Interview – Simon Dalby

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Simon Dalby is a Professor Emeritus at Wilfrid Laurier University, a Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria. From 2012 to 2018, he held the CIGI Chair in the Political Economy of Climate Change at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. He co-edited *Reframing Climate Change* (Routledge 2016) and *Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals* (Routledge 2019), and authored *Anthropocene Geopolitics* (University of Ottawa Press 2020), *Rethinking Environmental Security* (Edward Elgar 2022) and *Pyromania: Fire and Geopolitics in a Climate Disrupted World* (Agenda 2024). Simon Dalby was educated at Trinity College Dublin, the University of Victoria and holds a Ph.D. from Simon Fraser University. Before joining Laurier and the Balsillie School he was Professor of Geography, Environmental Studies and Political Economy at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I straddle a number of fields, those of international relations, climate change, geopolitics, security and the whole fascinating discussion of earth systems and the Anthropocene. The most exciting discussions are where multiple contemporary perspectives intersect with a common understanding that conventional modes of thought and policy making are not adequate to grapple with what is most recently being discussed as a global polycrisis. Welcome to the Anthropocene!

Post-colonial arguments are challenging the premises that much of international relations is based upon. Is international relations anything more than the conceptual infrastructure of American hegemony? How might subaltern or Southern scholars argue for more inclusive approaches to international relations research or should they in fact start somewhere else and address different audiences than the policy makers in the Global North? Earth systems analyses are pointing to looming tipping points in the earth system which emphasize the point that modern categories are part of the problem given their inability to effectively grapple with this novel material context. Globalization powered by fossil fuels is unsustainable, and this dawning realization is now upsetting assumptions of economic growth and progress as the promise to resolve policy difficulties.

The promises of the end of the cold war have foundered in part because of the failures of Western policy makers to recognise the consequences of their actions both for other states and the planetary ecology in general. This requires some very hard thinking about who or what is now being secured by which means where. In short scholars, researchers and, yes activists, face numerous new challenges which rework the classic themes of security, peace, war and environmental security. All this as a revival of militarism is suggesting the return of geopolitics in the sense of great power rivalries. But those great powers are mostly empires, so the geographical categories too need updates. We do indeed live in interesting times!

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I hope that my understanding of the world has become more sophisticated and perhaps even nuanced. Part of that is simply a matter of living longer, teaching more courses and writing all sorts of things over the course of nearly four

decades. One learns, and hopefully becomes a better thinker, rather than suffering from a premature hardening of the categories as one engages in scholarly and political debates. Reading outside one's own immediate disciplinary focus helps and having one foot institutionally in geography and one in international relations has been a useful stimulus to thought.

In so far as I have changed my views over time they have shifted both because new topics and research areas have emerged, requiring different intellectual tools and because "the times they are a changing." As times change topics emerge and new questions arise that require engagement. That said, Michel Foucault's question, in the preface to his *Order of Things*, concerning "how is it possible to think that"? has been a constant in my thinking ever since I struggled to figure out American geopolitical discourse in the revival of the cold war in the late 1970s.

While I was struggling to think my way through those issues I read Neil Smith's *Uneven Development* and was left puzzled by his formulations of the ideology of nature. It took years for me to think my way out of my early environmentalist strait jackets so that I could also grapple effectively with his ideas of the production of nature, a theme which works its way through much of my work on the Anthropocene. All by way of saying that being aware of and then tackling the blindspots, the aporias and silences in one's own thinking is essential if intellectual activity is to be productive.

I have continuously worried about geopolitics and the dangers of militarism in a nuclear weapons equipped world. Over the last decade in particular my concern has focused increasingly on the Anthropocene debate, the dangers of climate change and the extinction event humanity has triggered. The intellectual tools I worked out in my earlier work on critical geopolitics, both in the case of US foreign policy, ANZUS and elsewhere, have served me well as modes of interrogation for the policy discourses of environmental and climate security. Focusing on the implicit geographical assumptions in policy discourse as well as academic analysis remains a key part of what I do.

In your new book *Pyromania*, you discuss humans burning things such as fossil fuels and how it impacts the environment. What is the meaning of "firepower" in today's society, and how does analysing humans' history with fire help us understand our current climate crisis?

Firepower can literally be understood as the power that using fire gives to those who can partially control combustion. Historian Stephen Pyne notes that humans are the only species that has learned what he calls the "ignition trick" and it is the partial domestication of fire that has allowed us to become the dominant species on earth. Fire allows us to cook food, thus extending our range, provides protection, warmth, and later in history the ability to smelt metals and do all sorts of other chemical things. Most recently it has made us more mobile, first with steam engines and then the now ubiquitous internal combustion engines that still power most of our vehicles. Fire makes us powerful. Hence "firepower" in both the civilian sense and in the military sense of weapons.

