

First World political ecology: lessons from the Wise Use movement

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Received 22 July 2001; in revised form 29 January 2002

Abstract. The author demonstrates, through a case study of the Wise Use movement, that the insights and tools of political ecology have much to offer in the study of First World resource conflicts. He uses theories and methods drawn from the literature concerning political ecology and moral economies to argue that many assumptions regarding state capacity, individual and collective identities and motivations, and economic and historical relations in advanced capitalist countries are mistaken or incomplete in ways that have led to important dimensions of environmental conflicts in such locales being overlooked. The argument is based mainly on the author's own research on the Wise Use movement in the rural American West of the 1980s and 1990s but also draws on other recent work in political ecology, historical and economic geography, and environmental history.

Prologue: situating rural resistance conflicts

Imagine a movement composed of members of rural communities, whose livelihoods have long depended on a wide variety of uses of the lands and natural resources surrounding their homes. The movement's central complaint is that community members are losing access to and control over these lands and resources because of ever more vigorous pursuit of environmental goals by the resource conservation branches of the central government—a trend spurred on largely by the interventions of distant, highly bureaucratic, and professionalized environmental groups, virtually none of whose staff or members has ever been to the particular lands in question. Attempting to defend their access to and control over these lands, members of the protest movement resist increasingly environmentally oriented management through a variety of tactics: they set forest fires, encroach on and take resources from protected lands, pressure government employees in the area to overlook violations, and support through silence community members who break conservation laws deemed unjust by local standards. To national and international audiences who will listen, they proclaim their superior knowledge and understanding of local environments, assert the historical precedence and legitimacy of their uses, and argue that local users should have greater rights than nonlocal claimants. Finally, they suggest that conservation is merely a cover for increased state control and the assertion of class privilege in the region.

Such scenarios are common in the literature concerning international conservation. Prominent examples include Neumann's work on Tanzania (1998) and Peluso's work in Indonesia and Kenya (1992; 1993), and the great number and geographical diversity of cases found in edited collections such as Doornbos et al (2000), Zerner (2000), and Western and Wright (1994) testify to the frequency of such dynamics in the global South. Authors and imagined readers of such works nearly always share political and theoretical sympathy towards the rural resource users and a deep skepticism of the state and large conservation organizations.

The specific example I have in mind, though, is actually the Wise Use movement, a social movement that contested access to rural land and resources in the United States from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, particularly on federal lands in the

American West. Although it fit the description above, Wise Use overwhelmingly failed to engage the political and theoretical sympathies of academics, leftists, and environmentalists who had been broadly sympathetic to movements elsewhere that shared similar characteristics and claims. Its failure was partly a result of geography, I argue: Wise Use was located in the United States—a late capitalist, ‘First World’ country—rather than in the ‘Third World’. In consequence, I believe, most observers unconsciously evaluated Wise Use within a very different analytical framework, according to a different set of assumptions and norms, than they would have applied to a group making similar claims in a Third World country. Wise Use was widely dismissed as a corporate front. Its grass roots participants were deemed to be cynically deploying cultural arguments to secure continued subsidies at best, or as succumbing to corporate-orchestrated false consciousness at worst (see, for example, Helvarg, 1994; Wilderness Society, 1993). Yet such negative assessments of Wise Use seemed predicated on remarkably cursory ‘research’ on the individuals and communities involved. This anti-state movement contesting centralized environmental governance—which would have been a likely object of sympathetic ethnographic research and intensive case studies had it appeared in a Third World location—was written off after hostile environmentalist journalists had spent a few days in some of the counties active in the movement.

I undertake here to demonstrate that the insights and methods of political ecology are directly relevant to Wise Use and that it in fact had much in common with many movements sympathetically examined by political ecologists. This line of argument has two overall goals: to provide a better understanding of Wise Use as a specific phenomenon and to suggest by example that the methods and insights of political ecology could fruitfully be extended to many other environmental conflicts in advanced capitalist countries. I begin below with a very brief overview of Wise Use, followed by a summary of major salient themes and theoretical frameworks in political ecology. In the main section of the paper I explore the applicability of central themes in political ecology to Wise Use, and suggest that Wise Use in turn raises questions about the treatment of some of these themes in political ecology. In the conclusion I offer several suggestions regarding what viewing Wise Use as a political ecology case study of a First World resource conflict implies for the field’s research agenda, methods, and politics.

Wise Use

The Wise Use movement is an umbrella term for a coalition of organizations that was very active from 1988 through 1996. Wise Use was centered in the rural American West, where its agenda concentrated on efforts by rural commodity producers to maintain their historical, privileged access to and control over the federally owned lands in the region.⁽¹⁾ It was in part a reaction to regional restructuring: since 1980 or so, the rural West had seen dramatic downturns in primary production industries; rapidly increasing environmental priorities (pushed by environmental nonprofits and administered by federal agencies); large demographic influxes; changes in the region’s racial and ethnic composition; and the relocation and growth of services and light industry into new parts of the intermountain West (see McCarthy, 1998; 1999; 2001).

Wise Use claimed to be a grass roots social movement, rooted in a regional culture, responding to overly intrusive outsiders. It defined itself mainly in opposition to the

⁽¹⁾ Wise Use had two other wings that were more national in scope: one focused on the argument that governmental regulation of private property constituted a ‘taking’ of private property, and another focused on efforts to roll back or prevent national and international environmental laws and treaties. The three diverged rapidly after a few years of cooperation. My research and this paper focus on the wing of Wise Use centered on the rural West.

environmental movement, environmental regulations, and federal agencies governing land uses, all of which it portrayed as arrogant, ignorant outsiders intruding on local communities and denying them their livelihoods and right to self-determination. The movement thus had strong populist overtones: appeals to local knowledge, local rights, and 'common sense' as opposed to expert knowledge were central to its rhetoric. The term 'wise use' was a strategic appropriation from Gifford Pinchot and the early conservation movement in the United States, who used it in a way very much analogous to 'sustainable development', in both its ambiguity and its emphasis.

Wise Use exhibited many features often said to be diagnostic of social movements centered on resource use and access in the global South: cultural identity, local knowledge as an alternative to expert science, reinventions of community and tradition, a resolute defense of the local, and action outside of and in opposition to state arenas were all central to its goals and tactics (on these criteria, see Escobar, 1995; on their strategic invocation, see Brosius, 1997; Li, 1996; Rangan, 2000). It thus appeared to have much in common with the Third World case studies that form the corpus of political ecology. Yet it took place in the American West at the end of the 20th century: a region and a time where capitalist relations had long governed land, labor, and capital; bureaucratic rationality and well-developed state capacity were the norms; and very few of the claims at stake could look back more than a few generations before finding bloody acts of capitalist appropriation at their foundations.⁽²⁾ In short, it took place within the heart of late capitalist modernity, not at some liminal or transitional juncture.

