

The time and place for political ecology: An introduction to the articles honoring the life-work of Piers Blaikie

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Abstract

Political ecology (PE) is experiencing a renaissance and embrace similar to that of Geography itself. Just as there is a rediscovery of the importance of place and thus Geography, Geographers and others are discovering that this critical approach to the human-environment dialectic provides unique theoretical, methodological, and practical insights for unravelling the complexities of this contentious nexus. The host of new volumes that introduce students and the larger academic community to PE each emphasize different theoretical and thematic confluences. This volume is organized around the life-long work and intellectual history of a leading political ecologist, Piers Blaikie, and as such it is both a tribute to that work, and an alternative means to discover what PE is today. Piers Blaikie's life-work also encompasses research and writing on natural disasters and risk, development policy and practice, international environmental policy, conservation and biodiversity, AIDS in Africa, livelihoods, and books on India and Nepal. By assessing Blaikie's long and productive career, from pioneering foundational texts, through transdisciplinary exchanges in the fields of Geography, Development Studies, and policy, to constructive and critical engagement with the post-modern turn, and questions of epistemology and methodology, the contributions to this themed issue provide a diverse yet coherent set of insights. The three sessions of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) Conference in Denver in 2005 and group of articles that emerged from them to form this collection serve to clarify the major convergences and dissonances in the field and its ongoing vitality. In Piers Blaikie's case, as a central actor in both the theory and practice of PE, a collection based upon a critical overview of his contributions to PE provides a new window into seeing and understanding the past, present, and future of the field.

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1. Introduction

Political ecology (PE) has come of age. No longer peripheral, marginal, or outside the mainstream of academia, it is firmly entrenched in the curricula of most Geography graduate programs, and is experiencing a wider renaissance and embrace similar to that of Geography itself. Just as there is a rediscovery of the importance of place and thus Geography, Geographers and others are discovering this critical approach to the human-environment dialectic that provides unique theoretical, methodological, and practical insights for unravelling the

complexities of this contentious nexus. The host of new volumes that introduce students and the larger academic community to PE each emphasize different theoretical and thematic confluences that provide threads of continuity for the claim that PE is definable.¹ What has yet to be offered is a volume that is organized around the life-long work and intellectual history of a leading political ecologist. This is that volume. As such it is both a tribute to the lifework of Piers Blaikie, and an alternative means to discover what PE is today. Through an assessment of

¹ Definition also provides opportunities for re-imagining and re-inventing history with particular ends in mind – a subject of some of the contributors and Blaikie here.

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Blaikie's long and productive career, from his pioneering foundational texts, through his transdisciplinary exchanges in the fields of Geography, Development Studies, and policy, to his constructive and critical engagement with the post-modern turn, the contributions to this themed issue provide a diverse yet coherent set of insights. These serve to clarify the major convergences and dissonances in the field, and its ongoing vitality – a vitality at least partially attributable to Blaikie's numerous key interventions, as a number of the contributors point out. Thankfully there is no dearth of material to build such a collection upon. Blaikie is an extremely productive scholar, and as such his influence on each of the contributors to this collection is clear and powerful. The contributors themselves are each arguably leaders in the field in their own right. It is rare that one person has such impact, and not only through the written word, but through teaching, lecturing, mentoring, as well as the iterative application of ideas through participation in development projects and policies. This is Piers Blaikie's unique legacy. It was no accident that David Simon (2006) chose him as one of the *Fifty Key Thinkers on Development* in his recent volume of that title. And therefore, creating a collection based upon Blaikie's life contributions to PE provides a new window into seeing and understanding where the ever contentious and eclectic 'we' have been in the past, where we are today, and where we may be going in the future.

2. Piers Macleod Blaikie: a brief biography

Although it is a dramatically difficult time to maintain optimism, Piers Blaikie dares to believe that our work can contribute to a more socially and environmentally just future. He continues to challenge us with pertinent questions: How might PE, with its focus on the interrelationship between environmental destruction and social inequality, and with core values of social justice and equity, help us overcome the 'vacuum of responsibility', and engage the political realities of unequal power and control? Blaikie argues in the epilogue to this themed issue that, in a sense, PE's 'incoherence' is a risk worth preserving precisely because it provides a flexible non-dogmatic approach to 'real world' problems and their complexities. As such, it allows alliances with a wide range of others (not merely policy elites), and coalitions with individuals and groups in civil society, often in surprising places. This is Blaikie's guardedly optimistic approach.

This approach implies an inherent risk, however. Too much incoherence and too little shared commitment to core ideas could transform PE into a powerful discursive weapon for control – adopted, adapted, integrated into the institutions of the most powerful and used towards ends far removed from those first envisioned, and principally for maintenance of an unjust and destructive status quo.

PE is an intellectual device, a label and a proclaimed intention. It asserts that society and nature must be considered together. But as Piers Blaikie discusses in the epilogue,

the field is enormous and there are few persuasive boundaries. Does that matter? Perhaps not. As I have previously asserted (Muldavin, 1997), a lack of 'closure' and a concurrent 'boundary of ignorance' allows unruly practices to survive in the interstices. For other disciplines, PE has other meanings. Many ecologists see it as politicized ecologies, and there is a growing exchange between political ecologists and ecologists that Neumann (2005), among others, highlights. Davis (1998) writes about the PE of famines in *Ecology of Fear* – though his is a narrative about famine less concerned with the cross-disciplinary framings that increasingly predominate discussions of PE.

