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A Political Ecology for Marginal and Depopulated Protected Areas: A View from Geographical Rural Studies

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Abstract

From the perspective of political ecology and rural geography, the main ideas about nature and, in parallel, protected areas are reviewed. The initial approach of nature as wilderness, where the natural environment has not been significantly modified by society and the human activity changes progressively until the emergence of the Anthropocene period, where all nature is significantly affected by human nature. This evolution implies a clear change in the relationship between nature and society, from a binary relationship, with separate and pure realities to a fluid and hybrid one, where society and nature are accepted in a relational manner. These new ideas greatly influence the conception of protected areas based on the conservation of nature separated from society: to another where protected areas are conceived in a flexible, multi-natural and more-than-human way. Geographical discipline plays an important role in conceptual evolution and practice of natural protected areas.

Keywords: geography, political ecology, protected areas, depopulated areas, rural space, hybrid relations

1.0 Introduction

The initial argument of this review is that a political ecology for protected areas needs precise academic frontiers for an adequate analysis. The focus of this contribution is that human geography and rural geography itself have progressed from a binary and rigid spatial analysis to a more fluid, flexible and hybrid conception of space and that this academic evolution has been transferred to the spatial management of the protected areas. The new protected areas respond to singular spatial trajectories and particular socio-cultural histories arising from the flexible coexistence of local and extra local interests.

There is a (co)evolution between the geographical academic debates from the rural political ecology and the new management of protected areas. The universal and normative political ecology move to a more fluid, flexible and hybrid, and even individual political ecology, and this academic situation also occurs in the management of protected areas, more flexible and adapted for each space or species—with the consideration of humans. Recently, there is even an individualization of cultural spaces and species. We have chosen several singular areas in the geographical analysis to demonstrate this (co)evolution: (a) concept of nature; (b) human and non-human relationships; (c) individual trajectories of protected spaces, and (d) animal worlds.

With these criteria, the review has a geographical predilection for protected areas in depopulated rural spaces. The study of protected areas in depopulated and marginal spaces has little tradition in political ecology, but currently has a clear political and academic interest.

2.0 From Production of Nature to New Cultural Natures

The concept of nature has (co)evolved in parallel with the generation of more complex spatial structures and the emergence of new natures (Gissibl, Höhler & Kupper, 2012). They highlight diverse geographical perspectives:

- *The production of nature* (Watts, 2005), founded in a discussion of the intrinsic and external value of nature in the spatial analysis of human societies, and a notable distinction between first and second nature and its precise relationship between human and nonhuman elements as interpretive keys of nature in the capitalist system (Smith, 1984). In reality nature and society are not completely spaced pieces. The laws that regulate the second nature are not universal, since societies are in permanent flux, change and development.
- *The socio-cultural representation of nature* (Demeritt, 2002), which points out that the concepts of nature are socially constructed and historically and territoriality situated. The construction of nature is complex and used in multiple and parallel paths, but with limited utility in the politics of nature.
- Finally, *the hybrid approaches* (Castree, 2011) which maintain that the social and natural categories cannot be seen separately, in order to understand precisely their character and effect.

These three academic discussions open a process of analytical denaturalization of nature, with notable influence on the policy of protected areas. As explained by Castree (2011) “to conserve nature one need [*sic*] to understand that it is not a discrete object or space to be protected” (p. 296). This forces us to rethink what is meant by conservation and how the concept can be developed in nature conservation policies. In this analytical context, nature is a category of categories, as wilderness, animal or human (Delaney, 2001).

The most common approach to the conservation of protected areas derives from large-scale bioregionalism for the conservation of the biological community of a wide area (Ramutsindela & Noe, 2015). This has been translated spatially in closed areas in traditional conservation systems, such as national parks or natural parks. In this perspective dominates the separation between pure nature—the cult of wilderness—and everyday human uses and practices (Gissibl, Höhler & Kupper, 2012). More recently, it is possible to observe a trend that tries to incorporate the cultural landscape and its inhabitants into the conservation objectives of the protected areas. It aims to establish an adequate balance between humans and non-humans in the spatial protection of an area. As Castree (2011) suggests “political ecology was thus tasked with understanding how local resource use was being affected by wider social forces, and the accent was on asymmetries of power between ordinary people and the various actors affecting those peoples [*sic*] lives” (p. 292). This last perspective suggests new relationships and dimensions in the conceptualization and practice of protected areas: (a) nature–culture; (b) space–species; and (c) container–flexible, human–non-human, in–out or rigid–flexible.

