

Difference and Conflict in the Struggle Over Natural Resources: A political ecology framework

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ABSTRACT Arturo Escobar examines the increasing number of conflicts over natural resources around the world in response to neo-liberal globalization. He argues that such escalating environmental conflicts can be conceptually understood through three inter-related rubrics: economic, ecological, and cultural. His interest is in the relationship between difference and equality of access in economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts in order to set out a political ecology framework. He asks that we treat economic, ecological, and cultural distribution as equally important. If we are to live in a peaceful, just and balanced modern social world we can no longer deny people their rights to their own cultures, ecologies, and economies.

KEYWORDS economics; culture; subalterns; modernity; globalization; equality; politics of place

Introduction

Environmental struggles rage all over the world. This has been the case for a long time – at least since the nineteenth century – although it would seem that they are becoming more ubiquitous year after year in so many corners of our shared planet. It is as if the only way to face the declaration of war on nature and humanity by neo-liberal globalization is by conflict and struggle. The dominant models of development and the economy are making inroads into urban and rural landscapes, the body, and even the molecular fabric of life (for instance, as in the case of transgenic crops and nanotechnology). They introduce environmentally destructive practices that leave landscapes of ecological destruction, sometimes veritable devastation, along the way. It is no wonder that communities worldwide are increasingly steadfast, adamant and articulate about the defense of their places, environments, and ecosystems. Long gone are the days when one could count, on one hand, the environmental movements in the Third World that achieved visibility in the West (the most famous of which being the valiant defense of Himalayan forests by women, known in the 1970s and 1980s as the Chipko movement). Today the number of environmental conflicts and mobilization that receive, or at least merit, worldwide attention has skyrocketed. Tropical forests, biodiversity, water, seeds, energy technologies, food, rivers, and seas, contamination caused by extractive industries such as oil and mining, transboundary pollution, fishing rights, urban

redevelopment, the melting of glaciers, and polar ice caps possibly caused by global warming, and many more are all the object of struggles in many parts of the world. (Escobar, 1998)

These struggles have two important things in common. First, they often pit rich against poor, within regions, countries, and transnationally. In addition, the resulting struggles are often led by women, and they are particularly poignant when they involve indigenous or ethnic minority communities, given the tenacity with which they defend their places and the tremendous cultural contrast between the imposed models and local worldviews. Second, they invariably involve the questioning of capitalistic economic models, on the one hand, and some sort of mobilization around, or defense of, local cultures, on the other. This is why it is useful to think about environmental conflicts under three inter-related rubrics: economic, ecological, and cultural. Most conflicts over natural resources involve these three dimensions; this is particularly true in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America but I believe the statement holds true for most, if not all, situations worldwide.

Take any rainforest in the world, for instance. What goes on in many rainforests today could be described as a triple transformation, or conquest if you wish: economic, ecological, and cultural. It entails the transformation of local diverse economies, partly oriented to self-reproduction and subsistence, into a monetized, market-driven economy. It involves changes of complex ecosystems into modern forms of nature (often plantations or pasture for cattle ranching, as in the many parts of the Amazon. Or as in the Pacific rainforest of Colombia and Ecuador, where large areas are being converted into African oil palm plantations, and where mangrove forests are used for industrial shrimp cultivation). And it is changing place-based, local cultures into cultures that increasingly (have to) resemble dominant modern cultures, with their individualistic and productive ethos and market orientation. Social movements provide another insight into the simultaneous emphasis on economic, ecological, and cultural aspects of the conflicts. Today, the discourse and strategy of many movements suggest that they

are no longer willing to subordinate culture to economy or vice versa. For many movements the environment is a central stake. Most importantly, questions of difference are of paramount importance for many movements and it is to the importance of difference to a political ecological framework that I will now turn.

Why difference?

