



Critical review

Political ecology, development, and human exceptionalism

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ABSTRACT

The sub-discipline of Political Ecology devotes much critical attention to the complex and often pernicious socio-ecological impacts of mainstream development - developmentality - across the world. However, despite the 'ecology' in its name, Political Ecology continues to be predominantly anthropocentric which, we contend, compromises its critique of developmentality's excesses. Drawing on recent literatures in philosophy, political theory, and human geography, we argue that both the more-than-human and social impacts of developmentality are enabled by zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism which support anthropocentrism. We suggest that the adverse effects of development are co-constituted with the positive vision of human wellbeing which runs through developmentality. Thus, an effective critique of development will necessarily have to address the zoöpolitical logics that underpin anthropocentrism. Doing so will strengthen the rigour of political ecology's engagement with developmentality and widen its attention to the diversity of life harmed by mainstream development.

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1. Developmentality and Political Ecology

The post-colonial era has seen the rise of "human development" as a global socio-political goal (Sen, 1999). While development is a multifarious concept, its dominant form today is that of capitalist development, involving the widespread use of fossil fuels for energy, globalization of manufacturing, and the creation of a consumer class weaned on products recognizable throughout the globe. This standard model of development aka "developmentality" (Deb, 2009), centred around consumption-fuelled economic growth and surplus accumulation, has depended

on the intensive exploitation of people and nature, thereby adversely impacting societies and ecologies throughout the planet.

Political ecologists and other social scientists have dedicated much attention to the complex and often harmful effects of mainstream development (Escobar, 1995; Walker and Bulkeley, 2006; Penz et al., 2011; Peet et al., 2011; Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012; Ukridi and Walter, 2011; Kirshner and Power, 2015). However, the critical and theoretical focus of Political Ecology, like many other sub-disciplines of geography (as also the social sciences in general) has remained predominantly on people - on the human communities that are displaced and subject to the excesses of the development project (some exceptions: Collard and Dempsey, 2013; Emel and Neo, 2015). Indeed, Political Ecology has arguably devoted far more attention to critiquing efforts to protect nonhuman life from the harms caused by developmentality

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than to developmentality itself (Brockington and Igoe, 2006; Buscher et al., 2012; Roth and Dressler, 2012). In this piece, we examine the implications of Political Ecology's anthropocentrism in a context in which processes of development are predicated on the exploitation of nonhuman nature – and the reproduction of such exploitative relations within the human realm.

While there is much harm implicated in developmentality, this harm and the violence that often goes along with it, are grounded in a theory of *human wellbeing*: underlying a vast extractive machine is a vision of a 'good' life and the pursuit of happiness (Kenny and Kenny, 2006). Our goal in this essay is to place that positive goal in the context of ongoing violence against both human and nonhuman life and to ask whether it is enough for political ecology to critique the former while not paying much heed to the latter.

Specifically, we bring together recent scholarship in philosophy, political theory, and human geography to argue that developmentality's pernicious social impacts are the other side of the same zoöpolitical coin that enables the treatment and exploitation of nonhuman nature as first and foremost a resource for the pursuit of human wellbeing. As such, political ecology's primary focus on humans and human wellbeing – its anthropocentric lens – fundamentally limits its critique and analysis of developmentality's excesses.

2. The pursuit of human wellbeing

In its ultimate focus on human wellbeing, developmentality is different from older forms of exploitation, such as slavery and colonialism, both of which tended to be explicitly about extracting labour and resources from the exploited peoples. By contrast, contemporary development is decidedly biopolitical (Bakker, 2013; Mezzadra et al., 2013), with its discourses and practices of entangled harm and care, and with harm being often done in the very name of those who are being harmed. To reiterate, human wellbeing is the stated purpose of developmentality.

It is ironical that valorization of human wellbeing that is at the core of developmentality has the perverse consequence of marginalizing and exploiting people. What is the source of this apparent contradiction at the heart of developmentality? To understand this, it is necessary to unpack the vision of human wellbeing that is at the heart of mainstream development discourse and practice.

