

GLOCON

Global Change - Local Conflicts

International Symposium

Global Crises and Conflicts over Resources

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Book of Abstracts

Keynote Lecture

Bringing capitalism back in: new enclosures and dispossession in India

Shalini Randeria (Institute for Human Sciences, Austria)

The talk will address various kinds of dispossession as a result of new enclosures of land and of natural resources in India by focussing on Special Economic Zones, urban infrastructure and intellectual property rights as related to bio-genetic resources. It will situate these within the dynamics of neo-liberal development arguing that in order to understand the transformations of resource use and the production of surplus populations, we need to place the analysis of varieties of capitalism in the global South centre-stage. Going beyond David Harvey's thesis of accumulation by dispossession and Saskia Sassen's delineation of expulsion, I will discuss the debate generated by Kalyan Sanyal's incisive reformulation of Marx's idea of primitive accumulation. Finally, the promises and pitfalls of legal activism against the nexus of the cunning state and corporations will be examined along with the role of the World Bank.

The role of the state in conflicts over resources

The role of the state in conflicts over resources: a historical-materialist perspective

Ulrich Brand (Universität Wien, Austria)

Empirical analyses of the state and its role in resource conflicts often suffer four shortcomings: First, the state is seen as a promoter of powerful capitalist interests and at the same time, those who are affected by resource extraction and challenge it formulate their demands towards the state. Second, the state is seen as a rather homogeneous entity; heterogeneity, conflicts and the often precarious formulation of consistent state policies are overseen. Third, in the formulation of concrete policies (e.g. mining laws) the state does not act autonomously but within complex societal constellations. And fourth, the state is not just an actor performing legal, financial, repressive and other policies but it is also a collective intellectual with powerful means to stabilise, influence or even create societal discourses (or undermine existing ones).

In my rather conceptual contribution I would like to draw the attention to the contradictory and instable constituencies of the state (without denying its power and more or less stable structures) by referring to elements of a historical-materialist policy analysis (HMPA).

Criminalisation, collusion and corruption: the state and small-scale gold mining in Ghana

Gordon Crawford (Coventry University, Great Britain)

In April 2017, the Government of Ghana imposed a moratorium on all small-scale mining in Ghana, ostensibly to address the ‘galamsey menace’, as illicit small-scale miners are currently described by government and media alike, and associated environmental degradation. The moratorium is backed-up by a military-style crackdown – Operation Vanguard – and was still in force at the time of writing. This crackdown is the latest instance of the contradictory and inconsistent approach of the Ghanaian state towards small-scale gold mining. While such periodic criminalisation and militarisation of the sector occurs, the state is also responsible for the conditions that lead to widespread, illicit mining, in at least two ways. First, the state is culpable for the ‘perpetual informality’ (Hilson et al 2014) of the sector due to its neglect of small-scale mining, and, in contrast, its prioritisation of large-scale mining by transnational mining corporations, including through the dispossession of land from rural communities as large-scale mining concessions. Second, politicians and state officials are guilty of encouraging illegal mining through their own collusion and participation in such practices, often through corrupt activities. This paper examines the role of the state in the current crisis in small-scale mining in Ghana, the prospects for a more coherent policy response, and explores what this tells us about the nature of the state and democracy in contemporary Ghana.

Unfortunately, Gordon Crawford is unable to attend the symposium.

State, investors and the creation of property in conflicts over resources: insights from northern Brazil

Mario Schenk (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

States play a central role in conflicts over resources. However, to explain their influence in such conflicts it is misleading to conceptualize the state as a unified entity that is following a single goal. Neither is it sufficient for an analysis of resource conflicts to only focus on a few state actors involved. In this presentation I argue that in order to understand the role of the state in resource conflicts, we need an understanding of the state as a complex and often contradictory set of actors. Their actions follow several different positions and interests. I propose a comprehension of the state that is based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the state as a *field* is useful to disassemble the alleged single entity state. State action manifests itself through a multitude of actions by different state actors that can either be complementary, contradictory or even oppositional to one other.

My argument is based on a conflict over land in the state of Tocantis in northern Brazil. Here, smallholders and an investor in soybean production compete for access to and use of land. Building on data from ethnographic fieldwork in 2017, I present a detailed account of the different state actors involved as well as their actions. My analysis reveals that a core task of state actors is to create the framework of conditions for rendering land investable. State actors facilitate the productive and profitable use of land through credit schemes or the allocation of land titles and as such the creation of private property. Although, state actors are not directly involved in the transformation of the land or the settlement of the conflict, they nevertheless strongly influence the course and form of the conflict.

Studying the state as practices of governing

Verónica Schild (University of Western Ontario, Canada)

We gain analytically from posing the question about the role of the ‘state’ in conflicts over resources as a historical question about governing. The ‘state’ as such does not exist, Philip Abrams reminded us, but is at best a shorthand for practices of governing that are “in the first instance an exercise in legitimation, in moral regulation”. The neoliberalised state form, I suggest, constructs conflicts over resources, and responds to them, in the name of a new modernisation and through its production of ‘zones of sacrifice’, by ameliorative and, above all, punitive forms of social regulation (always gendered and racialised).

