



Political ecology III: Praxis - doing, undoing, and being in radical political ecology research

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Abstract

Praxis is central to political ecology scholarship but replete with tensions and ambiguities. This report explores advancements in praxis across epistemological, methodological, pedagogical, and political dimensions. Praxis in political ecology has benefited from detailed insights drawn from Indigenous, decolonial, postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and multi-species scholarship, among others. Attention to praxis allows for enriched research that has the potential to be useful and transformational for marginalized communities and better inform policy-making. Political ecology can remain relevant and meaningful when praxis is foregrounded and reflexively interrogated and performed for both intellectual advancements and radical socio-ecological justice.

Keywords

praxis, epistemology, methodology, pedagogy, scholar-activism

After all, radical simply means “grasping things at the root.” - [Angela Davis \(1989\)](#)

I Introduction

Political relevance and social significance have remained central organizing principles in most political ecology research. Genealogically, the field emerged to counter the separation of nature and society in theorizing, challenge the myth of neutrality and objectivity, and the detachment of scholarship from broader relevance to confront and challenge systems of oppression and violence. This field’s theoretical, interdisciplinary, and critically insightful findings, garnered from grounded empirical work, have made for vibrant scholarship across decades. Often working alongside resistance and social justice movements, including land struggles and freedom revolutions, political ecology has

overtly and implicitly remained a field concerned with praxis and applied wisdom ([Loftus, 2015](#); [Osborne, 2017](#)). The objectives have largely been to produce knowledge with, and for, communities and to influence better policy-making. Many years ago, [Piers Blaikie \(2012\)](#) challenged political ecologists to be more reflexive of their role and the impacts of their scholarship on communities and stakeholders that are integral to the research. This resulted in considerable discussion around praxis, relevance, and public engagement in political ecology, where research can have positive, negative, and unforeseen consequences.

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In my third and final progress report, I wish to return to praxis in political ecology and why it has been deemed essential for better research and researchers. Praxis is often invoked but not always elaborated upon, so it is worth exploring the contours, tensions, and emerging forms of praxis in political ecology. By and large, political ecology's relevance crystalizes through its careful attention to how theory and praxis are closely intertwined, not separated in binary logics of pure scholarship versus activism. Praxis rejects neutral theories or subjects, recognizes the political implications of action and theories, and accepts that power saturates research processes. This report thereby delineates how praxis in political ecology allows scholars to better unearth and explain injustices, showcase interconnected oppressions, and highlight oppositional gazes. I overview recent scholarship that has advanced political ecology praxis in critical and radical ways through refinements that are epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical, and inform policy-making via scholar-activism, direct action, and various types of public engagement.

II Why praxis matters in political ecology

Praxis, in general terms, is understood as a looping process of theory–action–reflection, whereby more critically reflexive, accountable, and robust theories are derived from the practices/action and reflection. Freire (1970) posited praxis as action and reflection in iterative loops to transform society, whereby critical pedagogy is foundational to instigate positive change via the development of “critical consciousness.” Political ecology pedagogy and methodological training are thus vital sites of intervention for praxis-oriented shifts in epistemology and ontology. Relatedly, Gramsci's notion of praxis driving counter-hegemonic politics argues for the importance of critical education of subaltern groups to arrive at their own revolutionary politics to address inequities and injustices (see Ekers et al., 2012). Political ecologists have taken up such aspirations through teaching, research, advocacy, and collaborations across the globe. While situated and contextual research is the hallmark of political ecology,

not all research leads to activism. Nonetheless, scholar-activism animates much of political ecology praxis.

Increasingly, researchers are more explicit about the politics and processes of their praxis—they are concrete about how they produce helpful knowledge beyond the academy, articulate a political orientation that names its radical politics, and underscore alternate historiographies and resurgent politics, with elaborations on the methodologies and epistemologies they find fruitful. Deeper conversations have emerged on engagements with positionality, reflexivity, methods, power relations, claims-making, justice, and policy outcomes. Engaged discussions around methodologies and pedagogies have been (re)invigorated in political ecology to refine praxis more clearly in pluralist ways to foster positive change in research design and relationships with communities and constituents.

