Natural Resource Conflicts: Regimes, Markets and Transnational Governance in the 20th Century

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When U.S. military forces invaded Iraq in 2003 it seemed to some observers that this had more to do with the imperialistic aim of gaining control of her oil fields than with the proclaimed „war on terror". At the same time western consumers were confronted with the problem of „blood diamonds" that were extracted from African mines controlled by guerrilla troops waging war. Like the Iraqi oil the diamonds´ long way from Africa to the world´s most affluent people demonstrated the complex interlinks in a globalised world between interests of parties far remote from each other and their devastating impact on the regions where these resources were abundant. Using history to find a way through these many linkages and to gain a better understanding of path dependencies on the road to violence, Laura Julia Rischbieter (Berlin) and Alexander Nützenadel (Berlin) invited to a conference which took place from May 26th to May 28th in Berlin and was sponsored by the Volkswagen Stiftung. The invitation was followed by a great number of scholars coming from different world regions and academic backgrounds.

The diversity of scholarly expertise was suitable for the complexity of the issue that was explored from an analytical perspective in the first presentations. HEIKO SCHMID (Jena) made clear that while resources do play an important role in many conflicts there is no direct correlation that would allow for a systematic conjunction of the two. Rather, natural resources should be seen as „socially constructed", meaning that they are embedded in a specific social context and rooted in local history. This view was supported by NADINE ANSORG (Berlin) who analyzed different conflicts in Africa and pleaded for a regional perspective. By simply focusing on a state level, she argued, the complex interplay of what she called „structural factors" and „triggering factors" could not be conceived.

Compared to these approaches, RICHARD AUTY (Lancaster) gave a much more clear-cut picture of the interconnection of resources and economic weakness. Auty presented his influential „resource-curse-thesis" that explains how an abundance of natural resources leads to a decline in economic growth rates. There was, however, as Auty argued, no automatism to this fate as countries had a choice that depended on their design of economic policy. While statist attempts to extract rent were a sure way to economic disaster the market attempt with its diffusion of rent could lead to economic prosperity.

But looking at the problem from the perspective of economic policy alone is probably not enough because its implementation may be a much bigger problem than the theoretical question of its perfect design. And there is also the question of interests. Economic growth rates are certainly a desirable goal for economic policy but they do not necessarily represent the interests of all actors involved.

In this regard the presentations by BOLADE EYINLA (Ilorin), IHEDIWA NKEMJIKA CHIMEE (Nsukka), BIRTE FÖRSTER (Darmstadt) and JESSICA SCHAFER (Ottawa) with their case studies of African states provided some further insights. In the case of Mozambique natural resource management became a „symbolic weapon" in political conflict as the Portuguese colonial power used her scientific knowledge of wildlife conservation to legitimize the colonial status. In Ghana and French Guinea, the colonial legacy became materialized in large scale infrastructure projects that served for stabilizing the colonial powers' status. Once they receded the integration of multinational enterprises perpetuated the old power relations much to the detriment of the indigenous people.

This was also the case in Nigeria where the partly British company Shell still plays a major role in the exploitation of the country´s oil fields that are concentrated in the area of the Niger delta. As Eyinla and Chimee made

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clear this region´s fate was linked as closely to its colonial history as to this peculiar resource, the „black gold". This was exemplified by the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-1970) and the history of the Ogoni people. Whether under British occupation in the 1950s, during the 1970s when a national monopoly for oil was established or in the 1980s and 1990s when social riots spread throughout the Niger-delta, neither the Ogoni people nor any other minority profited from the increasingly valuable resource. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, founded in 1990 by Ken Saro-Wiwa, put forward a Bill of Rights that made a claim for the people´s independence and a redistribution of the region´s wealth but it had little positive impact. The Niger delta was occupied by the military in 1993 and Saro-Wiwa was executed two years later. Oil still is the nation´s most important source of revenue but the region is still politically unstable and environmentally degraded.

Considering economic policy this history casts doubt on an all too easy call for a market attempt. Indeed, the history of Nigeria with its detrimental effects not least due to the monopolization of oil makes a case for Auty´s plead against statist attempts. On the contrary, one can ask if in the case of Nigeria a market attempt had been the right alternative given the imbalance of power between the different actors. Against this historical backdrop a „fair" diffusion of rent would have seemed unlikely and the vision of a stable society and economic growth a more complex issue.

