Towards a political ecology of education: the educational politics of scale in southern Pará, Brazil

David Meek

To cite this article: David Meek (2015) Towards a political ecology of education: the educational politics of scale in southern Pará, Brazil, Environmental Education Research, 21:3, 447-459, DOI: 10.1080/13504622.2014.993932

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2014.993932

Published online: 07 Jan 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 150

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 3 View citing articles
Towards a political ecology of education: the educational politics of scale in southern Pará, Brazil

David Meek*

Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

(Received 6 July 2013; accepted 19 November 2014)

Social movements have initiated both academic programs and disciplines. I present ethnographic data that I gathered during 17 months of fieldwork with the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in southeastern Pará, Brazil, to explore the MST’s role in creating agroecological education opportunities. My analysis highlights three factors in southeastern Pará that initiate environmental education opportunities. First, activist professors are key players, serving as mediators between the state and social movements. Second, recurring events incubate environmental educational institutions and degree programs. Third, by collaborating with institutionalized education, movements are able to develop their own radical educational spaces. These three factors result in a gradual anti-neoliberal transformation in southeastern Pará’s rural educational opportunities. I develop a theoretical perspective of the political ecology of education to understand the relations between these three factors and educational change. By drawing attention to the educational politics of scale, I help advance theories of environmental education in a neoliberal age.

Keywords: political ecology of education; Landless Workers’ Movement; environmental education; scale; Brazil

Introduction

Social movements are challenging neoliberalism’s dual vision of education and environmental resources as a market system of privatized services (McCarthy and Prudham 2004; Mein 2009). Social movements institutionalize critical environmental learning as part of a larger anti-neoliberal project. Yet, how and why do social movements institutionalize critical environmental education in the very neoliberal educational system? I address this larger question by exploring the following three sub-questions:

(1) How do social movements access political programs and financial resources?
(2) What facilitates the evolution of innovative educational institutions?
(3) How can institutionalized education help movements train their members?

In this article, I begin constructing a theoretical framework to attend to these questions, which synthesizes insights from political ecology and the political economy of education.

*Email: ddmeeck@ua.edu

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
Political ecology is an interdisciplinary sub-field that explores the relationships between environmental change and political, economic, and social processes (Bryant 1992; Greenberg and Park 1994; Robbins 2004). Political ecology can be contrasted with classic ecology, which apolitically explores relationships between organisms and their surroundings (Biersack and Greenberg 2006). Scholarship in the political economy of education, meanwhile, analyzes the relationships between political policies and the funding of educational programs (Elmore 1984; Carnoy 1985; Torres and Schugurensky 2002; Mitchell and Mitchell 2003).

As Roderick Neumann indicates in the opening to Making Political Ecology, ‘The environment and how we acquire, disseminate, and legitimate knowledge about it are highly politicized, reflective of relations of power, and contested’ (Neumann 2005, 1). Yet, despite this clear articulation of the relations between the politics of knowledge and the environment, there lacks a political ecology of education. In defining a political ecology of education, I expand on two traditional definitions of political ecology. The first is a synthesis ‘of political economy, with its insistence on the need to link the distribution of power with productive activity and ecological analysis …’ (Greenberg and Park 1994, 6). Secondly, I draw upon the definition of political ecology as ‘the study of interdependence among political units and of inter-relationships between political units and their environment’ (Hempel 1996, 150).

Synthesizing these conceptions, I define a political ecology of education as a framework for understanding how the reciprocal relations between political economic forces influence pedagogical opportunities – from tacit to formal learning – affecting the production, dissemination, and contestation of environmental knowledge at various interconnected scales. It also affords the possibility to explore downstream effects on access and control over natural resources, interactions with cultural landscape, as well as local conceptions of nature–society relationships.

I apply this nascent political ecology of education framework to a case study of the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (O Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or MST), an agrarian social movement that has institutionalized critical environmental education. First, I unpack the concept of scale. I then provide a short background on the MST. I then present research results in three sections, each of which examines one of the questions posed above. I collected these data during 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork, involving participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, between 2009–2013 in a variety of MST settlements and educational spaces in southern Pará, Brazil. I accounted for response bias due to my subject position as ethnographer by triangulation, verifying data when results became redundant (Luhrmann 2006).

