Sustainability and crisis in the Anthropocene
When thinking about human politics or human societies, the use of geological timescales seems strange – even inappropriate. Nearly the entirety of the sweep of human history can fit comfortably into the past two-hundred thousand years and barely registers on the scale of era or epoch. Yet the turn of the century – or millennium – also marked the passage of human civilizations from one geologic period to the next, from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, a name less for the presence of humans, as it is for the impact our presence has made on the world. For the past several centuries, human civilizations have been reshaping the face of the world and now, we must face the consequences.

Contemporary geopolitics is more than the reconfiguring of political space; it is the reconfiguring of the earth itself. As modern states grow and as they seek to extend their reach through ever widening and deepening networks of extraction, processing, manufacturing, and consumption, they also engage in large-scale “geoscaping” where millions of tons of earth, water, mineral and plant material are shifted, blasted, burned and reconfigured to service a global economy. The marks of human economic, social, and technological development are so great they can easily be seen from space.

THE PROBLEM

In the anthropocene, the greatest challenges to states and the global economy are those that are not geographically bound, but which spread across borders or envelope them completely. As the global climate changes, states around the world will be forced to grapple with crises that transcend traditional politics: intense weather events, from typhoons and hurricanes, to polar vortices, droughts, floods, and forest fires. Aside from such natural catastrophes, states will also be forced to contend with global pandemics, as perennial diseases and emerging ones proliferate through global networks designed to facilitate the spread of labour and capital. States will also be forced to contend with increased flows of “climate refugees”, a category of person so new there is little international law that recognizes them. Recognition or not, as the earth grows warmer, and ocean levels rise, millions of displaced persons will inevitably travel across boundaries both natural and political in search of refuge.

THE RESEARCH

Much of the research produced by work within the Borders in Globalization program is grim. As climate change increases pressure of vulnerable coastal states (to say nothing of arid or desert states), their populations begin to look to their neighbours for refuge or assistance. In neighbouring states, the worry is that the people most immediately effected by floods or droughts may choose to flee into surrounding nations, prompting humanitarian crises. They are either unable – or unwilling – to manage.

One of the chief issues is that in the Anthropocene, the strategies employed by states to spur economic development and to regulate the effects of self-made climate crises are inadequate. Rather than adopt long-term strategies to carefully manage economic development with an eye towards minimizing its environmental impacts, national states continue to focus on rapid, short-term development, drawing on reserves of cheap coal, natural gas, and other fossil fuels. By seeking to “modernize” as quickly as they can, and by working to extract as much as possible from the earth, states and multinational corporations are effectively selling out the future to pay for the present.

THE POLICY

Research by Borders in Globalization scholars are unanimous in their findings: contemporary geopolitical strategies to engage with global crises in the An-
thropocene are insufficient. Consider the case of India and Bangladesh: as climate-related disasters — flooding in this case — threaten the lives and livelihoods of Bangladeshi citizens, they may be forced to flee towards neighbouring India to find refuge. India, for its part, recognizes the threat posed by flooding in Bangladesh, but rather than adopt a multinational strategy to address it, instead chooses to harden its own borders. In the short term, this has the effect of preventing cross-border flows of Bangladeshi climate refugees, but in the long term, only exacerbates tensions between the two states and their neighbours. Nothing is done to address the root cause of the crisis, and now India is faced with two problems: an emerging humanitarian crisis along its border with Bangladesh, and a political crisis as well.

This short-sightedness is not an anomaly, it is the status quo in international relations. While many states will sign declarations such as the Paris Agreements in good faith, they do not seem willing or able to take the next crucial step: developing a response plan to climate crises that moves beyond traditional geopolitics. A drought does not care about the borders of a state, nor does a typhoon obey international agreements. Human civilizations are not — and never have been — separate from the natural world, and until states recognize this, virtually every national strategy will fail before it is ever implicated.

Flooding, fires, or droughts have global consequences, and a nation like Canada or the United States will not be able to stand apart as the rest of the world grapples with the anthropogenic disasters of the Anthropocene. An especially bad drought or blight in sub-Saharan Africa will result in humanitarian and economic crises elsewhere in the world, just as sharp drops in temperatures or severe blizzards in the Global North will place strain on continental energy grids even in places that are otherwise untouched by such emergencies.

The challenges of the Anthropocene demand a new lens through which problems must be analyzed. Economic development must be guided by a focus on sustainability — even restoration — of planetary ecosystems if states wish to mitigate the damage done in the pursuit of rapid economic growth. Nations must begin to develop cross-border, or pan-regional strategies for meeting the challenges of this new geologic age. States will have little choice: geopolitics is a human conceit, and Nature will not change itself to fit.

More information and research can be found by visiting the Borders in Globalization website.

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