

Michael J. Watts

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[Michael J. Watts](#), one of the most important figures in academic geography today, has transformed geography and cognate disciplines over the past three decades. A leading figure in the general field of human geography, and more specifically in political ecology, he paints his contributions to scholarship, and to the discipline, across a broad canvas. His lengthy record of distinguished scholarship and international recognition signal a fiercely original mind, and a brilliant theorist. His work is empirically based and contributes to theory, drawing on the arguments of a wide range of intellectuals and activists. It transcends scales, and it links historical events. Although strongly identified with a Marxist tradition and with political economy, his work since the 1970s has extended from the human ecology of agrarian societies in Africa, to the theorization of culture and difference, and the reasons behind the prosecution of war under contemporary capitalism.

Watts is a lifelong geographer. Having grown up in a small village between Bath and Bristol in the United Kingdom, the immediate rural environment [fostered personal and professional interests](#) in the commons, and in agrarian landscapes and their occupants. He excelled in school and later at University College, London, where he was also involved in the student politics of the late 1960s and early '70s. His graduate studies at the University of Michigan were supervised by Bernard Q. Neitschmann. He has taught geography and development studies at University of California, Berkeley since 1979, where he is currently the Class of 1963 Professor of Geography.

His ground-breaking book on food, famine and politics in West Africa, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (California, 1983), marked a turning point in cultural ecology by adding the dimension of political economy in exciting and innovative ways. It revealed important links between peasant society, colonialism, agrarian capitalism, and the state in the making of household vulnerability to hunger, and established him as a pioneer of political ecology. It involved household-level fieldwork combined with extensive historical and archival research. His central argument was that the Hausa-speaking rural peasantry north of Kano were historically disadvantaged not by drought, resource scarcity or population pressures but, more importantly, by the social convulsions wrought by an extractive British colonial regime. Watts was one of the first to offer a sustained social and historical explanation for food insecurity and famines in Africa and, with Amartya Sen's work, this has led to considerable debate among scholars and policymakers. Watts described a rural peasantry struggling against oppression,

hierarchies of power, and disadvantageous markets, such that reciprocal networks that formerly operated during times of food shortage were eroded under colonial rule. His theoretical challenges to the a-historical reasoning offered by cultural ecologists and natural hazards researchers—that labeled peasants as "adaptive"—was prescient. The tone of his challenges was too severe for some scholars, but criticism deterred neither his tenacity nor his motivation.

The agrarian theme has continued in less fieldwork-intensive studies carried out in other locales. Since the 1980s these have included studies of gender relations in Gambian rice farming (with Judith Carney), the workings of contract farming systems and the rise of agribusiness (with Peter Little and David Goodman, respectively), the commercial transformation of chicken farms in the United States, mechanized rice farming in the Sacramento Valley (with Mary Beth Pudup), decollectivised agriculture in Vietnam, power relations in agricultural biotechnology, and land reform and agrarian strategy in Kerala, India. He is also working on *West of Eden*, a project on the legacy of the 1960s countercultural movements and communes in Northern California (with Iain Boal).

Watt's interest in rural landscapes and the spatial expressions of capitalist practices has led to new "geographies of commodities," and the conflicts and debates these generate. In earlier research in northern Nigeria, he traced anti-modernist Islamic movements to discontent among poor migrants to Kano and their perception that "bad" oil money and state revenues and services were unequally apportioned. With the award of a prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, Watts examined processes of oil extraction, the rapid speed of their change, the massive accumulation of wealth by some, ethnic animosities, corruption, and protests resulting from oil's value. His studies of protest in Ogoni oil-producing territories on the Niger Delta, (where he was himself the victim of armed violence in 2007) have detailed the history of extreme political marginalization and local conflicts with oil corporations under the rubric of "petro-capitalism." Oil, he argues, with its possibilities for global profit and thus control and corruption, permeates politics, economies, and images. *Violent Environments* (edited with Nancy Lee Peluso, Cornell, 2001) compares several examples of resource-driven conflicts, rejecting Malthusian claims of scarcity-driven violence and arguing instead that the new politics of identity and ethnic conflict is rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations.

Power, for Watts, is also imbued with important symbolic meanings, as are new forms of environmental and political control and governance. His collaboration with Alan Pred (*Reworking Modernity: Capitalisms and Symbolic Discontent*, Rutgers, 1992) extended a material critique of capitalism to struggles over meaning, locating a range of historical examples to particular landscapes and struggles. More recently, his involvement with RETORT (a Bay area collective of activists and scholars) links a "Situationist" concern with spectacle in modern society, with a hard-hitting critique of the war in Iraq and US imperialism in the "poisonous epoch we are living through." (*Afflicted Powers*, Verso, 2005). Neoliberalism has, RETORT notes, economically marginalized the very regions from which terrorism is now emanating.

Through these and other studies, Watts has contributed to the interdisciplinary fields of political ecology and development studies, making defined contributions to each and working with a range of collaborators over three decades. For example, his book edited with Richard Peet, *Liberation Ecologies* (Routledge, 1996, 2004), defines a particular form of theoretically informed political ecology that traces the environmental and social impacts of contests over natural resources, through ideas and discourses about those resources, and it appraises the struggles to secure livelihoods that persist under neoliberalism, largely in developing countries.

Watts' commitment to social theory stems in large part from his deep concern for justice and moral economies. He has said of his commitment to political economy that "history does matter, and I can think of no better way of preparing for the future than, in part, by looking backward." Yet his commitment to geography is also strong. It includes numerous introductory and pedagogical texts, including the co-edited *Dictionary of Human Geography* (ed. with Johnston, Pratt and Gregory: Blackwell, 2000), and the forthcoming *Data Analysis and Knowledge Discovery*. During his career, Watts has significantly advanced geography and anthropology through his teaching and mentoring of large numbers of graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley. He has supervised more than 60 Ph.D. students and postdoctoral scholars, and has served on more than 70 graduate committees. His dynamic, energetic, almost zealous teaching and lecturing have motivated and inspired several generations of students and colleagues on that campus. His own students have benefited immeasurably from his tutelage and many of them now stand as leading figures in the discipline, particularly in the field of political ecology. In this sense, Watts stands out in his generation in terms of his influence on human-environmental research in geography and anthropology, and the genealogy of students who have gone on to empirically and theoretically move the disciplines in new and exciting directions.

The positive influence of Michael J. Watts on geography and related disciplines, particularly anthropology, cannot be overstated. He is truly deserving of the 2007 Robert McC. Netting Award.

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