International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research
www.socialsciencejournal.in
ISSN: 2455-2070
Received: 27-07-2021, Accepted: 12-08-2021, Published: 28-08-2021
Volume 7, Issue 4, 2021, Page No. 94-98

Moving beyond the Toponym: nature, political ecology and the conflict over the "Sea" that separates Korea and Japan

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Abstract
Conflict studies focus on conflicts or disputes over geographic names, territorial boundaries or resources, and make up a well-defined subfield within political geography. Studies have traditionally drawn on a mix of geopolitics, the politics of identity and/or international affairs to explain the complexities involved in these conflicts. However, studies of nature or environment as a physical entity within toponymic conflicts tend to be missing in these conceptual explanations. To strengthen and deepen future analyses, this theoretical paper argues that conflict studies could benefit from incorporating key theoretical insights from political ecology.

Keywords: political ecology, conflict studies, toponym, political geography

Introduction

Two names. one sea.

The names of an ocean, sea or lake seem just that – a name. However, over the past century, Japan and the two Koreas have been fighting a long and fierce argumentative battle over what to call the body of water that separates them. Most international documents and maps have adopted the "Sea of Japan" as their official term (the name preferred by Japan), while relegating other names such as the "East Sea" or "Donghae" (the names favored by Korea) to a "parenthetical" existence. Situated in a series of competing historical claims that are deeply intertwined with the countries' national identities (Choo, 2010; Oh, 2017) [7, 26], this toponymic conflict has been studied drawing on insights from international affairs and political geography. These studies have provided invaluable insights into how nation-state actors employ narrative and symbolic techniques to substantiate their claims (Casino & Shin, 2010; Choo, 2010) [5, 7]. What is often missing from these analyses, however, is a direct or indirect recognition that the "sea" constitutes a physical entity that is independent of the names that describe it.

This "omission" matters because the "sea" that is being fought over has experienced significant environmental problems – issues that either have been theoretically sidelined, or in some cases entirely "forgotten". Serious cases of overfishing (Zhang, Seo, Kang, & Lim, 2019) [41], benthos contamination (Belan, 2003) [3], major anthropogenic pollution (Vashchenko, 2000) [37], heavy metal and chemical pollution (Kobzar & Khristoforova, 2015; Tkalin, 1991) [17, 35], risks of seismic disasters (Hong, Park, Lee, & Kim, 2020) Tkali14n, and diminished seawater quality (Yoon, 2018) have been documented in this "sea". By reducing the conflict to dispute over a geographic name, other elements of the same conflict – arguably more important ones – can get left out. To help conflict studies move forward, this short paper, therefore, aims to show how political ecology can strengthen the understanding of toponymic disputes and other resource-driven conflicts. By definition, political ecology combines concerns of both ecology and political economy, and provides a broader view of bio-environmental relationships within political issues including conflicts (Robbins, 2008) [30]. Studying conflicts and environmental degradation from a political ecology perspective can unpack how hidden political and economic discourses drive geopolitical fights over resources and/or how disputes over seemingly inconsequential geographic names are often part merely the tip of the iceberg of much larger issues (Escobar, 2006) [10]. Political ecology, in short, offers the possibility to bring nature and the environment back into clearer theoretical focus – and in doing so – provides an interdisciplinary vehicle for mutual learning (Robbins, 2008) [30].

The Limits of the Existing Paradigm

Political geography– as the existing paradigm - has traditionally played an important role in understanding toponymic and territorial conflicts. Studies in this field tend to draw on core concepts such as territory, territoriality, and/or boundaries to show how political entities spatially form, evolve, and eventually collapse (Agnew, 2003) [1]. Conflicts – from a political geography perspective – thus often arise when claims over territorial boundaries or spatial order are normalized by competing political discourses. The field covers a wide range of research areas that involve: (1) different types of conflict (e.g. resource conflicts versus boundary conflicts), (2) the politics of identity (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), (3) issues of globalization (e.g. shifts toward a deterritorialized and borderless world), (4) symbolic representations of political power, to (5) the role of new social movements in conflict evolution (Monnet, 2011; Newman, 2006; Reuber, 2000) [23, 25, 29]. More recently, political geographers have also begun to adopt aspects of postmodern and social constructionist approaches. These perspectives focus more strongly on how different social actors construct, reproduce or reconstruct

territorial meanings and spatial boundaries. Together, these studies have provided invaluable insights into how conflicts are created, maintained and ended.