This themed issue identifies three main elaborations of PE which we proposed at the 2005 Association of American Geographers (AAG) Conference as being *a priori* those which occupy Piers Blaikie most consistently in his work. They are: (1) PE and Development Studies, (2) PE and policy, and (3) PE – its past, present and future.

Piers Blaikie's life work also encompasses topics perhaps not fully known to PE and Geography audiences. This includes research and writing on natural disasters and risk, development policy and practice, international environmental policy, conservation and biodiversity, AIDS in Africa, livelihoods, and a number of books on India and Nepal. Reflecting this diversity of topics, a number of contributors come from outside PE. That said, some authors in this volume have claimed that these works too can be treated as PE.

Similar collections have been very successful in the past, honoring a colleague's lifetime contributions in a wide range of areas, and providing us with a chance to re-evaluate the current state of a field. As PE writ large continues to grow as a theoretical field, methodological approach, and organizing rubric for many within Geography, an ongoing, self-critical reflection on its central actors and ideas is essential. In Piers Blaikie's case, as a central actor in both the theory and practice of PE, a critical overview of his work seems appropriate given the rapid expansion in the field.

Piers Blaikie warmed slowly to the idea of the triple session at the AAG and this subsequent collection. With typical modesty, he did not feel his career warranted such attention, let alone substantial new writing by colleagues young and old. Ultimately we persuaded him to participate with the promise that the sessions and subsequent themed issue would not focus so much on him, but rather on a number of key themes that run through his work, and their importance, past, present, and future. He was particularly concerned that the panels and papers would serve the interests of younger scholars in the field – a reflection of his lifelong mentoring and support for students around the world.

Following a brief chronology of his career, I will introduce the themes covered in the panel sessions, the contributions to this Themed Issue, connections between them, and end with some reflections, questions and challenges.

Piers Macleod Blaikie, Professor Emeritus of Development Studies at The University of East Anglia (UEA),

has been one of the principal voices in PE from its inception, providing decades of path breaking thinking, research and writing. Blaikie did his Geography degrees at Cambridge University. His first posting was in Geography at the University of Reading, from 1968 to 1972. He subsequently moved to UEA where he remained for 33 years, though not in Geography – an important point. Instead he was housed in the School of Development Studies. The unique qualities of UEA's approach to Development Studies, with unusual job specifications, shaped his life work in important ways. At UEA a professor's workload included 2/3 teaching and 1/3 outside research and consultancy. This encouraged a continuous cycle of 'forced' field experience, research and teaching, and created a constant oscillation between theory and practice. Many of the articles in this collection discuss some of the opportunities and dangers associated with such a career path, and Blaikie returns to this in his epilogue.

Blaikie did his Ph.D. dissertation research in northwest India between 1966 and 1970. The subject was the spatial organization of agriculture and consolidation of land holdings in north Indian villages. He followed this with research on the family planning program in northeast India between 1971 and 1973, with a subsequent long stretch of work in Nepal writing on under-development and center-periphery theory. He reported his fieldwork in three co-authored books: *Crisis in Nepal, Peasants and Workers in Nepal*, and *Struggle for Basic Needs in Nepal*.² Through consultancies and research he continued to work in India and Nepal for over 25 years, and in the Himalayas more generally, including Pakistan, Bhutan, and China. He has also worked in Morocco, and many of the countries of central and southern Africa.

He came as a guest professor to the US often – to Clark, UCLA twice, UC Berkeley, University of Hawaii, as well as briefly lecturing at Harvard's Institute for International Development, and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He was also a visiting professor at Australia National University, and at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

In 1985 he wrote *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, and subsequently co-authored *Land Degradation and Society* with Harold Brookfield. These two texts were foundational in the rising sub-discipline of PE, particularly *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion*. Coming into the 1990s, he continued with PE, but also with a number of other research projects including AIDS in Africa, with significant fieldwork in Uganda in the early 1990s. In 1994 he co-authored *At Risk* with Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner. The book is widely used in university courses as well as by policy makers and practitioners, and is now in its second, revised, edition and has been translated into a number of languages. He

then moved into what he terms 'a strange period' of doing what we may call PE, but which Blaikie himself doesn't really label as such. Rather, he viewed his new focus as being concerned with the politics of environmental policy, and from this perspective produced numerous articles and a book called *Policy in High Places*. In the late 1990s he wrote a series of review articles of PE and development, most notably in *Zeitschrift*, and *Environment and Planning A*, in which he not only provided overviews of the evolving directions of PE, but also discussed some of the challenges PE faces today (expanded upon by many in this collection). At the 3rd International Union for the Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress, in November 2005, he was invited to give the plenary speech, entitled "Risk and vulnerability to loss of biodiversity: changing what people do". At present, he is involved in the 'political ecology' of forestry, justice, tribal rights in India and Nepal, and an ongoing multi-country study on comparative environmental policy in the Himalayan region, including China, on which we have collaborated in recent years (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004a,b,c, 2006).