With the introduction of hybrid approaches the idea of conservation adopts a new orientation with respect to the long tradition of conservation as wilderness protection (Adams, 2017). A hybrid nature–society approach introduces a radical change in conservation strategies. As explained by Whatmore (2002, p.8) “the hybrid mappings are necessarily topological, subject to a multiplicity of time/spaces generated by the rhythm of heterogeneous associations” This new perspective assumes a fracture with the approach to the space like a container

that has determined the traditional spatial politics to the protected spaces. The *protected* space is fluid and flexible, beyond binary relations—in-out or local–global. This tendency introduces a new style of conservation and protection (Adams, 2017), where nature is denatured and replaced by a plurality of negotiated human natures (Castree & Braun, 2006). These dualistic approaches move to a relational idea in the analysis of protected societies–natures relations (Braun, 2008). Recognition of a non-binary, opposite or dual approach requires a new politics of nature, based in multiple socio-natures.

This new relationship integrates the human and non-human (material-spatial, animal and plant) currently contribute to singularize the character of each protected area, beyond their usual normative approach. The qualities that characterize postmodern and post human relationships, based on difference, flexibility and hybridization, support new visions of protected spaces.

3.0 Protected Nature and the Anthropocene

The emergence of the Anthropocene period—understood as the recognition of the scarcity of places or processes on the planet that have not been affected by human activity (Lorimer, 2015)—introduces a new stage characterized by domestication of nature that replaces the old and conventional categorized and territorialized protected natures. This renovated hybrid and fluid perspective has a topographical individuality in the protected areas, under a multiplicity of heterogeneous complex relations. Natures change place to place in the context of new and sophisticated cultures of nature (Hinchliffe, 2008a). A multiplicity of new spaces for ‘elaborated natures’ includes natures created by human activity and laboratories of cultural nature.

An adequate overlap between and within human and non-human elements of nature reinforce the emergence of specific place natures, with their own identities and iconographies. Every new protected nature emerges with its own singular voice (Matless, 2009). Each nature—as an individual—has multiple spatial variations and trajectories (Hinchliffe, 2008b): as many as socio-cultural experiences. The assemblage of conservation is singular and, at the same time, heterogeneous (Lorimer, 2015). Multiple natures coexist with the absolute domain of human activity of the Anthropocene. In this sense, the appearance of the concept ‘stewards of the Anthropocene’ reflects a new multi-natural conservation (Lorimer, 2015). In this argument the modern approach to nature as a pure, singular, and stable domain modified by its relation to urban and industrial society needs to be changed by a politics of Anthropocene under a multi-natural and more-than-human approach, which generates multiple political ecologies (Lorimer, 2012). In addition, the Anthropocene modifies temporal and spatial horizons through the intersection of human—individual—histories in geological times (Schmidt, Brown & Orr, 2016).

New directions in conservation include spatial connectivity and fluidity between (natural) reserves. Multiple spatialities are connected in the wider context of human and non-human politics of conservation. The exotic conservation natures coexist with the politics of mundane conservation. In short, nature would no longer be a pure category delimited by binary divisions; on the contrary it would be broadly interconnected with its cultural dimension giving rise to a new spatial and symbolic reality dominated by fluidity and impure relations (Jones, 2009).

This renovated approach to nature changes the traditional idea of protected areas. The new protected areas respond to particular histories that gather multiple voices of local and non-local people and government agencies (Carlson & Clapperton, 2012).

4.0 Individual Histories of Rural Protected Areas

In the field of geographical rural studies, a review of the main international handbooks suggests that the idea of protection linked to the restriction of human activity to conserve particular rural landscapes or rural environment atmospheres continues in force. It continues to dominate the argument that the designation of protected areas to preserve the most valuable characteristics of the rural environment allows the socioeconomic development of the field in general (Woods, 2005, 2011). In another key handbook (Gilg, 1985) conservation is associated with recreation in nature reserves, where conservation is the first stage of human action. Conservation and recreation plans must coincide in the space of natural protected areas, in the context of a wider land use planning (Gilg, 1985). Another relevant book (Robinson, 1990) in geographical rural studies suggests that the countryside should be, as a whole, used and preserved. Conservation in rural areas implies at the same time opening the countryside to people while preserving it. A crucial question is to combine the interests of urban and local (rural) populations (Robinson, 1990). All these texts situate conservation in the context of the processes of socio-economic and functional change in rural areas, together with a vision of consumption of nature, but still maintain a certain binary division between nature and society.