III Methodological interventions, pedagogical inversions, and new research on praxis

In a nutshell, political ecologists have overarchingly been engaging with the following in refining their praxis: new ways of doing research, trialing research that is more helpful or useful for the communities they work with, employing methods that allow research interlocutors and participants more agency, and producing work that supports communities achieve their goals (e.g., equipping communities with platforms and supporting long-term solutions). Research outcomes are deemed most valuable and transformational when beneficial for communities directly rather than just for purely academic outputs (Mehta et al., 2021). Methodologically, greater interest has been placed on capturing lived experiences and deploying methods such as storytelling for enriched ways of doing political ecology while supporting goals of marginalized groups.

Shifts have also emerged in praxis that counter dominant heteronormative white supremacist politics (cf. hooks, 2014). One body of inchoate political ecology scholarship is on Black ecologies and articulations of how Black narratives subvert hegemonic understandings of ecological change, biopolitics, and

racial capitalism (Gill, 2021a; Moulton and Salo, 2022; Murphy et al., 2021). Similarly, decolonial praxis of not only critique but also seeking liberatory potentialities through affinity, kinship, and connection across differences are emerging sites of radical praxis. Drawing from Black, Indigenous, and decolonial scholarship, political ecology praxis is honing further what it means to produce relevant scholarship with intellectual rigor and respect for socio-ecologies and cosmologies of local communities (Haverkamp, 2021; Nirmal and Rocheleau, 2019).

As such, there is a meaningful consideration of Indigenous and other non-Western scholarship, not just as an afterthought or lazy citation practice but valuing Indigenous scholarship, working with Indigenous scholars, and with Indigenous populations. With this has emerged greater emphasis on Indigenous ontologies and methodologies, as well as collaborations whereby research design is co-designed and implemented, and these are advocated for enhanced and decolonized political ecology research (Liboiron, 2021; see also Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). To that end, ideas such as pluriversality, ontological matrices, and multi-species justice have entered political ecology lexicon (Fry et al., 2022; Tschakert, 2022). Methodological creativity and expansions, valuing different ways of producing different types of knowledge and world views—but keeping an eye on who it is beneficial for and whose voice counts—have gained increased traction as a result. Simmering underneath is a desire to not be exploitative in the academic-industrial-extractive complex that has been centuries in the making. It has also had pedagogical impacts on how political ecology is taught and passed on across generations. This includes rigorous methodological training on ethical engagement, collaborative research design, and public discourse, not just intellectual debates of political ecology.

For instance, storytelling (Harris, 2021), counter-mapping (Moore et al., 2019), participatory research methods (Bezner Kerr et al., 2018), and public engagement (Demeritt, 2015) are of mounting interest to political ecologists. Research has been used to help advance justice goals of communities and proffer new research findings but also to challenge legal instruments and state operations (Anthias, 2019). Elevating subaltern voices and centering their

resistance struggles have arisen as ways of de-centering the researcher and academic pursuits, while acknowledging contradictions and complicities. Attention to responsibility, mutuality, and radical vulnerability often shape research praxis. The contingencies and ruptures are interrogated throughout research conceptualization, data collection, and writing processes (Asher, 2019). Methodological shifts thus allow for political ecologists to unearth truths and configure what those truths mean and how to foster community well-being.

Several political ecologists posited centering narratives and storytelling as critical methodological interventions to improve praxis. Drawing from Black, Indigenous, feminist, post-structural, and STS studies, Harris (2021) argues that narrative and storytelling are important political ecology praxes because they lend for a simultaneity of potentials that are methodological, analytical, political, and transformative. Narratives tell stories of peoples and places in their own voice, giving agency to communities that political ecologists research with, demonstrating connections to wider political economy. For instance, the Toxic Bios project relies on testimony in what they call “guerilla narratives” of everyday people using affective/emotional political ecology to tell stories of everyday embodied experiences of toxicity, pollution, and wasting. Storytelling is argued to be “a deliberate counter-hegemonic strategy with explicit political aim” (Armiero et al., 2019). As Houston and Vasudevan (2017) demonstrate, storytelling is not just collective capacity building to interpret and chart their own histories but also a reflexive act that connects peoples to wider communities with shared experiences. This is also demonstrated in other methodological pathways, such as situated auto-ethnographical narratives (Gillespie, 2022; Sultana, 2022b).

