"Some of the Best Movement People are Political Ecologists at Heart": An Interview About Political Ecology With Nancy Peluso

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Nancy Peluso pioneered political ecology research in Southeast Asia with her book on *Rich Forest, Poor People* (1992) that untangles peasant resistance and state control in Indonesian forest politics. Since then, the professor of political ecology at UC Berkeley, California, has done extensive ethnographic research on the effects of social difference (ethnic identity, class, gender) on resource access and control, dealing with forests, land, mining, and water conflicts in Indonesia and Malaysia. Her recent work investigates the relationships between migration and environmental change. Melanie Pichler spoke with her during the International Conference of the European Network of Political Ecology (ENTITLE) from 20 to 24 March in Stockholm where she delivered a keynote lecture on the unexpected impacts of women's migration on the environment in a forest village in East Java. During the interview, Nancy reflected on current trends in political ecology research, the potential pitfalls of indigenous peoples' rights, the contradictory role of NGOs in socio-ecological conflicts, and the potential of political ecology research beyond academia.

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Melanie Pichler: *From your research experience in Southeast Asia, what are current challenges for political ecology in the region and what are you focusing on at the moment?*

Nancy Peluso: If challenges means new research topics that are becoming important, I see big questions connected to migration, mobilities, and their role for the making of places. Migrations have multiple effects on resource holdings, forests, or pollution. Personally, I'm interested in the mobilities of people, capital, and resources into and out of forests and other environments. I think political ecology has brought foundational insights to understanding the struggles over making places, property, territory, or landscapes. But when you think about how much movement – mobilities – affects places and livelihoods everywhere in the world today, I think we have to admit that political ecologists have not done enough to integrate migration and mobility into their world views.

I also think that understanding the political ecological relations of mining and the spatial power of mining companies has become extremely important.

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Mining corporations are taking up huge spaces on the planet, claiming the underground as Gavin Bridge puts it. So how have these corporations been able to get access to so much land? If you think about the mining law in Indonesia that was passed in 2009, it requires mining companies that wish to extract metals and rocks to develop smelters for first stage processing inside the country. But many companies refused to do that: They left – ran away from concessions and sought mineral sources in other countries. There are so many questions around mining, including whether multinational corporations should stay or go, the conflicts around land, and the struggles over access to jobs. And of course there are huge questions around how small-scale mining has also exploded all over the planet – in conjunction with and opposition to large-scale mining projects.

Melanie: *Do you see any similarities between Indonesia and the current developments in Myanmar in the course of the liberalization process with regard to resource conflicts?*

Nancy: One thing that is actually a similarity between Myanmar and Indonesia, for example, is the role of the military, the power of the military, and what parts of the old regime are still in place as Myanmar undergoes massive changes. That is something that was and has been an issue in Indonesia since Suharto came to power; the connection between military concessions and logging, oil palm, or mining interests and the ways the government allocated concessions. Military connections seem to be critical in Myanmar's transition; I think military involvement in resource use is a pattern across Southeast Asia, though it takes different forms, of course. When looking at the particular historical moments in which liberalization becomes important – it's fascinating to think about comparisons and how specific histories make a difference. At some time or another all Southeast Asian countries have had authoritarian or military postcolonial governments, whether they were socialist, communist, capitalist, or state capitalist. As liberalization of these different political economies takes hold, it highlights these similarities as well as differences. We could learn much from the similarities and differences in the initial conditions – political, economic, and cultural – that 'host' neoliberal capitalisms.

Melanie: *You pioneered research on "political forests" in Indonesia in the 1990s. How have forest politics and associated socio-ecological conflicts changed since then?*

Nancy: I did that work with Peter Vandergeest, now a professor at York University in Toronto. We tried to historicize and locate forest politics. What did the formation of political forests mean? We saw them as strategies for assuming state power, though different forest areas were made "political forests" at different historical moments. The idea came out of a period in which state-led development and state action was really strong and the Indonesian state, the Thai state, and the Malaysian state all had strong authoritarian characters; different from one another but still very strong. What kinds of colonial and postcolonial relationships did political forests come out of? Of course the answers were very different for the three countries that we took as our examples, and even for specific regions inside those countries circumstances varied; but we looked at the formation and impositions of the law, the politics of rule

within these historical spaces, and the effects of the political violence of the 1950s to the 1970s on forest formations. I think one of the things that is striking today is that it's taken as a given that many forests are state or national forests in Southeast Asia; the idea that the forest belongs to the government has been naturalized – except, still, among many indigenous and forest dependent groups. Governments, conservationists, and others often assume that if the forest doesn't belong to the state, it should. That was one of the things that we wanted to understand; how did that idea gain so much power in so many different sites? And, once the idea takes hold, what other factors affect the politics of maintaining that forest or extracting resources from that forest?

