

REVIEW ESSAY

Rio Minus Ten: The Political Economy of Environmental Degradation

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Producing Nature and Poverty in Africa edited by Vigdis Broch-Due and Richard A. Schroeder. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000. Pp.350. US\$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 91 7106 452 4

Environment and Security: Discourses and Practices edited by Miriam Lowi and Brian R. Shaw. London: Macmillan, 2000. Pp.xvi + 225. £47.50 (paperback). ISBN 0 333 73167 0

Global Thinking and Local Action: Agriculture, Tropical Forest Loss and Conservation in Southeast Nigeria by Uwem E. Ite. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. Pp.xv + 142. £37.50 (hardback). ISBN 0 7546 1345 3

Conflict and Cooperation in Participatory Natural Resource Management edited by Roger Jeffery and Bhaskar Vira. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. Pp.xvi + 246. £45 (hardback). ISBN 0 333 79277 7

Analytical Issues in Participatory Natural Resource Management edited by Bhaskar Vira and Roger Jeffery. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001. Pp.xiv + 245. £45 (hardback). ISBN 0 333 79276 9

INTRODUCTION

Another 'Earth Summit' is almost upon us. 2002 marks ten years since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This year, a 'follow-up' is being held in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Johannesburg meeting, dubbed 'Rio Plus Ten', is likely to be as divisive as was its predecessor. Indeed, so fractious are the debates around planetary health and environmental security, that many are calling the 2002 Earth Summit 'Rio *Minus Ten*'. Ken Conca and Geoffrey

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Dabelko, in their seminal reader on environmental politics, *Green Planet Blues*, point out that 'the fundamental question' both at the 1972 Stockholm conference on human settlements and at Rio in 1992 was 'how to respond to urgent environmental problems in a politically, economically and culturally divided world' (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998, p.6). Ten years later, that question remains unresolved.

One would be correct in arguing that the main reason why so little has been accomplished since Rio is that the most powerful actors in the global political economy – (primarily Western) states and corporations – refuse to acknowledge that they are key to both problem and solution. Given their dominance, not only in terms of physical/material power but also in terms of the production and dissemination of knowledge, unless states and corporations agree that there is a 'problem' requiring a 'solution', then there is no problem.

Where there is global agreement on the presence of a problem, it is the powerful who continue to frame approaches to its resolution. For these people, most clearly represented at a gathering such as the World Economic Forum, the system itself is not in question. It simply needs a bit of reform. So, pollution, for example, is a question for producers and consumers to work out. Whereas, ISO 14000 can establish a set of criteria regarding the production, consumption and disposal of a product from 'cradle' to 'grave', action should be voluntary and ultimately determined by market forces. To question the liberal meta-narrative that underpins this knowledge is to be regarded as a 'dissenting voice in the environmental community' as Lowi and Shaw describe Simon Dalby in their collection *Environment and Security* (p.6).

In this essay, I want to focus on the contradictions between assenting and dissenting voices. Five publications constitute the core of this study: four are edited collections comprising 49 separate essays; one is a small monograph. Case studies are drawn from more than 20 countries, with India providing the focus in eight separate chapters. Some of the chapters take continent-wide (Africa), basin-wide (the Sangha River Basin in Central Africa; the Aral Sea; Lake Victoria), or regional (Middle East, South Asia, West Africa) approaches. All five are concerned with questions of environment and development. However, there is a profound dissonance between the Broch-Due and Schroeder collection, the chapters by Dalby and Thompson in the Lowi and Shaw collection and all of the other books, especially Lowi and Shaw.

This dissonance derives from the fundamental epistemological, ontological and methodological disagreements between those concerned with critical theory and post-positivist methodologies (Broch-Due and Schroeder, Dalby, Thompson) and those concerned with problem-solving theory and positivist methods. A further, crucial distinction is between those wedded to a statist

ontology, most clearly expressed in Lowi and Shaw, and those not. It is important to also note that the post-positivist, critical theoretical, non-statist approach tends to be more pronounced in those trained as anthropologists and geographers (that is, all those in Broch-Due and Schroeder, as well as Dalby and Thompson). This is an issue to which I shall return below.