Unlike territorial conflicts, which involve clashes over resources or geographic boundaries, toponymic conflicts involve disputes that are driven primarily by identity politics (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Woodman, 2014) [2, 40]. Ethnic, religious or nation-state identities are mobilized to support political claims to land and/or the right to name geographic places. In the conflict over the "Sea of Japan" ("East Sea"), for example, South Korea and Japan, in particular, have made claims and counterclaims that mobilize powerful national symbols and patriotic imageries (Paasi, 1998) [27]. The actor that wins this claims-making process – as Tuathail (1998) [36] has rightly observed – tends to get to name of the place and impose its historic views onto the international community. While the substance and history of the arguments is important, the comparative power of a country within in the larger nation-state system can often tip the scales in these conflicts (Paulson, Gezon, & Watts, 2003) [28]. While providing important theoretical insights, conflict studies – especially those situated within a postmodern and/or global tradition – often de-contextualize or decouple conflicts from the "real" physical essence of place. Territories, borders and natural resources become names, references and/or footnotes in an intricate game of political power and intrigue. However, by reducing places to mere toponyms, maps, and symbolic referents, this type of analysis risks eliminating the physicality of space. One needs to remember that issues of post-territory *are* – in a sense – all aspects of territoriality; not a substitute for them. A more holistic understanding of conflicts, therefore, necessitates the affirmation and/or reintroduction of physical space at the center of any analytical framework.

The Promise of Political Ecology

Political Ecology– as an alternative paradigm – can play a complementary role in studying toponymic conflicts (or other types of conflicts). It focuses on how economic, political, and socio-historical forces affect nature, and, as such, maps out the broader political economy of nature. The tradition can be traced back to the radical Neo-Marxist geography of the early 1970s (Harvey, 1982) [12], though more recently the tradition has started to incorporate other perspectives (e.g. feminist and postmodern epistemologies). While political ecology like political geography increasingly shows post-territorial or post-modern influences, the framework reaffirms the centrality of nature and the physical environment in all of its theoretical variations (Sheppard, 2011) [32]. Despite internal divisions, political ecology offers a number of key theoretical insights to conflict studies. It draws much closer attention to how power differentials among actors affect the actors' views on the environment but also how they can shape the very nature of conflicts. Social constructionists within the tradition further broaden these realist assumptions by looking how meanings of place, nature and the environment are linked to the political interests of particular actors. And finally, political ecology also puts the environmental/ecological physicality of space - something that tends to be missing in many other discussions – back into the theoretical center of all its analyses (Robbins, 2008; Walker, 2005; Watts, 1983) [30, 38, 39].

Shifting the analytical focus to nature and the environment, however, does not need to compromise the theoretical rigor of conflict studies but it can add to it. Political ecology, for example, can enable researchers to deconstruct geopolitical forces that drive resource conflicts, and with it, help them broaden the scope of their analyses. Conflicts often occur within regions that have long histories of resource overuse and environmental degradation (Hilson, 2002; Milligan & Binns, 2007) [13, 20]. Political ecology, as a result, suggest that existing resource exploitation and environmental problems can shape current and future conflicts in ways that have traditionally gone unacknowledged. By shifting attention to the environmental context and physical space, analyses of toponymic conflicts, could thus be further deepened. Political ecology also aims to transcend the politics of words by reminding us that nature (and its resources) have an ontological existence independent of any signifiers. Toponymic conflicts cannot settle issues of resource ownership, nor can they give adequate attention to the role of international law that regulates access to marine resources in the area (Rothwell & Stephens, 2010) [31]. Conflicts over resources thus be re-framed as "conflicts over nature". This shift is both discursive and substantive. It situates conflicts within the actual physical reality of nature, and in doing so creates theoretical openings to address related issues (e.g. environmental degradation in a fought over region). By drawing attention to the political dimensions of ecological issues, political ecology can this help conflict studies refine, broaden, and deepen its analyses of traditional resource conflicts.

The body of water that the world knows as the "Sea of Japan" has a long and contested history. To Korea, the sea is the "East Sea" (or "Donghae") and not the "Sea of Japan". While the meaning of the "East Sea" has undergone a series of changes from its sino-centric origins to its more contemporary usage (Dormels, 2009) [9], many Koreans associate "Donghae" with the making of a nation. The place evokes precious childhood memories of the heroism of King Gwanggaeto the Great, the enchanting mysteries of guardian deities and/or the promise of life with vast and bountiful natural resources (Choo, 2010) [7]. The "Sea of Japan" also triggers painful stories of Japanese expansionism on the Korean peninsula. To the Japanese, in contrast, the name "Sea of Japan" simply continues a European origin story. Dismissing charges of Japanese colonialism, Japan maintains that the term has been used internally since the 17th century. The term was further popularized for an international audience by Russian explorer Fyodorovich Kruzenshtern. Kruzenshtern wrote in his 1812 book, for example, that "*People also call this sea area the Sea of Korea, but because only a small part of this sea touches the Korean coast, it is better to name it the Sea of Japan.*" (Japan-Coast-Guard, 2005) [15]. While sympathetic to Korea's attempt to remove traces of its painful Japanese colonial past, Western scholar Mark Monmonier (2007) [22]argues that Japanese nautical maps from that time support Japan's narrative claims. Whatever the facticity of these historical positions, beginning in the early 20th century professional associations like the International Hydrographic Organization started to adopt the Japanese usage of the term. Over time, many other international organizations followed suit seemingly reifying a highly contested word (Choo, 2009) [6]. While systematic objections have been expressed since the 1992's United

Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Ministry-of-Foreign-Affairs-of-Japan, 2017) and many compromises have been suggested, none of these efforts have been able to resolve the conflict (Choo, 2012) [8].

