



Environmental Conflicts: Concepts – Theory – Analysis

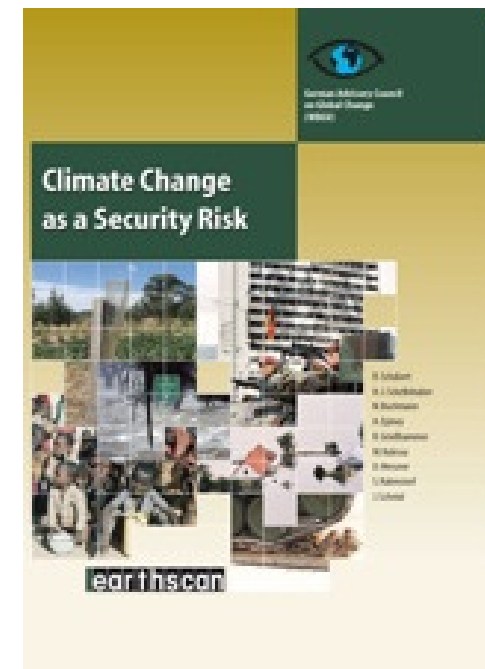
Taller de conceptos claves
Dimensión de Investigación III: Desigualdades socio-ecológicas
desiguALdades.net, 27 de Junio 2011

Environmental Conflicts – an emerging research field

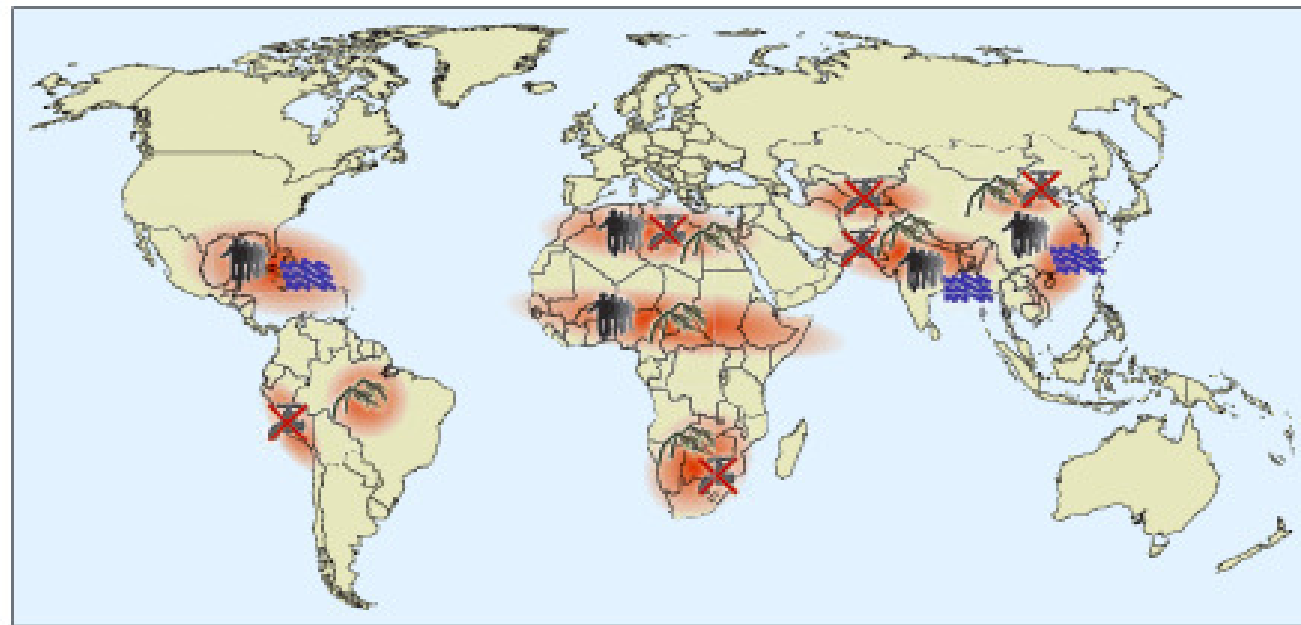
Emerging debate on environmental conflicts since 1990s at different levels

Global level:

- Environmental security discourse
- intra- and inter-state "resource wars": "water and climate wars", esp. in the global South and transition countries



„Conflict constellations in selected hot spots“



Conflict constellations in selected hotspots

-  Climate-induced degradation of freshwater resources
-  Climate-induced decline in food production
-  Hotspot
-  Climate-induced increase in storm and flood disasters
-  Environmentally-induced migration

