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Towards a Constructivist Understanding of Socio-Environmental Conflicts

Abstract:

The links between environmental degradation, renewable resource scarcity and conflict are still poorly understood. One reason for this is the positivist-rationalist bias which is characteristic of the mainstream literature on socio-environment conflicts but has largely remained unaddressed so far. Many studies are therefore unable to utilize insights from environmental sociology, constructivist conflict research and political ecology. Drawing on this literature and discourse theory, the article develops a constructivist understanding of socio-environmental conflicts (CUSEC). The proposed framework highlights the relevance of discursively constructed identities, situation assessments and interests for understanding the dynamics of such conflicts. The plausibility of the framework across different contexts is demonstrated by a discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and forest conflicts in northern Thailand.

Key words: environment, conflict, constructivism, Israel, Palestine, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

At least since the late 1990s, the detection of possible links between environmental degradation, renewable natural resource scarcity and various forms of conflict ranks high on the agendas of political geography and peace and conflict research.¹ Since 2007, these links have become a major point of contention in the debate on climate change and conflict.² While such conflicts are often termed environmental or, more recently, climate conflicts, I prefer the term ‘socio-environmental conflicts’³, since it is both social and environmental factors that drive their dynamics. Despite much attention by policy makers and the large number of studies on the issue, the links between renewable resource scarcity/degradation and conflicts as well as the dynamics of such socio-environmental conflicts are still poorly understood.⁴

The lack of consensual findings in the research on socio-environmental conflicts has been attributed to a number of factors, including missing interaction between quantitative and qualitative scholars⁵, theoretical models which are underspecified⁶ or too complex to be tested by empirical research⁷, an inconsistent use of major variables⁸ and the lack of high-resolution data on many indicators⁹. While all these issues certainly deserve further attention, I suggest another, so far often ignored reason for our currently insufficient understanding of socio-environmental conflicts: Many studies on the links between environmental degradation, renewable natural resource scarcity and conflict are characterized by a positivist-rationalist bias. This bias manifests itself in three interrelated assumptions shared explicitly or implicitly by what one might call ‘mainstream’ in the research on socio-environmental conflicts¹⁰:

Firstly, most of these mainstream studies assume that there is a material world which exists independent of human cognition and whose material qualities are key drivers of human behavior. For instance, all large-N investigations on the link between precipitation changes and conflict use rainfall data measured by meteorological stations in order to operationalize their independent variable.¹¹ By doing so, they implicitly assume either that rainfall reality is objectively measured by meteorological instruments and that human perceptions of it do not matter, or that meteorological instruments and local people perceive rainfall dynamics in the same objective way. Similarly, the classical qualitative case studies of Homer-Dixon and colleagues often use satellite- or expert-generated data to assess the degree of environmental degradation.¹² But various studies have concluded that perceptions of environmental problems, changes and risks are not only relevant for social actions, but also highly dependent on political, cultural, historical and personal backgrounds. Perceptions of environmental factors and dynamics are therefore far from objective and have important implications for political actions.¹³ And even if there is agreement on the existence and magnitude of an environmental problem, its meaning, causes and solutions are usually disputed.¹⁴

Secondly, factors which can more obviously not be conceived as objective are hardly incorporated in the theoretical frameworks or empirical investigations of mainstream approaches, especially if quantitative methods are used.¹⁵ Recent works in conflict studies have emphasized the importance of concepts such as identities, narratives, threat perceptions or enemy images for the development of conflicts¹⁶. Anthropologic accounts have elaborated the symbolic dimensions of natural resource conflicts for quite some time.¹⁷ And various studies have already shown the benefits of concepts like social constructions or narratives when analyzing socio-environmental conflicts in Ethiopia¹⁸ and the Middle East¹⁹. However, such factors have, with the exception of some short references to ethnicity and past violence, so far hardly been considered in mainstream research on socio-environmental conflicts. This is true for large-N studies which have serious problems to quantify such variables. But also many theoretical frameworks²⁰ and case studies²¹ largely ignore the importance of such assumed ‘soft’ factors.

