

**Final written assignment on Dianne Rocheleau
Anthropology 328, Politics of Nature (Spring 2000)
Danny de Vries, April 29, 2001**

“[Planetary management]... presumes a level of knowledge and understanding far beyond anything ever achieved, planning on a scale greater than has previously been attempted, a commonality of interests of all humanity that does not exist, and a consensus that has never been approached... (Haila and Levins, 1992).” (Rocheleau, 2000, p1)

“Forests are product of social “work” First there is the straightforward work of ... peasants (largely unseen or disregarded by outsiders) in banding together to make their forest islands, as a consequences of the way they make their settlements and farms. ... A second kind of social work shaping biodiversity [involves] several generations of outside agencies in sustaining a vision of a changeless tropical urwald. (Guyer and Richards, 1996).“ (Rocheleau, 2000, p1)

Quoted by Dianne Rocheleau and placed at the introduction of her paper submitted in 2000 to *Ecumena*, the two excerpts above sum up distinct facets of Rocheleau’s work: the impossible ideal of the management of complexity and the use of trees to follow the construction of pathways by different actors (with different visibilities) through this impossibility. I have taken these quotes as entry points to this paper as well, and will use them to clarify themes found in Rocheleau’s work.

The first quote seems to herald the notion that the kind of management we need, want, aspire, belief in, is so much further away than most of us in actuality, that a sense of humbleness and caution is eminently needed. Indeed, the world *is* a complex whole, and our ideas of managing it are hopelessly behind the times. Rocheleau is apt to provide us with evidence all throughout her work. For example, in a compelling and historical case study on the management of environment, development, crisis and crusade in Ukambani, Kenya, she concludes:

“We conclude that one must incorporate multiple past and present stories of places and peoples before attempting to solve their problems. All too often, development practitioners enter an area looking for a certain problem, find it, and then design a solution. Our historical perspective suggests that such experts are as likely to be part of the problem as they are a part of the solution. Quick fix solution for perceived unidimensional crises has itself been an enduring crisis for Kenyan society and the Kenyan environment. (Rocheleau, Steinberg, & Benjamin, 1995, p1047)

The idea of unknown repercussions and consequences of interventions is a theme that can be taken from this excerpt, and one that pervades Rocheleau’s thinking all throughout. In a public talk¹ she explained that after receiving her PhD, she worked for a development agency focused on regional planning in the Dominican Republic. The initial task: “Restore the forest.” The solution: elaborate tree planting schemes. But when she returned to the area 15 years later she was astounded to find the landscape covered with tall

¹ "Roots, Webs, Wings, and Wheels: Cyborg Forests in Complex Communities.", at the Geography Department of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Friday, December 1, 2000

grass, abandoned. She explained that the market for agricultural products had not been enough to sustain production, and all that replaced it was the breeding of some turkeys and horses for the New York city market, and “a world class pigeon farm program on the landscape driven by the odd hobby of a New Yorker’s fantasy.” “Could we have predicted this?” she asks the crowd. “No!” After the costs of airplane tickets went down, regular movement between the Dominican landscape and New York City became possible.” An element of surprise that was and could not have been predicted. Complexity theory.

But the idea of complexity is not only present in the form of chaotic unpredictability. Metaphors alluding to “complexity” and “dynamics” can be found all throughout her work. For example, from Harraway, Rocheleau takes the idea of *affinity* instead of identity, in order to “leave room for complex and shifting affiliations and simultaneous membership in a number of overlapping groups” (Rocheleau, 1995). The use of the language of complexity seems to mature throughout her work, explicitly culminating in later articles, such as the Ecumena submission:

“To address both social and ecological entities as contingent and complex, we respectively invoke feminist poststructural theories of multiple subjectivities, identity and social movements and biological theories of complexity” (Rocheleau, Ross, Morrobel, & Malaret, 2000, p4).

