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Boekbespreking van: Forests in International Environmental Politics

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Book Reviews

Ans Kolk, *Forests in International Environmental Politics, International Organisations, NGOs and the Brazilian Amazon*. International Books, Utrecht 1996

In reviewing this rich study of international environmental politics, I will focus on its contribution to theory formation in the field of international political economy (IPE), leaving aside many other interesting issues.

On the one hand Kolk examines in which way, given the world economic structure, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the World Bank have changed their positions and strategies towards the environment in general and the Brazilian Amazon in particular during the years 1990-1995. On the other hand her central focus concerns the way in which the so-called internationalization of the environmental debate influenced Brazil's national environmental policy concerning the Amazon during the years 1988-1992. Underlying the book is the debate whether neo-liberal economics and economic growth are compatible with environmental policy.

Current perspectives in international relations cannot explain why the Brazilian government could not formulate an autonomous environmental policy. Kolk's criticism of the perspectives she discerns – globalism, realism and institutionalism – is twofold. First, they do not take account of the environment as an explanatory factor. Second, they focus on the state-level of analysis only. Kolk argues that the analysis of national environmental policy should also take factors at the international, domestic and transnational levels into account. She includes new actors in the analysis of international environmental politics; international organizations and NGOs. Furthermore, she argues that the world economic structure has a critical influence in determining the national environmental policy of Brazil. By combining a state-oriented analysis with a political economy analysis she aims to provide insights into international environmental cooperation concerning rain forests.

The factors Kolk mentions to explain the increased international attention to forests are alarming figures on global warming, global media coverage of burning forests in the mid-1980s, and the murder of the internationally known rubber tapper Chico Mendes. The national environmental decree by president Cardoso was yet another event that aroused much international attention in 1996. Kolk refers to this event to highlight the importance of her investigation of the internationalization of Brazilian

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environmental policy concerning the Amazon (and for that matter the freedom to formulate a national environmental policy concerning forests of developing countries as such). She examines the national policy by referring to domestic factors (military ideology and the national political economic structure) and actors (president Cardoso), societal factors (Brazilian NGOs), transnational actors (international business and Northern NGOs), international actors (G7, World Bank) and the world economic structure.

Kolk formulates the focus and the aim of her book as follows:

The book examines the impact of the internationalisation of the environmental debate on policy-formation with regard to the Brazilian Amazon. It aims to shed light on the interrelationships between national and international politics, and the role of international organisations and NGOs. The book focuses on the way in which the environmental issue influences and is influenced by political and economic factors, developing an international political economy perspective on the environment. It tries to bring together and elaborate on distinct research areas and approaches, which can be grouped into respectively *national environmental politics*, *international environmental negotiations*, and *international political economy*. (p. 16)

By introducing all these variables, Kolk does fulfil her aim to bring together distinct research areas and approaches. In theoretical terms, however, the author does not develop the "international political economy perspective on the environment" as indicated in her introduction.

Reading Kolk's book the old philosophy of science debate concerning parsimony versus holism comes to mind. Kolk describes and examines much, while explaining little with many variables. In my opinion Kolk fulfils her aim to "combine these three strands of research (national environmental politics, international environmental negotiations and international political economy)" but she does not "contribute to filling the gaps they have left" (p. 17). Further to not clarifying what these "gaps" are, she fails to systematically apply the different perspectives to the case under consideration to indicate what perspective has most explanatory power and where her contribution would be different. As a matter of fact the case study she investigates seems to underline the explanatory power of realism rather than Kolk's criticisms of realism.

By focusing on the interrelationships between some very broadly defined variables, often phrased in quite normative ways and examined in different time periods, the actual argument is hard to discover. Due to the fact that Kolk examines interrelationships between variables, the dependent and independent variables are not very clearly distinguished or measured. The author's own perspective and assumptions on the relationship between neo-liberal economics and the environment (pp. 39, 49, 213, 217, 297), the consequences of the "Northern growth path" (p. 43), the "existing international order" (p. 42), and international business (p. 46) seem to constantly underlie the research.

Kolk acknowledges the multitude of different approaches within the field of what she calls "global international economy". She adds that "they will not be examined here because the main focus is on assessing the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches for the analysis of international environmental politics" (p. 33). By not examining these perspectives the author's understanding of international political economy (IPE) can cause a lot of confusion to the reader, especially if the reader is trained in a different tradition. Besides, it becomes hard to assess Kolk's own contribution to the field.

