

Ecological Politics, Violence, and the Theme of Empire

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Empire

The theme of empire is back in vogue in political discussion in Europe and in America.¹ In the aftermath of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, now easily seen as policing and pacification exercises on the part of a power that maintains garrison troops in many places, the debate about America's role is central to this discussion. America is not supposedly an empire, not like the European states from which its political rhetoric works hard to distinguish it. But the presence of American troops in many supposedly independent states, the global presence of the American navy, and the apparent willingness to exert intense political pressure or intervene with military force, has finally cut through the taboo on calling America an empire.²

If American power is understood in imperial terms then it follows that international politics is not a simple matter of international relations and debates between independent states in some form of anarchical arena. There is obviously much more to the patterns of international power than international relations models of competing and cooperating autonomous states suggest. Territorial assumptions about sovereignty are not very useful in a world of imperial power; the purposes of states, the supposed repositories of political aspiration on the part of their peoples, are also in doubt. If American power is understood in terms of empire then much hard thinking needs to be done precisely where, as Rob Walker has long argued, it has frequently been avoided by the transformation of the methodological convenience of studying "international relations" into a series of ontological presuppositions.³

But in parallel to this is another debate driven by the discussion of Hardt and Negri's volume *Empire*.⁴ The point of relevance in this volume is the argument that sovereignty is bleeding away from states into some amorphous series of rules, regulations and shared procedures that exceed the mandates of states

1. Ferguson 2003.

2. Bacevich 2002; and Boot 2002.

3. Walker 1993.

4. Hardt and Negri 2000.

and set the terms for incorporation of many institutions and peoples into an amorphous but powerful arrangement they simply term "Empire." While some of these arguments might be read as an extension of the literature in global environmental politics on regimes, intergovernmental arrangements and the rise of science as a legitimating practice in these matters, their claims about the incipient political order are much more far reaching.⁵

What is not in the Hardt and Negri formulations, and only partly incorporated into the contemporary discussions of American power as operating in imperial mode, is a consideration of the material context of contemporary politics. The specific geographies of who gets what where need attention, as do the modes of accumulation of wealth. But discussions of environmental politics add a crucial dimension to Empire precisely where they focus on the extraction of resources and the consequences of consumption.⁶ Adding these into the discussion of empire and "Empire" is a useful addition to contemporary understandings. But so too, as the rest of this comment will suggest, is the converse. Taking empire seriously, and focusing on the importance of the flows of resources from the peripheries with their related conflicts, adds considerably to the possibilities for rethinking environmental politics. In particular, as Ken Conca points out below in his contribution to this debate, this requires rethinking the priority given, in the study of international relations, to regimes and cooperation.⁷

To make the argument about the importance of taking empire seriously the rest of this comment addresses environmental history, political ecology, and the question of the geography of resource extraction. It suggests that both Empire, and the violent power of empire, are necessary contextual components of contemporary investigations of global environmental politics. In short "global" environmental politics is about much more than regimes, cooperation and regulations; the discussion of empire makes this point unavoidable.

History

Taking the discussion of empire seriously allows for the historical dimensions of contemporary events to be more explicitly considered. At the largest scale early environmental inquiry in international politics was driven by neo-Malthusian concerns about the possible demise of civilization as a result of the "limits to growth." The arguments about these particular scenarios do not need explication here, but it is important to note that similar, albeit more sophisticated and nuanced discussions, continue in the contemporary literature.⁸ The focus on population as key to potential future dangers is especially contentious in American discussions.

