

How many shoes...? Reflections on Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Environment

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Introduction

Posing the question *'How many pairs of shoes do you have?'* in any group setting, educational or otherwise routinely generates a number of responses - guilt being one of the most common as the style and branding of shoes has become a status symbol in many societies. Guilt also because so many of us have more shoes than we can possibly wear and because they then represent that other characteristic of society (especially in the West) - waste. A simple survey of the volume of water required to manufacture a pair of shoes (7,000 litres per pair of leather shoes¹) reveals another dimension of that culture: continuing waste of key resources. If the initial question on shoes is extended to include daily behaviours based on waste (e.g. water, food, energy, clothes etc.), then the discussion moves up a notch. Why is waste such a core feature of our lives and why do we engage in it so readily and habitually? Is waste simply a matter of personal responsibility or does it have systemic relevance and meaning? Where does personal responsibility and culpability begin and end and how do we mediate the conflicts that arise accordingly? In what ways does our embrace of waste represent a deeper malaise or challenge in the context of climate change, environmental degradation and a globalisation based increasingly on inequality? In what ways are the resource or environment conflicts of today different or more urgent than those of previous colonial and imperial eras? Such questions and the debates they generate represent a fundamental challenge to both the theory and practice of conflict resolution, one that the discipline simply must address.

This paper briefly explores some of the core conflicts such questions pose, identifying some key implications, especially in the context of climate change and the emergence of the Anthropocene; it briefly introduces a number of challenges for the field of conflict resolution theory and practice and explores the importance of research, intervention and advocacy in such a scenario.

Environmental Conflict Explored

Environment related conflict has long been the focus of analysis, debate and intervention at a variety of levels (as summarised by Attfield²); he highlights many of the fundamental tensions and conflicts between and around anthropocentrism (human beings are *the* central or most significant entities in the world), sentientism (all perceptive and feeling beings have moral value), biocentrism (biology is the central driving force of the universe) and ecocentrism (nature centred view of the world). The core issue in such debates is the question of the place of 'intrinsic value' in such perspectives. In his review of the genesis of environmental conflict, Attfield identifies a number of contributory factors – population growth, affluence, technology, capitalism, the absence of 'markets', patriarchy, growth and religion. Summarising the general scientific and philosophical consensus since the emergence of 'environmental ethics' in the 1970's (forged from its historical roots), Attfield notes:

*The global commons should be considered the common heritage of humankind, since humanity as a whole inherits them as a trust, subject to their being managed for universal (and not only human) benefit.*³

With increased focus on the urgent challenge of climate change, the debate has deepened and has become more entrenched. Despite incorporating a diverse spectrum of ideas, politics and economics (as well as prescriptions), many international organisations and analysts argue that environmental concerns and imperatives (including climate change) can be accommodated within current models of economic growth and its associated impacts with varying degrees of significant or more fundamental change. For organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF, the need to develop more robust 'environmental safeguards' while continuing to expand global growth remains the core model⁴. For others such as Columbia University Earth Institute Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the focus needs to be on agreeing a sustainable development model that makes sense of the interactions of three core systems - the world economy, the global society, and the Earth's physical environment. His argument requires a far more radical re-alignment of current growth models seeking synergy between technology, global governance and environmental constraints yet the growth model remains⁵.

In stark contrast to such views are the perspectives of a growing body of scientists, environmental activists and social movements who argue that in the era of transnational corporate globalisation and power, systemic and increasing inequality, the ecological

challenge has now become an extreme form of insecurity to people and planet. For many scientists such as James Hansen⁶ and Vandana Shiva⁷, activists such as Bill McKibben⁸ and Australian Aboriginal Senator Patrick Dodson⁹ we have long surpassed planetary boundaries and sustainable development is no longer possible pursuing current economic growth models. For Indian biologist Shiva, the debate on the environment represents nothing short of a 'paradigm war' (and, in practice, a war on the planet) which (in the context of water), she characterises as follows:

Paradigm wars over water are taking place in every society, East and West, North and South. In this sense, water wars are global wars, with diverse cultures and ecosystems, sharing the universal ethic of water as an ecological necessity, pitted against a corporate culture of privatisation, greed, and enclosures of the water commons. On the one side of these ecological contests and paradigm wars are millions of species and billions of people seeking enough water for sustenance. On the other side are a handful of global corporations...assisted by global institutions like the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and G-7 governments.¹⁰

At the core of the debate between these two fundamentally opposing world views is the argument that our exploitation of resources is expanding faster than nature can renew them, that we have reached a crisis point (as evidenced by climate change) and that the brunt of the crisis is being borne by the world's poorest and most vulnerable and consequently further growth is simply not sustainable ethically or environmentally.