A view from rural political ecology suggests that it is not necessary to propose a fixed vision of nature, in favor of a multiplicity of animated natures in differentiated rural spaces (Hinchliffe, 2008a and b). A new approach to the conservation and protection of nature must be based on a flexible and relational vision of differentiated places, connected by complex spatial and temporal relationships. This consideration breaks with a discrete vision of protected spaces (Hinchliffe, 2008a and b). This new orientation suggests a rethinking of what needs to be protected and the politics of conservation in large rural areas. This allows a particular transition between ideology and conservation practice in which each protected natural area has its own encounter between nature and society (Castree, 2011). The conservation of nature must be directed to the original and specific differentiation of each protected space, as a guide to what is necessary to preserve in each specific case. Each protected nature has its own political nature, without establishing meta-narratives, in benefit of heterogeneous narratives and elaborated discursive conservation strategies.

Protected areas in rural spaces find their own character in the romantic vision of the nature of the middle class (Braun, 2006), close to the ideal wilderness that does not include environmental problems that affect the daily life of local rural communities. In this ideal vision some local identities may be marginalized in relation to others. A *rural political ecology* must be critical of the multiple facets of difference that are established between actors and processes that destabilize the lives of rural communities and their local land uses practices. Each protected nature varies place to place, generating new cultures of nature (Hinchliffe, 2008a).

This post-nature conception is based on flexible connectivity between local and non-local people, rural and natural landscapes, and species. Hybrid approaches require new spatial relationships to facilitate more dynamic and permeable conservation spaces. Network topologies promoted a new form of governance of protected areas in rural settings. New fluid politics creates new rural and natural spaces for change (Lorimer, 2015). Nature–society hybrids produce a second nature for the conservation of rural landscapes (Zimmerer, 2000), connected by flows. The increase in concern for processes, flows, and hybridizations has been transferred to subjects (humans and non-humans), identities, and spaces that interact in protected natural areas. In this way nature reserves are a distinctive place with significant differences (Watson, 2003), as a

consequence of a particular configuration of heterogeneous relationships, which should be transferred to conservation and protection processes.

Each protected natural area establishes its own rhythm that includes all the populations that live daily within it. The commitment of the local people to preserve wild areas means that they are part of a certain state of nature, with their own rhythms and dynamics. The protected natural areas become in this way humanized spaces, with multiple and heterogeneous voices, that generate a remarkable variety of micro-politics of domesticated nature. These place politics of nature generate even different styles of resistance to conservation. Resistance styles are determined by different combinations of (a) type of conservation, (b) different implementation, (c) social and community context, and (d) particularities of the natural resources to be conserved (Holmes, 2007, Lee, 2016). The relation between nature and culture or between nature and society should go beyond the binary relation and integrate the role of practice in the relationship between peoples and non-human natures (Zimmerer, 2000). Especially through the integration the conservation processes in the *resistant* local culture. Protecting natural place involves marginalized local people, with long-term place resistance strategies. In short, in each protected natural area there are multiple voices and narratives that generate elaborate and sophisticated styles of mutual human and non-human conservation.

5.0 Animal Places, Lived Places, Protected Animals in Lived Places

Hybrid geographies affect both a reconsideration of natural protected areas and the conservation of the species that inhabit each area. More-than-human and hybrid approaches have incorporated new conceptualizations of humans and natures, but also of animals, with new dynamics in between (Whatmore, 2002). A topological vision of multi-natural protected spaces, not only must be based on material places, but also on the intersecting topologies of life (Philo, 2005). Animal histories coexist with places histories where the animal is a part of human social relations (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Wild animals' places coexist with denaturalized rural spaces. Parallel to the recognition of the hybrid and non-dualistic character of the human–nature relationships and the end of nature in the Anthropocene period, emerges the idea of the (co)protection of the human and the animal world, of each person and each animal, as the key to ecological protection and conservation (Wapner, 2010). In this way, protected areas are places of encounter between animals and humans, in the context of complex, fragmented, and individualized human and non-human relations, as a new form of impure life and cultural natures (Jones, 2000).