Globalization has not led to the flattening of differences that was once feared. While important forms of homogenization have occurred given the dominant European cultural forms (today largely driven by processes in the US), differences have by no means disappeared. Nevertheless, social groups worldwide see their long-standing cultural practices being transformed in the encounter with many other cultural forms, whether dominant and not. A key question with regards to these encounters is the relation between difference and equality. Especially, we need to consider how to achieve the goal of equality while respecting difference. Difference-in-equality has been rarely achieved in recent history. One of the key questions for the relationship among globalization, culture, and development that is becoming evermore pressing with the passage of time.

We now recognize that diversity is here to stay. New forms of cultural difference are continuously being created, even in reaction to today's seemingly overpowering globalization. This realization, however, is usually accompanied by the widespread belief that diversity can more easily generate conflict and inequality than enable functioning pluralistic systems and a measure of justice and equality. Hence, the importance of thinking again about the conditions for the coexistence of difference and equality under a set of historical factors which seems not only to pull them apart but to thrust them in opposite directions. It appears that the more diversity is affirmed, especially by those subalternized (culturally dominated and economically poor) groups which constitute the world's majority, the greater the tendency to exclude or dominate by the powerful few (rich) groups controlling the world's access to opportunities and resources for

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survival and development. Conversely, the greater the willingness by those in power to grant a measure of equality to subaltern groups, the more intense the pressure to deny their difference through processes of assimilation which are often conflictual.

The key questions we need to be asking are therefore: in what ways are economic, cultural, and ecological difference-in-equality either enabled or denied? How are culture, economy, and environment organized in order to deny difference or to produce difference but only according to a hierarchical order, and how are these denials and hierarchies related to issues of equality? What are the conflicts that ensue from this denial? For most critical analysts, it is the unequal distribution of income and material resources that is at the basis of conflict, instability, and the denial of difference and equality. The importance of economic factors cannot be emphasized enough. More recently, some have started to highlight the conflicts over access and control of natural resources as a key factor in today's global and local crises. In other words, today's cultural and economic crises have a fundamental ecological dimension. Few critics, however, seem to focus yet on what could be called 'cultural distribution conflicts', namely, those that arise from the relative power, or powerlessness, accorded to various cultures and cultural practices in a historical context. There are of course the exceptions of critics who discuss culture conflict in homogenizing terms such as 'the clash of civilization' (Huntington) or 'the end of history' (Fukuyama). But, is it possible to imagine a different framework for thinking about the relation between difference and conflict?

A political ecology of difference

Joan Martínez Alier (2002) defines political ecology as the study of ecological distribution conflicts. By this he means conflicts over access to, and control over, natural resources, particularly as a source of livelihoods, including the costs of environmental destruction. 'Ecological distribution conflicts', however, exist in the context of economies, cultures, and forms of knowledge, be-

sides the obvious ecosystem context. Traditionally, political economy has been the study of economic distribution conflicts. This definition assumes that economic distribution is a political issue and related to social power. Yet economists have not dealt with the ecological and cultural dimensions of distribution and equality. Over the past two decades, the debate between environmental economics and ecological economics around the question of the 'internalization of externalities' has led to a search for concepts to account adequately for the hidden ecological and social aspects of production. For neo-classical economists, the issue is resolved by internalizing previously unaccounted for ecological costs or 'externalities' into the economic system (such as the contamination of water tables by pesticides, clean-up costs, the costs of reducing carbon dioxide emissions or the payment for carbon sinks, or the benefits to future generations foregone by destroying biodiversity). This is simply done by assigning property rights and market prices to all environmental services and resources. The internalization of externalities has given rise to the field of environmental economics. It assumes that the valuation of natural resources is only subject to economic conditions, and that all natural aspects can be entirely reduced to (actual or fictitious) market prices.

