

# The 'Nature' of International Relations: From Geopolitics to the Anthropocene

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## The 'Nature' of International Relations: From Geopolitics to the Anthropocene

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International Relations (IR) has been criticised for its exclusively human perspective and for having 'been little concerned with the vast variety of other, non-human populations of species and "things"' (Cudworth and Hobden 2013, 644). One aim of post-humanist work is to find a way of including the natural world in a meaningful way into IR theory and analysis (see Kaltofen this volume). This is a challenge, but perhaps not an insurmountable one. After all, the discipline has roots in geopolitical analysis of how geography and climates affect world politics. The brief 'natural history of IR' that follows is necessarily a broad-brush depiction of how IR has (not) theorised and analysed the natural world in various ways (Corry and Stevenson 2017b). It shows that IR, although similar to sociology that became 'radically sociological' (Buttel 1996, 57), is not immune to concern for the natural world, but also that there is a long track record of either reifying or ignoring it. The chapter concludes by considering how best to proceed in developing an IR as if the Earth matters.

### Geopolitics and Nature

IR has some of its deepest disciplinary roots in considerations about geography. As Daniel Deudney pointed out, whereas 'recent literature typically casts nature as a new factor in politics, the idea that nature is a powerful force shaping human political institutions is extremely old' (1999 25-6). For Aristotle, climate and agricultural aspects of territory were behind the rise and spread of empires while Montesquieu argued that Asia and Europe had different political systems because of their geographies and modern writers have taken up similar *physiopolitical* themes (Diamond 1997; Crosby 2015[1986]). For Alexis de Tocqueville, nature itself was a factor in American democracy: 'it is not only legislation that is democratic; nature itself works for the people'; God had given them 'the means of remaining equal and free, by placing them upon a boundless continent' conveniently isolated from the anarchy of European inter-state relations (Tocqueville 2000, 267).

The 'geopolitics' tradition that emerged from around 150 years ago among European geographers, put the natural world at the centre of their analysis of world politics (see Haslam 2002, 162-182). This emerged in turn out of a shifting mix of geography, demographics, evolutionary ideas, racial theory and realist doctrine (Bashford 2014). In Britain, Halford J. Mackinder argued that geography, having charted the entire globe, then had to move on to analyse how humans live in and on the land and seas (1904). Best known for his Heartland Thesis – the idea that the central Eurasian landmass is the key to world domination – Mackinder saw land power as superior to sea power, reasoning that navies needed ports and docks to be built and operated from. In contrast, for Alfred Mahan, the sea presented itself 'as a great highway' that was until recently much easier to move on than land (Mahan 1890, 34). But for Mackinder the Heartland was impenetrable from the icy north and desert-covered south and mainly accessible to the west. This meant that the central drama of geopolitics was between Germans expanding East and Slavs in Eastern

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Europe who were in their way and competing for control of the 'pivot area'. Eurasia was effectively the 'pivot' of history.

Figure 1: Halford J. Mackinder's Heartland Theory map, as published in 1904

This cast nature as an anchor or determinant of international affairs. The Swedish geographer Rudolf Kjellén was the first to use the term 'geopolitics' in 1899, while German geographer Joseph Ratzel suggested he was conducting 'anthro-geographical' studies. With the term *Lebensraum* Ratzel aimed to describe how dynamic populations and states required space and resources, driving international conflict on a finite – and by that time fully charted – globe. Inspired by Darwinian and Malthusian thought, most infamously, geopolitics was appropriated instrumentally by the Nazis with the German geographer and general Karl Haushofer directly influencing Rudolf Hess with geopolitical ideas.

Geopolitics emphasised nature as a factor in world politics, but not as part of a vulnerable web of life. Rather, nature provided resources and a physical backdrop or stage upon which vigorous racial groups and nations engaged in struggles for power and resources. Thus nature, in pre-war *geopolitics*, is conceived of in firmly anthropocentric as well as state-centric terms as either a facilitator or hindrance to geopolitical expansion or defence of human groups.