One big question today is what replaces the forest. Harold Brookfield, Lesley Potter, and Yvonne Byron wrote a book in 1995 called *In Place of the Forest*; they looked mainly at eastern Malaysia and western Indonesia. Michael Ross wrote about booms and busts in the forests of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines and Peter Dauvergne wrote on *Shadows in the Forest*, comparing three countries and the role that trade and other agreements with Japan played in the three different contexts. Tim Forsyth and Andrew Walker (*Forest Guardians, Forest Destroyers*) focused on productions of environmental knowledge. More recently, Michael Eilenberg (*At the Edges of States*) has written about the fate of Borneo forests in international borderlands. What nearly everybody is talking about is the replacement of the forest by industry, plantation development, or mining and resulting new politics of forests in the region. As I already mentioned, when I started to think about labor migration's effects on forest and agrarian landscapes – this new topic I'm working on – I was thinking about what was happening in the Amazon – in Peru and in Brazil – because of the work that other scientists such as Susanna Hecht and Christine Padoch have done. In Indonesia, Rebecca Elmhirst has done important work on gendered labor migration and its effects on forests and forest livelihoods. And new work is starting to come out as migration appears in many forms to be such an important component of our times, yet the variation in effects is also important. In Java, where labor migration has been common for a long time, international migration is having new and huge effects on some forests through remittances – uses of the understories, agroforestry configurations outside the political forest, many different effects. At the same time, remittances have less direct impacts on forests in Kalimantan because they are being so rapidly and extensively replaced by industrial oil palm plantations. Government and corporate desires to transform forests to some industrial use is an important – and expanding – dynamic. The huge quantities of biological, ecological, cultural, and social diversity that existed in those forests can't be maintained in the same way when they are replaced with plantation environments. In any case, my work on migration is focused largely on East Java, where plantations came in a century and a half ago to the uplands, mostly preceding the reservation and enclosure of forests. It's almost ironic that migrations are having some bigger effects on the forests which have been enclosed for the longest in Indonesia. Theoretically, enclosure is often seen as an end to the agency of smallholders and the creation of laboring classes. But this Java case demonstrates the importance of context; showing how those who were seemingly locked out (of the forest) can come back in and change it in new and unexpected ways.

Melanie: *Have conservation policies like REDD had any impact on that?*

Nancy: Everybody was criticizing REDD or REDD+ when it first came out, but it sure looked pretty good next to using the land for oil palm plantations. REDD+ has greater potential – although not always realized – for community management and benefit. The good thing about REDD was – at least at a certain level – that the people that were involved in developing it were often committed to listening to some of the issues movement people brought up. Some tried to respond to indigenous rights issues and the whole 'who owns the forest' thing. To a certain extent there was some listening going on, at least the kind of listening that doesn't usually go on with all these other kinds of activities. Contrast this with many mining companies, oil palm companies, and other large land using industries that just don't care. This is not necessarily to endorse REDD+ but to understand it in a context of competing, less palatable options for transforming production relations and access to forests.

Melanie: *You mentioned indigenous people's rights which have gained importance in socio-ecological conflicts in recent years. What are the potentials and pitfalls of these instruments?*

Nancy: I think it's important but I wonder if it's not too late. I know, that's a depressing thing to say. One of the really interesting things that just happened in Indonesia is that the Human Rights Commission did an inquiry into the rights of indigenous peoples in forest areas. They went to these different parts of the country, held hearings, and brought witnesses from different parties to conflicts over land, forest, and water. I was able to observe just a single day of the Kalimantan hearings in Pontianak in October 2014. It was heart-wrenching because so many of the people that took part in those hearings had already lost everything. One of the witnesses from a forest area said, in response to a question from a commissioner about what she would like done, that she would like the companies to "put their customary forest back". But a company can't recreate an ancestral forest, it's physically impossible. It's just too bad that this investigation wasn't possible 10 or 15 years ago. Now people have to work with what they've got – which is a largely destroyed and stripped environment. But of course, indigenous rights are still important given the growing importance of land and land access. Indigenous and other local groups need to make their claims even though the complexities for both making and realizing those claims are growing.