The educational politics of scale

There remains little agreement on how to operationalize the term scale (Marston et al. 2005, 16). I employ a combination of a hierarchical and a horizontal conception of scale. A hierarchical vision of scale is a nested set of territorial units, ranging from the global to the body (Brenner 2005, 9). Horizontal scale, by contrast, is a network that transgresses boundaries (Leitner 2004, 237). I integrate these two scalar lenses within the political ecology of education perspective to help explore the implications of what I term the educational politics of scale. My conception of an educational politics of scale draws upon previous scholarship of “educational scales” as the spatial and temporal orders generated as pupils and teachers move and are
moved through educational systems” (Nespor 2004, 309, see also McKenzie 2012). I build upon Nespor’s understanding of scale as networked by emphasizing how the interconnections between multiple sites of political economy and social contest structure the production of educational opportunities for environmental learning.

I understand the educational politics of scale as concerned with the spatial character of educational policy and action. Similar to Cox (1998), one might draw upon the educational politics of scale to ask, for example, whether anti-neoliberal educational actions are inherently local, regional, national, or international? Similarly, where can one geographically position the public policies that fund anti-neoliberal educational initiatives? By addressing these questions, I demonstrate that the educational politics of scale are central to a political ecology of education, and its analysis of how interrelations between political policy, economic resources, and educational action affect environmental knowledge production.

Case study: the Brazilian landless workers’ movement
The Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) is widely recognized as the most successful agrarian social movement in Brazil (Wolford 2010). MST members occupy what they perceive as unused agricultural land and pressure the government to take the land and create a community, known as an agrarian reform settlement. Two foci within the MST are locally relevant education and agroecology.

The MST has a complicated relationship with the state in terms of education provision. The MST believes that education within settlements is the state’s responsibility. Yet, the MST also believes these schools’ curricula should incorporate the movement’s ideals and principles. The MST seeks to create culturally relevant curricula through its vocal position in an umbrella movement for education reform known as Educação do Campo.¹

The Educação do Campo movement is a major force in shaping rural education in agrarian reform settlements. The Educação do Campo movement is a movement of movements, ‘defined by its demands for quality and free education from infancy through university, and the construction of a distinctly rural school that is guided by a vision of rural development, which is based in social justice, agricultural cooperation, environmental respect, and the valuing of rural culture (Munarim 2008, 61)’. This movement has helped shape Brazilian educational policy toward locally relevant rural education as opposed to homogenous national programs that do not attend to local diversity in geography, culture, and history (Comilo and Brandão 2010; Breitenbach 2011).

Agroecology, which is the integration of ecological principles into sustainable agricultural systems (Gliessman 2006), is another main focus of the MST and larger Educação do Campo movement’s educational agendas. The MST’s ideological and material engagement with agroecology can be tracked to its role within the international umbrella peasant movement La Via Campesina (LVC) (Wittman 2009). Agroecology is employed by the MST as a tool opposed to industrial agriculture, and its conventional focus on environmentally damaging export crops, instead promoting agricultural sustainability (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Rosset and Martinez-Torres 2012).

The contest between neoliberal and anti-neoliberal education in Brazil
Brazilian universities are key battlegrounds between neoliberalism and anti-neoliberalism. The formation of the Brazilian higher education system, particularly
its agronomy programs, was interlinked with large-scale agribusiness and international financing. During the 1940s, the American International Association for Economic Development, funded by the Rockefeller foundation, founded university agronomy training programs that trained extension agents to transform rural producers from purportedly backward agricultural practices to modern ones based in advanced technology and industry (Callou et al. 2008). These programs increasingly focused on large-scale, technical and capital-intensive agriculture. During the 1980s, with the fall of the Brazilian dictatorship, civil society began to critique the increasingly ‘American organizational model of a rational, capitalist university-enterprise focused on productivity’ (Orso 2007, 79 in Carvalho and Mendes 2011, 133). However, the three successive national governments of Fernando Collor de Melo (1990–02), Itamar Franco (1992–03), and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–8 and 1999–2002) put into place the neoliberal educational policies of the World Bank, which included privatization and outsourcing of university activity (Segundo 2005). As Chauí notes, the university became characterized ‘as a service provider to private companies’ (2001, 35–36 in Carvalho and Mendes 2011, 134).

