



## The geopolitics of climate change



Simon Dalby\*,<sup>1</sup>

Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 6C2, Canada

### A B S T R A C T

**Keywords:**  
Geopolitics  
Climate change  
Geometrics  
Anthropocene  
Security

In his 2012 Political Geography plenary at the 2012 Royal Geographical Society meeting, Stuart Elden posed the possibilities of a “geopolitics” that engages the earth, the air and volumetric understandings as an alternative to geopolitics as a synonym for global politics with its two dimensional cartographic imagination. More is needed than political geography writ large: a material sensibility is necessary to think about security and geography but one that is not linked to traditional determinist formulations. Climate change has a long connection to geopolitics, but now humanity is determining the future of the planetary climate. Picking up Elden’s themes, this paper explores how taking the physicality of climate change seriously requires a rethinking of politics in the face of numerous transformations in what is becoming the more obviously artificial planet in the Anthropocene epoch. The geometrics now needed in security analysis include the volumes of global carbon dioxide and Arctic ice. Geopolitical discourse needs a fundamental overhaul to deal with the new circumstances and incorporate climate change as a production problem in the making of a new world, not as a deterministic phenomenon shaping human life in coming decades.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

“If we really care deeply about the climate and other socio - environmental conditions, our theoretical gaze and political passions have to shift from a concern with the environment per se to a concern and passion for the construction of a different politics.” Erik Swyngedouw (2013: 2)

### Geopolitics

Geopolitics is a word that invokes many things simultaneously. Struggles for political dominance is the most obvious meaning of the term and one that comes with the implicit suggestion that this is a matter that is to be understood at the global scale. The “geo” here is both a matter of the world and a matter of the geographical arrangements the shape the contests for power over that world. It is about the spaces of politics, the geographies of rule, authority and frequently violence. It is nearly always about attempts to make, organize, dominate and control particular spaces, most notably now the spaces of the global neo-liberal economy (Panitch & Gindin, 2012).

As a generation of critical geopolitics scholarship has made clear, geopolitics is also about the modes of knowledge, of ways of

representing the world that have political consequences (Dodds, Kuus, & Sharp, 2013). In this sense geopolitics is quite literally about how the world is made known. The geographical terms in the scripts used by politicians, the images conjured up by those who represent foreign places, and their specification in terms of having attributes requiring certain forms of policy are ubiquitous modern political practices (Agnew, 2003). These are obviously literary practices where geopolitical discourse is routine. But more than textual matters structure the practices of global politics even if the other forms of knowledge – numerical and computational – discussed below, are rendered back into text in the key practices of decision-makers and in the justifications used in policy documents, political speeches and media punditry.

Popular imaginations are shaped by multiple modes of political discourse, and in the case of climate change in particular, by numerous invocations of nature, threat and most recently severe storms and unusual droughts and heat waves in contemporary media (Boykoff, 2011). How these are known and interpreted matter in political terms as the huge amounts of money spent by “conservative” institutions in the United States to cast doubt on the realities of climate change show very clearly. How science relates to politics, and how various types of knowledge become politically useful is unavoidable in all this (Hulme, 2009), as it has long been in discussions of geopolitics.

The ability to establish a context remains a particularly useful capability in politics, a practice properly deserving the term

\* Tel.: +1 2267723150.

E-mail address: [sdalby@gmail.com](mailto:sdalby@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> Political Geography Lecture, presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Los Angeles, April 2013.

geopolitics. But the context in which climate and geopolitics might be linked has changed dramatically over the last century in particular. In no small measure this is due to the rapid expansion of technical capabilities and the engineering of whole new urban spaces, production systems, commodity chains as well as the rapid transformation of “rural” landscapes into zones of agricultural extraction. The green revolution and the relationships between weather and crop yields are not unrelated to the calculations of geopolitics (Perkins, 1999); cold war scholars will remember the importance of satellite-based estimates of the Soviet harvest. North Korea watchers do similar calculations today. Drought is, contemporary commentators have suggested, related to the “Arab Spring” (Mabey, Schultz, Dimsdale, Bergamaschi, & Amal-Lee, 2013). These technologies are also modes of knowing, charting, measuring and calculating the earth as it is transformed; this relationship is key to climate change geopolitics, but while it’s not a new matter, the recent focus on anthropogenic climate change adds important new twists to an old story.

Climate has become once again a matter for explicit geopolitical deliberation, but in very different terms than it was in the previous manifestations of what have become known as classical geopolitics. The emergence of climate change as a matter of increasing urgency in global politics requires us to engage with some of these themes again it seems (Webersik, 2010). This paper starts there. Subsequent sections deal with how the atmosphere was a key arena for the cold war, how climate science is tied into geopolitics through this period and how contemporary climate fears have become part of security discourse. The latter half of the paper suggests that both this history of cold war geopolitics, and the contemporary specifications of ecological spaces extend Stuart Elden (2013) concerns with volumes and geometrics. The text ends with some reflections on future trajectories and how climate is changing governance, both through markets and potentially through geo-engineering projects, suggesting that old determinist arguments have now been reversed in the ‘great acceleration’ period in the Anthropocene.

