An ecology of difference: Equality and conflict in a glocalized world

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Abstract: This paper develops a broad conceptualization of what could be called a political ecology of difference. The paper builds on trends in political ecology, politics of place, and cultural analyses of modern conceptions of nature, rights and the individual to outline an integrated framework for thinking about difference from the perspective of economic, ecological, and cultural distributions conflicts. The argument is illustrated with a case study from the Pacific rainforest region of Colombia, particularly the political ecology developed by the region’s social movement of black communities; the paper concludes with implications of the framework for thinking about the cultural politics of dominant institutions and their potential transformation along the lines of a politics of difference.

Keywords: Colombia, constructions of nature, difference, distribution conflicts, political ecology

The problematic of alterity revisited

More than twenty years ago, the literary critic Tvetan Todorov enunciated an important question that he referred to as ‘the problematic of alterity’, or otherness: How can we accept the other, who is different from us, as both equal and different? History, he argued, has given us plenty of examples in which either of the terms for achieving equality-in-difference is denied (Todorov 1984). In the past, difference was commonly recognized but equality denied, leading to domination (i.e., you are different from me, but inferior, and I can thus dominate you); in other cases, equality was granted, but difference was denied, leading to assimilation. For instance, for the Spanish missionaries at the time of the conquest of America, the Indians were equal to the Europeans under the eyes of God, but this equality could only be won at the price of conversion (ibid.). This latter situation seems more common today, although the first one has by no means disappeared. In some European countries, for example, debates on Third World immigrants at present are greatly shaped by the idea that it is the cultural difference of the immigrants that threatens the stability of European society; from this follows the demand for full assimilation as a prerequisite for successful integration, and hence the denial of the immigrants’ right to
their own culture (Stolcke 1995). In cases such as these, a dominant culture tends to crowd out all others, progressively eroding their cultural and social basis. Whatever redistributive policies are imagined under these circumstances must consider this crucial cultural dimension. Otherwise, they will amount to an exercise in dominance.

Difference-in-equality is thus rarely achieved. The question has only become more pressing with the passage of time. It can be said, indeed, that it is one of the key questions that can be raised about the relation between globalization, culture, and development. It is widely recognized, to begin with, that diversity is here to stay. Today many agree with the fact that new forms of cultural difference are continuously being created, even as a reaction to seemingly overpowering globalization. This realization, however, is usually accompanied by the widespread belief that diversity can more easily generate conflict and inequality than enable functioning pluralistic systems and a measure of justice and equality. Hence the importance of thinking again about the conditions for the coexistence of difference and equality under a set of historical conditions which seems not only to pull them apart but to thrust them in opposite directions: the greater the diversity that is affirmed, especially by those subaltern groups which constitute the world’s majority, the greater the tendency to exclude or dominate by those controlling the world’s access to opportunities and resources for survival and development; and the greater the willingness to grant a measure of equality to subaltern groups, the more intense the pressure for denying their difference through conflictive forms of assimilation. In short, Todorov’s ‘problematic of alterity’ has only become more acute at the start of the millennium.

There is a further paradox in stating the context in just this way. The paradox originates in the fact that our frameworks of analysis are unknowingly complicit with the globalizing will that characterizes the phenomenon we seek to describe, namely, globalization. Said differently, most social science and policy-related explanations of globalization participate in what philosopher Edward Casey (1993) has called ‘the disempowerment of place’. Theories of globalization assume a priori a power relation between the global and the local in which the global will always have the upper hand. Places are seen as inconsequential in social, cultural, and economic terms. Place-based communities and local social movements might resist the unfettered march of globalizing flows, but this resistance will ultimately prove futile. Sooner or later they will be absorbed in the meta-network created by the flows of capital, media, and commodities. But if we are serious about diversity, must we not resist this imaginary of a placeless world in which ‘local cultures’ are merely a manifestation of global conditions? We could make a parallel here with the dominant view of biodiversity that gives a prominent place to biotechnology for the maintenance and even the creation of biological diversity. In a similar vein, in a world of ‘cultural diversity’ without places, cultures would be seen as created and fostered chiefly by the conditions of globalization. Something is certainly amiss in this representation. Is it impossible to imagine local cultures which are not just particularistic, places that are not exclusionary? Can we not visualize transnationalized, yet place-based, identities that do not derive their logic solely from global forces? And is it not possible to posit the creation of cultural configurations different from the ‘secluded identities’ that are seen as the principal cultural reaction to globalization, and the most clear example of which are perhaps religious (and economic?) fundamentalisms (Castells 1997)? This is why in this paper we prefer to speak about ‘glocalities’ to refer to the fact that the world is not only global, it continues to be local as well, and that localities matter even for the types of globality we might want to create.

After a decade or more of emphasizing movement, diaspora, traveling, migration, nomadology, globalization, space, and so forth, in the 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists have—fortunately in my view—returned to the problematic of place without overlooking, of course, the main insights of the previous emphasis on movement and displacement. In debunking ‘globalocentric’
frameworks, some feminist political economists have also underscored place in ways that at the same time highlight difference (e.g., Gibson-Graham 2005). Many contemporary social movements have also come to emphasize issues of difference and its politics; the World Social Forum Process, started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 can also be seen as a space for the articulation of difference and equality as two sides of the same process (see, e.g., the excellent essay by Santos, 2003, on the subject). What is interesting about these trends is the connection that is established between place, difference, and equality. More recently, some academics and activists have attempted to build a framework that looks at how many contemporary struggles, particularly those led by women and environmentalists, are de facto articulating a ‘politics of place’ framework that attempts to systematize the inter-relations among place, difference, justice, and politics (Harcourt and Escobar 2005). Yet much terrain remains to be covered to flesh out more fully the various dimensions of these inter-relations. This paper suggests some additional elements in this regard by seeking to weave together culture, economy, and ecology into an integrated framework.