Against this neoliberal backdrop, the MST has helped advance rural universities focus on educação do campo. In 1998, the MST and other social movements that comprise the larger Educação do Campo movement began challenging the market logic of education policy by advocating the creation of the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). PRONERA provides funding to support secondary and post-secondary courses for inhabitants of agrarian reform settlements. I see PRONERA as exemplary of an anti-neoliberal educational policy, because its programs do not further privatize, but instead strengthen existing state educational institutions and seek to train students to attend to local social and environmental justice needs rather than those of the market system.

I now turn to explore the interplay between the opportunities and constraints facing the MST’s anti-neoliberal educational initiatives in the southeastern portion of the state of Pará. The educational institutions I analyze are the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), the Rural Marabá Campus of the Federal Technical Institute of Pará (IFPA-CRMB), and the Agroecological Institute of Latin America-Amazonia branch (IALA). The IFPA and UFPA are regional federal educational institutions’ while the IALA is a social movement educational space. I focus on two MST educational programs that revolve around critical environmental learning. The first is a graduate certificate program entitled ‘The Agrarian Question, Agroecology, and Educação do Campo,’ which is a PRONERA course offered in partnership between the UFPA and IALA. The second is a vocational high-school program in agroecology that takes place at the IFPA-CRMB. Both involve critical place-based learning activities.² The only students who can participate in these PRONERA programs are inhabitants of agrarian reform settlements. Frequently, the students chosen to attend these PRONERA programs are the most politically active members of their communities.

How do the region’s social movements access political programs and financial resources?

Two signs frame the entrance to the Federal Institute of Pará, Rural Campus of Marabá (IFPA-CRMB). The first indicates the amount of governmental investment in the campus’s construction. The second shows the MST flag and reads Educação
do Campo – Our Right – The State’s Obligation. These signs’ juxtaposition points to the ongoing struggle necessary to secure state resources for rural education.

On a Saturday in November 2012, a community forum is taking place at the IFPA-CRMB. The forum won’t start for some time, and so Helix, a student in the program, offers to show me some of the students’ experimental agroecology projects. We enter a garden area and find a tarp-covered piece of ground. A trellis with a PVC pipe surrounds it. This, Helix proudly tells me, is a biogas generator. ‘We just finished it, so no gas yet, but it would come out here,’ he points at a valve. ‘We bring the food waste from the school and mix it with manure, drop it under the tarp and let biodegradation do its work. When methane rises, the tarp will billow, and the only byproducts will be rich compost and a liquid that is high in nutrients.’ Impressed, I turn around and find Marcos Aurelio, Helix’s agroecology teacher, bending down in some bushes. Seeing Helix and me, he calls us over. In his agroecology class they’ll be talking about nitrogen fixation, and Marcos wants to show his class an example of rhizomes. ‘I want to show them how rhizomes look like. It can’t just be in theory, it needs to be in practice as well. The students need to be able to see and feel the rhizomes. He reaches down and pulls up a plant, gently fingering its roots. This will do.’ We walk back toward the auditorium and come to an area where beans are planted in amongst the grass. Marcos remarks ‘We’re doing research on these beans, looking at them as a method of combating the pasture grass. Rather than burning, farmers can plant beans, which not only give food, but also provide nitrogen to the soil. Early results look promising.’ Heading towards the cafeteria where the presentations will take place, I reflect on how divergent these experiential agroecological learning opportunities are from the traditional educational system that reproduces a conception of high-input agriculture.

