

The political ecology of hazard vulnerability: marginalization, facilitation and the production of differential risk to urban wildfires in Arizona's White Mountains

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Article Summary

This article summarizes the results and key arguments of Collin's dissertation work on hazard vulnerability in six Arizona White Mountains communities. The focus of his study is as much a demonstration of the benefits of a political ecology approach to hazard vulnerability research as it is a re-theorization of classic Third World definitions of marginalization. By incorporating what he coins as *facilitation*, Collins expands the marginalization definition in order to be applicable to First World situations where it is not only the disadvantaged who live in hazardous areas. By expanding marginalization, the author leads into this third focus of the article which is to show how First World marginalization and facilitation produce differential patterns of risk in residential landscapes of the poor and affluent. While outlining a thorough and convincing argument, the author's lack of attention to his data and methods takes away from the foundation of his claims and reads more like a long Results and Discussion section, rather than a complete research report. It is likely the author had to refocus the research to fit the style requirements of the publication journal; and, at least all claims made in the results section are followed by a citation to one of his other publications on the same study that probably show more definitive rigor.

Because an overarching goal of this article is to approach hazards research through the lens of political ecology, the author takes a lot of time to define his re-theorized terms and various hazards terminology. Marginalization's classic definition describes how disadvantaged social groups in the Third World are the most vulnerable to environmental changes and dangers. The author expands this concept to the First World by incorporating facilitation: a process where institutional protection allows affluent groups to develop in hazardous areas and externalize the costs of this development to all classes of society.

In a rather sharp transition, the author shifts focus to the study area and outlines the history of wildfires in Arizona's White Mountains. He describes how a change in the economy from a resource extraction economy of lumber farming to an amenity based economy where the new affluent residents outsourced their income, created a class division where the former lumber economy dependent residents were forced to enter the service industry and so experienced a loss of income, power and security in the process. The long history of lumber farming coupled with the hazardous residential patterns magnified the wildfire intensity and risk in the White Mountains communities; but this risk was posed differently to the disadvantaged and the affluent. Where the affluent had access to resources and institutional protection (i.e. emergency response, fire insurance) the poor had little access to this kind of protection and were at a higher risk from wildfires.

The author utilized a mixed method approach both quantitative and qualitative to assess differential patterns of risk in the six communities. His quantitative methods involved using mass surveys, in-field hazard assessments, demographic information, historical/archival research and GIS (to aggregate the information). His qualitative methods were a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews which he described as providing a "nuanced understanding" to his quantitative data.

Ultimately, the author concludes that institutional structures are the most important contributor to the production of differential risk. The Poor's lack of access to these social resources is the strongest influence on their vulnerability to wildfires. He goes on to claim that the unfairness that allows the affluent to capitalize on institutional protection and externalize the costs of their hazardous lifestyles is the result of a layered system that launders risk in a way that concentrates protection for the wealthy. It is during this section that the author's style turns slightly more opinionated and cynical in comparison with earlier parts of the article. The author concludes his discussion by identifying two types of residential landscapes that result from differential risk to wildfires: livelihood and lifestyle landscapes. Livelihood landscapes are inhabited by the poor who see the land and nature as a basis of their livelihood and depend on it directly to survive. Lifestyle landscapes are inhabited by the affluent who see nature as a commodity or piece of art that they can both admire and use as a symbol of their class status.

Discussion Summary

Discussion opened up on the author's mixed method approach and opinions generally approved, although some did not favor the author's designation of his qualitative data as augmenting his quantitative data instead of complementing it. The idea that qualitative data is secondary in its usefulness to quantitative data is a recurring theme we are all familiar with and all tend to agree that it is an unfair assessment.

A sharp turn in discussion led to questioning the Western belief that a person should have the freedom to live wherever they wish. On the surface it is easy to take the libertarian stance and defend this freedom so long as people are aware of the risks they are putting themselves in and keeping that risk only to themselves (if only the world were so simple). Collin's article demonstrates that not only is it impossible to internalize the costs of this 'freedom' to those who are making the choice to live in these dangerous areas, but that the imperfect and sometimes corrupt system of providing social protection to these people ensures that these risks are unfairly put on people who do not want it and are too powerless to avoid it. The example of the Oakland Hills reassessment scandal brought real world context to the problematic institution of social protection.

The discussion took an even more cynical turn when one person observed that it is mostly White Americans who like to live in these dangerous areas and that, as Californians, many of our most affluent residents are guilty of the same poor decisions as the affluent residents in White Mountains. Rather than dwell too much on the race aspect of why the rich choose to live in hazardous areas, a consensus chalked up the observation to a difference in cultural backgrounds, instead of strictly racial backgrounds. And the main difference in this cultural background centered on varying values of nature. Just as the article claimed, the group unanimously agreed that the affluent view nature as a status symbol for their wealth and class and that may have led them to underestimate the dangers they put themselves in.

Discussion revisited this dual valuation of nature idea when William Cronon's famous quip, "Are you an environmentalist, or do you work for a living" was brought up to point out that even the most liberal sympathizers of nature preservation have a similarly 'privileged' view of nature. The example of the spotted owl and how it received widespread calls for protection (likely due to the spotted owl being an

adorable animal) demonstrated the narrow and disconnected relationship that even well-intentioned environmentalists have with nature.

As I reflect back on the discussion, I am surprised to realize that very little criticism was put forth on the wealthy themselves. Surely, it was implied and I do not think anyone would have been hard pressed to muster up harsh criticism if asked, but most of the criticism put forth was aimed at the institutions that allow this to happen. When it was remarked that simply eradicating the institutional protection provided to these short-sighted wealthy developers was a problematic solution in several ways, the bottom line reasoning came down to the institution's underlying power dynamics that are heavily influenced by the class structure. Again, the blame for this corruption was on the weak and impressionable institution, not on the wealthy lobbyists and their subterfuge.

The discussion came to end on the logistics of article publishing and the author's history as having taken Geography 696 with Dr. Rodrigue! He built his work off the literature on Third World marginalization that our professor contributed to as well. His case study format was well received, especially since the majority of students in our class plan on organizing their Master theses as case studies. We were all happy to know that many researchers publish more than one article on the same fieldwork and research topic and that it is not uncommon to expand a Master's thesis topic into a more thorough dissertation in the future. Knowing this, I'm sure we will all think a little more carefully on just how interested we are in our thesis topics right now.