Securitizing the Environment in Human Terms

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The fact that forms of negative environmental change, such as pollution or resource depletion, can be sources of insecurity is uncontentious. Nevertheless, the notion of environmental security remains highly contentious. Environmental security is increasingly invoked in political discourse but it means very different things to different people. This article examines the different ways in which the environment has come to be 'securitized', as a matter of national, human or ecological security and also appraises the arguments against securitization, from the perspectives of both environmental sceptics and political ecologists. One important consequence of this epistemic divergence on environmental security has been to inhibit the building of a consensus on how best to address urgent environmental problems. This is particularly problematic because environmental problems, more than most if not all political concerns, require consensual responses. Issues like climate change or atmospheric pollution are more complex, holistic and multi-faceted than more typically securitized issues- such as war or terrorism- and so require more complex, holistic and multi-faceted political responses to mitigate their effects. Hence, agreeing upon what we are talking about when invoking 'environmental security' is an important task beyond an academic ontological debate. This article argues that it is both necessary and possible to overcome some of the differences that impede epistemic consensus on securitizing the environment. In particular, it is argued that there is more common ground between Human Security approaches and political ecological thought than is often appreciated and upon this we can construct a meaningful and useful notion of environmental security.

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The fact that forms of negative environmental change, such as pollution or resource depletion, can be sources of insecurity is uncontentious. Nevertheless, the notion of environmental security remains highly contentious. Environmental security is increasingly invoked in political discourse but it means very different things to different people. One important consequence of this epistemic divergence has been to impede the building of a consensus on how best to address urgent environmental problems. This is particularly problematic because environmental problems, more than most if not all political concerns, require consensual responses. Issues like climate change or atmospheric pollution are more complex, holistic and multi-faceted than more typically securitized issues – such as war or terrorism – and so require more complex, holistic and multi-faceted political responses to mitigate their effects. Climate change and atmospheric pollution are also – on a global scale – far deadlier threats than war or terrorism but are, at the same time, far less likely to be addressed as matters of security. The complexity and long-termism of environmental problems make them more likely to be misunderstood, ignored or not faced up to. Long-term creeping emergencies require long-term, gradual but nonetheless profound responses involving as many people as possible. This is quite distinct from how political emergencies are usually addressed, by relying on governmental elites and security forces to keep us safe from harm.

Even though the human security paradigm has sought to give far greater priority to environmental problems than traditional Realist International Relations thought and international relations practise, in line with ecological thinking, environmental security still tends to be perceived in traditional terms. The rise of the resource wars thesis, at around the same time as Human Security, has tended to overshadow the latter, particularly in political practise. The resource wars thesis 'securitizes' the environment in traditional terms: focussing on how environmental change may trigger wars and so require military preparation and responses by states. This, of course, is anathema to how political ecologists want to accommodate and address environmental concerns. As a result, the considerable common ground that exists between Human Security and ecological thought is frequently overlooked, damaging the cause of advancing global environmental policy.

This assumption that security comes from the state and the military, forged in the fires of the three global wars of the twentieth century, goes some way to explaining how the term came to be viewed more as a noun than an adjective: a commodity provided by the state (McSweeny, 1999). The persistence of military threats continues to give currency to this 20th Century national security conceptualization, focussed on the provision of security by the state. Nevertheless, the fact that people's lives and the proper functioning – and even existence – of states are at stake in the face of environmental change is increasingly obvious. Over 10 million people a year are killed by pollution, around 100 times as many as die as a result of political violence (war, terrorism and other political killings combined) (Lancet, 2022). The death count from heatwaves and wildfires, the most literal symptoms of global warming,

have been higher than ever in recorded history since the start of the millennium. Several states, including The Maldives, Kiribati, Palau, Fiji, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Cape Verde, are at risk of being submerged under rising sea levels in the near future and most others face severe economic effects from this and other facets of climate change, such as the acceleration of desertification.

Whilst the level of insecurity posed by issues of environmental change remains subject to contention, this has gradually lessened over time as the threats become more apparent and people become better educated about them. A 2021 opinion poll of over a million people across 50 states found that over two-thirds of respondents – and a majority in all countries – judged climate change to constitute a 'global emergency' (UNDP, 2021). An epistemic consensus – both academic and public – on environmental threats has deepened but, whilst the notion of treating such matters as part of the politics of security has grown, this remains highly divisive.

