

## **Environmental Conflicts as a new Dimension of Peace Research \***

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### **Introduction**

Modern peace research as it started in the 1960s<sup>1</sup> – after Johan Galtung<sup>2</sup> founded the first Peace Research Institute in Oslo in 1959 – focussed around the classical subjects of interstate warfare, overshadowed by the East-West-Conflict, the Cold War. Masatsugu Matsuo (2001) points rightly out that with Johan Galtung's article on structural violence in 1969 an enlargement of the scope of peace research took place. For sure there has been an overextension of this scope to include nearly everything in life, although Johan Galtung himself never succumbed himself to this tendency.

I agree with Matsuo, as he argues that the issue over environmental conflicts has to be taken within the narrower, or let us say, traditional concept of peace research as they touch the very core of international, interstate as well as intrastate violent conflicts, although we should also consider those issues, which take into account the structural dimension too.

Because there is a problem, which we cannot understand or explain with common sense, we need science, we need research, which is in general funded by society. So, the starting point is: Why are there environmental conflicts?

But before I proceed further I propose to introduce a definition of environmental conflicts: Environmental conflicts are those conflicts, which have as origin the control of natural resources. We should for the further analysis differentiate as in peace and conflict research in general between the following levels:

- International, global
- Interstate
- Intrastate.

And we should also look into the different forms of environmental conflicts. The driving forces are:

- Power
- Luxury/affluence

- Poverty/necessity.

Environmental conflicts are still dominated by the strive for controlling resources to increase power – material, financial or/and political. However, the defence of a certain lifestyle, e.g. the American Way of Life, conspicuous consumption of a leisure class, the luxury of exotic and rare goods leads also to massive environmental conflicts. On the other side stand the victims, the losers of colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, who live in poverty or even in misery and who fight back for their own survival.

### **Some historical remarks**

Looking back into history is always useful. One can argue that environmental conflicts have existed since the beginning of humankind. Conflicts were mostly about the control of natural resources, between hunters and farmers etc. But the high tide of early modern times brought the development of modern colonialism in the search of gold, silver, herbs, and slaves. The gold and silver mining in Latin America as well as in Africa brought besides human misery and exploitation also the destruction of the natural environment. The same holds true for other exploitations of the nature by logging e.g. This is not only the case of colonialism abroad, but in the own country itself. Often that happened in annexed countries and regions as in the case of Tsarist Russia. Actually we may interpret these conflicts also as class struggle on different levels.

Here as at all times vested interests stand vs. legitimate interests, although these notions only developed in modern times with the modern rule of law. And here the reference to the Westphalian Peace Treaty may be helpful. The Westphalian Peace Treaty of 1648, concluded in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück in Northwest Germany, was the beginning of modern international law, which constituted its subject: the nation-state. However, during the colonial expansion thereafter non-Western societies were in general just not regarded as equal. Only in cases of other developed societies – like the Ottoman Empire or some Indian Maharajahs or Japan – treaties, but often unequal ones, were concluded. As these societies did not have ownership rights following the Roman rule and were not written, it was assumed that rights did not exist, and that land and all natural resources were free for the invaders.

Only the nation-building (sic!) in the decolonisation process constituted these societies as subjects and equal. However, as we know from all judicial affairs, there is a difference between *de jure* and *de facto*. The colonial period was followed in most cases by neo-colonialism, and exploitation of natural resources by the former and new colonial powers, accompanied by conflicts around them, continued.

Through the Charter of the United Nations of 1945, which by the way is based on the principles of the Westphalian Peace Treaty, basic human rights were established universally (Széll 2003, 2004). These rights are unalienable and guarantee a decent life.

So, when Indians in the Amazonas region fight back against mining companies and cattle raisers or landless immigrants, then it is an environmental conflict, because their natural resources and traditional habitat are endangered or even purely and simply destroyed. We even do not need to refer to the notion of structural violence in this case.

### **Some theoretical reflections**

For a better understanding we have to ask first: What is the nature and origin of environmental conflicts?