Themes and geographies in political ecology

Wise Use's situation in an advanced capitalist nation immediately set it apart from most cases studies and literature in political ecology, which concern rural, often agrarian, Third World situations. This point has been widely acknowledged and several recent, excellent, histories and overviews of the field exist, so I will not replicate their contents here (see Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Neumann, 1998; Peet and Watts, 1996; Walker, forthcoming). What is important here is that what unites these disparate cases, and largely defines political ecology as a field, is a shared focus on certain themes in the study of rural resource conflicts. The major themes of political ecology include: access to and control over resources; marginality; integration of scales of analysis; the effects of integration into international markets; the centrality of livelihood issues; ambiguities in property rights and the importance of informal claims to resource use and access; the importance of local histories, meanings, culture, and 'micropolitics' in resource use; the disenfranchisement of legitimate local users and uses; the effects of limited state capacity; and the imbrications of all these with colonial and postcolonial legacies and dynamics. It is arguably the *presence* of most or all of these themes as objects or components of case studies that defines political ecology more than any consistent theoretical or methodological *approach* to them.

Political ecology is theorized, of course, but it is marked by substantial theoretical pluralism. Marxism, dependency theory, world systems theory, agrarian studies, property theory, and other theoretical lineages have all strongly shaped the field. A theoretical source especially relevant to the present case is E P Thompson's seminal work on struggles over forest resources, class formation, and the concept of a 'moral economy' (Thompson, 1966; 1975; 1993). Thompson examined the struggles inherent in shifts from vestigial feudal rights and class relations to modern, capitalist ones (Sahlins, 1994). His exploration of early developments in modern forestry practices that later came

⁽²⁾ Williams's appropriate skepticism regarding the lineage of virtually any property notwithstanding (1973, page 50), Native American claims are, of course, an important exception here.

to dominate many colonial forests (Grove, 1995) has been especially influential in political ecology. Many case studies in political ecology have focused on what are in certain respects parallel shifts in land rights and social relations in other times and places around the world, albeit more recent and often in colonial contexts (for example, see Guha, 1989; Mackenzie, 1997; Neumann, 1998; Peluso, 1992).

Given such theoretical underpinnings and thematic content it is not surprising that there has been debate about whether and to what extent the insights and methods of political ecology can be applied to the study of resource conflicts in advanced capitalist countries. Some have defined political ecology as an approach specific to the Third World, or maintained at least that the political ecologies of the First and Third Worlds are distinct and that inquiries into them must proceed from fundamentally different premises (for example, Bryant and Bailey, 1997, pages 7–9; Castree and Braun, 1998, pages 10–11; Neumann and Schroeder, 1995; Peet and Watts, 1996, pages xi, 7, 264). Other literatures have certainly examined the construction and politics of environmental knowledge and power in First World arenas: in this sense, research on the social construction of knowledge in environmental science (for example, Latour, 1999), ecological modernization theory (for example, Beck, 1992), and analyses of the roles of major First World international institutions and organizations in environmental governance (for example, Keck and Sikkink, 1998; McAfee, 1999) all could be said to constitute a sort of political ecology of the First World. Yet although such investigations are vital they focus on major international institutions and highly placed actors in international professional networks. Many of the core concerns of political ecology—marginality, loss of customary access to land and resources, ambiguous and informal social relations and institutions, and more—thus play little role in them.

In distinction to both of the positions above, a growing number of scholars in geography, anthropology, and related disciplines have begun to investigate the core themes of political ecology in the United States and other First World countries. Representative examples include the work of Hollander (1995), Emery (1998), Hansis (1998), Wilson (1999), St Martin (2001), Sheridan (2001), and Walker (forthcoming). As yet, however, there has been little explicit discussion or theorization of the ways in which political ecology as it has developed can and cannot be applied to First World cases: many attempts at such application have borrowed what seemed useful without directly addressing this larger question, which inevitably arises when entire suites of methods and literatures are borrowed and applied to new contexts.

I argue here that many of the themes, insights, and methods of political ecology are directly applicable to First World cases but that there is much to be gained through explicit attention to the fact that they are borrowed from other contexts. In keeping with the thematic, case-based approach of this field, I attempt to show some of these gains by example in what follows. I take major themes and insights from political ecology and see what analytical purchase they afford on Wise Use, and ask what their applicability or lack thereof says about their theorization in the field.

A political ecology of Wise Use

Rural land and resources

Virtually all research in political ecology focuses on access to and control over rural lands and resources: this is one of the most striking commonalities across geographic contexts. Many authors, however, presume a sharp divergence in the *motivations* of actors in First and Third World locales for seeking control. It is widely assumed that actors in the First World seek control mainly to pursue aesthetic agendas for nature, whereas those in Third World cases seek control primarily to secure subsistence and maintain

basic livelihoods (Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Neumann and Schroeder, 1995). The concept of marginality is thus central in the second instance, and nearly irrelevant in the first.

This geography of motivations is questionable. Considerations of livelihood and social reproduction in fact figure centrally in struggles over access to and control over rural lands and environments in the United States. I focus here on federally owned lands, but the points apply to many rural lands in the United States with other tenure arrangements. Nearly all rural Westerners live close to enormous blocks of public lands that are fairly easily accessible (Snow, 1997). This contributes to the fact that rural Westerners frequently view the federal lands surrounding their communities as, in effect, a common property resource (Fortmann, 1990). Much recent work documents rural Americans' use of national forest and other public lands for a host of reasons beyond the aesthetic (for example, Anderson et al, 2000; Emery, 1998; Hansis, 1998; McCarthy, 1999; Muth, 1998; Schneider, 1997; Sheridan, 2001). In addition to the well-known and highly politicized uses of logging, grazing, and mining, many people hunt, fish, trap, and gather a wide variety of nontimber forest products (NTFPs) on the national forests. Some are for household use, reducing dependence on commodities (for example, firewood, fish, and venison) or enabling the performance of ethnically defined identities (for example, through gathering and preparing edible forest products not yet commodified in the United States); some are sold, providing seasonal supplements to income (for example, furs); and some are the basis of full-time businesses, some quite lucrative (for example, mushrooms, dried wild flowers for arrangements, increasingly popular herbs sold for medicinal purposes, and so on). Roads on national forests are important transportation routes in much of the rural West: lack of access to them can greatly increase travel time or effectively place large areas off limits to the kinds of uses above [for examples from Idaho's Boundary County, see McCarthy (1999)]. If such uses are not essential to subsistence, they certainly make major contributions to many livelihoods.