Resources, conflicts and social relations

Who owns the land? Kinship, authority and claims to African resources

Sara Berry (Johns Hopkins University, United States)

Social relationships, or sustained patterns of interaction between individuals or among members of a group, may be cooperative, contentious or a mixture of both. In the past, many Africans gained access to land through what one recent publication refers to as “social tenures” – access to land through membership in a social group, rather than freehold ownership. Typically, members of a landholding group could use any part of the group’s territory not already employed by someone else, but could not transfer their rights without approval from others. In recent decades, as rising demand for land led to the spread of land markets, urgent questions arose about what was being bought and sold by whom? Whether shaped by legislation or policy, pursued in courts of law, or argued (and sometimes fought over) in local settings, debates over land transactions often turned on questions of authority. Who was entitled to sell, lease, mortgage or bequeath land or land use rights to others, and who could decide? Coinciding with African struggles to work out the conditions of their own self-government following the end of colonial rule, rising competition over land intersected with conflicts over authority and obligation at all levels of social interaction.

Using case studies drawn from my own and others’ research, this paper will describe and compare some of the ways land conflicts reflected, intensified or reshaped struggles over authority within and between families, local communities, institutions and states in the postcolonial era. How have relations of authority and obligation among members of families or other social groups influenced and been altered by commercialisation of land transactions? When have contests over land remained local, and when have local struggles become enmeshed in national politics? While recognising the importance of recent large-scale acquisitions of land by (often) foreign investors, this essay will focus on processes of “privatisation from below,” asking how smaller-scale commercial acquisitions figure as sources of wealth and/or threats to livelihood in different economic and political contexts.

Unfortunately, Sara Berry is unable to attend the symposium.

The restructuring of the rural working class in agricultural transformation processes: the case of sugarcane production in São Paulo

Jan Brunner (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

In recent times, global transformation processes led to the restructuring of the agricultural sector. Increased investments in land and the expansion of an agro-industrial mode of production are key features of this development leading to deepened capitalist relations in agrarian societies. This has an impact on social relations and especially on class relations. Studies within the field of Critical Agrarian Studies (CAS) essentially contributed to the respective scientific debate and generated valuable insights regarding the impacts of global transformation processes on class relations. Surprisingly, the debate lacks a thorough analysis of how these processes affect (wage) labor, the working class, capital-labor relations and working-class struggles.

In my analysis, I refer to field research on the recent transformation of the sugarcane sector in São Paulo state (Brazil), which is characterised by an expansion, internationalisation and mechanisation of sugarcane production. The transformation had impacts on the organisation of the work process and labor relations in the sector. This raises a couple of questions: How have workers and trade unions reacted to this transformation? Has the bargaining power of sugarcane workers been strengthened or weakened? Do such changes impede or stimulate solidarity between workers and between trade unions? In short, in my contribution, I analyse how agricultural change affects the composition of the rural working class, their unity and class consciousness. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the transformation affected capital-labor relations as well as the character and frequency of working-class struggles like strikes in the sector.

Gender and environmental conflicts: theoretical approaches and empirical evidences from Kalimantan, Indonesia

Kristina Großmann (Universität Passau, Germany)

Gender and its intersections are decisive factors which shape and are shaped by environmental conflicts. However, categories of differentiation are framed and employed differently by academics and practitioners alike. Meanwhile, civil society organisations and development institutions, echoing ecofeminist approaches, frequently deploy ‘strategic essentialisms’ in the context of gender and ethnicity in order to pursue their interests. Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) rather seeks to work against essentialisms in the analyses on the role and agency of women within globalised processes of environmental transformations. Recent approaches as Material Feminist Political Ecology or Queer Ecology bring back materiality into the analysis, which was excluded in postmodern feminist work. However, despite enlarging understandings of gender, the majority of the existing research focuses on women rather than on gender relations or men. Therefore, I end up describing the constitution of a masculine indigenous semi-nomadic identity in struggles over land, ethnic identity, and autonomy in the course of conflicting resource extraction such as mining in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia.

The rise of authoritarian populism: rethinking social and political struggles over resources

Ian Scoones (University of Sussex, Great Britain)

The rise of ‘authoritarian populism’ in different parts of the world suggests a new political moment is emerging. Such diverse political reconfigurations are responding in different ways to the fundamental crises of globalised neoliberal capitalism. This has huge implications for our understanding of the relationships between global crises and conflicts over resources.

This presentation will start with a short discussion of authoritarian populism, drawing from the work of Stuart Hall and others. I will argue that different forms of authoritarian populism emerge at a ‘political-ideological conjuncture’ when the ‘balance of forces’ change. Through a transformist, authoritarian movement, often with a strong figurehead leader and drawing on popular discontents, ‘moral panics’ are mobilised and ‘authoritarian closure’ is thus given a gloss of ‘populist consent’. Why are we seeing versions of such phenomena globally, and what implications does this have?