To advance a theory of place-based identities committed to openness and equality even if in a globalizing world it is necessary to think anew about the conditions that deny difference-in-equality. I suggest that it is useful to think about these conditions simultaneously in three different but interrelated domains: economy, culture, and environment. In what ways are economic, cultural, and ecological difference-in-equality either enabled or denied? How are culture, economy, and environment organized so as to deny difference or to produce difference but only according to a hierarchical order, and how are these denial and hierarchies related to issues of equality? What are the conflicts that ensue from this denial? For most critical analysts, it is the unequal distribution of income and material resources that is at the basis of conflict, instability, and the denial of difference and equality. The importance of economic factors cannot be emphasized enough. More recently, some have started to highlight the conflicts over access and control of natural resources as a key factor in today’s global and local crises. In other words, today’s cultural and economic crises have a fundamental ecological dimension. Few critics, however, seem to focus yet on what could be called the ‘cultural distribution conflicts’, namely, those that arise from the relative power, or powerlessness, accorded to various cultures and cultural practices in a historical context—with the exception, of course, of those who discuss culture conflict in homogenizing terms such as ‘the clash of civilization’ (Huntington) or ‘the end of history’ (Fukuyama).

My approach here is chiefly suggestive. I do not seek to provide a rigorous conceptualization of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts and their interrelations. I merely indicate the importance of doing so and provide a tentative outline for this task. The concept of distribution, it seems to me, is useful for linking together difference, conflict, and equality. To do so, however, distribution has to be broached from cultural, ecological, and economic perspectives. Culturally, to neutralize the pervasive tendency to reduce everything to the economic; ecologically, because issues of access and control of natural resources are not only central to many of today’s problems and struggles, but because they underscore contrasting cultural conceptions and practices of nature, and because ecological crises tend to be generalized crises. The intertwined salience of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts is evident in the case of many social movements, as I will illustrate with a brief analysis of a social movement in a Colombian rainforest region.

**Economic, ecological and cultural distribution conflicts**

From Smith and Ricardo to Marx and Sraffa, economists have paid significant attention to economic distribution. Political economy can be said to be the study of economic distribution conflicts. This definition assumes that economic distribution is a political issue, that is, related to
social power. Yet economists have not dealt with the ecological and cultural dimensions of distribution and equality. In recent years, the debate between environmental economics and ecological economics around the question of the ‘internalization of externalities’ has led to a search for concepts to account adequately for the hidden ecological and social aspects of production. For neo-classical economists, the issue is resolved by internalizing previously unaccounted for ecological costs or ‘externalities’ into the economic system (such as the contamination of water tables by pesticides, clean-up costs, the costs of reducing carbon dioxide emissions, the payment for carbon sinks, or the benefits to future generations foregone by destroying biodiversity). This is simply done by assigning property rights and market prices to all environmental services and resources. The internalization of externalities has given rise to the field of environmental economics. It assumes that the valuation of natural resources is only subject to economic conditions, and that all natural aspects can be entirely reduced to (actual or fictitious) market prices.

For the field of ecological economics, on the contrary, the value of nature cannot be assessed only in economic terms. There are ecological and political processes that contribute to define the value of natural resources that cannot be reflected in market prices. Indeed, in many cases there is incommensurability between economic and ecological processes to the extent that communities value the environment for reasons other than economic—whether they consider nature to be sacred, uncommodifiable, or what have you. Conflicts over access and control of resources take on a complex ecological and political character if the widely-held idea that everything can be tagged in monetary terms is suspended. Ecological economists have suggested the category of ecological distribution as a means to make visible this complexity, and a new field—political ecology—as the study of ecological distribution conflicts (Martínez Alier 2002). Ecological distribution conflicts here refer to the struggles over access to, and the destruction of, environmental resources and services. Under conditions of unequal distribution of wealth, economic growth and production entail the negation of ecological processes, since the time and requirements of capitalistic production and those of natural processes are not the same. The result is conflicts of ecological distribution, such as those found in struggles around the protection of forests, rivers, mangroves, wetlands, or biodiversity. The fact that these conflicts often times appear when poor communities mobilize for the defense of the environment as a source of livelihood has led some ecologists to describe them as ‘environmentalism of the poor’. The environmentalism of the poor combines the concern for the environment with that for social justice; it usually brings together local and global issues in unprecedented ways, and it is often times based on the overwhelming participation of women (Guha and Martínez Alier 1997; Martínez Alier 1995, 2002).

But if production under unequal distribution negates ecological processes, it also negates the cultural processes that are at the basis of people’s valuation and relation to the natural world. Not only do ecosystems have different ecological conditions and requirements for their maintenance, communities world-wide have perceptions and practices of nature which differ greatly among themselves and which are also essential to the health or decline of natural environments. This difference is the more pronounced when one contrasts the cultural models of nature of many rainforest and rural communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America with the dominant ways of perceiving and relating to it characteristic of capitalist modernity, best exemplified by the plantation system and by current agricultural biotechnology (Escobar 1999). In recent years, anthropologists have been documenting with increasing eloquence that many social groups throughout the world construct nature—and hence utilize it—in quite specific ways, which often do not coincide with the parameters of modern nature. In many non-modern or non-Western settings, the strict separation between the biophysical, the human, and the supernatural worlds that characterizes urban-based, modern societies does not exist. On the contrary, ‘nature’ is an integral component of the human
and supernatural domains. Nature exists in a dense universe of collective representations that at once grounds different ways of doing things with/around nature. Succinctly put, many communities in the world signify their natural environment, and then use it, in ways that markedly contrast with the more commonly accepted way of seeing nature as a resource external to humans and which humans can appropriate in any way they see fit (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Restrepo and del Valle 1996). The consequences of this realization for sustainability and conservation are yet to be worked out.

