

Understanding Environmental Crisis

A series of 5 seminar talks by Felix Padel at CWEH, University of Sussex, January-April 2020, conceived as a collaborative effort, with participants encouraged to bring examples from their own work and experience.

Conceptualising Environmental Conflict through Multidisciplinary Lenses

Friday 31 January 2020 17:15-19:15 Fulton, room 203

Than Fridays 7 & 21 February, 13 March & 10 April (tbc)

As academics, as well as ordinary citizens and perhaps as activists too, how can we enter a deeper awareness of what's happening and what to do about it? What economists, like most governments and corporations, conceive as 'resources', indigenous peoples and environmentalists see as sources of life. It's significant that indigenous peoples find themselves in the frontline: the 'war on terror' and the war on nature meet in the militarisation of resource conflicts over indigenous lands. The argument here is that the military-industrial complex drives the escalating war on nature – ecocide alongside genocide, exemplified in the Kalinganagar police firing of 2nd January 2006 to facilitate a Tata Steel factory (among hundreds of similar conflicts in India) or the Amazon fires and overriding of hard-won indigenous rights in Bolsenaro's Brazil. We all know numerous examples, and participants in these seminar talks are encouraged to bring examples from their own experience.

The first session will set the scene with recent events and debates, including mass species loss in the fires in Australia, Brazil and elsewhere, introducing the centrality of indigenous politics, and a way of conceptualising what is happening through the elements of earth, water, fire and air.

2. Earth: Land, Lifeforms, Livelihoods

From forest fires to megadams, ecosystems are getting devastated. In India, conservationists are pitted against Adivasi land rights, a telling example to many of environmental racism, compounding the massacre of trees by Adani and other corporate entities. Private ownership undermines common patterns and promotes black money, while 'compensatory afforestation' threatens further displacement. In the soil itself, fecund humus constantly renewed by earthworms is replaced by chemical agriculture – the 'dead earth' that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) warned of. Has the Cochabamba Declaration on the rights of nature or mother earth had any impact yet? Our industrial lifestyle depends on vast mining enterprises whose impacts most of us remain barely aware of, devouring huge fertile regions with monstrous craters and complete disruption of livelihoods. The minerals in our mobiles for example are mined in conditions approaching slavery and civil war in Congo...

3. Economy in Water

Big dams are always launched with lavish promises of 'development', yet the reality always seems to involve mass displacement and devastation of fertile

regions, with water snatched from villagers and restricted to corporate works. Industrialisation repeatedly pollutes water sources and rivers, as in Vedanta's copper mine tailings poisoning the Kafue river that harmed thousands in Zambia, for which it was recently convicted by the UK's Supreme Court. We know that water is key to life on earth, how it is increasingly privatised, and how plastic and industrial waste pollutes our oceans. But how aware are we of the assault on underground aquifers? Are large areas of the earth surface actually drying out, in Australia, North India, the US, China, Middle East...? Could humans relearn how to be economic in using and conserving water?

4. Firepower

Burning fossil fuels is central to the modern economy since the industrial revolution, for electricity, transport, and not least metal production. Aluminium factories use vast quantities of electricity to split the pure metal from oxygen at the molecular level, while use of aluminium in bomb technology rejoins them explosively. The technology of modern warfare is based on firepower, and depends on hidden links with the mining industry and supremely polluting combustion processes in arms factories. Destructive forest fires, like volcanos, are symbols of destructive nature out of control, but we take for granted this mass use of fire in factories. The underground fires devouring the Jharia coalfields for the last 100 years are symbolic of widespread forces unleashed by human enterprise, conjuring Robert Frost's poem 'Some say the world will end in fire...'

5. Air Waves

Debates on climate change have reached a new level of intensity, with cataclysmic weather events increasingly apparent, and air pollution at record levels in many cities. Also, local climate change needs more examination. Aluminium factories (like Vedanta's in Odisha), iron/steel plants, power stations and mines all transform local weather conditions dramatically, and spawn toxic dust that gives nearby villagers as well as workers skin and respiratory diseases. Debates about microwave pollution from the expanding wi-fi spectrum represented by 5G are highly contentious too. An estimated 20,000 new satellites are being launched, as well as receptors that many scientists believe pose a new level of threat to insect, bird and human life.