Thirdly, the actions of individuals and social groups are not only assumed to be primarily structured by an objective, material reality. Humans are also conceived as acting in an instrumentally rationalist way towards this reality. Similar to the rational choice models in classical economics, social action is thus largely described as a result of informed means-end considerations. Among many other examples, just consider Salehyan’s explanation for why resource scarcity is unlikely to raise the risk of violent conflict onset:

‘violent conflict is an inefficient and sub-optimal reaction to changes in the environment and resource scarcities [...] Engaging in armed rebellion is quite costly and risky and requires large-scale collective action. Individuals and households are more likely to engage in simpler, personal, or smallscale coping strategies [...] As mentioned above, rebellion does not distribute resources by itself, and protracted civil wars can have devastating effects on the economy and the natural environment, leaving fewer resources to bargain over.’²²

In other words, rational calculations about the resources they need, efficient strategies for acquiring them and the environmental impact of civil conflicts are considered to be the most important explanatory factors for the use of violence by individuals or social groups. This is not to say that such rational choice-based arguments are necessarily wrong (although they frequently are), but rather that they cannot account for some important aspects of social reality.²³ Instrumental rationalist accounts to conflict face problems, for instance, when they have to explain the use of violence in cases where/when violence is a suboptimal strategy in terms of utility maximization.²⁴

In short, there exists a positivist-rationalist bias in the mainstream research on socio-environmental conflicts because many studies conceptualize individuals and social groups as utility maximizers which act in an instrumental rationalist manner towards a bio-physical and socio-economic surrounding which is reduced to its material, seemingly objective characteristics.

Such an understanding has well-known limitations, or rather blind spots. The aim of this article is to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing the inter-subjective dimensions of conflicts around scarce renewable resources. In order to do so, it combines insights from discourse theory, constructivist conflict research, political ecology and environmental sociology. The utility of this framework is demonstrated by discussing the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and forest conflicts in northern Thailand. In doing so, this article adds to a growing, but still small number of studies which use constructivist insights to analyze socio-environmental conflicts.²⁵

The article proceeds as follows: At first, a theoretical framework for a constructivist understanding of socio-environmental conflicts (CUSEC) is introduced. Afterwards, the usefulness of this framework is illustrated by a discussion of two case studies, namely the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and forest conflicts between highland and lowland dwellers in northern Thailand. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

A CONSTRUCTIVIST UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Discourse is a concept which is widely used in the social sciences²⁶ and already has been successfully employed in the study of socio-environmental conflicts.²⁷ It will therefore serve as a starting point for the theoretical framework developed here.²⁸ A discourse can be defined as ‘a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’.²⁹ In other words, discourses constitute collectively shared meaning and thus define what is considered as true by a specific group. There is a vast literature showing how certain discourses (re-)produce specific understandings of a certain situational configurations, for instance as an environmental problem or a security threat.³⁰ But besides such situation assessments, and empirically often deeply intertwined with them, discourses also provide ‘subject positions’³¹ for social actors. These define the role and characteristics, or in other words, the identity of individuals and social groups.

The definition of discourse used here implies that discourses are (re-)produced by human practices and cannot exist independently of them.³² Thus, I assume a relationship of mutual structuration between discourses and practices in the sense that discourses structure the form and content of practices while practices in turn (re-)produce or transform discourses.³³ This implies that discourses structure - or shape, facilitate and restrict - but never determine human actions. Practices can be understood as ‘conventionalized action patterns’ which follow a certain (discursively constructed) understanding about the proper way of acting in a certain situation.³⁴

Practices refer to a wide range of actions, including making (oral or written) statements, on which most discourse analysts focus, but also dressing or controlling a border point. A discourse is considered dominant if it structures how a social group thinks about and acts towards the world.³⁵

