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Introduction

Conservation Is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea is my first book. After reading these reviews, I am amazed and flattered by the careful, critical, and insightful readings that scholars who I respect have given my work. Additionally, it is an honor for my work to be reviewed, again, with Stuart Kirsch's book (see Macintyre 2007). His *Reverse Anthropology* is an extraordinary book that makes a substantial contribution both to anthropology and to the ethnography of New Guinea (see West 2007). In the spirit of the *Pacific Studies* Book Review Forum,

I will use the reviews of *Conservation Is Our Government Now* to raise some questions I feel should be at the center of scholarly discussions in anthropology and related fields. I will address three points made by Bryan, Halvaksz, and Nash and use them to begin to enumerate three pertinent scholarly debates.

Issues of Scale and Problems with Political Ecology

Joe Bryan argues that I am “complacent with the notions of local, regional, and global scales” and that I treat “scale as an object of inquiry rather than as a problem to be explained.” At times in the text, I do use the scalar terms to make my point, for instance: “the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area is the product of a series of local, national, and transnational exchanges between individuals and institutions” (West 2006:36). However, the use of these terms does not mean I take these articulations of scale to be “objects of inquiry.” My use of scalar terms reflects Sayer’s (2005) argument that scale is both a way of seeing the world and as a set of ontological propositions about the world. The fluid boundary between these two aspects of scale intrigues me, and it underlies one of the purposes of my book, which is to take part in the growing discussion of “connections between seemingly ‘local’ sites and ‘global,’ or ‘transnational,’ processes” (West 2006:xix). For me, then, scale is, in fact, one of the central problems to be explained.

The scales that are produced (in part) by, and that work to produce, the Crater Mountain Wildlife Management Area come to be thought of as real through processes similar to the ones I describe for the other ontological propositions that I examine throughout the book (“nature,” “culture,” “forests,” “Crater Mountain,” “the Gimi”). The pertinent scalar terms range from “village” and “the Lufa District” at one extreme to “the Pacific” and “the Asia-Pacific Region” at the other. As terms, they represent cartographic forms of scale-making that have particular histories and uses. For instance, at various times, they are assumed, by external actors such as American ecologists and internal actors such as Papua New Guinean ecologists, to be vertical and encompassing articulations of the progression from the local and internal-regional to the national and external-regional (see Gupta and Ferguson 2002).

I spend some time in the text laying out the ways in which “Maimafu” as “village” comes to be space and place and how it is scaled as “the local” (see especially West 2006: 10–12, 94–95). Related to this, I show how the people who live there are taken to be at the bottom of these vertical and encompassed scales and how this shapes the ways other people perceive

and evaluate their opinions, needs, and desires. Of course, Gimi peoples do not always see scale in the same way as their interlocutors, and I employ Neil Smith's notion of "jumping scale" to show how Gimi work within external social systems in ways that confound and upset conservation ecologists, activists, and practitioners as well as government officials and others (West 2006:27). From this, it is clear that the Gimi and Australian biologists, for example, take as true differing ontological propositions of scale and their different sociopolitical and institutional arrangements of relationships and obligations. Of course, these differences are not of solely intellectual interest. That is because the propositions of scale of Gimi peoples' interlocutors are deployed by powerful actors, agencies, and institutions to bring a particular world into being, the one that accords with these propositions and their corollaries (see Carrier 1998; Lefebvre 1991; Said 1978).

Bryan is right to point out that I employ scalar language, a use that reflects the extent to which I draw on theoretical work in political ecology. Bryan's comments about scale, together with my own work, have pushed me to think carefully about the way political ecology sees the world. In particular, I wonder about the ontological assumptions of political ecology and whether the scalar thinking inherent in both political economy and ecology make it difficult for political ecologists to take seriously the ontological and epistemological propositions made by the people with whom they ostensibly work.

In a paper that came out a few months before *Conservation Is Our Government Now*, I argue that political ecology, like all institutions that produce knowledge about other people, is a set of translation practices (West 2005a:632). Moreover, because it is grounded in a very long history of the production of knowledge-as-power (Foucault 1970, 1972), political ecology's translation practices are likely to have a particular orientation. Many of us who think of ourselves as political ecologists would like to imagine that our field, because it is at the epistemic margins of various disciplines, is a potential site for radical thought and practice, but Bryan's comments about scale and my work make me reconsider this, a reconsideration made more compelling by Kirsch's insistence that we engage in "reverse anthropology" (Kirsch 2006).¹

Political ecology grew out of radical critiques of a kind of "blame the victim" approach to environmental degradation (see Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). Anthropologists, geographers, and ecologists working in rural areas having extreme environmental change confronted conservation-and-development practitioners and research economists who blamed local people for that change. Early political ecology clearly laid out, in case after

case, that much undesirable environmental change was the result of political and economic forces that seemed to be beyond the control, or even the awareness, of those local people. These early works were enhanced in the 1990s and early 2000s by work that took seriously postcolonial and poststructuralist critique, notions of power and discourse, and new examinations of western philosophical texts in cultural studies (Biersack 1999).