RIVAL PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

The notion of environmental security divides opinion in several ways. Firstly, the concept is rejected by sceptics on opposing ends of the spectrum of opinion on the severity of environmental problems: environmental sceptics and many political ecologists. Secondly, those strands of political opinion that have embraced environmental security as a concept have done so in very different ways, according to the referent object being securitized. For some environmental security is an emerging dimension of national security; another factor to be taken on board in the primary political task of the military defence of the state. For others environmental security is more than that; the scale of the threats posed by environmental changes in themselves challenge the deep-seated assumption that the military defence of the state must be the primary political priority. A further perspective reasons that the environment itself, as opposed to states or people, should be the referent object of security if we are to address problems like climate change and atmospheric pollution appropriately.

Environmental Sceptics

Whilst it is a position without any academic credibility, the political significance of environmental scepticism cannot be overlooked. Securitizing the environment clearly is anathema to the 'heads in the sand' business-oriented right-wing populism that has been politically influential across much of the world over the past two decades. From the conscious acceleration of deforestation by Bolsonaro in Brazil to the labelling of climate change as a 'Chinese hoax' by Trump in the US, the inconvenient truth of environmental degradation can easily be denied to garner the support of the simple-minded, gullible or greedy.

Though environmental scepticism increasingly operates in the same 'post-truth' space as bizarre conspiracy theories, the logic that problems associated with environmental change are not critical because they can be overcome by science is not without some foundation. The non-arrival of a demographic doomsday of the sort forecast by Malthus back in the late eighteenth century or by the 'Neo-Malthusians' in the 1960s prompted the emergence of 'Cornucopians' to suggest that economic growth need not be restrained to save the planet since technological progress and human ingenuity can be relied upon to surmount future problems related to resource depletion or pollution (Simon, 1981). The world, indeed, has never become overpopulated (in terms of correlating global food supply to population) because resources have come to be exploited more efficiently and societies and economies have evolved on the back of scientific progress. The Green Revolution, which expanded the food supply in the Global South in the 1970s and '80's through agricultural technology transfers in development policy, made the 'population bomb' (Ehrlich, 1968) ecological rhetoric of the late 1960s seem hysterical[1] and damaged the cause of environmentalism. The legacy of this can be seen in contemporary climate scepticism. 'The Sceptical Environmentalist' Bjorn Lomborg, for example, attracted great interest (and great derision from ecologists) for questioning whether implementing international policy on climate change made any rational sense. Lomborg did not deny that climate change was a human-caused problem but suggested that it was not as significant a threat as it had been painted and that the expenditure allocated to tackling the problem would be better spent on addressing issues such as global poverty (Lomborg, 2001). Today resisting 'net zero' targets for mitigating greenhouse gas emissions on the grounds that this is too high a price to pay in tough economic times is a familiar populist political cause. Recent years have seen a marked decline in climate change denial itself, as such a position has been rendered absurd by both the evidence of science and most people's own eyes. Scepticism is now dominated by the 'new denial' form, in line with Lomborg and the Cornucopians, doubting current climate change mitigation methods, downplaying the threats and advancing adaptation instead (CCDH, 2024). For most environmental sceptics today, environmental problems are problems that are prone to exaggeration and do not constitute urgent political matters worthy of securitization.

Security Sceptics

The opposing end of the spectrum to the scepticism of climate change deniers and down players has also tended to resist environmental security as a concept. Most traditional political ecologists are sceptical about 'securitization' through concerns that this means: 'responding to climate change in counterproductive, militarized ways' (Vogler, 2024). In this view national security responses are inappropriate in the face of complex, long-term and geographically non-specific threats emanating from environmental changes. In most countries 'security' has come to be synonymous

with military defence, in line with the advent of total war in the 20th Century, and policies mitigating climate change or pollution are anathema to this.