In the current literature IPE appears to be a very rich field of research, encompassing different perspectives at different levels of analysis - the system, state and society levels. Kolk defines IPE as "world system analysis" (p. 33). Throughout the book international political economy is used as a theoretical approach as well as referring to "the world economic system" as such. She regards the state, institutions, international business and NGOs as the major actors in the international political economy, all operating in the world economic structure. In itself it is valuable and important to emphasize the underlying political and economic structure to explain events, but at the same time this is a rather questionable explanation as it refers to such a broad category and is therefore hard to refute.

She measures internationalization of environmental policy in terms of what she interchangeably calls "views", "perspectives", and "positions" of various types of actors on the relationship between neo-liberal economics and the environment (pp. 51, 288). In order to position Kolk among the scholars in the field, this approach could also be labelled either as a cognitive approach to IPE or a bureaucratic politics approach.

The case study concerns the Pilot Programme for the Brazilian Amazon (PPB). Kolk explains why she chose this case to underline her argument:

PPB shows not only the complexities of environmental regulation and the problems of international assistance, but also the way in which conflicts over national sovereignty can be reckoned with in international environmental policy. Because of their involvement in the PPB, donors and the World Bank have the opportunity to raise concerns about developments in Brazil, such as the adoption of a new decree on Indian lands by the Cardoso governments. (p. 296)

The case does fulfil Kolk's aim as stated in the beginning: it sheds light on the inter-relationships between national and international politics, and the role of international organizations and NGOs. Had she systematically analysed the case by using, for example, a method to measure the actual influence exerted by the actors at the various levels, then the value of the case in theoretical terms could have been greater. As it is, it does not become clear whether the case actually refutes the critique on the three perspectives she discerned. For example, in arguing that national environmental policy has internationalized, it would have been more cogent to state the case in realist terms. A strong case would be a case that realism in itself cannot explain by referring to national

self-interest on a state level only. The case should show a situation in which international agents were not likely to influence Brazilian environmental policy but actually did so. The case Kolk has selected, could only affirm her hypothesis. Not mentioning "states" as a variable in the title reveals the lack of intention to give the explanatory power of the different perspectives a fair chance. In this way the added value of bringing together the different perspectives, the explicit aim of the book, is not clear.

This is even more problematic as on careful reading it becomes clear that the book actually gives credit to the approach that she criticized from the outset: realism. Kolk even acknowledges that "scholarly interest in environmental security (...) would not have changed the realist view on the main actors in international politics" (p. 25). She concludes that "the Amazon (...) shows the conflicts which emerged, especially in connection with the question of sovereignty" (p. 288). She mentions the strategic value of the environment repeatedly, unfortunately without elaborating this insight in theoretical terms (p. 324). A problem in pinning down the argument is that Kolk defines the "state interest" in extremely broad terms (p. 26).

Self-interest was involved as far as the G7 were concerned: "the PPB could help to fulfil the European promise to stabilise emissions at the 1990 level" while presumably being "cheaper than the costs of achieving the same results in the European countries themselves" (p. 294), and would have "beneficial domestic effects" (p. 290).

For Brazil realist arguments were numerous: in the "late 1960s .. the military put great emphasis on the strategic and economic importance of the Amazon in its doctrine of national security and development" (p. 291); "Increasing international concern over deforestation (...) was seen as a threat to Brazilian sovereignty and the legitimate right to use and manage the Amazon" (p. 292); "The 1989 government initiative to organise UNCED in Brazil was a deliberate attempt to improve the country's environmental image. (...) This nationalist perspective also influenced the neo-liberal approach (...) particularly in view of the preservation of national (state or private) influence in certain economic sectors and the recognition of the corresponding interests" (p. 293).

As Kolk concludes, the book shows that:

Environmental policy requires changes in existing patterns of production and consumption and in profitable economic activities, and thus affects political and economic interests. The environment therefore became an issue in international relations, influencing both the world economy and the interstate system. (p. 287)

This conclusion is considerably less ambitious than the aim of the book stated in the introduction (p.16). Nevertheless, the book does fulfil its aims in many respects. Kolk reveals an important new area of research in the field of international relations as well as her "objective (...) just to provide a broad and inevitably general overview for the purpose of understanding international environmental politics" (p. 23). Yet it would

have been interesting, for example, to discover which perspective of the rich tradition of various IPE-approaches to international environmental politics had more explanatory power under which circumstances. Her criticism of realism seems to be at least partly refuted by the data.

