside of academia in professional contexts, particularly in or with policy-making organizations and social movements (Resurrección and Elmhirst, 2008). They bring plural insights of FPE into largely technocratic and bureaucratic organizations and spaces in efforts to effect changes in

policies and practices (Harcourt, 2017). These are also different forms of praxis in FPE.

A key shift in FPE theorizations in recent years is greater accounting for intersectionality, which advances understandings of patriarchy and other power structures to look at the co-constitutiveness of various workings of power and oppression (Mollett and Faria, 2013; Nightingale, 2011b; Sultana, 2011). The co-constitutive character of overlapping intersectionalities can reinforce marginalization and oppression across a range of axes (such as gender, class, race, sexuality, disability, age, education, etc.). As such, power assemblages are understood and analyzed as interlocking systems of contextual marginalization. De-privileging gender to foreground multiple identities and subjectivities has become more common in FPE in the pursuit of complex interrogations that engage a range of concerns around power relations and situated knowledges. Nonetheless, gender continues to be a central axis of difference across societies and therefore in FPE scholarship, but intersectionally so in relation to other subject positions. A politics of affinity, instead of identity, is important (Sundberg, 2017). Greater attention is being paid to issues of race, ethnicity, and difference (Mollett and Faria, 2013). Similarly, attention to queer ecologies (Bauhardt, 2013; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010) has raised questions of ongoing heterosexism and binarism in gender theories and practices concerning ecologies and nature. Feminisms are thus understood to be more than just focusing on women but on broader issues of social justice and decolonizing gender. As scholars have noted, gender and feminism are not fixed categories, but need to be troubled (cf. Butler, 1990). Increasing focus is on performativity and subjectivities that destabilize a fixed subject that is often taken for granted in PE more broadly.

The role of emotions and affect is a central tenet in many FPE analyses to better explain resource struggles (González-Hidalgo and

Zografos, 2020; Nightingale, 2011a; Singh, 2013; Sultana, 2015). Such attention has further exposed the terrains of struggles that occur beyond the scope of the market or rational subjects, demonstrating how markets, economies, households, and communities are as much issues of complex emotions and affect as they are of structural power assemblages or external forces that impact some disembodied 'rational' subjects. Better explanations of emotional geographies of resource struggles and nature-society relations demonstrate complex emotions at work in why and how these occur as they do. Relatedly, embodied subjectivities, the intimate and bodily experiences of environmental crises and resource governance, have allowed for more intricate understandings of everyday environmental governance at the scale of the body (Truelove, 2019). The body is an important site of analyses with focus on the materiality and corporeality of the body and its relationality to other species, spaces, and power structures (Guthman and Mansfield, 2013; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2015). Embodiment shifts notions of essentialisms and questions relational privileges, struggles, and differences.

FPE scholars also mobilize concepts such as rooted networks that focus on socio-ecological relations and place-specific materialities of relations in networks (Cantor et al., 2018; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015). Production of socio-natural differences and subjectivities in FPE includes attention to post-humanism, new materialism, hybridity, and more-than-human ecologies. This involves renewed interest in commons and commoning to investigate collective action and transformational politics as well as the questioning of what constitutes 'well-being' or the 'good life' (Clement et al., 2019; Elmhirst, 2015). Human-animal relations and speciesism bring forth greater conversations around rethinking nature and more-than-human natures (Collard et al., 2015). FPE scholars have brought these insights more centrally

to PE, deconstructing the marginal locations that such scholarship may be relegated to. By thinking more carefully about natures, spaces, networks, and complexities, feminist political ecologists are centralizing diverse sets of theoretical work to expand what PE is or envisioned to be.