3. The AAG conference panels

The venue for the first engagement with Blaikie's life work was three full panel sessions at the AAG Annual Conference at Denver in April 2005. In the invitation for papers, the questions below were put forth, and eleven papers were read at the conference with two further commentaries provided by the co-organizers.³ Panelists and contributors were guided by the following suggestions and key questions. First, review Blaikie's work in the light of the historical development of a broader PE including relevant aspects of cognate disciplines in the natural and social sciences. Second, examine the 'two-way traffic' and interactions between Blaikie's work and the broader developments of PE and Geography, including changing epistemologies, ideologies and methods since the 1980s. The realist, critical realist and more sceptical social constructivist approaches to PE have been the center of attention for the past decade. How does Blaikie's work contribute/

² I have provided at the end of this article, in consultation with Piers Blaikie, a selected bibliography of his key writings, and will therefore refer to them only by title or date.

³ The three linked AAG panels on Piers Blaikie's life work that form the basis of this themed issue were co-organized by myself and Alex Clapp of Simon Fraser University. I want to thank Alex for his generous intellectual contributions to the process from start to finish, particularly in the lively discussions that ensued following each panel's presentations. While not everyone who presented was able to provide a revised paper for this collection (and others were asked to contribute just for this Themed Issue), I want to thank each participant for their contribution, as well as the audience, without which the panels would not have been such a success, nor this collection completed. Finally I wish to thank Piers Blaikie for agreeing to participate, as well as providing insightful commentary, feedback, insights, and inspiration at each stage of the project. While whatever accomplishments of the collection owe their merit to the collective contributions and process, as editor I accept full responsibility for any oversights or limitations of the work as a whole. Lastly, I wish to thank Katie Willis and the other editors of *Geoforum* for their work in bringing this collection to fruition.

detract from these debates? And third, what opportunities and constraints are offered by Blaikie's work for future directions of PE, policy and Development Studies?

The three panels that explored Blaikie's life work and the state of PE as a sub-discipline were then each organized around a broad theme. In the first session Terry Cannon, David Simon, Richard Peet, and Michael Goodman presented papers on 'Political Ecology and Development Studies'. The following more specific questions and issues were raised. Is PE involved principally in a critique of "development", and if so, to what degree should it be? Should it seek to make more applied and practical contributions to development? Was Blaikie's work effective but detached critique, or incorporation by the "development industry", or something else entirely?⁴ That is, what contradictions emerge from the simultaneous career-orientated critiques of environment and development, and 'practical', hands-on involvement through NGOs, activism, and consultancies for development agencies?⁵

In the second session Dianne Rocheleau, Jack Ives, Michael Dove, and Rod Neumann's papers investigated 'Political Ecology and Policy'. They raised the following questions. How does PE help us understand policy, how to critique and deconstruct it, and how constructively to contribute to it? Does active involvement in policy and policy making necessarily involve political compromise? Should academics be involved in this type of activity at all? That is, Is there a place for an engaged and yet more critical and deconstructionist approach to policy?⁶

In the final session Lucy Jarosz, Paul Robbins, and Margaret Fitzsimmons (2005) explored 'Political Ecology – Past, Present, and Future'. They asked the following questions among others. Does PE today have coherence, or is it just a label gratuitously used? Is all 'environment and development' research PE now? Does Blaikie's work offer any ways forward to resolve these challenges? How do the most recent books on PE draw upon, critique or move on from Blaikie's work? And finally, what are PE's new horizons, potential cul-de-sacs, and academic future(s)?⁷

In each session, Blaikie was provided an opportunity to respond to the presentations briefly before the panel discussion was opened up for audience participation. What made the sessions special was the strong participatory quality of the large audiences, the excitement that the discussions of Blaikie's work generated, and the continuity of both ideas and people through the day-long series. This illustrates not only the ongoing importance of Blaikie's work, but also recognizes how such forums enable the substantial contributions of an individual's life work to flourish as collective projects. As a result of the success of these sessions, and with the encouragement of many participants and audience members, we embarked on transforming the papers into a themed issue that could be shared more broadly. What follows is the product of this collective effort, one which we all hope will not only serve to honor Blaikie's life-long contributions in PE, Geography and Development Studies, but that will also provide a proper reflection of the creative and inspiring discussions that took place.

4. Goals of the collection

A special issue to mark the life work of an academic has many goals. This includes commemoration and celebration, but these are much less important than critiquing and elaborating various key themes widely deemed important. By bringing together individuals who have been influenced by Piers Blaikie's work and who have been part of an exciting critical discourse in PE and Development Studies, we are presented with a unique opportunity to do just that. So, what are the goals of this issue?

First, the collection focuses on Piers Blaikie's 30 year contribution to PE. Authors speak to Blaikie's lifetime contributions, theoretical and substantive, and their influence on PE. By presenting selected work on PE and related subjects for critical analysis and assessment, new connections, contradictions and synergies can be discovered. For Blaikie, the work was sequential over a long period, but for the contributors, this Issue is a simultaneous act, collapsing bibliographic time into a direct positioning of different ideas which were originally written in some cases 30 years apart. Second, other works not styled as PE by Blaikie are reviewed here, and their contributions (either to clarity or confusion) to PE discussed. Blaikie's work on the family planning program in India in 1975; three co-authored books on the political economy of Nepal (in the early 1980s); HIV/AIDS in central Africa in the early 1990s; and more recently, two co-authored books on disasters and risk, fall into this category. Although Blaikie did not develop an explicit political ecological approach to his work in these areas, other authors in this issue do see those connections, and comment on them here. Third, a review of Blaikie's work and the connections between it and the work of the present authors of this issue provide a launching pad for discussion of past political ecological thought (even when it was not styled and labelled as such), critical reviews, present possibilities, and the question of

⁴ For a more complete critical exchange on this question, see Blaikie (2000), "Development, post-, anti- and populist: a critical review" *Environment and Planning A*, 32; 6:1033–1050, in a special issue on Radical Geography edited by Richard Peet.