To Rocheleau, this is a radical challenge to fixed and unitary constructs of cultures, classes, and ecologies with essential attributes. A challenge that as she argues is supported on the social side by the mutual embrace of diverse identities, affinities, and contingent coalitions, and on the biological side by processes of self-organization from below, contingencies of ecological entities, fuzzy boundaries, and simultaneity of participation in multiple ecological units. (Rocheleau, Ross, Morrobel, Malaret, 2000). When I meet her in Chapel Hill, Rocheleau has made complexity theory the explicit focus of her agenda when she explains that she sees herself to apply post-structural theory and complexity theory to sustainable development issues: “Complexity theory has been tossed at us for 15 years. It has been used by people in management, industry, and science. The last two years there has been an acceleration of the use of the theory.”

The second quote made at the introduction of this paper, points at some of the roots of this crisis in natural resource management. In a Latourian fashion a subject-object of personal and professional interest is taken, the tree, and this subject-object is followed through the patchy works of invisible peasants into the labyrinths of outside agencies sustaining a notion of wilderness in a greening public discourse:

“Nowhere is the facile division into preservation and production more apparent than in the ubiquitous forest imagery and the use of forest as stages for global economic and environmental scripts. Trees and people have become the major players in what Schminck and Wood (1992)

called the greening of the discourse on development. Trees have become both icon and currency in the domain of sustainable development. “

Rocheleau points out that this *greening of the discourse* on development can be costly to the local peoples involved, and this perhaps lies at the heart of her passion with which she has engaged her development work in the past years. She writes about Osmarino Rodrigues, successor to Chico Mendes as leader of the rubber tappers movement, who notes that the use of green discourse opened their landscapes, livelihoods, and everyday lives to the scrutiny, regulations, and interventions of national and global environmentalists. With Rocheleau, the battle for local justice is taken up, and by now its form and tactics have come to take shape through both the eyes of complexity theory and the no-longer-objective fact of the tree itself:

“To use trees and forests as a metaphorical site of investigation into the daily practice and long term process of struggle between interests of global environmentalists, multinational corporations, and popular movements”(Rocheleau & Ross, 1995).

To Rocheleau, the tree is a tool with which at least three common premises of received wisdom in policy and practice can be complexified: “we all know what ‘the forest’ is; ‘the forest’ is good and no-forest is bad; and there are two kinds of people, forest protectors and forest destroyers” (Ecumena, 2000, p3). Her almost infallible poetic and rhetorical power sparks in these moments of cultural critique:

“There is a particular need to critique and propose alternatives to the plethora of forestry and agroforestry initiatives which have been sheltered in the discursive shade of trees as symbols of green goodness”(Rocheleau & Ross, 1995).

And thus, chaos and branches combine to provide the fervor of the submitted Ecumena paper (2000):

“To challenge the facile dichotomies between forest and farm, cultivated and wild plants, and social and ecological processes, as well as the simple unity so often attributed to popular social movements” (Rocheleau, 2000, p23)

Rocheleau’s dream would be to use insights in the intricate workings of trees and people in the landscape to demand a more nuanced understanding by both political and biological ecology. She envisions addressing the interplay of both conflict and affinity within and between social movements and rural households and the interactions of both with complex biological systems. She wants to look at all actors, across scales, as both makers and unmakers of specific forest ecologies.

The trees, invisible peasants, chaos, and greening discourses combine to provide a stage for another theme so far bypassed in this paper. Sweeping away the dichotomies of modern reason, Rocheleau convinces her reader that the particularities of local ecosystems include by definition people and their institutional structures as well as the landscape which they both create and inhabit (Thomas-Slayer & Rocheleau, 199?). Thus, central to improving livelihood systems are the capacities of local

institutions to respond to challenges within these ecosystems. She argues that therefore the effectiveness of institutional responses is linked to the role of both women and men within the local community.

