

POLLEN2020 Session report

P019-A1 SESSION. Grassroots activism in times of authoritarian neoliberalism

Organizers

Dr. Elia Apostolopoulou - University of Cambridge and Harokopio University of Athens

Dr. Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez - University of A Coruña

Session overview

In this panel, we aim to explore what triggers social-environmental struggles to be turned into pathways to radically different futures, instead of feeding into the growing right-wing global tide. To address this aim we ask two specific research questions: Firstly, how do social-environmental struggles and movements relate to radical alternatives, transformations and grassroots innovations? Secondly, what structural factors and local specificities contribute to the development, endurance, up-scaling, dissolution or cooption of such radical alternatives and innovations, in specific global-local constellations? Our aim is to explore and compare processes of resistance and transformative change in both urban and rural settings, across the Global South and North. We focus on cases where radical alternatives to capitalist socio-natures, transformations to sustainability and grassroots innovations – defined as sets of social relations and practices that are initiated by networks of people which are autonomous from state institutions and capital forces and aim to generate radical, democratic, bottom up, and novel socially-environmentally sustainable and futures-oriented solutions– are a key aspect of community activism. By uncovering broader patterns of resources, possibilities, limitations, narrative frames, spatial practices and pathways of up-scaling such practices and relations in different contexts, we hope to reveal the connections between social-environmental struggles (collective action, with specific spatial narratives and practices), emerging radical alternatives, transformations and grassroots innovations (exceeding the limits of the local, at least in their imaginaries) and broader structural factors, thus making an important contribution in debates over radical ecologies and future socio-natures.

P019-A1. The uneven geographies of China's Belt and Road Initiative: Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, social inequality and grassroots resistance in London, Athens and Sri Lanka

Authors

Dr. Elia Apostolopoulou - University of Cambridge

Abstract

In this presentation, I explore the links between infrastructure-led development, urban transformation and inequality in China's Belt and Road Initiative. I theorise the BRI as an exemplar of infrastructure-led development that primarily acts as a spatial fix to the overaccumulation problems of Chinese capitalism while also benefiting corporate elites beyond China. By drawing on the experiences of London, Piraeus, and Colombo where BRI-related projects are being currently materialised, I aim at shedding light to the way the initiative may transform the geographies of everyday lives, remaking places, ecosystems and livelihoods. I argue that the BRI is an emblematic manifestation of the emergence of a tight interrelationship between infrastructure-led development and authoritarian neoliberal urbanism that despite its variegated expressions across different contexts is deepening social, spatial and environmental inequality in cities across the Global South and North. By shedding light on social contestation against BRI projects in London, Piraeus and Sri Lanka, I conclude that grassroots resistance linking the right to the city to the right to nature is the only way to open pathways to radically different urban futures.

P019-A1. Ecological Struggles on “Middle Grounds” as Struggles against Authoritarian Co-Figuration: Translation and History

Authors

Mx. Larry Lohmann - The Corner House

Abstract

This paper will try to help entice scholars into an ongoing discussion regarding a particular type of movement process that – although well understood by grassroots activists themselves – has almost never been properly recognized by academics concerned with environmental politics. The strategy is to use cutting-edge work in imperial and colonial history, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, critical race studies, political ecology and what has recently been dubbed “post-translation studies” to shake up conventional studies of ecological politics in a way that might push them toward greater intellectual respect for what is happening on the ground. The scholarship that the paper tries to press into service for this project includes Richard White's (2010) explication of “middle grounds”, Naoki Sakai's (1997, 2006) investigations of “heterolingual address;” W. v. O Quine's (1960) and Donald Davidson's (1989) critiques of reified “meanings” and “languages;” Lydia H. Liu's (2000, 2006, 2011, 2019) work on “hetero-linguistic super-signs” and imperial “events” of translation; Eduardo Viveiro de Castro's (2004) studies of the Amazonian “method of controlled equivocation” and Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) advocacy of an “intersectional” stance, among others. The paper will suggest an affinity between everyday practices of “plurinational” and other grassroots-based ecological movements and struggles against the hypertrophied “regime of translation” (Sakai 1997) that underpins the “co-figured,” united global “pan-racism” of the leaders of today's nationalist right.

