



Should political ecology be Marxist? A case for Gramsci's historical materialism

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates some aspects of political ecology's relation to Marxism, specifically its ties to Marxism's "historical materialism". I argue Gramsci is an essential feature in the reinvigoration of that relation, and that political ecology should be Marxist, if by Marxist we mean Gramscian. I focus on the concept of hegemony, arguing that Gramsci's historical materialism, in contrast to the Engelian tradition within which most materialism is snared, allows us to take account of both moments in Gramsci's hegemony, the "economic" and the "ethicopolitical".

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Clearly the weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons, and material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. (Karl Marx, 1975, p. 251)

Should political ecology be Marxist? If so, what does that mean? My goal in this paper is to consider some aspects of political ecology's long-standing, if inconsistent, relation to the Marxist tradition, specifically to that tradition's so-called historical materialist commitments. I argue that Gramsci is the key figure through which to negotiate this relation, and that political ecology should indeed be Marxist, if by 'Marxist' we mean Gramscian. For a Gramscian approach demands a particularly critical engagement with Marxism's materialism, and operates political-analytical categories that do not always sit easily on its foundations. Indeed, I want to show that a Gramscian political ecology suggests a powerful critique of historical materialism that can help reinvigorate political ecology's relation to Marx. Since this undertaking would be unwieldy with respect to the totality of Gramsci's thought, I focus on the concept of hegemony, which is at any rate the most influential element of his political and theoretical legacy.

Gramsci is relatively infrequently cited in the political ecology literature. To take some recent examples: none of the contributions to the new edition of Richard Peet and Michael Watts' foundational collection, *Liberation Ecologies* (2004), and only one in the first edi-

tion (Moore, 1996), engages with his work. Similarly, he is entirely absent from Karl Zimmerer and Thomas Bassett's edited volume *Political Ecology* (2003), and receives only one minor note on "war of position" in Nancy Peluso and Watts' *Violent Environments* (2001). In every case, it is other thinkers—most prominently, but not only, Michel Foucault—that are called upon explicitly, not Gramsci. Given the substantial place of Marxian political economy in political ecology's legacy and, to perhaps a lesser extent, its current practice, this disproportion in citation is somewhat surprising, especially since, as I will argue below, Gramsci's Marxism can do a great deal of essential political work, perhaps more than some of those who turn to Foucault recognize.

For, bibliographic content aside, the spirit of Gramsci does indeed animate political ecology—it is not difficult to see that many of Gramsci's principal commitments and concepts, if sometimes unwittingly, organize much of the field as currently practiced. Clearly, some political ecologists are Gramscian in that they share these commitments explicitly, and purposefully connect themselves to his work (e.g. Peet and Watts, 1996; Moore, 1996, 2005; Cohen, 2004; Gordillo, 2004; Robbins, 2004; Wainwright, 2005). Many more share, if only tacitly, assumptions about their own work that would hold for any political ecology that deserves the adjective "Gramscian": first, it can never be merely scholarly. Second, it can never be disembedded from the currents of social change it investigates and of which it must necessarily be a part. Of course, much of political ecology inevitably suffers from the ivory tower syndrome that plagues most scholarly work today, but it is surely that case that political ecologists work harder than most to escape the academy's thrall.

The tension I find fascinating, then, is this: although contemporary political ecology is in many respects Gramscian, it is not so

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clearly Marxist. How does this work? Gramsci was first and foremost a Marxist. The accumulated thought of the Marxist tradition weighs heavily on his work, and on his influential conceptualization of hegemony in particular; it is no exaggeration to say that without Marx and Marxism, the modern concept of hegemony is impossible. This spectre of a non-Marxist Gramsci is worth addressing, for good theoretical and political reasons. Theoretically, because Gramsci's ideas, like all thought, developed at a particular historical juncture, and the arc of their historical trajectories both constitutes and constrains their analytical power—this is the materialist lesson *par excellence*. Politically, because recovering, or recalling, political ecology's Marxism can link it explicitly to an intellectual practice that Gramsci himself typified—the dream of praxis, the unity of theory and practice to which so many political ecologists strive. Gramsci's critical ethical materialism can provide a basis for these efforts, since it is both a sharp critique and a powerful reworking of the methodological and epistemological basis of Marxism, i.e. historical materialism. For, as Peet and Watts point out (1996, pp. 28–29), any political ecology that takes hegemony seriously must be able to account not only for the 'material' fact of hegemony, but also for how it works ideologically. In other words, it must do more than point out that the ruling bloc is hegemonic and demonstrate the material evidence of its power; it must also explain how and why that hegemony operates in the social life of *thought*—norms, morality, common sense.