In framing my essay this way, it is the intention to shed light on the debates at Rio and Rio Plus Ten. Along the way, I hope also to encourage those concerned with environment and development to ask better questions. The essay itself is divided into three sections entitled theme and theory, discipline and disciplines, and action. In the first section I discuss the central theme of these texts – that is, the environment/development problematique – and contrast problem-solving with critical theoretical approaches as they are brought to bear upon it. The second section suggests that strengths and weaknesses in analysis result from the ways in which knowledge is bounded by discipline. Finally, I make some modest proposals for action.

THEME AND THEORY

In a general sense, all five books are concerned with 'environment and development'. More specifically, however, each volume is concerned with what might be described as the political economy of environmental degradation in geographical areas generally considered to be of marginal economic value, but often of increasing environmental value to wider national and global interests. For example, in his study, Itse examines the political economy of national park creation in Nigeria. Specifically, he is interested in understanding and describing the dynamics behind the creation of the Cross River National Park, in particular its gorilla conservation project in the Mbe Mountains, and its impact on the livelihood strategies of local villagers.

Apart from 'biodiversity preservation', the Cross River National Park project has as its goals, watershed protection, the prevention of savannisation, and the development of tourism. To achieve these goals, donors are keen on creating both wildlife corridors and buffer zones between villagers and endangered species. Funding for the project comes from Shell, the Ford Foundation and the European Union. It is administered by the World Wildlife Fund (UK) and the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. While externally conceived, donors nevertheless claim to be interested in facilitating the active participation of local communities, thereby ensuring project sustainability and promoting equitable economic benefits.

A random sampling from the other volumes reveals similar circumstances and experiences but in very different lived spaces: among pastoralists in East (Maasai) and Central (Mpiemu) Africa; among small farmers in Madagascar,

Malawi, Cameroon, Central Tanzania, the Sahel, Sudan; among subsistence farmers in Bolivia and Zimbabwe; among forest fringe dwellers in Nepal, India, Indonesia and the Philippines; and among fishers along Pulicat Lake in India.

In every case a 'resource' – for example, wildlife (birds, gorillas, elephants), forest, savannas, fish, water, soil – pre-identified by a donor (for example, SIDA, GTZ, USAID, WWF, IUCN, Birdlife Africa) as being degraded *by local people* and thus needing to be 'expertly' 'managed' brings local people into, often, unwelcome contact with a complex web of state (national, provincial, district, village) and international (TNCs, INGOs, donor governments) 'actors'. Paraphrasing Stacy Leigh Pigg, Broch-Due (in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.47) states: 'A development project ... "starts out as a plan but turns into a context" in which people are brought together to interact around some activity, bringing with them diverse forms of knowledge and practice.' However, it should come as no surprise that, in virtually every case, the inequalities of (economic, political and social) power and (technical and scientific) knowledge mean that 'donors and the state become arbiters of decisions and definitions' (Broch-Due, p.48).

While Thompson (in Lowi and Shaw, p.203) suggests 'do no harm' as a 'pretty sound first principle', too often the 'real' outcomes of 'development' are the opposite of those intended: increased environmental degradation, increased poverty and economic marginalisation. Why? To address this question, we must turn to theory.

Solving Problems

Today, an entire industry is constructed around what Jeffery and Vira (p.1) identify as the 'new orthodoxy ... among multinational donors such as the World Bank and FAO, as well as bilateral donors and many governments': that environmental degradation can only be arrested and reversed if local people are made partners in the project. The Jeffery and Vira collections assess community-based, participatory models of integrated natural resource management – PNRM for short. Theirs is a problem-solving exercise:

Attempts to manage natural resources through collaboration rather than competition, through negotiation rather than by fiat, by agreement rather than conflict, have become a touchstone for many who see these efforts as the harbinger of global sustainable development. But thoroughgoing, independent assessment of the successes and failures of experimental programmes around the world, and the conditions within which such efforts might be made with some chances of success, are still in their infancy (Vira and Jeffery, p.viii).