Such uses and considerations contribute to the fact that many rural primary commodity producers in the United States believe themselves to be marginal. They are correct in some respects. To be sure, most are in little danger of dying as a result of loss of access to natural resources—thanks mainly to state entitlements. They recognize, however, that they constitute a very small fraction of the population (less than a quarter of the US population is rural, and only about 3% of its workforce is in primary production). This means a relative lack of political power and influence. For instance, the number of households producing commodities from federal lands is dwarfed by the number of urban environmentalists who value such areas as spaces of consumption. Thus, a diminishing number of people engaged in primary production—often viewed as a goal and an indicator of development—means that those who do remain in that sector are often viewed as somehow vestigial. Many environmentalists eagerly participate in the construction of rural primary production as marginal, backward, and inefficient: in the course of conducting research on the Wise Use movement I several times had environmentalists explain to me that I had to understand that “it's the stupid ones who can't deal with change that stay on the ranch” (McCarthy, 1999; see also DuPuis and Vandergeest, 1996). For a group concerned on the whole to protect nature from the market, environmentalists have sometimes been extremely quick to evaluate rural land uses in terms of economic efficiency and comparative advantage when it fits their agenda: subsidies should be ended because they are inefficient; rural communities should remake their economies around whatever commodifications of the local environments are most lucrative; and no old-fashioned attachments to place, community, or way of life should confer any privileged claims to land or decisionmaking arenas. Many reports and recommendations by environmental organizations on the future of rural

Western areas imply that a transition away from a resource-based economy is not only well underway, but also *inevitable* and *progressive* (for example, Power, 1996). Natural-resource-based industries in the West appear in such environmentalist narratives as virtual dinosaurs, still lumbering around on the federal lands only because they are too stupid and stubborn to realize their time is over (for example, see Wilkinson, 1992).

Thus, although rural primary producers in the United States are far from powerless, and are not marginal to political processes to the same degree as many of their Third World counterparts,⁽³⁾ they are genuinely, steadily losing access to and control over the federal lands, contributing to the sense of marginalization that was so central to Wise Use. In this sense, they can be considered to be losing on the federal lands what Leach et al (1997), building on work by Amartya Sen, term ‘environmental entitlements’.

On the aesthetic front, the power exerted over rural landscapes and populations by extralocal aesthetic criteria is a central dynamic in many Third *and* First World contexts. The rapidly growing importance of nature-based tourism around the globe means that aesthetic criteria for nature are important factors in the material reshaping and commodification of many Third World landscapes for nonlocal tourists (for example, see Neumann, 1998; Ryan and Page, 2000). The same is equally true, though, of many of the most prized ‘natural’ landscapes in the American West and other First World countries (for example, Rothman, 1998). In short, extralocal aesthetic criteria backed up by purchasing power are transforming environments around the globe, often to the detriment or against the will of local users.⁽⁴⁾

Scale

Another major lesson to be drawn from studies of environmental conflicts in Third World locations concerns the scale focused on in research and analysis. Research on resource conflicts and conservation agendas in the United States has tended to focus on the federal arena and on the formal, legal realm. Ambiguities and conflicts are resolved by looking to the law, and it is widely presumed that the state is able to enforce whatever result emerges from the legal arena. Moreover, most major environmental laws are federal—reinforcing the national government’s centrality and minimizing the role of regional or local jurisdictions.⁽⁵⁾ These tendencies are clearly seen in the literature on federal lands, which is dominated by lawyers specializing in the relevant areas of legislation [Coggins et al (1993) remains the representative standard], and in studies of the federal agencies that administer these lands, often by scholars more interested in the state as an object of analysis than in land uses per se (for example, Davis, 1997; Klyza, 1996).⁽⁶⁾

Political ecology cases in Third World contexts, by contrast, typically focus on a ‘local’ scale: the scale of villages and surrounding areas. Even cross-national comparisons often still concentrate on this scale—for example, by picking villages on opposite sides of national borders and examining how they negotiate similar issues of resource

⁽³⁾ For instance, most are literate, subsidized, enfranchised, and citizens of the world’s most powerful state.

⁽⁴⁾ This is not invariably a local versus extralocal dynamic: Tsing (1999) has demonstrated that some local groups in Indonesia support nature preservation and use rural environments for fundamentally aesthetic purposes, and postcolonial states have supported conservation not just for foreign exchange but for a variety of purposes, including legitimacy, military support, and more.

⁽⁵⁾ This focus on national-scale, legal arenas has been both a cause and an effect of the dominant strategy of the modern, mainstream environmental movement in the United States, which has been to pursue its goals by focusing its limited resources on the passage of federal laws. It is also a legacy of Progressive-era regulatory approaches (Pincetl, 1999).

⁽⁶⁾ Significantly, Hays’s classic *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (1959), a milestone in US environmental history, originated from the author’s interest in Progressive-era political structures rather than from an interest in conservation per se.

access and control [for example, for a comparison of Zimbabwe with Mozambique, see Hughes (1999); for a comparison of Thailand with China, see Sturgeon (1998)]. This choice of scale flows largely from widespread acceptance that, in these cases, central states are weak and property rights are ambiguous, making dynamics within the community, closer to the ground, critical determinants of actual resource use and access. Political ecology and related fields have had to insist on the importance of such local and informal arenas in the face of long lineages of colonial and postcolonial disregard for existing usages, property regimes, and local priorities and knowledge. Thus, a focus on local specificity and ‘micropolitics’ has come to dominate relevant academic agendas (Moore, 1996; Peet and Watts, 1996), and the need for ‘community-based resource management’ (CBRM)—in which communities allegedly help to design, participate in, and benefit from conservation efforts—has become orthodoxy in conservation policy circles (for example, McNeeley, 1993; Western and Wright, 1994; but see also Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

In practice, of course, attention to local, regional, national, and international scales and to the linkages among them is appropriate in most cases. What this means in the United States is that much *more* attention is needed to the things privileged in most Third World political ecology case studies: ambiguities in property relations, limits on state capacity, and sharp differences among juridically equivalent citizens, to name a few examples, all remain critical in resource struggles. Very local-scale politics therefore still play a large role in shaping who has what kinds and levels of material access to land and resources, and such on-the-ground outcomes can vary substantially within the country and within individual states and counties. Too often, failure to recognize, analyze, and work with these realities has severely limited analysis and governance of resource use and conflict in the United States.⁽⁷⁾

State capacity

A major reason for the scales and foci of analysis above concerns state capacity with respect to natural resource management and conflicts. Central aspects of this capacity include the abilities to monitor resource use, enforce laws and policy, and run effective, professionalized resource-management bureaucracies, usually despite opposition by affected communities, corporations, and other interested parties. The inability of many Third World states to meet all these criteria figures prominently in many political ecology case studies. Resource-management agencies appear as underfunded, understaffed, and undertrained, as corrupt and full of illicit alliances and deals with nonstate resource users that run counter to the agencies’ missions, and as lacking basic ecological data about the lands and resources they are supposed to administer (although for significant challenges to this view, see Peluso and Watts, 2001; Rangan, 2000). Such deficiencies go a long way towards explaining what makes informal arenas, micropolitics, and resistance of various sorts both so effective and so pivotal in determining what actually happens on the ground in these situations.

