

## Book review: *Power in Conservation. Environmental Anthropology Beyond Political Ecology*

Jevgeniy Bluwstein

Department of Geosciences, University of Fribourg, Chemin du Musée 4, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland

Correspondence: Jevgeniy Bluwstein ([jevgeniy.bluwstein@unifr.ch](mailto:jevgeniy.bluwstein@unifr.ch))

Published: 9 March 2021

*Carpenter, C.: Power in Conservation. Environmental Anthropology Beyond Political Ecology, Routledge, London, New York, 219 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-34250-0, EUR 40.00, 2020.*

As the subtitle of the book suggests, the starting point of *Power in Conservation* is in acknowledging that political ecology has so far been the most popular approach in studying power in conservation and, with that, to try to advance our understanding of power in conservation by drawing on anthropological insights *beyond* political ecology. Carol Carpenter argues that mobilizing Foucault's concepts of power together with ethnographic methods from anthropology promises such a deeper understanding. The book is written in an accessible textbook style to introduce Foucault's key ideas and to show how seminal works in anthropology of conservation and development have drawn on these ideas and developed them further since the 1990s. The book will be particularly of interest to undergraduate and graduate students in political ecology, geography, anthropology, development and environmental studies, and conservation biology and environmental management. Students who are more generally interested in Foucault's governmentality lectures at the Collège de France might also find parts of the book helpful as a reading aid, although the book's coverage and interpretation of these lectures is fairly short and selective, lacking a systematic and in-depth engagement with key ideas developed by Foucault.

Throughout the book Carpenter focuses on four key Foucauldian concepts of power: the power of discourse, discipline and governmentality, subject formation, and neoliberal governmentality. The introduction finishes with a short but useful overview of different ways in which power is conceptualized drawing on Foucault. Carpenter's intention is to provide a "tool-box of ideas about power in conservation". The

first 12 out of 18 chapters are well structured by first introducing Foucault's ideas and then illustrating how these ideas resonate with seminal works in conservation and development anthropology. Chapters 13 to 18 abandon this structure, instead offering a collection of themes in environmental anthropology, from the role of the economy and the state, to assemblages, to global conservation agreements and underlying universals (e.g., nature), ending with world-making in the Anthropocene. Although all these themes in conservation and development are important in their own right, why they were selected remains unclear and somewhat arbitrary. How they relate to *power in conservation* is also not always spelled out.

Carpenter begins the book by asserting that a lot of ink on power in conservation has been spilled to highlight its coercive dimensions while an examination of its more subtle and benevolent workings is still wanting. The author does not substantiate this, to me, questionable claim. However, she seeks to explain this alleged lacuna through two further claims. First, power in conservation has been predominantly examined from a political ecology perspective which lacks an ethnographic approach. Second, the analytical limits of a political ecology of conservation lie in its overemphasis on a Marxist macro-structural framework to explain everything – in deterministic ways – through the lens of capital accumulation.

Carpenter's first claim suggests that political ecology is a discipline just like any other, for instance anthropology. However, this is not the case. Many anthropologists have advanced political ecological scholarship (e.g., Paige West, Rob Fletcher, Tania Li, Arturo Escobar), whereas most scholars who are associated with political ecology would not self-describe as political ecologists but as geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, or development or environmental studies scholars. Whereas anthropology is an established field go-

ing back to the 19th century, worldwide there have only been a handful of political ecology professorships established to date. In other words, it makes little sense writing against or taking issue with political ecology *as a discipline*.