⁵ A further question brought forth is why is political ecology still so dominantly situated in the South? Did early political ecology pioneers (Blaikie, Watts, and others) set the agenda so that political ecology in the North was neglected or was perceived to require another completely different paradigm? See Schroeder et al. (2006) in the introduction to an earlier special issue of *Geoforum* entitled "Political ecology in North America: Discovering the third world within?" for an excellent discussion of this and related questions.

⁶ One example is our recent (2004a) article comparing environmental policy in India and China.

⁷ Blaikie's article in the German Journal *Zeitschrift für Geographie* (1999) "A review of political ecology: issues, epistemology and analytical narratives", 43, 3/4, 131–147, provides material for this line of questions.

what is the future shelf life of PE. Authors speak about how Blaikie's work has influenced their own intellectual projects, both appreciatively and critically, and how well his work has lasted in view of new developments in the field. Their reviews link their perceptions of opportunities and constraints to a lively, incisive, and relevant PE for the future. Blaikie (1999, 2000) has provided reflections on the dangers and opportunities for PE, and several writers in this collection have picked up and expanded upon these. In the end, Blaikie is given an opportunity to respond in his epilogue.

Coming back to the three main elaborations of PE I introduced above (PE and development theory, policy, and the future of PE) we can discern several recurring, and connecting, themes. These derive from Blaikie's work, but are taken in divergent directions and into new fields by contributors who weave them into their own work.

1. PE and the "post-ist turn" (post-modern, post-structuralist, post-colonial and post-development). This involves a much more explicit treatment of knowledge and power. Lucy Jarosz (2005) discussed these issues at length in her conference paper, arguing that we should grasp the opportunities offered by cultural economy, which both Blaikie's and others' work have ignored or at least underplayed.⁸ Others too have made important contributions along these lines in this issue (Rocheleau, Robbins and Bishop, Bryant and Goodman, Dove and Hudayana). The so-called "Marxist impasse" and the structuralist epistemology in which it was imprisoned is not limited to PE of course, and is simply one of those issues which will remain unresolved, or maybe will be overtaken by history and simply go away. Tim Forsyth carefully screens Blaikie's work for a developing appreciation of the ways in which political ecological knowledge is produced. Some of Blaikie's early work (Blaikie, 1984; 1985) was clearly inspired by Marxist theory and by under-development theory (Seddon et al., 1979; Blaikie et al., 1980; 2000), and shared similar challenges faced by many contributors to this Issue, while later work increasingly focused on knowledge and power. Rod Neumann picks up this theme following the differences and difficulties of the work of "early Blaikie", which critiques environmental policy makers, and contrasts it with "late Blaikie" where Blaikie is seen to be "critiquing the critiquers".
2. Epistemology of PE and policy is another contested issue and provides a point of elaboration for earlier discussions. A related issue revolves around the "responsibility of the author" to the audience (imaginary or real), and is taken up at length by Rod Neumann. The degree

of reliance on natural science by policy making to tell us of "real" problems (or socially constructed ones) in which asymmetric power and knowledge are key analytical tools (see the Dove and Hudayana paper) is another. Is the charge levelled at some post-modern writing of "ethical refusalism" and "fiddling while Rome (really) burns" tenable, or is it merely evidence of naïve realism on the part of an epistemological dinosaur? or, Should such a bi-polar approach be avoided altogether, and various realist and post-modern epistemologies kept together and 'in tension' in policy matters? Blaikie engaged with these issues, and almost all contributors have something to say about the level of consistency and argument, and how they themselves attempt to meet this challenge.

3. Finally, another set of discussions concerning the interface between epistemology and methodology focuses on modes of explanation in PE. Blaikie's 'chain of explanation' stimulated much discussion, partly in terms of modern/post-modern engagements, and partly within the more determinist and structural tradition. This stimulates a series of questions: Is it a fruitful approach? Does it empower the researcher, provide clear vision for the policy maker, and inspire students to grasp complexity? or Does it confuse or over-simplify all, and block off more promising avenues? There is a wide range of views expressed here. And furthermore, do structural approaches, Marxist and other, to PE, retain any potency vis-à-vis post-modernist challenges? Blaikie argues strongly in the affirmative. The discussion is important not because it involves Blaikie's 'chain of explanation,' but because of the direction in which the contributors' critiques lead us, and the way they frame the future of PE. The issue of scale is linked to explanation as PE frequently involves multi-scalar perspectives. This raises another series of questions: to what degree should the notions of embeddedness, local meanings and uniquely situated subjects in PE preclude the linked multi-scalar explanations mentioned above? Blaikie, on the whole, does not think they should, while other political ecologists in this Issue disagree. Surely this too, is a key debate in any future PE.