However accurate these claims regarding allegedly weak Third World states and their purported lack of resource management capacities, what is crucial here is their *inherently* comparative character: we can only describe states as ‘weak’ or fragmented, and bureaucracies as *lacking* specific capacities, if we have in mind an image of a strong, unitary state wielding those capacities. The states and resource management agencies of First World countries serve as this standard, implicitly or explicitly. But the United States, often portrayed as the gold standard of sovereign state capacity, actually experiences many of

⁽⁷⁾ One recent trend that seeks to counteract this deficiency has been the importation of CBRM methods into the rural United States by some of the main actors advancing them internationally, such as the Ford Foundation.

the problems and limitations supposedly diagnostic of 'weak' states in controlling its own territory and population. In examining these gaps and contradictions in state control, and their consequences for resource management in the First World, the accumulated insights of Third World political ecology are invaluable guideposts.

State capacity in the United States may be far greater than in most cases examined in the political ecology literature, but research on both federal lands and Wise Use provides copious evidence that the US state is far from able comprehensively to monitor resource use and enforce its own laws and regulations. For example, the US Forest Service is nearly hopelessly behind schedule in meeting its own requirements for monitoring the vast acreages of private grazing allotments on Forest Service lands (see McCarthy, 1999). The revisions of formal management plans for those allotments—required to be based on current ecological conditions—are thus also far behind schedule and often out of touch with current conditions.⁽⁸⁾ Moreover, even if the agency ever caught up, it has nowhere near the funds or staff that would be necessary to effectively monitor many provisions of those management plans on an ongoing basis: precisely how many cattle that ranchers are allowed to have on what portions of their allotment for how many days, and so forth. Thus, the agency relies heavily on voluntary compliance rather than its own monitoring and enforcement to ensure that the terms of grazing agreements are met. Consequently, violations are more the rule than the exception. Analogous constraints and dynamics prevail in many instances of private logging on federal lands.

Coherence is equally lacking. Political ecology has emphasized that the state—in resource management and in general—is far from unitary or coherent in its goals and actions (Moore, 1993; Rangan, 2000). This is abundantly true in the rural West. Various federal agencies have competing agendas both among and within themselves. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), both historically 'captured' by federal lands commodity producers, have important internal divisions, such as that between older employees committed to maximizing commodity production and younger employees with more ecologically oriented agendas. Both are often in tension with the Fish and Wildlife Service, which has the most direct responsibilities for endangered species protection and gives directives to the Forest Service and BLM but itself has relatively little presence in most communities in the rural West. Congressional committees and federal courts make their own conflicting demands on the agencies: setting budgets, creating legislative and judicial mandates, monitoring performance and compliance, and so on. Federal inconsistency was well illustrated in Boundary County, Idaho, in the late 1970s: a local production-oriented Forest Service office conducted an assessment of roadless areas for potential wilderness designation, as required by headquarters in Washington, DC—but then used its local discretion to begin logging the most pristine areas furiously in the early 1980s, before wilderness designations or stricter planning requirements could be put into place (McCarthy, 1999). Similar examples abound. For rural land users, the lack of a unitary federal agenda or presence is a mixed blessing: it fosters uncertainty and frustration, but also creates slippages and tactical opportunities.

Like their counterparts around the world, federal employees in the rural West are subject to a variety of pressures and temptations that sometimes lead them to favor local resource users at the expense of their administrative mission. They are often focal points of local anger against the state. During the height of Wise Use activity, federal land-management employees were shunned and insulted in the towns where they lived—not only at work but during other daily activities. Their family members were also targeted, including their children in local schools (McCarthy, 1999). Like most conservation bureaucracies, US federal land agencies recognize these pressures and try to maintain a

⁽⁸⁾ This gap between administrative requirements and realities is central to the strategy, adopted by many environmental groups, of constantly suing agencies for failing to meet their own requirements.

sharp demarcation between their bureaucracies and local user communities by procedures such as the frequent rotation of higher level personnel (Neumann, 1998, pages 195–200). Lower level personnel, though, often remain in place and become in many respects part of the community and deeply sympathetic to local land-use agendas. Thus, despite the agencies' efforts, the boundary between 'the state' and 'the community' is continually blurred (see Dove, 1995; Robbins, 2000).

Property relations

Property relations, broadly defined, are another major focus in Third World political ecology. Common themes include the importance of informal property rights and relations, the viability of common-property regimes, the functionality of ambiguity in property relations, and the importance of social networks in gaining effective property rights (Berry, 1993). A frequent overarching theme is the conflict between these property relations and superimposed systems in which property is treated as a commodity and negotiated primarily in formal juridical arenas. Property relations in advanced capitalist countries such as the United States figure in these debates insofar as legally formalized, transferable private property has been and continues to be pushed by development institutions as a critical precondition of economic growth, social stability, and integration into global markets. In response, participants in and proponents of other property regimes have had to emphasize the longevity and functionality of existing property regimes. They have demonstrated, first, that property is best understood as including *any* claim to use of resources that can be enforced in the relevant arenas and, second, that effective property claims and rights in this broader sense can arise and derive their power and legitimacy from a wide array of sources beyond the legal, including customary usage, community sanction, economic power, regulatory practice, moral authority, and more (for example, see Agrawal, 1999; Peluso, 1992).

As with state capacity, though, many of the insights about property generated in such Third World cases apply to property relations in the United States, particularly in conflicts over rural land and resources. Private property and legal resolutions of disputes certainly dominate property relations in the United States but they are far from the only types of property rights and relations at work. Forms of informal and communal property rights still figure centrally in shaping resource use and access in the United States [for example, on coastal New England fisheries, see St Martin (2001); on cattle grazing in the Southwest, see Sheridan (2001); see also Jacobs (1998)]. The federal lands offer more examples. The simplest view of these relations, and the one implicit in much environmentalist discourse, is that the federal government holds all property rights on these vast areas of land and that all uses by private actors are merely privileges allowed by the federal government (for an extended critique of this view, see Fairfax et al, 1998). Property relations on federal lands are in fact substantially more complex than this. There are many places where private inholdings interrupt federal ownership, and private actors can sometimes compel the federal government to transfer property rights in other cases (for example, through mining claims). Moreover, the key property rights on federal lands often concern not ownership per se but more complicated relations of control, access, and use. There is thus no clear correspondence between the spatial extent of federal lands and any bundle of stable property rights (Cewart and Fairfax, 1988; Fairfax et al, 1999; Wiebe et al, 1998). Most important here is that these already complex legal relations are often substantially further modified in administrative and informal realms: bureaucratic discretion allows a great deal of leeway in how formal requirements operate in practice, and informal relations including bureaucratic cultures, tacit endorsement of customary usage, routine violation of formal boundaries, and selective lack of enforcement all mean that

what happens 'on the ground' is often very different from what laws and regulations dictate (see McCarthy, 1999).