Environmental Conflicts – an emerging research field

Transnational level

- New attention to transnational environmental struggles concerning...
 - use of and control over, water, land, biodiversity, fishing grounds, forests ...
 - contamination, destruction and resource competition caused by extractive industries (oil, mining) or industrialised agriculture (soy production)
 - causes and consequences of climate change (droughts, melting of glaciers, floods ⇒ adaptation)



Context:

Expansion of capitalist valorisation of nature, extractivism and crisis regulation patterns

Environmental Conflicts – an emerging research field

Some open questions:

- What do we mean if we talk about conflicts in relation to the environment?
 - How can we conceptualise "environmental conflicts"?
 - How do we theorize the relationship between society and nature in environmental conflicts?
 - How are environmental conflicts related to other forms of social struggle?
 - How are environmental conflicts structured?
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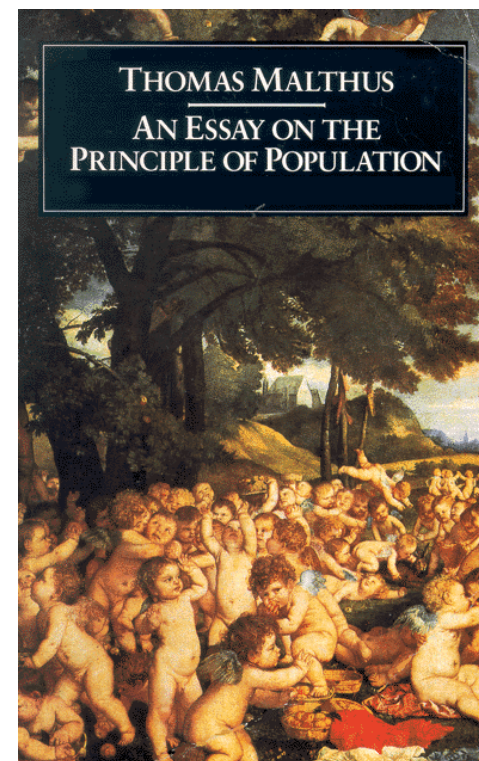
- The "environment conflict school" – a neo-Malthusian approach
 - Core assumptions and premises
 - Critique and gaps

 - The political ecology of environmental conflicts
 - Core assumptions and premises
 - Theoretical foundations: social and conflict theory

 - Synopsis, analytical implications and questions for the debate
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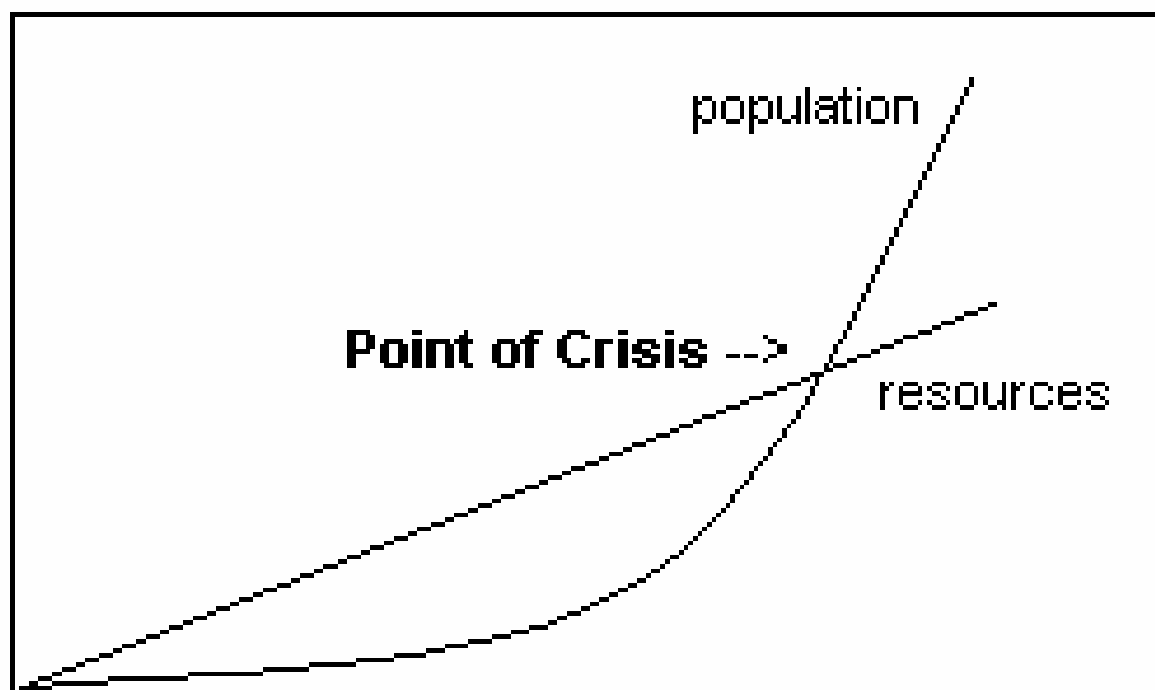
Neo-Malthusian Approaches

