Should political ecology be Marxist? A case for Gramsci’s historical materialism

Geoff Mann

Simon Fraser University, Department of Geography, Burnaby BC, Canada V5A 1S6

Abstract

This paper investigates some aspects of political ecology’s relation to Marxism, specifically its ties to Marxism’s “historical materialism”. I argue Gramsci is an essential feature in the reinvigoration of that relation, and that political ecology should be Marxist, if by Marxist we mean Gramscian. I focus on the concept of hegemony, arguing that Gramsci’s historical materialism, in contrast to the Engelsian tradition within which most materialism is snared, allows us to take account of both moments in Gramsci’s hegemony, the “economic” and the “ethicopolitical”.

Clearly the weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons, and material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. (Karl Marx, 1975, p. 251)

Should political ecology be Marxist? If so, what does that mean? My goal in this paper is to consider some aspects of political ecology’s long-standing, if inconsistent, relation to the Marxist tradition, specifically to that tradition’s so-called historical materialist commitments. I argue that Gramsci is the key figure through which to negotiate this relation, and that political ecology should indeed be Marxist, if by ‘Marxist’ we mean Gramscian. For a Gramscian approach demands a particularly critical engagement with Marxism’s materialism, and operates political–analytical categories that do not always sit easily on its foundations. Indeed, I want to show that a Gramscian political ecology suggests a powerful critique of historical materialism that can help reinvigorate political ecology’s relation to Marx. Since this undertaking would be unwieldy with respect to the totality of Gramsci’s thought, I focus on the concept of hegemony, which is at any rate the most influential element of his political and theoretical legacy.

Gramsci is relatively infrequently cited in the political ecology literature. To take some recent examples: none of the contributions to the new edition of Richard Peet and Michael Watts’ foundational collection, Liberation Ecologies (2004), and only one in the first edition (Moore, 1996), engages with his work. Similarly, he is entirely absent from Karl Zimmerer and Thomas Bassett’s edited volume Political Ecology (2003), and receives only one minor note on “war of position” in Nancy Peluso and Watts’ Violent Environments (2001). In every case, it is other thinkers—most prominently, but not only, Michel Foucault—that are called upon explicitly, not Gramsci. Given the substantial place of Marxian political economy in political ecology’s legacy and, to perhaps a lesser extent, its current practice, this disproportion in citation is somewhat surprising, especially since, as I will argue below, Gramsci’s Marxism can do a great deal of essential political work, perhaps more than some of those who turn to Foucault recognize.

For, bibliographic content aside, the spirit of Gramsci does indeed animate political ecology—it is not difficult to see that many of Gramsci’s principal commitments and concepts, if sometimes unwittingly, organize much of the field as currently practiced. Clearly, some political ecologists are Gramscian in that they share these commitments explicitly, and purposefully connect themselves to his work (e.g. Peet and Watts, 1996; Moore, 1996,2005; Cohen, 2004; Gordillo, 2004; Robbins, 2004; Wainwright, 2005). Many more share, if only tacitly, assumptions about their own work that would hold for any political ecology that deserves the adjective “Gramscian”; first, it can never be merely scholarly. Second, it can never be disembedded from the currents of social change it investigates and of which it must necessarily be a part. Of course, much of political ecology inevitably suffers from the ivory tower syndrome that plagues most scholarly work today, but it is surely that case that political ecologists work harder than most to escape the academy’s thrall.

The tension I find fascinating, then, is this: although contemporary political ecology is in many respects Gramscian, it is not so
clearly Marxist. How does this work? Gramsci was first and foremost a Marxist. The accumulated thought of the Marxist tradition weighs heavily on his work, and on his influential conceptualization of hegemony in particular; it is no exaggeration to say that without Marx and Marxism, the modern concept of hegemony is impossible. This spectre of a non-Marxist Gramsci is worth addressing, for good theoretical and political reasons. Theoretically, because Gramsci’s ideas, like all thought, developed at a particular historical juncture, and the arc of their historical trajectories both constitutes and constrains their analytical power—this is the materialist lesson par excellence. Politically, because recovering, or recalling, political ecology’s Marxism can link it explicitly to an intellectual practice that Gramsci himself typified—the dream of praxis, the unity of theory and practice to which so many political ecologists strive. Gramsci’s critical ethical materialism can provide a basis for these efforts, since it is both a sharp critique and a powerful reworking of the methodological and epistemological basis of Marxism, i.e. historical materialism. For, as Peet and Watts point out (1996, pp. 28–29), any political ecology that takes hegemony seriously must be able to account not only for the ‘material’ fact of hegemony, but also for how it works ideologically. In other words, it must do more than point out that the ruling bloc is hegemonic and demonstrate the material evidence of its power; it must also explain how and why that hegemony operates in the social life of thought—norms, morality, common sense.

I open what follows, then, with some initial groundwork concerning Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. With that laid out, the rest of the paper is packaged in two parts and a conclusion. The first is largely historical, the second theoretical. I hope this is not too clunky a mode of presentation, but a thorough discussion of what the adjective ‘Gramscian’ denotes, and what particular sensibilities it demands, seems to me essential. Part 1 thus contains a somewhat detailed discussion of the relation of certain elements of Gramsci’s Marxist social theory to the communist movement that inspired it. The intellectual–political tumult of communism in Gramsci’s time is central to an understanding of what he wrote, and, just as importantly, why he felt it worth writing (Losurdo, 2006). Placing Gramsci’s historical materialism in the context of the Leninism then dominant in the communist movement, I argue that a materialism that can take account of what Gramsci called the “ethical–political” (which he could not get from Lenin) is absolutely crucial to any real contribution hegemony can make to political ecology.