## Human Nature

This changed with the advent of the modern post-WWII disciplinary IR. Geography as a determinant of politics fell into serious intellectual disrepute. Often labelled a 'classical realist', Hans Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations*, declared geopolitics to be 'a pseudoscience erecting the factor of geography into an absolute that is supposed to determine the power, and hence the fate, of nations' (Morgenthau 1985, [1948], 174). Geography, Morgenthau admitted, could give 'one aspect of the reality of national power' but amounted to a 'distortion' (ibid.) on its own, especially when fused with virulent nationalism. Even today, geopolitics has to deflect suspicions and claim 'misappropriation' during the interwar years (Kaplan 2009, 61), some suggesting that the term *geopolitik* be used for the German interwar variant (Sicker 2010, 5).

In most accounts of classical realism, the main aspect of nature still taken seriously is *human* nature. In Morgenthau's 'Six Principles of Political Realism' the first is that 'politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature' (1985 [1948], 4). These laws had not changed 'since the classical philosophies of China, India and Greece' (ibid.) and finding and adhering to them meant accurately identifying human nature (rather than nature itself). On this account, the vast planes and mountain ranges of Asia were swapped for the mental schemata and drives of *Homo Sapiens* in general, and of statesmen (sic) in particular. Foreign policy should be guided by the concept of 'interest defined in the terms of power'. This depended, in turn, on 'the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated' (ibid., 11).

Realism never relinquishes the issue of resources and territory, but they seem by now already to be subordinate to politics, interests and historical conjunctions that allowed these to take shape. Morgenthau is at pains not to reduce

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politics to anything else, including geography: 'Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs' (ibid., 13). Critical of social science scientism, Morgenthau also objected to how 'geopolitics endeavoured to put foreign policy as a whole on a scientific basis' (1964, 94). Science itself was in any case not objective: even physicists viewed their 'own external world in a way which I can only describe as mystical', he commented (ibid., 134). Sounding like a modern constructivist Morgenthau argued that '(n)ature as the object of human knowledge is, therefore, somehow the product of human action' (ibid., 141).

At the same time, post-war Realism was an incubator of, if not a strong sense of nature, then other expressions of materialism. Technology and economics were considered important mediators of power. In particular, Morgenthau, John Herz and others recognised that the nuclear revolution changed some foundational calculations of political order and conflict. Human appropriated forces of nature – technology – had become a significant condition for power politics. For some this also suggested a need to re-code some core realist ethics (van Munster and Sylvest 2016): going beyond concern for the national interest, 'global realist' thinking took as its point of departure the 'material existence of the globe as a single physical and sociopolitical space' (ibid, 10).

## Nature and Modern IR Theory

However, by the time IR had moved beyond the first 'Great Debate' between realists and (imagined) idealists, to debates about scientific method and 'rigor', nature disappeared even further from view. If Morgenthau insisted on the irreducibility of politics, Kenneth Waltz and the neo-realists worked to establish the autonomy of the international from the rest of politics. Waltz' epistemological stance told him that 'in reality everything is connected to everything else' (Waltz 1979, 8), but also that scientific models should isolate an element of reality in order to render it amenable to analysis. A theory of international politics would therefore abstract from complexity (and hence history) and focus on regularities and structure.

With neorealism, the structure of international politics became a disembodied product of multiple competing units, irrespective of national cultures, geography or statesmen. Waltz had effectively airbrushed the physical backdrop to geopolitics away revealing an abstract neorealist formalism (Corry and Stevenson 2017a). Maps of the globe (see Figure 1) were replaced with schematic model representations (see figure 2).