In the course of its development, however, three things seemed to happen to contemporary political ecology. First, it forgot some of its roots in cultural anthropology and moved away from careful ethnographic description (see West 2006:41, 2005a,b). Second, it continued, like the very work to which it was a reaction, to fail to take indigenous scholarship and philosophy seriously. Third, it uncritically incorporated the scaled notions inherent in ecology, geography, anthropology, and political economy. These three things are related. I will return to the first two in my discussion of Halvaksz's comments below, but for now I will focus on the third.

In geography, scale begins with issues of cartography and the relational sizes of spaces featured on maps, which were tools for representation and analysis that allowed for them to make generalizations and explain phenomena. However, these representations came to be taken as real and used to organize social, political, and economic life. In other words, the scaled vision of the world as represented on maps became a shared vision of how the world really is. Once people, especially powerful people, started to act as though those representations were real, their actions made them real (see Carrier 1998).

Scale in political economy has a similar history, which is linked to the use of scale in anthropology. Used to understand the spatial relations between political and economic institutions and the spatial distribution of particular kinds of economic systems, it fed into the creation of scaled anthropological ideas about social organization, political relations, and economic institutions. One manifestation of this is the way anthropologists scaled the world through their analyses of "bands," "tribes," "chiefdoms," and "states," which linked cartographic scale with notions of complexity, progress, and vertical social evolution. Although most anthropologists now reject these ideas, they have become inherent in much political, economic, development, and conservation thinking today.

In ecology, even though scientists only began using terms such as "hierarchy theory" and "spatial scale" in the 1970s, scaled thinking by ecologists is part of the very beginnings of the discipline (Schneider 2001:547). Scaled ideas about how biological systems are organized are inherent in all biology (cell, tissue, organ, organism) and organized in hierarchical structures in all

ecology (species, populations, communities, ecosystems, landscapes). This is extended, especially in landscape ecology, to include scaled ideas about “composition,” “structure,” and “pattern” (the spatio-relational formations of those hierarchical structures).

These four disciplines brought particular scales into being for the purpose of analysis, and their scales have come to be taken for granted by conservation and development practitioners, economists, and others. Many anthropologists, geographers, and cultural studies specialists have spent a long time arguing against the epistemological and ontological propositions these scales contain when they shift from being convenient analytical tools to being statements of reality. However, those efforts have not stopped political ecologists from incorporating those scales and their assumptions. They now face the consequences.

Engagement the Work of Indigenous Scholars, Indigenous Philosophy, and Thick Ethnography

Jamon Halvaksz raises an important point when he asks why I did not attend more to engaging the work of indigenous scholars. He wonders “if recent work theorizing indigenous epistemologies in the Pacific would be of benefit” to my analysis and asks, “while we attend to indigenous modes of analysis, shouldn’t we also attend to indigenous modes of scholarship?” My answers are Yes and Yes. In other work that is focused specifically on Gimi epistemology (West 2005a, 2009a,b), I do draw on indigenous scholarship, especially on Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo’s work on “indigenous epistemology” (“a cultural group’s ways of theorizing knowledge”; Gegeo 2001:491; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001). In more recent work on Gimi philosophy (West 2009c,d,e), I have engaged the work of other indigenous scholars who grapple with questions of epistemology, ontology, and indigenous philosophy (see Ka’ili 2005, 2008; Nabobo-Baba 2006; Māhina 1993, 2002; Smith 1999; Teaiwa 2001; Tengan 2005).

In my new research project, I am trying to work through the relationship between Euro-American understandings about coastal areas and indigenous philosophies of space and place (West 2009a,b), drawing particularly on the work of ‘Okusitino Māhina (1993, 2002), Tevita O Ka’ili (2005, 2008), and Epeli Hau’ofa (1998). That project focuses on tourist understandings of Papua New Guineans and their surroundings and asks on what ontological propositions they are based, how they endure, and what their ecological, social, economic, and political consequences are. As part of this, I am considering the larger question of how outsiders’ external productions of space in coastal areas intertwine with the philosophies of the people who

live there who are concerned with the earth, the sea, the past, and the present.