Such an understanding of discourse can neatly be connected to conflict theory. An intergroup conflict can be defined as a process in which at least two collective actors conceive their respective interests as contradictory and undertake actions in order to enforce or articulate these interests.³⁶ If such actions to enforce or articulate interests involve the use of direct, physical violence, a conflict can be considered violent.³⁷ But interests do not just appear in the minds of individual or collective actors. Rather, interests arise from and are strongly shaped by a group's collective identity:

‘Questions regarding identities must always take precedence over questions regarding interests. It is only *as some-one* that we can have an interest *in some-thing*; it is *only once we know who we are that we can know what we want.*’³⁸

A collective identity can be defined as a social category which contains ‘constitutive norms’ that define who the members of a group are and by which attributes they are characterized and ‘social purposes’, i.e. the goals of the group.³⁹ Furthermore, identities (or subject positions) are always relational and contain one or several Others against which a group defines itself.⁴⁰ The boundary markers which determine whether an actor belongs to the Self or is considered as an Other are called ‘diacritica’⁴¹. Examples of diacritica that are identified as driving intergroup conflict include ‘primordial resident – invader’⁴², ‘fair-minded – unjust’⁴³ or ‘superior – inferior’⁴⁴. Identities are also considered as likely to drive conflicts if the Other is perceived to be homogenous, if identities are seen as fixed and unchangeable and if the Other is constructed as a threat to the Self.⁴⁵

It has been discussed above that discourses not only (re-)produce subject positions/identities, but also situation assessments. The latter can be defined as the sum of an actor's causality assumptions and perceptions of surrounding material conditions. Such assumptions/perceptions are relevant for the dynamics of all intergroup conflicts.⁴⁶ But they are likely to be especially important for socio-environmental conflicts which are basically about the (perception and interpretation of) bio-physical and ecological materialities. With regard to the role of identities, interests and actions discussed above, situation assessments are relevant for three reasons:

- a) Situation assessments and identities mutually influence each other. The attributes and capabilities ascribed to the Self (identity), for instance, influence how a social group perceives the threat emanating from an environmental change or the growing influence of another group (situation assessment).⁴⁷ In turn, the assessment of the speed of economic

growth in recent years or the military capabilities of neighbouring groups shape a group's identity as hard-working or inherently threatened.⁴⁸

- b) Situation assessments influence interests since the existence of an interest requires the prior definition of a situation against which this interest is articulated. For instance, a group's interest in (concrete forms of) climate change mitigation and adaptation is influenced by the perceived consequences of climatic changes for the respective group.⁴⁹
- c) Situation assessments are a key intervening variable between interests and actions since they define possibility spaces. For instance, a group might conclude that it is in its interest to attack a rival or prevent coastal erosion. However, the group is unlikely to act in accordance with its interests if it assesses its technical, financial and military resources as insufficient to do so.⁵⁰

In the literature, many situation assessments are discussed as playing a crucial role for conflict onset and escalation. Examples include the description of an Other as responsible for a problem the Self faces⁵¹, the perception of important resources as being limited and/or the object of a zero-sum game⁵², the description of a valued reference object as existentially threatened⁵³ or the assessment of unilateral actions and eventual violence as promising in terms of resources, salvation or security.⁵⁴

Such a constructivist understanding of intergroup conflicts seizes a middle ground between linguistic idealism/radical constructivism and materialism/objectivism. On the one hand, it insists that 'everything we perceive, experience, sense is mediated through socially constructed and typified knowledge [...] We have no direct access to the world *per se*'⁵⁵ (epistemological constructivism). But on the other hand, it is emphasized that 'the analysis of discursive constructions [...] is especially powerful when done in the context of a study of the socio-historical' and bio-physical contexts (ontological realism).⁵⁶ This pragmatism is in line with what Fierke calls conventional or weak constructivism in International Relations theory⁵⁷ and resonates well with political ecology's emphasis on 'the simultaneity of symbolic and material struggles' over natural resources.⁵⁸ It allows researchers to take into consideration the characteristics of bio-physical and socio-economic systems, but highlights that discourses structure how the relevant actors perceive and act towards these systems.