This seems to be the case even more so when conflicts center on a resource like oil that has deep implications for almost all economies around the world. It is hardly a coincidence that more than half of the presentations were related to oil. RÜDIGER GRAF (Cambridge, MA) gave an explanation for this. He claimed that during the 1970s gold had been exchanged for oil as the most important natural resource and explained this transformation with the oil price crisis. According to Graf price hikes and the realization of dependence on the small and weak countries of the Middle East has led to a fundamental shift of security concepts. Graf stressed the point that in analyzing this shift one needed to be aware of one´s vocabulary as this was developed by contemporary actors who not simply described but consciously constructed the „oil price crisis" as a historical „watershed". The impact of this shift can still be seen in U.S. military operations today as WERNER RUF (Kassel) put forth the thesis that the current fight against terrorism largely reflected a struggle for resources.

So while it is certainly true that local history plays an important role in the way natural resources are linked to conflicts, global developments that change meaning and importance of these resources need also be considered. The idea of BERND STEFAN GREWE (Konstanz) to trace the history of gold as a conflict laden resource from the place of its origin to the world market where it was sold was thus by all means convincing. Having the aim of „taking experiences from below very seriously", he consequently started with the example of a gold mine in South Africa where deep down in this „total institution" the white men´s authority was omnipresent and everyday life was marked by coercion and fighting. Although Grewe stressed it was not possible to find a single concept of power that would be able to catch all aspects of gold as a commodity it unfortunately did not become clear whether the gold mines represented a form of power relation that was specifically related to gold and in what way this was related to the global gold market.

Another two presentations focused on transnational governance as a possible strategy for preventing conflicts and economic drawbacks due to corruption. The first one by ANNEGRET MÄHLER (Hamburg) discussed the impact of the Extractive Industries Initiative (EITI) and came to the conclusion that its measures can hardly be described as successful. The second talk on this topic by HEIKO PLEINES (Bremen) drew a similarly pessimistic picture using the example of the Caspian region. Although Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan all have accepted international standards of transparency, in neither case this has led to a noteworthy decrease in corruption. Pleines argued that this was due to an almost exclusively „symbolic" embracement of the standards that did not actually change national anti-corruption policies.

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Focusing on the Bay of Bengal, EHSANUL HAQUE (Dhaka) took another pessimistic stance on the possibility of solving conflicts by transnational governance. The bay is rich in oil and gas but India, Bangladesh and Myanmar are facing the problem of unresolved disputes over property rights. Although Haque stressed the importance of the international law of the sea, the present uncertainty mostly due to the future conduct of Myanmar made negotiations difficult. While all this has not yet turned into a violent „hot conflict" all countries have reinforced their naval powers and seem to be prepared for a clash of this kind.

A less pessimistic outlook was given by OLE SPARENBERG (Göttingen) who discussed the global struggle over the regulation of deep-sea mining from the 1960s to the 1980s. Although all member nations of the UN declared the deep sea and its resources should be the „common heritage of mankind", most industrialized countries favored free access while developing countries argued for a redistribution of the revenue. After intense debate deep sea mining was regulated in accordance with the latter principle known as the „Common Heritage Principle". Instead of establishing the vision of a new „fair world order", however, the principle was the major reason countries like the United States voted against the convention. Until now, deep sea mining has never been conducted on a commercial scale. With the many examples of violent conflicts over resources in mind, however, the principle may function as a visionary departure from the way by which countries have tried to solve these conflicts so far.

There were two further presentations that gave examples of how the use of resources does not necessarily lead to conflicts. In MAXIMILIAN MAYER´s (Bonn) and JOST WÜBBEKE´s (Berlin) talk this was the case of China. They asked why it was that in defiance of seemingly clashing interests China´s thirst for energy has not led to resource conflicts. They saw the answer in a specific way of communication between China and the United States which they introduced as „transnational practice communities". How much interests are in fact the product of historical contingency was also demonstrated by NORMAN FRENZEL (Basel) who, using the case of the oil pipeline construction in Iraq during the 1920s and 1930s, showed that for a long time the British colonial power struggled to find out what her own interests were.

