



Who owns nature? Conflicts and challenges in international biodiversity politics

Ulrich Brand --- 15 November 2012

Göttingen, Fachtagung „Biodiversität und Gesellschaft“

- **ontological-epistemological remark**
- **theoretical considerations: Global Political Ecology, enhancement**
- **distinction between explicit and implicit (international BD) politics**
- **political economy of biodiversity**
- **role of state to deal with conflicts**
- **conclusion: some remarks on conflicts**



ontological and epistemological remark

- **broader perspective advantages and disadvantages**
- **critical theory is doing empirical research**
- **but focus not on causalities but on plausibilities**
- **this means for research: to identify out of literature structures and broader societal developments**
 - E.g. modern societies tend to dominate nature
 - E.g., accumulation imperative of capitalism
 - They do not determine everything! – contingencies, contest / struggles - dysfunctionalities
 - but they form strong tendencies



(Global) Political Ecology

- nature is not external to society but its materiality constituted by society: *societal nature relations*
- nature has its materiality which we can detect (i.e. through science, experiences)

„[A]ll ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa. Ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral.” (David Harvey)



(Global) Political Ecology ... (2)

- *what are the historically specific and locally uneven forms of the appropriation of nature (resources, waste, sinks)?*
- crucial is then: forms of production, mobility, food, living – this is linked to interests, power and domination
- the forms of societal nature-relations are contested → *energy and food production*
- **many latent and manifest conflicts** terrains of envt'l politics to transform them and to deal with them; terrains are selective (specific problem definitions, policies)



„Gramscian-Poulantzian“ political ecology

- **plurality of societal nature-relations but some forms dominant / **hegemonic**** (industrialised agriculture, auto-mobility)
- **specific form and functions of the **(internationalised) state****
- **to link the to other social relations and overall developments: **post-Fordist societal nature relations****



not just **governance** but also the **state and its internationalisation**

- not just one actor beside others (many governance approaches), but **a specific societal relation**
- specific means: monopoly of legitimate violence, tax state
- state needs to be understood in relation to social actors and orientations („material condensation of societal power relations“)
- giving durability to specific, historically concrete relations; e.g. dominance of pharmaceutical or agro industry, of Northern countries
- **my focus today:** state creates terrain to deal transform manifold conflicts to political ones, to constitute terrain to deal with conflicts



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

- transformation of the state towards **internationalised competition states** at different spatial levels
 - control of natural resources become crucial for competitiveness and power of countries, regions (EU) and economic players
 - (internationalised) state secures / promotes commodification of nature
 - hegemonic “national interests”: to secure or enhance competitiveness, *environmental protection come after this or is articulated with is*



to sum up first part

- **Some reflections on critical theory**
 - **Global Political Ecology as one paradigm in debate**
 - **in my work: enhancement with hegemony theory (Gramsci) and state theory (Poulantzas, Jessop)**
- preparation of a **broader perspective** on intl BD politics
- makes empirical work more realistic, more complex
- my point is **not** that this has **to be done in each work**



perspective of international BD politics

Ken Conca: „explicit environmental politics“

- **CBD to deal with dramatic erosion of BD; 2010 target**
- **political institutions to promote sustainable development / green economy ABS, „green gold of the genes“**
- **central line of conflict: North-South (e.g. Nagoya Protocol)**



**absent in int'l BD politics – but crucial
„implicit environmental politics“**

- **other processes** like free trade, industrial or resource policies are **decisive** for societal nature relations and ecological crisis
- **capitalist industrialist** mode of production and living creates a rationality to dominate and commodify nature
- predominance of **competition, competitiveness and geopolitics**
- diplomatic conflicts in CBD, FCCC and elsewhere hide other **conflicts** over appropriation of nature like domestic or local ones
→ **Who owns nature?**



Implicit politics – shaping of societal nature relations

***→ this opens up analytical space to understand conflicts differently
– not only as conflict among governments and mainly North-South***

- **political economy of biodiversity (politics)**
- **the role of the state, intl politics**
- **then I come back to my argument**

political economy of biodiversity (politics)

- manifold dynamics and interests: conservation, green gold of the genes, defending local livelihoods etc.
- emerging common understanding: „conservation through economic valorisation“
- latest round: (payment for) ecosystem services

„... since the 1980s economic valuation is likely to pave the way for the commodification of ecosystem services with potentially counterproductive effects for biodiversity conservation and equity of access to ecosystem services benefits“

(Gómez-Baggethun/Ruiz Pérez in *Progress in Physical Geography*, 2011)



Political economy - „imperial mode of living“

The global North defends its form of living, i.e. the imperial form of living: access to global resources and cheap labour

- Deeply embedded in production and consumption patterns, in everyday practices of people and in societal relationships of forces (capital-labour, gender relations)
- It presumes an unlimited access to resources (legally, via open force)

it tends to get universalized but it is not universalisable



coming back to my major argument

- a) (internationalised) state like CBD is **societal relation** and condensation of power relations
- b) is (asymmetric) terrain **to deal with conflicts**
- no surprise that „logics“ of commodification are inscribed (**Bonn Guidelines, Nagoya Protocol**) and that conservationist strategies play secondary role
- search for new spheres of capital accumulation; **access, IPR** crucial
- crucial idea: „state“ creates adequate framework for „markets“
- **IPBES: Intergovernmental** Platform on BD and Ecosystem Services; form of knowledge production within narrow corridors
 - strengthening role of scientific knowledge via assessments, specific actors and policies → Alice Vadrot tomorrow



CONFLICTS

- **there are many conflicts, but they take place in hegemonic corridors**
 - - consent about commodification of nature
 - - about „resources“ for marketable products
 - - resource extractivism in Latin America, Greece, elsewhere
- **distributional conflicts (ABS, IPR) are more politicised than conflicts about recognition (indigenous rights)**
- **no questioning of (imperial) mode of production and living**



some analytical and political **challenges**

- analytically: to consider **„implicit politics“**, i.e. the (cultural) political economy of biodiversity
- weak CBD: **overlapping issues** / dynamics
 - dynamics of „agrofuels project“
- how to evaluate **green economy**, payment for ecosystem services? & related world views („nature as a resource“, Rio+20: „nature capital“)
- question of **democracy**: (a) participation within CBD process; (b) who decides over socio-economic developments; shaping of SNR



thank you for your attention!