

POLITICAL ECOLOGY: SECURITY STUDIES APPROACH

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Nature does nothing uselessly.

Aristotle (384-322 BC)

Intro. Concerns about the environment have been rising steadily since the 1970s, when a larger Western public became aware of the threats posed by environmental degradation and pollution. The growing importance of environmental issues on political agendas and in the media has been accompanied by a dramatic increase of research on the environment in developing and Western countries. Scholars of development studies, security studies or conflict studies have focused on the environment trying to understand and conceptualise its effects on human life and vice versa. But how should one assess environmental changes and their effects on society? This preoccupation with human-nature interaction resulted in a variety of new approaches within different disciplines, each producing very different research results and, ultimately, policy recommendations. Even though environmental change has been discussed in academic and policy circles for about thirty years now, it has not yet brought about anything close to a theoretical consensus. The multitude of different and often contradictory theories on human-environment interactions call for a critical review of the current state of the art in order to facilitate future research on sustainable development, natural resource management and resource conflicts. One of the approaches that has emerged as most promising is political ecology, which stands at the centre of these thesis.

Political ecology is a relatively new field of research that has been widely discussed and much used in recent analyses of interactions between humans and the environment. However, despite its prominence key concepts of political ecology remain ambiguous. It is an area of research where social scientists with ecological concerns and natural scientists looking at the 'human factor' take into account ideas of social security and political economy. Among the security questions that political ecology deals with are: (1) how both nature and societal structures determine each other and shape access to natural resources, (2) how constructed concepts of society and nature determine human-environment security interactions, (3) the connections between the access to, and control over, resources and environmental change, and (4) the social outcomes of environmental change.

One of the characteristics of political ecology is that it is not a coherent 'grand' theory, but rather a specific lens through which one can examine the interactions between the environment safety and social security. Scholars do so from different viewpoints and relying on very different disciplinary backgrounds (geography, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, history and management). Very often diametrically opposed paradigms and theories (for instance, neo-liberal vs. neo-Marxist) are brought forward by researchers who deal with a similar field of scientific inquiry, i.e. human-nature interactions and the mutual effects engendered. Political ecology seemingly provides conceptual tools for security analysis rather than an encompassing theory of human-environment relations. Moreover, as most works in the field of political ecology are distinct case studies of different, local security problems, it is difficult to identify specific and coherent theories of political ecology that scholars base their research upon. Despite the growing importance of political ecology as an analytical and practical approach to how environmental changes impact on the security behaviour of people affected by them, the theoretical work has just begun. There is still much work to be done to shape a comprehensive theory of political ecology that will be able to serve as a solid foundation for scientific research within security studies.

Being an interdisciplinary approach political ecology is still in its formative phase. The concepts of scholars vary greatly and their respective perspectives on political ecology are often subject to harsh criticism by their peers. To this day the majority of political ecology research consists of analyses of local environmental changes, which are related to broader social and political security structures. For security-orientated political ecologists the challenge is to circumvent the 'ideographic trap' – i.e. to avoid research findings valid only for a specific and spatially limited area. There is a need to elevate research results from their original unit of analysis onto a more general level if one seeks to contribute to the mitigation of syndromes of global environmental change. But more often, and arguably rightly so, the goal of regional political ecology is to explicitly avoid generalisations and to do justice to local realities.

Central to political ecology is the in-depth examination of social-political security structures in their global and historical contexts to explain environmental change and the analysis of the various involved actors, their interests, actions and discourses. Two main branches of research stand out in this regard. There is the more conflict-orientated approach that looks at environmentally induced conflicts, political conflicts between stakeholders at different levels of administration as well as violent conflicts.

Conclusion. A political ecology approach to security issues is used to provide a conceptual framework for an understanding of the relations between social and environmental dimensions of security. In this approach the politicized social structures and land capabilities are construed as those influencing the proximate determinants of both the social-political processes and the possible processes of environment degradation. The objective is to show that interlacing qualities of social-political life and economic-political "development" determine the degree of environment degradation. The qualities of environment are argued to be grounded in the web of social relations and it is stressed that affiliations to different socio-economic groups also determine whether the economic actors has to overexploit the environment. In a situation in which the environment capability cannot satisfy the needs of the user,

new survival strategies have to be found. These can either be adaptation to the new socio-economic and socio-political situation like the "multi-active ecopolitical strategy", or disclaiming from the contemporary situation like the "secluded-group strategy". The ecological consequences of the new survival strategies are still to be assessed.