For the field of ecological economics, on the contrary, the value of nature cannot be assessed only in economic terms. There are ecological and political processes that contribute to define the value of natural resources that cannot be reflected in market prices. Indeed, in many cases there is incommensurability between economic and ecological processes to the extent that communities value the environment for reasons other than economic, for example, when they consider nature to be sacred and uncommodifiable. Conflicts over access and control of resources take on a complex ecological and political character if the widely held idea that everything can be tagged in monetary terms is suspended. This is why ecological economists have suggested the category of ecological distribution. Under conditions of unequal distribution of wealth, economic growth, and production entail the negation of ecological integrity,

since the time and requirements of capitalistic production and those of the natural processes are not the same. The result is conflicts of ecological distribution, such as those found in struggles around the protection of forests, rivers, mangroves, wetlands, or biodiversity. The fact that these conflicts often times appear when poor communities mobilize for the defense of the environment as a source of livelihood has led some ecologists to describe them as 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martínez Alier, 2002; Guha and Martínez Alier, 1997).

But if production under unequal distribution negates ecological processes, it also negates the cultural processes that are at the basis of people's valuation and relationship to the natural world. Not only do ecosystems have different ecological conditions and requirements for their maintenance, communities worldwide have perceptions and practices of nature which differ greatly among themselves and which are also essential to the health or decline of natural environments. This difference is even more pronounced when one contrasts cultural models of nature of many rainforest and rural communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with the dominant ways of perceiving and relating to it characteristic of capitalist modernity, best exemplified by the plantation system and by current agricultural biotechnology (Escobar, 1999). In recent years, anthropologists have documented with increasing eloquence how social groups throughout the world 'construct' nature – and hence utilize it – in quite specific ways. In many non-modern or non-western settings, the strict separation between the biophysical, the human, and the supernatural worlds that characterizes urban-based, modern societies does not exist. On the contrary, 'nature' is an integral component of the human and supernatural domains. Nature exists in a dense universe of collective representations that at once grounds different ways of doing things with/around 'nature'. Succinctly put, many communities in the world signify their natural environment, and then use it, in ways that markedly contrast with the more commonly accepted way of seeing nature as a resource external to humans and which humans can appropriate in any way they see fit

(Descola and Pálsson, 1996; Restrepo and del Valle, 1996).

Not only economic factors and ecological conditions, but cultural meanings, define the practices that determine how nature is appropriated and utilized. Until now, sustainability has referred chiefly to technological and economic variables. Ecological economists among others added the ecological dimension, yet the full inclusion of cultural conditions remains elusive (Leff, 1998). Recently, some work in political ecology as well as social movements' strategies have begun to emphasize cultural conditions. They shift the question of sustainability from its economic, technological, and managerial centre to the ecological and cultural level. Struggles for cultural difference, ethnic identities, and local autonomy over territory and resources are contributing to redefine the agenda of environmental conflict beyond the economic and ecological fields. They take us fully into the terrain of the cultural as they elaborate a complex demand for seeing places in terms of economic, ecological, and cultural difference. To put it bluntly, the destruction of rainforests, advancing desertification in many parts of the tropics, and so forth are the dramatic physical effects of distribution conflicts linked to particular constructions of nature. The resignification of rainforests by modern capitalist interests, in this way, results in a profound physical reshaping of the landscape in the most literal sense.

Following this approach, we can now visualize the different levels of analysis that circumscribe environmental conflicts. In the first instance, environmental economics attempts to account for the so-called externalities associated with economic processes, but without altering in any significant way the current parameters of market, the capitalist economy and, in the last instance, modernity. This is a worthy aim to some extent, but it contributes to consolidate neo-liberal market-driven ideologies of environment and development. A further level of analysis and action is introduced by ecological economists, who conclude that socio-environmental processes cannot be reduced to market values and that it is impossible to find a common standard of valuation for all cases and situations (including the possibility of

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incommensurability of values). Ecological economists thus posit the need for both an equalization of income and a fairer ecological distribution. For example, let us take the concept of ecological footprint (e.g., Hornborg, 2001), or ecological debt: countries or social groups that appropriate biomass in excess of their biological production, or that pollute beyond their capacity to process their pollutants incur in an ecological debt with those who bear the burden of it. Politically, these approaches align themselves with social movements for environmental justice and for the defense of the environment as source of livelihood (environmentalism of the poor). This trend has great scholarly, social and political importance today.