Rocheleau sees gender as a key factor in divisions of labor and rights and responsibilities, which thus affects resource management and equitable development. In her articles, she provides scores of support for this feminist cause. For example, she argues that a growing number of women-headed households throughout the world, and an increasing role of women as household providers in declining rural economies, make it essential to incorporate gender into the discussion of natural resource management and sustainable development. Rocheleau has already engendered the image of the largely unseen or by outsiders disregarded peasant, hacking away forests to create patches and natures of *his* own creation. At a level of depth that is beyond the usual world of male science, the peasant *himself* is deconstructed and this is central to the feminist political ecology of Rocheleau. The challenge is a double whammy:

“We face the double tasks of reshaping the terms of discourse about popular, local ecological science and introducing women’s science and interests into the larger domain” (Rocheleau, Jama, Wamalwa-Muragori, 199?, p70)

And the implications are hardly imaginable:

“The implication is that at least half of indigenous ecological science has been obscured by the prevailing invisibility of women—their work, their interests, and especially their knowledge—to the international scientific community” (Rocheleau, Jama, Wamalwa-Muragori, 199?, p70)

Because of this and the new wave of enthusiasm for sustainable development (and the concurrent upwelling of interest in biodiversity and indigenous knowledge), a deeper look into the place of rural women’s ecological science, as well as a consideration of the possible consequences of this new direction for rural women’s future and those of their communities is called for (Rocheleau, Jama, Wamalwa-Muragori, 199?). The issue includes understanding of gendered rights over access to environmental quality, environmental resources, and the control over environmental decisions and technologies.

Rocheleau further out the practical goals of such endeavor:

“Once the existing gender division of land use interests is understood, fieldworkers and policymakers alike may build upon this to reinforce complementarity, to resolve conflicts, and to restore the balance between men’s and women’s shared rights and responsibilities in traditional, evolving, or experimental land use systems. This will help reconcile the objectives of environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic productivity from the individual to the national level” (Rocheleau, Jama, Wamalwa-Muragori, 199?, p71).

This negotiability of tenure rights gives policy makers and communities another lever with which to promote a more equitable distribution of rights to the management of natural resources (Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997). But the story does not end here. The move toward the feminist cause is one that

transcends the mere division of labor that one might encounter in the forest patch next to the house of a Dominican farmer. Instead, the very nature of our understanding itself is at stake:

“While the dominant and most visible structure of science and environmentalism dominated by man, mostly from wealthier nations, women have been hard at work maintaining a multiplicity of environmental sciences as well as grassroots environmental movements. And while it is the same few who may lay claim to pieces of the living landscape as private and state property throughout the world, women and many men and children have also been busy maintaining and developing their own places on the planet through the daily management of the living landscape.”
(Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer, & Wangari, 199?, p6)

The gendered science underlying Rocheleau’s critique of science and environmentalism serves as the very basis and reference for policy interventions, and sustains misguided perceptions into the field of natural resource management. Blind to the (increasingly) important role gender has in understanding natural resource tenure these intervention are designed to miss the multidimensional nature of natural resource property itself. In response to this ignorance, feminist political ecology has provided an umbrella for critiques of mainstream environmental science and resource management, with a strong emphasis on the identification of women with nature and the mistreatment of both by a male dominated, instrumentalist science. Finally, Rocheleau’s feminist political ecology expresses itself in a plea to illuminate the presence of gendered organizations. She notices a surge in women’s activism as a response to actual changes in the local environmental conditions as well as to discursive shifts towards “sustainable development” in national and international political circles”. (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer, & Wangari, 199?). As a result, women have increasingly been entering into local organizations, leading them to more formal political arenas of politics and grassroots activism.

Having identified three themes that incorporate Rocheleau’s work—complexity and the impossibilities of current natural resource management paradigms, the use of trees in tracing relations in complex ecologies, and the gendered nature of knowledge, rights, and organizations—there is perhaps some room left to introduce a fourth theme that is predominant in her work and reflects in itself all the former three: methodological pluralism that aims for transformation.

“My own work is embedded in feminist geography and political ecology, both of which have turned towards methodological pluralism and beyond, toward the transformation of scientific paradigms”. (Rocheleau, 1995, p458)

Posed here is a critique of the method of science, in sink with Rocheleau’s criticism noted in other articles on the ways of the “experts,” as well as ideals put forward towards a more democratic collaborative research design:

“[There is] little doubt on the utility of extracting some discrete bits of rural women’s ecological knowledge. However, there is even more to be gained by an ethnoscience research approach based on empowerment of rural people rather than simple extraction of their knowledge. An action research program might facilitate the discussion and transfer knowledge among men, women and children as their roles, responsibilities, and interests change. (Rocheleau, Jama, Wamalwa-Muragori, 199?, p70).