Since discourses support particular constructions of situations and identities, they favor some options for action over alternative ones, that is, they constitute an important source or form of power.⁵⁹ Such ideational or bargaining power exists in parallel to and is deeply intertwined with structural power, which derives from military and economic capacities.⁶⁰ The ontological pragmatism of CUSEC allows for taking both structural/material and ideational forms of power into account.

In sum, CUSEC emphasizes that the actions which constitute socio-environmental conflicts are structured by identities and situation assessments, which are in turn shaped by discourses. Discourses, by contrast, are (re-)produced by human actions and also shaped by the ‘material quality [of reality] which confronts us with problems of interpretation’.⁶¹ Figure 1 gives a summary of this theoretical framework:

- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE -

Figure 1: Simplified summary of CUSEC

EVIDENCE FROM CASES

In this section, CUSEC will be applied to two socio-environmental conflicts about renewable resources perceived as scarce by the parties involved: the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and forest conflicts in the north of Thailand. The cases were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, material factors, such as a dry climate and water scarcity in the Middle East⁶² or population growth and deforestation in South Asia⁶³, are frequently portrayed as (potentially) important for the dynamics of these conflicts. This makes them hard cases for CUSEC, which highlights the importance of inter-subjective factors vis-à-vis objective environmental and demographic ‘facts’. Secondly, both cases differ considerably with regard to their political, geographical and cultural background, their embeddedness in larger conflicts, the nature of the parties involved, the public attention they receive and the resources they concern. For instance, in the Israeli-Palestinian case, military occupation coincides with severe inequalities in vertical power⁶⁴, while in Thailand, the conflict took place within internationally accepted state borders and all contending parties had some (although unequal) access to the same formal institutions.⁶⁵ A short analysis of these two cases does certainly not prove CUSEC, but hopefully suggests its plausibility across different contexts.

The Israeli-Palestinian Water Conflict

The water conflict between Israel and Palestine is just one of several interrelated dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Water is one of the few topics on which no final (but only a provisional and contested) agreement could be reached during the peace process in the 1990s.⁶⁶ The existence of a water conflict is also expressed by current patterns of water distribution. According to the Oslo II interim agreement, signed in 1995 by the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Israel can withdraw 912 million cubic meters (MCM) per year from the shared mountain and coastal aquifers⁶⁷, while Palestinians are only allowed to use 253 MCM/year.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Israel extracts 600-700 MCM per year from the Jordan, while

Palestinians have no access to the river at all.⁶⁹ Fresh water availability per capita is considerably higher in Israel than in Palestine, with many Palestinians living below the WHO recommendation of 100 liters of water per day.⁷⁰

This unequal utilization of the region's water resources is consolidated and even increased by the Israeli-Palestinian water governance regime. Under the institutional framework established by the Oslo II accord, the Israeli administration can effectively block the development of water infrastructure or the rising of well extraction quotas in the West Bank, while Palestinians have no way to influence water-related projects or the utilization of shared water resources on Israel's territory.⁷¹ Palestinians have little chances to change this situation since the West Bank is still occupied by Israel, while the Gaza Strip is largely sealed off. Especially in the West Bank, Israel is able to enforce the unequal water regime by destroying unauthorized water pipes, wells and pumps.⁷² The large majority of Palestinians is clearly not satisfied with the current situation and strives for an adjustment of water extraction quotas and the bilateral water policy framework.⁷³ The Israeli administration, in contrast, prefers to preserve the status quo.⁷⁴