The main part of the presentation will focus on four themes that require us to rethink the social and political dimensions of struggles over resources. First, is the observation that the form of populism depends on historical engagements with globalisation and relationships between urban and rural economies, including patterns of migration. Globalisation processes affect rural spaces in different ways to urban metropolises, with contrasting implications for class, caste, gender or age – and so processes of political mobilisation.

Second, the emergence of populism, with a strong rural political base, requires us to ask sympathetically why it is that young people, women, peasant farmers and others are often strongly behind reactionary populist positions. There is thus a need to think harder about the politics of identity, belonging, recognition and community, as central to resource struggles.

Third, authoritarian populism provides a nationalist, anti-globalisation rationale for the continued extractive exploitation of resources – land, water, resource grabbing continues apace – but with new capital-elite-state alliances forged. This affects the politics of dispossession, and with these the dynamics of accumulation, among local and international elites, requiring new perspectives on resource grabbing and extractivism.

Fourth, in relation to resistance and mobilisation, authoritarian populism requires new frames, challenging simplistic notions of sovereignty, localism, autonomy and a rejection of the role of the state and globalism as foci for progressive movement-building.

In conclusion, I will argue that the new political contexts of authoritarian populism in different parts of the world require new questions, new analytical frames and new forms of mobilisation, if resource conflicts are to be resolved in favour of the poor and marginalised.

Transformation from below

Challenging politics of austerity by mobilizing alternative socioecologies: insights from Greece

Giorgos Velegrakis (Harokopio University, Greece)

Rita Calvário (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)

The paper, by focusing on current socio-environmental conflicts in Greece, explores how the politics of austerity influence the dynamics of environmental conflict, and how the environment is mobilised in subaltern struggles against the normalisation of politics of austerity. Using a Gramscian political ecology framework, our analysis shows that by reciprocally combining anti-austerity politics and alternative ways of understanding and using 'nature', the current socio-environmental movements in Greece challenge the reproduction of uneven society-environment relations exacerbated by the neoliberal austerity agenda. Furthermore, we seek to understand the transformative potentials of these movements by researching their attempts of bringing forward radical alternatives.

Unfortunately, Rita Calvário is unable to attend the symposium.

Conflicts over resources and its potentials for transformation

Kristina Dietz (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)

In this contribution I ask for the transformative potentials of conflicts over resources, particularly conflicts over mining. Recently, scholars focus on the potentials that struggles over resources may bear for transformative politics, i.e. the transformation of social and property relations and democratic decision making. However, what transformation thereby actually means, and under what conditions it comes about, is hardly conceptualised. Building on concepts from participatory and materialist democracy theory, this paper explores entry points for conceptual clarification.

I apply the conceptual ideas to a case study from my own research on protests against a gold mining project in Colombia in which opponents use popular consultations as a means of direct democracy and struggle. The paper reveals both the transformative potentials *and* limits of this struggle against mining. I argue that in order to understand the possibilities for social transformation that emanate from conflicts over resources we have to focus not only on protest actors and their strategies but also on the relationship between popular struggles and the historically evolved structural conditions within which conflicts emerge.

Eight dimensions of land grabbing that every researcher should take into account

Marc Edelman (City University of New York, United States)

Researchers on land grabbing need to attend to various frequently neglected dimensions. These include: (1) the presence of historical antecedents in current history; (2) problems of scale;

(3) the issue of falling commodity prices in recent years and the impact of commodity prices on so-called ‘drivers’ of land grabbing; (4) the role of national or domestic actors; (5) the various reactions ‘from below’ to land grabbing, ranging from expulsion or displacement to incorporation, under adverse conditions, into the grabbers’ enterprises or projects; (6) the multiple and increasingly complex dimensions of financialisation and its role in the new context of falling commodity prices; (7) land grabbing for non-agricultural purposes, such as urbanisation and industrial zones; and (8) racism and the need to make visible target populations that are stigmatised and systematically invisibilised, such as nomads, pastoralists, artisanal fishers, indigenous peoples, and racial and ethnic minorities who occupy lands coveted by grabbers.

Labour and strategies of social-ecological transformation

Oliver Pye (Universität Bonn, Germany)

This contribution argues that the labour movement is central to the social-ecological transformation from below of capitalist society. On a fundamental level, this is because the alienation of labour is at the heart of the ecological crises of capitalism. On a structural level, conflicts over resources are embedded within global production networks (GPN) – themselves alienated steps in the social metabolism with nature. Any social-ecological transformation strategy (e.g. food sovereignty) will need to transform these GPN (e.g. corporate food regime) to establish new social relations with nature. The transnational matrix of capitalist production now materially links groups of workers and the appropriation of nature in unprecedented globalised forms, creating the potential to reforge a planetary internationalism. However, this potential is currently not realised politically. A labour turn in the environmental justice movement is necessary.