Relatedly, methodological experimentation with visualizations and maps add nuances to complement storytelling in political ecology, permitting researchers to situate themselves in the research project that integrates their academic understanding and theorizing but moves beyond it (Moore et al., 2019). Participatory video has fostered research participants to be co-creators of information to bring together emotional/affective work into a more meaningful

conversation on embodiments and resource access (Tremblay and Harris, 2018). Conversely, Anthias (2019), writing reflexively, found that legal-bureaucratic encounters in counter-mapping projects can lead to ambivalent outcomes in participatory mapping meant to clarify power dynamics between state and Indigenous knowledge of territory.

Ethnography continues to dominate political ecology research, but many publications foreground explicit discussions over praxis further. For instance, like other scholars, Radonic and Kelly-Richards (2015) show that collaborating with residents in designing research questions, approaches, and goals led to more valuable outputs for both community members and the scholars in their collaborative investigation of uneven urban water provisioning. This intentional praxis allows for better design that is more robust and ethical. This was also evident in other work, like climate change and local action, as detailed in Rice et al. (2015), whereby the scholars argue that climate praxis emphasizes working with communities rather than researching on/about them in the face of climate crises.

Transformative research outcomes may drive much of praxis in political ecology research, but scholars have also cautioned against unrealistic goals (Bluwstein, 2021; Vogel & O'Brien, 2022). Political ecology has been critiqued for its ability to explore problems instead of offering concrete solutions (Chambers et al., 2021). While the latter may not be the job of academic scholars—indeed, it would be foolish to assume such hubris without wider collaborations—political ecology networks and alliances have been exploring various routes that can result in better outcomes. For instance, Mehta et al. (2021) argue for a “patchwork transformation” that sheds light on shifts and hybrid alliances amid unsustainable processes that foster transformations which can be scaled up on issues related to climate adaptation and water politics. They, in essence, call for transformation as praxis whereby researchers’ main objectives are to assist variously marginalized peoples achieve their goals by focusing on the well-being and recovery of agency (see also Moseley and Otiso, 2022). Similar goals are articulated by Osborne et al. (2021), who provide scalar analysis from local, national, and international arenas in

ecosystem restoration projects for equity and justice by promoting more local authority and agency over ecosystems.

What is evident is that praxis in political ecology involves labors of care and care-full attention to one’s scholarship and politics. In more explicitly detailed instances, scholars have demonstrated how care is praxis for communities devastated by ecological decline in landscapes of ruination and provide counterbalances to racial capitalism and neoliberal extractivism (Hilton, 2022). Feminist scholarship on care and care ethics is becoming more prevalent in political ecology as scholars recognize and investigate the pathways for constructing futurities of flourishing (Neely and Lopez, 2022). Healing in colonized spaces through more intentional Indigenous ecological knowledge praxis also gestures toward care, reciprocity, well-being, and self-determination (Larsen, 2016; Mortimer, 2022).

Emancipation is often an end goal in the usefulness/relevance desires of political ecology research, but it is also questioned whether research helps or hinders the emancipation it claims to support. Some have cast this as necessitating more engagement with critical reflexivity and positionality work of the researchers in affectual ecologies (Collins et al., 2021; Gonda et al., 2021), while others have encouraged critical autoethnography as methodological interventions to situate embodied lived experiences of political-ecological changes and explore revolutionary potentialities (Sultana, 2022b). Collaboration and co-production are often crucial to produce research that has emancipatory potentials for communities and scholars. However, collaboration is understood in different ways, from co-designing research approaches, goal setting, methods used, dissemination of findings, and collective activities that move beyond academic pre-figurations (Hakkarainen et al., 2022).