Said differently, not only economic factors and ecological conditions, but cultural meanings, define the practices that determine how nature is appropriated and utilized. Until now, sustainability has referred chiefly to technological and economic variables. Ecological economists among others added the ecological dimension in recent years, yet the full inclusion of cultural conditions remains elusive (Leff 1995, 1998). In recent years, however, new trends in political ecology as well as social movements’ strategies have emphasized this latter aspect. They shift the question of sustainability from its economic, technological, and managerial center to the ecological and cultural level. As we shall see with the analysis of the Colombian case, struggles for cultural difference, ethnic identities, and local autonomy over territory and resources are contributing to redefine the agenda of environmental conflict beyond the economic and ecological fields. They take us fully into the terrain of the cultural as they elaborate a complex demand for seeing places in terms of economic, ecological, and cultural difference. To put it bluntly, the destruction of rainforests, advancing desertification in many parts of the tropics, and so forth are the dramatic physical effects of distribution conflicts linked to particular constructions of nature. The re-signification of rainforests by modern capitalist interests, in this way, results in a profound physical reshaping of the landscape in the most literal sense.

To sum up, we can now visualize the different levels of analysis that circumscribe environmental conflicts. In a first instance, environmental economics attempts to account for the so-called externalities associated with economic processes, but without altering in any significant way the current parameters of market, the capitalist economy and, in the last instance, modernity. This is a worthy aim to some extent, although it contributes to consolidate neo-liberal market-driven ideologies of environment and development. A further level of analysis and action is introduced by ecological economists, who conclude that socio-environmental processes cannot be reduced to market values and that it is impossible to find a common standard of valuation for all cases and situations (including the possibility of incommensurability). Ecological economists may thus posit the need for both an equalization of income and a more fair ecological distribution—as with the concept of ecological footprint (e.g., Hornborg 2001), or ecological debt: countries or social groups that appropriate biomass in excess of their biological production, or that pollute beyond their capacity to process their pollutants incur in an ecological debt with those who bear the burden of it; politically, they align themselves with social movements for environmental justice and for the defense of the environment as source of livelihood (environmentalism of the poor). This trend has great scholarly, social, and political importance today.

In a third instance, yet to be more fully developed, cultural diversity is added to ecological diversity as a source of redefinition of production, sustainability, and conservation. By identifying culturally diverse models of nature as one of the three pillars of ecological distribution, this option moves outside the economic domain. This third proposal thus deepens the incommensurability of economy and ecology postulated by ecological economists; it sees this incommensurability as arising from the contrasting cultural meanings assigned to nature by various human groups, and from the concomitant power strategies of social movements in defense of nature as both source of livelihood and cultural identity. (It should be pointed out that incommensurability applies not only to nature con-
Cultural distribution conflicts and the question of rights

Cultural distribution conflicts are defined here as those arising from the difference in the effective power associated with particular cultural values and practices. They do not emerge out of cultural difference per se, but of the difference that this difference makes in terms of the control over the definition of social life: who—whose cultural perspective—defines the norms and values that regulate social practice concerning, for instance, personhood, economies, and ecologies; who controls the production of knowledge, the conception of property, and so forth. Cultural distribution entails a close link between culture and social power. The study of cultural distribution conflicts thus seeks to ascertain how cultural differences create or propagate inequalities in social power, usually through the imposition of a particular set of cultural norms as 'natural' and universal. If economic distribution foregrounds the political dimension of the economy by shifting economic rationality to the field of political economy, and as ecolog-

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tical distribution identifies dominant economic strategies as the source of environmental destruction and poverty, thus originating the field of political ecology, so cultural distribution displaces the study of cultural difference from strict concerns with diversity toward the distributive effects of cultural dominance and struggles around it. This last aspect of our tripartite conception of distributive conflicts results in what I would call a political anthropology centered on the relation between social power and contrasting cultural practices. Power inhabits meaning, and meanings are a main source of power (Gledhill 2000). How particular cultural meanings are endowed with power becomes the object of this political anthropology. Issues of access to, and destruction or disempowering of, cultural resources for the definition of social norms and goals become a key question according to this definition. And as in the economic and ecological cases, cultural distribution suggests a different set of redistributive issues.

The concept of cultural distribution brings out more clearly the effects of rendering certain cultural values/practices inconsequential through effects of dominance and hegemony. There is a geo-politics to this effect (between rich countries with dominant cultures and poor countries with subaltern cultural conceptions), as well as class, ethnic, and gender dimensions to it (inside countries, regions, and communities). While the gender dimensions of economic and ecological distribution conflicts have been discussed broadly in recent years, the cultural dimension is of paramount importance given that gender is a pivotal aspect of many cultural processes and is yet to receive significant attention. In a similar way in which gender has been shown to be a critical variable in shaping access to, and the knowledge and organization of, natural resources (Harcourt 1994; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slattery, and Wangari 1996), so with cultural resources. Gender and ethnicity thus bring to the fore the intertwined aspects of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution. Moreover, it is often women and organized ethnic groups who today are leading the transformation of those patterns of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution that generate both inequality of access and policies that reinforce those skewed patterns.