5. Litfin 2000.

6. Paterson 2000.

7. Conca 2004.

8. Dobkowski and Wallmann 2002; and Dalby 2004.

A parallel concern is the discussion of the historical collapse of previous societies linked to apparent resource exhaustion and the failure of institutions to adapt to looming crises in time to prevent disaster.⁹ The discussion of historical failures suggests analogies with contemporary situations and the possibilities of major civilizational collapse on a global scale. The classic discussion is the debate about Easter Island and the fate of its population doomed by deforestation and over-fishing.¹⁰ Neo-Malthusian ghosts haunt the discussion of resource shortages and the failure of adaptation on the part of many societies. But it is worth noting that the theme of collapse also haunts European history, whether it is in terms of eschatological theology and theories of imminent judgment, or more secular ruminations on the decline and fall of the western Roman empire, a polity that so many European, and subsequently American, leaders looked to for inspiration in building their empires in the last few centuries.

Environmental matters have been more fundamental to imperial politics than is usually understood. In Richard Grove's terms:

Colonial ecological interventions, especially in deforestation and subsequently in forest conservation, irrigation and soil 'protection,' exercised a far more profound influence over most people than the more conspicuous and dramatic aspects of colonial rule that have traditionally preoccupied historians. Over the period 1670 to 1950, very approximately, a pattern of ecological power relations emerged in which the expanding European states acquired a global reach over natural resources in terms of consumption and then too, in terms of political and ecological control.¹¹

The reasons for this are not very complicated, but they need restating more frequently than has been the practice in most discussions of environment.¹²

The argument that Grove, and other environmental historians writing in the aftermath of Alfred Crosby's summation of matters in *Ecological Imperialism* make, is that the process of imperial expansion, whether in terms of direct conquest in what Crosby calls the neo-Europes, or indirect disruptions as a consequence of trading patterns and military actions, fundamentally changed many ecological processes.¹³ The introduction of horses to the Americas, rabbits to Australia, or even the humble potato from the Americas to Europe, changed the environments of these places. This is not the first time such changes had altered the planet's ecology; agriculture and the domestication of animals means that the Holocene, the geological period since the last glacial episode, has been one of anthropogenic-induced changes in most places, but the accelerating speed and scale of change in the last half millennium is what is most important.

The ecological dimension of such imperialism is what needs much more attention than it has received until relatively recently. In Grove's terms, the focus

9. Diamond 2003.

10. See Ponting 1991.

11. Grove 1997, 183.

12. Braun 2002.

13. Crosby 1986.

on the political and the administrative dimensions of empire have occluded the practical material impacts of colonization on people's lives and on land, animals, fish, forests and other facets of their ecological contexts. The environment has, in these terms, simply been taken for granted until recently when the ecological dimension of human history, minus the distractions of environmental determinism, is once again being worked into the picture. This is a long overdue intellectual development, one that extends matters of environmental politics beyond the themes of politics as that which states and their governments do, to consider much more explicitly the interconnections of production and consumption as well as the political subjects constructed by these practices in many places.

By adding in the historical dimension the pessimistic assumptions of decline, the notions of disaster and falling empires can be countered by a more complex contextualization that suggests complex adaptations are possible. Declinist pessimism, an ironic but prevalent accompaniment of many successful imperial endeavors, both historical and contemporary, is then challenged by an engagement with history which suggests that humanity shapes its environments much more than simple linear models of imminent doom suggest. In the contemporary period and at the largest scale this has led J.R. McNeill to pose matters, in a phrase borrowed from Ecclesiastes, as *Something New Under the Sun*.¹⁴ We are literally, and inadvertantly, remaking the biosphere. As a result the "environment" can no longer be taken for granted as a given context for considering either politics specifically or human life more generally.