From a positivist-rationalist point of view, the existence of such a conflict is surprising given that water as a physical quantity is neither extraordinarily scarce nor economically important in both countries.⁷⁵ There will be enough water to satisfy domestic and basic agricultural water needs in the next decades even under extreme climate change and population growth scenarios.⁷⁶ Technological innovations are likely to relax the situation even more. Currently, around 50 per cent of Israel's agricultural water demand is covered by recycled wastewater, while desalination provides approximately 25 per cent of the total water consumed in Israel.⁷⁷ In addition, a large amount of virtual water is imported to the region in the form of food.⁷⁸ Finally, agriculture, the by far most water-intensive economic sector, employs only 1.5 per cent of the Israeli and 7.0 per cent of the Palestinian population⁷⁹ and accounts for no more than 2.5 per cent and 5.3 per cent of the respective GDP.⁸⁰

One might reply that many representatives of mainstream socio-environmental conflict research highlight the relevance of 'resource capture'⁸¹ or 'the misdistribution of renewable resources'⁸², and that the discourses only reflect these water-related inequalities. However, I would consider the unequal distribution of water resources as an expression of rather than as a reason for the water conflict. One could also interpret the water conflict as a mere byproduct of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But there are many examples of agreement on water issues in the context of intense conflicts.⁸³

Fortunately, there are a number of studies which have focused on water discourses in Israel and Palestine, which can be used to illustrate the additional insights gained from CUSEC. In the

following, I will focus on the dominant discourses in both societies⁸⁴ and the identities and situation assessments they provide.

Regarding the *assessment of the water situation*, Selby distinguishes three types of discourses.⁸⁵ An 'ecological discourse' states that regional water resources are limited, while population and demand are growing. According to a 'technical discourse', water problems are caused by inefficient infrastructures and administrations. Finally, a 'political discourse' insists that water scarcity is a product of unequal water distribution and thus ultimately of unequal power relations. This political discourse can also be considered as an injustice frame, which frames a group of people as being the victims of an unjust authority.⁸⁶

The Israeli assessment of the water situation combines elements of an ecological and a technical discourse. On the one hand, it insists that water in the Jordan basin is not sufficient to keep (let alone rise) current living standards in the region in the face of population growth, aquifer degradation and climate change (although this discourse of regional water scarcity only in the 1950s replaced a discourse of regional water abundance).⁸⁷ In the face of these challenges, it would be unwise to relinquish control over the aquifers and the Jordan River.⁸⁸ The availability of additional water resources due to desalination and wastewater recycling has not yet caused a major desecuritization of water in the Israeli discourse or a greater willingness to share the aquifers and the Jordan River with the Palestinians.⁸⁹ The lack of good-quality water available for the Palestinians, on the other hand, is depicted as a result of inefficient water management and the heavy pollution of water by the Palestinians. By contrast, water management in Israel is portrayed to be excellent.⁹⁰

The dominant water situation assessment in Palestine, by contrast, can be classified as a political discourse or injustice frame. Water resources in the region are described as sufficient to at least significantly increase the quantity and quality of water available for the Palestinians.⁹¹ Consequentially, the unequal distribution of limited regional water resources in combination with the occupation of the West Bank, the Israeli blocking of Palestinian water infrastructure projects, and the isolation of the Gaza Strip are perceived as the root cause of water problems in Palestine.⁹² The assessments of the water situation in the Israeli and Palestinian discourses are drivers of the water conflict. Both discourses acknowledge the limits of water availability in the region. More importantly, however, the causes of the water problems are disputed between the dominant discourses of both sides, with each side (partially) portraying the Other as responsible for the water scarcity and/or pollution problems the Self faces.