Working from this critique, Part 2 suggests that perhaps the most ‘Gramscian’ quality of contemporary political ecology is a product of Gramsci’s Marxism. That quality is its recognition that the many efforts to confront socio-environmental dynamics and their political function—the very things that constitute the “politics” political ecology studies—emerge from a field of competing normative ideas regarding the unfolding of history. Although these ideas often contradict each other, Gramsci showed that this crucial “ethico-political” field is what constitutes the “moment of hegemony”. In any account of the production of nature, Gramscian political ecology pays careful attention not only to the “economic” relations of production, but also to the moral field of claims regarding the relationship between history, geography and what Hegel called “Right”. What is of interest is more than the discursive production of nature; it is a nothing less than a moral ecology. Actors involved in contests over the meanings and control of “nature” often understand the movement of “Right” as more than a normative standard, but as an active, material force in the making of the world—what Gramsci called an “idea-force” (1975, p. 72). In other words, for the “masses”, nature is always metaphysics, but it is not messianic. Right is not “natural”; rather, Right makes nature—or it should (e.g. Gramsci, 1985, p. 192).

Contrary to common mischaracterizations of Marx as a rigid materialist, his account of historical change, environmental or otherwise, always recognized the role of human explanations of those changes—beliefs—as forces of change themselves. Although Marx famously wrote that life determines consciousness, not vice versa (1978, p. 155), his theory of history—not to mention his own politics—makes little sense if consciousness does not bite back. This is absolutely not to say that either Marx or Gramsci were moralists—they were not—but rather to emphasize both of their critical analyses recognized morality—eschatology even—as a causal force in history (Losurdo, 2006, pp. 146–147). In other words, as Gramsci says, the ethical–political does not merely express but also drives political–ecological dynamics. Coming to grips with this means taking a wider view of the forces that “matter” in history. Remembering that he says “all men are philosophers” (1971, p. 323), here is Gramsci on the problem at hand:

> Every philosopher is, and cannot but be, convinced that he expresses the unity of the human spirit, that is, the unity of history and nature. Otherwise, men would not act, they would not create new history; in other words, philosophies would not become “ideologies”, they could not, in practice, acquire the fanatical granite solidity of “popular beliefs”, which have the equivalence of “material forces” (Gramsci, 1996, pp. 194–195).

My hope is to help highlight the Gramscian dialectic at the heart of political ecology, one that takes account of how much ideas matter, and to emphasize its embeddedness in a vein of critical Marxist praxis. As Marx famously said, people make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Either way, they do not do so thoughtlessly.

1. Political ecology after Lenin: hegemony, morality, and praxis

In offering these remarks about some object called “political ecology”, I recognize the danger in lumping together a wide and busy field of research, in which any critical examination is necessarily somewhat scatter-shot. In the details, a precise line of argument will almost certainly miss more than it will hit. Yet in the totality of work called political ecology, blurred boundaries and all, some broad patterns are discernable. All political ecologists set themselves two broad explanatory goals: to account for the production of nature and environment, and to understand the ways in which (produced) natures and environments help shape social relations (Robbins, 2004). The literature tends to work across

---

1 Everyday efforts to understand what “caused” history, and the concepts, categories, and theories those efforts produce, become part of what Gramsci, after the philosopher Benedetto Croce, calls the “ethico-political”. These explanatory efforts help construct, in other words, the ethical–political ground upon which sense-making happens, and that ground in turn comes to “matter”. Moral or ethico-political history must free itself from these faulty theories and from these limitations of circumstance by correcting itself and by conceiving as its object not only the State [German version], the government of the State and the expansion of the State, but also that which is outside the State, whether it co-operates with it or tries to modify it, overthrow and replace it: namely, the formation of moral institutions, in the broadest sense of the word, including religious institutions and revolutionary sects, including sentiments, customs, fancies, and myths that are practical in tendencies and content. . . . The creators of these institutions are the political geniuses and the aristocrats or political classes which give them life and in turn are created and supported by them (Croce, 1945, pp. 103–104).

2 “Right” (Recht), not “rights”.

3 Indeed, the idea-force “Leninism” continues to play no small part in political ecological drama. Mediated by the “materiality” of cold war politics, Leninism helps determine global ecological regimes—this despite vicious Leninist opposition in the international communist movement, of which Gramsci was an active participant, to the mere hint of something like an “idea-force”.

4 Lukács saw this too—and got bitten for it: “It is true that reality is the criterion for the correctness of thought. But reality is not, it becomes—and to become the participation of thought is needed” (1971, p. 204).
a spectrum between what we might call political ecology, interested in human politics as a factor in environmental change, and political ecology, interested more particularly in the environment and nature as site and partial product of human politics. While both biophysical and social systems are almost always at issue, the political spectrum is defined on one end by a primarily (but not exclusively) environmentalist project, on the other by a primarily (but not exclusively) social justice project. This is to say that all political ecology is “political” in the colloquial sense; excellent research that troubles the powers—that be goes on across the research spectrum. But there is an important strand of the literature motivated in particular by a desire to provide political ecology with an adequate theory of politics. Adding Gramsci to the mix is clearly to think primarily about politics, so I aim what follows specifically at that strand, which I take to be exemplified by the contributions to Liberation Ecologies (Peet and Watts, 1996; Watts and Peet, 2004), and the work of McCarthy (2002, 2005a,b), Neumann (1998, 2005), Peluso (2004, p. 17 note 3; Neumann, 2005, pp. 22–24, 42). The second is the “moral economy” literature associated with Thompson (1975) and Scott (1976, 1985) (e.g. McCarthy, 1998, 2002). The third concerns the so-called second contradiction of capitalism, linked to the “green Marxism” of more recent writers like James O’Connor (1998) (e.g. Prudham, 2005). It is possible, but by no means certain that any of these, or some combination of them, is readily assimilable to Gramsci’s Marxism. None are coextensive with Marxism “in general” (if there is such a thing). There are ideas Gramsci shares with all these trajectories, but he breaks with some of them dramatically with regard to their “materialism”, a break without which his development of the theory of hegemony would have been impossible. To put it perhaps too crudely—I work this out in more detail below—with the partial exception of Thompsonian moral economies and Scott’s “revolutionary thought” (1985, p. 331), the other “Marxisms” are fundamentally Engelsian; but Gramsci was a Marxist (Potier, 1986, pp. 212–216): But what did M. [Marx] mean when, in the Theses on Feuerbach, he talked about “the education of the educator”—did he not mean to say that the superstructure reacts dialectically to the structure and modifies it?… The assumption (put forward as an essential postulate of historical materialism) that one can present and explain every political and ideological fluctuation as a direct expression of the structure must be combated on the theoretical level as a primitive infantilism, or should be combated in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works (Gramsci, 2007, pp. 157, 173).