In a third instance, yet to be more fully developed, cultural diversity is added to ecological diversity as a source of redefinition of production, sustainability, and conservation. By identifying culturally diverse models of nature as one of the three pillars of ecological distribution, this option moves outside the economic domain. This third proposal thus deepens the incommensurability of economy and ecology postulated by ecological economists. The approach sees such incommensurability as arising from the contrasting cultural meanings assigned to nature by various human groups, and from the concomitant power strategies of social movements in defense of nature as both source of livelihood and cultural identity. In the last instance, what is at stake is a redefinition of production and the economy in line with both the ecological and cultural dimensions of the environment (Leff, 1998; Escobar, 1999). This in turn entails a plurality of development styles, and deeply questions the economic and technocratic approaches that have dominated the development experience. Instead, it encourages social groups and communities to engage in other types of development approaches and economies.

The study of cultural distribution conflicts looks at how cultural differences create or propagate inequalities in social power, usually through the imposition of a particular set of cultural norms as 'natural' and universal. Cultural distribution displaces the study of cultural difference from strict concerns with diversity towards the distributive effects of cultural dominance and

struggles around it. This shift operates in the same way economic distribution foregrounds the political dimension of the economy by shifting economic rationality to the field of political economy. And similarly to how ecological distribution identifies dominant economic strategies as the source of environmental destruction and poverty, thus originating the field of political ecology. The access to, destruction or disempowering of, cultural resources for the definition of social norms and goals become a key question in this understanding of the cultural. And as in the economic and ecological cases, cultural distribution suggests a different set of redistributive issues.

The concept of cultural distribution brings out more clearly the effects of rendering certain cultural values/practices inconsequential through effects of dominance and hegemony. There is a geopolitics to this effect (between rich countries with dominant cultures and poor countries with subaltern cultural conceptions), as well as class, ethnic, and gender dimensions to it (inside countries, regions, and communities). While the gender dimension of economic and ecological distribution conflicts have been discussed broadly in recent years, the cultural dimension is of paramount importance given that gender is a pivotal aspect of many cultural processes and is yet to receive significant attention. In a similar way in which gender has been shown to be a critical variable in shaping access to, and the knowledge and organization of, natural resources (Rocheleau *et al.*, 1996; Harcourt, 1994), so with cultural resources. Gender and ethnicity thus bring to the fore the intertwined aspects of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution. Moreover, it is often women and organized ethnic groups who today are leading the transformation of those patterns of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution that generate both inequality of access and policies that reinforce those skewed patterns. Let it be emphasized that when talking about women and ethnic groups we are talking not only about differentiated social roles and practices but also about contrasting worldviews and, very importantly, power relations.

Akin to the 'women and politics of place' conception (Escobar and Harcourt, eds., 2005), the above

argument brings together into one framework discourses and struggles around culture, often the focus of ethnic, gender, and other movements for identity; environment, the interest of ecology movements; and diverse economies, usually the concern of social and economic justice movements.¹ This political ecology framework aims to analyse the interrelations created within subaltern struggles (such as those of black and indigenous people in the case of the Colombian Pacific; see Grueso and Arroyo, 2005) around identity, environment and economies, in all of their diversities (diverse identities, diverse ecologies, diverse economies). The aim of the framework is to demystify theory that ignores subaltern experiences and knowledge of the local economy, environment, and culture in order to relocate their politics of place as key to our understanding of globalization. Many subaltern struggles can be seen today in terms of place-based yet transnationalized strategies – or, more succinctly, as forms of place-based globalism (Osterweil, 2005). The following table summarizes the framework (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005).

Conclusion

I started this article by emphasizing the need to re-examine the relationship between difference and equality of access from the simultaneous and interrelated perspective of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts (Table 1). The fact that a growing number of people and groups demand the right to their own cultures, ecologies and economies, as part of our modern social world can no longer be denied. Nor can these demands be easily accommodated into standard liberal or neo-liberal doctrine. It is the time for thinking more openly about the potential healing effects of a politically enriched difference and otherness.

