Climate terror: a critical geopolitics of climate change

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BOOK REVIEW


*Climate Terror* is a frenetic, impassioned, angry book, from the denunciation of ‘historically perpetuated environmental injustices by the powers that be’ on the first page to the ‘Armageddon’ of the ‘the globally peripheral peoples of the global South’ on the last. The reader is barraged with an array of specialist theoretical concepts, ‘scare quotes’ proliferate uncontrollably, cases range from Bangladesh to Nigeria, and the authors’ arguments encompass the power of hegemonic forms of scientific knowledge, securitization and militarization, changing borders and territorial geopolitics, and the crisis of the state. The myth of the great flood stalks the pages, and the flow of the book swirls through choppy waters that can be hard to navigate.

Overall, however, the authors manage to craft a largely coherent account of many violences done by the rise of a *Climate Terror Industry*, and the great value of this book is both its scope and range, combined with writing from the perspective of the Global South with an orientation towards forces of subaltern resistance. Despite the many allusions to diverse concepts and theorists the book manages to be relatively accessible as well as challenging, and researchers new to the fields of climate geopolitics or political ecology will find a range of provocative lines of enquiry.

It is not an easy book to summarize, but the central thrust is an attempt to contest the western, Eurocentric account of a future climate catastrophe by directing attention towards postcolonial voices – particularly in South Asia – and the daily experiences and past memories of multiple types of violence perpetrated by the Minority world on the Majority world. Detailed analyses of Indian and Chinese climate policies in Chapter 3, and the political representations of (potential) climate migrants in Bangladesh in Chapter 5, are particular highlights and genuinely original contributions.

Climate change and other environmental issues are framed as assemblages of geopolitical elite governance in this book, rather than the projects of grassroots social movements. It is not until Chapter 7 that social movements make a sustained appearance, in the form of case studies of trade unions, religious groups, and Friends of the Earth International. The driving question as the book moves towards its close is whether climate discourses have the potential to be recaptured by emancipatory projects of environmental justice. The tone here – as throughout the book – is pessimistic. The authors conclude that ‘Global emancipatory movements have so far failed to identify relevant and compelling global targets for action and strategies for moving beyond the state. The meta-narrative of climate change – even as climate justice – may even be a step backwards, subsuming all human/environmental struggles under it, obscuring the material and power inequalities that North/South categories are so helpful at illuminating’ (p. 182).

As this quote illustrates, binaries such as North/South, Minority/Majority and hegemonic/subaltern do quite a lot of conceptual work in this book, and whilst the authors do recognize the difficulty of drawing these lines they are continually reasserted as politically important. That may be the case, although some readers will doubtlessly disagree, but it does sometimes lead the argument into controversial or puzzling assertions. Claims that ‘In the South, with the “community” already in existence,
there is an innate respect for localised systems of knowledge’ (p. 182), or that issues such as ‘the rights of
the non-human; and the welfare of future generations’ have ‘little relevance to the everyday welfare
of those inhabiting the global economy’s peripheries’ (p. 207) are contentious simplifications which
many other critical theorists (including from the Global South) working in political ecology would
reject. Although the argument has a certain force and narrative coherence, ultimately the claim that
populations in the Global South or the Majority world find it ‘hard to get excited about potentially
rising sea levels measured by elite scientists in the North’ (p. 208) is an unsubstantiated assertion, and
one that is contradicted by activists from Small Island Developing States, for example. Indeed, the
earlier account of the emergence of climate justice discourses within Friends of the Earth groups and
communities in Nigeria, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brazil seems to suggest that some of the lines of
climate geopolitics are more hybrid, fractured, nuanced and complex than the impression sometimes
generated by parts of this book.

The book is full of interesting sub-theses. The chapter on securitization and militarization, for exam-
ple, concludes with some fascinating questions about how the social movement form is being invoked
and adopted by what is termed the ‘new security movement’ (p. 153), through which US power in the
Indo-Pacific region is mobilized. As a result, this is not a textbook nor the result of a tightly focused
research project: rather it is a maelstrom of contentions, reviews and provocations. Perhaps it should
best be read as an alternative overview, a counter-perspective, to more mainstream assertions of the
importance of ‘doing something’ to tackle the climate crisis.

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