As all human societies are based on the necessity of reproduction, the economy is their base. Labour is the transformation of nature into products. Therefore only a materialist approach is adequate. And as I demonstrated in the chapter before, all human action is only to be understood in a historical dimension. So, really existing capitalism is today the driving force also in the case of environmental conflicts. That is not to say that we should apply a simplistic approach, because, as we see, we have quite different forms of capitalism in today's world, e.g., from the U.S. model – the most powerful – via different European ones, to the Japanese, the Chinese etc. That is also why due to different historical circumstances we have different strategies, e.g., concerning the Kyoto Protocol.

In regard to the methodology it is essential to understand the dialectics at work. There is nothing on earth, especially not in society, without contradictions. This holds particularly true concerning environmental conflicts. In this context we have for a deeper understanding to differentiate between *Wesen und Erscheinung* (substance and surface). An environmental conflict may be on the surface a cultural or political conflict, but the reasons behind on a historical-materialist base are in general economic.

Science has not only to understand the reasons for problems and conflicts, but should also contribute to overcome them. As Karl Marx formulated in his 11th Feuerbach thesis: “The philosophers have so far only interpreted the world differently, however, it is the task to change it.” In those days the discipline of peace research did not yet exist, nor any other social science. In this sense we are all philosophers. This leads me to the issue of Enlightenment and emancipation. Modern sciences and humanities are the children of the Age of Enlightenment. Therefore the emancipation from self-inflicted minority, i.e., emancipation, as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant put it at the end of the 18th century, is the task for humanity, and our main duty as scientists (Postman 1999).

### **Main environmental conflicts**

The main environmental conflicts turn since ever around water, food, and energy – they are all fundamental for survival. Though ecology exists since more than 100 years as a discipline, social ecology is rather new as it dates only back about 40 years. Ecology at the beginning was a natural science, which regarded species in their environment (Délégé 1992). But soon the human species was included, especially as since the 19th century and via industrialisation it has become the main predator and changed drastically the earth and the oceans – in many cases in a non-convertible way. This was accompanied by an enormous increase of the number of human beings within a few generations from less than 1 billion in 19th century to more than 6 billion today, and still increasing – although not anymore in the OECD-countries (Széll 1994).

The Club of Rome became prominent with its first report on the Limits to Growth in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972). There the future scarcity of resources led to scenarios, which forecasted growing environmental conflicts. A further important step in the global consciousness and at least some action were the Brundtland-report (1987) for the United Nations and the Rio Conference on the Environment and Development in 1992, where the concept of Sustainable Development was implemented into the Agenda 21 and a number of treaties, which should prevent or at least reduce environmental conflicts. I am now turning to some examples to illustrate my arguments.

### Examples of some environmental conflicts

The following table may help to systematise different environmental conflicts according to their form and level:

**Table 1: Forms and levels of environmental conflicts**

	International	Interstate	Intrastate
Power			
Luxury			
Poverty			

I will discuss in the next subchapters some environmental conflicts, which may be regarded as exemplary according to the above scheme.

#### *International*

First the international dimension, which is classically regarded as the main field of environmental conflicts. Let us start with a topic, which is hot in Japan: whale hunting. The species has been driven near extinction, due to over-hunting in the last couple of decades. Japan and Norway are the only nations, which try to abolish the convention to protect these mammals. They argue that eating whale is in their traditional diet. For “scientific reasons” Japan is allowed to hunt a limited number of whales. Everybody in Japan knows that this is an euphemism. I myself have been served recently in a Tokyo bar whale sashimi, and have seen whale meat on display in shops. This conflict is not a violent one, and in so far would not touch the realm of peace research. However, conflict research is concerned with.

The problem of over-fishing is another, related issue. Here also Japan is heavily involved as the nation with biggest per capita fish consumption in the world. Factory-like ships comb the seas taking out everything, even small fish, where the reproduction of many species is not guaranteed anymore. No violent conflicts again – except if some ships enter foreign national waters. The exploitation of the sea ground and Antarctica for natural resources leads to conflicts in regard to the ownership of these territories.