Carpenter's second claim leads the author to briefly review Marx's and Foucault's approaches to power. The author sees a clear opposition between a Marxist base–superstructure division that to her explains how power follows the economy and a Foucauldian analytics that conceptualizes power as profoundly enmeshed in economic relations in endless ways. This simplification of Marx's ideas is unnecessary, in my view. Carpenter could have compared Marx's dialectics and historical materialism with Foucault's genealogy and his very different approach to history. While these are two fundamentally different epistemologies, they also highlight how both thinkers were concerned with processes of capital accumulation and held that power and the economy are inseparable (Cook, 2018). Although it is true that Foucault positioned himself against a Marxist concept of power in some of his lectures (Foucault, 2007:2), what is more interesting, I think, is to highlight how Foucault's 1975–1976 lectures can be read as a dialogue with Marx (see lecture one and 277–278 pp. in Foucault, 2003). Given the particular relevance for conservation, Carpenter could have also highlighted the differences and similarities between Marx and Foucault as to how they conceptualize the production of labor power as a commodity (Mezzadra, 2020), the relationship between labor and discipline (Foucault reverses Marx here in his "Society must be defended" lectures), the question of class struggle (Cook, 2018), the Gramscian concept of hegemony, and the process of primitive accumulation (Perelman, 2000).

This is not to say that Marx and Foucault are interchangeable when it comes to examining power in conservation (and development). I agree with Carpenter's claim that in studying power in conservation, Foucault allows us to raise a set of questions and to examine processes that go beyond a Marxist analytics. Still, rather than pitting Marx against Foucault and suggesting that this difference is due to the limits of Marx's oeuvre, an emphasis on how these thinkers help us ask different questions about conservation and beyond would be more warranted (Jessop, 2007; Marsden, 1999; Hannah, 2011; Tyner, 2015; Bluwstein, 2018; Federici, 2004; Li, 2007). This point becomes even more important in those chapters of the book where Carpenter examines how environmental anthropologists have drawn on Marx's ideas to make important contributions (e.g., Tania Li's work in chapter 13). It is here that the strange omission to thoroughly engage with Marx's ideas in the book becomes obvious. While Carpenter gives Foucault's original ideas ample space, Marx is reduced to the base–superstructure caricature.

Given such a simplification of Marx ideas, Carpenter's argument that political ecologists tend to simplify Marxist (and Foucauldian) approaches seems odd, for two reasons. First, I see an unnecessary dichotomization in pitting anthropology against political ecology and Marx against Foucault. For

instance, Carpenter rightfully points out that "capitalism itself needs to be broken down and studied in particular places at particular times", presumably through a Foucauldian analytics of power that helps us illuminate these micro-scale processes (15). She makes this point to suggest that a Marxist political ecology usually assumes a global capitalist system and is less interested in understanding spatial and temporal particularities and contingencies of capitalism. This, to me, essentializes and overstates the differences between how Marxist and Foucauldian scholars study capitalism and related themes. In another, in my view, unfair characterization of political ecological engagements with Foucault's ideas, Carpenter suggests that "political ecologists" (we are left in the dark as to who exactly these may be) misread Foucault by wrongly assuming that discourse and power relations are separate, instead of being deeply intertwined and by wrongly assuming that power acts *on* knowledge instead of seeing it being exercised *through* knowledge and truth claims (27).

Second, the book draws heavily on two political scientists, Arun Agrawal and James Scott, to show how power in conservation can be studied without analytical simplifications, despite the fact that both authors have received their fair share of important critiques precisely because they have simplified their analyses. See for instance, Neumann (1998) and Mitchell (1990) taking issue with Scott's conceptualization of hegemony and resistance (important concepts for a Foucauldian analytics of power) and Cepek (2011) and Singh (2013) questioning Agrawal's concept of environmentality (another key concept).

There is another imbalance in the book as to which thinkers the author draws on to examine power in conservation. While Marx is clearly muted and Foucault is everywhere, Latour's ideas permeate much of the book, most prominently through scholarship by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway but also through how Tania Li and Tim Mitchell have mobilized the concept of assemblage. However, Carpenter chooses not to explain to the reader some of the key ideas that underpin how Latour conceptualizes power relations. Most importantly, I missed a discussion of the significance of Latour's ontological flattening and his new materialism, which have paved the way for a more-than-human geography that is in many ways at odds with both Marxist and Foucauldian scholarship on conservation and development (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020). Here, a discussion about analytical gains and limits of combining Foucault with Latour would have been welcome.