Cultural distribution conflicts exist in practically all areas of social life. Among the most prominent are those arising from dominant notions of the individual, nature, and the economy. These domains have particularly salient implications for thinking about issues of rights, equality, and difference in today’s world. Let us see briefly how. One of the key constructs of modern Western societies is that of the individual. From Hobbes, Locke, Smith, and Mill in the formative period of the modern era to Hayek, Macpherson, Freedman, and various moral philosophers in the twentieth century, the liberal doctrine enshrined a notion of ‘possessive individualism’ that not only became dominant but that has had among the most powerful distributive effects. According to this notion, the individual, and only facts and norms couched in terms of the individual, are the foundation of the social order. From the dawn of the capitalist era to the neo-liberalism of the last two decades, this order has not ceased to become progressively naturalized (albeit moderated by what Polanyi (1957) called ‘protective measures’, including the development of welfare state societies in some countries). Society came to be seen as the association of free individuals, particularly as they enter into market relations. This liberal doctrine gave rise to bourgeois society, the generalization of markets and the commodity, and the rights-based liberal state. It is well known, from the work of Michel Foucault for instance, that the state was the chief mechanism through which many aspects of economic, social, and cultural life were progressively transformed and linked to individualizing practices and administrative apparatuses (what Foucault called ‘governmen
tality’ as well as practices of subject formation in general). Individuals became normalized through these practices. Social power became naturalized and depoliticized in arrangements based on private property. Redistributive policies were forced to move within this ambit, or thrown out altogether, as it is happening today in many places where welfare policies are predicated on identifying ‘truly needy’ individuals whose ‘responsibil-
ity’ for their own progress is no longer seen in any collective or social terms. Only as a result of a unique historical transformation were concepts and practices of need, the commodity, the individual, property, the state, and rights woven into a complex cultural regime.

Of importance for distributive conflicts in this regard are the following observations. First, the cultural regime of the possessive individual relies on structures of domination and regulation tied to capitalist social relations, particularly those of private property. Second, individual-based regimes tend to exclude or at least subordinate all other conceptions of society, property, and the person, such as relational and holistic conceptions, in which the person is seen not as a self-bounded, autonomous entity but in terms of relations to others and to larger social wholes. These latter conceptions prevailed even in medieval Europe and are still strong in many parts of the world, as anthropologists continue to insist (e.g., Battaglia 1995; Strathern 1988). For most of human history, society has taken ontological priority over the individual (this is still the case to some extent even in the modern Iberian and Mediterranean worlds, and in those countries that maintain the welfare society structure in Northern Europe, Canada, and some parts of Latin America, for instance, as opposed to the United States). Third, the dominant order based on the individual shapes conventional notions of rights, property, and conceptions of the good (Strathern 1996). Rights and property must be seen as enjoyed by individuals, not by collectivities; property, even intellectual property, is similarly constrained by the individualistic straightjacket, such as in the intellectual property rights regimes pushed by the World Trade Organization; and conceptions of the good must accept a priori the primacy of the vision of a society based on individuals in order to be considered (this is particularly the case in the United States).

All of these cultural practices are of course challenged in various ways, today most notably by indigenous peoples and some ethnic groups. The call for collective rights to territory and natural resources made by some of these groups today; their insistence on the collective character of ‘traditional’ knowledge, their demand for collective representation and cultural and political autonomy, etc., are all instances of challenges to the liberal order of the individual, private property, and bourgeois rights. These challenges show the persistence of accounts of society not fully restricted to the possessive individual, with important implications for conceptions of economy, the collective good, property, and the like (Gledhill 1997). This should not be understood as the complete absence or denial of forms of individuality in these communities. Indeed, in Latin American rural communities, for instance, what is often found is a complex combination of forms of individuality and collectivity, as with the coexistence of private and communal forms of property, or of mechanisms of market and reciprocity in the economy, or market and house-based models of the economy (e.g., Gudeman 2001). What this means, on the one hand, is that the rationality attached to the notion of the ‘individual’ (especially in liberal economic theory) is not exclusive and, on the other, that the dichotomy individual/community is not very useful. It is more important to consider how social groups are trying to recreate both individual and communal forms of cultural and economic practice and political organization to meet the demand of the time. The experience of collective land titling, as we shall see, is instructive in this regard.

The problem of deciding on ‘comprehensive conceptions of the good’ in pluralistic societies, for instance through the creation of ‘overlapping consensus’ (Rawls) or rational communicative practices (Habermas), continues to be a vexing one in contemporary political theory. Rarely, however, do these debates dare to take into consideration the radical alterity envisaged by Todorov or by a growing number of social movements. Most take for granted the norms and forms of modern liberal society. Some are of course aware that “social influences favoring some doctrines over others cannot be avoided by any view of political justice … We may indeed lament the limited space, as it were, of social worlds, and of ours in particular; and we may
regret some of the inevitable effects of our culture and social structure” (Rawls 1993: 197). This, in a nutshell, is a description of what we have called cultural distribution conflict. In the absence of discussions about distribution, and as with most attempts at multi-culturalism, discussions of justice and equality will amount to first assimilating and creating differences within the cultural regimes of the possessive individual and economic man. They will impose on all societies a structure of power in which the cultural codes of modernity have been inscribed. The same applies to conceptions of nature and the economy, among others.

Is radical, non-exclusionary alterity a historically foreclosed possibility? Some social movements certainly do not believe this is the case. Theirs is a struggle to conserve differences in cultural practice. Their demands cannot be easily accommodated into the terms of liberal theory. Where are these relational persons, these discourses of collective knowledge and property, this talk of cultural autonomy and alternative development coming from if not from a different cultural history? To be sure, their ‘communities’ are as much the outcome of contested relations of power and cultural meanings as any other. Yet equally inescapable is the realization that they embody different cultural possibilities, out of which might come the demand for ‘collective rights’ even as a contemporary invention but with some references to long-standing practices. For a long time, as the regime of the individual was under construction, relational views of the world—such as those found in communal life—were receding (Strathern 1992). Now we realize, as a result of internal critiques of Western modernity, the problems created in the process. With recent social movements, we also realize that many social groups have resisted complete construction in line with liberal individualist regimes. To have a chance for life, however, these struggles have to articulate with wider movements for justice, for redistribution of economic and ecological resources, and against individuation. “Since their current position is one of heightened disadvantage, they deserve to succeed, even if they cannot take the rest of the disad-

vantaged with them or, unaided, force a collapse of the larger regime of possessive individualism” (Gledhill 1997: 101; speaking about the Zapatistas in Chiapas). In the long run, these movements must propend toward broad popular alternatives against neo-liberalism. By emphasizing their own radical alterity, they might contribute to reframe other popular identities and social attitudes; in fact, this reframing is essential for the survival of ethnic forms of alterity committed to social justice and difference-in-equality. This is to say that these movements must resist tendencies for the essentialization of difference and the individualizing terms of much debate on indigenous and ethnic rights. They also need to be mindful of whose interests are to be upheld within agreed upon notions of ‘collective’ rights; these definitions are always contested, with gender, class, and ethnic dimensions some times clashing with each other along the way.