Loss and criminalization of access

National and international conservation agendas continue to cause the loss and criminalization of long-established uses of lands and resources by local users in Third and First World locales. Such trends, widely recognized in the literature on Third World political ecology, proceed in the United States as well. The National Forests, for instance, were conceived and have long been run as what might now be termed 'extractive reserves': areas where some special degree of environmental protection coexisted with private, economic uses for the benefit of adjacent communities and the nation as a whole, under the auspices of government ownership and administration.⁽⁹⁾ The extractive triumvirate of logging, grazing, and mining dominated these private uses, but many others were important as well, as previously detailed. The ongoing loss and criminalization of such access and use, perhaps even more than diminished commodity production per se, have fueled local fears that federal lands are being 'locked up'. Ironically, hardening the boundaries of federal lands and elevating ecological goals above all others in its management in this way, frequently despite bitter local opposition, runs directly counter to contemporary wisdom in international conservation, which has come to emphasize the need for porous boundaries to protected areas, extractive reserves, and community support for and participation in conservation (see McCarthy, 2001).

Perceived violations of a moral economy regarding access to federal lands have provoked a range of active and passive resistance tactics familiar from cases around the world: trespassing and steady encroachment; poaching and punitive killings of protected wildlife; illicit grazing, harvesting, and fuelwood collection; severe community pressure on government personnel; and setting of fires in protected forests to gain access (see McCarthy, 1999, see also Muth, 1998).⁽¹⁰⁾ Local juries in the rural West have refused to convict for 'crimes' they do not see as crimes, such as ranchers trapping mountain lions on their grazing allotments on federal land. There are constant transgressions regarding just when, where, and how many cattle can be grazed on federal land on private grazing allotments. Criminalization has also given rise to covert resistance, such as circumventing gates barring motorized access to federal land, or killing endangered predators (for example, grizzly bears and wolves) and keeping quiet about it. Such responses are shaped by a local political consciousness and idiom in which earlier pivotal losses of access (most notably the withdrawal and creation of the forest reserves themselves) are clearly remembered and invoked as dangerous precedents (Neumann, 1998, pages 69–70).

Integration into capitalist markets and moral economy formation

Another major theme in political ecology and agrarian studies is that of integration into capitalist markets and consequent transformations of property and production relations to those of capitalist societies. Such integration and transitions can be drawn out over years, decades, and even generations, but they are generally seen as one-way, and one-time, processes in a given location. *Moral economies* figure centrally in this dynamic, arising as defensive alternatives to capitalist modernity. The originator of the term, E P Thompson (1993), saw moral economies as constructed largely as alternatives to the economic relations of modern capitalism. Most subsequent authors have

⁽⁹⁾ This was the justifying theory, anyway; some commercial use served these purposes but much benefited mainly national and multinational extractive corporations in ways that were neutral or detrimental to community and national goals.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Stands of burned timber are often put up for sale by the Forest Service in 'salvage' sales, whereas the same stands, unburned, would remain offlimits to logging.

seen them as by definition *precapitalist* (for example, Neumann, 1998, page 41). I would like to suggest, by contrast, that human–environment dynamics in the heart of capitalist modernity include *ongoing* struggles over nature, including ongoing resistance to the perennial dynamics of capitalism in the form of newly articulated moral economies.

A clear moral economy was visible in Wise Use's claims on federal lands. It was *not* about survival, redistribution, or risk minimization, as most moral economies are, but it *did* offer a coherent view of how economic and other social relations on federal lands should be structured, in ways that focused on the maintenance of livelihoods and social reproduction, departed substantially from capitalist ideals, and had strong normative and traditional elements. The pivotal question for its participants was not so much *whether* they could make a living at all, as *how* they would make it. They remained committed to making it through commodity production on federal lands. The central tenets of this moral economy were that: (1) federal lands exist primarily for the use and benefit of adjacent rural communities and (2) commodity production on federal lands was essential to the health of those communities.

Wise Use did not defend production on federal lands as an end in itself, or for the sake of the national economy. Rather, it insisted that natural resource industries are permitted on federal lands primarily for the maintenance of rural communities in the region. For many rural Westerners, federal lands are a communal resource: the only legitimate reason for reserving such lands from privatization at the turn of the last century, in their view, was to ensure a sustainable source of raw materials for communities in the region. Wise Use activists referred to the words of Gifford Pinchot, who wrote "It is the duty of the Forest Service to see to it that the timber, water-powers, mines, and every other resource of the forests is used for the benefit of the people who live in the neighborhood or who may have a share in the welfare of each locality" (1910, pages 51–52). They also pointed to other seminal statements regarding the purposes of federal lands. For example, the 1897 Forest Management Act, the first clear statement of congressional intent regarding the forest reserves, required that timber sold from the reserves be used in the state or territory where it had grown. Although this requirement did not last, it indicated a clear early preference for local use and economic development over the interests of capitalist firms competing in national and international markets. Similar precedents abound. Wise Use thus advanced a very simple geographic claim: it insisted that all members of the American public did not have equal rights to advance claims to federal lands; those rights were tied to place. Legitimate claimants were those who could demonstrate some combination of historical continuity, residence in the rural communities in question, productive use of federal lands, and contributions to the local economy. Ideally, the four went together, and one was not necessarily enough by itself.⁽¹¹⁾ Thus, many rural Westerners have felt repeated losses of access to land for the sake of nature preservation to be *moral* violations as well as economic losses.

The moral economy articulated by Wise Use also had strongly anticapitalist elements. Its participants objected vehemently to environmentalists' attempts to remove federal lands from circuits of capital entirely. But they objected just as strongly to attempts to place them in an unrestricted free market. Although vehemently defending commodity production on federal lands, Wise Use also insisted that such lands should *not* be fully marketized or privatized: subsidies and entitlements based on being 'local' were as central to the agenda of Wise Use as support for commodity production. Many members had rejected James Watt's efforts in the early 1980s actually to sell federal lands to the highest

⁽¹¹⁾ For instance, environmentalists living in rural Western counties are often still rejected as legitimate claimants, and so, at times, are extractive corporations that produce commodities on the federal lands but do not contribute significantly to local economies.

bidder, and more recently they have been outraged by environmental groups bidding on public grazing allotments for the purpose of *not* grazing any cattle and resting the allotment. In each case, they recognized that competitors for these lands would outbid them, but refused to recognize the latter as valid claimants, no matter how much money they brought to the table. This refusal to plunge land and resources into an unrestricted free market is a defining characteristic of moral economies.