## *2 Diversifying topics and methods*

Building off earlier work, FPE scholarship continues epistemological and ontological expansion that interrogates multi-scalar, intersectional operations of power (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018). How power operates across gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, and other contextual axes of differences exposes and unearths how resource struggles play out on the ground. Such analyses have been applied to various types of struggles and diversified ranges of issues in FPE scholarship. Some recent examples include but are not limited to the following: agriculture (Leder et al., 2019), water (Adams et al., 2018; Truelove, 2019), climate change (Gonda, 2019; Nightingale, 2017; Ojeda et al., 2020; Sultana, 2018), land (Lamb et al., 2017; Mollett, 2017; Vaz-Jones, 2018), extractive industries (Elmhirst et al., 2017), payment for ecosystem services (Bee, 2019), conservation (Gillespie and Perry, 2019), biodiversity (Bezner-Kerr, 2014), species/animals (Doubleday and Adams, 2019), health (Barry and Grady, 2019), masculinities (Behzadi, 2019; Rose and Johnson, 2017; Shrestha et al., 2019), tourism (Cole, 2017), housing (Tilley, 2017; Tummers and MacGregor, 2019), migration (Baada et al., 2019), queer ecologies (McKeithen, 2017), and resistance (de Vos and Delabre, 2018; Graddy-Lovelace, 2017). This necessarily short list of examples illustrates recent, expanding work in FPE that advances theorizations into other fields of analyses and bodies of scholarship. With the rise of neo-Malthusianism with climate change discourses (Lewis, 2017; Ojeda et al., 2020), it is

imperative to heed the work of FPE scholars for epistemological and methodological insights for both rigorous and robust comprehension of the world but also insights on how to change it.

Methodologically, FPE has historically deployed strong ethnographic approaches and various qualitative research methods to capture greater detail, nuances, connections, and complexities. This involves diverse methods such as participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, oral histories, and transect walks, among others. Archival research and quantitative analyses are also used. Issues of ethical research, praxis, reciprocity, and integrating reflexivity and positionalities in the research process are central in much of FPE. Generally informed by feminist methodologies and feminist ethics, FPE scholars strive for methodological innovations that allow for greater attention to intricacies and scalar patterns while remaining truthful to situated knowledges and partial truths (Bauhardt and Harcourt, 2018). A recent collaborative collection discusses further methodological interventions by feminist political ecologists dealing with fieldwork challenges ethically, methodologically, and corporeally (Johnson et al., 2020). Scholars have also drawn from insights such as counter-topographies (connections between seemingly disparate and distant places (cf. Katz, 2001), counter-mapping (Mollett, 2013), narrative ecologies and story-telling (Hayman et al., 2015), and GIS and participatory diagramming (Nyantakyi-Frimpong, 2019). Methodological expansion continues in FPE.

### *3 Margins within margins: Decolonizing FPE*

A decolonial turn in FPE was not necessarily always labeled 'feminist' or a disappearing of gender but rather an expanding and rethinking of FPE beyond gender and class to ethnicity, indigeneity, non-human animals, more-than-human worlds, and other cosmologies (Rocheleau, 2015; Sundberg, 2017). Thus, within FPE,

we can see other forms of margins and centers, whereby decolonial scholars raise the concern of Western feminisms embedded in FPE, whereby white feminism is often wrapped up with colonialism, white supremacy, and Eurocentrism (Hayman et al., 2015; Walsh, 2015). Even situated perspectives and knowledges can be colonial and Eurocentric.<sup>2</sup> Suspicions and skepticism of Western feminisms in FPE led to calls for recognizing and engaging different feminisms (Hayman et al., 2015). For this reason, FPE is evolving to engage more forcefully with decolonial feminism, post-colonial and Third World feminisms, indigenous feminism, Black feminism, transnational feminism, and Africana womanism. Decolonial FPE sees feminism not as identity but as a 'standpoint of denunciation and relation' against racist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, and classist approaches to nature (Walsh, 2015: 123). Heteropatriarchy was normalized through colonialism and postcolonial state-craft thereafter globally, leading to greater critiques by decolonial FPE scholars on the workings of power across space, time, scale, and positionalities.

