

Sustainability Education: What's Politics got to do with it?

David Meek

ddmeek@ua.edu
University of Alabama

Abstract: This article explores the relation between politics and sustainability education. It draws upon a political ecology of education perspective to analyze how political and economic processes shape the curricular content of sustainability education, environmental behaviors, and processes of ecological change in Brazil. Examples from research on agroecological education within the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) highlight how national level public policies and economic incentives intersect with the MST's political ideology to influence the creation of sustainability education programs, development of curricular content, and advocacy around land management practices. Scholars, educators, administrators, and community activists are encouraged to draw upon the political ecology of education perspective in negotiating the political nature of sustainability education.

Keywords: agroecology, Landless Workers' Movement, political ecology, political ecology of education, sustainability education

David Meek is an environmental anthropologist, critical geographer, and education scholar with an area specialization in Brazil. Meek theoretically grounds his research in a synthesis of political ecology, critical pedagogy, and place-based education. His interests include: sustainable agriculture, social movements, and environmental education.

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The interconnections between political and economic systems are key to understanding the distribution, efficacy, and ideological content of sustainability education (McKenzie 2012; Stevenson et. al. 2013). Thus, rigorous analysis of politics and economics is essential to understanding the production and dissemination of sustainability knowledge within educational systems, as well as the ultimate affect of sustainability education on environmental behaviors and ecological change. I believe a *political ecology of education* framework offers unique insight into these recursive interconnections (Meek 2014 a, b; Meek 2015). The political ecology of education framework evolved out of the interdisciplinary subfield of political ecology (Zimmerer and Basset 2003; Neumann 2005). Traditional political ecology explores the political and economic determinants of patterns of ecological change (Robbins 2004). In this context, I view the political ecology of education as a perspective that sheds light on how the interconnections between political, economic, and pedagogical processes affects the provision of sustainability knowledge, and in turn students' relation to both the natural environment, and access to its resources, as well as conceptions of nature-society interrelationships. This framework is directly relevant to policy makers crafting legislation, educators teaching sustainability education, and students challenging their existing conceptions of the world. To illustrate the broad contours of this perspective, I draw upon my research on agroecological education in the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (*O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST).

Sustainability education has increasingly become important within the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST). The MST is an agrarian social movement of landless peasants, whose members occupy unused agricultural land in order to pressure the government to take the land and create agrarian reform settlements (Branford and Rocha 2002; Wolford 2010). The MST provides its members opportunities for agroecological education, because agroecology, or the integration of ecological principles into sustainable agricultural systems, enables communities to work towards attaining food sovereignty, and land restoration (Gliessman 1990; Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012). Through the subsequent analysis of the relation between governmental policies, educational funding initiatives, and political ideology, the political ecology of education perspective provides unique insight into the intersection of politics, economics, and sustainability education within the MST.

The MST has been at the forefront of education reform in Brazil, and has made massive strides in institutionalizing opportunities for sustainability education. In the late 1990s, the movement was instrumental in pressuring the Brazilian government to develop the National Program for Agrarian Reform Education (PRONERA), which provides funding for state-social movement education partnerships (Molina 2003; Araujo 2004). PRONERA has funded numerous university-level and graduate certificate programs in environmental education for inhabitants of agrarian reform settlements throughout Brazil. In the state of Pará, the MST has accessed PRONERA funding to create a vocational high school program and graduate certificate in agroecology (Meek 2014a, 2015). These programs cater to students in the MST's settlements. The MST invests considerable political and economic resources in advancing these programs, because they are central locations for obtaining training in the MST's agroecological ideals and practices. The

MST's larger educational activism, which involves negotiating political policies and economic incentives, is responsible for helping to create PRONERA, develop programs around agroecology, and provide sustainability education to its members. Drawing upon a political ecology of education perspective, a feedback loop appears between the MST's environmental ideology, its role in the origin of PRONERA, and the political economy of PRONERA, which provides the funding necessary for the MST's agroecological education programs.