Wise Use's moral economy defied a straightforward capitalist logic in other respects as well. Contrary to environmentalists' charges, it constituted more than a land grab and an attempt to maximize profits. Participants often prioritized community stability and reproduction over accumulation. Many did not sell private land when they could have done so at a considerable profit. They stayed in ranching or forest-products industries despite very low profits rather than moving away or into other lines of business. They fretted over whether they would be able to pass on generations-old family businesses: one of the concerns local Wise Use activists expressed most frequently was whether their children would be able to stay in the community or work in the same industry. They expressed pride in working on the same piece of land, or in the same area, for generations. Such evidence suggests that their commitment to primary commodity production was not reducible to a desire to maximize profits.⁽¹²⁾

Cultural politics

It is widely recognized in Third World political ecology that struggles over resources are always also struggles over meanings (Peet and Watts, 1996; see also Moore, 1993; 1996). Cultural politics at all scales thus play a major role in such struggles. Common dynamics include the assertion of resource claims based on tradition, custom, or particular ethnic or racial identities, particularly indigenous ones. Importantly, these traditions, customs, and collective identities are often either invented or significantly reinterpreted in order to bolster the specific claims at stake (for example, see Brosius, 1997; Veber, 1998; Zerner, 1994; Zimmerer, 2000). Another common tactic along these lines is Third World claimants' strategic manipulation of Western environmentalists' often romantic assumptions regarding indigenous groups' relations with nature (for example, see Brosius, 1997; Conklin and Graham, 1995; Veber, 1998).

Studies of environmental politics in advanced capitalist countries, by contrast, have on the whole paid far too little attention to culture. Although some researchers have certainly looked at the role of cultural politics in environmental struggles in these countries (for example, Berglund, 1998; Pulido, 1996), such studies have constituted a small portion of the overall scholarship in this area. Moreover, little if any of this work has been informed by highly relevant work in political ecology. Too often, researchers proceed from the presumption that actors in fully capitalist countries are the purely rational, instrumental, and individualistic agents who appear in modernity's self-image, and that local cultures and traditions have long since been overridden by capitalist markets and modern, national bureaucracies. Yet cultural politics are as potent a part of environmental politics in the heart of capitalist modernity as elsewhere. Claims of tradition, custom, or rights linked to ethnic or racial identities are still regularly invoked in environmental disputes in the United States (for example, see McCarthy, 1999; Pulido, 1996; Wagoner, 1998).

⁽¹²⁾ Desires and pressures for profit and accumulation were by no means absent, of course: community members demonstrated them, and the large firms that dominate many communities in the rural West certainly operate to maximize profits. For all of these actors, the demands and constraints of national and international markets are crucial variables, as in most political ecology case studies. I am not suggesting that these local economies in the rural West are entirely or even largely anticapitalist, only that they contain anticapitalist elements and are far from fully explicable by reference to the dynamics of capitalism.

Although many critics reduced Wise Use to a straightforward exercise of corporate power for economic ends, complex cultural politics were in fact at the heart of the movement. Its defense of particular property relations, subsidies, and entitlements on federal lands rested not on a legal, economic, or ecological foundation but on a set of arguments about culture. Wise Use certainly made claims in each of the other three domains, but all were *predicated* on certain claims regarding regional culture. In effect, Wise Use attempted to displace debates about federal lands out of the arenas of federal environmental requirements, ecological criteria, and economic efficiency, and squarely into an asserted moral economy of the rural West. By asserting indissoluble links between particular uses of federal lands and local economies and cultures, its participants attempted to shift the terrain of debate onto grounds where most of their critics' arguments would be moot. Wise Use's central tactic in this strategy is worth examining in some detail, because it illustrates dramatically how cultural politics continually reinsert ambiguity, the extralegal and informal, and the specific into the supposedly formalized, abstract, and universal structures and rules of modern bureaucracies and laws.

The major manifestation of Wise Use in the rural West was the passage by over one hundred counties during the first half of the 1990s of a series of ordinances and land-use plans that attempted to give county governments greater control over federal lands within their borders (Catron County, 1992). The counties argued that commodity production on federal lands was in fact central to their local 'custom and culture', and that the associated land uses—logging, grazing, and mining—were therefore protected by some of the very federal environmental laws that were reshaping federal land-management priorities in ways Wise Use found threatening. Whatever the legal merits of this position (which were scant) the county ordinances made a creative and clever series of arguments.

First, they noted that many federal environmental laws contain provisions requiring the federal land-management agencies to 'coordinate' and 'cooperate' with local governments, especially when those local governments are directly affected by the agencies' decisions. Much federal legislation also requires the agencies to take account of land-use planning efforts by state and local governments and to attempt to minimize conflicts between such efforts and federal plans. The most important site of such language for the counties' purposes was the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), but they also cited similar requirements in the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the Federal Land Policy Management Act (FLPMA), the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, the revised Endangered Species Act, and many others. Forest Service regulations also require the agency to monitor and consider the impacts of its actions upon communities adjacent to the land it manages and to allow county governments to 'participate' in the development of national forest management plans. Similarly, the BLM is required to remain apprised of local planning efforts, 'give consideration' to local plans, attempt to resolve inconsistencies between federal and nonfederal plans, and provide for 'meaningful' public involvement when preparing management plans for the land it administers. Wise Use activists compiled a list of such requirements applicable to the federal land agencies and argued that, taken together, they pointed to a much greater role for county governments than those governments currently enjoy.⁽¹³⁾ They insisted that meaningful 'coordination' implied some actual power and decisionmaking capacity on both sides,

⁽¹³⁾ Catron County's compilation of such language relied on work by Karen Budd-Falen, the leading Wise Use lawyer propounding this line of reasoning. She culled over sixty examples of such language from federal legislation including NEPA, FLPMA, NFMA, the Clean Air and Water Acts, the Endangered Species Act, Historic Preservation Act, Soil and Water Conservation Act, Rural Environmental Conservation Act, and Resource Conservation Act, Forest Service and BLM regulations, presidential executive orders, and relevant court decisions. The excerpts she cites are too numerous and lengthy to list here (see McCarthy, 1999).

rather than the agencies simply informing the county governments of what the agencies were going to do—which was what current relations amounted to, according to the counties.⁽¹⁴⁾

Second, they pointed out that many of those same laws contained provisions directing federal agencies, in effect, to minimize their negative effects on values of a cultural or historic nature. The key phrase in the introduction of NEPA notes the importance of preserving “important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage”. Similar phrases occur in the other federal regulations and guidelines cited by the counties. Wise Use activists claimed that the patterns of commodity production on federal lands in their counties fell under such language and so were deserving of protection. They also explicitly defined the county’s ‘environment’ as including the prosperity, health, and safety of its citizens, and therefore an appropriate arena of action for local government (County Commissioners, 1993, page 1).