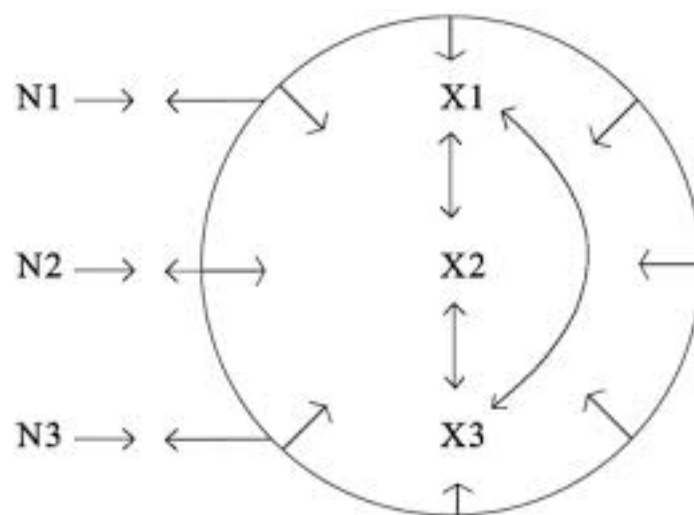


Figure 2: Waltz's model of the international system

'Capabilities' lingered as the strongest link in neo-realism back to a material sense of place and time: a state takes on

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the role of a pole in the system if it has relatively many capabilities including 'the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, military strength, political stability and competence' (Waltz 1979, 131). But each state also became 'functionally equivalent', as each one had to solve essentially the same dilemmas. Hence, nature was ignored, or reduced to fungible resources of power. Notwithstanding occasional references to geography e.g. 'the stopping power of water' (Mearsheimer), for neorealists, 'place' became a function of economics, military strength and political affiliation.

Neoliberal Institutionalism, the main rival to neo-realism during the 1980s and 1990s, evolved out of functionalist and liberal traditions and was part of the effort to make IR into a social science. With its focus on rational actors, institutions, rules and incentives rather than place, history or drives, the physical and natural world became, if anything, even more consistently occluded from view. In Karl Deutsch's cybernetic approach, *communication* and 'systems of decisions, regulation and control' replaced 'drives' and 'instincts' as explanatory factors in international relations (Deutsch 1969 [1963], 77). Later, notions such as 'complex interdependence' (Keohane and Nye 1977) challenged realist nostrums but offered no alternative view of the natural world's place in international politics. 'Environment' and 'population' were cursorily included as examples of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977, 26) but most examples were drawn from the field of economics (Moravcsik 2009, 245). Multinational firms, other non-state actors and inequalities worldwide were thought to be among the factors changing the basic codes of world politics undermining the distinctness of the units (states) and the high politics/low politics distinction that made up the basis of the realist states-in-anarchy model.

Liberalism has a strong human-centric impulse (although the transformative potential of technology has also been a theme in this tradition – see Deudney 2006, 193-214 for a summary of 'liberal historical materialism'). When 'neo-liberal institutionalism' emerged taking on board neo-realist notions of anarchy and state-centrism as well as a rational decision-maker model, the natural stage upon which rational state action and institution-building played out is perhaps implicitly assumed, but as such it is invisible. At least nature no longer figures in explanations or predictions of potential shifts or stability in world hegemony (Keohane 1984). Similarly, formal modelling in a rational-actor paradigm operates with disembodied 'social actors' and 'decision-makers', although, again, these may have access to 'resources'. The main determinant of actions is 'preferences' and 'information' (e.g. Keohane and Ostrom 1995).

Outside the two leading paradigms, Marxism of course had materialism as a founding tenet, and this remains the case in much contemporary IR theorists drawing on Marx – although a portion of Western Marxism with Lukács explicitly rejected a 'dialectics of nature' reserving dialectics to history and society (Foster 2013). In practice, post-Marxist IR-approaches have focused on economic structures, dependency in terms of social and economic development and overarching 'world systems' (Wallerstein 1974). Alternatively, hegemonic projects anchored in (currently neoliberal) forms of social organization and ideology (Cox 1981) have taken analytical precedence over analysis of human interaction with nature directly (Mészáros 1970).