The second difficulty in determining the links between political ecology and materialism is the imprecision of the term “materialism” itself. No political ecology worthy of Gramsci accepts strict materialism, what he called its “vulgar” variety. It always examines an equally essential, and arguably much less straightforward, aspect of everyday life: its relation to and meaning on the plane of ideology. What politics “legitimate” particular environments and their social implications? What historical narratives can absorb forms of environmental change as possible, even “inevitable”, processes, and how do they do so? How do people understand the meaning of environmental change, i.e. what happened and why? What are the various judgments of its place in always-unfolding historical narratives? How do we ask these questions as “materialists”? Any explanation that confronts such problems poses the question of what could be called natural and historical force. It confronts the fact that, with political ecology’s emphasis on the mutual production of society and nature, to ask “what makes history happen?” is also to ask “what makes nature happen?” These are big and currently unfashionable questions. Political ecologists are distinctive in the scholarly world for posing the latter—and suggesting an answer: “natures,” as Hugh Raffles (2002, p. 7) writes, “are dynamic and heterogeneous, formed again and again from presences that are cultural, historical, biological, geographical, political, physical, aesthetic and social”. For most other fields, “nature” is given, merely “altered” by history, not produced. But outside the academy, the question “what makes nature happen?” is often not considered so absurd or unfathomable, although the range of answers is far less materialist than that suggested by political ecology. As more than a few political ecologists have

5 We might also add as a variety of “political ecology” that of European scholars like Alain Lipietz (1999), which, to put it far too simply, is a different beast, closer to what North Americans would call environmentalism.
demonstrated, many people the world over consider it more than possible to determine what makes history or nature happen, even to give the same answer in both cases: God, or something like it (e.g. McCarthy, 1998; Magubane, 2003). Biology, or something like it (e.g. Wailoo 2003; Kosek, 2004a,b). And those who give these answers act in the world as if they were true: their ideas have “material force”. In either case, “materialism” as usually understood cannot on its own confront the problem of social, environmental, or socio-environmental change. We need a conception of ideology as historically co-constituted by both moments of hegemony Gramsci identified: the economic and the ethico-political (1971, p. 161).

1.1. Hegemony, materialism, and historical materialism

How could Gramsci theorize the world in this way, and still call himself a “materialist”? What materialism can handle him? What is its relation to hegemony? And why should political ecologists care about the theoretical categories peppering these paragraphs? Before proceeding, it is worth underlining why this “abstract” conversation is useful. Recall the questions with which we began: should political ecology be Marxist? If so, what does that mean? I believe the necessary terrain of a response is at once political and categorical. Examining materialism in political ecology is a necessary precondition to understanding hegemony as a political–ecological concept. Without an adequate critique of materialism, political ecology’s explicitly emancipatory aims (Robbins, 2004; Watts and Peet, 2004) are hobbled, for the straightforward reason that crude materialism would suggest our superstructural efforts cannot take us to the land of freedom. So the stakes are not small. It is hard to imagine contemporary political ecology without hegemony as a central conceptual resource, and hegemony makes no sense if you do not accept that the ethical-political is no mere superstructural “expression”, but can change the course of history. “Historical materialism does not exclude ethical–political history, since the latter is the history of the moment of hegemony” (Gramsci, 1973, pp. 236–237).

I realize that to a Marxist, this sounds like the eighth deadly sin—“idealism”. But that accusation is based in a long-standing misapprehension of what idealism and materialism entail (and of what they meant for Marx). Indeed, Marxism’s relation to materialism is something Marxists have not always thought very hard about, and the most self-conscious “materialists” often rely on “vulgar” or “crude” materialism (Gramsci, 1996, pp. 189–190). “Materialism” in political ecology is usually traced to the field’s roots in Marxian political economy (Blaikie, 1986; Bryant, 1992; Robbins, 2004; Neumann, 2005), but that genealogy sells the de facto practice of political ecology a bit short. Materialism in the tradition of Marxian political economy is not identical to that of Marx or Gramsci, which was far less dogmatic, much more open, and historically and geographically sensitive—a materialism much better suited, it would seem, to political ecology. The materialism of political economy, rather, owes much more to Friedrich Engels’ work after Marx’s death, and Engels’ influence on the seminal thinkers of the Russian revolution—Plekhanov, Bukharin, Kautsky, and most famously, Lenin.7

So: what is materialism? And what is its relation to historical materialism or hegemony? Flipping through a dictionary of philosophical and categorical. Examining materialism in political ecology is a necessary precondition to understanding hegemony as a political–ecological concept. Without an adequate critique of materialism, political ecology’s explicitly emancipatory aims (Robbins, 2004; Watts and Peet, 2004) are hobbled, for the straightforward reason that crude materialism would suggest our superstructural efforts cannot take us to the land of freedom. So the stakes are not small. It is hard to imagine contemporary political ecology without hegemony as a central conceptual resource, and hegemony makes no sense if you do not accept that the ethical-political is no mere superstructural “expression”, but can change the course of history. “Historical materialism does not exclude ethical–political history, since the latter is the history of the moment of hegemony” (Gramsci, 1973, pp. 236–237).