To this end, co-production with communities in decolonial political ecology is advancing conversations on praxis (Zanotti et al., 2020). Reframing through decolonial and Indigenous perspectives, emancipatory and regenerative frameworks can also include healing praxis through historiographies and kinship ecologies (Daigle, 2018; Mortimer, 2022). Participants and interlocutors are also more in charge

of the knowledge production process (Arsenault et al., 2018) and in developing diverse and convivial ontologies and paradigms (Collins et al., 2021). The centering of alternative anti-colonial paradigms to confront racial capitalism, colonial capitalist logics, and power-knowledge relations in governance structures allows for more just BIPOC futures (Leff, 2021; Tozzi et al., 2022). Such research foregrounds reciprocity, respect, regeneration, and renewal.

Multi-species justice scholars also call for co-production with more-than-human communities and greater ecologization of political ecology (Hewitson and Sullivan, 2021; Tschakert et al., 2021; Vayda and Walters, 1999). This includes anarchist political ecology that interrogates humanity's place in the biosphere (Springer et al., 2021). At the same time, it is also a critical inquiry about what constitutes co-existence with other species, which clarifies not only the relationships of trust and mutuality that are forged processually but also shifting locations within wider struggles (Martin et al., 2021). Debates in political ecologies of conservation have further expanded on connections to managerialism, white supremacy, colonialism, and community praxis (Collins et al., 2021).

Lastly, pedagogical praxis is a crucial intervention by political ecologists to deploy radical traditions of both deconstruction and constructivist approaches (akin to Robbins' [2020] hatchet and seed impetus in political ecology). Abolition ecologies in pedagogy can thereby foster what Pitts et al. (2022) argue as "seed bombs" where intentional focus on co-learning and care are prioritized in the teaching and research process. Political ecology in and beyond the classroom thus fosters praxis of liberatory and emancipatory ideas and methods that hold potential for more enriched political ecology praxis in the future (Butt, 2022; Meek and Simonian, 2017).

IV Scholar-activism as praxis

Scholar-activism has been one avenue to advance praxis in political ecology and beyond. However, this topic is challenging to gauge solely from academic publications since various scales of scholar-activism that academics engage with, both inside and beyond

the academy, are not always elaborated upon and also face constraints vis-à-vis institutional bureaucracy, funding politics, and value within the academia (Batterbury, 2018). Nonetheless, several scholars gesture toward doing more political activism and more meaningful activism. Emerging projects directly reference such clear activist goals (such as the ToxicBios project on environmental justice) (Armiero et al., 2019). Since engagement with environmental justice has been resurgent within political ecology (Svarstad and Benjaminsen, 2020), further direct commitments to scholar-activism are likely to emerge. However, some form of activism exists for many political ecologists and allied scholars, whether within the academy in epistemological and methodological shifts, in pedagogy, or with broader communities and policy spheres. There are thus concurrently more significant considerations of scholar-activism through collaborations, co-production of research goals and topics, and teaching and mentoring future generations of scholars.

It is essential to note that praxis in political ecology should not be assumed to only mean activism consisting of resistance and insurrectionary protest (Dunlap, 2020). While political ecology may be seen as essentially a field of scholar-activists, the strands of what "activism" means and what it is constructed in opposition to (i.e., some pure disembodied intellectual pursuit disconnected from struggles on the ground whereby there is a hierarchical distinction made between academic pursuits and liberatory practices) are always under critique (Batterbury, 2015). For instance, for feminist political ecology, the personal is always political, where a normative separation of some mythical "pure academic research" divorced from material politics does not exist. Praxis embodies a range of methodologies, epistemologies, and material politics that challenge dominant frameworks (see details in Johnson et al., 2021). Indeed, in a systemic review of recent political ecology scholarship, scholars found an activist turn in political ecology compared to existing deconstructivism impulses (Desvallées et al., 2022). However, there is a spatial geography to it, whereby they conclude: "The differences we have analyzed between the stances of European advocacy, hybrid North American, and political ecology as practiced

across the Global South (to generalize starkly) reflect differences in epistemological and practical commitments” (p. 335). While these are broad regional generalizations, it is evident that political ecologists globally engage with activism beyond the academy in different ways.