Political Ecology

These concerns in environmental history are paralleled by the growing recognition in the literatures of landscape change, and in political ecology, that humans live in a complex interaction with environments that adapt and change in much more complex ways than is facilitated by linear thinking within the territorial boxes of contemporary administrative arrangements. This literature, often focused on the local and case studies, suggests clearly that "global" markets and economic connections are essential to understanding the complex politics of "local" environments and struggles over access to specific resources in particular places.¹⁵

However such phrases of scale are not nearly as helpful as they might be. Global and local are spatial abstractions that obscure the specific flows of resources and commodities between particular places.¹⁶ This is the point about empires; they are complex arrangements for the extraction of resources and their consumption elsewhere tied together by many informal rules and diffuse

14. McNeill 2000.

15. Peluso and Watts 2001.

16. Luke 2003.

trading relations rather than encompassed in a firm framework as is the case in more homogenous territorial states. Viewed in these geographic terms civilizations and “global cities” are understood as urban arrangements, ones dependent on resources, agricultural and otherwise, from the rural peripheries.¹⁷ Understanding this at the largest scale, of the planet as a whole, gives us a geography of environmental change that is far more informative than the cartographically myopic specification of matters in most international politics discussions, as well as in the all too prevalent discourses of nationalism and development.

But while empires are complex political economies of resource extraction and consumption they are also violent enterprises. The contemporary context suggests that imperial formulations of ecology and violence may give scholars a much more useful framework for thinking about environmental degradation and conflict. What has often been missing in the discussion of these themes, as well as the more recent attempts to explicitly link environmental change to matters of human security, is the appreciation of the geopolitical contextualization within which the discussion of environment and conflict is framed.¹⁸ Metaphors of empire make this easier to see.

The discussion of the literature on environmental degradation leading to conflict in the early 1990s, and Thomas Homer-Dixon’s earlier work in particular, effectively dismissed the more alarmist arguments that suggested a simple link between environmental problems and political instability.¹⁹ War between states over “environmental” resources was also deemed unlikely for numerous reasons, not least the fact that states heavily dependent on forestry, fisheries and food production frequently lack the industrial capabilities to build major military forces. More recently the growth in American military pre-eminence has emphasized this pattern of military capabilities. “Terrorism” might be understood as a mode of resistance to imperial domination, but hardly as an effective mode of inter-state warfare. The “terror” attacks on September 11th 2001 have little connection with the argument that environmental degradation in some way leads to warfare.

Resources and Conflict

Instead, as will be suggested below, the 9/11 terror attacks may actually have very clear links to the counter argument that resource abundance is related to violence.²⁰ This recent literature suggests that rebellions and attempts to control the resource flows from areas of abundance is directly related to violence. Linked to discussions of resource curses and problems caused by currency inflations as a result of export earnings, the so called “Dutch disease”, all sorts of political

17. M’Gonigle and Dempsey 2003.

18. See Dalby 2002.

19. Thomas Homer-Dixon 1994.

20. de Soysa 2003.

difficulties, and frequently violence, arise from attempts to control resource supplies.²¹ The pattern of undemocratic regimes, or outright political violence associated with oil fields in many parts of the world, suggests that human rights problems and political violence are one of the syndromes linked to petroleum economies.²²

Resources are exported into the world economy from numerous peripheral places. They are worth controlling and fighting over precisely because they are valued in the global economy. Consumption is thus the other side of the issue; the international flows of resources are part of the political economy of violence in many peripheral places.²³ Not all of the violence on the periphery is about control of the resource streams. At least part of the violence and disruption caused by the exploitation of resources is due to the resistance of local peoples, aboriginal peoples in many cases, to the destruction of ecosystems and livelihoods on the frontier.²⁴ Once again this is a very old imperial pattern of land appropriation, settlement and displacement related directly to ecological change. The fact that these patterns are perpetuated by supposedly “post-colonial” states suggests that the economic and ecological consequences of formal sovereignty are in many cases not very substantial.

