

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
State of the Art and Research Needs
International Conference, KlimaCampus, Hamburg University, 19/20. November 2009

Abstract

Political ecology and climate conflict research

Beniam Awash

Binghamton University, USA

In this paper I examine the theoretical limitations of climate-conflict research by situating it in relation to earlier debates on environmental security. Climate-conflict research has been influenced by the methodological debates of environmental security. The centrality of such concepts as scarcity and migration in the causal chains of environment-centred conceptions of violence has been resurrected within current climate-conflict research. These limitations are reviewed through a critical comparison of various theoretical approaches that participated in the debate examining the relation of environmental change to violent conflicts: a political ecology framework that posited environmental conflict as a struggle over access/control of natural resources (Peluso and Watts 1996; 2001), ecoviolence models (Homer-Dixon 1994; Baechler 1999) that posit violent conflicts as linked to environment induced “scarcity”, and large-N quantitative methods (Gleditsch 1997) that posited resource abundance as integral to generating environmental conflicts. Key issues of methodology and causality, conceptual specificity of environmental conflict and the utility of an ecoviolence paradigm of violent conflict remain relevant to current examinations of the climate-conflict research.

This paper will also suggest that research on climate change and violent conflict can advance by engaging with a broader discourse on climate and society; that investigates the impact of climate on history. This will allow for an evaluation of the formation of the current research programs on climate-conflict and the possible avenues for adding to advance our knowledge on this crucial issue. This will serve to displace a “physics” optic of analyzing how climatic oscillations react on social life, i.e. violence. I suggest that by adopting a political ecology approach we can move this research towards a multi-causal and relational approach focusing on the social dimensions of climatic weather-events and the generation or transformation of violent conflicts. An important reason for adopting a political ecology approach to the study of climate change and its relations to violent conflicts is its taking power, political economy and historical conjunctures as analytical starting points rather than discrete climatic-weather events. This is a starting point that begins with the relation of users and nature and thus conceptually clarifies the substantive meaning of such concepts as scarcity and violence. It is by historicizing climatic phenomena and relating it to specific social systems and societies that we further our understandings of the inter-relationship between climate change and violent conflict.