In the auditorium, the director of the IFPA-CRMB is giving a presentation to an assembled group of parents. A summary of the budget of the school’s agroecology high-school program is projected on the wall. The director provides context for these figures by describing the ongoing struggles, victories, and setbacks that occur in the process of securing the state’s promised education funding. The audience erupts into applause as the director concludes his presentation with a picture of him hugging Brazilian president Dilma Rouseff. ‘That was just three days ago in Brasília!’ he smiles. The image in combination with the director’s account of trials, struggles, and partial victories keeping the campus fiscally solvent paints a clear picture: The administration and faculty are directly linked to the seat of power and will traverse geopolitical scales in order to pressure the government for the resources needed. Negotiating these educational politics of scale is essential to obtain the political and financial resources needed to continue the dual projects of advancing locally relevant education and the creation of agroecological education opportunities.

The UFPA is another site of anti-neoliberal action that is resulting in the creation of critical environmental education opportunities. The case of Gemeson Brito, below, illustrates how activists working within the university are crucial for motivating and sustaining PRONERA’s activity. With his black coconut ring symbolizing his commitment to emancipatory social change, and MST movement shirt, Gemeson Brito contrasts from most high-level university administrators. Brito has directed nearly all of the region’s PRONERA courses. When asked about the political economy of PRONERA, Brito responded, ‘PRONERA only agrees to fund courses that have an involvement with a University or an educational institution, and social movements. And why is it this way?’ he asked, rhetorically. ‘Because, the program
was designed by the social movements themselves... But it’s very unstable, because it is open to the evaluation of the Ministerio Publico, and the accusations of the Bancado Ruralista [a right-wing land owners’ lobby group].’ He goes on to explain,

There was a crisis in which there was a congressional inquiry of the MST. They were going to evaluate government projects that finance the MST’s projects. The first program that was analyzed was PRONERA, and almost two years went by without being able to liberate any monies, or almost any funding.

Brito’s evaluation of PRONERA’s political economy highlights two important points concerning the educational politics of scale. First, Brito draws attention to the role of a horizontally scaled social movement in molding the funding networks that influence local education. Social movements helped develop PRONERA in order to fund partnerships between themselves and universities. Additionally, Brito underscores the vertically scaled political economy of education: whereas the congressional inquiry into the MST’s finances was at a national level, the experience of financial instability was inherently local.

Brito goes on to discuss the linkages between bureaucracy, financial instability, and the everyday resistance of activist professors. When asked what his daily life is like as a coordinator of these PRONERA programs, Gemeson sighs, takes off his wire rim glasses to rub his eyes, and continues, ‘In a variety of ways you simply have [long pause]....to struggle, because you have to get involved. If you were just to send a memo requesting funds to be made available it can easily be forgotten.’ Brito continues, ‘So if you don’t pick up the phone and call, and insist, and question – so many times I’ve had to personally go to INCRA, you understand? Because sometimes to get access to a [financial] installment you need to get approval at five levels.’ Brito concludes:

So you send in the protocol, but the thing doesn’t move forward in the nice way that it should, and so you call and they say, ‘Oh, it’s stopped at the first level,’ and so you go there personally: ‘What’s the problem?’ .... ‘Oh, it’s missing this document, you need to correct this or that,’ and so you need to exert this additional force, because if you don’t these things take too long, you lose the window of time. There is an activist force, in the sense that you need to force the bureaucracy to function.

Brito’s persistence is more than simply following up on his administrative responsibilities. His persistence is emblematic of quotidian forms of resistance (Scott 1987). Studies of such resistance, particularly among institutional activists negotiating bureaucracy (Katzenstein 1998; Moore 1999; Raeburn 2004; Arthur 2009; Banaszak 2010), highlight the importance of simple tactics such as picking up the phone.

Much like Gemeson Brito, Marcio de Souza’s life is intertwined with education and activism. Marcio is a teacher in the IFPA-CRMB’s vocational agroecology program. Marcio is a long-time member of various social movements and is extensively involved with PRONERA courses. He describes the accretion of educational opportunities in this area as an organic process arising from sheer need in the early 2000s.