This perspective constitutes a break from the traditional vision of 'zoo culture,' which seeks to preserve wildlife from the ecological consequences of the modernization process. The zoo culture promotes the marginalization of animals in large rural protected areas and their separation from human activity. In this point of view, the relationship between animals and modernity is founded in the delimitation of large enclosures. The zoo culture has a double role as a product and producer in the preservation of pure ecology in domesticated parcels of nature-rural areas (Watts, 2004). Currently, wildlife species cross protected natural areas—outside of conception zoo container—and interact with humans in large rural areas. The management of protected areas is integrated into the management of large rural areas (Steinberg, Morzillo, Riley & Clark, 2015).

An adaptative political ecology founded in the more-than-human geography opens individual visions of spaces and animals. Hybrid approaches are also

expressed through different forms of difference. Traditionally conservation put the focus on species, now there is more interest in individuals within species. Post-human nature unfolds through multiple and varied spaces. Many animals and plants claim their own space and present their specific mobility. Currently, these are common considerations in any conservation or preservation policy (Natter, 2002). These charismatic natures introduce a new point of view in the political ecology of conservation in the Anthropocene period. There are charismatic species that generate public and social affection (Lorimer, 2009). This idea promotes singular animal voices. The non-human charisma introduces the emotions and affections about emblematic animals in conservation processes. This also happens in the case of singular trees, which acquire a symbolic sense of the forest mass and of the place or of historical forest masses. As suggested by Cloke and Pawson (2008), the trees are active organic components in the constitution of place and the tree places contribute emotional and symbolic responses to rural community.

The inclusion of a more-than-human perspective is fundamental to the affirmation of solidarity biopolitics (Rutherford & Rutherford, 2013). Also of importance is the need to adapt political ecology perspectives from the more-than-human open individual visions of spaces and animals.

6.0 Conclusion

In the context of the emergence of denaturalized rural natures (Castree & Braun, 2006), it is possible to situate the ideas and practice of rural protected areas and their conservation. The ideas of nature and countryside have interacted through different practices, usually dominated by a binary dimension, where the rural space was the refuge of nature against the urban and industrial world (Whatmore, 1998). A *new* hybrid and impure vision of rural natures allows us to explore the interaction between the different human actors and adopt a more ethical and relational vision with the subjects of the non-human world. Using this approach we have tackled some of the main dimensions of human-nature relations (Robbins, 2010): flows and connections between humans and non-human; borders, categories, and distinction; and the problem of mutual influence between human actions and practices and the natural system.

As suggested by Castree (2005) in the Anthropocene period always “lives in a mixed-up, hybrid and impure world where it is difficult to differentiate things from their relationships” (p. 225). This fact has remarkable implications for the conservation and management of protected natural areas: the human acts as a *relevant* part of complex and dynamic biophysical systems (Castree, 2005). This tendency revises the old ecology or people versus protected areas in order to conserve the natural romantic countryside. In spatial terms, the new orientations review the scalar and universal natures in favor to topological inter-connected multi natures. As explained by Robbins (2013, p. 312) “the political ecology emphasizes flexibility rather than determinacy. In an era of global environmental change, the new principle is adaptation.” In the words of Murdoch (2006, p. 106) the new hybrid protected areas link topographical management and topological fluidity. The main purpose of many protected natural areas has changed, clearly, from a politics of natural preservation to a post-nature approach, which includes the management of wildlife natures for social and economic rural development (Abel & Blaikie, 1986). The hybrid approach in management of protected areas coincides with the hybridization of the whole of rural areas. Thus, the hybrid of new protected natural areas is part of the new fluid rural—depopulated—areas, which includes aesthetic, environmental, and consume functions, with persistent and substantial flows between urban and rural spaces.

This review suggests some thematic orientations for the future: (a) investigate the emotional and non-representative approaches in the management of protected areas, (b) the new power of nature over local populations in new protected areas, (c) an excessive domain of case study in the analysis of protected areas (Castree, 2008), and (d) the heterogeneity of discourses about nature and its relevance in the individual processes of emergence of new protected natural areas (Buller, 2008). A feature of the new nature and new protected areas is competing philosophies, visions, interest around the spaces and species.

Finally, the political ecology is a flexible and expansive field of study (Bryant, 2015). This contribution empathizes a geographical vision of political ecology, with special attention to renewed interest in hybrid, fluid, and flexible approaches and new topics around individual and narrative histories of natures. In consequence, this review is selective and explores certain trends associated with the intersection between a geographical political ecology and geographical rural studies in the study and management of protected areas.

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