I realize that to a Marxist, this sounds like the eighth deadly sin—“idealism”. But that accusation is based in a long-standing misapprehension of what idealism and materialism entail (and of what they meant for Marx). Indeed, Marxism’s relation to materialism is something Marxists have not always thought very hard about, and the most self-conscious “materialists” often rely on “vulgar” or “crude” materialism (Gramsci, 1996, pp. 189–190). “Materialism” in political ecology is usually traced to the field’s roots in Marxian political economy (Blaikie, 1986; Bryant, 1992; Robbins, 2004; Neumann, 2005), but that genealogy sells the de facto practice of political ecology a bit short. Materialism in the tradition of Marxian political economy is not identical to that of Marx or Gramsci, which was far less dogmatic, much more open, and historically and geographically sensitive—a materialism much better suited, it would seem, to political ecology. The materialism of political economy, rather, owes much more to Friedrich Engels’ work after Marx’s death, and Engels’ influence on the seminal thinkers of the Russian revolution—Plekhanov, Bukharin, Kautsky, and most famously, Lenin.7

So: what is materialism? And what is its relation to historical materialism or hegemony? Flipping through a dictionary of philosophy, I have discovered, hardly clarifies the matter. Nevertheless, since theoretical interpretation was a principal arena of factional struggle in European radicalism, by Gramsci’s time a Marxist’s relation to the international communist movement could be defined by the position he or she took on these questions. The struggle over materialism began after Marx’s death in 1883, when Engels took control of Marx’s legacy (Karatani, 2003, p. 136; Postone, 2003). In works like Anti-Dühring (1878) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1888), Engels laid out a rigid materialism he insisted was the only epistemological and ontological stance appropriate to Marxism; it was he who coined the term “historical materialism” (Karatani, 2008, p. 569). This approach emphasized with quasi-dogmatic strictness the argument that “reality”—the material conditions of the world—determined human consciousness. Engels argued that material reality evolved according to “dialectical” processes Hegel correctly identified, but erroneously confined to the realm of ideas—an insight he gained by separating what he believed was Hegel’s (correct) method from his (incorrect, idealist) system. Without access to much of Marx’s pre-Capital, more explicitly philosophical writings, many of history’s most prominent Marxists learned their “Marxist” philosophy not from Marx, but from Engels (Riazanov, 1973, p. 210; Colletti, 1975, pp. 8–10). And, while Engels’ own presentation tends toward heavy-handedness, the materialism he advocates found sharper adherents, Lenin among them. After World War II, influential party theorists like Louis Althusser, Sebastiano Timpanaro, and Galvano Della Volpe elaborated a scientific “Leninism” that stood as the theoretical orthodoxy of western European communism throughout the cold war. Tying Lenin’s legacy to the (Engelsian) path of “scientific socialism”, they committed themselves to purging Marxism of its “mystical” and “idealist” Hegelian residue. Althusser is most commonly associated with this position, but Timpanaro gives us the clearest statement of the materialist position, worth quoting at some length:

By materialism we understand above all the acknowledgment of the priority of nature over ‘mind’, or if you like, of the physical level over the biological level, and of the biological level over the socio-economic and cultural level; both in the sense of chronological priority (the very long time which preceded before life appeared on earth, and between the origin of life and the origin of man), and in the sense of the conditioning which nature still exercises on man and will continue to exercise at least for the foreseeable future. Cognitively, therefore, the materialist maintains that experience cannot be reduced either to a production of reality by a subject (however such production is conceived) or to a reciprocal implication of subject and object. We cannot, in other words, deny or evade the element of passivity in experience: the external situation which we do not create but which imposes itself on us. Nor can we in any way reabsorb the external datum by making it a mere negative moment in the activity of the subject, or by making both the subject and the object mere moments, distinguishable only in abstraction, of a single effective reality constituting experience (Timpanaro, 1975, p. 34).8

Gramsci’s relationship to this line of thinking—and especially to Lenin’s work in this vein—is a matter of heated debate (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 126–134; Anderson, 1976/77; Piccone, 1976; Adamson, 1980, pp. 170–179; Timpanaro, 1975). It is clear that criticizing Lenin was political suicide in the international communist movement of Gramsci’s era, but it is also clear Gramsci was a Leninist, and saw himself as such, on many important political

6 Unless it comes with a prepackaged and entirely uncritical theory of self-interest, which it sometimes does (Diamond, 2005).

7 As Lenin wrote in 1913, “Marx and Engels defended philosophical materialism in the most determined manner and repeatedly explained how profoundly erroneous is every deviation from this basis. Their views are most clearly and fully expounded in the works of Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and Anti-Dühring, which, like the Communist Manifesto, are handbooks for every class-conscious worker” (Lenin, 1972, pp. 19, 24).

8 Timpanaro’s materialism is far better known than his name in the English-speaking world, since it is his theorization that Raymond Williams engages in his well-known Culture and Materialism (2006) and in the entry on materialism in Keywords (Williams, 1976, pp. 163–167).
questions. His explicit admiration—"the greatest modern theorist of the philosophy of praxis" (Gramsci, 1978, p. 40)—was not just careful politicking. At the very least his political-strategic vision, including the importance he eventually placed on the role of the party, is largely inspired by Lenin's own. Indeed, Gramsci argued that the concept of hegemony, which many consider his greatest gift to contemporary politics and thought, was not in fact his contribution, but rather Lenin's "greatest contribution to Marxist philosophy, to historical materialism: an original and creative contribution" (Gramsci, 1996, p. 187; cf. Anderson, 1976/77).

But there is no getting around the fact that like his contemporaries Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács (although he was not very familiar with their work), Gramsci moved beyond Leninism in his rejection of the dogmatism that contaminated Marxist theory—including much of Lenin's influential work—at the time (Colletti, 1975, p. 8). Although he never directly attacked the materialism Lenin famously laid out in 1908 in *Materialism and Emperio-Criticism* (from which Lenin later seemed occasionally to distance himself, e.g. Lenin, 1972, vol. 38, p. 114), it is certain he read it, and equally certain that his own writing on historical materialism is incompatible with it. Compare the following with the materialism of the Leninist Timpanaro, quoted above:

> It is clear that in historical materialism, “matter” should be understood neither in the meaning it has derived from the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, mechanics, etc.) nor in the meaning it has derived from the various materialist metaphysics. Historical materialism takes the physical (chemical, mechanical, etc.) properties of matter into account, of course, but only insofar as they become an “economic factor” of production. The issue, then, is not matter as such but how it is socially and historically organized for production, as a *human relation*. Historical materialism does not study a machine in order to establish the physical—chemical—mechanical structure of its natural components; it studies it as an object of production and property, as the crystallization of a social relation that itself coincides with a particular historical period... An erroneous interpretation of historical materialism is made into a dogma and its quest is identified with the quest for the ultimate cause or single cause, etc. The history of this problem in the development of culture: the problem of ultimate causes is, in fact, dispelled by dialectics (1996, pp. 164, 166).

