

BOOK REVIEW

The Precarity of Energy Security and Environmental Activism in the South

Simpson, A. (2017). *Energy, governance and security in Thailand and Myanmar (Burma): A critical approach to environmental politics in the South*. Copenhagen K, Denmark: NIAS Press. 271 pages, ISBN: 978-87-7694-207-6.

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In recounting the conditions during the fieldwork for this book project, Adam Simpson cited that he is aware of the “security difficulties and ethical dangers” that exists in and around Myanmar, especially with the stringent military presence surrounding the particular pipeline and dam sites he was interested in researching about. However, Simpson quickly acknowledged that unlike the local activists that he has conducted interviews with, his Australian and EU citizenship provided him with a level of security that is, unfortunately, not shared by his subjects. The military conditions eventually changed since the release of *Energy, Governance and Security in Thailand and Myanmar*’s initial hardbound edition back in 2014 to a “more permissive” atmosphere that he mentioned and discussed in his follow-up eighth chapter for the 2017 paperback edition.

In that same line, one of the most appealing aspects of the book is how extensively Simpson expounded on the differences and similarities of North and South environmentalism. He was careful to cite his privileges

(if and when he needed to) and to base his interpretations solely on the numerous interviews, related literature, and resources that he utilized in order to complete the book’s critical framework. This unbiased scholarship, partnered with a strong organization that strives to define imperative terminologies and provides extensive examples, maintains an analysis that engages with the precarity of environmentalism in the South—and how transnationalism (and globalization, in relation to this term) can either hinder or help local activist groups and non-government organizations.

The book largely depends on the four “green pillars” that determine whether environmental groups were “emancipatory:” ecological sustainability, participatory democracy, environmental justice, and nonviolence. In the Preface to the updated paperback edition, Simpson relayed how the major source of criticism for his first edition was on whether these four pillars were appropriate to determine the situation of Southern environmentalist groups. Though he found the critique valid, he did defend his choice for the four

pillars as those that support the philosophical values that are present in both North and South subaltern environmentalism. As the book progresses, it appears that even if Simpson delineated the four pillars as the basis for defining whether an environmental group is emancipatory or not, his analysis was more open to interpretations—in the sense that he did not allow the four pillars to be his sole guides for his analysis. He mentioned crucial terminologies as he further related his critical framework, such as Laura Pulido's "subaltern environmentalism" which challenges the many intersections of domination of/from environmental conflicts or problems experienced mostly by oppressed and marginalized groups, and "activist diaspora" which is usually brought upon by unsafe environments for the activists themselves, though in the end it most likely allows for otherwise unavailable linkages and specialist knowledge for the exiled activist to access due to "broader campaign networks or coalitions in foreign or 'outsider' communities" (p.89). It is in the engagement with these terms and their succeeding situations that Simpson's work has found its niche: environmental activism in the South is crucial, not only for the South itself but also for the global community.

Grappling with the question, "Are Southern activist groups emancipatory?" and using the four green pillars as its theoretical framework, *Energy, Governance and Security* immediately provided the obvious distinctions between North and South activist environmental governance. In the first chapter, it was stressed that activist environmental governance is most important in the South because it is where environmental security is problematic; it is also where authoritarian governments and institutions rule these energy-rich states. Unfortunately and not surprisingly, they usually favor the corporations or countries behind these energy projects. Furthermore, these developments are usually at the expense of minorities or oppressed indigenous groups that have lived in the energy-rich areas for decades or centuries. It is clear at this point that the book is, as Simpson stressed, based on "how the activist community sees themselves and their role in society" (p. 10). That point is made to narrow down one of the unsaid goals of the book: provide a voice for the subaltern environmentalists of the South. The analysis operates on the data that Simpson has researched and/

or received from the activists themselves, and does not include any points of view from the corporations, governments, or institutions that it is critical of. That said, the overall unbiased tone of the project and its acknowledgment of its limitations signals that there is no need for interjections from the other side of the environmental security discourse, either.

The second chapter focuses on the theoretical overview of the analysis, including a critique of a model proposed by Doyle and Doherty in the essay, "Green public spheres and green governance state: The politics of emancipation and ecological conditionality" that was published in *Environmental Politics*. Here in this chapter is the distinct emphasis on the differences between the North and South environmentalism, which relates that when it comes to environmental security, the Global North focuses more on "ecological issues that may result in social injustices" (p.34), while in the Global South, this particular approach in situations such as the forced removal of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands may result to threats of violence or death. It is also in this chapter that Simpson provided the framework for the four green pillars in relation to their significance in critiquing the environmental groups in the South. These are the following: ecological sustainability, which in many parts of the South may be construed as one that naturally follows a more urgent focus on justice and democracy for marginalized groups; participatory democracy that has emphasis on its key goal of decentralization in the sense that decentralizing means local economic self-reliance and sustainability; environmental justice that views the natural relationship of equality among individuals, and shuns the "hierarchy" brought about by neoliberalism and/or modernity; and finally, nonviolence that is rooted in nonviolent protests and (at times) religious beliefs for even if protest plays a critical role in environmentalisms in the South, nonviolent is seen as an acknowledgment of vulnerability, thus, conquering said vulnerability. Also notable in this chapter is its discussion of the differing current ideological frameworks working in the North and South; wherein the North is striving towards post-materialists critiques and discourses, while the South grapples with the effects and situations of post-colonialism and post-structuralism.

What Simpson did not emphasize on, however, is the concept of “Northern Imperialism,” which he mentioned in differentiating North and South ideological cultures. Though he did eventually move to a more critical overview of how transnational campaigns can either benefit or harm local activist movements in the South (predominantly in chapter six), he did not offer a reasonable focus on how the North itself is at times the root cause of the precarity of environmentalism in the South, and that this current exploitation and power imbalances are often brought about by persisting imperialism in former colonial countries and/or neoliberalism from neighboring and richer Asian countries. In Simpson’s defense though, he has noted that there are power imbalances in other parts of the Global South, but that his focus was solely on Thailand and Myanmar because of their chiasmic environmental situation and transnational avenues of environmental projects.