Uneven and Combined Development theory has recently been developed and has touched at times on the role of natural features of regions and countries in establishing and perpetuating unevenness (Rosenberg 2013) – or on these and the role of non-human (but highly social) factors such as pandemics (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, 81-82). Neither nature nor human nature here are considered a-historical quantities, yet neither is subsumed under 'national interests' or abstracted away via rational decisionism. Historical materialist method thus has perhaps the most immediate potential in terms of providing theoretical apparatus for including nature in IR and allowing for analysis of dialectical relations between nature and human societies (see below).

Constructivist and post-structuralist approaches arrived just as Marxist perspectives faltered towards and after the end of the Cold War. Reflectivist approaches were opposed to rationalism, but did little to change the marginalization of 'nature' in IR. Alexander Wendt advanced a predominantly idealist and social constructivist view of international relations, though he reserved a space for 'rump materialism' (Wendt 1999, 110). The latter included 'human nature, a weak version of technological determinism and geography/natural resources' (Guzzini and Leander 2006, 78) although this, Wendt admitted, was relatively inconsequential for his theoretical setup (Wendt 1999, 136). Post-structuralism with its focus on discourses and structures of signification ventured further down the anti-materialist route, eradicating the 'rump' of materialism, albeit in terms of epistemology more than ontology. Commonly post-

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structuralists do not deny the existence of 'the external world' – external to discourse – but materiality takes on a shadowy existence as an essentially unknowable entity that is accessible and effective only through signification and social institutions which are typically imbued with language and meaning rather than matter.

## **Nature as 'Environment'**

Instead, nature reappears in IR from around the 1970s, not as a constitutive factor underpinning world politics but in the guise of 'the environment' – as an issue or problem to be managed (Corry and Stevenson 2017a). This partly reflects the way it appeared. While military-related technologies such as satellites, space-travel and climate models prepared the way, environmental issues such as climate change were pushed by scientists, international organizations and popular environmental movements worried about environmental limits (Edwards 2010).

This inserted a different, but still firmly anthropocentric, view of nature into IR with a 'separation of the 'human' from other species, natures and entities' (Chudworth and Hobden 2013, 643). While it stimulated analysis and theorising, it did not initially bring the natural world into the IR theories themselves. The collective action-framing of environmental problems was a major impetus to the formulation of regime theory, but this focused on principles, rules, norms and procedures (e.g. Krasner 1982; Young 1989). 'Regime complexes' – overlapping institutions and norms that are formally distinct but functionally linked – were similarly prompted by analysis of the patchwork of climate change institutions and norms (Raustiala and Victor 2004; Keohane and Victor 2011). Environmental issues also provided a major occasion for the 'epistemic communities' literature to enter International Relations (Adler and Haas, 1992) and new global challenges such as ozone depletion and other cases that suggested a prominent role for scientific knowledge in international politics have more recently inspired more interaction with Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Beck and Forsyth 2017).

Meanwhile 'the environment' also became a feature of realist lineage. This can be seen notably in debates about environmental security (Homer-Dixon 1994; Dalby 2002) and resource scarcity and conflict (see Jan Selby 2014 for a critique). More recently this debate has been framed in terms of 'climate security' (see MacDonald 2013 for an overview). Securitization Theory was developed partly to accommodate environmental 'referent objects' of security (Wæver 1995) and recent expansions of the Copenhagen School of security studies seek to encompass 'macro-securitizations' that arise from global risks such as climate change (Buzan and Wæver 2009). Recently English School writers have begun considering whether environmental stewardship is gradually becoming a 'primary institution' of international society and sovereignty (Falkner 2017).