From this point the questions thought to be pertinent are: what is participation? what is a community? who should participate? how do we measure participation? how do we resolve conflicts that inevitably arise? Virtually every chapter in the Vira and Jeffery collections wrestles with these questions. To assist in analysis, typologies abound: of forms of participation; kinds of conflict; 'good' and 'bad' social capital. Schematic diagrams are brought to bear in 'understanding' how knowledge is created, how conflict is resolved, how stakeholders interact. Templates are constructed to assess the degree to which participation has been successful – to the donor, to the community, to the individual. Rarely is it asked if there should be an intervention at all, and it is not surprising that 'unintended outcomes abound' (Broch-Due, p.39). Importantly, but too often overlooked, is the fact that these actions affect the lives of real people.

In reading these two volumes one is struck by the way in which contributors dance around the politics not only of the problem, but of the context itself without ever acknowledging or engaging with it. In identifying failed case after failed case, the contributors never suggest anything more insightful than the need for 'better institutions'. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that the vast majority of work on PNRM regards the global political economic context within which these interventions take place as unproblematic. This is a context steeped in binaries: strong and weak states, scientific and superstitious peoples, modern and traditional societies, progressive and backward thinking. Hence, the following assumptions apply: (1) environmental problems emanate from developing countries; (2) they arise due to the pressures placed on limited resources by burgeoning populations; (3) people in developing countries lack the technical-cognitive skill to deal with these problems; and (4) Western donors – states, companies, NGOs – must therefore help them to help themselves.

Thus, theories of social capital, new institutional economics, co-productive participation, societal risk (but not Beck's version!), alternative conflict resolution and new knowledge creation never get to the heart of the problem because they are ultimately problem-solving theories which grow out of a Western imaginary that regards people of colour as inept, and reifies an ontology of states that seeks to daily confirm this.

In the case of the environment/development problematique, *poor people are to blame both for their poverty and their deteriorating environment*. Such thinking is far from benign. In Broch-Due's view, 'such imaginaries are powerfully at work on the ground because they are so heavily implicated in the ways problems are framed, which itself informs the outcomes of resource struggles' (p.19). Abiding 'doomsday imagery of Africa' as fallen 'from an ecological paradise' not only justifies action but, in Broch-Due's view, 'leads to asking the wrong questions' (p.22). Seen in this light, it is 'not particularly

surprising that many conservation measures have left not sustainable communities but endless conflicts, dislocation and poverty in their wake' (Broch-Due, p.24).

This sort of theorising is at its worst in the hands of orthodox scholars of security. The Lowi and Shaw volume is illuminating in this regard. Except for the chapters by Dalby, Lonergan, and Thompson (importantly, two geographers and one social anthropologist), this volume offers testimony to the inability of political scientists to think beyond or below the Westphalian state and the received hierarchy of states in the international system. It also offers testimony to the power of the American government in pre-determining the ways in which potentially meaningful questions get answered *to the satisfaction of the state and its vested interests*.

Thinking Critically

In their introduction, Lowi and Shaw identify Dalby as '[a] dissenting voice in the environmental community' (p.6). Yet, Dalby is the only contributor to (i) place his analysis in global historical perspective; (ii) identify the limitations of thinking about environmental problems from the confines of the state – what he calls the 'territorial trap'; (iii) dare to suggest that Western societies are not environmentally benign; and (iv) locate present problems within the broader context of 'the expansion of modernity' wherein 'political violence can be understood to be an intrinsic part of environmental change' (in Lowi and Shaw, p.95).

Both Dalby and Thompson (in his very important chapter on Nepal) flag the dangers inherent in pursuing policies based on these 'totalising ideologies of development, modernity and progress' (Broch-Due in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.45), as though they were based in objective fact. As is made clear in chapter after chapter of the Broch-Due and Schroeder volume, the Westphalian state form is more problem than possibility in most of the so-called 'developing' world. Its root remains colonial and imperial – bureaucratic, extractive, rent-seeking, oppressive. No amount of 'new institutional economics', nor measure of 'social capital', nor amount of 'reform' will change this condition. It occupies a physical space long occupied by other forms of social production and reproduction. In Shapiro's words: 'the North American landscape is a conquerors' construction where the history of resistance is obliterated from maps and memories' (Dalby quoted in Lowi and Shaw, p.95).