The third and fourth chapter is an intimate and exhaustive narrative of the political and environmental history of Thailand and Myanmar, as well as the four projects that has merited activism from the two countries: the Yadana Gas Pipeline Project, the Trans Thailand-Malaysia (TTM) Gas Pipeline Project, the Salween Dam Projects, and the Shwe Gas Pipeline Project. Chapter 3 provides the necessary backgrounds for the current environmental issues that the two countries are facing, while Chapter 4 reveals the measures local activists have taken and undertaken to assert their rights and the rights of the marginalized peoples. In Chapter 4, Simpson defined “local activism” as “activism that is undertaken within borders primarily directed at a domestic audience in the home country, which is the physical location of the project” (p. 93), and mentioned that because of the precarity of activism in the South, “transnational activism” has been one of the many results of it. That said, local activism in the South is characterized by two distinct features: first, public protests (usually nonviolent), and second, engagement with the state and business through public participation. Despite the nonviolent nature of these protests and their appeals to the dominant religion (Buddhism, for example, in Thailand) as symbols of identity and differentiation to engage the public, the literature reveals that the

more authoritarian the political regime is, the more significant its impact is on the vulnerability of the local activists.

The analysis takes a more transnational turn in Chapter 5 when Simpson utilized a transnational non-government organization—Earth Rights International (ERI)—as an exemplar. As a case study, Simpson found USA-based ERI compelling for he ticked all the descriptors for an emancipatory governance group (EGG), and that it engages in activism against environmental insecurity in the South by offering legal programs, training courses, and campaigns. Also defined here is the term “earth rights,” which is the nexus between human rights and environmental protection and security, which is among the core values of ERI. Furthermore, he detailed here how the ERI was formed when two multinational oil companies—Total of France and Unocal of the US—fostered a relationship with Myanmar to build the Yadana Gas Pipeline Project. The result of this partnership is catastrophic when the local communities are taken in context: widespread reports of the Burmese army attacking and intimidating the indigenous peoples that included human rights violation such as murder, rape, and forced evacuations. Eventually, exiled Ka Hsaw Wa from the Karen ethnic minority in Burma collaborated with two American lawyers, Katie Redford and Tyler Giannini, to form ERI. With a grant from the Echoing Green Foundation, the team was able to sue the two oil companies for human rights abuses in a US courtroom and had set a precedent for human rights and corporate accountability. Perhaps one of the most intriguing projects of ERI nowadays is its “EarthRights schools” that provides information and education on the effects of globalization in the South and allows the students to employ critical training tools for responding, managing, and challenging associated processes in environmental security.

In Chapter 6, Simpson focused on “transnational campaigns” that investigates other notable transnational organizations, coalitions, and networks that may or may not offer other strategies in tackling and critiquing environmental security in the South. Then, he punctuated this critique with what appears to be the most striking part of the book, which is Chapter 7: Environmental Politics in the South. This chapter

is where Simpson only asserted, and where his voice not only as an environmental researcher but also as an environmental activist/advocate is strongly revealed. He proposed a more critical approach to the discourse of energy security and that this issue must not be separated from environmental security. The approach is a more generalized environmental security framework that has further emphasis on decentralization: first, energy security must be considered as a fundamental and integral component of critical environmental security; second, the referent object of energy security moves from the North to the marginalized individuals and communities in the South; third, critical energy security analysis should broaden to include renewable, low carbon, and decentralized energy sources rather than on just centralized fossil fuels, with the hopes that energy production can be owned or controlled by local communities; and finally, the pursuit of energy security is not affecting other aspects of environmental security and the overall aspects of total environmental security should and must be improved.

The newest addition to the paperback edition is Simpson's postscript on Chapter 8: Accommodation and Oppression. He further elucidated on how, despite the friendlier and more permissive atmosphere in the previously militarized and hostile environments he has been in, issues regarding environmental security still prevails—perhaps more so than before. Local activism, on the other hand, has found other mediums like social media and websites to engage the public. He also mentioned the current Rohingya issue wherein Aung San Suu Kyi has refused to acknowledge the crises or criticize the military for its campaigns against many ethnic regions in Myanmar. In doing so, he opened up the arena for a more international discussion of the situation, and how the human rights violations in this particular issue have garnered worldwide attention. In short, it has placed Myanmar within the crosshairs of justice and human rights violations; thus, unearthing other issues—environmental or not—in the South, as well.

The book's streamlined discourse on the environmental security of particular energy projects in Thailand and Myanmar has resulted in a comprehensive project that details not only the precarity of local activism in the South, but also the significance

of transnational activism and efforts in global environmental issues. The study itself proves useful in other environmental security concerns in neighboring Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and India wherein the persisting intersections of power with and among their former colonizers has resulted in the degradation of their natural resources and the compromise of the lives of its many ethnic minorities. Students of environmental politics and history, ecology, biology, and even the environmental humanities will benefit most from Simpson's study. Policymakers and lawmakers will also benefit in drafting policies are related to climate justice. Most important, the critical framework that Simpson offered in the seventh chapter may prove imperative in analyzing other environmental groups in order to ascertain their future effectiveness in dealing with the precarity of environmental situations in the South. That said, Simpson's groundbreaking project paves the way for a more critical discourse of environmental security in the Global South, without isolating it from the global environmental discourse; rather, it lends the complicated environmental politics of the South a voice and a face in the growing awareness of worldwide environmental issues, and demonstrates how both the North and South inevitably relate/affect one another in these situations.