## **The New Geopolitics and the Anthropocene**

At the same time, the geopolitics of old is having something of a renaissance. Reconnecting directly to the pre-war geopolitics, writers such as Robert Kaplan announced the 'revenge of geography' (2009) and Patrick Porter has sought to dispel the 'myth of the global village' (2015). For both – and other post-classical realists (see Brooks 1997), the overall argument is that world politics is still underpinned by geography that conditions the ease or difficulty projecting power, even given the technological innovations such as the Internet and aviation. Globalization and technological changes modulate the significance of geography, but they do not negate it. Mackinder and the others were 'misused' by the Nazis, they say (Kaplan 2013, 61), to fashion a crude determinism, and the baby was thrown out with the bathwater.

More problematically, related ideas are currently espoused by Alexandr Dugin, a neofascist Russian sociologist who has advised amongst others the speaker of the Russian Duma. Dugin claims also to draw on the work of Mackinder, Kjellén and other geopolitical thinkers but espouses the view that the strategic aim for Russia should be to head a Eurasian empire, carve up Central Asia and Europe with an expanded Germany, while destabilising and undermining the Atlanticist US-led world order. Allegedly influential in Moscow, Dugin recommends using all means available including (cyber-)subversion and war against the West (Dunlop 2004; D'Ancona 2016).

But while reintroducing geography, this literature neither engages the 'environmental' question, nor the planetary ethics of the 'nuclear realists', casting some doubt also on the transformative power of technologies. Mackinder,

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Ratzel and Kjellén focused on the implications of geophysical structures for world politics – not the other way around. Humans are connected to it in so far as it provides resources or erects barriers to power. Others outside IR, notably critical geographers have long viewed geography as something mediated by social institutions, histories and discourses (O' Tuathail and Agnew 1992). Simon Dalby has suggested that what is needed is an Anthropocene geopolitics. The politics of knowing and governing geophysical systems of the planet is a different problem to the classical one of navigating power politics: '(g)eopolitics is no longer just about playing the great game of state rivalry; it is also now literally about remaking the playing field' as the ice caps melt and the climate heads for a new, hotter equilibrium state: 'the current geopolitics is determining the future climate of the planet. Political and business leaders are effectively deciding whether there will be polar ice caps on the planet a couple of centuries from now' (2014, 3). Similarly, Earth Systems Governance literature explores how dynamic and vulnerable natural systems and 'planetary boundaries' can be negotiated (Biermann 2014; Rockström et al. 2009). STS has made an impact on IR too (Acuto and Curtis 2014; Beck and Forsyth 2017), though its wariness of grand theory puts a limit on this.

This covers some international issues, but more fundamentally, how should canonical categories in IR such as sovereignty, anarchy and balance of power be re-thought in an Anthropocene age (Corry 2016)?

## Nature/Human: Synthesis or Dialectics?

There are of course numerous ways to go about answering such a puzzle. To simplify, some proceed by blurring the distinction between the human and the non-human (Kaltofen, this volume) or between social and natural. For instance, Audra Mitchell has suggested the term 'worldly security' encompassing the physical, built environment and cultures of human communities (2014) and she draws on Isabelle Stenger's notion of 'cosmopolitics' according to which 'human and nonhuman, living and non-living, organic and inorganic — can intervene in politics by 'forcing thought' through their effects, properties, presence or absence' (Mitchell 2016, 17). Some STS approaches including Actor-Network Theory would tend to point in a similar direction using the concepts of 'actant' and 'assemblage' to indicate a hybrid ontology of natural and social systems (Latour 1990; see also Acuto and Curtis 2014).

Other critical posthuman approaches do, however, emphasise the continuing importance of boundaries between humans and nonhumans, but aim to specify the 'embeddedness' of humans in the non-human: 'We need to take analytic account of both differences and distinctions as well as the ways in which beings and things (including ourselves, of course) are co-constituted' (Cudworth and Hobden 2013, 644).