5. The papers: points of departure

With his parallel career beginning over a decade after Blaikie, Simon takes us carefully through a narrative of Piers' intellectual path, situating his PE writings within a broader engagement with Development Studies. As such it provides thematic links between the two and a distinctive view of Blaikie's evolving life-long concerns. Simon's detailed bibliographical chronology, fitting of the editor of *Fifty Key Thinkers on Development*, allows him to provide thematic continuities, echoed by many in this collection. He points to Blaikie's "simultaneous engagement with theory and policy" as a distinguishing feature of his

⁸ David Simon identifies what he calls "development othering" in Blaikie's and others' work. Why not, he asks, elaborate and link up with urban and peri-urban studies and situate them in developed areas? Hurricane Katrina has offered opportunities to do this and has given rise to a lively literature and debate.

work. Blaikie's continuous "grounding in extensive and detailed primary research" he argues, allowed him to avoid overly-sweeping ideological generalizations and ensures the longevity of his ideas and analysis. Blaikie's perspective, he asserts, has "an essential integration between PE and development research" at its foundation. As such, Blaikie's approach has remained broad, avoiding the 'localist trap'. Simon argues that the diverse topics of Blaikie's research are connected by "the integration of social and natural science in order to understand the relationships between people and their environment". And ultimately he points to Blaikie's moral concern with human wellbeing and development prospects as "the essential matrix that binds together the various aspects of his work". Like many others in this collection, he too sees Blaikie's sceptical engagement with the post-structural turn as key to his invigorating of the ongoing discourse. By insisting that material implications could not be ignored, and maintaining political economy throughout in a flexible and adaptable form open to new and diverse currents, Blaikie enabled a critical reassessment while remaining open to valuable new insights the 'cultural turn' afforded. Ultimately, Simon argues for expanding PE into the peri-urban and urban contexts, rebalancing the political and ecological dimensions, and promoting the reintroduction of political economy into development research.

In their provocative paper, Bryant and Goodman argue that Blaikie's well-deserved reputation is based on pioneering work inspirational across theoretical, empirical, and disciplinary boundaries. They draw our attention to how Blaikie has dismantled "barriers to thought in order to open up new avenues for scholarship under a 'broadly defined' political ecology." They outline four key contributions. First, that Blaikie opened new intellectual vistas through pathbreaking interweaving of political economy analysis and natural scientific understanding. Second, Blaikie helped PE avoid the pitfalls of the neo-Marxist 'impasse' though his sceptical yet pragmatic importation of post-structural ideas in the research field. Such constructive scepticism has enabled a "re-imagining and reworking of development theory and practice along alternative and ethically-based routes that do as much for improving material conditions as they do for transforming discourses about development." Blaikie helped make engagement with post-structuralism safe for a generation of young scholars, leading through his "suggestive rather than prescriptive", "pragmatic rather than dogmatic" contributions. Third, they point to Blaikie's eclecticism as reflective of his rejection of narrow classification, for example in area studies, and hence his desire to "relate case studies to broader theoretical and policy concerns". While there is recently greater attention given to global processes linking North and South, they see this as building on Blaikie's prior move away from a narrow area-specialist approach to Development Studies. And fourth, they point to Blaikie's important role as a leading non-American political ecologist, and thus in internationalizing PE, helping it avoid

the moniker of 'cultural imperialism' elsewhere in the world. Ultimately, they assert that Blaikie's major if ambiguous impact on PE reflects the field itself – paradoxically caught between theory and practice, coherence and multiple truths. In fact, they assert, a PE based on 'multiple truths' in the 1990s reinforced the leading role of Blaikie, as his work provided a "common referent precisely because the field has sometimes been seen to 'lack theoretical coherence'". While Blaikie based his legitimacy on practice and impact, as opposed to ideological purity, they assert that his pragmatic approach excites a new generation of scholars because it allows "ample room for political action as well as multiple research trajectories". In the end, they assert that how we 'read' Blaikie, and how we construct his reputation, will be grounded in our own needs and perspectives, and yet will guide the future direction of the field.

Rocheleau argues that the new wave of PE "honors the legacy of Blaikie and other PE founders yet incorporates the insights and political projects of feminism, post-structural critique and autonomous or alternative development movements." Rocheleau maintains that Blaikie provided a key model in how to combine the academic, practical, and policy roles rather than having to choose between them. She points out five hallmarks of Blaikie's PE 'in the key of policy': multiple methods, objectives, actors and audiences; integration of social and biophysical analysis of power relations and environment; multi-scale analysis; empirical observation and data gathering at household and local level; and finally, chains of explanation combining structure and agency. She focuses her analysis here on the first two, with great effect. Thus first she discusses how Blaikie was "instrumental in creating space for policy relevant PE research", and she helps elucidate how a Blaikie-informed approach plays out in terms of multiple objectives, methods, actors and audiences. This helps us clarify our own location – chosen and un-chosen – in the contested terrain of analysis and audience formation. As such, she argues that he has been unfairly pilloried by un-self-critical academic purists who fail to challenge the simple dichotomy between 'tainted' applied work and 'clean' academic and/or NGO work. The hypocrisy she points to challenges the 'safer spaces' idea of an academia somehow devoid of the ethical dilemmas Blaikie and others' 'hybrid' work engages. In fact, she argues Blaikie is only following in a long tradition of such engagement, citing Sauer's experiences half a century earlier. And again provocatively argues that the reality of his experience is contrary to the re-written histories of Geography and Political Ecology which fail to integrate this "longstanding and rich tradition of critical applied research". Her discussion of Blaikie's hybrid research across social and biophysical domains, while mirroring others' contributions in this collection, contextualizes his contributions in relation to scholarship concerned with HIV/AIDS, human dimensions of global environmental change, and ecological PE. She continues by discussing Blaikie's contribution to two trends in PE: increasing engagement with activism and