Although water is hardly a top priority in public and policy discussions nowadays,⁹³ it is still closely connected to Israeli and Palestinian *identities* in the respective national discourses. Within the traditional Zionist ideology, water is closely related to agriculture, which is in turn crucial for

key Zionist goals such as settling the Holy Land and creating a safe Jewish homeland.⁹⁴ The related identity offer is the ‘*chalutz*’, the pioneer, who helps to build a Jewish state and thus contributes to the redemption of the ‘chosen people’.⁹⁵ Water disputes with its neighbours further contributed to the securitization of water in Israel.⁹⁶ Confrontative diacritica can also be detected in the Israeli water discourse: While Israelis are depicted as reasonable, developed and good water managers, Palestinians are described as irrational, underdeveloped and water polluters.⁹⁷

In the dominant Palestinian discourse, water is connected to identity in two ways. Firstly, water is conceived as an attribute of the land which rightfully belongs to the Palestinians, but is currently occupied by Israel. The idea of control over sufficient water resources is therefore intrinsically tied to control over land and thus closely connected to the goals of Palestinian self-determination and a viable Palestinian state.⁹⁸ Secondly, the ‘myth of the *fellah*, who works and sustains his land even in the worst of circumstances (and needs water to do that)’ continues to play a role for Palestinian identity construction.⁹⁹ Related to the situation assessment described above, Israelis are referred to as ruthless and unfair in appropriating shared water resources.¹⁰⁰ Palestinians, by contrast, are portrayed as not over-using common water resources and as being ready to share them equitable.¹⁰¹

In sum, both dominant discourses construct water as important for the national identity and portray the respective Other as largely homogenous and negative. Given these identity constructions as well as the situation assessment provided by the dominant discourses, anything else than a conflict regarding the distribution and management of the (not particularly scarce) regional water resources is hardly imaginable. Israel, as the by far superior power in terms of structural and bargaining power, has so far been able to enforce most of its interests in this water conflict.¹⁰²

Forest Conflicts in Northern Thailand

After the Second World War, Thailand experienced rapid and large-scale deforestation, with most of the timber cut was sold on international markets. A partial exception of this trend was the northern part of the country, and especially the northern highlands.¹⁰³ The degradation of forests has been considerably slowed down by the imposition of a total logging ban in 1989, in combination with several national parks and protected areas established during the 1970s and 1980s. However, these parks were frequently demarcated without sufficient local knowledge and often included the land of existing villages, especially when inhabited by ethnic minorities.¹⁰⁴

Starting in the early 1980s, northern Thailand experienced a socio-environmental conflict about forest resources, closely intertwined with disputes about water and land, which peaked in

intensity around the turn of the millennium.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, a coalition of ethnic Thai lowland dwellers demanded the eviction of ethnic minorities from the sensitive highland forests. In their point of view, the agricultural practices of the highland dwellers posed a threat to the agricultural livelihoods of the lowlanders.¹⁰⁶ The lowland dwellers were supported by Thailand's Royal Forest Department (RFD), conservationist groups lead by the Dhammaanat Foundation, national park authorities and parts of the military.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, highland-based ethnic minorities, such as the Hmong or the Karen, resisted their removal. Around 75 per cent of them did not have Thai citizenship, and even less had formal land titles, but most of them lived on their land for generations.¹⁰⁸ Resistance against the relocation of these groups was supported by the Northern Farmers' Network, the Peasants' Federation of Thailand and by the Land Department.¹⁰⁹

The conflict remained largely non-violent in terms of direct, physical violence. Both sides primarily resorted to public protests and lobbying.¹¹⁰ However, several instances of attacks against human beings and properties are reported. Most of them were directed against highland ethnic minorities and included the arrestment and forced eviction of people as well as the destruction of houses, crops, fruit trees and religious images.¹¹¹ Some acts of counter-violence by highland groups occurred as well.¹¹²