The position of the state is important for many of these processes. In some instances concerning indigenous communities, the issue of collective rights has been taken up by the state—sometimes even invented by it—but with an essentialized formula that sees indigenous people as belonging to purely communalist traditions. This is an a-historical and romantic view to say the least. But the state can fulfill and important function. The state needs to create spaces for the constructive discussion of sub-national (ethnic, popular, dominant) identities once the project of building a homogenized national identity is abandoned, as in the case of many Latin American countries recently when the dream of a unified mestizo identity finally gave way to the emerging force of pluri-culturality. This spaces must be predicated on the fact that all identities are hybrid, as it is widely recognized today (Garcia Canclini 1990), that is, that there are no ‘pure’ identities to be preserved in pristine state; that there are power dynamics at play between and within identities; that it is important to address these power issues without fostering violence and hatred; and that, as a cultural actor, the state needs to take on this task seriously. Despite the much touted ebbing of the state, the fact is that the state continues to perform a powerful cultural
and political role. Neo-liberalism in Chile was greatly an affair of the state, often times in conjunction with NGOs which took on the task of the cultural re-conversion of popular groups into the neo-liberal subject preached by the model (Schild 1998). But the state could as well play a more progressive role in making possible the conditions for inter-culturality.

The Colombian case exemplifies some of these aspects of distribution conflicts as they involve culture, the state, and social movements. Let us see briefly how these issues have been played out in the case of a particular social movement committed to redressing them through a politics of difference and equality.

A Colombian example

The example comes from Colombia, where struggles for the defense of natural resources have taken on a decidedly cultural character, particularly in the context of biodiversity debates. Such is the case with the social movement of black river communities in the richly diverse rainforests of the Colombian Pacific. The growth of this movement since about 1990 has taken place against a complex backdrop. At the national level, significant events included the opening up of the Colombian economy to world markets in 1990 and a substantial reform of the national constitution in 1991, which granted black communities of the Pacific region collective rights to the territories they had traditionally occupied. Internationally, tropical rainforest areas were in the limelight, because of their importance as the main biodiversity powerhouses on the planet. The emergence of collective ethnic identities in the Colombian Pacific and similar regions thus reflects a double historical movement: the emergence of the biological as a global problem, and the bursting forth of cultural ethnic identities.4

The social movements of black communities that developed in the region since about 1990 include a network of more than 140 local organizations grouped under what is known as Proceso de Comunidades Negras, PCN. What follows focuses on the work of this particular network. Throughout the 1990s, PCN emphasized the social control of the territory as a precondition for the survival and strengthening of culture and biodiversity. In the river communities, activists and communities worked together to understand the meaning of the new constitution and to develop concepts of territory, development, traditional production practices, and use of natural resources. This process led to drawing up a proposal for the law of cultural and territorial rights called for by the 1991 constitution (Ley 70, approved in 1993), and to consolidating a series of politico-organizational principles that emphasize four fundamental rights: the rights to identity, to territory, to a measure of political autonomy, and to their own vision of development.

Because of its rich natural resources, the Pacific Coast of Colombia has been in the spotlight of the national and international development establishments. Until 1998, activists sought to insert themselves in biodiversity-related discussions at all levels. One of the most important fora for this was the engagement of PCN activists with the government-run Proyecto Biopacífico (PBP), a project for the conservation of the region’s biodiversity, which ended up accepting the black and indigenous movements as one of its most important interlocutors. Of importance in this regard was also the movement’s participation in international official fora such as the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) and in various international oppositional movement networks. At the same time, PCN activists ran for local elections, continued to organize locally and nationally, and sought funding for territorial demarcation and alternative development projects. By 1998, there started an escalation of violence in the region, some of it directed explicitly against activists and communities to discourage them from pressing for territorial demands. These tensions were related to the overall intensification of development, capitalism, and modernity in the region, leading to massive displacement of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities particularly since 2000 (Escobar 2003).

PCN activists progressively developed a political ecology framework through their interaction with community, state, NGO, and academic
sectors, particularly in the period 1993–2000. Within this framework, the territory is seen as a fundamental and multi-dimensional space for the creation and recreation of the ecological, economic, and cultural practices of the communities. The territory is seen in terms of articulations between patterns of settlement, use of space and resources, and symbolic practices. Local communities have been shown to have developed throughout the centuries a sophisticated local model of nature that integrates the biophysical, human, and supernatural worlds and that is significantly distinct from modern conceptions. One of the important contributions of the PBP was to research the traditional production systems of the river communities. These systems were found to be more geared towards local consumption than to the market, and for this reason they have generally been sustainable. The practices are characterized by low-intensity exploitation, shifting use of productive space over broad and different ecological areas, diverse agricultural and extractive activities, family and kindred-based labor practices, and horticulture. By the 1970s, in many of the river basins these systems not only were under heavy stress, chiefly because of growing extractivist pressures, but they were becoming increasingly untenable, thus calling for novel economic and technological strategies that could also generate resources for conservation.