There is, indeed, plenty of good evidence that 'securitization' can lead to the misallocation of resources. For instance, fears that the 'war on terror' may be hampering governments in dealing with other threats to their citizens became apparent in 2005 with the US government's response to deadly flooding in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Much of the first batch of relief supplies sent to the area by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was made up of materials intended for dealing with the aftermath of a chemical terrorist strike, not a natural disaster. The notion of a natural disaster as a national emergency simply did not register in a political system built on traditional military security foundations. Similarly, the instinctive national security response of despatching troops in the aftermath of a natural disaster can backfire. In 2010-11 a cholera epidemic occurred amongst Haitians who had been re-housed by UN troops after a huge and deadly earthquake, due to the installation of inadequate sanitary systems in the new dwellings by soldiers rather than builders, which, ultimately, resulted in over 10,000 deaths. An extensive academic study found that such military operations have the advantage of being able to quickly mobilize large numbers of people to assist but, on the debit side, tend to be expensive and poorly coordinated with humanitarian agencies (SIPRI, 2008). The reflexive security policy of 'sending in the troops' certainly can be useful in the aftermath of natural disasters but saving lives from earthquakes, floods and the like is far more likely to be achieved by addressing underlying vulnerabilities that transform such natural events into disasters, such as inadequate building regulations, than fire-fighting missions after the event.

Not only are national security responses to environmental threats often inappropriate, ecologists point out that they are part of the problem since militarism is inherently environmentally damaging and serves to distract political attention from other important issues (Deudney, 1990; Aradau, 2004). The sheer existence of the military-industrial complex comes at a significant environmental cost. Wars are, obviously, environmentally-damaging but so too is the wider and persistent process of preparing for war. It has been estimated, for instance, that the US military consumes a quarter of the world's jet fuel and is responsible for around 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Sanders, 2009).

In some cases Political Ecology has come to embrace some traditional security language in order to emphasize the urgency of mitigation strategies. Nixon, for instance, popularized the notion of negative environmental change as 'slow violence': 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (Nixon, 2011: 2). In general, though, Political Ecology has preferred to steer away from the language and politics of security, seeing this as very much the discourse of political power and aggression.

Environmental securitization is also resisted by some within its more natural academic domain of international relations (IR) who are not ecologically sceptical.

From a realist IR perspective Gordeeva contends that environmental securitization of any kind is: 'a dangerous and overall counterproductive undertaking' (Gordeeva, 2022: 17). She asserts that such an approach can succeed in raising the stakes for important environmental issues but, in doing so, may provoke conflict between states and reduce the prospects of cooperation (*ibid*). Another concern about utilizing the language of security to heighten awareness of environmental crises is that this may actually be counter-productive in terms of excessively alarming the public. Warner and Boas reason that environmental securitization often backfires by; 'instilling a sense of ontological insecurity in the intended audience rather than rallying support' (Warner & Boas, 2019: 1475). Complex, slow-burning crises are inconvenient truths more readily ignored than imminent disasters or invasions. Most people demonstrably do fear climate change and favour greater environmental regulation but many might be put off by securitization. Securitization, in what this is generally held to mean, is prone to fuelling accusations of scaremongering and exaggeration from vested interests seeking to downplay environmental problems.

National Environmental Security

Environmentalism emerged as a global political concern in the second half of the 20th Century, at a time when the national security paradigm had assumed the ascendancy in the Cold War era dominated by a nuclear balance of terror. Whilst military security undoubtedly dominated the international political agenda in this age, the two policy areas came to intersect to some extent centred on resource depletion fears. Neo-Malthusian alarm at global overpopulation in the late 1960s came to be joined by specific resource security concerns over oil as the US became a net importer, the Soviet economy continued to grow and Middle Eastern exporters began to call the shots over pricing. Most strikingly the 'Carter Doctrine', announced by the US President in 1980, made it explicit that questions relating to the economic resources of other states would enter into the calculations of the American national interest by stating that military action to secure oil imports and other economic interests in the Middle East was a possibility[2].

Towards the end of the Cold War such resource security thinking began to permeate the political mainstream and even find the ear of a superpower. A landmark article by US diplomat Jessica Mathews for the influential orthodox security journal *Foreign Affairs* highlighted the need for states to give proper concern to the newly-apparent threats posed by environmental problems. In addition to calling for greater consideration in foreign policy of the effects of resource depletion on the political stability of poorer states, Mathews argued that environmental problems with global ramifications, such as ozone depletion, climate change and deforestation, should become issues of state security because they were an increasing underlying cause of regional instability (Mathews, 1989). Four years previous to this legendary US diplomat and Realist George Kennan had argued that the world faced 'two unprecedented and supreme dangers', which were nuclear war and 'the devastating

effect of modern industrialization and overpopulation on the world's natural resources' (Kennan, 1985: 216).