As in the Israeli-Palestinian case, CUSEC can shed much light on the causes and dynamics of this conflict. In terms of *situation assessments*, lowland agricultural groups blamed highland dwellers responsible for the severe environmental degradation they experienced. Traditionally, many highland groups practiced swidden agriculture, but since the late 1970s, sedentarization and the production of cash crops became much more widespread. While the latter is associated with higher inputs of water, fertilizers and pesticides,¹¹³ the former has been identified as a main source of deforestation. Both agricultural practices were portrayed by the dominant lowlander's discourse as increasing water pollution and river silting, water scarcity in the dry season and destructive floods during the rain season in the valleys.¹¹⁴ Influenced by international fortress conservation discourses¹¹⁵, the RFD and the Dhammaanat Foundation perceived the agricultural practices of the highland groups as particularly damaging for the watershed forests, which were discursively constructed as located in the highlands and of great hydrological importance.¹¹⁶ According to York, 'in the minds of the lowlanders, watershed forest is the only "important" section of the forest, and the "source" of the river on which their livelihoods depend'.¹¹⁷

This situation assessment was clearly resisted in the dominant discourse of the highland groups. Here, the widespread deforestation in the lowlands due to commercial logging and inadequate management was identified as the main reason for the disturbance of the watershed regime. The water scarcity lowland framers faced was perceived as a consequence of their increasing

cultivation of water-intensive cash crops and of double cropping.¹¹⁸ According to the highland groups' dominant discourse, the concentration of many remaining forests on higher elevations clearly indicates their ability to preserve and manage forests, which can be contrasted with widespread deforestation in the valleys.¹¹⁹ Highland groups also insisted that they know the location and importance of watershed forests and protect them accordingly. Their dominant discourse identified the expansion of (badly managed) national parks and of lowlander's cash crop fields into the highlands as the most important threat to these watershed forests.¹²⁰

In sum, the discourses of both groups promoted very different understandings of the ecological situation. Due to their primarily agricultural livelihoods, both groups also perceived the ongoing degradation of forest and water resources as an existential threat to their well-being and identified the respective Other as responsible for this degradation. Discursively constructed situation assessment can thus be considered as a central driver of this socio-environmental conflict.

These situation assessments were related to multiple diacritica and *identity* constructions. In the lowlanders' discourse, the highland groups were not only portrayed as backwards swidden agriculturalists or greedy commercial farmers which tacitly accept the destruction of valuable forests. These highland groups, which are usually ethnic minorities, were also portrayed as uncivilized, stateless foreigners and non-Thai.¹²¹ Following the dominant Thai cosmology, they were considered to live far away from the 'guardian spirit' of the city (*Muang*) in the valley and close to the 'devil spirits of the forest (*Pa*)'.¹²² Along the lines of this 'racialization'¹²³, the RFD and parts of the military considered the highland ethnic minorities as disloyal to the Thai state, which was expressed by their assumed support of the Communist insurgency in the 1970s, and as illegal opium growers.¹²⁴

Not surprisingly, another discourse was dominant among the highland groups. Firstly, they insisted that some of them were already Thai citizens, while nearly all others considered themselves to be part of the Thai nation and strove for citizenship.¹²⁵ Secondly, in their dominant discourse, the highland groups were portrayed as experienced and capable stewards of the mountain environment, while lowlanders and especially the RFD were portrayed as bad forest managers.¹²⁶ Consequentially, a paradigm shift from state-led/fortress conservation to community-based forest management was demanded.¹²⁷ Thirdly, several recent activities of the lowland farmers and the Thai state were perceived as an existential threat to the highland groups. These included the demarcation of national parks without consulting local inhabitants, the limitation of swidden agriculture by erecting fences and declaring fallow lands as protected forest, and demands to evict these groups from the highlands.¹²⁸ In the highlander's discourse, these measures were not only constructed as an economic or livelihood threat, but also as an identity threat, since the identities of the highland groups are strongly place-based.¹²⁹

These discursively constructed identities and situation assessment were crucial for the development of the conflict between the lowland farmers, the highland ethnic minorities and their respective allies. If, for instance, lowland groups had identified the commercial logging of forests in the valleys as the main source of water scarcity and river sedimentation, and if their identity constructions had not been based on the highlanders as the non-Thai Other, the onset of such an intensive socio-environmental conflict would have been impossible. Of course, material factors and forms of hard power also played a role in shaping the conflict dynamics, such as international pressure to fight opium cultivation and deforestation, state support for commercial agriculture, competition about agricultural land in the lower highlands, population growth, the 1997 financial crisis and several droughts during the 1990s played an important role as well.¹³⁰ However, explanations based purely on these factors would miss important aspects of the conflict.