While political geography has been seminal in illuminating the complex nature of claims-making in this toponymic conflict (Johnson & Balentine, 2014) [16], one could argue that it has failed in other ways. Toponymic conflicts like the one over the "Sea of Japan" ("East Sea), for example, deemphasize or draw attention away from the physical characters of the actual body of water. While it is important to deconstruct the evolution of geographic names, it de-politicizes nature and dismisses the environment as legitimate subject of scientific inquiry. By analyzing the symbolic politics of the names, nature as an actual place often gets "forgotten". In contrast, political ecology draws systematic attention to the social relations that exist among nations. It would point out, for example, that the United States is a powerful arbitrator that mediates between the claims made by different actors – in this case mainly between South Korea and Japan (Short & Dubots, 2020; Stoltman, 2019) [33, 34]. Within the system of neoliberal capitalism, political power of a nation-state actor depends (in part) on how it can leverage this political power. Seen from this perspective, the name "Sea of Japan" as an internationally accepted "reality", thus may – to some extent – reflect Korea's unequal standing within this system. Drawing attention to how the political economy plays out in toponymic conflicts, however, is also not sufficient. Political ecology can also provide important insights into how the claims-making process legitimizes one reality ("Sea of Japan") while – at the same time – acquiescencing others (e.g. "Nature"). The two toponyms "Sea of Japan" and "East Sea", from this perspective, constitute merely a spatial rhetoric that establish linguistic legitimacy among respective audiences. While the international community, including International Hydrographic Organization, has engaged both countries to agree on using both names (Moon, 2011) [24], these efforts have failed to open any real dialogue on how to, for example, share information on water quality, species diversity and/or other marine resources– aspects that get sidelines by the conflict. In a sense, what is *not* being talked about here ("nature") can be as important as what is ("the name"). Political ecology can offer important theoretical points of departure here.

Analyses that draw upon a political economy or social constructionist framework are important. To the extent to which they exclude "nature" or the "environment", however, they can fail the analysist. By studying the nature and origins of these conflicts, conflict scholars risk becoming part of the very politics they are trying to understand. The words, symbolic imagery and historical accounts they choose to illuminate may affirm or challenge our taken-for-granted reality (Foucault, 1976) [11]. They can render existing metanarratives hegemonic and silence others. Political ecology reminds us that all conflicts play out with a space that not only has unique socio-political histories (as seen from the vantage point of particular actors) but also comes with specific biophysical characteristics. Thus, by augmenting conflict studies with a political ecology framework, scholars could better unpack the many interweaving stories of how nature, politics and the economy intersect. In doing so, they could also help inform a more "rational" policymaking process and/or help enrich stalled discusses within the public sphere (LeBillon & Duffy, 2018) [19]. When "nature" gets (added) back into the theoretical framework, the story of toponymic conflicts could reveal new and intriguing plots twists – narrative crescendos that may challenge our taken-for-granted understanding of the world.

Conclusion

Solomon's wisdom

All toponymic conflicts come down to conflicts over resources. Political geographers have successfully drawn attention to some resources in these conflicts (i.e. symbolic and political) while de-emphasizing and/or omitting others (i.e. natural or environmental resources). The continued political drama between the Koreas and Japan over the proper "name", however, challenges not only the ingenuity of seasoned politicians and activists but also asks researcher to rethink and sharpen their own analytical toolkits. Science *studies* policy as much as policy reflects the "facts" and "realities that geographers and other social scientists construct. Whether researchers want to or not – they are part of the larger social machinery that co-produces reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) [4].

In a well-known biblical story, King Solomon was asked to adjudicate between the claims of two young women saying they were the mother of the child. Solomon's wisdom was to sidestep these arguments and move the frame of reference. Rather than examining each respective claim, he reframed the situation by focusing on what was best for the child (LaRue, 2004) [18]. By analogy, political ecology could help shift the theoretical focus so as to include both nations' genuine love for the "sea" – a sea whose physical existence is being threatened by environmental degradation. In doing so, it can help move beyond the toponym and enrich our understanding of conflicts, and, if desired, sketch out possible contours for real-world solutions….

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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