Let us take another example, which is connected with Japan too, the Kyoto Protocol. Although Japan convened the meeting for the reduction of carbon-dioxide to stop global warming, it hesitated long – under pressure of the USA – to ratify it. Finally

the Protocol is implemented thanks to the ratification by Russia since 16 February 2005. Again this is not a violent conflict – yet. Through green house warming the raising of the sea level or desertification endanger the survival of millions of people in Bangladesh, Maldives islands, the Sahel zone etc. No direct conflict so far, although, illegal mass migration led already to tens of thousands of dead in the seas, on European and US-American shores and borders.

Logging for chop sticks etc. for Japanese and other Asian countries brings down the forests and contributes by it to climate change. A brown cloud is permanently hanging over Asia, from Iran to North East China, due to pollution. The burning of forests to clear them for settlement or logging in Indonesia and Brazil create permanent smog, so that the sun cannot be seen for weeks and months and brings serious health hazards. I have myself suffered of it while in Singapore. The city-state, which in general is over-clean – even more than the Japanese – does not do anything to protect itself and its citizens from such hazards. No open conflict.

Another dimension is acid rain. As weather normally with the turn of the globe comes from West, polluters like Britain send since decades their smog over to the European continent. An open conflict did not develop. A similar problem is related to pesticides and insecticides, which also know no borders. Toxic, nuclear and other waste is one of the main problems for the environment. Before our natural resources will die out, our waste will bury us. This is in Japan one of the main environmental problems, although again no conflict, as its environmental groups are too weak, to raise the issue. The bay of Tokyo is successfully filled with waste islands, but this strategy cannot go on indefinitely.

Multinational companies are one of the main actors in environmental degradation on the global level. They tend to locate their production at those places with lowest environmental standards, amongst them in a prominent place the P.R. of China. Local conflicts are already rising, and got special international attention with oil pollution in Nigeria by Shell. This global critique led Shell to be one of the leaders in introducing Corporate social responsibility (CSR) as their Corporate Governance principles (Széll forthcoming).

A further issue is the protection of the habitat for indigenous people, which are faced with extinction. Every year 50 languages die out, that are human cultures, which

are lost forever. This is a serious environmental conflict, insufficiently addressed by peace and conflict research hitherto. On the other side we face another kind of environmental conflict with the protection of endangered species like tigers, elephants etc. With the demographic increase of local human populations and the destruction of the habitat of those species, the animals tend to invade agricultural land and villages for their own survival, damaging thereby the plants and settlements, eventually killing people. A severe environmental conflict between humans and animals, which is difficult to decide.

Drug production and trade is also not only a societal and health problem, but also a very serious environmental conflict. On the one hand they are produced instead of necessary food, and contribute by that to the destruction of essential natural resources for the survival of the indigenous populations. On the other hand, the fight against drug production with pesticides destroys the natural environment and also other plants.

The use of Agent Orange by the American military during the Vietnam war, to tear down the leaves of the forests to uncover the Vietcong, destroyed the environment for decades – not to speak of the health hazards also to the civilian population, and even their own pilots.

The two recent Iraq wars are other examples of destroying the environment. Any war is related to environmental degradation by itself. However, the burning oil fields in Kuwait by Saddam Hussein during the war of 1991 was a new quality of using the destruction of natural resources on a large scale as defence, although it did not help him to win the war. Today Iraqis and associated fighters, who resist American and their allies' occupation also destroy regularly pipelines to harm their enemies. This leads us to the last point, where we are quite close to environmental conflicts on the interstate level. That is, international and national terrorism – may it come from a state or religious or political groups. Environmental destruction has not yet been the case, although the destruction of a nuclear power plant is looming as a risk on the horizon. And poisoning water is a thousand year old strategy of warfare, but sometimes happens even between neighbours.

### ***Interstate***

Environmental conflicts in the age of globalisation are still mostly taking place between states. Neo-colonialism leads to the exploitation of natural resources by monocultures, dams and mining on a large scale in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

However, there are also more direct environmental conflicts as the building of a dam on the Euphrates river in Turkey for irrigation purposes, which reduced substantially the water resources for Syria and Iraq. As mentioned already above, drinking water will be the scarcest resource in a few years. Already today a large part of the world population has no access to clean water, which even happens regularly in the richest part of the most powerful nation in the world, in California.

And the Mid-East conflict between Israel and its neighbours is to a large extent a conflict about the control of water resources. Israel needs the water resources in the West Bank and on the Golan Heights for its agriculture. In the Gaza strip there is no water. That is why Ariel Sharon is ready to concede it to the Palestinians.