From these seeds sewn by Kennan and Mathews in the 1980s a new strand of IR enquiry emerged in the post-Cold War New World Order era, positing that heightened competition for resources would increasingly be a cause of war, particularly in the Global South. Canadian academic Homer-Dixon and US journalist Kaplan were perhaps the most prominent advocates of this resource wars thesis (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Kaplan, 1994). Homer-Dixon summarized this thesis succinctly: 'Environmental scarcities are already contributing to violent conflicts in many parts of the world. These conflicts are probably the early signs of an upsurge of violence in the coming decades that will be induced or aggravated by scarcity' (Homer-Dixon, 1994: 6). Kaplan similarly prophesized that *this coming anarchy* of conflict in the Global South would puncture the New World Order optimism of the early 1990s. Around the same time that this Homer-Dixon / Kaplan thesis was emerging increased competition for that most precious of all resources heralded a similar and significant 'water wars' literature highlighting how arid regions, such as the Middle East or North Africa, could increasingly see access to water used as a weapon (Starr, 1991; Bullock & Adel, 1993).

Since the 1990s many others have come to link scarcity with war and a subsequent strand of the resource war thesis emerged specifically in relation to climate change. Dupont and Pearman, for example, posit that a warming world has increased the likelihood of conflict in five key ways: resource scarcity, land being rendered uninhabitable due either to water scarcity or inundation, the effects of disasters and disease, greater refugee movements and an increased scramble for remaining resource sources (Dupont & Pearman, 2006). In an empirical study by Columbia University, similar in style to the Homer-Dixon research, a team lead by Hsiang concluded from crunching the data that: 'The median effect of a 1° change in climate variables generates a 14% change in the risk of intergroup conflict' (Hsiang et al., 2013). This research built on earlier quantitative analysis focussed specifically on weather pattern changes associated with climate change. Hsiang's team then found that countries affected by the *El Niño*–Southern Oscillation extreme weather phenomenon between 1950 and 2005 were twice as likely to experience major civil or international conflict (i.e. those with at least 25 fatalities) as those not. Illustrative examples highlighted in the study included the fact that *El Niño* struck Peru in 1982, the same year that Shining Path's leftist insurgency took off, and that civil wars in Sudan had flared up in parallel with the emergence of extreme weather conditions. The study concluded that 'when crops fail people may take up a gun simply to make a living' (Hsiang et al., 2011).

Human / Critical Environmental Security

Going beyond the national security 'widening' approach of securitizing environmental issues that are not directly military where national interests are

seen to be invoked are critical and Human Security approaches focussing on the manifold threats environmental changes pose to people. Critical and Human Security approaches have come to divert somewhat over the past two decades, with the former often viewing the latter as too mainstream and linked to Western governmental interests (Booth, 2005; McCormack, 2008). Nevertheless, the two still share a commitment to shifting the focus of security from the military defence of the state to a more multi-dimensional understanding of the concept based on a referent object of the human being. For both Human and Critical Security advocates the scale of the threats to people posed by environmental change are so far removed from the way in which issues are conventionally ordered on the political agenda by states that international relations theory and international political practise needs to find ways of accommodating them in order to remain credible. Millions of people a year already die from environmental change and this is set to get much worse. The most extensive medical study of climate change and mortality to date found that an extra 5 million deaths per year were attributable to abnormally warmer temperatures (Zhao et al., 2021). Aside from these globally-threatening forms of pollution, more general contamination by smog, smoke and long-range contamination of the air and water by pollutants claims over 10 million lives a year (Lancet, 2022). War and terrorism set against this represent much lesser threats (around 60,000 deaths per year) and yet still dominate national and global security agendas and state budgetary allocations. Most of these deaths by pollution and other environmental problems can be avoided by political action, therefore if steps are not taken to avoid them a political failing has occurred. In line with Nixon's notion of 'slow violence', are people indirectly killed by a known problem, rather than a gun or a bomb, not insecure? Human insecurity is clearly linked to negative forms of environmental change.

> *When people do not have enough options to avoid or to adapt to environmental change such that their needs, rights, and values are likely to be undermined, then they can be said to be environmentally insecure* (Matthew et al., 2010: 18).