The methodologies Rocheleau suggests are part of a *transformative* feminist political ecology. The idea of change embedded within her work is of prime importance. As she writes in her personal statement:

“Perhaps most importantly, this approach goes beyond critique and seeks to inform policy and transform practice in forestry, conservation, and environmental planning.” (MacArthur Fellows Program Application)

Rocheleau gives explicit attention to her methodology. When the object of study deals with visibility (or invisibility) itself, than attention to the issue of methodology makes compelling sense, since “methodologies and lenses influence what we cause” (public lecture, UNC-CH 2000). Rocheleau conceptually methodology distinct from her theory. Still, the concurrence, or perhaps even better; coevolution, of theory and methodology in Rocheleau’s work, can be noted as remarkable, as in the following question:

“Is there a feminist poststructuralist science an, and if so, is there a distinctive methodology that can enrich the practice of feminist research?” (Rocheleau, 1995)

The methodology itself is one that speaks the theory. It includes a complexity of formalized research methods which together act as a critique on the trap of post-modern circularity and male authoritarian empirical science, and carries within it a postnormal democratic idea of research design (see for example, Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994):

“The acceptance of *partial objectivities* obviates the need to choose between multiple and irreconcilable subjectivities or the single objectivity of an omniscient gaze. Rather, it challenges scientists to revalue the subjective, then stretch and combine it into something that can be verified and validated through a variety of methods (including quantitative measures) with an ever widening circle of shared experience.” (Rocheleau, 1995, p459)

Rocheleau takes the notion of partial objectivities from Donna Haraway, who critiques remote sensing as allowing for a new level of distance and apparent objectivity that “sees everything from nowhere”. However, writes Rocheleau, rather than abandoning the use of imagery, Haraway encourages feminist scholars to reclaim vision and imagery, to project the multiple perspectives of situated subjects, and to engage in an explicitly social project of scientific understanding. The crux of Rocheleau’s criticism lies in the idea of overlapping dimensionalities. When the gaze begins from space, and when the gaze-from-

space is uninformed by the logic of gendered livelihoods and landscapes, then the erasure of women's place in the mapped spaces is all but certain:

“While much of the literature on land use change and environmental degradation has relied on counting, the images driving that counting exercise, and the interpretation of the results, have been based on two-dimensional constructs of space. The maps and pictures of government agencies have tended to privilege “dominant” land use and land cover categories at the expense of secondary or minor uses and rights. They have also portrayed one-dimensional notions of property with single points of control and ownership—almost exclusively male heads of households—that have obscured women's lands, resources, products, and activities nested within men's properties. (Rocheleau, 1995, p463)

In response to this unidimensional research methodology, Rocheleau argues for a multimethod approach that combines several data collection activities and critically examines the following questions:

- 1) Who counts: who does the counting and whose life and landscapes are counted?
- 2) Why and when should we count: as both feminist and land use analysts, when should we use quantitative versus qualitative methods, in pursuit of greater visibility for women and partial yet powerful objectivities?
- 3) How can we further integrate the gendered insights of stories and pictures with the rigor and comparative value of quantitative methods? How can we combine very distinct ways of knowing and to reclaim vision within a feminist practice of science?

Rocheleau's methodology is grounded by an emphasis that relies on case studies that signify a return to a specific place and particular histories to understand the broader political outlines that bind local ecologies, economies, communities, and cultures into regional and global systems in a complex, multifaceted landscape with a diversity of actors (Rocheleau, Steinberg, Benjamin, 1995, p1039).