The first course was in literacy, and then it was like, ‘How can you have literacy training without teachers’ education?’ So then there was teachers’ education. ‘Okay, so you’ve got teachers’ education, well how can you not have a technical course?’ So the technical course was the first in Brazil, but then we said ‘Okay, you’ve got a technical course, how can you not have a university level course?’ So then we got a university
level program in agronomy and rural education. And then we asked ourselves, ‘How can you have a university level program without a post-graduate program?’ It was in this way that it kept developing in the region.

Marcio’s perspective underscores how the relationality between educational scales is constitutive of gradual change. The creation of educational opportunities at various institutional scales – from high-school to university to graduate certificate to continuing education – enabled the ‘the vertical integration of courses,’ as another professor described it. The metaphor of ‘vertical integration’ is a tactical deployment of the educational politics of scale, as the combination of local projects evidence regional change. The piecemeal manner that anti-neoliberal movements and their interlocutors advance specific projects is, therefore, one way they articulate a counter-hegemonic vision of education within the larger hegemonic neoliberal system. The educational politics of scale constitute the examples of the director of the IFPA-CRMB’s trip to Brasilia, the financial instability of PRONERA funds, and Souza’s description of the vertical integration of rural education courses. From a political ecology of education perspective, institutional activists’ negotiation of the educational politics of scale is a key factor in the production of critical environmental education opportunities.

What facilitates the evolution of innovative educational institutions in southern Pará?

Spaces of dialog are instrumental to creating anti-neoliberal environmental education opportunities. Spaces that have an intended educational objective and whose purpose is to encourage critical dialog with the ultimate goal of actualizing emancipatory social change are termed dialogic spaces (Rule 2004, 320). As Eduardo, an activist professor who directs the agroecology certificate program at the UFPA, describes, debate is a key strategy for creating change within the University:

Our orientation and partnership with the social movements is clear. You begin to occupy the university with debates, with actions, with videos, with week-long activities, which is part of our strategy … when you’re bringing all this in, there’s no way that the university can turn its back on it...you enable the reflection on what other forms the university can take.

Eduardo is explicit: Both social movements and faculty seek to physically and ideologically occupy the university through the debates and activities they host. These debates are, according to Eduardo, used to integrate and legitimate the demands of activists from social movements in the university’s public consciousness. These dialogic spaces have a trickle-up scalar effect. Although they started at a small scale, they caused a transformational process at the larger scale of the university itself.

Indeed, the origination of the Rural Campus of Marabá (IFPA-CRMB) grew out of the scalar politics of dialogic spaces. All professors I spoke with emphasized how this agroecological school arose from a series of debates and associated activism that took place at the Regional Forum of Educação do Campo (FREC) in 2005, 2009, and 2011, consisting of seminars, plenaries, debates, and workshops.

The importance of the FREC to both the origination, and continued development, of the CRMB, is sustained by having a FREC representative on the CRMB advisory board. Jean Luc is the FREC representative. A 75-year-old French agronomist, educator, and activist who worked in the region for the last 30 years, Jean Luc
has only a handful of remaining teeth, evidencing that his life in the campo was not much different than the peasants with whom he works. When I ask Jean Luc to help me understand FREC’s role in the region, he tells me:

the Rural Campus of Marabá is the product of a dialog that was created by the FREC. The FREC brought together the diverse institutions and movements that are working in the region – and from there created a debate that led to the creation of the Rural Campus of Marabá.

The CRMB is the only federally funded and managed agroecological technical institute within an MST settlement in Brazil. This achievement exemplifies a national scale change in the form of a space for radical education within the federal technical institute system. Employing a political ecology of education lens, the constitutive nature of the FREC and the various debates in the university draw attention to how the reciprocal relations between the spaces and scales of debate created the CRMB and a transformed university, providing new opportunities for critical environmental education to students from agrarian reform settlements.

How can institutionalized rural education help movements train their members?