The other thing is that the Indonesian government has a very narrow definition determining which indigenous communities can be recognized as such: they have to still have ties to the forest or other ancestral lands, and also be able to prove that their indigenous community ties are still in place and have meaning. In other words they are not supposed to have changed – the concept assumes a static state. Not only is this ridiculous – everything changes – but the indigenous communities are constrained in making claims to land that they have occupied and used long before the Indonesian state came into being. The static definition of indigeneity is a major part of this problem. Think about movements in Brazil, for example: The MST [movement of landless peasants] didn't have a problem with saying, look, our ancestors were expropriated a long time ago and their children moved to the city, but that

history matters; we were dispossessed and now we want to reclaim the countryside. It's about being courageous enough to build a new definition of what it means to be indigenous, a peasant, a small farmer. The point is to understand varied notions of belonging. I read this great article by Philip Kelly a few years ago about agrarian change and migration. His point was basically that migration is normal, settlement is what's odd. In Indonesia, many mobile people(s) were stopped in their tracks, in their mobile trajectories, by the colonial guys: they were sedentarized; they had to stay in place. Maybe they would have stayed anyway in some places, who knows? The point is that we are so engaged in understanding claims in place that we don't really understand the trajectories, the mobile processes and people through which places have been made – past and present.

Melanie: *How do you see the role of NGOs in all these socio-ecological conflicts?*

Nancy: Generally speaking, I think that local or domestic NGOs in Indonesia can sometimes help to translate and facilitate conversations between disparate groups. But we all know that NGOs are often in conflict or competition with each other in terms of approaches, philosophies, and objectives. That can be part of a 'problem' in trying to understand NGOs as a whole; many refuse to publically acknowledge that there are differences. I think this attitude is largely a legacy of the Suharto era when NGOs had a clear common point of opposition; the 'common enemy' is less clear under contemporary political economic conditions. The academic conversation is often about NGOs in general and – again, something left over from the Suharto era – you would try not to say negative things about NGOs just because of their 'alternative' status. Today, many small NGOs are dependent on national and international NGOs, on the government itself, or sometimes on companies for their funds, so it's very messy. They play a role, sure, but their roles are not always critical and oppositional; they may not necessarily support the kinds of positions that other activists or local people or other organized groups are hoping for.

Melanie: *Many political ecology researchers still come from Western countries. What do you think about political ecology research from Southeast Asia?*

Nancy: You find political ecologists in Southeast Asia in many different places. Some of the best movement people are political ecologists at heart. There are a lot of people who are getting into political ecology from the region but they are not all academics. The pathway to becoming an academic – at least in Indonesia – is a winding one, with many potential distractions along the way. Yet, many people in their NGO work find that they need research or need to know how to do research. A lot of times, they have no idea how to gather the kind of evidence that is convincing about the origins of socio-environmental problems – an objective which is still at the heart of political ecology in my opinion. Activists are usually so committed to their campaigns and to their issues but don't have time to write. A promising thing is that a lot of them have managed to get overseas – to get away to writing or study programs. We all often need to get out of our immediate environments in order to find time to write – in this they are not so different. I guess, I don't think that there are just a few political

ecologists, there are certainly a lot more than when I first started working. They just don't appear in academia as frequently.

Melanie: *You mentioned the interlinkage between research and activism that is very important for political ecology. Can you mention any current examples of this interlinkage?*

Nancy: I'm thinking of the *Assembly of the Poor* in Thailand. They were concerned when dams were being built on the Mekong and they raised questions that had to do with whether fish would be available to all the people who depend on fish for food and livelihood. That movement was dealing with one of the biggest challenges affecting the political ecologies of Southeast Asia: Dams are making a huge comeback in Asia, and all over the world. The *Assembly of the Poor* is an example of academics and activists getting together in a really positive way to oppose them. In East Malaysia, one of the dams that they were planning to build on the Baram river was stopped and this was the work of a small NGO and a few academics based in the US working with many contacts and connections in Sarawak that probably should not be mentioned by name. Yet academics and activists managed to get the Chief Minister to listen and to think about the dam and its potential damage in the submersion area and also to support micro-hydro development for local water use. That effort was a combination of academics, other professionals, activists, and local people. [So I am putting in a plug for the Borneo Project which is based in Berkeley, California, and has some super committed people involved with it!] In Indonesia, there is also a great, very committed NGO working out of Pontianak in West Kalimantan called the *Swandiri Institute* and their sister group *Gemawan*. They have been doing research and working on the ground with communities suffering from corporate impingements on their land. They do excellent research on the illegal takings of customary and forest land by oil palm interests in particular. *Swandiri* folks are using drones for a good purpose: to photograph and map sites where community members claim the companies are illegally exceeding their bounds. That's an amazing example of activist research.

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