social movements, and a return to ecology and embrace of complexity. Ultimately, Rocheleau asserts that as the “pendulum swings back to a more even mix of critique and technique”, Blaikie’s pathbreaking example of practical and technical research in a critical frame, radical empiricism based in observation, is key to the potential to mesh concepts of PE, feminist theory and complexity.

Neumann argues that Blaikie’s most important contribution to PE is his critique of land and resource conservation policy in the global south. He points out three central ideas in what he terms ‘early Blaikie’: policies are made under conditions of scientific uncertainty; there is a problematic relationship between policy and science, particularly stemming from ideology; and that because of issues of land use, access, and control, political-economic analysis is necessary to explain why conservation policies fail. He points to the resulting Blaikiesque conundrum: while a complex chain of explanation is needed in policy, such analysis highlights causal linkages that can rarely be addressed by the powers that be as it challenges the basis of their power and wealth. Ultimately he argues (like Watts, 1997) that ‘early Blaikie’ anticipated the post-modern turn, if not introducing it into PE, but he goes further to assert that Blaikie’s subsequent engagement with post-modernism led him to the contradictory ‘late Blaikie’ position in which we (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004a,b) have “come full circle back to a model of policy based on rational, apolitical decision-making.” He thus challenges our assertion of the continuing utility of science to inform policy despite its contested and political qualities. Further, he argues that Blaikie’s recent adoption of ‘responsibility’ as a key theme, and our assertion of a ‘vacuum of responsibility’ (2004a, p. 542) on the part of some post-structural scholars is misplaced, particularly when applied to practicing political ecologists. In fact, Neumann argues that ‘constrained constructivism’ has led many political ecologists to deconstruct environmental narratives, take science and method seriously, while advocating policy change (paradoxically also noting Blaikie’s firm adoption of a similar approach). Furthermore, Neumann asserts that the concern Blaikie has about the post-modern turn is unnecessary, as “practitioners of political ecology incorporate the insights of post-structural social theory without losing sight of the importance of sound empirical scientific methods.” He also argues that policy relevance is not the responsibility of the researcher, though this sidesteps the question of the ideological context of knowledge production within the academy (as Blaikie expands on in his epilogue), as well as the indirect ways that such research affects policy via social movements and other actors. Neumann’s powerful argument adds to the critical yet appreciative assessments of Blaikie in this volume, providing important insights and ideas for future directions.

Dove and Hudayana take a decidedly different approach from the other authors in this collection, focusing on their application of Blaikie to a particular case study to illuminate his key intellectual contributions – in this case their

joint fieldwork in an Indonesian village over the past 25 years. In essence Blaikie’s evolution as a scholar is mirrored in their own evolving understanding of the changing context in the community of Turgo, Central Java, where following an eruption of a nearby volcano and destruction of the village, production shifted from livestock-supported subsistence agriculture to agriculture-supported market-oriented livestock husbandry. Hence, they unravel the classic questions of scale and time, space and practice, in a Blaikie-influenced anthropological analysis that interrogates cross-scale relations, spatial ‘contradictions’ and ‘fixes’, and the structural properties of everyday practices and human agency. They invoke the parallel development of Giddens’ structuration theory at the time of Blaikie’s publication of *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion*, and the similarities and differences between these two scholars’ work. Ultimately they see Blaikie’s analysis of poverty and environmental degradation pointing toward a Foucaultian vision of the way in which power works (those things not done are as important as those things done), though are stubbornly wary of “analytical positions that promote dis-engagement with real-world issues”. They assert that the ‘central heuristic’ of PE, of which Blaikie (1985) provided the defining contribution, “is that the decision-making of individual farmers cannot be understood without reference to the wider society’s dynamics”. Simple as this now sounds, Blaikie, they argue, directed our attention to macro-level contradictions in the political economy that could only be resolved through a ‘fix’ of environmental degradation at the local level. This was a major insight and shift from the sole concentration (and hence casting of blame and focus of transformation I might add) upon micro-level farming practices and individual farmers’ decision-making to explain degradation. They then tie this important groundwork to the subsequent theoretical work on the nature of the articulation between space and practice – hence Giddens. Blaikie, they claim, was a major contributor to “a critique of the focus on time as opposed to space” among neo-Marxist and later post-structural scholars. This conception of regional analysis rests on “heterogeneity and discord”, and its purpose is to “reveal unevenly developed ‘contradictory’ landscapes” across space and scale. Thus Blaikie, they remind us, viewed soil erosion as a contradiction of incorporation into the world economic system in which “someone’s degradation is someone else’s accumulation”. Blaikie, they assert, thus made clear “the structural implications of everyday activities” as well as the “emergence of ‘practice’ as an enduring focus of scholarship”. Finally, they supportively point to Blaikie’s resistance to ‘ethical refusalism’ and his engaged scholarship towards a more socially and environmentally just future.

