

Workshop 25

Contested Environments: The Political Ecology of Agrarian Change and Forest Conservation

Abstract: In the present post-development and globalization era, the political and economic dimensions of human-environment relationships are characterized by controversies over inequality, exploitation, and marginalization. Theorists labeling the world's present condition as post-colonial, post-socialist, or neoliberally globalized find it increasingly essential to engage the issues of environmental justice, conservation, and agrarian change. Ethnography is particularly well suited to help understand the local realities behind, as well as the contestations and ideologies of global ecological concerns, such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, forest protection, genetically modified agriculture, global food regimes, water scarcity, mining, etc.

In this panel we aim in particular at bringing together research on two central themes in political ecology: the politics and violence associated with forest conservation and the neoliberalization of agriculture under the present global food regime (H. Friedmann).

There is a broad interrelation between increasingly protected forest boundaries and agriculture. In many ethnographic settings "agrarian frontiers" (cattle, soy beans) extend into forest areas, spurring far-reaching ecological, social, and political consequences that go beyond the established trends of forest clearance, decline in biodiversity, and displacement of indigenous peoples. Global deforestation, mainly through conversion of forests into agricultural land, continues at an alarmingly high rate—about 13 million hectares per year (FAO 2007). On the other hand, authoritarian state forest protection may deprive local peasants of much needed commons for use as grazing grounds or as water and wood sources. In other ethnographic contexts the ecological frontier of forest/agriculture may generate antagonistic and dynamic divisions of peoples, such as between indigenous and "mainstream" or between hill and plains societies (J. Scott, N. Peluso). We also want to reflect on possible differences between the political ecological dynamics of agrarian change and forest conservation: Is agrarian transformation driven more by science (biotechnology, green revolution) and capital, while forest conservation is the domain of NGOs, transnational institutions, and developmental states? How do practices of control and regulation in the "greening" of agriculture (fair trade, organic) and

forest management (UNEP standards) differ? Are the cultural politics of protest and resistance expressed differently among peasant (agriculture), indigenous (forest), and urban middle class environmental activists (forest and agriculture)?

In this panel we invite ethnographic contributions to the emerging field of political ecology, with which we hope to engage regarding recent theoretical advances in the anthropology of globalization, post-socialism, and post-colonialism. On the other hand we expect to stimulate critical social and cultural theory in anthropology by bringing ecology (back) in.

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