P019-A1. Groundwater Activism in Rural California: Engaging the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act

Authors

Dr. Casey Walsh - University of California Santa Barbara

Abstract

More than a century of aquifer depletion throughout California has created problems of subsidence, high pumping costs, wells going dry, and arsenic in the drinking water. These problems resulted in the 2015 Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), and a process of measuring and managing groundwater extraction. This paper has two parts. First it deploys crisis theory in political ecology to portray the relations between irrigated agriculture, groundwater depletion and regulation. Second, it discusses how residents of the Cuyama Valley understand and respond to the crisis of irrigated agriculture and groundwater. Using ethnography and survey data, I outline the contours of popular perceptions of the quiet catastrophe wrought in Cuyama and uneven efforts by local residents to ensure a more sustainable future.

P019-A2 SESSION. Grassroots activism in times of authoritarian neoliberalism

Organizers

Dr. Elia Apostolopoulou - University of Cambridge

Dr. Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez - University of A Coruña

Session description

In this session, we aim to explore what triggers social-environmental struggles to be turned into pathways to radically different futures, instead of feeding into the growing right-wing global tide. To address this aim we ask two specific research questions: Firstly, how do social-environmental struggles and movements relate to radical alternatives, transformations and grassroots innovations? Secondly, what structural factors and local specificities contribute to the development, endurance, up-scaling, dissolution or cooption of such radical alternatives and innovations, in specific global-local constellations? Our aim is to explore and compare processes of resistance and transformative change in both urban and rural settings, across the Global South and North. We focus on cases where radical alternatives to capitalist socio-natures, transformations to sustainability and grassroots innovations – defined as sets of social relations and practices that are initiated by networks of people which are autonomous from state institutions and capital forces and aim to generate radical, democratic, bottom up, and novel socially-environmentally sustainable and futures-oriented solutions– are a key aspect of community activism. By uncovering broader patterns of resources, possibilities, limitations, narrative frames, spatial practices and pathways of up-scaling such practices and relations in different contexts, we hope to reveal the connections between social-environmental struggles (collective action, with specific spatial narratives and practices), emerging radical alternatives, transformations and grassroots innovations (exceeding the limits of the local, at least in their imaginaries) and broader structural factors, thus making an important contribution in debates over radical ecologies and future socio-natures.

P019-A2. Development dispossession, authoritarian state and ‘asymmetric environmentalism’: Is this the beginning of a new environmental politics?

Authors

Dr. Manoj Misra - Western Connecticut State University

Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the extreme cases of climate vulnerable countries, yet its stubborn pursuance of coal energy threatens to endanger the already fragile forest ecology and jeopardize livelihoods of forest and fishing communities. In 2010, Bangladesh and India signed an agreement to set up two 660 MW capacity coal-fired power plants near the Sundarbans mangrove forest in Rampal, Bangladesh. The forest is a livelihood source for approximately 500,000 people in the surrounding areas. As the locals protested against the imminent land grab, the authoritarian state responded with a violent and forcible expulsion of several thousand agricultural wage laborers, sharecroppers, smallholders and shrimp farmers. In response, the people of Rampal formed alliances with national-international organizations to launch vigorous grassroots resistance against the power plants. Based on in-depth interviews with the key movement leaders, this paper examines the politics of resistance to coal energy and the convergence of social, ecological, political and economic crises in play therein. I argue that the Rampal resistance movement signals the emergence of a new form of environmentalism that is qualitatively distinct from the existing conceptual apparatuses I tentatively call this new form of resistance ‘asymmetric environmentalism’ in which power is unequally distributed among the unique constellation of ideologically divergent and socio-economically placed movement actors. Crucial to our interrogation here is its inability to invent a politics that would address the problem of landlessness and informalization that is interwoven with this instance of development dispossession but remains invisible to the network of national and transnational politics.

