



# Autistic Geopolitics / Anthropocene Therapy

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The recent rise of populist, if not genuinely xenophobic, nationalisms poses obvious dangers in the international system. Bellicose rhetoric and the blaming of domestic grievances on foreign causes has long been an easy political strategy for those willing to risk conflict and attempt to impose solutions to social difficulties. As ‘environmental’ transformations accelerate, these traditional political difficulties are now compounding; the rise of claims to autonomy and the assertion of national priorities in the face of rapid global change are making coordination on climate change in particular more difficult, even as the urgency of tackling it is becoming clear to those who choose to consider the problem.

While the diagnosis of autism as a dangerous condition in contemporary geopolitics might seem extreme, and may offend some families with autistic children, the term is fitting insofar as the autistic person’s lack of communication capabilities matters when it causes difficulties for family or wider society, however brilliant the person may otherwise be. The analogy holds in many ways in contemporary geopolitics, and points to increasingly dangerous failures of imagination that invite profound upheavals in the age of accelerating climate change.

The lack of public imagination in how ‘others’ are represented, and in particular the failure to comprehend the concerns and priorities of members of other political entities and to behave accordingly, has long been a recipe for avoidable conflict in the international system. The fossil fueled global economy and the formulation of ‘development’ as an imposition of artificial systems into an external 'nature', a matter of dominating a supposedly stingy external environment rather than understanding how to facilitate the flourishing of human and other species, reproduces the pernicious assumptions of separation and rivalry.

Nationalist populism and claims that states are autonomous, masters of their own destinies, sovereign in the sense of arbiters of their own fate regardless of the concerns or actions of other states, are increasingly pervasive. Understood as

responses to perceived injustices, or as a matter of disappointed expectations, this rhetorical reassertion of control is appealing in an uncertain world. But by mobilizing resentments and generating images of dangerous or morally inferior 'others', these forms of populism pit people and states against each other in narratives that emphasize separation and competition. Linked to rhetorics of security and the assumption that territorial modes of exclusion are efficacious in dealing with contemporary problems, the geographical imaginaries invoked by fence building and increasingly restrictive border crossing measures simply increase the dangers to those compelled to move.



Among those affected are environmental refugees who find themselves subjected to media rhetoric depicting them as a danger to Western state stability. Although this phenomenon isn't new, the climate crisis has revived and intensified its use. Over all, migrations are rarely caused by single factors, although the obvious exceptions are cases of ‘distress migration’ in the face of disasters such as hurricanes. Rising sea levels forcing communities and whole island nations to move is clearly a matter of climate-induced migration. Portraying those forced to move as a security threat simply makes people on the move doubly vulnerable. Failing to understand the complex political economies of rural areas vulnerable to climate variations and, in many cases, the vagaries of the international property market, simultaneously

obscures both the social processes that set people in motion and, ironically, the indirect responsibility of fossil fuel users for these disruptions. Once again, the geopolitics of separation operates to securitize the vulnerable while obscuring the causal connections across supposedly permanent geopolitical entities.

More fundamentally, climate change challenges the geopolitical imaginaries of our time with respect to the powerful modern assumptions of human autonomy from an external 'environment'. The climate crisis renders these, too, untenable as a premise for effective political action. Whether in non-Western cosmologies of Mother Earth or contemporary earth system science syntheses of the human transformation of the biosphere, *the assumption of separation as the starting point* for governing a supposedly external realm is now simply untenable. Humanity is interconnected within itself and as part and parcel of the process of transforming the biosphere. Claims to autonomy both in terms of political separation and territorial division, and of humanity apart from nature rather than a part of it, obfuscate the connections that make action on climate change and human mobility necessary. By invoking a supposedly stable context they also deny the history of prior human disruptions of societies and ecological systems.

In the process, these geopolitical formulations obscure the historical grievances of societies disrupted by past imperial violence that are now facing the largest risks from accelerating climate change. Blunt refusal on the part of states that have done the most to produce atmospheric change to consider discussions of loss and damage in climate negotiations, as well as their historical responsibilities to the larger global community, render it unlikely that states will be able to collaborate on reconstructing the global economy to move beyond its dependence on fossil fuels. Continuing to consider the climate as just a pollution problem amenable to traditional abatement strategies aggravates the difficulties while perpetuating a geographical imaginary of the atmosphere as somehow external to humanity. These formulations replicate the rhetoric of internal security and external danger which belie both the global infrastructural circumstances of the human present, and the dramatic ecological alterations that have constructed this system.




While the assumption that order can be imposed on a rapidly changing world continues to facilitate populist rhetorics and the justifications for Brexit and frontier wall building fantasies, the consequences of its premises of separation, and the failure to engage in effective communication with other entities, will likely have further future violent consequences in the near future. This crisis of geopolitical representation poses profound problems for which some form of ‘political therapy’ is now needed. The obvious ‘therapy’ is to invoke a larger narrative in which interconnections are crucial to rethinking national autonomies. The difficulty is that the rejection of such political narratives is a key part of the imaginary of autistic geopolitics.

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In this regard, perhaps the Anthropocene discussion can be more helpful than reciting mere political formulations or reasserting the supposed benefits of globalization. The Anthropocene forces us to consider how the rich and powerful parts of humanity are changing the biosphere as a result of the political choices made about production systems. To focus on what is being made (and how and where) that is changing both human systems and the larger biosphere that contains them, shifts attention to matters of making the future rather than trying to defend supposedly autonomous societies from external change. This directly links up with the discourse of the sustainable development goals in terms of transformation, but provides a compelling recontextualization of geopolitics as production rather than separation.

The task for scholars is to facilitate this understanding of an interconnected world being rapidly remade by a globally connected set of economic and energy systems. Working out how to share a crowded world, rather than devising strategies to try to dominate what is assumed to be a divided one, is the key to any geopolitics that takes the new Anthropocene understandings of the human context seriously. Comprehending the distant consequences of proximate actions is central to this, a matter anathema to the more autistic geopolitical imaginaries currently in vogue.

Most 'therapies' for autism emphasize the need to cultivate interaction, working on reducing fear of communication and generating contextual awareness and empathy for others. Thinking in terms of the Anthropocene, with its potential to shift public imaginations to a more explicit focus on humanity as a transformation agent within a complex biosphere rather than as an external actor in competition with a dangerous external environment, is but one form of geopolitical therapy. But clearly such therapies are now urgently needed to counter the rush to separation, wall building, and xenophobic rhetoric, and to help construct less violent forms of ‘security’.

## Tags

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