Discussion of commodity chains in various academic literatures of late suggest that these interconnections are becoming a more important part of the considerations of political economy.²⁵ Understanding the importance of consumption and marketing as relating fairly directly to the production of commodities in distant parts of the planet suggests a political linkage between metropolitan economies and peripheral production sites that is of increasing significance. Ethical consumption and ethical investing are part of the matter here; from consideration of the consequences of production of cosmetics in the case of the high profile campaigns on the part of the Body Shop, to more recent concerns about shade grown and organic coffees in fair trade arrangements, to the wide ranging ramifications of attempts to certify forestry products as sustainably produced in the debates around the Forest Stewardship Council, evidence is mounting of the importance of politics. These political issues are not easily constrained within either state or inter-governmental modes of regulation and administration.²⁶

Similar political initiatives around such things as blood diamonds from Sierra Leone extend this discussion to matters of violence and peacekeeping. Preventing the export of resources from conflict zones, so the argument goes, has a beneficial effect on civil wars and political violence in some places by effectively removing the financial incentive to control the resource and hence a

21. Le Billion 2001; Renner 2002; and Bannon and Collier 2003.

22. Watts 2003.

23. Le Billion 2003.

24. Gedicks 2001.

25. Talbot 2002.

26. Baldwin 2003.

source of funding to support continued military activities.²⁷ Again here the links between core and periphery through commodity chains are the focus of attention in international boycotts.²⁸ In the case of diamonds in particular, matters of status and social hierarchy are part of the issue. But so too where tropical timbers and other “exotic” commodities are sold in advertising campaigns that emphasize the cachet implicit in the rarity, novelty and hence status implied in their consumption. As David Cannadine has shown, empire in the British experience at least, was to a substantial degree a matter of aesthetics related to social hierarchy, a matter of “ornamentalism” in his telling terminology.²⁹

But the imperial connection can be extended here directly to matters of the “consumption” of exotic landscapes in various forms of contemporary tourism, whether designated “ecotourism” or not. Safaris and game reserves, hunting trophy animals in exotic environments were all part of the imperial experience for colonial administrators and their friends. Conservation has its roots in imperial administration of resource production as well as in the debates over such things as botanical gardens, zoos, and game “reserves.” This imperial mentality, one that manages the rural according to urban and metropolitan criteria, continues to haunt many formulations of these matters, especially so when discussions of local input into conservation arrangements are explicitly considered.³⁰ Environmentalism is an aesthetic politics in all too many cases; one that emphasizes the visual appeal for visitors rather than the practicalities of earning a livelihood for the local inhabitants, who have often been forcibly removed from parks and reserves to “preserve” them in the first place.

The violence of dispossession and environmental change as a consequence of mining and petroleum is normally a matter of internal politics, of political violence that is constrained within a particular state.³¹ Classic geopolitical concerns about access to coal, or rubber, or other resources are part and parcel of the story of many empires, not least Rome with its perennial concerns about grain supplies. But the global market place and the declining real prices of most commodities has supposedly led to a situation where direct military interventions to protect resource supplies are now a thing of the past. But on the largest scale there is one very obvious exception to this generalization. The exception is oil, the essential fuel and commodity for contemporary economic activity. Which brings the argument back to the war on terror and contemporary American foreign (imperial?) policy and its support for many regimes that control oil fields.

Taken to its extreme in the Saudi Arabian case, the inordinate wealth and a policy of effectively buying off Islamic extremists, led first to supporting anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan, and subsequently to one of its leaders, Osama

27. Le Billion 2003.

28. Princen, Maniates, and Conca 2002.

29. Cannadine 2001.

30. See Matthew, Halle, and Switzer 2002.

31. Evans, Goodman, and Lansbury 2002.

bin Laden, going renegade. An old imperial pattern once again, but one that suggests that bin Laden is trying to change the political order in Arabia by provoking more explicit imperial interventions there to destabilize local rulers who maintain their power by controlling the rent streams from petroleum exports.³² Oil and world power are intimately interconnected; the recent attack on Iraq is also related directly to the presence of oil in the gulf region. Iraq's oil is of direct interest to many in Washington and to many in the international oil trade. But this whole episode can easily be seen as another imperial venture by the United States finally settling scores with a former client state that went against its imperial patron's wishes in 1990.³³

However the war is a venture that supports a particular mode of consumption, one that is based on cheap oil and resistance to such things as climate change treaties. In Mike Renner's summation:

By rejecting U.S. participation in the Kyoto Protocol early in his tenure, George W. Bush sought to throw a wrench into the international machinery set up to address the threat of climate change. By securing the massive flow of cheap oil, he may hope to kill Kyoto. In a perverse sense, a war on Iraq reinforces the assault against the Earth's climate.³⁴

Empire and environment are here linked once again; external military involvements are triggered by fear of disruptions of essential supplies to the metropolises. At least supplies essential to a particular mode of urban living dedicated to spectacular forms of consumption.