Direct action as a form of scholar-activism has also gained wider attention. Malm’s “How to blow up a pipeline” may not be read as political ecology scholarship but is undoubtedly relevant (Malm, 2021). While many political ecologists would possibly undertake non-violent action emerging from the impetus of their research and their ethical poisoning, few would undertake violent ones. Direct action can come from other interventions like exploring possible political action and policy input in collaborations with impacted communities. For instance, the political praxis of resistance and subversion to counter fossil-fuel capitalism (Dunlap, 2020) and ecocide (Dunlap and Brock, 2022) have garnered interest, which also speaks to work on ecological anarchism (Springer et al., 2021) and other measures of direct action such as industrial spying and resistance (Brock, 2020).

Enhancing research solidarity for strengthening scholar-activism has also been called for. Goldfischer et al. (2020) describe the obstinate curiosity for unexpected solidarities in field research that can result in fruitful collaborations. Montenegro De Wit et al. (2021) demonstrate that by writing reflexively as a collective, it is possible to explore ways that horizontal non-exploitative learning is enriched in a collaborative collective by first engaging in internal organization for more accountable and reciprocal relationships with grassroots movements. They devised protocols and principles for ethical research collaborations and everyday scholarly praxis. Such protocols must be revisited and updated as collaborations evolve and mutate, and material politics and outcomes emerge and shift, as discussed in Osborne et al. (2021).

Policy intervention and public dialog continue to be of interest to political ecologists (Demeritt, 2015). Policy intervention may be at local, state, and international scales. For instance, Dale (2021) looks at

not just reconceptualizing what food sovereignty means but a broader understanding of food governance, as it would allow for more meaningful state-level changes and designs with broader policy goals in mind. Similar work on water, climate, energy, and biodiversity has animated political ecologists who aspire to policy changes, articulating various policy interventions whereby water governance, climate justice, just energy transition, ecotourism, and conservation policies have been informed by praxis-reflexive research (Bersaglio and Margulies, 2022; Eriksen et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2019; Gonzalez, 2022; Hammelman et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2021; Sovacool, 2021; Sultana, 2022a; Tozzi et al., 2022). These scholarships are worth engaging with closely and building upon. Relatedly, intervening in international policymaking and discourse, scholars have also highlighted gaps in understanding and faulty planning, such as in global climate change (Schipper et al., 2021) and food systems (Carter and Moseley, 2021). Writing for the general public, media engagement, public pedagogy, and even social media engagement are sites where political ecologists are informing public debate and enhancing global knowledge sharing. Cumulatively, this is not insignificant.

The longevity of sustaining scholar-activism for a cause, a community, a region, or wider ethics has confounded many political ecologists. Nevertheless, connection and disconnection may not be linear, which can assuage some anxieties given constraints identified above. Connection and intersubjectivity through processes of entanglement and detachment recur over time and space for different reasons (Engelhard et al., 2021). Relationality to microbes, plants, animals, and ecosystems can emerge, dissipate, mutate, and transform. Entanglements are never entirely stable. Similarly, ethical detachment may be necessary to decenter oneself and disconnecting to reconnect differently with greater radical vulnerability and transformational potential (O’Reilly, 2014). These are part and parcel of understanding everyday praxis in different contexts to sustain long-term connections in political ecology.

V Conclusion

Praxis has been central to much of political ecology scholarship. However, it is not devoid of tensions and contradictions across epistemological, methodological, pedagogical, and political dimensions. Praxis in political ecology has benefited from detailed insights drawn from Indigenous, decolonial, postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and multi-species scholarship, among others. Praxis matters since political ecologists engage with policymakers, civic groups, politicians, international organizations, and community groups globally. In this final report on political ecology, I foregrounded praxis in political ecology since it offers fecund grounds of extensive and enriched research that has the potential to be transformational and influence policy-making. Informed by critical insights from Gramsci, Freire, hooks, and other scholars, political ecology can remain relevant and meaningful when praxis is foregrounded and reflexively interrogated and performed for intellectual advancements and radical socio-ecological justice.

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