

Political Ecology: Global and Local

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This collection of eighteen papers is drawn from a conference held in 1994 marking the centenary of the birth of Harold Innis, a Canadian political economist. Thirteen of the twenty three authors are Canadian, with a strong presence from the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto. The volume takes a broadly political science perspective to cover issues such as growth and trade, food production, control of carbon dioxide emissions, ecofeminism, materialism and environmental ethics. Unifying themes rotate around concepts of sustainable development, its meaning in political terms and how the main goals it encapsulates might be achieved.

Political ecology is, the reader will find, founded upon political economy and cultural studies with the aim of critically analysing the relationship between human society and nature. Two groups of people are identified as redefining political economy in this way: ecological economists and neo-Marxist environmentalists. In the emphasis on political science, and concepts such as Fordism, this collection seems to lean strongly towards the latter. However, much of what is said here could fit within the pluralist movement of ecological economics.

Economic growth, and its implications, remain a central concern throughout the volume. Contributors accept the need for judgement, evaluation, and the consideration of ethics and justice, in understanding the process of human induced environmental change. Growth is seen as commonly irreversible leading to loss rather than gain. Shifting the debate from growth to development is an improvement but still inadequate. The development concept remains a misleading expression of the socio-ecological concerns which underlie political ecology and the sustainability debate. Ecological interpretation of the globally diverse mix of human social structures alters the perspective on such empirical distinctions as modern/traditional, urban/rural, industrial/agricultural (p.79).

These and other discussions bring forth the economic and cultural aspects of change in terms of materialism and symbolism, and quantitative and qualitative change. Mainstream economics neglects qualitative change in terms of structure, shape and form, preferring to emphasise quantitative factors such as material throughput and energy use (although still neglecting entropy). The message here is that social structures must be analysed to understand environmental problems and that social change is necessary for their solution.

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