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, conventional views of both environmental threats and of geopolitical concerns are parts of the same problem. The geopolitician's fears of external threats to the domestic political arrangements of modernity map neatly onto fears of environmentalists concerning environmental disruptions causing conflicts and disasters of various sorts. Both require a response that controls and dominates that external space that is the origins of the supposed threat. Whether in terms of resource management, or imperial interventions to ensure political stability, the same cartographic imagination of danger impels action.

Environmentalists have long bemoaned the damage done by what is frequently termed "the domination of nature." Once one asks the simple geographical question "what is the geography of the domination of nature?" the answer fairly quickly reveals itself as the history of colonization and imperialism. Ironically environmentalists who wish to ease the burden of that domination have frequently promoted the establishment of protected spaces, parks and

32. Dalby 2003a.

33. Dalby 2003b.

34. Renner 2003, 21.

the control of populations in manners that nonetheless replicate the practices of empire.

Science and academic knowledge are not neutral here; neither are geographical designations of politics. The heuristic point about empire is that it challenges the taken for granted assumptions of territorial sovereignty and inter-governmental cooperation in building environmental regimes. The theme of empire suggests something more important is going on. This is the case whether either the novel claims of Hardt and Negri's formulation are taken seriously, or whether the historical view of empire sketched above is worked into the analysis. The argument here is that both matter and that they complement each other rather well. The geographic specification of politics is unavoidable; it is especially important when "global" phenomena are invoked.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the development of "science" and the knowledge that it produces is not divorced from social and economic context. Mike Davis shows this, so eloquently and so tragically, in his analysis of the rise of meteorology and the extension of European empires in the nineteenth century.³⁵ In providing preliminary evidence of what was only much later understood to be the El Nino Southern Oscillation phenomenon, meteorological science charted a picture of a cruel and unpredictable nature that could easily be blamed for famine in various parts of the world. Nature as precarious and fickle let European imperial grain merchants off the hook for the disruptions to the global patterns of food production that were a major contributing cause to the famines. Environmental science too is tied into the thinking of empire here at the largest of scales; not least when it provides powerful support for neo-Malthusian arguments about overpopulation, nature and all sorts of disasters in "far away" places, whether understood as matters of environmental security, or not.³⁶

Empire directly challenges how the theme of the global is formulated in environmental politics. The abstractions of global and local obscure both the histories of environmental change and the contemporary flows across political boundaries. The immense advantage of studies such as those included in Magnusson and Shaw's volume on one very particular place, Clayoquot Sound on the West Coast of Canada, is that the spatial tropes of contemporary administration, and political studies in many disciplines, are revealed as very inadequate starting points for analysis.³⁷ Linking environment and empire explicitly allows for reflection on the taken for granted identities of both protagonists and scholars in the debate about global environmental politics.

Understanding our own roles as urban consumers in the metropolises of empire is a useful corrective to assumptions of dispassionate scholarly identities. It also allows appropriate contextualization of the crucial matters of envi-

35. Davis 2001.

36. Stott and Sullivan 2000.

37. Magnusson and Shaw 2002.

ronmental history to be added explicitly into the discussion of environmental politics. In addition empire constructs matters of violence and the environment in a way that rejects the alarmist neo-Malthusian temptations of environmental security discourse. For all these reasons the theme of empire has very considerable potential to advance scholarship in global environmental politics.

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