Third, they passed local ordinances that, they argued, fit into the legislative provisions above. Federal agencies had in the past acknowledged that they were obliged to consider local plans, economic stability, and so forth but had argued that they could not be held to any strict standard when those plans were not defined in any concrete way. Wise Use counties therefore passed land-use plans that identified and codified ranching, logging, and mining on the federal lands in the counties as central to local ‘custom and culture’, using definitions of each term carefully crafted around land uses, practices, values, and beliefs. The results deserve to be quoted at length:

“**Culture** is a practice or belief established over a long period of time that is adhered to by a society. The people are inseparable from their culture. In the County Movement, the term culture pertains to the land use culture of a society. ‘Society’ is defined as the citizens of a county. The land use culture stems from a complex web of land uses, practices, values, and beliefs. Each county is unique and many hold a different land use culture than other counties. However, as an illustration, the people of Catron County, New Mexico, prepared the first county comprehensive land use plan. Through a public input process, they defined their land culture as the belief that land should be properly stewarded and used to obtain a sustained harvest of natural resources. This belief is in opposition to the practice of the preservation or nonuse of the land. In other words, the people of Catron County believe the land should be wisely used to produce food and fiber and to extract needed minerals from the earth.

Customs are the way people implement their culture—the way they traditionally use the land, make a living, and act toward each other. Customs are the visible and tangible manifestations of the shared beliefs that bind a group of people into a community. In law, customs consist of ‘long established practice or usage, which constitutes the unwritten law, and long consent to which gives it authority. Customs are general, which extend over a state or kingdom, and particular, which are limited to a city or district’ (Bouvier 1868). In short, the methods used by the citizens in carrying out their culture amounts to their customs. The citizens of Catron County harvest trees for lumber, irrigate crops and graze livestock for food, outfit hunters, and extract necessary minerals from the earth. The activities of carrying out their customs result in various industries, i.e., timber, livestock, and mining industries have traditionally formed the basis of the county economy. Obviously, the attributes of customs, culture, and economy ... must be treated as an integrated whole; i.e., the term ‘economic stability’ or ‘community stability’ is used to convey the integrated meaning” (County Commissioners, 1993, pages 1–2).

⁽¹⁴⁾ Their assessment of their situation was strikingly similar to Ribot’s (1998) analysis of environmental governance in Senegal, in which the state gives local structures representivity or real power, but never both together.

Environmentalists and the federal government immediately denounced the counties' positions, insisting that the ordinances were legally unfounded, that they had actually been developed by Wise Use corporate interests at regional and national levels and then peddled to gullible rural county commissioners, and that their definition of 'culture' was absurdly narrow and instrumental. Wise Use activists insisted that the ordinances were both valid and homegrown. The actual history is quite complex and does not so much fall between these extremes as weave them together (see McCarthy, 1999). The point here, though, is not whether Wise Use articulated a 'genuine' culture of the rural West: I am less interested in debates over the definition and analytical utility of 'culture'⁽¹⁵⁾ than in the fact that *claims* regarding culture and identity remained *central* to environmental politics in the late-20th-century United States.

In addition to the specific claims regarding local culture made by Wise Use counties, cultural politics figured prominently in the movement in other, broader ways. First, corporate power certainly played an important role in Wise Use. But corporate hegemony in the rural West, if it existed at all, was not the result of rural Westerners blindly succumbing to simple false consciousness, as many environmentalists insisted. Rather, extractive corporations had to be very strategic in their invocation and manipulation of regional discourses, histories, and ideologies in order successfully to mobilize people and catalyze grass roots organizations in the rural West. Corporations were in fact often more sensitive to the region's cultural politics than many environmentalists and so were better able to engage culture for instrumental purposes.

Second, cultural politics were crucial to forging and maintaining the class alliance at the heart of Wise Use. The movement was primarily an alliance between those classes with the most to lose in the erosion of certain property rights and relations on federal lands: small independent producers and large extractive corporations. The assertion of communities defined by *place* and *property relations* allowed them temporarily to unite despite strong class and other tensions *within* the movement. The myth of the Jeffersonian smallholder was by far this alliance's most potent rhetorical trope: both groups were willing to rally behind this class banner against new claims on the rural West. The critical point is that the cultural identities deployed by Wise Use were not simply tools wielded by a *preexisting* class alliance; they were a crucial part of *forging* Wise Use as an effective political movement in the first place.

Wise Use also grounded its members' claims to federal lands in a particular political identity: it basically argued that landed property owners engaged in primary production were the true citizens of the United States. This privileging of a Jeffersonian ideal, combined with the insistence on property relations solidified in the second half of the 19th century, meant that Wise Use's agenda was an implicitly racialized and gendered one: only white men enjoyed and were fully able to stake property claims in those periods. In sum, Wise Use provided abundant evidence that locally and regionally specific cultural politics—including identities bound to particular places, ethnicities, or races; and rights based in custom, tradition, and other informal and extralegal realms—remain central to environmental politics in advanced capitalist countries.

Colonial legacies and roles in spatial divisions of labor

A final major theme of political ecology is the tremendous role of colonial and postcolonial dynamics in shaping access to and control over resources in many Third World countries. Colonialism and its legacies play major roles in structuring conservation, property rights, wealth and poverty, integration into international markets, and

⁽¹⁵⁾ Mitchell's (1995) doubts regarding the term's utility for explanation in human geography are highly persuasive.

many other facets of case studies in political ecology. These connections are well recognized with respect to Third World locales.

Less recognized, though, is that colonialism's traces are still clearly inscribed in patterns of resource use, access, and control in many First World locations. This is particularly true of the so-called settler colonies. The fact that many of these are now solidly part of the First World (for example, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) often eclipses the fact that they were also European colonies, with lasting consequences for environmental governance. Attention to their historical geographies as colonies reveals important continuities with many Third World countries and aids investigations of contemporary resource conflicts. Provocative beginnings of such a project can be found in the proliferation of comparative work in environmental history and historical geography on Anglo 'settler societies': authors such as Beinart and Coates (1995), Grove (1990), Rangan and Lane (2001), Griffiths and Robin (1997), and Dunlap (1999) all highlight continuities in colonial patterns of governing nature, populations, and territories in India, South Africa, New Zealand, the United States, and elsewhere. Major commonalities include widespread adoption of common imperial scientific forestry practices, deployment of the same array of modernist techniques to make new territories legible to expanding states (Hannah, 2000; Scott, 1998), conflated and polarized reactions to 'wild' nature and 'primitive societies', dissemination of the 'Yellowstone model' of national parks, and the ongoing significance of colonial impositions on previous populations to contemporary resource politics (for example, Native American and Hispanic populations still maintain claims on much of the American West). Robbins (1994) and Cosgrove (1995) in particular interpret environmental politics in the United States, particularly in the West, in light of the expansion of European colonial powers into the region—Robbins focusing on the expansion of capital, Cosgrove on ideologies of race.