In a similar vein, I have been thinking about how Gimi might theorize the production of space differently than have some of the European and American scholars I drew on in my book (especially Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1991, 1996). Lefebvre proposed a triad of dialectically related categories for spatial production: (1) spatial practice, the practices and actions of a society that “secrete” the society’s space (Lefebvre 1991:38); (2) representations of space, how a society “conceptualizes” space through science, planning, technology, and its other knowledge-producing social forms (1991: 38–39); and (3) representational spaces, “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols” (1991:38). The question for me became, how well does this scheme fit Gimi understandings of sociospatial production? After several further visits to Papua New Guinea and after considering the work of some of my Pacific islander colleagues (see Gegeo 2001; Ka’ili 2005; Māhina 2002) and other colleagues (see Halvaksz and Young Leslie 2008; Jacka 2003; Kirsch 2006; Knauft 1994; Robbins 2003, 2004), I concluded that Gimi sociospatial production can be only partially theorized using Lefebvre, Harvey, and Smith. Presently Gimi produce space through the processes outlined by Lefebvre, but that appears to be the consequence of their engagements with their interlocutors, national and international institutions and agencies, and their associated structures of hierarchy and power. Historically, however, Gimi made the world through social relations between people and between people and plants, animals, the animate physical features of their surroundings (things such as rocks, streams, and caves) and their ancestors (see West 2005, 2009d, n.d.). Looking back on *Conservation Is Our Government Now*, I wish I had spent more time relating Gimi forms of sociospatial production to other indigenous ways of such production. If I had turned to my indigenous colleagues earlier, I might have done this.

In turning to my indigenous colleagues when thinking about sociospatial production, I have learned that indigenously specific theories of space, place, and time can tell us about broader processes such as transnationalism and the crafting of personhood and subjectivity in the context of migration and social change (two of the other goals I had in the book). For example, Māhina (2002), in a paper on Tongan philosophies of “mind,” shows that both “time” and “space” are socially made and that they derive from particular culturally specific understandings of the natural, mental, and social realms. In other words, he uses the Tongan concepts of *tā* and *vā* (time and space) to develop a nuanced theory of the relationship between nature, mind, and society. Ka’ili (2005) expands Māhina’s work by using *vā* (as

social space) to understand how Tongans make and are made by transnational relationships. He highlights the genealogical aspects of *vā* and the exchanges that are necessitated by *vā* and shows that these Tongan concepts can help us to understand the transnational more broadly. Both of these scholars use indigenous philosophy to understand the processes we think of as “globalization” and the ways in which Tongans become Tongans, “indigenous,” and “Pacific Islanders,” in a contemporary world.

Other indigenous Pacific scholars are using indigenous philosophy to interrogate indigeneity as subjectivity. Diaz argues that, “the study of native politics as it is led by an emergent Native Feminist critique of indigeneity, with indigeneity being defined as both an ontological and an analytical category, one that takes seriously the specificity of indigenous claims to space and place via genealogy and other discursive and non-discursive modalities, and to query their possibilities for politicized historical and cultural studies in general” (Diaz 2008:3). Gegeo (2001) examines the concept of indigeneity and asks whether it is space, place, identity, or all of the above. With this, he examines how indigeneity and “authenticity” are navigated during migration, conflict, and transnational relations. Kauanui (2008) and Tengan (2008) both examine the historical processes by which native Hawaiians and their authenticity has been produced. Tengan focuses on the social process by which native masculinity is made as lacking and aberrant by colonial and national discourses and then remade by native men who are seeking to dispel stereotypes of “easy-going, happy-go-lucky nature children” and troubled alcoholics (Tengan 2008:52). Kauanui focuses on the legal process by which “blood quantum” politics come to define who is native enough, or authentic enough, and shows that claims of authenticity always turn on particular histories of power-knowledge (Kauanui 2008). These scholars raise questions about how people come to be subjects and agents, and this is most certainly a site of critical inquiry that is lacking in political ecology. Although political ecology has been obsessed with what people do in the world, it has not focused enough on how people are “in the world” or how people “make the world.” More sustained engagement with indigenous scholarship would push political ecology to undertake both of these tasks.