Compare Rayner and Malone's claim that 'Tanzania's secret dancing societies' are an example of social capital (in Lowi and Shaw, p.51). On the surface, this seems innocent enough, but, in my view, such a truth claim performs several acts. It privileges Western ways of being and knowing by equating Tanzanian society with Western social forms. It reaffirms

Tanzanians as 'inferior' and 'backward' by subjecting them to a measure of social good, that is, social capital, of which they have 'a little'. Further, they reinforce statist ontologies, and depoliticise development interventions by suggesting that social stability is a matter of creating appropriate institutions.

Taken together, this truth claim obliterates an entire political, economic and social history. In the Western liberal meta-narrative this is unproblematic as we have, in any event, reached the end of history. Not only is such unreflective 'science' offensive; it also betrays these Western experts' ignorance about social formations and the exceedingly problematic nature of the state in Africa. To ignore these tensions and to simply define various Third World state forms as 'weak' and 'backward' is to tacitly acknowledge that such a definition may satisfy your needs, but it does little to address the needs of people in those societies you seek to 'change'.

The role colonial powers played in creating not only states, but African 'tribes', is well known. Less well known is the way in which mobile populations were interpreted as poor, where 'wealth on the hoof was considered "bad wealth" – the very anti-thesis of agrarian wealth' (Broch-Due, p.74). In the colonial mind, 'poverty' was tantamount to being primitive, nomadic, a pauper, a criminal (Broch-Due, p.74). According to Giles-Vernick, 'French colonisers believed that instability and movement were markers of people who were "uncivilized" and without a history' (in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.308). However, the history of the continent is a history of movement of people and animals largely determined by broad seasonal weather patterns. The notion of 'fixed space' is anathema to the ways of the continent.

The contrast between problem-solving and critical theory is made particularly clear in the following example regarding the creation of Amboseli national park in Kenya. It also highlights the tension between thinking about Africa as a place of weak states, and Africa as a collection of multiple, mobile social forms. Working within the statist, problem-solving framework of PNRM, Kabiri describes how the Maasai came to suffer land alienation which 'assumed institutional dimensions when the Amboseli game park was created'. He draws the following conclusion: 'Positive Maasai relationships to wildlife can therefore be developed on the basis of a cultural legacy, and their participation in environmental conservation can be promoted'; and 'The Maasai, as a group, do seem to have a case to lay claim to resources in their region' (in Jeffery and Vira, pp.42, 59). Compare Kabiri's relatively apolitical political science with Schroeder's description:

In the mid-1970s, Maasai residents of southern Kenya were abruptly relocated from land that was subsequently enclosed within Amboseli

National Park ... In response, the displaced groups began a systematic effort to kill many of Amboseli's most prized tourist attractions, including dozens of leopards, elephants, and rhinos. The program of extermination was undertaken not for sport or profit but as part of a desperate protest campaign designed to counter the growing threat tour operations posed to Maasai land rights (in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.340).

In three short sentences Schroeder has got to the heart of the politics of land in Africa. Indeed, a powerful theme in the Broch-Due and Schroeder volume is the way in which state forms, conceived in the state houses of Europe, have impacted on the livelihoods of nomadic peoples or peoples whose lived space deviates markedly from the fixed geography of the Westphalian 'sovereign' state. While not recognised as such, many of the chapters in the Vira and Jeffery volumes clearly articulate this problem. Thus, well-intentioned conservationists, ecologists, environmentalists and development 'experts' step perhaps unwittingly into this deeply problematic state/non-state relationship.

By accepting the state as the proper locus for action, people who have long ignored state boundaries become by default 'a problem'. Yet, from a critical theoretical perspective, not to enquire into the essence of what Lefebvre calls representations of space before taking 'action', and instead to simply accept the 'reality' of a Western liberal meta-narrative about states and civil societies is deeply problematic. Too often, the development expert, however, cannot see the politics in his/her science.

