Culture and Global Environmental Governance: Harnessing the Power of Habits

https://www.e-ir.info/2009/06/12/culture-and-global-environmental-governance-harnessing-the-power-of-habits/

HANNES R. STEPHAN, JUN 12 2009

When nations assembled at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the United States was struggling to dispel the image of being an obstructive laggard on global environmental issues, insisting that the Bush Administration was itself pursuing a 'green' agenda. Despite their efforts, one particular phrase used by the US delegation, and later attributed to President Bush, stands out: "the American life-style is not up for negotiation".[i] Was this merely a way of saying that the US was not going to share its wealth with the developing world or maybe an oath of loyalty to the domestic electorate in the year of the presidential election? Perhaps… but one ought to ponder the emphasis on 'lifestyle' more thoroughly. The US did eventually promise more money for environment and development, yet it never renounced its basic way of life or questioned its 'automobile' culture based on individual freedom and cheap energy. In other words, it is not self-evident that this particular story can be told from the conventional vantage point of rational, economic self-interest. At Rio, the American administration was defending more than its wallet or electoral chances: it was pre-empting an assault on the 'common sense' and cultural habits of Americans, including their attitudes to resources, nature, and development.

Clearly, the US negotiating position at Rio is not the only, and certainly not the most obvious, example of the cultural dynamics residing at the heart of global environmental governance. The politics of the environment is – alongside questions of distribution/justice and physical sustainability – always a matter of meaning and purpose. And this should not come as a surprise. As the cultural-materialist logic goes, what is indispensable for human survival is usually also invested with ideational meaning – sometimes to facilitate its regulation and distribution or, more indirectly, for spiritual sustenance and identity reproduction.

Culture, wrote Raymond Williams in his *Keywords*[ii], "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language", and this verdict has lost none of its relevance. Social-scientific disciplines have long battled over its usage, regarding it as a marker of essential difference[iii], merging it with the realm of politics[iv], or demoting it to the status of malleable 'surface practices'[v]. The notion of relatively entrenched, group-based cultural identities may have fallen out of favour with some writers, but one does not need to predict a Huntingtonian 'clash of civilisations'[vi] to take seriously the influence of cultural values on international negotiations. Like other issue-areas in global politics, environmental matters often impinge on deeply held beliefs, identities, and cultural practices, be they the love of 'automobility' and big cars, the decline of red squirrels in Britain, or the destruction of traditionally sacred sites for open-cast mining.

At the international level, in global environmental negotiations, there are no genuinely one-dimensional debates, as considerations of global justice, environmental sustainability, economic profit, physical security, and cultural identity are nearly always closely intertwined. If climate change policies can trigger a defensive cultural response, other issue-areas have even more obvious cultural connotations. The global regulation of whaling, for instance, has long pitted a 'preservationist' alliance of mainly Western NGOs and publics against the 'sustainable harvesting' policies of indigenous communities and a small number of countries (Japan, Norway, Iceland). Japan's population is not wholly united in favour of its government's struggle to continue whaling, but the evocation of national pride and cultural self-determination conceal the otherwise diminished size of a supportive domestic constituency – mainly fishing villages and the whaling industry. The case of genetically modified foods and crops (GMOs) has created even more

Culture and Global Environmental Governance: Harnessing the Power of Habits
Written by Hannes R. Stephan

turbulence in the international system, for it juxtaposed the regulatory schemes of the US and the EU, two major economic 'superpowers', and demonstrated that there is no fundamental cultural harmony at the core of the Western alliance.[vii] For most Americans, GMOs are just another technology promising to 'green' industrial agriculture, allowing it to produce more yields while using fewer pesticides. Opposition centres on the possible risks to human health and environmental integrity, both thoroughly utilitarian concerns. For many Europeans, GMOs are seen as a 'sounding board' encapsulating a host of unwelcome socio-economic and cultural changes, destabilising cherished agricultural patterns and landscapes, undermining food cultures steeped in national identities, and industrialising the 'building blocs' of life itself. Old currents of medieval thought, long believed to have been swept away by the tides of modernity, re-emerged to defend the 'natural order' or evoke 'nature's revenge' in the form of unpredictable risk and 'post-normal' science.[viii]

On the other hand, culture can be more than merely a negative force in global environmental governance. If conceived as a partly 'political' – and therefore partly adjustable – structure of habitual practices and beliefs, then an expanding sphere of global cultural synchronisation could provide a basis for more harmonious global cooperation. A macro-sociological lens to capture this process is the idea of an increasingly pervasive 'world culture' based on the values of 'progress' as defined by ever-greater wealth and equality.[ix] According to this perspective, states around the world have been constructed on the model of Western nation-state, while its competitors (empires, colonies, loose tribal groupings, etc.) have been thoroughly delegitimised. Wealth is largely pursued through established models of industrial development and equality is grounded in individual rights. Surely, the resurgence of cultural identity politics in recent years partially falsifies this theory of global cultural convergence. Nevertheless, the notion of world culture's contemporary relevance is evident when thinking about the discursive power projected by campaigns for universal human rights or eloquent pleas for the sovereign right to economic development.