In Pará, institutionalized rural education is facilitating the construction of radical education spaces that are intended to augment the MST’s reach in providing agroecological education to its members. Take, for instance, the concluding section of the UFPA graduate certificate course in ‘The Agrarian Question, Agroecology, and Educação do Campo.’ This event was a three-day seminar in December 2012 hosted at the Agroecological Institute of Latin America (IALA), located in another MST settlement. MST leaders and University professors organized this event as an opportunity to strategize the development of this institute as a Pan-Amazonian center for radical agroecological training. Fifty MST and educator activists travelled from the Pan-Amazonian region to discuss how IALA can achieve its mission to be a space for agroecological convergence.

A state MST leader, Andreia, takes the microphone on the second day and launches into a polemic: ‘The seminar, from yesterday, to today, to tomorrow, is a process for us to reflect about the necessity for the construction of a project, and the construction of a strategy.’ Andreia both goads and grounds the presenters:

One of the things that we’ve discussed through the weekend is that all that we’ve done at IALA up until this moment isn’t sufficient to achieve what we’ve wished for, or for what we’ve been challenged to do... and for this we have the saying.

Her voice slows and she speaks the next words like a mantra: ‘the IALA is a process of construction that is...’ and the crowd collectively finish for her, ‘continual.’ During a break between sessions, Dayze, a dedicated MST activist, the long-time director of IALA, and a student about to graduate from the certificate program, reflects on the collaboration of the nascent IALA with the certificate program, noting that:

We began with the certificate because it was the only type of course that we could develop with the University, and because then it is easier to access other types of training programs, whether at the level of certificate or even at the high-school level. In addition, offering the certificate gives you a certain liberty to include in the course curriculum themes that help us to engage not only with the course itself, but to think about the challenge of the construction of IALA, what is it that IALA should be?
Dayze’s sentiments, and the context in which they were given (namely, at a seminar weekend of a University course hosted in a radical agroecological institute) show that leaders within the MST strategically designed courses that would facilitate the creation of University partnerships. Lastly, Dayze explains that the freedom built into course helps develop the institute itself; in other words, there is a scalar feedback loop between the IALA and the creation of the course. Similar to Marcio’s description of ‘vertical integration,’ IALA is being constructed through an iterative scalar process, where scale is understood as educational, in terms of variety of course offerings, and both horizontally and vertically geographic, as exemplified by its course offerings that brought together students and activist intellectuals from across the Pan-Amazonian region.

In two ways, the concluding section of the graduate certificate course evidence how the politics of educational scale provide insight into the political ecology of education. First, recursive debates arose at IALA as students presented their research projects on agroecological production challenges in the region, leading to discussions about how IALA could better reach not only the region’s 500 settlements, but also the countless other rural communities in the Pan-Amazonian basin. These discussions were intended to create educational opportunities at vertically and horizontally interconnected geographic scales – from the local to the regional, national, and international. This scaling out was inherently horizontal, as the regional leaders of the MST, a national-level Brazilian movement, advanced the agroecological aims of the international, umbrella social movement LVC. Second, financial resources from the vertically scaled national PRONERA program enabled a horizontally scaled convergence as dozens of MST members, activist professors, and renowned academics converged in this MST settlement to debate the future of its evolving agroecological educational space. The certificate program was funded by the national-level PRONERA program and was explicitly designed to facilitate the construction of an anti-neoliberal educational space that would attend to the needs of various vertical and horizontal scales. It achieved this by embracing the politics of scale and drawing upon a national vertically scaled program to bring together horizontally scaled local, regional, national, and international activists and intellectuals. The political ecology of education lens draws attention to the importance of iterative relations between scale, political economy, and the creation of critical environmental learning opportunities at educational institutions, such as those described here between IALA and the UFPA.

Conclusions
In this article, I proposed a theoretical framework for explicating the political ecology of education of educational institutions in Pará. The educational politics of scale are integral to this perspective and offer a way of understanding how economics, policy, power, and resistance influence both vertically and horizontally scaled opportunities for environmental knowledge production. I drew upon the political ecology of education framework to answer three main questions related to the evolution of opportunities for critical environmental education in southern Pará, Brazil.