*Materialism and Emperio-Criticism* (1972, vol. 14) remains an important text, Lenin's most sustained engagement with philosophy. In it, he lambasted the empiricism, objectivism, subjectivism, and idealism associated with the Marxism of Ernst Mach and his Russian followers, whom he regarded as empiracists who rejected the fundamental materialist assertion of a knowable world outside human experience or thought, a “thing-in-itself”. Instead, they believed that what we call “matter” was merely a human construct through which we try to understand our experiences: “Thing, body, matter, are nothing apart from the combinations of the elements—the colours, sounds, and so forth—nothing apart from their so-called attributes” (Mach, 1959, p. 7). To Lenin and his “historical materialist” contemporaries, this was tantamount to resurrecting within Marxist thought something Marx and Engels had worked so hard to crush: the idea that the world as we know it is a product of our thought about it, as opposed to the other way around. The political implication—the revolution could be in our heads—seemed as limiting to Lenin as it did to Marx and Engels when they attacked the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology*.

But what matters so much to the present discussion is that Lenin countered Mach not with Marx, but with Engels. In other words, rather than a radical historicism—by which I mean an emphasis on “the historical [and geographical] origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity [and geographical particularity] of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things” (Jameson, 1981, p. 9)—he proposed a very un-Gramscian radical materialism. Lenin attributed all aspects of consciousness—emotions, thoughts, religion—not to history, but to “matter”, things outside the human mind: the conditions of production (Adamson, 1980, pp. 112–113). The political practice that position demanded combined a critical analysis of the points at which a social order had become inadequate to its stage of productive development with the strategic cultivation of an organic relationship between the leading cadre (those doing the analysis) and the proletarian masses. What it did not adequately account for, however, was the mode through which that organic relationship might be realized.

It is precisely this shortcoming Gramsci addresses in his reconstruction of Lenin's theory of hegemony. Lenin directed his materialist wrath at what he called “spiritualism” and “ideism”, at the “Kantians” who denied a real, knowable world. But Gramsci's historical materialism leans not on Engels, but on a Marxism held in tension with—some would say saturated in—the idealist legacies of Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce (Colletti, 1969, pp. 97, 110–111). It is consequently more historicist (in the sense I describe above and in note 9 below) than materialist. This productive if intentionally unhappy theoretical marriage leads Gramsci to redirect political praxis, i.e. the struggle for hegemony, away from an obsession with Marxism as “science”, and toward a philosophical critique of realism.

Using Bukharin's *Popular Manual* as a proxy target, Gramsci attacks the fundamentals of the positivist materialist orthodoxy. Without naming names, he shows how Leninists cannot get beyond a commitment to a “scientific” one-sidedness. In the idealist-vs.—materialist battle, Lenin said, one has to pick sides. Only the “shame-faced” (Lenin, 1972, vol. 14, p. 292) are unwilling to declare their allegiance:

> The question then is, are there more comprehensive concepts with which the theory of knowledge could operate than those of being and thinking, matter and sensation, physical and mental? No. These are the ultimate, most comprehensive concepts, which epistemology has in point of fact not surpassed... One must be a charlatan or an utter blockhead to demand a ‘definition’ of these two ‘series’ of concepts of ultimate comprehensiveness which would not be a ‘mere repetition’; one of the other must be taken as primary (Lenin, 1972, vol. 14, p. 146).

---

9 Several readers have bristled at the term “historicism”, understanding it either in its older meaning as a search for the “laws” of history, à la Leopold von Ranke—the thinking Karl Popper attacked in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957)—or as insufficiently attentive to geography. Supplemening Jameson’s definition quoted above as I have, I hope, clarifies the matter. I have yet to conjure an appropriate phrase for this kind of thinking. What would it do is a term that does for historicism what “historical-geographical materialism” does for “historical-materialism”. Historicism—geographicism is just too ugly, but that is what I mean.

10 Interestingly, the Machianos also accused their opponents of “Kantianism”, arguing that the materialism of Plekhanov (their principal target) lapsed into “genuine mysticism” by admitting the existence of something beyond, something transcending the bounds of “experience” and knowledge” (Lenin, 1972, p. 14, 22). “Kantian” is also the slur thrown at Lukács after History and Class Consciousness. This was clearly a bad time to be a Kantian—something worth considering in light of Lucio Colletti’s (1973) and Kojo Karatan’s (2003) compelling arguments that Marx was more Kantian than Hegelian.

Gramsci could hardly be more opposed to such narrow-mindedness—but, indeed, it is exactly what he exorcizes in communist theory and practice. The point, he said, was “to go beyond the traditional conceptions of “idealist” and “materialism”... As for the expression “historical materialism”, greater stress is placed on the second word, whereas it should be placed on the first: Marx is fundamentally a “historicism” (1996, p. 153).

The difference between Gramsci’s and Lenin’s respective theories of hegemony is closely bound to their theoretical divergence concerning materialism. In his genealogy of hegemony, Anderson (1976/77) shows that Lenin conceived the problem of hegemony as concerning the proletariat’s leadership of non-revolutionary classes at determinate historical moments—even in a bourgeois revolution. This of course demanded a political strategy through which the peasantry and fractions of the petit bourgeoisie could come to see their material interests realized in that movement. In other words, for Lenin, hegemony described the need for alliance against the ruling class—a politics internal to one side of the class war, as it were. Gramsci starts with this need, but cultivates a much more powerful idea from it. For him, as we know, hegemony describes the mode of leadership of an historic bloc over society as a whole. The operation of hegemony involves more than an appeal to material or economic interest, and it saturates both productive and ideological relations across the social formation. It is not merely a Leninist strategy, but a Marxist historical–critical category and general conception of “idealist”... On the other hand, the so-called orthodoxy, concerned to find a philosophy which, according to their extremely limited viewpoint, was more comprehensible than just a “simple” interpretation of history, have believed themselves orthodox in identifying this philosophy fundamentally with traditional materialism (1971, pp. 388–389).