Another more optimistic approach was put forth by GREG BANKHOFF (Hull) who described how transnational nature conservation was able to „make parks out of making wars". Because the wildlife in the frontier zones of countries at war could – as the borderland turned into a no man´s land – prosper, this development created the basis for the creation of so called „peace parks". Here, the abundance of natural resources is used as a means for promoting peace by leaving a little space between social groups but also for encouraging tourism and economic development.

„Resources are a challenge, not a curse!" This statement comprises the essence of both the conference´s findings and what to make of them. A challenge calls for measures but to be effective these measures have to match its complexity. So while there is a chance of solving existing and future resource conflicts any simple measure that does not take into account the various specifics of different resources and regions is doomed to fail. History plays an important role in this regard not only because it provides us with case studies of how resource conflicts have evolved and ended in the past but also because local history and path dependencies shape what has been termed the „social embeddedness" of a resource. By bringing together different scholars from different academic backgrounds and by focusing on the so far largely neglected history of natural resource conflicts the conference was a good example of how historians could add to the debate.

Conference overview:

Laura Rischbieter (Berlin): Welcome and Introduction

Theories and Concepts. Analyzing Natural Resource Markets
Chair: Sandrine Kott (Genève)

Heiko Schmid (Jena): Conflicts over Resources: The Perspective of Political Geogra-

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Rüdiger Graf (Harvard): National Security, Global Conflicts, and „Complex Interdependence". Oil and International Relations in the 1970s

Keynote-Lecture

Richard M. Auty (Lancaster): Natural Resource Contests: Comparing Statist and Market Rent Deployment

Divided Regional Resources as Causes of International Conflicts
Chair: Greg Bankhoff (Hull)

Nadine Ansorg (Berlin): The Role of Natural Resources in Regional Conflict Systems – The cases of the Great Lakes region and Western Africa

Ehsanul Haque (Dhaka): Offshore Oil and Gas Explorations in the Bay of Bengal: Conflict of Interests between Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar

_Powerlessness? Agency of Local Players in Resources Markets
Chair: Heike Wieters (Berlin)

Bernd-Stefan Grewe (Konstanz): Governance in the Global Commodity Chain of Gold

Bolade M. Eyinla (Ilorin): The Ogoni Crisis and the Agitation for Resource Control in the Niger-Delta

Regimes: Politics of Power
Chair: Andreas Eckert (Berlin)

Birte Förster (Darmstadt): Maintaining Colonial Power: Infrastructures as Means of Access to Resources

Werner Ruf (Kassel): The Role of US-African Command

Maximilian Mayer (Bonn)/Jost Wübbeke (Berlin): Explaining China's Peaceful Road to Energy Security: An Eclectic Approach

Transnational Governance
Chair: Frank Trentmann (London)

Annegret Mähler (Hamburg): Conflict prevention through improved governance of natural resources? A comparative analysis of EITI and further transnational and national resource management initiatives

Heiko Pleines (Bremen): Anti-Corruption policies between international regimes and national politics. A case study for the Caspian oil and gas states

Resources as Sources of War and Resource Management in Preserving the Peace
Chair: Mathias Mutz (Berlin)

Ihediwa Nkemjika Chimee (Nsukka): Interrogating the role of petroleum resources in civil conflict: The Nigeria-Biafra War in perspective

Jessica Schäfer (Ottawa): Conflict, Peace, and the History of Natural Resource Management in Sussundenga District, Mozambique

Greg Bankhoff (Hull): Making Parks out of Making Wars: Transnational Nature Conservation and Conflict Resolution

Who owns the Sea? Clashing Interests in Transnational Resource Markets
Chair: Frank Uekötter (Munich)

Norman Frenzel (Basel): Pipeline Conflicts: The Iraq Petroleum Company (1927-1934)

Ole Sparenberg (Göttingen): Deep-Sea Mining and the New Law of the Sea. The Struggle over Resources of the Abyssal Plains (ca. 1968-1994)

Alexander Nützenadel (Berlin): Conclusions

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