Understanding Environmental Conflict and its Implications

In 2008, the Geological Society in London proposed describing the current geological epoch as the Anthropocene – to follow the Holocene, the interglacial span of stable climate which supported the rapid evolution of agriculture and urban civilisation. This new epoch marked the significant impact of anthropogenic climate change, especially since the 'great acceleration' of such change since 1944. The epoch is characterised by a significant build-up of greenhouse gases, deep landscape transformation; 'ominous' acidification of oceans, relentless destruction of biota; a 'new age' without close parallel in the last several million years defined by an increasing heating trend and by 'radical instability' of future environments. The society cautioned that:

...the combination of extinctions, global species migrations and the widespread replacement of natural vegetation with agricultural monocultures is producing a distinctive contemporary bio-stratigraphic signal. These effects are permanent, as future evolution will take place from surviving (and frequently anthropogenically relocated) stocks¹¹.

For the Society (and for those scientific bodies debating the issue since led primarily by the International Panel on Climate Change), evolution itself is being forced by human agency into a new trajectory.

Despite ongoing attempts by a very small but powerful lobby of commercial and political interests to deny the reality of climate change, the science remains firm. As noted in 2005, by 11 international science academies:

Climate change is real. There will always be uncertainty in understanding a system as complex as the world's climate. However there is now strong evidence that significant global warming is occurring. The evidence comes from direct measurements of rising surface air temperatures and subsurface ocean temperatures and from phenomena such as increases in average global sea levels, retreating glaciers, and changes to many physical and biological systems. It is likely that most of the warming in recent decades can be attributed to human activities.¹²

The urgent implication of this analysis has been brilliantly captured by James Hansen (reputed to have brought global warming to public attention in the 1980's) in his *Storms of My Grandchildren* reminding us of the '*remarkable world*' we inherited and of our obligation to preserve the planet and pass it on in reasonable condition to future generations reminding us en route that Earth and creation are intergenerational '*commons*', '*...the fruits and benefits of which should be accessible to ever member of every generation*'.¹³

The implications of such an analysis for conflict resolution theory and practice are little short of transformative. University of Chicago historian Dipesh Chakrabarty¹⁴ has enumerated many of these:

- Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age - old humanist distinction between natural history and human history accepting that nature itself has its own history
- It challenges the Hobbesian idea that we, humans, could only have proper knowledge of civil and political institutions while nature remained God's work and was therefore ultimately inscrutable

- Environmental history has recognised humans as biological agents and climate scientists now argue that humans have much more than simple biological agents, humans now wield geological force. Through the cutting down of so many trees, the burning so many billions of tons of fossil fuels etc., we have indeed become geological agents

For analysts such as Chakrabarty, Smail¹⁵ and Weisman¹⁶ the environmental conflicts we face over the 'long march of history' include those between recorded history and 'deep history'; the planetary and the global and, most importantly species thinking and critiques of anthropocentrism. It represents nothing short of a fundamental retelling of the human story, those of the universe and of other species, the conflicts between rich and poor, the West and the rest and the entire idea of 'developed and developing' regions and their associated worldviews¹⁷.

This now represents the backdrop for considering environmental conflict and our responses to it across society including the academy. Climate Change has now become the defining human development issue of our times.

Describing Environmental Conflict

The traditional linkage between environment and conflict has been as the struggle for economically valuable resources or for scarce natural resources; these have provided much of the driving force for colonialism and imperialism and now for a significant element of transnational corporate agendas. The list of such resources is almost endless from cotton and cocoa to spices and rubber, timber and minerals and, of course, oil. While many of these resources continue to fuel conflict (e.g. timber, water, oil and 'conflict minerals'), a range of 'newer' resources have become a focus for conflict e.g. 'land grabs', seed banks, intellectual property and patents. Apart altogether from conflicts over access to and 'ownership' of resources, we are also now witnessing conflict and violence around those individuals and movements seeking to defend their environment and its resources against destruction, pollution, forced privatisation and general degradation¹⁸.

Traditional conceptions and issues of environmental conflict have included biodiversity (e.g. conflict over wildlife and biodiversity, conservation, fair trade, patenting rights, indigenous knowledge, genetically modified crops and land clearances); air quality, pollutants and their impact on health and those around water resources (between communities and the state or

between states and now increasingly over the privatisation of water resources - 'water wars'). They have included conflicts over coastal zone and sea resources due to overdevelopment, overfishing and marine ecology degradation. Environmental conflict literature¹⁹ also highlights the vulnerability of women in the broader sense (physically, economically, socially and politically) who bear a disproportionate brunt of the effects of environmental conflicts and stress.