Breaking down the analytical distinction between human and non-human, the challenge is to not subsume one under the other: either risk treating all natural systems as pliable and socially constructed; or treating social life as simply a subset of the natural world, rendered from the same matter and subject to the same (scientific) methods of knowing. With James Lovelock's (once-controversial, now less so) Gaia-theory, the Earth is considered one single self-regulating organism, and humans can potentially be dispensed with as a result of Anthropocene changes, or could possibly survive and act as Gaia's 'brain' (Lovelock 2009, 248). Just as anthropocentrism renders the natural world incidental to analysis, Lovelock's eco-centrism recognises that human society is dispensable to the Earth (Lovelock 2006).

The other strategy is to maintain that humans and society on the one hand, and natural systems on the other, deserve their own terminologies and theories. Although they are increasingly linked – and in the Anthropocene inextricably so – they represent different analytical logics and are best theorised as such. Here the major challenge is then to specify in a satisfactory manner *how* they relate to each other. This can be as distinct but interlinked entities or spheres, or perhaps in terms of *dialectics* between humans and nature: one conditions and transforms the other, which in turn acts back upon the first in its new form, recreating the point of departure for the next historical and iterative development.

While new materialism is promising, an 'old materialism' emphasising the dialectics of nature and history should also be explored more fully. Marx put nature, and human interaction with it, right at the centre of a historical social theory (Foster 2000). Production and technology mediated between humans and nature, with the latter two conditioning the other as well as technology: 'For Marx, human beings transformed their relation to nature but not exactly as they

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pleased; they did so in accordance with conditions inherited from the past and as a result of a complex process of historical development that reflected a changing relation to a natural world, which was itself dynamic in character' (Foster 1999, 390). Uneven and Combined Development theory inserts a specifically international dimension into these dialectics (Rosenberg 2013).

But dialectical method is not confined to Marxism. The transformation of the natural world that the 'Anthropocene' captures, and the transformation of the human that 'post-humanism' aims for, could be considered two sides of an accelerating dialectic. This requires some explications that are beyond this essay. But even in more prosaic terms, there is a dialectical interchange implied in some existing interpretations of environment and security. In Ole Wæver's seminal essay *securitization/desecuritization* the environment is just one of several possible 'valued referent objects' of security, i.e. which is threatened and requiring exceptional means to defend it (1995). This keeps the environment ontologically separate yet implicated in the political logic of 'security'. That logic itself in turn grew out of specific historical conditions after the end of WWII (Wæver 1995). In dialectical terms the story does not stop there, either. Articulations of environmental security might be transforming the logic of security anew (Trombetta 2008). In this volume, Matt MacDonald considers the idea of 'ecological security' (2016) as a way of moving beyond anthropocentric notions of environmental security. This clearly involves more than applying a familiar notion of security to the biosphere, requiring instead a new idea of security. Which again provides the basis for a new understanding of 'environment', and so forth.

Although IR is a thoroughly anthropocentric discipline, nature has featured prominently, albeit quite differently and sporadically. From the *physiopolitics* of the Greeks, via European *geopolitics* to the more recent *global environmental politics*, this legacy bears remembering while we search for a stronger sense of materiality and a framework for accounting for the natural world in IR theory. The post-war rationalist and constructivist paradigms perhaps marginalised nature most starkly. Classical realists engage with territory and technology but with the ascent of a social scientific epistemology, geopolitics and historical materialism marginalised. The concept of 'the environment' involved a pigeonholing of nature, which became, at best, a human collective action problem.

The challenge now is to find a way forward that does not simply revive geography as a condition of great power competition, but rather one that grapples with an *Anthropocene IR*: how do we rethink IR for a world where humanity, the international system and the Earth's current ecology are mutually transformative – and potentially mutually destructive? If the main thrust of post-humanism and political ecology has been to deconstruct the distinction between human and non-human, alternative modes – such as viewing the relationship as a dialectical one – deserve more systematic attention. Although, in the end, both will doubtless be necessary if there is to be a discipline of IR as if the Earth mattered (Corry and Stevenson 2017b).

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