The dreams that come from a journey encountered in reading through Rocheleau's papers and attending one of her public lectures is one that transgresses all boundaries, is kin to notions of radicalness, has a tendency to overload the reader with a complex of notions, ideas, affiliates, and relationships, but ultimately seems comprehensive in formulating a message that reaches audiences with different ideas and goals in mind. Above all, a sense of connectedness to real people, real stories, and real landscapes appears in the form of a transformative political route through which natural resource management can be renewed and approached. Part of Rocheleau's strategy is to guide the journey to the emergence of a feminist political ecology, an approach that recognizes “complexity in both social and ecological spheres and acknowledges the uneven relations of power embedded in the use, perception, and control of resources” (personal statement, MacArthur Fellows Program).

What is there left to dream for the reader? Exhausted and enticed, the reader ends up staring at the blatant reality of a message that seems contradictory in nature, appears unsettling, but is nevertheless compelling. The conclusions might very well be: 1) we know nothing yet, 2) it is all much more complex,

3) we were wrong all along, 4) we need a major restructuring of our vision, and 5) to be pragmatic we have to accept the former four. The apparent contradiction between complexity and pragmatics is perhaps the hardest to reconcile of all. How can we seriously argue for multidimensionality when unidimensionality hasn't even lead us anywhere? The task is frightening and daunting. Is there a space left safe? Is this not but a welcome step towards the ideal of a democratic reality? I can not but be reminded of a reading I encountered early in this seminar by Funtowicz & Ravetz (1994). Rocheleau's methodological plurality and theoretical complexity that will bring natural resource management closer to the people is like minded to the ideal of a post-normal science as a place where a mixing and blending of skills and not the denial of special competence or expertise is what matters. A place where the guiding principle is quality rather than truth. How do we attain this place within natural resource management? Rocheleau provides excellent examples, and I believe that her lead is to be admired, necessary, and cutting edge. But I am not sure how to go from this theoretical place in intellectual space to the realities of profit driven financial investment bankers on the ground. Perhaps elaboration on ideas that suggest ways of inviting these notions to be adopted by mainstream researchers (demographers?) and be read by natural resource managers is what is most important in this respect. The problem I am pointing out surely lies not with the intellectual and moral compellingness of the argument—it clearly *is*—but more with that which is left unfinished: the economic effectiveness of the approach, the translation of the ideas, and the aggressive strategies with which these ideas should be marketed. Not to sound reductionistic, I wonder what the economic competitiveness of this approach could be. Could we think about “beefing up” this aspect, cutting its costs, and marketing its success, without losing our own sense of morality? Are we anarchists or part of the mainstream?

The problem might be that posing ourselves as radicals is putting us on the margins in a debate on a topic that is marginal already. This is not to say that that is not needed—I am a firm believer in marginality and its creative effect—but what I believe is lacking is a strategy that leads to a guided process of appropriation of the thoughts and ideas engendered by Rocheleau into the minds and actions of those in power. While the greening of discourse indeed has its local costs, it also concerns the problem of changing the color of a machine with a momentum that is unstoppable. To deny its existence would mean making oneself nonexistent. The way academic advocates work seems mostly to be through the relatively slow evolution of networks that carry novel ideas. These network ultimately—and slowly—lead to those development specialists and professionals who think alike, and tries to connect them with the aim of implementing a way of policy and praxis that is more equitable and just to the larger public. And although this is not ineffective, I am not sure if this piece of the project has been capitalized on enough. Is there actually a strategic plan worked out, or is this seen as an example of the “self-organizing” thing that will be motivated by merely hanging out in the academic world? The “public” face of the noble anthropologist

project is often left untouched, deemed beyond the scope of the self-sustaining academic enterprise. With caution I thread this path, knowing well that it is exactly somebody like Dianne Rocheleau who is capable of straddling the divide of academics and professional lives. Still, I fear that perhaps the idea that the extension of networks of belief and praxis should be done by those managers who do it best—marketers—and preferably in the form of an official network, institute, or program which has considerable funding attached to it—corporate or not—is one that is commonly bypassed in the academic world, by fear of copying that which is bad and rears its ugly head. I would argue that Rocheleau would be a great advocate of a feminist political ecology if she would be given the resources and tools to translate the message appropriately. I hope to remain updated.

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