However, the defining environmental conflict has now become climate change – a conflict that not only involves individuals, households and communities but also regional, national, corporate global interests and agendas. It is also one that challenges the entire basis of our global 'development' agenda, the rights and entitlements of future generations and of other species and, indeed of creation itself. Given the changed nature of this conflict, the implication for conflict resolution agendas is immense.

At the core of such a conception of environmental conflict is the recognition of the central importance of the concepts of ecosystem and environmental change and the dangers of destabilisation in the equilibrium of such an ecosystem. Overall environmental degradation (human-made environmental change) leading to negative impact on human society and on nature itself has become central to the debate. Such degradation implies one or more of the following - overuse of renewable resources; overuse or exhaustion of the environment's 'sink capacity' (pollution) and ongoing impoverishment of our (and other species) living space.

In such a context, it is possible to identify four key conflicts:

- Direct environmental conflict – fuelled by individual and collective behaviour, the millions of everyday actions and inactions by all of us individually and collectively that impact negatively on nature and on the planet. This conflict pivots around the infinite variety of consumer goods and behaviours that have environmental impact, many of which we are unaware of or which we choose to routinely ignore or even deny. The issues surrounding car use, air travel, cruise liners, air conditioners, heating options etc. exacerbate the challenge considerably. Energy and food waste highlights the challenge even further.

- Indirect conflict mediated by inequality etc. – as illustrated by global footprint data broken down by region and country, the poor of the world maintain a light footprint whereas the rich have an altogether heavier impact and the super-rich a mega footprint. Much of 'western' consumer choices and behaviours, many of our jobs, much of our energy and food consumption, many of our pensions and investments have global and environmental reach. Through them, we routinely externalise costs to poorer countries and the planet while retaining value and benefit ourselves. Environmental insecurity has now been added to previous (and continuing) economic and political vulnerability.
- Systemic conflict via an economic system based heavily on over-consumption and waste, on disregard for nature and its value. For example, one direct link between the dominant financial system and the environment is the effect that recessions (and boom and bust cycles) have on environmental regulation and investment in the long term. In a recession it is common to hear the argument that costs to businesses are too high due to regulations which are represented as onerous, and that the relaxation of these regulations would allow businesses to recover with positive results for the 'economy' but not necessarily for the environment. In this context, the conflict is pitched as that between the economy (or a particular model of economy) and the environment.
- Intergenerational conflict – presently, our economic system externalises the costs of environmental degradation and social injustice; part of that externalisation is to future generations. Despite a growing awareness of the need to begin to recognise the rights of future generations in the legal system, citizens of the future have no rights as regards what occurs today and the legacy they will inherit. Realising such rights in any meaningful way means passing on a world that has not been irreparably damaged or one that has been repaired (or one with the capacity to repair). Society today places very considerable emphasis on the right to choose while simultaneously reducing the choices future generations will have²⁰.

Challenges to conflict resolution theory and practice

Climate change is different from other problems facing humanity (in its scale, depth, consequences and universality) and the conflicts it generates; this has clear implications for conflict resolution theory and practice. Climate change challenges us to think about what it means to live as part of an ecologically interdependent human community and, in this sense, it requires a systemic approach as discussed by Rubenstein²¹. In his analysis of violence producing systems, he cautions on a key danger – that of using conflict resolution insights and practices to maintain the system (co-option of the approach – in environmental terms the danger of ‘greenwashing’ and related approaches) as against system reform and system transformation. A key point Rubenstein raises is that our theory and practice now needs to be guided by a structuralist understanding of the obstacles to and the possibilities for serious systemic change. This observation is fundamental in the context of environmental conflict where all too often the emphasis is simply placed on individual behaviour change and not on the systemic. At the heart of all significant analysis of issues such as climate change is the recognition of its systemic nature and the need for resolution strategies that address it as such. This view has been forcefully stated by fifteen international economists noting that *‘...in the face of the sheer scale of the overlapping crises we face, we need systems-level thinking²²’*.