At the same time, it is important to not romanticize indigenous systems that can also practice unequal and exploitative gender power relations. Indeed, renowned decolonial feminist scholar Maria Lugones argued that decolonial scholarship needs to engage and integrate women of color's intersectional feminist scholarship to deconstruct the colonialities of gender (Lugones, 2010). Post-colonial critiques of development and transnational feminism provide insights that are important to heed in this regard (Mohanty, 2003). Decolonial and post-colonial feminisms focus more on communities under oppression than individual liberation under liberal feminism (McLaren, 2017). FPE, and PE more broadly, thus must continue to engage with and value the burgeoning scholarship that advances complexities of power, relational privileges, intersectional politics, and epistemological differences. Otherwise, various

forms of marginality are reproduced and reinforced. Decolonial FPE, as aspirational and affirmative, denaturalizes Eurocentric or universalizing knowledge claims. In many ways, there are parallels with post-humanist PE that also stresses other ways of knowing. But decolonial FPE is more historical and spatial in its accounting for colonialities that exist to this day and are reproduced in academic scholarship and collective action (cf. Dhillon, 2020).

A key issue in decolonial FPE is fostering decolonized environmental politics, climate activism, and alliances and solidarities with indigenous peoples. Such solidarities involve navigating complex power relations (Sundberg, 2014). Decolonial FPE is gaining ground in theorizing how pluriverses may be envisioned and enacted (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015). Valuing mutuality, relationality, and reciprocity are being foregrounded, with increasing critiques of colonialities of gender and patriarchy as well as historical Eurocentrism that still resides at the heart of PE. Drawing from such insights, some scholars call for alternative understandings of abundant futures (Collard et al., 2015). Walsh argues that a decolonial FPE would foster movements that transgress to look at the fissures and cracks so that more complex critiques are put forth to ongoing modernity/coloniality (Walsh, 2015). As such, FPE continues to evolve, to be inclusive of and accountable to different constituents and epistemological framings. This is important not only for PE or Geography, but for academia more broadly.

## **II Conclusion**

In understanding margins in relation to centers, hooks (1989) posits that margins can be spaces of ‘radical openness’ where spaces of resistances are cultivated and radical possibilities exist. Margins have to be sites of resistance where the center/colonizer can work with solidarity to erase the differences and categories, to learn open radicalness and possibility. This

helps create counterhegemonic discourses for transformational politics. In choosing to frame my analysis in terms of margins and centers, my goal is not to fetishize the margins or maintain their Otherness, nor call for cooptation of margins into centers without radical changes. It is to recognize how margins are constitutive of centers and how power and tokenism operate in our epistemologies, theories, methods, and pedagogies. My framing is a request to be continually aware of how marginality is reproduced and how various positionalities within academia are maintained. What falls under the broad umbrella of FPE occupies various spaces of margins and centers relationally to broader PE. By understanding different iterations and evolutions of FPE, it becomes possible to envision more just futures that effect change in dominant systems globally by valuing both its contributions as well as recognizing the workings of various forms of marginality. Understanding, accepting, celebrating, and valuing the different mutations and instantiations of FPE can help us push forward better theorizations and practices.

Despite internal heterogeneity and differences, FPE is overarchingly about feminist ethos – not a single focus on women or gender or a fixed set of ideas, but contextual understandings of histories, spaces, places, and socio-ecologies. FPE is about the everyday, emotional, embodied understandings of nature-society dialectics and politics. It interrogates power assemblages, undertakes multi-scalar analyses from the body to the planet, investigates counter-topographies of connections across spaces, scales, places, and species, and is explicit about its praxis in deconstructing the theory-practice binary and the responsibilities of academics. FPE is continually moving away from only critique to envisioning alternative futures along diverse and decolonial pathways. Meaningful and productive routes will involve emphasizing some things over others. One of the main challenges that remain for FPE, and PE more so, is greater collective thinking

and action (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015) as well as enacting more just futures through solidarities. Building coalition politics in these troubled times may be difficult but it is essential. This report is a modest invitation for us to explore and confront evolving challenges around margins and centers.

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### Notes

1. Excellent overviews of and historical background to FPE as a field can be found elsewhere (e.g. Elmhirst, 2011, 2015; Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Sundberg, 2017).
2. White feminist fatigue syndrome (Bhandar and Silva, 2013) has been theorized by scholars that speak to such concerns.

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