Ecological Security

The resistance by ecologists to environmental securitization is, in part, a consequence of academic evolution. The green roots of Political Ecology lie in the social rather than political sciences. It is a discipline born of the critical turn in Anthropology, Development Studies and Political Economy rather than political theory or International Relations. Blaikie and Brookfield argue that: 'the phrase "Political Ecology" combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself' (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17). The focus of Political Ecologists who emerged from the 1980s was land ownership, economic structures and conflict in a much wider sense than inter-state wars. In contrast, the roots of environmental security lie very much in international relations scholarship which, traditionally at least, is

a discipline that critical social scientists tend to distance themselves from as being politically conservative, state centric and methodologically positivist (Zwierlein, 2018). The emergence and popularization of the resource wars approach (including its 'real world' influence on governments such as in Washington and London in the 1990s) served to reinforce this perception. The Homer-Dixon / Kaplan thesis is the most popularized stream of environmental security literature and is known to have particularly influenced the Clinton and Blair governments and continues to be prominent in 'real world' international politics today. The notion that increased environmental scarcities in the developing world will trigger more conflicts amongst the people who inhabit them jars with political ecologists as analysis that is overly-determinist and blind to the wider structural causes of scarcity, inequality and conflict (Aradau, 2004; Le Billon & Duffy, 2018; Selby et al., 2022).

Political Ecology, also, has fundamental differences from Human Security, despite this paradigm being far more receptive to environmentalism than traditional national security approaches in IR. Political Ecology, in essence, is about rejecting anthropocentricism in favour of ecocentrism and Human Security, by definition, is an anthropocentric approach. Furthermore, the life and death or existential focus of Human Security can also be problematic in ecological terms. Ecosystems rarely 'die' and the Earth should 'survive' climate change. The increasingly prominent legal term *ecocide*, for instance, succeeds in helping securitize ecological destruction for nature's sake (and not just for how this is instrumental in human suffering) but the etymology of killing the environment is, perhaps, misguided. The desire to give legal personality to a river or forest, for their own intrinsic value, is more predicated on wanting to ascribe them the right not to be significantly negatively changed for human interests rather than necessarily destroyed outright.

In spite of deep-seated reservations about securitization, an ecological take on security has emerged as some ecological thought has permeated into IR. Some looking to upgrade the notion of security to the contemporary age argue that, rather than states or people, it is the world as a whole that should be securitized. McDonald, for instance, defines ecological security as the 'resilience of ecosystems' (McDonald, 2021: 109). Dalby similarly defines security in terms of a referent object which is the global totality: 'the assurance of relatively undisturbed ecological systems in all parts of the biosphere' (Dalby, 2002: 106). Whilst acknowledging that such a broad referent object and seemingly imprecise adjective opens up the definition to criticism of vagueness, Dalby rightly notes that states / nations – the most orthodox focus of security enquiry and politics – are highly imprecise referents in a globalized world plagued by civil and transnational conflicts. In particular defence of his definition, he notes that this permits a suitably holistic framework for addressing a complex, multi-faceted problem like climate change. Furthermore, such an approach goes beyond the strict utilitarianism of human security by permitting a focus on the most vulnerable rather than on people per se (*ibid*: 121-122). In addition to factoring in socio-economic aspects of vulnerability, this brings into purview non-human victims and future generations of people (*ibid*: 7).

BUILDING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY

The problem of a lack of epistemic consensus over environmental security has far more significance than serving to divide the academic community. It has hampered building a political consensus on environmental issues in international diplomacy, even when they are acknowledged as significant problems. As with public opinion, a governmental head in the sand strategy of denial has come to be more and more untenable as those sands have visibly expanded. This was particularly evidenced by the universal solidarity evident at the 2015 Paris Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change when the landmark commitment to limiting average global temperature increases to 1.5-2°c was made. However, whilst the seriousness of the challenge posed by climate change is universally acknowledged (albeit to differing levels of concern), treating this and other forms of environmental problems as matters of security continues to be fiercely resisted by some states.

Several attempts to put climate change on the agenda of the high table of security politics, the UN Security Council (UNSC), have thus far failed to do so. The UK used their presidency of the UNSC to put climate change on its agenda for the first time in 2007 and it has been discussed there periodically since then. References to climate change have also come to feature in 70% of national security documents produced by governments around the world (Vogler, 2023). The most concerted effort yet to securitize climate change at the UN came in 2021. A UNSC resolution, tabled by the governments of Ireland and Niger and backed by 111 others, which essentially sought to establish climate change as a permanent concern at the council, was blocked by a Russian veto in addition to a 'no' vote from the Indian delegation and a Chinese abstention. The representatives of these three states expressed scepticism as to the links between climate change and security and reasoned that the UNSC was not an appropriate venue for environmental issues to be debated. The fact that it was three states often viewed as particularly negligent on climate change and pollution in general that blocked the will of the majority to securitize environmental change in this way made the battle lines seem a predictable ecological and geopolitical schism, later to be exacerbated by the Ukraine War (McDonald, 2023)[3]. However, the expressed positions of the governments of Russia, China and India were in no way dismissive of the seriousness of climate change and essentially mirrored the position of the security sceptics rather than environmental sceptics. The Indian delegate at the 2021 UNSC meeting Tirumurti commented:

> *India is second to none when it comes to climate action and climate justice, but the Security Council is not the place to discuss either issue. In fact, the attempt to do so appears to be motivated by a desire to evade responsibility in the appropriate forum and divert the world's attention from an unwillingness to deliver where it counts* (UNSC, 2021b).

The Indian government here were resisting the national securitization of the environment, not rejecting taking climate change very seriously. The Russian Permanent Representative to the UN, Nebenzya, similarly claimed his government supported global policy on climate change but contended that the link between this and conflict, the basis of national securitization, was founded upon 'dubious analysis' (UNSC, 2021b). Whilst it is not difficult to be cynical about a Russian blocking manoeuvre at the Security Council, most political ecologists, Critical Security theorists and many Human Security advocates would concur with Nebenzya on this particular point about securitization.

The climate change securitization proponents in the UNSC since 2007 have, indeed, largely argued from the resource wars thesis perspective. Over time this has become a little more nuanced but this very much remains the dominant narrative. The 2021 Resolution did reference the plight of low-lying island states facing the most literal form of existential threat under the rising seas and did discuss a broad range of threatening consequences of climate change, such as food security. However, these symptoms and threats of climate change were still highlighted primarily for: '… leading to social tension and exacerbating, prolonging or contributing to the risk of future conflicts and instability and posing a key risk to global peace, security and stability' (UNSC, 2021a: 2). Overall, in a draft resolution of under 2,000 words the words 'conflict' and 'peace' appeared 24 and 34 times respectively (UNSC, 2021a). Indeed, the fact that this was a military-focussed national securitization move was not denied by the resolution's backers. Nason, the representative of sponsoring Ireland, admitted: 'The draft resolution is aimed at responding to the climate-related security risks affecting the conflicts on the Council's agenda – no more, no less' (UNSC, 2021b).

The playing of the national security card over climate change by some countries is instinctively treated with suspicion by others because of what national security is understood to stand for in the discourse of international relations all have been engaged in over the past century. It invokes a militarization of politics with an aggressive interference in the affairs of others or a defensive retreat behind strengthened armed borders, neither of which are relevant for the multi-dimensional threats posed by climate change, pollution or resource depletion. The rhetoric of climate change securitization has done little to dispel this notion. The debates in the Security Council, the foreign policy statements of many governments and the academic arguments of the likes of Homer-Dixon have highlighted national security threats of failed states, resource wars and mass migration. However, tightening up borders to deter environmental migrants is directly contradictory to the human interest and the solution of armed humanitarian interventions to lawlessness deployed in other contexts is unlikely to be either welcomed or useful. In theory it is appropriate that climate change be debated at the high table of global high politics but the problem with this in practise is that the UN Security Council has always been an arena of great power realpolitik. It is the arena where Soviet and US Cold

War adventurism was ignored and, in the present age, where blatant violations of international law by the permanent members and countries like Israel and Syria have been ignored because of their sponsorship by Washington and Moscow.

This resistance to embracing the language of security has also served to blind Political Ecology to emergent Human Security approaches keen to embrace environmental concerns and move IR beyond conservative state-centricism. In the main Political Ecology has brought into the orthodox narrative that 'security' is a noun and not an adjective: the same presumption as IR realists and even environmental sceptics. This highlights the importance of semantics in both the analysis and practise of politics. If Human or Critical Security was the norm, rather than militaristic national security, political ecologists would be far less resistant to securitization. The anthropocentricism of a human referent object of security would still be problematic to an ecocentric approach but much less so than a deep-seated assumption of the centrality of the military defence of the state.