Kolk's dissertation is very rich in terms of the interrelationships between variables and actors. Kolk touches upon some very interesting concepts, especially concerning the changed significance of sovereignty in international relations in view of environmental issues. She offers a very concise and well-documented study. Although the study seems well organized, it is at times quite repetitive as is underlined by the numerous references to other sections.

Two important findings in the book demand more scholarly attention in the field of IPE. The first is the significance of the internationalization of the environment to the concept of sovereignty. The second issue is the significance of the upcoming and changing role of NGOs and international organizations for the international relations between states. The role of US NGOs in influencing the American Congress and public is particularly interesting and revealing. The "American approach" as opposed to the "European" or "Southern" approach – if one can actually label them as such –, and the power basis of US NGOs due to the US political system and importance of the American financial contributions to major International Organizations are only two other issues that deserve further attention and elaboration.

In terms of policy formation NGOs can learn a lot from the book with respect to "best practices", strategies to influence politics by various types of NGOs – especially the US NGOs –, and the attitude of some governments and the World Bank towards NGOs. These insights, of course, are very significant for policy-makers in governments and international organizations alike. Besides these insights, the book gives a concise overview of the state-of-the-art concerning international forest policy, and of the history of criticism raised against the World Bank and its consequent reactions and changes to these criticisms.

I would like to conclude by saying that the author is rather radical in her presumptions and criticism of the positions and actions of actors involved in the political game around international forests, but extremely moderate and subtle when it comes to drawing scientific and policy-oriented conclusions. From a political science perspective I would have preferred to have seen more radical theoretical conclusions pointing towards few variables that explain a lot, while taking a more moderate position towards political positions. Hence, I recommend the book to those involved in environmental practice and looking for provocative criticism rather than to researchers interested in new perspectives and theoretical exercises.

Hadewych Hazelzet

Wilfried Dewachter, Inge Thomas and Sam Depauw, *Afscheid van het Laatste Dobbelparlement (Bidding farewell to the last double parliament)*, Acco, Leuven, 1997, ISBN 90-334-3768-6, 995 Bf.

Regionalism has always been a characteristic of some European countries, particularly Germany. Over the last decade it has become a major runner-up in many more countries, for example, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom and even France. Regionalism tends to take the shape of political structures such as a parliament, a government, and sometimes a court system.

Belgium is an outstanding case. The country is composed of two major language groups: the Dutch-speaking Flanders in the west and the French-speaking Walloon provinces in the east; there is also a small German-speaking community close to the border with Germany. The language difference has always been much more than a difference of mother tongue. For centuries, French was the language of the socio-political upper class and the Walloon provinces acted as the dominant area of Belgium. After the Second World War this relationship of political inequality began to reverse. Modern economic activity took off in Flanders. The region gained self-confidence and self-reliance. The Dutch language became a symbol of socio-political emancipation.

Increasing tensions between the two major language groups resulted in series of compromises (pacification) at the level of the elites. The aim was to transfer government powers from the national (now federal) level to that of the communities. A major compromise was made in 1992 regarding the bicameral parliament, i.e. the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (more or less comparable to the UK House of Commons and House of Lords). By 1995 it had restricted its functions to the federal level and transferred its sub-national powers to five new councils for Flanders, the Walloon region, the bilingual city of Brussels, the French speaking community (in fact the Walloon provinces plus one part of Brussels) and the German community. The national parliament which had been elected in 1991, appeared to have become Belgium's last so-called double parliament.

This book, written by political scientists at the (Flemish) University of Leuven, is not a memorial to that parliament. The authors' objective is to describe and analyse what happened to the parliament and its members as soon as it became clear that its double function was over and that five new councils would be born. Does a body behave differently as soon as it is aware that amputation is close at hand?

Five more specific questions they endeavour to answer are the following. The first regards the position of the parliament in the political system. Is it the major platform of representation, the major decision-maker, in balance with the executive, divided by government majority versus opposition or some complex mix? These so-called models of parliament are compared with a range of twenty different functions of parliament. The second question of research is much more behavioural: what do the MPs do? Their activities, particularly in the fields of legislation and control, are counted and weighted for the years 1988-1995 and compared with those rising in the newly born sub-national councils.