Recently, the environmental 'movement' itself has sought to recover some of this movement, but largely of animals, not people, hence the notion of 'buffers' and 'corridors'. Confined to specific geographical space, people are being driven to 'sedentarisation'. For many African peoples such immobility is tantamount to death: 'Finding their old strategies of spatial mobility criminalised, their access to places in the forest curtailed ... [the Mpiemu of the Sangha Basin] perceive themselves as a "dead people"' (Giles-Vernick in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.317).

While peace parks are being created to facilitate the movement of wildlife and the preservation of ecosystems, people under the guise of 'participation' and 'partnership' are being forced to occupy more and more difficult geographic space. The Broch-Due and Schroeder collection offers damning evidence of the continuing 'production of poverty and nature' in Africa. In my opinion, it is a key text and should be read by all who are concerned with the environment and development.

DISCIPLINES AND DISCIPLINE

Why do intelligent and probably well-intentioned people continue to accept an unreflective theoretical framework that brings more harm than good? Why do 'dissenters' seem able to marshal a persuasive critique of dominant development practices but not able to contemplate action? It seems to me that these puzzling and important conditions are a function of the nature of the production of knowledge within the strictures of disciplinary boundaries and research-funding criteria. Perhaps this reveals nothing more than a personal bias, but it seems to me that, more often, those trained in geography, anthropology, sociology and history (as are the contributors to the Broch-Due and Schroeder collection) are better able to understand the nature of poverty and environmental degradation than problem-solving oriented thinkers (as seen in the other volumes).

Until recently, political science was, by definition, the study of the state. International relations initially emerged as the study of relations between states, and has been described by Stanley Hoffman as 'an American discipline'. Both have historically focused on the actions and decisions of the most powerful, many have been employed by them. As a consultant to a government, the unstated assumption is that you will frame your analysis in a way that best serves your employer. If you do not, you are unlikely to secure another contract.

While anthropologists have often served states, historically they have focused on people(s). As such, their spatial frames tend to be non-state. Given the central part anthropologists have played in imperial and colonial mappings, and the way in which their Western prejudices have helped render non-Western peoples as 'inferior' and 'primitive', they have often attempted to overcome this unfortunate legacy by being more self-conscious about their claims to the 'truth'. The same cannot be said of either political scientists or the majority of those in the development 'industry'.

ACTION

This brings us back to the debates at Rio and those likely to arise at Johannesburg. Rio – as UNCED – privileged states and their interests. Parallel meetings held there by NGOs and other non-state 'actors' were not simply some quaint expression of 'global civil society'; rather, they were indicative of the highly political nature of 'environment as physical space' and 'physical space as resource use'. Development interventions are actions which determine how resources will be used – these are therefore in every instance a political act. Framed this way, the parallel summit at Rio may be seen more accurately as the more 'well-behaved' predecessor to the Seattle *et al.* demonstrations around the WTO.

States, by definition, seek to reproduce themselves. In order to do so, they must use resources including 'natural resources'. Moreover, states define and regard themselves in relation to other states: not the condition of the global environment, nor the condition of humankind, and, as has been made painfully clear in chapter after chapter, certainly not in relation to border-ignoring pastoral communities. Any thinking beyond or below borders, must, therefore, be filtered through what might be called, to paraphrase Dalby, the 'sovereignty trap': how states and state-makers maintain themselves.

Hence, Rio, as most large inter-state meetings, centred on the concerns of state-makers grouped into contending coalitions loosely defined as OECD versus G77. Each coalition was centrally concerned with one question: how to maintain or advance their position – individually, certainly; collectively, possibly – in a global hierarchy of states. Far from an 'Earth Summit', Rio was a typical inter-state dialogue between contending coalitions of state-makers and their corporate allies. How to understand environmental degradation? and global poverty? The debate degenerated into the now quite familiar argument between 'there are too many people' (the view from the North) versus 'there is too much consumption' (the view from the South). Each 'side' has purported to speak on behalf of its 'people'. Few in the formal summit have listened to anyone in the parallel meetings. Had they listened, then it was with an ear to understanding how proceedings there might threaten the state-centred *status quo*. The resulting politics manifest as a specific kind of environmental agenda.