However much he credited Lenin with the conceptual breakthrough the concept of hegemony enabled, Gramsci’s treatment at the hands of post-World War II Leninists leaves no doubt they were not fooled by his genuflection. In France, Althusser tried to recuperate him with an idiosyncratic, arguably disingenuous, antihistoricism in Reading Capital (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp. 119–144). In Italy, while the national Communist Party under Togliatti opportunistically manipulated Gramsci’s legacy, communist theorists like Della Volpe (Jay, 1984, pp. 424, 427), Colletti (1973, p. 38, n. 28) and Timpanaro (1975, p. 236) wrote him off as an “idealist”. In England, Perry Anderson (1976) named him one of the founders of “western Marxism” (the others are Korsch and Lukács)—by which he meant the increasing tendency to distance theory from real political struggle—a designation he chooses to salvage by suggesting a rigorous “hidden order” to Gramsci’s theoretical work (Anderson, 1976/77, p. 6; Buttigieg, 1994, pp. 130–131). For our purposes, these attacks only underscore the extent to which a Gramscian political ecology must be something more than Leninist.

2. Political ecology, moral ecology, and hegemony

Gramsci’s historical materialism is historicist to such an extent that analyses that lean on his ideas must also historicize. Indeed, his unequivocal commitment to what he called “absolute historicism”—again, no reading of Gramsci could fail to recognize the phrase also implies “absolute geographical specificity”—might also help clarify the difference between ideology and competing concepts like discourse, which have been widely adopted in political ecology (Peet and Watts, 1996). Such concepts, and the suite of theories and practices that constitute them, aim to describe modes other than ideology through which meaning is produced. The fundamental Gramscian objection to substituting something like discourse for ideology is that for Gramsci, contrary to the occasional claims of explicitly anti-ideology thinkers (e.g. Foucault and Deleuze, 1977), the question of ideology must precede any attempt to understand the political. This is an absolutely irreducible component of his thought.

In other words, ideas like discourse, social construction, or desire are analytically useful, but it is difficult to imagine a way to discover their points of social purchase without the prior work that must be done to ground or historicize them. We must consider first the historical–geographical, ontological or epistemological bases on which power, discourse, or desire rest at any particular time and place: this is “absolute historicism”; not even power can escape it. The trouble, as Gayatri Spivak (1988, p. 274) remarks of Foucault in particular, is that “[b]ecause of the power of the word “power,” Foucault admits to using the ‘metaphor of the point which progressively irradiates its surroundings’. Such slips become the rule rather than the exception in less careful hands.

In other words, power or desire can each become their own historical object and end—autopoeitic, operating on and for themselves. This is incommensurable with a Gramscian approach, which begins with the question of what are power or desire—or hegemony—for? And on what terrain do they unfold? “Governmentality”, for example, the powerful Foucaultian analytic very influential in political ecology, begs the question of the social–historical (i.e. political) ground upon which its discursive constitution operates. Hence, as Moore (2005, pp. 10–12) remarks, it must be supplemented and “grounded” in geographies that are always contested terrain.

Without a simultaneous analysis of the historical–geographical specifics of the common sense grounds upon which domination is legitimated, if only by those who dominate, it is hard to understand how the problem of governmentality can arise.

Gramsci calls such grounds ideology, and he insists on its conceptual necessity. In political ecological terms, then, we must

---

13 This theory is important to Marx also. See The German Ideology, for example (Marx and Engels, 1978, pp. 172–174).

14 One can of course dispute the extent to which, under capital, accumulation might supply part of that ground. But governmentality cannot float in ahistorical air; it cannot stand on its own. See Gillian Hart’s brief but incisive comment on the Gramsci-Foucault comparison (Hart, 2006).
ask not only what allows people to “make sense” of the ongoing mutual co-production of human communities and nature. We must also ask, as Moore does in what is perhaps the most compelling engagement with Gramsci in contemporary political ecology, what is at stake in a context in which sociophysical dynamics are comprehensible at all: “If landscapes are integrally entangled in power relations, then analysts need to take more seriously the environmental and site-specific materialities enmeshed in rule, unequal resource distribution, and governmental projects” (Moore, 2005, p. 23). This is much more than a call for “socio-environmental context”, this is a conception of environmental change as part of the relations that constitute space and time. If landscape is no “mute backdrop” (Moore, 2005, p. 23), then in what conversation is environmental change a meaningful “statement”, i.e. a something that can be heard and understood?

That “conversation”, I suggest, is history itself, and the political stakes are history’s purposes. Hegemony is about taking the helm of history. It is Gramsci’s answer to Lenin’s famous question, “What is to be done?” Without exaggeration, achieving and maintaining hegemony is about reconfiguring past, present, and, consequently, the future. Hegemony shapes the very geographies on which it unfolds: “territoriality rests on a constantly shifting process of hegemony formation” (Bobrow-Strain, 2007, p. 44). It is about rewriting the world according to history’s “proper” course through its “rightful” terrain. Oppositional politics of the kind often of interest to political ecologists, therefore—even if it is “non-revolutionary”, challenging hegemony “in its own terms”—is simultaneously a denunciation of, and an attempt to “correct”, the flow of history, to reshape geography (Scott, 1985, p. 317). The ways people come to grips with the geographical power of environmental change—the ways they explain how and why it happened—are, then, not mere ex post facto causal propositions, epiphenomenal to geography and history. Rather, they are moral claims on the adequacy of history’s “truth” to this place, on what should be with the passage of time here. As Scott points out (1985, pp. 322–335), history’s current trajectory grants it no political legitimacy or justice in the eyes of its victims. Gramscian political ecology, then, is dialectical in the true Hegelian sense of the word. It is simultaneously an account of the conscious intervention in the unfolding of history at particular times and places, and it constitutes, in its attempt to cancel-preserve-overcome, just such a conscious intervention itself.