The unrestricted pollution of rivers and the seas is another conflict around water resources. The North Sea in Europe has become the biggest waste sink of the world. There is no open conflict, because all bordering countries participate in it – on the expense of future generations. And finally in this part of the paper I have to raise again the nuclear issue. There is since many years a conflict about nuclear power stations in Slovakia, which are rather unsafe, as they are built in Soviet times and are similar to the Chernobyl type. Austria tried to force Slovakia to close them down, even threatening to block Slovakia's entry into the EU. The story is not yet at its end, however, it will be solved with the help of EU-money.

### ***Intrastate***

On the Intrastate level it is mostly minorities, which are the victims of environmental conflicts. One of the most famous cases is the fate of the aborigines in Australia, but includes also Indians in Latin and North America. And since thousands of years again in Africa cattle raisers, nomads fight against farmers for the control of natural resources. These conflicts actually have always been very violent – most recently very brutally in Uganda.

Environmental conflicts are also often linked in secession moves like in the cases of Biafra or Katanga.

Let me come back to an environmental conflict, which everybody can see, who lands at Narita airport: Farmers continue to block since a generation the extension of the airport. A classical environmental conflict. And to close this chapter I pick up another, more recent Japanese environmental conflict, which may be typical for modern life-style and society, an expression of egotism, as already Alexis de Tocqueville described it in his treatise “Democracy in America” from 1835/1840 – still the best analysis of American society until today. A group of anglers, led by a famous actor, sued the prefecture for the right to put in fish into the Biwa lake for their pleasure, which, however, would annihilate the natural wildlife there. They referred to the Constitution, and that they have the right for the pursuit of their happiness: that is in this case angling, wherever they want. Auspiciously the court turned down their demand.

## **Conclusion**

In capitalism it is the companies who have power and are at the end responsible for environmental conflicts on all levels, which I discussed before. Since a couple of years opportunely a new notion spread: Corporate social responsibility, which includes the respect of the environment. So, new phenomena lead to new forms of conflict, which demand a new quality of action, and with it new actors. They appeared in the form of Non-government, non-profit organisations like Greenpeace or Robin Wood, or just as local and regional associations, but also as political parties, the Greens, entering even governments in several countries.

The specificity of environmental degradation is that it has mostly very long term effects, in the case of nuclear waste, millions of years. And they endanger – as described before – not only peace with nature, but social peace as well (Busch et al. 2000). These long term effects make it difficult to approach the problems and assess the right strategies. That is also why the specialists diverge in so many points. And you even find well-paid opponents to the Kyoto-Protocol.

First we can conclude fortunately that so far environmental conflicts have not yet led in most cases to violent conflicts, so they may not be properly apprehended with the classical tools of peace research, although they are in the centre of a narrow concept

of peace and conflict research. However, no new grand theory seems to be necessary. But it demands a new methodology, which relates structural and event analysis. This methodology has to be based on historical analysis, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Case studies are the most appropriate form. The Danish sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg has published an outstanding book “Making Social Science Matter – Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again” in 2001, which should also be read by all peace and conflict researchers. (Apparently much innovation came in peace and conflict research from the now peaceful societies in Scandinavia. Actually, in the past the Vikings were just the contrary, i.e. very violent.)

Finally we should not forget that in really existing capitalism the economy is predominant. However, the target for an enlightened science is to overcome this dominance, this primacy and to lead to the emancipation of humankind from its self-inflicted minority. This is the challenge for modern peace and conflict research today in Japan and in the whole world.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently there existed already peace studies in the Greek antiquity with philosophers like Aristotle in their search for a good society (cf. Flyvbjerg 2001). And also in the Renaissance the Irenik, Erasmus von Rotterdam and humanists were very much concerned. And not to forget the Age of Enlightenment with notably Immanuel Kant's writing on eternal peace. Also in other cultures we find eminent treatises on peace (India, China, Arabia, ...)

<sup>2</sup> Johan Galtung has been made Dr.h.c. at the University of Osnabrück for his merits on peace research in 1995 (Széll/Kinkelbur 1996).