Activists introduced a number of important conceptual innovations. The first one was the definition of biodiversity as ‘territory plus culture’. Closely related to it was a view of the entire Pacific rainforest region as a ‘region-territory of ethnic groups’; that is, an ecological and cultural unit that is laboriously produced through the daily practices of the communities. The region-territory is also thought about in terms of ‘life corridors’ which bring together communities, their activities, and the natural environment. Unlike the scientific concept of biological corridors (e.g., forested zones linking habitats of key biological species), the activists’ life corridors might link mangrove ecosystems, or extend from the middle of the rivers to the inside of the forest, integrating ecological and human processes. Some are formed around particular activities, such as traditional gold mining or women’s shell collecting in the mangrove areas. The region-territory is a management category that points toward the construction of alternative life and society models. It is an attempt to explain biological diversity from inside the ecocultural logic of the Pacific. The territory, conversely, is seen as the space actively used to satisfy community needs. For a given river community, the area of effective appropriation of resources has longitudinal and horizontal dimensions, sometimes encompassing several landscapes and river basins. The territory thus embodies a community’s life project.

If the territory is the space of effective appropriation of the ecosystem, the region-territory is conceived of as a political construction for the defense of the territories and their sustainability. Said differently, and contrary to conventional approaches, sustainability cannot be conceived in terms of patches or singular activities, or only in economic terms. It must respond to the multi-dimensional character of the practices of effective appropriation of the ecosystem. The region-territory can thus be said to articulate the life project of the communities with the political project of the social movement. Similarly, the definition of biodiversity encompasses local principles of autonomy, knowledge, identity, and economy. Nature is not an entity ‘out there’, but is deeply rooted in the collective practice of humans who see themselves as integrally connected to it. Within this conception, the reductive view of biodiversity in terms of genetic resources to be protected through intellectual property rights becomes untenable. The struggle for territory is above all a cultural struggle for autonomy and self-determination. The strengthening and transformation of traditional production systems and local economies, the need to press on with the collective titling process, and working toward organizational strengthening and the development of forms of territorial governability are all important components of an overall strategy centered on the region.

As in similar cases in other parts of the world, the social movement of black communities of
the Pacific was at this point in time faced with novel and still poorly understood intersection of genetic knowledge, commercial interests, long-standing cultural constructions—such as ‘intellectual property rights’—and globalization. As in the much debated case of transgenic agriculture, in biodiversity strategies gene technology and patents are used to consolidate power over food and nature. Corporations and international organizations such as the World Trade Organization play a key role in propagating these pervasive views. The Colombian case reveals other forms of dealing with conservation and food production that do not rely on genes, patents, or individual property in isolation from their cultural context. Activists suggest that what is at stake in the struggle over ‘genes’ are contrasting cultural backgrounds, contested understandings of food and nature, and diverging concerns with globalization, cultural autonomy, and models of the economy (Heller and Escobar 2003).

Biodiversity discussions tend to exacerbate the cultural distribution conflicts between European/North American and other cultures. It is assumed that only through biotechnology, the market, and intellectual property rights can indigenous peoples and farmers realize the wealth of their resources. But for many peasant and indigenous societies, genes and intellectual property rights are not meaningful categories or concepts. Locally meaningful categories—including kindred, reciprocity, commons, and non-commodified forms of compensation—cannot be easily translated into Western concepts of genes and individual property. Social movements argue that there may be room, however, for arriving at different interpretations of these concepts—for instance, by including the idea of collective cultural property and other products of collective life into debates on intellectual property. Such a shift would re-embed ownership in cultural life. Similarly, knowledge and innovation are emphasized by social movements. Community economies are grounded in place (even if not place-bound), and often rely on holding a commons consisting of land, material resources, knowledge, ancestors, spirits, etc. By imposing the language of intellectual property rights on peasant systems, the benefits of community innovations are made to accrue to external capital. This is why many activist and authors insist on the need to protect community spaces outside the market so that the place for local innovation is preserved and the results may be locally enjoyed (Gudeman 1996, 2001).

Difference, equality, and the politics of scale

The struggle for the control of territory by social movements can be seen as a strategy for the defense of place and culture. In the Colombian case, the notion of territory is mobilized politically for the creation of a collective identity and the production of place according to three strategies: firstly, a place-based strategy of localization for the defense of local models of nature and cultural practices; secondly, a further localizing strategy through an active and creative engagement with external forces, such as the global discourses of biodiversity, genetic resources, and intellectual property rights; and thirdly, an intermediate political strategy that establishes links between identity, territory, and culture at local, regional, national, and translational levels (e.g., by participating in translational social movement networks). Social movements of this type thus engage in what geographers call a ‘politics of scale’; they jump from one scale to another in their political mobilization. The results occur at various scales, from the local territories to the construction of regional socio-natural worlds, such as that which the Colombian activists call the ‘region-territory of ethnic groups’ (Escobar 2001).

As it was mentioned in the introduction, globalization discourses in general create the sense that the global will always prevail over the local. This asymmetry has led some scholars and activists to formulate a defense of place as both intellectual and political project (e.g., Harcourt and Escobar 2005). Intellectually, it is important to learn to see place-based cultural, ecological, and economic practices as important sources of visions and workable strategies for recon-
structing local and regional worlds. Politically, it is necessary to think of the conditions that might make the defense of place a realizable project. It is true that capital and globalization achieve dramatic scaling effects. They control places through the control of space. As geographers point out (Swyngedouw 1997), we are witnessing an important geographic rescaling by capital which shifts power primary to the global level and global forms of governance (for example, NAFTA, the EU, GATT, WTO, etc.). Most times these maneuvers are undemocratic and disempowering; they are fuelled by discourses of free trade, development, and the unrestricted work of markets.

However, social movements and progressive NGOs often times also create networks that achieve supra-place effects that are not negligible. The network of indigenous peoples of the Americas is already well known in this regard, but there are new networks emerging every day. These networks propitiate the reorganization of space from below and some measure of symmetry between the local and the global. We might speak of these networks as producing ‘glocalities’—cultural configurations that connect places with each other to create regional spaces and regional worlds. Not only capital, but place-based struggles, reorganize space through networks. Glocality means that everything is local and global, to be sure, but not global and local in the same way (Dirlik 1998). Social movement networks builds on place-based resistance and practices to reconfigure the world according to different parameters and concerns. The region-territory of ethnic groups is a concrete expression of the scalar effects of social movements’ networks.