As witnesses or scholars, our analyses of any particular response to “What it to be done?”—in other words, of the means employed in, and the identifiable ends of the struggle for hegemony—can thus never be divorced from the problem of “Right” or the ethico-political. Indeed, the goal of social scientific explanation is often to describe a plausible ethical or moral realm in which the means and the ends of certain forms of struggle appear legitimate (barring the occasional dismissal of certain actors as “evil” or “irrational”). Many analyses of the events of 9/11, for example, have tried not so much to justify the attacks on New York and Washington, but have rather described a set of political and ethical conditions according to which the attacks might be understood, in some places and by particular people, as justifiable. The “moral force” of claims to “Right” or justice is, as such, a key determinant of the politics of explanation. Whether or not we find the account of such a moral order compelling determines our response to the explanatory account. Consequently, and much to a strict materialist’s dismay, the politics of “Right” is a crucial factor in the making of history and in the production of particular political ecologies. The conscious experience of history—the very effort to explain how and why history unfolds and how it ought to unfold—has political ecological effects.

I take it as obvious that “material” environmental change plays a dramatic role in the production of geographies of all kinds, whether they are identified as “environmental” or not. The important point here, rather, is that ideas—ideologies—are also powerful geography-makers, because they shape the understanding of history upon which people act in the world. For the philosophy of praxis [Marxism] the conception of ethico-political history, as long as it is independent of any realist conception, may be adopted as an ‘empirical canon’ of historical research, of which one needs constantly take account if one wants to produce integral history and not partial and extrinsic history (Gramsci, 1978, p. 41; emphasis in original).

This is old news to contemporary political ecologists. One of the most endurably appealing aspects of political ecology is how seriously it takes the environmental foundations of its subjects’ politics (in terms of gender, class, citizenship, and more). Examples abound: Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s account of Chiapas landowners’ normative “socio-spatial order” (2007, p. 200); or Sharlene Mollett’s analysis of the racialized conflict between Miskito and Garifuna in eastern Honduras (2006). Moreover, many political ecologists make it clear that their critique is aimed not only at explaining how marginalization happens, but also at identifying ways it might be reduced (Peet and Watts, 1996; Watts and Peet, 2004; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Low and Gleason, 1998; Adams, 2001; Bryant and Jarosz, 2004; Robbins, 2004).

Political ecologists’ explicit emancipatory commitment flags an interesting Gramscian moment. For in the struggle for hegemony, one of the principal ideological undertakings is the elaboration, in terrain carved (however temporarily) out of hegemony, of the normative arguments according to which reducing something like marginalization is the right thing to do (Bryant and Jarosz, 2004, p. 809). The critical task of Gramsci’s factory councils was the development, in democratic settings, of a shift of workers’ perspective, a slow reconceptualizing of extant power relations in light of a new morality. In other words, theorization, like all political discourse, must not only be logically compelling, it must be ethically compelling as well. Indeed, that is its task. The reason Gramsci reads differently than most contemporary social science—even the “critical” variety—is the centrality in his analysis of a critical morality, a normative standard of judgment that could not only account for alternatives, but wielded its own ethico-political critique as ruthlessly and rigorously (Potier, 1986, p. 227).

You may think this petty: “Of course reducing marginalization (or poverty or suffering) is the right thing to do. Why should we bother outlining the ethical bases upon which we deem particular social conditions unjust? Many of the cases political ecologists study are so obviously unfair that wasting time explaining the obviousness is just another ivory tower exercise, of no use to anyone but the marble-countertop Marxists who are in fact part of the problem”. Yet the grounds upon which we base ethical judgments, and the normative arguments derived therefrom, are by no means incidental to political ecology, nor to its object of study—that is Robbins’ and Peet and Watts’ point (Jarosz, 2004). Nevertheless, critical social science has mostly chosen to ignore the fact that, although we all seem to agree that marginalization is “bad”—that is

---

15 This passage is drawn from Gramsci’s notes on Croce. The term “empirical canon” is a reference to the once-Marxist, always-Hegelian, Croce’s description of Marxism as (merely) an “empirical canon of historical research”. “Integral history” is Croce’s term for a total history, one that avoids the pitfalls of “abstraction” Hegel associated with “one-sided” or non-dialectical accounts (Croce, 1945, p. 96, 102; see also Gramsci, 1971, pp. 388–391).
one of the principal reasons we bother to study it—we have not specified the bases of that claim.\(^{16}\) From an analytical perspective this is a problem, because the question of ethics, of a moral order by which to judge history, is often an essential part of the lives of the subjects of social scientific, in this case political ecological, investigation (Neumann, 2004; Turner, 2004). People all over the world have ideas of how things ought to be, and why they ought to be that way. For many, social life is at least partially determined by these ethical commitments or expectations, and one of political ecology's merits is how much attention it pays to the normative dimensions of human–environment relations. But Gramsci was more than willing to up the ante in his analysis of what usually gets glossed with the term “normative”. He argued that what was at stake for many was nothing less than the justice of the unfolding of history. What was at issue for the working class subjects with which he engaged was not merely normative, but moral:

When you don't have the initiative in the struggle and the struggle itself comes eventually to be identified with a series of defeats, mechanical determinism becomes a tremendous force of moral resistance, of cohesion and of patient obstinate perseverance. “I have been defeated for the moment, but the tide of history is working for me in the long term” (1971, p. 336).

Indeed, Gramsci understood that many political engagements are at least partially motivated by a desire to help history back into line with the course it “should” be taking. Some explicit attempt to understand the moral order as a social–historical force is thus called for. Both Gramsci and Marx understood that the historical force of ideology—of which ideas of “right” and “wrong”, “good” and “evil”, are an essential part—is something that political intervention, even in the rarefied fora of academic journals, must embrace:

Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely important. The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of historical bloc in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form... (Gramsci, 1971, p. 377).

