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On Securitization of Nature

There are two terms that have come to define the twenty first century: urban age and the ‘age of man’. While the former is often rehearsed, the latter is rarely mentioned despite their interconnection. It is widely known that the 21st century is the first urban century because for the first time in history more people live in cities. However, what is less known is that the urban age is the manifestation of ‘the age of man’. The latter, also known as ‘Anthropocene’, describes an epoch which is paradigmatically different from the previous 10,000-year-old geological period of relative climate stability (called Holocene). For the first time in history, human activities have caused planetary changes whose significance is on par with geological forces. A compelling evidence of this is the reconfiguration of the planet’s carbon cycle by anthropogenic release of quantities of fossil carbon over the past couple of centuries that took the planet hundreds of millions of years to store away.

The outcome is multifaceted and includes global warming, sea level rise, melting of the Arctic, changes to oceans’ chemistry, and a whole range of other changes that are attributed to climate change. What has made this process materially possible and ethically acceptable is the anthropocentric view of the world that has prevailed since the Enlightenment era. This was the time when scientific revolution stripped nature from its divinity and symbolic values and by doing so gave humans both means and the right to exploit nature. The rise of environmentalism in the 1960s followed by the sustainability agenda of the 1990s began to question the fallacy of the modernist assumption about our ability to conquer and exploit nature with little or no consequences. This realisation was firmly confirmed by climate change which has become a powerful reminder of our complex and precarious relationship with nature.

However, elsewhere I have argued that the reflexive environmentalism which imbued the sustainability agenda is increasingly displaced by the increasingly dominant discourses of climate change that are shifting the focus from nature as asset to nature as risk. This is a new way of seeing nature which is radically different from the one evoked by sustainability because it construes nature not as a finite asset to be sustained for future generations but as a threat against which future generations should be secured.

Seeing nature as risk ushers in deep anxieties about security. The more nature is conceived of as a threat to us, the more our relation to it is framed in terms of safety and security. Therefore, risk and security feed from one another in the sense that keeping up the demand for security requires maintaining a heightened sense of risk.
Given the attraction of such circularity, many of our contemporary social and environmental problems, including climate change, are being re-cast as security problems, making securitisation the hegemonic discourse of our times. As a result, the hallmark of the reflexive modernity has become not just the risk society, as Ulrich Beck suggests, but also the security society. In this context, security is not just a means to an end (i.e. protection from risk), but is an end in itself (i.e. a tradable good). It is ‘sold’ as a commodity with a price tag and is factored into both business plans and governance strategies. In the environmental field, the axis of debate seems to be swinging from development versus environment to: which security should take precedence. For example, the debate over energy crops has turned into a competition for priorities between energy security and food security. This is an anathema to traditional environmentalism because increasingly, food security trumps biodiversity, energy security trumps renewable energy, and climate security trumps sustainability. In many ways, this is hark back to a pre-modern conception of human-nature relations that was centred on what nature does to us rather than what we do to nature.

The securitisation of nature has profound implications for how the environment is treated and valued, what kinds of environmental policies are formulated, and what types of environmental politics are mobilised. Risk and security provoke strong emotions that can legitimise extraordinary measures which may otherwise be indefensible. A clear manifestation of this discourse is reflected in the language used by the national military advisors who are now active participants in the international climate change negotiations. For them, climate change is a “threat multiplier”; i.e. an underlying condition for all other threats such as terrorism, and hence is open to military strategies if need be.

The language of risk and security create imaginaries of fear which can renounce social conflicts, foreclose politics, and crowd out any descending voices in the name of urgency and emergency. They squeeze out the arenas in which questions about justice and fairness can be raised. The interpretation of climate change as national security problems can turn the conflict over the distributive implications of climate change into a new geopolitics in which nation states may consider military strategies as acceptable responses to the conflicts over who is exposed to what climate risk, and who has access to what climate security. The danger is that democracy may suffer in the name of urgency and emergency.

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1 This paper draws on the following two papers:
Davoudi, S. (forthcoming) Climate change, securitisation of nature and resilient urbanism, *Environment and Planning C*