In any event, the global environmental discourse – be it in the service of the state (as is the case with most contributors to the Lowi and Shaw volume), or in the service of the planet (as is the case with the 'dissenting' voices of Dalby, Thompson and perhaps Lonergan in that same volume) – seems very far removed from the lives of those people who figure centrally in the other four books under discussion. Yet, the impact on them from these discussions is very direct. It is at its most pertinent in terms of actions taken in defence of biodiversity and against global warming. The two issues – biodiversity preservation and climate change – find common cause in defence of the forest, in particular, moist tropical forest. Much of the content in all five volumes is devoted to case studies of its 'management': in Africa, Asia, Latin America.

A great deal of expert 'knowledge' is brought to bear. Definitions abound: climax forest, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), savannaisation, stages of degradation, per capita fuelwood consumption, buffer zones, peace parks, the desertification jump. Most of the contributors in the Vira and Jeffery volumes accept these terms as fact: for example, that slash and burn practices lead to a loss of forest cover and an increase in savannas (hence 'savannaisation'). Is this true? Fairhead and Leach (in Broch-Due and Schroeder) challenge this

correlation. Indeed, they raise the possibility that 'scientific' facts such as 'stages of degradation' serve neither the planet nor people, but the powerful: in other words, they act as justification for state possession of resources otherwise managed sustainably by local people (pp.177–80). From a critical theoretical perspective, to claim that peasants are degrading the forest is a political act. To dress it up with scientific terminology is to attempt to depoliticise it, thus masking the true nature of 'resource capture'.

None of the problem-solving approaches involve what appears to critical thinkers a fairly obvious question: why are so many people throughout the developing world forced to inhabit, to 'settle' in forests and along the fringes, and why are they increasingly under siege from a wide variety of national and global interests? In other words, why are the already marginalised being both further marginalised and criminalised? Instead, what most of these experts do is take the fact of poor people using more and more forest resources as a given but decontextualised problem, and then seek ways to reconcile their livelihood strategies with the 'needs' of, *inter alia*, the state, the donors and the ecosystem. Is reconciliation possible? Are experts asking the right questions?

One thing that must be done, it seems to me, is that we have to ask more pertinent questions. To do this, we must move from the limiting confines of separate disciplines. We need to become, in essence, undisciplined, if we are to be able to ask and seriously address what the mainstream considers awkward questions. Too often, we speak only to each other, and only to those with whom we agree. It is to their credit that Lowi and Shaw have included both Dalby and Thompson in their collection for, intellectually, these scholars are truly worlds apart.

In my estimation, we also need to work systematically towards a new critical political ecology, and somewhere in these five books lies its kernel. Indeed, this is a term Dalby and Ite both use. However, this will be no easy task, for what these studies also reveal is that the mainstream is 'still wedded to worthless ways of defining the problem': a neo-Malthusian argument that claims 'There are too many Africans, Asians, Latin Americans using finite resources unwisely' (Thompson in Lowi and Shaw, p.195; also Broch-Due in her introduction; Ite, pp.16–17, 120).

Simply reading the many epigrams that begin the Broch-Due and Schroeder collection should be enough to make one feel humble, not about what is to be done, but about what *has* been done. These epigrams document throughout history the way in which Western 'experts' have continued to regard non-Westerners as inferior, and non-Western spaces as the proper terrain for social experimentation. In Jeffery and Vira's words, 'More modest claims ... will ensure that the issues of social inequality, which are usually the root causes of environmental deterioration, will be more clearly addressed in future' (p.15).



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My fear, however, is that the September 2002 Earth Summit will continue to be a dialogue between state-makers and their technical experts whose outcome will be, in Schroeder's words, the 'commodification and commercialisation of nature, the imposition of essentialised identities, and the cooptation of progressive political agendas' (in Broch-Due and Schroeder, p.347). For all those unhappy with the likelihood of Rio *Minus* Ten, our task at least will be to ask better questions and to pursue strategies whereby the powerful may listen and the weak may be heard.