I open what follows, then, with some initial groundwork concerning Gramsci's concept of hegemony. With that laid out, the rest of the paper is packaged in two parts and a conclusion. The first is largely historical, the second theoretical. I hope this is not too clunky a mode of presentation, but a thorough discussion of what the adjective 'Gramscian' denotes, and what particular sensibilities it demands, seems to me essential. Part 1 thus contains a somewhat detailed discussion of the relation of certain elements of Gramsci's Marxist social theory to the communist movement that inspired it. The intellectual–political tumult of communism in Gramsci's time is central to an understanding of what he wrote, and, just as importantly, why he felt it worth writing (Losurdo, 2006). Placing Gramsci's historical materialism in the context of the Leninism then dominant in the communist movement, I argue that a materialism that can take account of what Gramsci called the "ethical–political" (which he could not get from Lenin) is absolutely crucial to any real contribution hegemony can make to political ecology.¹

Working from this critique, Part 2 suggests that perhaps the most 'Gramscian' quality of contemporary political ecology is a product of Gramsci's Marxism. That quality is its recognition that the many efforts to confront socio–environmental dynamics and their political function—the very things that constitute the "politics" political ecology studies—emerge from a field of competing normative ideas regarding the unfolding of history. Although these ideas often contradict each other, Gramsci showed that this crucial "ethico–political" field is what constitutes the "moment of hegemony". In any account of the production of nature, Gramscian

¹ Everyday efforts to understand what "caused" history, and the concepts, categories, and theories those efforts produce, become part of what Gramsci, after the philosopher Benedetto Croce, calls the "ethico–political". These explanatory efforts help construct, in other words, the ethical–political ground upon which sense-making happens, and that ground in turn comes to "matter".

Moral or ethico–political history must free itself from these faulty theories and from these limitations of circumstance by correcting itself and by conceiving as its object not only the State [German version], the government of the State and the expansion of the State, but also that which is outside the State, whether it co-operates with it or tries to modify it, overthrow and replace it: namely, the formation of moral institutions, in the broadest sense of the word, including religious institutions and revolutionary sects, including sentiments, customs, fancies, and myths that are practical in tendencies and content. . . . The creators of these institutions are the political geniuses and the aristocrats or political classes which give them life and in turn are created and supported by them (Croce, 1945, pp. 103–104).

political ecology pays careful attention not only to the "economic" relations of production, but also to the moral field of claims regarding the relationship between history, geography and what Hegel called "Right".² What is of interest is more than the discursive production of nature; it is a nothing less than a moral ecology. Actors involved in contests over the meanings and control of "nature" often understand the movement of "Right" as more than a normative standard, but as an active, material force in the making of the world—what Gramsci called an "idea-force" (1975, p. 72).³ In other words, for the "masses", nature is always metaphysics, but it is not messianic. Right is not "natural"; rather, Right makes nature—or it should (e.g. Gramsci, 1985, p. 192).

Contrary to common mischaracterizations of Marx as a rigid materialist, his account of historical change, environmental or otherwise, always recognized the role of human explanations of those changes—beliefs—as forces of change themselves. Although Marx famously wrote that life determines consciousness, not vice versa (1978, p. 155), his theory of history—not to mention his own politics—makes little sense if consciousness does not bite back.⁴ This is absolutely not to say that either Marx or Gramsci were moralists—they were not—but rather to emphasize both of their critical analyses recognized morality—eschatology even—as a causal force in history (Losurdo, 2006, pp. 146–147). In other words, as Gramsci says, the ethical–political does not merely express but also drives political–ecological dynamics. Coming to grips with this means taking a wider view of the forces that "matter" in history. Remembering that he says "all men are philosophers" (1971, p. 323), here is Gramsci on the problem at hand:

Every philosopher is, and cannot but be, convinced that he expresses the unity of the human spirit, that is, the unity of history and nature. Otherwise, men would not act, they would not create new history; in other words, philosophies would not become "ideologies", they could not, in practice, acquire the fanatical granite solidity of "popular beliefs", which have the equivalence of "material forces" (Gramsci, 1996, pp. 194–195).

My hope is to help highlight the Gramscian dialectic at the heart of political ecology, one that takes account of how much ideas *matter*, and to emphasize its embeddedness in a vein of critical Marxist praxis. As Marx famously said, people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Either way, they do not do so thoughtlessly.

1. Political ecology after Lenin: hegemony, morality, and praxis

In offering these remarks about some object called "political ecology", I recognize the danger in lumping together a wide and busy field of research, in which any critical examination is necessarily somewhat scatter-shot. In the details, a precise line of argument will almost certainly miss more than it will hit. Yet in the totality of work called political ecology, blurred boundaries and all, some broad patterns are discernable. All political ecologists set themselves two broad explanatory goals: to account for the production of nature and environment, and to understand the ways in which (produced) nature and environments help shape social relations (Robbins, 2004). The literature tends to work across

² "Right" (Recht), not "rights".

³ Indeed, the idea-force "Leninism" continues to play no small part in political ecological drama. Mediated by the "materiality" of cold war politics, Leninism helps determine global ecological regimes—this despite vicious Leninist opposition in the international communist movement, of which Gramsci was an active participant, to the mere hint of something like an "idea-force".

⁴ Lukács saw this too—and got bitten for it: "It is true that reality is the criterion for the correctness of thought. But reality is not, it becomes—and to become the participation of thought is needed" (1971, p. 204).

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