My point is not only that the “moral dimension” has political ecological effects. That is part of it, certainly, and I am far from the first to state it (e.g. Clapp, 2004; Neumann, 2004; Turner, 2004). I am also arguing that political ecology’s realization of Gramsci’s praxis depends upon the recognition that normative-political support for one’s research subjects’ cause is no substitute for connecting its analysis to its subjects’ “popular convictions”, i.e. “the relation between human will (superstructure) and the economic structure” (Gramsci, 2007, p. 170).\(^{17}\) The ultimate goal is to make common cause, to be for, and written to, the subjects themselves, to participate in their construction of a new hegemony by engaging with their world. In other words, and this is from my perspective perhaps the toughest challenge, it is to write and do a political ecology that is not just analytical, i.e. about ethics or morality, but that also, and at the same time, is ethical and moral. Gramsci did not write to change the way the powerful thought. Although he was certainly a Leninist insofar as he wrote to change the worldview of the people he was writing about, he did not simply reproduce Lenin’s concept of hegemony in his own work because he understood that the rigid Engelsian materialism upon which it was based was one-sidedly “economic”. When he framed capitalism’s exploitative practices as unjust, he wanted his audience, who were also his subjects, to believe it could and should be otherwise. Injustice demanded both an explanation of the historical means through which those practices developed, and an elaboration of the moral order, the historical vision, according to which they are wrong. Facts alone are inadequate to this task.

It is forgotten that Marx’s thesis—that men become conscious of fundamental conflicts on the terrain of ideology—has an organic value; it is an epistemological rather than a psychological or moral thesis. This forgetting results in a frame of mind that looks on politics and all of history as a marché de dupes, a matter of conjuring tricks and sleight of hand. All cultural activity is thus reduced to “exposing” tricks, provoking scandals, and prying into the private affairs of political figures. Obviously, errors of interpretation have been gross at times, and as a result they have had a negative effect on the prestige of the original theory. For this reason, economism must be fought not only in the theory of historiography but also in the theory and practice of politics. In the latter case, the struggle should be conducted on the terrain of hegemony... (Gramsci, 1996, p. 183).

3. Conclusion

3.1. Integral political ecology, or Marx qua Gramsci

To participate in the construction of hegemony, then, necessitates an intervention in the ethico-political, the “moment of hegemony”—a political ecological incarnation of Gramsci’s “integral history”. This is where political ecology as a scholarly practice has the opportunity to extend itself. The literature is certainly exceptionally adept at explaining the “economic” causes of environmental degradation (e.g. Blaikie, 1986; Stonich and Vandergeist, 2001; Watts, 2004) or a particular moral economy (e.g. Neumann, 1998; McCarthy, 1998, 2002; Walker and Fortmann, 2003). It is also increasingly effective in linking larger symbolic and discursive modes to specific environmental practices and meanings (e.g. Sundberg, 2003; Kosek, 2004b; Zimmerer, 2004). But, as I said in the introduction, it is one thing to show that the ruling bloc is hegemonic, and demonstrate the material and symbolic evidence of its power. It is another thing to explain how and why that hegemony operates in the social life of ideology—norms, morality, common sense. A moral economy is not only an economy, as historical materialism sometimes suggests; it is also a morality. For Gramsci, the latter can never be a mere product of the former, nor is analysis that emphasizes morality necessarily moralizing.

To put it perhaps too crudely, we are very good, for example, at explaining the political economic dynamics that lead peasants or indigenous people to degrade their land. But we also know that sometimes it does not tear them up inside; they are not infrequently willing to degrade their land under certain conditions (Ishiyama, 2003; Gidwani, 2008). In fact, political ecology has probably contributed more than any other field to the destruction of the myth of the “ecological Indian” and the nostalgia for the peasant pastoral. We also have compelling theories of the ways

---

\(^{16}\) This argument opens the door to a larger examination of the moral claims of radical politics and scholarship more broadly, which would be very worthwhile. This is not the place to follow it up, but it seems to me (this is not an original thought) that the ethical-political commitments which drive radical scholarship are often based in quasi-liberal commitments to “equality” and “basic human rights”. This is not necessarily a fatal flaw, but these commitments are often explicitly disavowed by some of the dominant theories of power that animate current political ecology. I believe this disjunction between our theories of the world and our judgments of it merits attention.

\(^{17}\) For a related (but not Gramscan) argument specifically concerning the pedagogy of political ecology in the university, see Lucy Jarosz’s (2004) inspiring article.
in which nature becomes raced, classed, and gendered in pernicious ways (Moore et al., 2003; Kosek, 2006). Yet we have very few ideas as to how these developments came to seem not merely necessary, but acceptable to those involved, especially the "victims". Attention to discourse is necessary but not sufficient to this task, because it is on its own unable to address the "why" questions of history—and if it does, it usually contains a implicit theory of (self-)interest and ideology very much like those it explicitly deems unworkable or illusory (Spivak, 1988, p. 273). To say that a discourse of progress or racial ideology renders a particular socio-nature comprehensible is irresistible, an essential point of departure, but only a first step. The problem of why that discursive relation came to be so—for it must at some point have been otherwise—requires another move.

So, insofar as Gramsci's hegemony matters to current political ecology—although mentioned infrequently, let us say his spirit is palpable—it must be treated attentively to avoid a one-sidedness, snared perhaps by a non-Gramscian version of historical materialism, or by an anti-materialism that can only provide part of the story. The economic moment is almost always there, since it is political ecology's bread-and-butter. But on the flip side of the hegemonic coin, the discursive must not be substituted for the ethico-political moment but instead supplemented by it. Of course, in concert with a political economic account, even one that takes the "economic" dimensions of ideology seriously, explanations of how the exploitative or unjust is discursively normalized are very compelling. But the very basis of political ecological critique—that the world could be better—is opened only if we ask both of the questions Gramsci, in the tradition of Marx, fearlessly asks: not just how the world came to be unjust, but also why—why it came to be this way, and why this way, morally, is unjust. He commits to both questions for two crucial reasons. First, because his work is ethico-politically reflective: he demands of himself a moral account adequate to his historical critique. Second, because he writes both for and to history's victims, he writes the political on the terms of the economic and the ethico-political because he knows the why of history is, as he says, the "moment of hegemony". He is unafraid of the inevitably historically specific claim to the realm beyond history. We have other models of this critical risk-taking—Fanon and Césaire come to mind—but we have yet to bring their lessons to political ecology. Or, perhaps better, we have yet to bring political ecology to them.

Acknowledgements

This paper has benefited a great deal from the insights of many, especially Scott Prudham, Alex Loftus, Mike Ekers, Joel Wainwright, Gillian Hart, Mat Coleman, Mary Thomas, Becky Mansfield, and anonymous referees.

References