In security studies through the period of the cold war, the major concern was to constrain the use of firepower. Nuclear weapons were simply too dangerous to be used. The threat of their firepower, supposedly a weapon, but in fact a device that was too dangerous to be used or detonated, though useful to deter others from doing so, required strategies to confront the simple fact that militaries had too much of a good thing. Supposedly more firepower gave you control over circumstances, but actually using the weapons that supposedly gave this control would very quickly undermine any meaningful control over most things that mattered.

Climate change offers a very interesting parallel. It is caused by the rich and powerful parts of humanity using too much fire to power the global economy. The dangers that climate disruption are starting to produce aren't yet on the scale of nuclear warfare. However, the destruction of cities, think Acapulco in late 2023, and the disruption of agriculture in many places, for instance olives in Spain in 2023, is causing major security difficulties in specific places already. To arrest this slide into ever worse environmental disruption we need to rapidly constrain the production of fossil fuels. The new proposals for fossil fuel non-proliferation treaties should sound familiar to security scholars. Constraining firepower in both senses is now necessary for global security.

Is nuclear power a solution to climate change?

Nuclear power may have some niche uses in the future and may provide some useful electricity for grids in some places. Some Asian states are having a hard look at it as an option for the future. But it isn't going to be "the" solution to climate change. There remain all sorts of difficulties with weapons proliferation, as the Iranian policy debacle reminds us regularly. If things go wrong with reactors, they can go spectacularly wrong as Chernobyl and Fukushima remind us. One of the key consequences is that such technological failures take a substantial part of the electricity supply system offline, often for a long time which makes them a risky option. In France during summer heatwaves, some of their reactors have had to be shut down because of water shortages in the rivers used to provide cooling water. They are offline precisely when they would be most useful in generating electricity for air conditioning.

Nuclear powerplants are notorious for cost overruns when they are being built and usually take about a decade to complete. Solar panels can be installed in days, windmills in weeks or, in the case of the big ones at sea, in months. They can be brought on stream quickly, and so can storage systems, in particular, batteries. Most of them are in modular configurations, so if one panel or windmill fails it doesn't matter much because the rest of the system stays online and the faulty one can be replaced easily. Climate change needs to be tackled quickly so renewable systems, coupled with retrofits to buildings and the introduction of now increasingly ubiquitous heat pumps, can all be done much more quickly and flexibly than building new nuclear power stations. The new ideas for modular nuclear plants that might be smaller, safer, and able to be built more quickly are decades in the future. So too is nuclear fusion.

What is the most significant factor preventing countries and companies worldwide from more climate-friendly policies?

The power of incumbency! The entrenched power of the fossil fuel industry and governments dependent on revenue from fuel production presents major difficulties for rapid moves towards more climate friendly policies. So much of industry, transport and domestic life is currently dependent on fossil fuels that many things need to be changed. Electrical heating and propulsion are much more energy efficient, but many industrial processes and urban infrastructure are dependent on the continued use of fossil fuels, at least in the short term.

The windfall profits of major oil companies in 2022, as a result of pandemic disruptions and then the supply interruptions and resultant price rise caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have also boosted both their profitability and hence both their attraction to investors and their abilities to lobby and influence governments. Further investments in fossil fuel facilities, including natural gas imports into Europe, lock in dependence on these fuels as there is strong incentive to use them to pay off the investment. All of which just makes climate change worse and transitions off these energy sources more difficult.

In so called petro states, where national government revenues are dependent on fuel sales, all these difficulties are compounded. Generating new revenue sources takes time and intelligent policy directed to investing in other economic activities. The power of incumbency pushes towards perpetuating fossil fuel production, especially in periods when the prices are high, as they have been recently in many places. Opposition to carbon taxes too, often mobilized by right wing movements and think tanks lavishly funded by foundations and entities supported by fossil fuel industries, only adds to these difficulties.

What key trends towards more renewable energy sources have emerged in the last couple decades?

The most important is the fact that the cost of solar and wind generated energy has come down dramatically. Technical improvements in production and the rapid expansion of both windmill and solar panel production has driven prices down and made electricity more affordable and accessible. Renewable energy is now cheaper than coal or gas generated electricity in many markets. Electric vehicles are also competitive albeit the up-front cost is greater, while the energy and servicing costs are much less. EVs don't have fuel bills!

When coupled with intelligent policies that retrofit buildings to be much more efficient and equip them with heat pumps to replace fossil fuel furnaces, these reductions in electrical generating cost have been driving the transition. Innovations in battery storage and numerous other practical technical changes in such things as building design can make energy use much more efficient quite quickly.

Simultaneously there has been a gradual cultural shift in preferences where old fossil fuel technologies are increasingly seen as out of date and inferior to novel electrical systems. Tesla led the way in vehicle technology but many of the other vehicle manufacturers are following suit and new Chinese brands are growing rapidly. Likewise with domestic heating and cooling systems; it no longer makes sense to install oil furnaces in houses when heat pumps are so much better.

Are there any specific domestic policies that would be a good model for reducing fossil fuel emissions and combatting climate change?