Furthermore, a more nuanced take on the referent object of the human can permit Human or Critical Security to find common ground with Political Ecology. So long as human security is understood in the context of us being part of a global biosphere, the safeguarding of which enhances both human and non-human interests, this need not be problematic (Dyer, 2001). Dalby argues that the key to safeguarding human security in issues such as Climate Change and Resource Depletion is to cease framing such problems in the context of 'environmental threats'. 'Where security has traditionally been about protecting what we have, now security must be re-thought as protecting our abilities to learn, adapt and innovate in the new circumstance of the Anthropocene …' (Dalby, 2024: 122).

Human and Critical Security approaches share political ecologist's concerns with the resource wars thesis: the most influential confluence of environmental and security politics. Despite its influence on the thinking of the US and governments and many others, the approach of framing environmental scarcity as a military security matter has certainly not been without its critics. The empirical evidence linking environmental degradation and political conflict is, even by Homer-Dixon's own admission, not straightforward, prompting scepticism as to whether other variables are the real causes of conflicts in situations where environmental scarcity can be demonstrated. The assumption that changes in the balance between resources and people creates political problems is viewed as flawed logic by a growing literature of resource war sceptics. Critics have reasoned that it is easy to link droughts in Sudan to the Darfur Crisis and other civil conflicts in the country but such events are a product of politics rather than the environment and responsibility for the bloodshed lay squarely with the Janjaweed insurgents and the Sudanese government for giving a green light to their murderous campaigns (Brown & McLennan, 2009). History also can provide plenty of evidence of environmental disasters and extreme weather conditions *not* prompting conflict. The devastating dustbowls that struck the US Great Plains in the 1930s did not trigger conflict (Brown & McLennan,

2009). Australia has been as much affected by *El Niño* as Sudan or Peru but has not been struck by civil war for obvious economic and political reasons. Neither was conflict a consequence of the 2010 earthquake in the far more politically volatile state of Haiti, in spite of the widespread assumptions that it would be. Correlation is not causation and even the correlation here is questionable. The widely cited cases in support for the resource wars thesis might suggest a correlation between conflict and underdevelopment and a lack of democracy more than with environmental scarcity.

Political Ecology has little to fear from environmental securitization so long as it is of a critical or human variant freed from anthropocentric constraints. Such a conceptualization of environmental security, centred on clear facts about human vulnerability in the face of ecological changes, would also be more grounded in reason and resonate better with an increasingly concerned public than speculative, unproven assertions of such changes making wars more likely.

CONCLUSIONS

Semantics are important but can also be problematic in the pursuit of discerning political priorities. There is a compelling case for securitizing the environment if we are to take 'security' at its word. Climate change, pollution and other forms of negative environmental change are already a far greater threat to human life than war and terrorism and also threaten to render many sovereign states obsolete.

However, orthodox political discourse – both academic and diplomatic – is so 'stuck in its ways' that the security 'label' struggles to stick to issues that are self-evidently sources of profound insecurity. The politics of security is so associated with the military defence of the state that many within the corridors of both power and IR academia cannot be shaken from a blinkered view of what being insecure really means, despite the rise of challenges to this orthodoxy. Outside of IR disciplines such as Political Ecology have largely been blind to these challenges to the orthodoxy and so the politics of security is instinctively resisted as anathema to the cause of keeping people safe from dangerous forms of environmental change. The problem with this is that the politics of security is entirely appropriate for addressing climate change, pollution and resource depletion, it just needs to be a different sort of security politics than we are used to. Critical and Human Security approaches are not anathema to prioritizing environmental policy and do not reduce this area of politics to advancing the resource wars thesis. Security does not 'belong' to states and the military, it is a human condition and one that is increasingly determined by global environmental change. Rejecting securitization because of what it has generally been held to mean over the past century makes no sense: security, rather, needs to be redefined. Old habits are hard to break but sometimes they need to be broken.

NOTES

1 *The Population Bomb* used dramatic language and metaphors in the cause of securitizing overpopulation. '[W]e can no longer afford merely to treat the symptoms of the cancer of population growth: the cancer itself must be cut out…The battle to feed all of humanity is over' (Ehrlich, 1968: xi). In a subsequent article Ehrlich predicted that 'by 1985 enough millions will have died to reduce the Earth's population by some acceptable level, like 1.5 billion people' (Ehrlich, 1969: 28). This message reached even the populist levels of the Johnny Carson US television chat show where Ehrlich infamously declared that: 'I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000'.

2 'An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force'. (Carter, 1980)

3 Albeit the Chinese abstention does not actually constitute a block.

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