At present, this form of cultural globalisation, which has long preceded the economic and political variants, does not appear to favour the objectives of sustainability and environmental protection.[x] Growth, innovation, self-realisation, dynamism, and 'creative destruction' are the guiding motives of a global market and a burgeoning middle class of Western-style consumerism. The setting up of national environmental ministries and the multiplication of environmental NGOs has not effectively counteracted the unleashing of energy- and resource-intensive economic activity around the globe. Whereas the prospects of cultural convergence may therefore represent a threat to a sustainable global future, there are some signs that this dark cloud has a silver lining, provided that the cultural content of globalising practices could be changed.

The narrative of sustainable development, for instance, is slowly but surely supplanting earlier discourses of 'industrial revolution', prompting an at least rhetorical questioning of business-as-usual scenarios. The vectors of cultural-ideational transformation are (1) the civil societies of the most powerful states, (2) the network of non-state environmental actors summarised by the notion of global civil society, and (3) the worldwide diffusion (and acceptance) of authoritative scientific knowledge showing the depth of the environmental crisis and describing options for a coordinated international response[xi]. The combination of 'greener' values and critical knowledge thus constitutes an indirect and long-term form of structural transformation, fashioning a new global political system in which most actors speak the language of sustainable development and, more often than not, act accordingly.

But will this more hopeful vision of global cultural change actually come about? There is certainly some evidence for such a fundamental shift: the discourses of – and policies for – economic development, the constitutional 'ecological' language of new or reformed states (e.g. Montenegro, Ecuador, Bhutan), and the 'green stimuli' of more recent economic recovery packages[xii]. However, these hopeful developments appear to move at a 'glacial' pace, are hampered by powerful advocates of the status quo, and are currently unlikely to halt or even reverse the processes of environmental degradation and human destitution.

This sobering assessment does not detract from the 'rediscovery' of the cultural content of global environmental cooperation, regardless of whether its effects are primarily facilitative or obstructive. As the above examples have illustrated, political change is, at heart, always reliant on a cultural transformation of the prevailing 'common sense', unless it is merely imposed by a small clique of decision-makers – and even then, its implementation requires a measure of support at all levels of governance. Recognising the cultural quality of global cooperation would make it

Culture and Global Environmental Governance: Harnessing the Power of Habits
Written by Hannes R. Stephan

easier to identify enduring differences and offer creative compromises rather than appeal to 'truth' or rely on superior power alone. This insight even extends to the global politics of climate change, where decision-makers and publics must judge how to respond to the likely calamities, who is to blame, who is to be saved, and whether the ends justify the means.[xiii]

Hannes R. Stephan is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Law, Politics, and Justice (Keele University, U.K.). His main research focus concerns the international politics of climate change, but – drawing on previous work – he is also writing a book on the transatlantic cultural politics of GM crops and foods.

[i] Time Magazine. "Summit to Save the Earth: Rich Vs. Poor", 01 June 1992.

[ii] Williams, Raymond (1976). *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana Press.

[iii] Black, Peter W. and Kevin Avruch. 'Culture, Power and International Negotiations: Understanding Palau-US Status Negotiations.' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 22, 1993, pp. 379-400.

[iv] Reeves, Julie. *Culture and International Relations: Narratives, natives and tourists*. (London: Routledge, 2004).

[v] Ferguson, James. *Expectations of modernity: myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt* . (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[vi] Huntington, S. 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 1993.

[vii] Stephan, Hannes R. 'Cultural Context and International Environmental Co-operation: The Cartagena Protocol.' In: Rohee Dasgupta (ed.). *Cultural Practices, Political Possibilities*, pp. 233-259 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

[viii] Wagner, Wolfgang, Nicole Kronberger, George Gaskell, Agnes Allansdottir, Nick Allum, Suzanne de Cheveigné, Urs Dahinden, Carmen Diego, Lorenzo Montali, Arne Thing Mortensen, Uwe Pfenning, Timo Rusanen and Nina Seger. 'Nature in disorder: the troubled public of biotechnology'. In: G. Gaskell and M. W. Bauer (eds.). *Biotechnology 1996-2000: the years of controversy*, pp. 80-95 (London: Science Museum, 2001).

[ix] Thomas, George M., John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John Boli (eds.).*Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

[x] Kaskarelis, Ioannis A. 'Free market economy, representative democracy, cultural globalisation and the protection of the environment.' *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development*, 8(2), 2009, pp. 132-150.

[xi] Meyer, John W., David J. Frank, Ann Hironaka, Evan Schofer, Nancy B. Tuma. 'The Structuring of a World Environmental Regime, 1870-1990.' *International Organization*, 51(4), 1997.

[xii] The Guardian. 'South Korea lights the way on carbon emissions with its £23bn green deal'. 21 April 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/apr/21/south-korea-enviroment-carbon-emissions (accessed 31/05/2009).

[xiii] Hulme, Mike. 'Climate change: from issue to magnifier'*. OpenDemocracy*, 19 October 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/globalisation/politics_protest/climate_change (accessed 31/05/2009).