For Rubenstein (as for others), one important outcome of such a view of conflict (as systemic and structural) is the need for a ‘new politics’; a recognition that conflict resolution practitioners cannot ignore the reality that political activity is unavoidable. So too is the need to embrace lessons and learning from other disciplines (and, for this author, those from educational theory and practice in particular) and to develop and offer real alternatives as a prerequisite for challenging and ultimately changing public attitudes and behaviours. For commentators such as Avruch²³ this implies the imperative of multi-level structural change and the inevitable tension between pragmatists and structuralists. In many ways, this parallels the history of the discipline from dispute and conflict mediation and resolution to conflict prevention and to systemic transformation (it parallels also the history of much analysis and action on environmental issues since the 1970s).

While climate change and related issues has dramatically focused analysis on the systemic, responsibility for action (and inaction) principally on government and transnational corporations, responsibility continues also to extend to individuals, households and

communities and, in this context, the role of conflict theory and practice remains both traditional and central.

Climate change in an increasingly fragmented and unequal world dominated by the agendas and interests of corporate and private capital is already leading to conflict, conflict that will inevitably increase unless it is addressed fundamentally. In such a context, real change will require the renegotiation of multiple social relationships involving the environment, whether it's oceans, water, forestation or vegetation or open space. With an increase in the severity and speed of climate change, the needs and interests of different groups will change and generate conflict. The challenge for conflict resolution study and practice is how to engage effectively with such conflict and to intervene to build not just public awareness and engagement but also public judgement that reinforces more positive social and environmental relationships rather than allowing it to degenerate into further violence – political, economic or social.

Engaging Environmental Conflict

With reference to engaging with issues such as climate change and environmental conflict, Rubenstein²⁴ has emphasised the pivotal need for public education on a large scale and in this much can be gained from systematic engagement with educational theory and practice, especially that around public engagement and public understanding²⁵. There is also a need to take account of the work of Haidt²⁶ on the emotional dimension of coming to judgement on issues such as environment and personal responsibility. Much of this research sits well with theory and practice in conflict resolution where the need to research and understand the perspectives and motivations of antagonists is important. On this, there is also much to be gained from engaging with public survey research and methodologies around issues such as conflict etc. Inspiration from multiple sources is needed.

One of the core issues faced with reference to environmental conflict (and many related matters) is the complexity of public attitudes and responses. A key starting point is the generally accepted reality that the gap between the science underpinning the issue and public perceptions and attitudes remains wide. While public attitude surveys suggest that citizens across Europe, the US and Australia recognise the challenge of climate change, many do not trust the evidence of scientists or the prescriptions of government – they simply do not trust those 'leading' on the issue. There is also some (limited) evidence that the public

place greater trusts in 'outside' institutions (thus, as Pidgeon and Lorenzi suggest offering an opportunity for conflict resolution practitioners).

Knowledge of the issue remains unsurprisingly limited; the links to everyday human activity vague (alongside local relevance) and, most importantly the evidence suggests a lack of knowledge of effective alternatives. In short, as Pidgeon and Lorenzi ²⁷ also argue the challenge revolves around three key issues - agency, trust and responsibility. Overall, the largest gap remains that between a general and rather vague concern for the environment and the willingness and/or knowledge to link it to personal behaviour, systemic issues and the need for individual and collective action. The challenge of environmental conflict is seen to be one essentially for government and for corporates with limited opportunity for citizens to impact on either. In addition, climate change is generally considered less important than other personal, social or political issues. Interestingly, research suggests that many people derive their assessment of environmental conflict from their general political perspective and this directly influences their immediate or possible response²⁸.

The brief arguments above suggest that conflict resolution approaches could productively focus on three key areas:

- Research – as part of the broader effort to build a conversation around environmental conflict and public perception (of relevance, trust, agency and responsibility), practitioners need to study and proactively engage with a broad range of 'publics' (across all demographics and contexts), collate and process the results of public perceptions, concerns, fears and reservations and, as a result, make recommendations. Research could also be undertaken on the issue of alternatives and how they could be configured locally and regionally. All of this by way of building a public conversation, expanding the list of alternatives and, crucially, building trust and a greater sense of agency. In undertaking such work, alliances can readily be forged with educationalists, researchers engaged in participatory research methodologies (including those engaged in international development at community level) and 'sectoral interests' (universities, churches, trade unions, women's groups etc.).
- Intervention – conflict resolution practitioners can take a lead alongside educators and progressive public communication personnel (such as those engaged in

advocacy around social issues – minority rights, environment etc.) in significantly expanding and deepening public education on the issue. Such interventions are already well underway in, for example, work on the SDGs and on women's rights; in formal sector education around sustainability; in research on the emotional and psychological dimensions of public judgement etc. These contexts offer considerable opportunities to conflict resolution theory and practice. As Rubenstein²⁹ points out, as a result of this, national and international conversations could be convened aimed at imagining and implementing systems designed to produce positive outcomes for people and planet and to challenge the system generated violence. He also suggests that such dialogues could take place locally in connection with more narrowly defined conflicts in order to demonstrate general usefulness and scalability.

