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THE GLOBAL MOBILIZATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCEPTS: RE-THINKING THE WESTERN/NON-WESTERN DIVIDE

It is increasingly evident that the process of globalization is a more complex and conflicted one than has been thought to be the case. Former iconographic images of “one world” have come to be suspect (Ingold, 1993; Sachs, 1992), and predictions of the coming “global village” have receded in the face of increasingly prominent divisions between developed and under-developed countries, North and South, Western and non-Western (Huntington, 1996).¹ The first challenge of global governance, as the debate over global warming has demonstrated, is not to coordinate solutions to global environmental problems, but to agree on a definition of the problem in the first place (Dove, 1994). An apparent irony of the globalization process is that at the same time as it erases some barriers and boundaries it constructs and crosses others. The simultaneous construction and destruction of boundaries is evident in the new and unorthodox alliances and oppositions that global mechanisms like the World Trade Organization have fomented.

One prominent fault line running through these new global alliances and oppositions is that between the developed industrialized nations and the less-developed industrializing ones. Western and non-Western stances in these debates are often easily differentiated. This differentiation maps onto a more general distinction that has developed over the past generation between Western and non-Western systems of resource use and environmental knowledge. Through the 1960s and 1970s, Western scientists privileged their own views of the environment, perceived few alternatives, and assumed that their views would eventually hold sway over the world as a “global science”. Then, in part because of the increasingly obvious unsustainability of certain of the resource-use systems underpinned by Western science, non-Western systems of environmental knowledge and practice began to receive some recognition. Previously pervasive deprecation of non-Western systems of resource use has been replaced in many quarters by valorization of these same systems. This reappraisal is a

useful correction to the previously uniform approbation and disapprobation of Western and non-Western systems, respectively, in international circles. However, the perceived underlying division between the two is actually quite problematic (Agrawal, 1995; Dove, 2000).²

There is a critical literature on the social construction of global environmental problems (e.g., Lohmann, 1993; Taylor and Buttel, 1992). Recent contributions to this literature focus on the sociology of knowledge involved, in particular the way that environmental knowledge is transported and transformed, and in particular between Western and non-Western societies (e.g., Brosius, 1997; Dove, 1998; Gupta, 1998; Rangan, 1992; Tsing, 2000; Zerner, 1996). Most relevant to critiquing the validity of the division between Western and non-Western systems is recent research on the global circulation of environmental concepts. "Circulation" is actually an inadequate and misleading term to describe this process, because of what it implies for the agency of the concepts themselves as opposed to the people who hold and mold them. Environmental concepts do not travel independently from one place to another and impose themselves on agency-less people. Rather, the concepts of one part of the global community get appropriated, transformed, and contested by specific local actors when they move to another part, for which reason the term "deployment" or perhaps "mobilization" of ideas might be preferred to circulation (Tsing, 1999b, 2000). Transformation of concepts is made both possible by this movement and also necessary: concepts become powerful in a new setting only if they can be integrated into it, at the same time as a part of their power derives from continued identification with their prior setting. It is the non-fixity of the transported concept that allows it to draw on (as well as dispute) sources of authority in both its place of origin and its new setting.³ The non-fixity of the transported concept is also a key to forging global coalitions: Tsing (2000) maintains that the key to successful global coalitions is the *mis*-translation of ideas. The movement of ideas is powerful, in part, because of this very reinterpretation and hybridization.

The process of the global mobilization of environmental knowledge is the subject of this chapter. The chapter is built around a number of different case studies, focusing on three themes. The first involves the valorization and villainization of resources users; the second focuses on the complexity of Western environmental discourses and how this affects their deployment in both Western and non-Western countries. The third theme concentrates on the historic processes by which Western and non-Western environmental concepts become hybridized.

HEROES AND VILLAINS IN THE TROPICAL FORESTS

In recent years, a problematic linkage has emerged between western environmentalists and politically marginal forest dependent communities in the tropics. Since the 1980s, some Western environmentalists concerned with conserving or sustainably managing tropical ecosystems have championed their cause in part through romanticized representations of forest-dwellers as "ecologically

noble savages" or primitive environmentalists (Ellen, 1986; Redford, 1990; Brosius, 1997; Conklin, 1997). These representations exoticize forest-dwellers as timeless, egalitarian, wise, and natural stewards of the environment (Poffenberger and McGean, 1993; Lynch and Talbott, 1995). Some anthropological work criticizes these representations of forest-dependent communities, revealing their dubious authenticity, the Western environmentalist agendas that motivate them, and the political-economic consequences when one group of forest-dwellers rather than another captures the interest of western environmentalists (Brosius, 1997; Conklin, 1997; Li, 1999). Other scholarship has taken a different tack, examining not only the process of fashioning these representations, but also the benefits they provide to local people (Tsing, 1999; Li, 2000). [Editor's note: see Dudgeon and Berkes' paper on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Roy Ellen on the Construction of Biological Knowledge in this volume.]

Primitive conservationists in Borneo

The first example comes from the work of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), which is developing forest co-management programs with Dayak communities and other stakeholders in East Kalimantan.⁴ By investigating the possibilities of forest co-management, CIFOR has opened up new rhetorical space for Dayak to contest dominant state resource discourses and to represent their own resource rights and uses better. As Li (1999a: 24) explains,

Instead of a dialogue between the state and its critics, a mirror effect simply inverts the categories (wise swiddener/destructive swiddener, valuable traditions/backward traditions) leaving the categories themselves essentialized and fundamentally unchanged. In between these opposing camps, uplanders must invent especially creative strategies in order to defend their livelihoods and advance their own agendas, attempting to turn both state and 'green' discourse to their own ends.

One example of these "creative strategies" was demonstrated during a two-week research workshop, which was attended by (among others) three local Dayaks. Each of the individuals represented a different ethnic group – Kenyah, Merap and Punan. All three men were well-respected individuals in their communities and had extensive contact with researchers. During the workshop, all three emphasized both the cohesion among the ethnic groups and their efforts to protect forest resources. For example, they explained that when they find *gaharu* (*Aquilaria* spp.), they attempt to extract the part of the tree that is infected, leaving the rest of the tree standing in hopes that it will recover.⁵ This account contradicts previous descriptions by other Dayak of the *gaharu* harvesting process, in which the entire tree is felled. Further, these three Dayak men consistently spoke of the harmonious cooperation among their respective ethnic groups, presenting a picture of village social dynamics which dramatically differs from both the stories told previously by other villagers and personal observations during fieldwork in their villages.⁶ This fieldwork revealed not only a lack of cohesion among the different ethnic groups, but also an explicit inter-group discourse of inferiority and aggression.

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