Similar to traditional political ecology, which has critically explored binary conceptions of nature/culture (Escobar 1998; Swyngedouw 1999), the political ecology of education perspective focuses on the embedded ideological content of these programs. As an agrarian movement, the MST's educational programs seek to instill a cultural valuation of agricultural labor, and the agrarian environment. A conception of agroecology as a tool to attaining food sovereignty is embedded in many of these programs. Food sovereignty is not a politically neutral concept, but rather is connected to a critique of industrial agriculture, and a valorization of small-scale farming (Wittman 2009. Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2014). By advocating agroecology as a means to attaining food sovereignty, the MST's educational programs instill the ideal of an agrarian landscape comprised of small-scale family farms in its students' minds. The political ecology of education perspective, which draws attention to the linkages between political processes, forms of pedagogy and environmental behaviors, illuminates how the MST's political ideology structures its educational programs' pedagogical content, and their promulgation of a normative vision of land management.

Sustainability knowledge is not neutral, but rather embedded within relationships of power. By drawing attention to power, the political ecology of education framework enables an analysis of how the quotidian political struggles affect the dissemination of sustainability knowledge throughout local communities. Schools within MST settlements are the front lines in the struggle over sustainability education. Although the MST provides opportunities for its educators to gain training in agroecological education, the larger cultural milieu in these settlements is a barrier to disseminating sustainability content within the schools. Employing a political ecology of education lens draws attention to how the political participation of educators is a central variable in determining whether or not sustainability content is taught. Educators who are politically aligned with the movement are motivated to teach about sustainability; those who oppose the movement teach the state's traditional curricula. Thus, by bringing attention to daily politics, the political ecology of education perspective reveals the deeper motivation of educators working from within the system.

Institution-community partnerships enable the reciprocal transformation of the educational institutions and the communities in which they are housed and serve. Educational institutions themselves are central actors in creating the conditions for sustainability education. Institutional activists, or individuals committed to social justice concerns who are working within the Brazilian university system, are creating opportunities for sustainability education by holding teaching workshops, discussion groups, and film screenings (Meek 2014a). The ultimate result of this amalgamation of events is an institutional environment in which sustainability education is being publicly discussed within the university, and new programs are being developed to provide opportunities for teacher training. Institutional activists, from a political ecology of

education perspective, are able to use educational events as incubators of larger institutional change.

Community members and movements are sites of non-traditional forms of knowledge about sustainability. Educational institutions have the power and legitimacy to access public programs and resources to advance these knowledge systems. In my research, I found that local MST settlements were important sites of critical place-based research in PRONERA-sponsored education programs (Meek 2015). Students in these agroecological education programs conducted comparative research on environmentally devastating forms of mineral extraction and agricultural production, as well as more environmentally sustainable forms of agricultural production, such as agroforestry. These students' research provided a starting point for larger community discussions about the challenges of moving from environmentally degrading to more sustainable forms of production. A political ecology of education framework highlights how providing opportunities for place-based education and institution-community partnerships enables the building of educational institutions and agendas around community-based progressive sustainability goals.

The political ecology of education perspective focuses attention on several key aspects of sustainability education. It analyzes the role of public policies and economic incentives in shaping the content of sustainability education, environmental behaviors, and conceptions of the interrelationships between nature and society. In addition, the political ecology of education promotes an appreciation of the value of institution-community partnerships in providing transformative sustainability education opportunities both within educational institutions and communities. Scholars and educators engaged with sustainability education should draw upon this perspective in analyzing and developing sustainability education content that is attuned to the inherently political nature of sustainability.

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The interconnections between political and economic systems are key to understanding the distribution, efficacy, and ideological content of sustainability education (McKersie 2013; Thompson et al. 2013). Thus, rigorous analysis of political and economic contexts to understand how they produce and disseminate sustainability knowledge within educational systems, as well as the ultimate effect of sustainability education on environmental behaviors and ecological change, I believe a political ecology perspective offers a useful framework for examining these interconnections (Mick 2014a, b). In this context, I view the political ecology of education as a perspective that sheds light on how the interconnections between political, economic, and social systems affect the production and distribution of sustainability knowledge, and in turn students' relation to both the natural environment, and access to its resources, as well as conceptions of nature-society relationships. This framework is directly relevant to my research interests in agroecological education, teacher education, and students challenging their existing conceptions of the world. To illustrate the broad contours of this perspective, I draw upon my research on agroecological education in the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (*O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST).

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The political ecology of education framework, drawn from traditional political ecology, which in contrast with analytical classical ecology explores the political and economic determinants of patterns of ecological change. This framework is instrumental to critically analyzing sustainability education. Its focus on political economy enables an