Political ecology has also failed to attend adequately to how indigenous and native peoples develop and deploy their own methodologies for understanding the world. In fixating on “indigenous knowledge” as a thing to be learned by anthropologists, we have failed to see that we can learn from indigenous philosophy.² For example, the peoples who have historically inhabited and who continue to inhabit the island New Guinea, with settlement beginning in about 40,000 B.P (Matisso-Smith and Robins 2004), have unique understandings of the life cycles (birth, life, death, and the

afterlife) and the existence of humans, animals, and plants, as well as aquatic, terrestrial, and geographic features of their surroundings. These understandings are distributed based on language group affiliation. Although there may be some similarities between neighboring and related, language groups (for example between Gimi and their Fore neighbors) each group has a unique philosophy of life and existence. These are more than ways of “knowing” or “understanding” the world, and they are most certainly not “culture” (an ontological proposition made by early anthropologists that still plagues our discipline). They are philosophical propositions that are based on knowledge, and the knowledge they are based on is acquired through both a priori and a posteriori methodologies. A priori knowledge is knowledge that is held independently or prior to material experience, whereas a posteriori knowledge is knowledge that is known through material experiences. For Gimi, knowledge gained from myths and ancient clan-history stories would be a priori, and knowledge gained from spending time in forests and observing plants, animals, and landscape features would be a posteriori. Gimi act in the world in ways that are consistent with the knowledge gained from these methodologies. These methods also allow Gimi to theorize (and here I mean to produce theory) about the world.

The Problem of Money, Unrequited Reciprocity, and Neoliberal Economists

Jill Nash asks why I don't attend more to the issue of money and the fact that Gimi need it to live and want it to participate in “development.” She connects this to a discussion of unrequited reciprocity. For me, this raises questions about Gimi theorizing and explanatory practice. One of the major things that concerns them is the problematic relationship between their interlocutors and appropriate exchange relations.

Many people who come to Papua New Guinea, whether to conduct research, do conservation-as-development, or undertake business ventures, fail to act in socially appropriate ways. Because Gimi see that people become human through reciprocity and exchange, they see such in-comers as less than or different from human. Like many Papua New Guineans, Gimi people try to induce these in-comers to act appropriately. When their more subtle attempts fail, they resort to blunter means, like openly asking for things or, when it is appropriate, demanding compensation. These attempts to get outsiders to behave properly lead to endless criticism by conservation-actors, business people (national and expatriate), and some scholars.

Often, the result is the invocation of another concept that started as a useful analytical device but became reified, culture. Echoing Rostow's (1960) old argument in *The Stages of Economic Growth*, some hold that the natural resources in the country mean that people in Papua New Guinea should be well-off, but they are not because "the country's resources are inefficiently exploited and badly distributed, as a result of a highly dysfunctional political system" (Fukuyama 2007:2). This unfortunate state of affairs is said to reflect a "lack of fit" between European institutions necessary for proper government and the "underlying society" (Fukuyama 2007:3, 9). For Fukuyama, as it was for Rostow, the faulty element of that underlying society is "culture," the major barrier to economic development, exemplified in Papua New Guinea by compensation claims and indigenous systems of land tenure. Similarly, Gosarevski, Hughes, and Windybank (2004:136) argue that communal land ownership creates "barriers . . . to savings, investment, and productivity." These critics echo an old solution to the old problem of culture, the imposition of Western systems of private property (Gosarevski, Hughes, and Windybank 2004:141).

Like Rostow a half century before them, these people ignore the ways that structural factors, especially a country's position in the global economy, can impoverish a country and its people. And also like Rostow, these critics see the practices that concern them as hindrances to progress rather than as reasonable and appropriate ways to be properly human and to engage in proper relationships with others.

However old and discredited these argument may be, they are potent, as indicated by recent changes to Papua New Guinea's Environment Act. Those changes make it almost impossible for landowners to go to court to stop resource-extraction companies from destroying their environment, abusing labor, or exploiting landowners. Those changes were made because of pressure by China's Metallurgical Construction Corp (MCC), which invested \$1.5 billion into the Ramu nickel mine.³ The mine is huge and hugely controversial, and its development was hindered by the success of landowners in their attempt to get a court injunction to halt the construction of a pipeline that would send mine wastes into the Madang Lagoon, seriously damaging a site of astonishing biological diversity that is extraordinarily productive in terms of local subsistence and economic development. This leads to a bizarre state of affairs: The changes to the act that adhere to the critics' arguments about Papua New Guinea culture will end up impoverishing the very people these critics want to see enriched. Without attending to the ways in which economists and development practitioners use antiquated concepts from anthropology, and thereby attending to the history of anthropology, political ecology cannot begin to understand the ways the contemporary lives of the people with whom we work.

Conclusion

Political ecology, the form of scholarship with which I most identify, can learn from the critiques of my work offered by Bryan, Halvaksz, and Nash. I hope that with this response I have shown some directions in which political ecology might move in the future.

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NOTES

1. For a cogent discussion of the margins at which radical thought might happen and where Papua New Guinea and anthropology fit as sites for radical thought, see Knauft 1994.
2. For what is still the most insightful critique of the politics of comparing indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge, see Agrawal 1995.
3. See <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/png-law-to-shield-resource-giants-from-litigation/story-e6frg8zx-1225874201579> (accessed on June 20, 2010).

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