To Forsyth, Blaikie’s early writings on PE were a “turning point in the generation of environmental knowledge for social justice.” He asserts that the lessons provided by Blaikie are too often missed today by analysts asking “what is essentially political or ecological about political ecology,” or those who see deconstruction as the sole path to

critically assess environmental knowledge. Instead, he argues that beyond his key linkage of politics and environmental knowledge, Blaikie also shows how “environmental analysis and policy can be reframed towards addressing the problems of socially vulnerable people,” and hence “a means of building socially-just environmental policy.” Forsyth defends Blaikie from Watts’ charge of being underpoliticized, arguing that on the contrary, Blaikie’s work should “be seen as important first steps for a new and engaged focus on the politics of environmental epistemology”. He continues saying that “rather than seeking to demonstrate how a particular approach to ‘politics’ could be applied to predefined notions of ‘environment’, Blaikie sought instead to demonstrate how social values and environmental knowledge are co-produced.” As he moved beyond strict structural Marxism, Forsyth asserts that Blaikie’s evolving approach asked two key questions: “How do we understand environmental crisis? And how do we identify social vulnerability?” Asking these questions contributed to two broader changes in political ecology: the adoption of “insights from post-structural debates about political origin and institutionalization of environmental knowledge”, and increasing awareness about the “limits of ecological notions of stability and equilibrium that underlie many popular narratives of environmental change and crisis.” Blaikie’s challenging of crisis narratives is important because of the ways in which they contribute to vulnerability, and are also used to legitimate destructive interventions by states and other powerful actors (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004a). Forsyth argues that Blaikie’s experiments with sceptical or critical realism has as primary goal “some level of scientific progress in a world where knowledge claims reflect current and historical power relations.” Hence Blaikie’s ‘tactical interest’ in attempting to influence science and policy actors “by acknowledging that knowledge also had to be considered legitimate.” In conclusion, Forsyth asserts that the challenge to PE is “understanding both environmental and political change in ways that enhance social justice, but which do not impose a priori notions about each.” His efforts to move us beyond dualistic notions that he argues define how we now conduct PE, is a fitting tribute to Blaikie’s influence in providing ideas on just how to do so.

Robbins and Bishop, like Dove and Hudayana, focus on one example, in this case HIV/AIDS, to highlight what they see as the resilient value of Blaikie’s particular PE. In so doing they bring attention, like Simon, to this lesser-known yet prescient and perhaps most important of Blaikie’s work, with the specific goal of “recovering the powerful tools at our disposal sometimes hurriedly lost in the rush of intellectual change.” Having fully participated in this rush, they are in a unique position to ‘rediscover’ Blaikie’s chain of explanation and assert that its “core materialism and epistemological flexibility may lend itself to understanding and acting (on) the greatest socio-ecological crisis of the early 21st century, HIV/AIDS.” Through analysis of Barnett and Blaikie’s 1992 work *AIDS in*

Africa, they argue that this structural and ‘most traditional’ PE still provides one of the most powerful means to understand the questions of land, labor and ecological knowledge that “lie at the heart of what is arguably the world’s largest crisis,” and at an historically crucial moment. Asserting that we still know next to nothing about the “actual political ecological adaptation in the face of the disease”, they list the questions needing to be asked in a study of such an enormous problem. The blueprint for such a study, with potential to answer these questions, coming as a surprise it seems to themselves, is Barnett and Blaikie’s volume. They do, however, insert some careful caveats about its limitations vis-à-vis further theoretical developments since its publication, in particular the heightened scrutiny of power and knowledge emergent from post-structural scholarship. They also assert that we should not make the false choice between unproblematic adoption and abandonment of Blaikie’s frameworks. Much of the recent scholarship, unlike Barnett and Blaikie’s contribution they argue, has failed not only to explain essential aspects of the material transformation of daily life in South Africa, their chosen case, but despite its academically acceptable explanation, has become part of the erasure, if not reproduction, of the fundamental problems themselves. As they point out, Barnett and Blaikie prophetically argued that as AIDS was brought under control in the North, it would just become ‘another tropical disease’ of the South, and drop off Northern research agendas in a too-predictable display of class, gender, and ethnic prejudices, with horrendous consequences for millions in distant forgettable communities. Hence, they conclude that “Blaikie’s assertion that problems lie not only in the politics and economics of livelihoods but also in the politics and economics of research, now seems all the more urgent, prescient, and painfully evident.” And further, that “Blaikie’s political ecology is as current as ever.”