P019-A2. Imaginaries and elder environmental activists: socio-environmental transformations within local waterscapes

Authors

Dr. Mary Gearey - The University of Brighton

Abstract

Degrowth imaginaries offer radical, alternative ways of envisioning future societies, decoupled from dominant neoliberal worldviews. Those, predominantly working age and working class people, seeking to purposefully enact social-environmental change in the here and now are termed ‘nowtopians’. Based on empirical work undertaken within waterscapes across the UK, this paper argues that dynamic examples of nowtopian, transformative initiatives develop from an alternative and overlooked demographics: rural

community elders. Contending with the new realities of living under 'austerity localism', many elders have undergone a personal, if not political, epiphany and have turned to forms of environmental activism to articulate their agency and demonstrate solidarity with fellow humans across generations. This paper contributes to a developing literature which explores the role of elder community activists in supporting environmental justice innovations. Explored through a series of interlinking activist narratives this paper argues that the genesis of this activism is a desire to re-assert agency in older age that can be linked to degrowth sensibilities. Their narratives detail their socio-environmental campaigning, civic participation and physical labours, orientated around collective responses to stewarding local waterscapes. These elder nowtopians champion direct action, conviviality and living well; and seek to counter prejudices that have marginalised them as the progenitors of contemporary social and climate crises. Ageing and place-connectivity are the motivators which underpin one of the key nowtopian concepts: 'redefining life's purpose'. Reflecting back, projecting forward, but operating in the 'now', these elders helps us to consider a 'politics' of degrowth through grassroots activism amidst local water resources.

P019-A2. Towards a more-than-human political theory: recognising the role of non-humans in conceptualisations and geographies of resistance

Authors

Ms. Carlotta Molfese - University of Plymouth

Abstract

At the time of writing, a novel coronavirus named Covid-19 has been spreading around the world. In a matter of months, it has overwhelmed some of the world's most esteemed national health systems infrastructures, infecting millions of people and claiming more than 500,000 human lives worldwide. The Covid-19 virus is emerging as a "power-full" more-than-human agency, capable of disrupting in drastic (but deeply unequal) ways the day-to-day living of billions of people around the world. But how can we get to grips with the power of this microscopic being and the political dynamics that have brought it about and are unfolding in its wake? And given the extreme measures that are being put into place, how can resistance to this new world order be effectively mounted? While a political analysis of the current pandemic is beyond the scope of this paper, an appraisal of works that speaks to the power and politics of more-than-human assemblages more broadly seems a more opportune and timely undertaking. In fact, in order to begin answering these questions we need to take a step back to consider first what happens to our understandings of power and resistance once we recognise the 'vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations' (Bennett 2010: 7). This paper engages with early attempts at developing a *posthumanist* political theory to explore their significance and potential contribution to critical conceptualisations of resistance in more-than-human

world(s). It starts by briefly introducing the theoretical developments associated with the “more-than-human turn” to then reviews a range of works that is attempting to reconfigure traditional understandings of power and politics by taking the material and affective agency of non-human others seriously. It concludes by considering what the material turn means for critical understandings of resistance and its geographies.

P019-A2. Environmental justice: a world movement

Authors

Prof. Joan Martinez-Alier - ICTA, Autonomous University of Barcelona

Abstract

The industrial economy is not circular, it is entropic, therefore it requires new supplies of energy and materials extracted from the “commodity frontiers”, and it produces polluting waste. Therefore ecological distribution conflicts arise. The Atlas of Environmental Justice is an online inventory of such conflicts based on scholarly and activist knowledge. It reached 3200 entries by July 2020 (ejtlas.org) allowing research in the field of comparative, statistical political ecology. The EJAtlas is used for research but also for university teaching in the environmental social sciences and in business economics and management. It is a unique instrument co-produced with and supporting environmental movements. One can do comparative analyses on the social actors involved in the conflicts and their forms of mobilization, and also on the behaviour of private or public companies. Research may focus on countries or regions but also on cross-cultural topics such as gold and copper mining, sand mining, hydropower and dams, eucalyptus or oil palm plantations, incinerators and other methods of waste disposal, coal fired power plants, gas fracking, nuclear reactors, CAFOs. Analyses are done also on the cross-cultural expressions of the conflicts gathered in the EJAtlas (slogans, banners, murals, documentaries), as performative symbols of environmental justice. The wealth of research coming from the EJAtlas gives an affirmative answer to the question: Is there a global environmental justice movement? Making old or emergent ecological distribution conflicts more visible contributes to placing political ecology at the centre of politics.