How do the region’s social movements access political programs and financial resources? As my results illustrate, institutional partnerships, and the activists that directed them, were key players in creating new rural educational opportunities. This draws attention to how both ‘local neoliberalisms’ (Peck and Tickell 2002) and local
anti-neoliberalisms are imbricated within wider networks. The contest between neoliberal and anti-neoliberal tactics – between funding and blockage – produces heartlands, such as the capital of Brasilia where policies are formed and disputed, and the zones of extension, such as rural Amazonia where they are implemented (Peck and Tickell 2002). Additionally, the amalgamation of new program across the region constitutes gradual change. Paying attention to these scalar politics makes it difficult to trace historical points of origination and larger geographical trajectories of change (Steiner-Khamsi 2004). As they conglomerate, the existence of anti-neoliberal educational opportunities begins to take on the omnipresent and unquestionable nature of neoliberalism (Hursh 2007; Ferguson 2009).

What facilitates the evolution of innovative educational institutions in southeastern Pará? Eduardo’s narrative highlighted how the UFPA faculty strategically held debates and activities to bring about a transformative discussion at the university level. Directing the focus to the incubation of institutions, Jean Luc’s vignette provided a third example by pinpointing the FREC as the originating point of the CRMB. By exploring the relations between scale, space, and environmental learning, a political ecology of education lens showed how dialogic spaces affect the production of critical environmental education opportunities.

How does institutionalized education help social movements train their members? The IALA narrative highlighted how IALA was able to benefit from PRONERA funding by forging a University partnership, starting it on a perceived road toward expanded radical education provision at various educational scales. The results from IALA, when seen from political ecology of education perspective, demonstrate that the MST fostered a unique feedback loop between the graduate certificate program and the construction of IALA, harnessing the resources and opportunities afforded by institutionalized rural education.

These three questions, and the analyses presented along with them, collectively highlight a central conclusion: by creating anti-neoliberal educational opportunities at various institutional scales, inter-institutional networks of MST and professor activists have fomented a regional transformation in agroecological education opportunities currently taking place in southern Pará. This gradual swell is occurring on various planes. The educational politics of scale were exemplified by ‘vertically integrated’ courses, educational spaces, such as IALA that attend to Pan-Amazonian educational needs, and spaces of debate that led to the origination of the CRMB and a transformed university. This sea change is also pedagogical – based in an anti-neoliberal paradigm of education, known as educação do campo. Part and parcel of each of these facets are political and economic processes.

The political ecology of education perspective emphasizes the importance of power, resistance, and economics in mediating the construction of interconnected scales of agroecological education opportunities. Whereas three ostensibly separate questions guided this article, from the political ecology of education perspective, they are part of a broader question about the relations between political and economic processes and changes in critical environmental education opportunities. This vantage point understands environmental education opportunities as a product of power, resistance, and scale. Future studies are needed to further develop both the theoretical implications and practical utility of a political ecology of education lens, bringing into focus the often messy scalar relations between politics, economy, education, and ecology.
Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant [BCS-1060888]; Social Science Research Council’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship; Fulbright Foundation Fellowship. Pilot research in 2009 was funded by the University of Georgia’s Dean’s award; Melissa Hague award; and Tinker award. Additional field research in 2013 was supported by the University of Georgia’s Wilson Center Foundation.

Funding

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant [BCS-1060888]; Social Science Research Council’s International Dissertation Research Fellowship; Fulbright Foundation Fellowship. Pilot research in 2009 was funded by the University of Georgia’s Dean’s award; Melissa Hague award; and Tinker award. Additional field research in 2013 was supported by the University of Georgia’s Wilson Center Foundation.

Notes

1. I capitalize Educação do Campo when referring to the education reform movement; otherwise, the phrase refers to locally relevant pedagogy.
2. Space constraints preclude extended discussion of the content of these programs; in this manuscript, I focus on the origination of these critical environmental education opportunities and the institutions that offer them.

Notes on contributor

David Meek is currently an instructor of anthropology at the University of Alabama. His research interests surround the intersection of sustainable agriculture, critical environmental education and social movements. He has published on this research in The Journal of Peasant Studies, Antipode, Environment and Society: Advances in Research, Studies in the Education of Adults, Journal of Sustainability Education among other journals.

References