It is necessary to strive for economic, ecological, and cultural distribution equally. Modernity and development have been built through unfair distribution and unequal exchange on all these three levels, and it is time to redress it. Movements for economic justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural difference are moving in this

direction. The implications of such directions for policy and other forms of action are evident, for example the need to limit cultural dominance in key institutions. This is particularly important in those institutions that regulate global policy concerning, for instance, property rights, conservation, and other forms of economic organization and development. Conversely, it is important to create spaces for the continued activation of non-dominant cultural forms, such as less individualistic forms of economy and ecology. There should be educational strategies or an entire pedagogy of difference to support this aim; this applies to gender policies as well, to the extent that women are often at the forefront of challenging unfair distribution patterns at the levels of body, home, place, economy, and environment (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005). Finally, it is important to support the social movements that are creating alternative and plural visions of rights (such as the right to basic subsistence, autonomy and difference), economy (in terms of alternative capitalistic and non-capitalist practices), nature (in terms of ecological design principles that integrate human and ecological processes) (Gibson-Graham, 2005).

One final word about why so much emphasis on difference and 'conflict'. First, as the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff (2002: 26) says, the valuation of difference entails acceptance of complementarities and convergences constructed out of the diversity of worldviews and practices. Second, while highlighting power, 'conflict' should not be seen as reducing everything to power or to quantitative assessments of inequalities. The emphasis on conflict and difference is not about exclusion or segregation, as some might fear. In the best of cases, the language of distribution conflicts entails serious individual and collective confrontations with difference but without (having to) fear. It entails bridge building and technologies of crossing across difference (Anzaldúa and Keatin, 2002). As biologists Maturana and Varela (1987: 246) put it, 'a conflict can go away only if we move to another domain where coexistence takes place. The knowledge of this knowledge constitutes the social imperative for a human-centered ethics. ... As human beings we have only the world which

Table 1. *Economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts*

<i>Context/historical process</i>	<i>Concept/problem</i>	<i>Theoretical/academic response</i>	<i>Intellectual/political project</i>	<i>Social/political responses</i>
Global capitalism	Economic distribution (Negation of Economic Difference)	Internalization of externalities Environmental economics	'Sustainable' capitalist development	Environmental management
Reductionist science and technology	Ecological distribution (Negation of Ecological processes and Difference)	Highlight incommensurability of (modern) economy and ecology Ecological economics and political ecology	Need to re-embed economy in society and ecosystems	Struggles over the environment as source of livelihood Environmentalism of the poor
Dominant modernity (Modern Colonial World System)	Cultural distribution (Negation of Cultural Difference)	Highlight incommensurability of (modern) economy and culture Political ecology, politics of place frameworks	Need to re-embed economy in society, ecosystem, and culture	Place-based struggles for economic, ecological, and cultural difference Cultural politics of social movements; social movement networks.

we create with others – whether we like them or not’.

The answer to today’s imperial globality enforced through violence by the ecology of difference is to ask that we understand distribution as the search for a shared sense of peace and justice. As a value, peace-with-justice does not belong completely to the domain of rationality but of ethics. It requires an attitude of transformation, caring, and solicitude in the face of difference and injustice. Peace-with-justice should be seen as always in process, something that can only be approached asymptotically but never

really be reached. It is in the light of a planetary sense of ethics and spirituality such as found in the best ecology and pluralist religious thought and in the best humanist traditions of secular modernity that one may find elements for a workable strategy of peace out of the recognition of conflict (Boff, 2002, 2004). ‘Peace’ – understood as a set of economic, cultural, and ecological processes that bring about a measure of justice and balance to natural and social orders – is the deepest meaning of the ecology of difference that aims towards a plurality of knowledges and worlds.

Note

- 1 The ‘women and the politics of place’ framework also includes the body (and, hence, diverse embodiments) as a central element. I will not develop this dimension in this work. For the full framework, see Harcourt and Escobar, 2005.

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