This is to say that the politics of place has to be found at the intersection of the scaling effects of networks, on the one hand, and emergent identities, such as black and indigenous identities of the Colombian Pacific, on the other. Social movements and local communities are not just trapped in places, awaiting for the liberating hand of capital, technology, and development to join the networks of transnational flows of commodities, information, and the like. In constructing networks and localities of their own, even if of course in their engagement with dominant networks, social movements might contribute to democratize social relations, contest visions of nature (such as in biodiversity debates), challenge current techno-scientific hype (for instance, concerning transgenic agriculture and genetically modified organisms, GMOs), and even suggest that economies can be organized differently from the neo-liberal dogma (as in the resurgence of interest in barter, local and regional economies, and the continued survival of non-capitalist practices among a number of social movements).

A politics of difference-in-equality based on place-based networks and coalitions is greatly aided today by the creative use of new information and communications technologies (ICTs). Information and networking have been shown to be of vital importance to the political strategies of a number of cultural rights movements, including the Zapatista and the Maya culturalist movement (Nelson 1996). It might seem paradoxical at first to use ICTs, known for their de-localizing effects at the service of capital and global media, for a defense of place-based cultures and cultural practices. But the fact is that people rooted in local cultures are finding ways to have a stake in national and global society precisely as they engage with the conditions of transnationalism in defense of local cultures and ecologies (Arizpe 1999). This is so because these networks—such as women’s, environmental, ethnic, and other social movements networks—are the location of new political actors and the source of promising cultural practices and possibilities. They are most effective when they rely on an ongoing tacking back and forth between cyberpolitics and place politics—that is, between political activism in the internet and other enabling networks and activism in the physical location at which the networkers sit and live. Because of their historical attachment to places and the ecological and cultural difference they embody, women, environmentalists, and social movements in some parts of the world are particularly suited to this task of weaving the real and the virtual, and culture, gender, environment,
and development into an innovative cultural and political practice (Harcourt 1999; Ribeiro 1998).  

Conclusion

I started this paper by emphasizing the need to re-examine the relation between difference and equality of access from the simultaneous and interrelated perspective of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution conflicts. While the economic aspect is usually given most importance in discussions about conflict and equality, it is clear that the ecological and cultural dimension are often as prominent in the strategies for the defense of place and culture of many social actors, perhaps even as a reaction to the tightening of the economic grip through neo-liberalism. To speak about a politics of difference and equality by restricting it to notions of ‘rights’ arising from the same liberal tradition that fuels its neo-liberal incarnation of today is clearly insufficient. This does not mean that we need to abandon the politics of rights; it means that it has to be shifted away from its sole reliance on liberal institutions that shelter capitalist social relations and regimes of individuation that deny diversity and greatly limit equality of access to decision-making structures, goods, and services. Only by delving again into the cultural domain can the ethico-political principle of equality of access be reinvigorated.

For behind seemingly neutral and universal economic processes of globalization and free trade are particular cultural choices. This is why social movements and many progressive NGOs and scholars are finding it increasingly necessary to posit a defense of place and place-based practices against the economic and cultural avalanche of recent decades. Most times this project does not take the form of an intransigent defense of ‘tradition’ but rather of a creative engagement with modernity and transnationalism, often times aided by ICTs. These social actors do not seek so much inclusion into the global network society (Castells 1996), but its reconfiguration in such a way that their visions of the world may find minimum conditions for their continued existence. They create networks and localities with a more decidedly plural character: localities in which many cultural politics and political cultures can coexist, giving new meaning to democracy, despite tensions and conflicts. Popular localities might be able to establish structures of power that do not impose homogeneous conceptions of the good on all of its participants. Here we might find a new hope for a reasonable pluralism. The fact that a growing number of people and groups demand the right to their own cultures, ecologies, and economies as part of our modern social worlds can no longer be denied, nor can these demands be easily accommodated into standard liberal or neo-liberal doctrine. It is no longer the case that one can only contest dispossession and argue for equality from the perspective of inclusion into the dominant culture and economy. In fact, the opposite is becoming the case: the position of difference and autonomy is becoming as valid, if not more, for this contestation. Appeals to the moral sensibilities of the powerful ceased to be effective, if they ever were. It is time to try out other strategies, like the power strategies of cultures connected in networks and localities, in order to negotiate contrasting conception of the good and the value of different forms of life and to restate the long-standing predicament of difference-inequality. It is the time for thinking more openly about the potential healing effects of a politically enriched alterity.

To put it one more time in the terms of this paper, it is necessary to foster the equalization of economic, ecological, and cultural distribution. Post-development can in fact be defined in terms of this equalizing movement. Modernity and development have been predicated on an unfair distribution and unequal exchange at these three levels, and it is time to redress it. Movements for economic justice, environmental sustainability, and cultural difference are moving in this direction. The re-visioned fields of political economy, political ecology, and political anthropology (this latter focused on the study of the cultural politics of social movements) are providing some guiding concepts to broach this...
task. On what basis could transnational social movements, NGOs, and policy-making bodies foster a politics of difference-in-equality? Again, this requires a three-pronged effort that addresses the material, ecological, and cultural conditions of inequality, one that takes seriously both the existence of place-based practices of difference in many parts of the world as well as their nurturing into concrete proposals. Following from this overall goal, it might be possible to think about some possible policy orientations, to which anthropologists might be in a particularly good place to contribute.

Firstly, it is necessary to put limits on the single cultural dominance that occurs at key institutions. This is particularly important in those institutions that regulate global policy concerning, for instance, property rights, conservation, and other forms of economic organization and development. It is important to introduce in these institutions a minimum of genuine cultural pluralism, in terms of outlooks and outcomes. The same applies to the state. Efforts by the state for the construction of spaces for pluri- and interculturality must be supported.