Developmentality articulates a very *specific* idea of human wellbeing: it envisages a 'good' human life as one that is freed from the vicissitudes – the risks and vulnerabilities – of living on the planet, of being a part of 'nature', of being animal (Clark, 2011). Even the most basic of development indicators – such as that of life expectancy – are predicated on the human capacity to circumvent the risks (and inconveniences) that are inherent to living as a part of the more-than-human world (Desai and Potter, 2008).

Embedded in this quest for an insulated and protected life is an ever-increasing degree of consumption – material and otherwise – aimed at enhancing comfort and pleasure, and rendered possible by the use, exploitation and redesign of nonhuman nature.¹ At the same time, this vision of human wellbeing relegates as inferior all other human ways of life – those that are less insulated from the risks posed by nature, and those that are not predicated on the pursuit of consumption, surplus accumulation, and an expanding definition of 'basic' needs. Alternatively, they are romanticized as a 'different' way of life reserved for exotic "Others".

This idea of human wellbeing that underpins developmentality is, in many ways, the *summum bonum* of human exceptionalism.

Human exceptionalism, which has been discussed widely in more-than-human geographies and cognate fields (Haraway, 2008; Buller, 2015), combines ontological and ethico-political claims: ontological claims about the uniqueness of human beings are bound up with claims about the ethical superiority of humans over all other life-forms, aka *anthropocentrism*. Human exceptionalism is about establishing and maintaining ontological and ethical divides between human beings and all other life-forms, especially nonhuman animals.

As discussed in the next section, the discourse of human exceptionalism has involved the deployment of zoöpolitical logics (Vaughan-Williams, 2015), wherein perceived differences in certain capacities and traits are used as criteria for establishing the human/animal divide, and for making ethico-political distinctions between human and nonhuman life (Agamben, 1998, 2004; Derrida, 2008, 2009). Examples of such capacities include reason and intelligence, and associated technological development (Garner, 2004; Srinivasan, 2010; Tomasello, 2014).

The zoöpolitical logics of human exceptionalism play a key role in the pursuit of development by rendering nonhuman life killable. The extractive and exploitative use of nonhuman nature as a mere resource is made possible and legitimized by rationalities of human exceptionalism. However, this is not the only role that the zoöpolitical machine, after Agamben (2004), has in developmentality.

Development discourse and practice co-opts and transfers zoöpolitical logics from the domain of the more-than-human to the domain of the social, the intra-human. The idea of human wellbeing embedded in developmentality goes along with the zoöpolitical relegation of those peoples and ways of life that do not meet the benchmarks of development as inferior and in need of the 'improving' care of development. The "privileging of European systems of intensive agriculture and property use over traditional forms of subsistence production" is an obvious example of this (Kymlicka and Donaldson, 2014, 116).

In many ways, developmentality is a theory of exceptionalism. It is a theory of how human beings can maximise their exceptionalism with the recognition that all human communities are *capable* of being developed into the dominant form of human flourishing – even if only a few are *actually* there. Development is about amplifying those human features that are believed to be maximally different from other species, creating institutions that maintain that distinction, and about pushing 'forward' those societies that do not meet these standards of development. Human ways of life that depart from the norms of human exceptionalism set by certain societies are animalized and cast as in need of upliftment – of 'development' (Martinez-Alier, 2009). As political geographer Vaughan-Williams puts it, it is the zoöpolitical human/animal distinction that makes possible "further distinctions within the category of the human" (2015, 6).

Thus then, our challenge to political ecology is this: the adverse effects of development aren't due to the negative aspects of capitalism alone but also due to the positive vision of human wellbeing which runs through developmentality and is tied to the discourse of human exceptionalism. In other words, an effective critique of development will necessarily have to address the zoöpolitical logics that underpin human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. As a first step towards that, we critically examine below key rationalities that have been used to justify human exceptionalism, focusing on the human-animal divide.

3. Human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism

A compelling reason for anthropocentrism is that humans are responsible to other humans in ways they aren't for other

¹ For instance, contemporary medical advances are based on a system that necessitates the violent exploitation of nonhuman animals.

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