- Advocacy – generating a sense of the broad range of alternatives already possible and of the potential of 'everyday activism' is a key component of building a new story around environmental conflict (such as the Fairtrade, Forest Stewardship Council or 'degrowth' agendas, the ethical food, consumer or investment/disinvestment movements etc.). It has become an indispensable element of the 'dreaming' that is now 'the new practicality'³⁰. Constructing conflict resolution initiatives and projects around the 'multiple millions of everyday acts' is a realistic and necessary component of advocacy work as is identifying and elaborating what the alternative means in practice³¹.

While educational interventions in environmental conflicts are vital and a sine qua non for more engaged involvement, they are clearly not enough. Our economic system and its environmental consequences need a complete transformation. This requires work at multiple levels; building public awareness and judgement must revolve around the key areas of relevance, trust, agency, responsibility and resistance.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>

² Attfeld Robert, *Environmental Ethics*, London, 2014, Polity Press, pp1-69

³ Ibid. p.198

⁴ World Bank, *Environmental and Social Framework*, 2018 available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/environmental-and-social-framework>

⁵ Jeffrey Sachs, *The Age of Sustainability*, 2015, New York, University of Columbia Press

⁶ James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren*, 2009, London, Bloomsbury

⁷ Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*, 2005, South End Press

⁸ Bill McKibben, *Global Warming's Terrifying New Math*, 2012, Rolling Stone available at

⁹ Patrick Dodson, *In Search of Change: Robed in Justice*, City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture, 2008 available at

¹⁰ Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatisation, Pollution and Profit*, 2002, New York, South End Press

¹¹ See J. Zalasiewicz et al, 'Are we living in the Anthropocene?', 2008, *Geological Society of America*, Vol. 18, No.2, p.6

¹² Global Science Academies Statement *Global response to Climate Change*, <http://nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf>

¹³ James Hansen, op.cit., p.270

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, 2009, Eurozine available at <https://www.eurozine.com/the-climate-of-history-four-theses/>

¹⁵ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 2008, University of California Press

¹⁶ Alan Wiseman, *The World Without Us*, 2007, New York, Thomas Dunne

¹⁷ Jason Hickel, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Social Inequality and its Solutions*, 2017, London, Heinemann

¹⁸ Global Witness, *At What Cost? Irresponsible Business and the Murder of Land Defenders in 2017, 2018*, London

¹⁹ See for example, Barnett, J. and W.N. Adger 2007. Climate change, human security and violent conflict. *Political Geography*, 26, pp. 639–655; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007. IPCC Fourth Assessment Report – Working Group 111 Report 'Mitigation of Climate Change'. Available from: <<http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg3.htm>> and Fletcher A.J. (2018) More than Women and Men: A Framework for Gender and Intersectionality Research on Environmental Crisis and Conflict. In: Fröhlich C., Gioli G., Cremades R., Myrntinen H. (eds) *Water Security Across the Gender Divide. Water Security in a New World*. Springer

²⁰ Nicolas Stern et al., *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review*, 2006, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

²¹ Richard E Rubenstein, *Resolving Structural Conflicts: How Violent Systems Can Be Transformed*, 2017, London, Routledge

²² The Guardian, *Buzzwords and tortuous impact studies won't fix a broken aid system*, 2018 available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jul/16/buzzwords-crazes-broken-aid-system-poverty>

²³ Kevin Avruch, *Taking Stock of the Field: Past, Present and Future*, *International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution*, 2013, Vol.1 No.1

²⁴ Richard E Rubenstein, op.cit.

²⁵ Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, 1991, Syracuse University Press

²⁶ Richard Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, 2013, New York, Random House

²⁷ Irene Lorenzi and Nick Pidgeon, 'Public Views on Climate Change: European and USA perspectives,2006, Climate Change Vol.77 No.1, pp.73-95

²⁸ Pew Research Centre, The Politics of Climate, 2016 available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/04/the-politics-of-climate/> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/04/everyday-environmentalism/>

²⁹ Richard E Rubenstein, op.cit.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michael Doorley et al.,Everyday Activism, 2015, Dublin, Concern Worldwide