In a similar matter, the de-escalation (although not termination) of the conflict since the early 2000s, with the result that most upland dwellers were not evicted, can only be explained by considering forms of structural and bargaining (discursive) power simultaneously. Space constraints preclude an extensive discussion of this issue, but the relevant factors include: a better organization of marginalized farmers in the mid-1990s, the coming into power of governments more reluctant to evict highland groups, and a shift of international discourses towards community-based conservation.¹³¹

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, a positivist-rationalist bias was identified in the mainstream research on socio-environmental conflicts. In other words, many studies conceptualize individuals and social groups as utility maximizers which act in an instrumental rationalist manner towards a bio-physical and socio-economic surrounding which is reduced to its material, seemingly objective characteristics. Such assumptions are contradicted by a large body of literature from constructivist conflict research, environmental sociology and political ecology. Hence, mainstream research on socio-environmental conflicts tends to miss an important part of the picture, namely the inter-subjective and socially constructed dimensions of such conflicts. In order to account for these, I developed a constructivist understanding of socio-environmental conflicts (CUSEC), which highlights the importance of discursively constructed situation assessments, identities and interests. A discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and forest conflicts in northern Thailand illustrated the relevance of CUSEC and suggested its plausibility across different contexts

Constructivist accounts have not yet gained much ground in the mainstream research on socio-environmental conflicts. Not surprisingly, then, several important tasks need to be performed by future research on the issue, four of which I shortly discuss here.

Firstly, to show its merits but also its limits, CUSEC should be applied to other cases of socio-environmental conflicts and too longer time periods. It is very relevant to trace how identities and situation assessments change over time and how this influences the dynamics of socio-environmental conflicts. Similarly, the framework developed above is designed to be applicable to different contexts. A comparison of several cases drawing on CUSEC would permit researchers to figure out which identities and environmental assessments facilitate socio-environmental conflict or violence under which circumstances. Pastoralist conflicts in the Horn of Africa are interesting cases in this regard.¹³² Researchers have highlighted the relevance of perceptions of rainfall changes, negative diacritica, or assessments of commercial opportunities, but a systematic discussion of these issues is still pending.¹³³

Secondly, neither the theoretical framework nor the case studies presented above deny the relevance of a material quality of the world, although it cannot be objectively perceived. Political ecologists and historical materialists have done considerable work on the role of structural power asymmetries, marginalization and resource appropriation in socio-environmental conflicts.¹³⁴ A more thorough integration of these insights with CUSEC promises great analytical potential.

Thirdly, as partially shown for conservation discourses northern Thailand, it is important to investigate how global/international discourses interact with local discourses in order to create more or less conflictive identities and situation assessments.¹³⁵ Finally, it is promising to analyse how macro-discourses like those discussed above are used in concrete framing processes by various actors. This would reveal why and when certain actors resort to which conflict actions and thus increase our understanding the micro-dynamics of socio-environmental conflicts.¹³⁶

On a practical level, CUSEC implies that conflicts around scarce natural resources are not solely driven by greedy or impoverished actors which strive to increase their control over these resources, but that confrontative situation assessments and identity constructions are extremely important in understanding the onset, dynamic and cessation of such conflicts. However, discourses are not static and can, even in conflict environments, change over time. Consequentially, efforts towards prevention, mediation and solution of socio-environmental conflicts should not just aim at improving agricultural practices or providing more water, but utilize tools which aim at transforming the discourses of the parties involved to be more compatible and cooperation-prone.¹³⁷

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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