One must be careful about making blanket statements on this as not all policies will fit in every situation but in so far as IR scholars are thinking about all this it makes sense to think about policies for improving national security by rapidly reducing dependence on fossil fuels. There are both direct and indirect benefits which will vary depending on the history and energy mix in particular places. The rise of renewables and the increasingly obvious dangers of climate disruptions are changing the calculus of security.

Domestic policies that reduce dependence on fossil fuels have three obvious security benefits. First by reducing the use of fossil fuels the long-term dangers of climate change are reduced and the speed of climate changes is slowed, making adaptation to the future changes that are already locked into the earth system, easier. Second by reducing dependency on long fuel supply chains, which are frequently disrupted both by political and military action, as well as by extreme weather events, storms as well as droughts, life can go on with fewer disruptions.

In addition, third, these disruptions are part of the cause of rapid fuel price changes which make both domestic and commercial budgeting difficult. Financial security comes with fixed or at least predictable energy prices, something that is much easier to regulate in electricity grids than in systems dependent on fuel. In so far as much of modern life is dependent on reliable supplies of electricity, a matter quite literally of keeping the lights on, then security in all three interconnected senses in improved by the adoption of sensible renewable electricity systems.

How has the use of fossil fuels and the climate crisis changed the state of geopolitics today?

The price spikes in fuel supplies in recent years, coupled with the growing climate disruptions are changing geopolitics in various albeit sometimes contradictory ways. Reducing demand for oil and gas has obvious consequences for states dependent on export markets, only most obviously those in the Middle East heavily dependent on fossil fuel revenue. Producer states that have practical plans to transition off fossil fuels and do so successfully are likely to do much better than those that don't. Those that don't work out successful transition strategies may suffer major difficulties or even state collapse, a matter of concern for all in the international system.

Fears of supply disruptions in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have heightened a focus on fossil fuels. Where the response to previous supply disruptions, only most obviously in the 1970s following the partial oil embargo by OPEC states, was to work on diversifying fuel supplies, now climate change has focused attention on the need to reduce dependence on fuel overall. Even the International Energy Agency, once a key institution focused on fuel supplies, has come to the opinion that the renewable energy transition is happening, and doing so more quickly than was thought possible until the last few years.

In terms of geopolitics the traditional American view that fuel self-sufficiency was a key to a flexible foreign policy, and hence its geopolitical pre-eminence is now being challenged by the energy transition and the growing awareness of climate disruptions. Now the policy framework must tackle the old assumption that fossil fuels made for successful geopolitics and replace it with policies that reduce the use of fossil fuels. In the process this will reduce multiple forms of vulnerability both to political manipulation of supplies and prices as well as to the direct and indirect disruptions of extreme and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns.

What suggestions on climate change policies would you make for future generations?

The key point is that human societies need energy to function, but now that energy must come without burning fuel to

acquire it. Those that are continuing to produce stuff that burns, which is what fossil fuels are, are now the security problem for future generations. The cultural politics of this are important, and so is the identification of the sources of insecurity. Where fossil fuels were once lauded as the source of prosperity and symbols of social success, now they have become the problem. This is both because of the obviously growing climate dangers but also because it has become obvious that the health effects of fossil fuel combustion pollution are literally killing millions of people every year, and the indirect effects of societies so dependent on automobiles are also producing huge numbers of injuries and deaths.

What was notable about the climate conference in Dubai in late 2023, the twenty eighth COP of the framework convention on climate change, was that for the first time at these annual events, fossil fuels were being focused on as the problem that needed to be tackled directly. There is a rich irony in that just when the fossil fuel companies had taken over the whole process — the conference chair was an oil company executive, and the conference organization was based in oil company offices – they became the clear focus as to what needed to be addressed. This point also highlights the need for climate geopolitics to happen in other venues too; the focus on greenhouse gas emissions in previous COPs simply hasn't delivered effective reductions in global fuel use. Now the need to do so has become unavoidable.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations and Politics?

Traditional international relations and politics investigations have taken the material world pretty much for granted. Their geopolitical assumptions were of a stable world over which the great powers struggled, and the smaller powers tried to evade the dangers of these struggles, or in some cases take advantage of them. That world is over. We now live in a world where dramatic physical transformations are afoot, partly precisely because of the policies that drove those geopolitics. We need younger scholars to address what my colleagues, Daniel Levine, Audra Mitchell, Stefanie Fishel and Anthony Burke and I called this "planet politics" in our manifesto on these matters published in *Millennium* back in 2016.

The topics that matter now are those that focus on the changing material circumstances for societies and what can be done to both slow climate change and the course of the current global extinction event. How to most effectively do these things, and work the global geophysical and biological realities that are rapidly changing into the analysis, and then policy prescription, is now the task for young scholars. Us older ones, those of us that my students so delightfully liked to call "stale pale males" have been very neglectful of these pressing priorities. While polls of IR scholars suggest that they mostly understand that climate change is very important, as yet the contents of the leading journals do not reflect this insight. That needs to change quickly.