Secondly and conversely, it is important to create spaces for the continued activation of non-dominant cultural forms, such as those that rely on relational notions of personhood and more collective or holistic conceptions of rights, responsibilities, and organizations. Some of this is happening, of course (such as with Article 8j of the CBD which calls for the defense and promotion of indigenous knowledge of biodiversity) but much more is needed. The same goes for less individualistic forms of economy and ecology. Redistributive policies at the level of economy and environment (such as according to the ecological debt) must be pursued in earnest. But there must always be a synergy among economic, ecological, and cultural redistributive policies if difference-in-equality is to be pursued effectively.

Thirdly, there should be educational strategies for reframing popular and mainstream identities in conjunction with the emergent culturally-based identities, such as those of ethnic movements. Alterity does not apply only to subaltern groups; it must reframe ‘popular’ identities in general (Gledhill 1997). Those demands by social movements that do not conform to the liberal dogma must not be seen as a threat but as a possibility. It is important to create a context for an entire pedagogy of difference to this end. As with the cases of racism and sexism, those living in dominant cultures must come to see, and hopefully unlearn, the privileges they have enjoyed because of the naturalization and universalization of particular cultural constructs.

Fourthly, this applies to gender policies as well. Women are at the forefront of challenging unfair distribution patterns at the levels of body, home, place, economy, and environment (Harcourt and Escobar 2005). Here the synergy would be between the transformation of gendered and popular identities.

And finally, one of the most effective ways to promote difference-in-equality is by supporting the networks and localities being created by social movements and other organizations. These networks are creating alternative and plural visions of rights (such as the right to basic subsistence, autonomy and difference), economy (in terms of alternative capitalist and non-capitalist practices), nature (in terms of ecological design principles that integrate human and ecological processes), and the like. These efforts should be supported by facing head on the socio-economic dimensions that the different visions convey, even if these means sheltering some aspects of social life from the tyranny of markets, prices, and allegedly free-trade policies.

These orientations suggest a revitalized democratizing project that takes its cues from the struggles of many social actors that enact or embody recognizably different forms of doing things. In the process of continuously reinventing their communities, these actors could be seen as asking dominant societies for greater flexibility in their design and modes of action, for instance in terms of economic, ecological, and political arrangements. Contrary to conventional belief, humans are not inherently ethnocentric and the relations among cultures are not necessarily hostile. It is conflict and domination that renders cultures antagonistic towards one another.
That cultures increasingly co-determine each other is undeniable. It is now necessary to turn this historical fact into an opportunity to re-enact the dream of difference-in-equality.

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This paper was prepared in 1999 for UNESCO's World Culture Report II, coordinated by Lourdes Arizpe (UNESCO 2000). However, only the brief case study on the Colombian Pacific was actually published in the report; the great majority of it has thus never been published in English. In preparing this version for Focaal at Don Kalb's suggestion, I sought to preserve most of the original text and tone, although I did some pertinent adaptations, chiefly to update the text on the situation of the Pacific and to add a few key references to works that have been published since the late 1990s (e.g., a short paragraph on the anthropology of place with more recent studies). I preferred to retain most of the original text since I believe it possesses a certain style and force that might be lost if rendered into a more conventional academic style, even if major revisions would have been possible (e.g., on recent, and very rich, articulations of the problematic of difference). I would like to thank Lourdes Arizpe for the original invitation to write the text for the UNESCO volume, Monique Nuijten for her kind invitation to submit a text to Focaal, Don Kalb for suggesting this particular text as appropriate, and an anonymous reviewer for a number of useful observations.

Notes


2. I attempt to provide such an integrated framework in a book I am currently completing on work I have been doing in the Colombian Pacific since the early 1990s. Some of this work will be discussed briefly later in the paper.

3. This is a provisional definition. I am aware that the definition of power itself is culturally determined. For now, 'social power' refers chiefly to the processes that regulate control over the setting of social norms and values, and their relation to issues of access to decision-making structures, goods, and services.

4. The concept of 'coloniality' of power and knowledge provides a framework for examining this geopolitics and set of power relations around knowledge. This is outside the scope of the paper, but interested readers will find an exhaustive presentation of the work of the authors working with this concept in Escobar (2004).

5. The Pacific Coast region of Colombia covers a vast area (about 70,000 km²) stretching from Panama to Ecuador and from the westernmost chain of the Andes to the ocean. It is a unique rainforest region, one of the world's most biodiverse. About 60 percent of the region's one million inhabitants (900,000 Afro-Colombians, about 50,000 Embera, Waunana, and other indigenous people, and mestizo colonists) live in the few larger towns; the rest inhabit the margins of the more than 240 rivers, most of which flow from the Andes toward the ocean. Black and indigenous peoples have maintained distinct material and cultural practices. The politics of biodiversity in this region is discussed in Escobar (1998), and the black movement in Grueso, Rosero, and Escobar (1998). Armed conflict and large-scale displacement have become common, unfortunately, since the late 1990s (see Escobar 2003 for displacement in the region).

6. The local model of the black river communities is described at length in the works of Restrepo.
(Restrepo and del Valle 1996) and Losonczy (1997).

7. I am perfectly aware that the defense of place can lead to very reactionary politics, and that ‘place’ and ‘community’ are contested domains of thought and action. See Harcourt and Escobar (2005) for a comprehensive discussion. I am here particularly interested in those social movements that enact a progressive cultural politics for the defense of place-based ecological, economic, and cultural practices of difference.

8. See the report by on collective land titling experiences in Latin America to the Inter American Development Bank by Soren Hvalkof and Roger Plant (2001). The report explores the conditions for successful collective titling, the consequences of individual titling, and the overall political conditions that might make collective titling successful. I thank Soren Hvalkof for useful discussions of some of these issues for the present paper.

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