6. My relationship to Blaikie’s work

As someone who came to Geography and the social sciences from the physical and biological sciences (soils, agronomy, entomology, and conservation), I found in Blaikie’s work a shared goal to integrate environment and political economy. In the early 1980s, when I began my international fieldwork in rural China, I was searching for a methodology to help me understand the rapid social and environmental changes I was witnessing. Blaikie’s approach was a touchstone that helped guide me as I dove over my head into years of fieldwork and attempts to unravel how the transition from state socialism to market socialism, and the shift from collective socialist political economy to a derivative hybrid of what I termed “the worst of socialism and capitalism” (1997), impacted nature and society. *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion* was the unforeseen help that arrived in the nick of time, as I began work on my MA thesis at UC Berkeley, followed by another two years of fieldwork in the late 1980s for my

Ph.D. It and subsequent writings by Blaikie et al. provided a visible outpost in my relatively lonely terrain where I was adopting a PE approach to understand socialist transition, as opposed to the more classic investigations of capital penetration in former colonial contexts.⁹

In 1992 I joined a Macarthur-funded project comparing socialist transition in five countries and its environmental impacts. With me on the environmental team was none other than Blaikie. Thus began what is now 15 years of intellectual collaboration. But what was perhaps most striking about that first meeting were the personal and professional traits Blaikie displayed: he was (and is) humble, open, always as self-critical as critical in his analyses, and incredibly generous intellectually – the contrast to other academics I had met was vivid. Blaikie was willing to engage and integrate a broad range of knowledges into his theorizing, fieldwork, policy work, teaching, mentoring, writing, and speaking – perhaps eclectic, but never dogmatic. And it is this lack of dogmatism that perhaps best explains the continuing vitality of his body of work, clearly delineated in all of the contributions herein.

7. Blaikie's recent scholarship: post-'retirement'

My current joint work with Blaikie, post-'retirement,' in the Himalayan Hindu Kush region, focuses on the translation of environmental policy from international to national to local scales with transformations of meaning and practice throughout. We argue that ultimately local practices are far removed from international conceptions of the policy in the first instance, and habitually, local resource users are blamed for lack of implementation through their poor governance, corruption, backwardness, and other tried and true formulations of neo-modernization theory. The new context of biodiversity hotspots experiencing serious degradation, has fuelled a recent resurgence of fortress conservation displacing participatory approaches to community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) of the past decades, and the integration of local peoples and knowledges. Once again 'crisis' legitimates new interventions and impositions upon the most marginal of peoples and places by states and other national and international actors. This raises a decidedly modernist, if critically so, challenge to improve policy, and in some sense provides a new call to arms reminiscent of another era before CBNRM, social forestry, and the rhetorical privileging of the local.¹⁰ Blaikie expands upon these issues in a number

of new writings, including his recent *World Development* article entitled "Is small really beautiful? Community-based natural resource management in Malawi and Botswana," his new book with Oliver Springate-Baginski *Forests, People and Power: the Political Ecology of Reform in South Asia*, and most recently in our ICIMOD Working Paper which offers a new methodology for policy analysis (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2006). While officially retired, Piers Blaikie has by no means taken his hand off the plow, and continues to uncover that which he finds most interesting, and which he feels may make the greatest, dare I say, contribution to our collective future.

8. Conclusion and final words

While Piers would not consistently self-identify as a political ecologist for all his work, it was and continues to be foundational for the large number of recent books on PE that partake in this framing exercise. Part of a self-identification with PE may be done for career objectives, a point he returns to in the epilogue of this collection. Yet, PE has come to mean that you are concerned with inequality and environmental conservation enough that you want to theorize but also do something about it – i.e. that one has an interest in justice. As Lucy Jarosz pointed out during the final session, PE without praxis does not make sense.

At the AAG in Denver in 2005 there were 83 papers listed under Political Ecology/Cultural Ecology. In 2007, in San Francisco there were 82 sessions organized with four times as many papers. As this Themed Issue goes to press, we are certain that the sub-discipline – problematic, contested, in perpetual formation as it is – is now institutionally enshrined. This has both positive aspects in terms of reduced marginality, and negative aspects in terms of reformation to fit institutional requirements, and thus a decline perhaps in what makes PE most vibrant. Fieldwork, careful reflection, eclectic building of theory and method towards specific goals is not the optimum way to retain a competitive edge in an academic career. Desk-based critical dissection of others' efforts in this regard is much more productive, as Blaikie powerfully argues in the Epilogue. Those who do PE are not necessarily those who benefit from its advance within the institutions where professional reproduction is paramount.

My hope is that the three sessions and group of articles that emerged from them to form this collection will stimulate further critical reflection on key issues, helping to promote within our diverse community the most innovative and exciting possibilities. The effort to consider society and nature together, to be simultaneously intent upon environmental conservation and social justice, to theorize and yet adhere to praxis, to synthesize ideas through the messy complexity, day to day challenges, and urgent demands of the majority of the world's peoples and places – i.e. a critical modernist ethic (though perhaps bounded within a 'constrained constructivism'), is no less important today

⁹ There have been many critiques of this seminal book since that time, including a number in this Themed Issue, and yet I would argue that the work stands out as being simultaneously intellectually stimulating, amazingly clear and cogent, and a practical, if flawed, guide through the complex process of political ecology as praxis.

¹⁰ As Terry Cannon pointed out in the first panel session, Blaikie has often argued that there is much conflict at the 'community' level, and yet a corresponding false assumption that external stimulation of 'local potential' will get 'the community' going on the path to equitable and just development.

then it was when Piers Blaikie began his exceptional career. For not only the ideas and actions of a lifetime embedded in local to global practices, but also for the very long and hard work, often hidden from view, that is required to produce the quality of his ideas and actions – we owe Piers Blaikie a collective debt of gratitude. And from him we take nothing less than collective inspiration – a very rare and precious gift.

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