Throughout the book, the author is motivated by improving conservation policy-making and practice through the examination of power, rather than merely subjecting it to a radical critique. Given that most conservationists are well-meaning people with good intentions, Carpenter insists that we should not vilify them but teach them about how power works in conservation. This sits oddly with the author's conviction that all forms of conservation governmentality – from violence to surveillance to participatory mechanisms – stand

in the way of effective conservation and should therefore be rejected. This leads the author to ask what conservation would look like without governmentality. While I share the author's critique of conservation governmentality and while I find this question equally captivating, I struggle with the idea that western conservation can be disassociated from governmentality and *still* be called conservation. Suggesting that conservation could exist as a scientific discipline and a practice without governmentality is akin to suggesting that conservation could exist without power, an insight that goes against a Foucauldian concept of power and power relations. What matters for a Foucauldian analysis of power in conservation is how power relations develop and how they can develop otherwise. It does not matter how power relations can be entirely overcome. In other words, there can be no conservation without governmentality, but there can be different, alternative governmentalities (e.g., feminist, indigenous, anarchist) in how we sustain biodiversity and practice nature–society relations (e.g., see Goldman, 2020; Dempsey, 2016; Dunlap, 2020). This more radical critique of conservation is missing from the book, even though Foucault's ideas about power allow us, if not even *force* us, to problematize western conservation in ways that its colonial character can no longer be denied and its decolonization appears urgent. Unfortunately, the book chose not to engage the question of coloniality and decolonization vis-à-vis the exercise of power in conservation.

## References

- Bluwstein, J.: Biopolitical Landscapes. Governing People and Spaces through Conservation in Tanzania, PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, 2018.
- Büscher, B. and Fletcher, R.: The conservation revolution: radical ideas for saving nature beyond the Anthropocene, Verso, London, UK, 2020.
- Cepek, M. L.: Foucault in the forest: Questioning environmentality in Amazonia, *Am. Ethnol.*, 38, 501–515, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01319.x>, 2011.
- Cook, D.: Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West, Verso, London, UK, 2018.
- Dempsey, J.: Enterprising Nature: Economics, Markets, and Finance in Global Biodiversity Politics, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex, UK, 2016.
- Dunlap, A.: The direction of ecological insurrections: political ecology comes to daggers with Fukuoka, *J. Polit. Ecol.*, 27, 988–1014, 2020.
- Federici, S.: Caliban and the Witch, Autonomedia, New York, USA, 2004.
- Foucault, M.: Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76, Picador, New York, USA, 2003.
- Foucault, M.: Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977–78, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, UK, 2007.
- Goldman, M.: Narrating Nature: Wildlife Conservation and Maasai Ways of Knowing, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, USA, 2020.
- Hannah, M. G.: Biopower, Life and Left Politics, *Antipode*, 43, 1034–1055, 2011.
- Jessop, B.: From micro-powers to governmentality: Foucault's work on statehood, state formation, statecraft and state power, *Polit. Geogr.*, 26, 34–40, 2007.
- Li, T. M.: The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics, Duke University Press, Durham, USA, 2007.
- Marsden, R.: The Nature of Capital: Marx After Foucault, Routledge, London, UK, 1999.
- Mezzadra, S.: Class Struggle, Labor Power, and the Politics of the Body. Marxian Threads in the Work of Michel Foucault, *ZINBUN*, 50, 57–69, 2020.
- Mitchell, T.: Everyday Metaphors of Power, *Theor. Soc.*, 19, 545–577, 1990.
- Neumann, R. P.: Imposing Wilderness: Struggles Over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa, University of California Press, Los Angeles, USA, 1998.
- Perelman, M.: The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation, Duke University Press, Durham, USA, 2000.
- Singh, N. M.: The affective labor of growing forests and the becoming of environmental subjects: Rethinking environmentality in Odisha, India, *Geoforum*, 47, 189–198, 2013.
- Tyner, J. A.: Violence in Capitalism: Devaluing Life in an Age of Responsibility, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, USA, 2015.