Similar parallels can be seen with respect to three characteristics often considered diagnostic of the Third World: *widespread poverty*, economies focused on subsistence and exports of *primary commodities*, and a *relative lack of power* in the institutions with the most power over these countries. These shared characteristics are, of course, closely linked to colonial legacies of unequal exchange, enforced specialization in primary sectors, and formal rule by Western imperial powers. With respect to the Third World, the persistent coexistence of these conditions is undeniable. It is striking, however, that residents of many rural areas in advanced capitalist countries complain of precisely the same problems. Such regions are often the poorest in their countries, tend to specialize in natural resource industries, claim to be run by and for external interests, complain of being marginalized or ignored in national politics because of their relative lack of votes and wealth, and are the sites of large areas of 'protected' land owned and administered by national governments despite local opposition (Bunker, 1985; Castle, 1995; Flora, 1990; Marsden et al, 1990). In the rural West, for instance, claims of suffering an attenuated form of colonialism are a perennial staple of the region's political discourse and identity (for a review and critique, see Robbins, 1986). Although such a claim is indefensible regarding the contemporary West, it had considerable truth in the mid-19th to late 19th century—the period, not coincidentally, when enduring patterns in the region's environmental governance were established (for example, the decision to retain federal ownership of roughly half the land in the region).

Rural areas in advanced capitalist countries obviously do not face the same present conditions and constraints as Third World countries—a claim both ludicrous and insulting. Yet the fact that some of their characteristics and complaints resonate across the North–South divide indicates that they are traces of integration into national and international economies in what were originally similar functional niches in spatial

divisions of labor and uneven geographies of capitalist development, through related dynamics of colonial administration and rule. It is therefore no coincidence that precisely such areas have been the most common sites of efforts to apply the methods and insights of Third World political ecology to First World cases.

Conclusions

In this paper I have advanced a specific argument and a general argument. The specific argument is that analyzing the Wise Use movement through the lens of political ecology reveals that it was more complex and ambiguous, in terms of its legitimacy and operations, than was recognized or acknowledged by most 'leftists' and environmentalists in the United States. The general argument, following from this case study, is that the core concerns and approaches of political ecology are directly relevant to research on environmental politics in First World locales. These arguments have several implications for research in political ecology and environmental politics.

First, they suggest an expansion of *research agendas* in political ecology. If the field aspires to "combine the concerns of ecology with a broadly defined political economy ... [which] encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources"—a definition proffered by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987, page 17) and reiterated nearly a decade later by Peet and Watts (1996)—then there is no theoretical or empirical reason to limit its application to the study of agrarian resources and conflicts in Third World locales. I have shown here that many of the core themes of political ecology are not specific to Third World locales. More broadly, the transformation of nature by or in the service of multinational corporations, rapid urban growth, and affluent consumption in advanced capitalist countries would seem to have at least as much causal power in contemporary ecological and political economic dynamics as the struggles of agrarian peasant societies. Inquiry into each of these topics, then, as well as into a host of other arenas of human transformation of the environment, should fall squarely within the domain of a Marxist-influenced commitment to studying environmental use, degradation, and conflict wherever they occur. No one argues *against* such a broadening of political ecology, but few researchers have as yet taken up repeated calls for such an expansion of research agendas.

Second, the arguments presented here have *methodological implications* for studies of First World environmental politics. I have shown that core aspects of political ecology case studies such as informal property relations, limited state capacity, local and regional cultural politics, and more all profoundly affect environmental governance in the United States. If this is so, and ambiguities and resistance with respect to fully capitalist relations persist, then this has implications for research methods: statistical analyses of localities never visited, aggregate quantitative portraits of regions, drive-through 'fieldwork', and formal legal interpretations will simply never adequately address the dynamics at the heart of most political ecology case studies. Substantial evidence from geography, anthropology, and related disciplines indicates that extended fieldwork using intensive case studies and ethnographic techniques offers the best hope of insight into such dynamics. In-depth consideration of historical geographies and comparative frameworks are also critical. Such methods are the exception in studies of environmental law, policy, institutions, and conflicts in the United States, the majority of which focus on the formal realm and have little or no transnational comparative perspective (and when such a perspective is used, it is most often in the context of promoting the United States as a model for other countries). A political ecology perspective can go a long way towards counteracting this American exceptionalism, parochialism, and self-congratulatory high modernism.

Third, the application of political ecology to First World resource conflicts also raises questions regarding the *political sympathies* of its practitioners: research in the field typically proceeds from an implicit sympathy with local and historically grounded claims on the productive use of resources and with the local communities at the center of the study, and from a corollary skepticism towards the state and international organizations involved in local resource conflicts. These orientations made me more inclined to take Wise Use seriously. At the same time, however, such predilections can at times lead to insufficiently critical, populist stances. Wise Use and other cases of resource conflicts in the United States call these predispositions in political ecology into question, serving as a reminder that local agendas are not inherently more legitimate than state or environmentalist agendas, and that centralized state resource management is not always a bad thing, for social or ecological goals (contra the overall tenor of Scott's important 1998 work).

Fourth, an examination of Wise Use confirms Latour's contention that "we have never been modern" (1993). Specifically, the ongoing centrality of locally and regionally contingent meanings, identities, and resistance to ideal capitalist norms in cultural politics of the environment in the United States directly contradicts the enduring myths that modernist rationality governs Western relations to nature, that actors in the advanced capitalist countries are economically rational and individualistic, and that local cultures in places such as the American West have long since been overridden by modern capitalist markets and bureaucracies (see Spurr, 1993; Walton, 1992; Worster, 1985).

Recognizing this and incorporating it into the research agenda of political ecology has the potential to advance radical politics. Such a project should include a fuller engagement between political ecology and theories of economic geography that explore the *ongoing* nature of capitalist development, emphasizing that new rounds of investment, revolution of means and relations of production, and other associated dynamics are guaranteed to continue to disrupt temporary coherences in social relations, the built environment, and human–environment relations. And so, far from being a one-time transition, the confrontation between capitalist rationalization of nature–society relations and what Thompson called the "tissue of customs and usages" is a never-ending story. The imperatives of capitalism necessitate ongoing attacks and outrages against sustainable, democratic, egalitarian relationships within human communities and in human uses of nature at all scales. These insults to a wider range of human sensibilities and commitments than afforded space within strictly capitalist logic will continue to provoke new moral economies (in the sense of backlashes against further commodification, subordination of society to the market, and disruptions of culturally specific forms of capitalism) as new rounds of investment and commodification disrupt established relations. Such reactions may be conservative or progressive, but they all have radical potential insofar as they are explicitly oriented against the deepening of capitalist relations. Recognizing this potential, even within the heart of capitalist modernity, and making it part of the agenda of political ecology would expand the theoretical and political potential of that field.

Acknowledgements. I thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments, and the departments of geography at Rutgers University and Syracuse University, and the departments of anthropology, history, and geography at the University of Washington, for opportunities to present and refine these arguments. Also, Peter Walker's shared interest in these issues has led to many productive exchanges.

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