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834)



An essay on the principle of population (1798)

neo-Malthusian Approaches



Malthus' Basic Theory

neo-Malthusian Approaches

Thomas Homer Dixon (* 1956)

University of Toronto



*Environmental Change and Acute Conflict Project (ECACP,
"Toronto Group")*

Environment, Scarcity, and Violence (Princeton 1999)

Hypothesis: Resource scarcity causes or aggravates conflicts!

Three causal forms of scarcity:

- demand induced (population growth)
- supply induced (degradation, environmental change)
- structural (unequal distribution of resources among individuals & groups)

Causality:

Resource scarcity + population growth + structural inequalities
→ resource capture, marginalisation, migration → conflict

neo-Malthusian Approaches: weaknesses and critique

Empirical:

- Weak empirical basis
- Claims rely on assumptions about the future not on empirical evidence, eg. "water wars"

Conceptual/methodological

- Methodological nationalism („territorial trap“)
 - Causal paradigm → eco-centric perspective on social reality and human agency (*environmental determinism*)
 - Interactions between social and natural sphere remain unclear
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neo-Malthusian Approaches: weaknesses and critique

Theoretical

- Biased and unexplained concept of conflict:
 - Focus on sources of conflicts → prevents thorough understanding of conflict as social manifestation
 - Neglect of perceptions, meanings and strategies of actors confronted with environmental change

 - Dualistic perception of nature – society relations: social and political mediation of nature is neither captured nor theorized
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Political Ecology

Research field that originates in the late 1970s / early 1980s

Michael Watts (* 1951), University of California, Berkley

Political Economical research approach

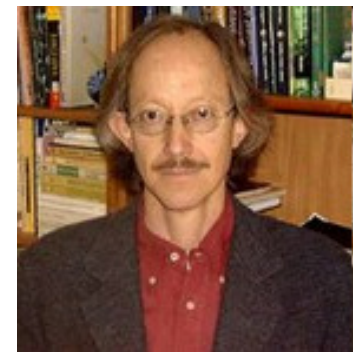
Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements (London 1996/2004)



Arturo Escobar (* 1952), University of North Carolina,
Chapill Hill,

Poststructuralist Approach

Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes. (Durham 2008)



A political-ecological approach

Core assumptions

- Nature and society are mutually interlinked: Nature ↔ Society
- Not scarcity but entitlements, access, control, distribution as well as representation and meaning
- Environment as arena of contested entitlements and cultural meanings
- environmental conflicts are social conflicts, are economic conflicts, are political and are cultural conflicts

Theoretical foundations – conflict theory

- *Conflicts*
 - acts of social action, with a minimum of two conflict parties involved (e.g. individuals, groups, private corporations, states)
 - situated in and linked to overall social structures, differences and contradictions
 - emerge and develop on the basis of meaning, perception and interpretation actors involved attach to an event, a problem, an action, a change or a transformation process
- *Conflicts* feature a general structuring (Giesen 1993)
 - Interests and power are core analytical dimensions
 - interests → target structure
 - power → means structure

Theoretical foundations – social theory

- environmental conflicts are situated at the interface between the nature and the social sphere
- dialectic perspective on Nature-Society relations: dissolution of dichotomous perspectives
 - Social power relations are inscribed in Nature through transformative material practices and symbolic representations
 - Nature as a sociophysical process infused with political power and cultural meaning (Haraway 1991)
 - address the causal powers inherent in Nature

Starting points for analyses

- Documentation and analysis of differentiated actors and the ways they act in historically and culturally constituted social spaces
 - What do different social actors do in relation to nature?
 - How do they perceive and interpretate (environmental) change?
 - What are the knowledge forms and cultural meanings they base their agency on?
 - How do environmental conditions change/transform social action and social institutions?
- Analysis of power relations and interest structures:
 - What are the interests in play?
 - What are the power sources of different actors?
 - How do social categories mediate "environmental conflicts"?
- Reflection of transnational linkages: going beyond methodological nationalism

... Questions

... Comments

... Discussion

Thank for your attention!