### Determinism, climate and geopolitics

Theories that reduce human history to uni-causal mechanisms are rightly regarded with scholarly suspicion. Much of the early work of the twentieth century on these themes of environmental causation and the influence of climate on the course of human history have been dismissed as being determinist if not racist or imperialist myopia. The latter point is particularly important, as Mike Davis (2001) makes so clear in his *Late Victorian Holocausts*. There remains a very powerful politics to natural explanations of social phenomena that allow the rich and powerful to evade their responsibilities while attributing human suffering to natural causes. Nonetheless to argue that all discussions of climate as a constraint, if not a cause of human history should be dismissed is to fly in the face of much research in environmental history that has of late richly added to the understandings of earlier phases of the human condition (Hornborg, McNeill, & Martinez-Alier, 2007).

While care has to be taken with dismissals of earlier scholarship, not least because of the unavoidable oversimplifications of disciplinary history, and the institutional advantages of distancing new scholarship from the supposedly inferior or tainted practices of the past, simple arguments that climate causes things were frequently simply badly off the mark. Preston E. James’ (1972: 376) summary comment on Ellsworth Huntington’s work will have to suffice in place of a more detailed exposition here: “Huntington worked on subjects for which objectively defined data were lacking and in a period before the methods for collecting such data had been worked out”. More recent environmental history emphasizes the complexity of climate and other factors in ways that reinforce

James’ evaluation. This is all important because of the popularity of Malthusian environmental scarcity formulations as the cause of all sorts of contemporary insecurities (Dalby, 2009). As Christian Parenti (2011) emphasizes, contemporary climate changes are impacting on landscapes already restructured profoundly by the processes of neoliberal agriculture.

Rendering earlier theories in terms of possibilism rather than determinism is an altogether safer intellectual strategy, not least because there are environmental constraints on many human activities, only perhaps most obviously such things as particular modes of agriculture that can be undertaken in what parts of the world due to rainfall availability and the constraints of nutrient availability and the numbers of degree days needed for crop maturation. Likewise disease prevalence is related in some ways to ecological conditions necessary for vectors to flourish; tropical diseases are mostly so called for obvious reasons. Indeed it seems that Jared Diamond’s (1997, 2005) major work in *Guns, Germs and Steel*, and *Collapse* is better understood as sophisticated re-articulations of possibilism, rather than as matters of environmental determinism, not least because of the key point in *Collapse* that humanity could now learn its way out of ecological difficulties.

Determinist arguments are nonetheless remarkably persistent in political discourse, not least because of their overly simplistic geographies. Attributing causal logics to specific contexts, and in the process imputing natural explanations on the grounds that either that’s the way things are ‘there’, or that there are no choices because of how things are ‘there’, is routine geopolitical discourse. It has long been key to invoking environmental causation to conflicts (Dalby, 2002). As geographers have been arguing for a long time these convenient naturalizations of artificial cartographic convention (Fall, 2010) work well to obscure social and economic matters that flow across the boundaries demarcated on maps. In the process the responsibilities that go with those cross boundary activities are elided in favour of simple specifications of ‘here’ and ‘there’, and usually virtuous proximity and threatening or morally flawed others elsewhere.

All this is especially dangerous when, as is sometimes the case, it now feeds into the geopolitical discussions related to contemporary climate matters. It is dangerous, as the rest of this paper argues, mostly because it so dramatically misconstrues the nature of contemporary transformations. This misconstrual can be very politically useful to those who either wish to proceed on present trajectories or those who warn of the need for coercive preparations to deal with what is coming. Whatever the merits of earlier arguments about the climate’s shaping influence on human history might have been, it is no longer that case that this matters much in terms of geopolitics. What now matters is the opposite argument. The rich industrial carbon fuelled part of humanity is now determining the future course of the climate not the other way round! This is why, according to a growing number of earth system scientists, we now live in the Anthropocene, not the Holocene.

### Anthropocene geopolitics

The transformation wrought in the last few generations by global capitalism, and especially in the period since the middle of the twentieth century, the period of ‘the great acceleration’ in the terms of the earth system scientists, now means that it is human action that is shaping the future of the earth’s climate system (Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2011). Decisions made by those who determine what gets made where, and how the terrestrial surface of the planet is used, now matter directly in terms of the future climate configuration. Climate matters in human affairs now, particularly in terms of the likely impacts more severe storms and more extreme weather events will have on unprepared

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7493669>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7493669>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)