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## BOOK REVIEW: Simon Dalby's *Security and Environmental Change*

### Securing Change? Securing the Environment?

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Simon Dalby, professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton College in Ottawa, offers his insight into the geopolitical and discursive position of the debate on 'environmental security' in his recent monograph *Security and environmental change* (2009). From the outset, Dalby's text promises to offer the reader an engaging and thought-provoking account of environmental security, which ultimately may accomplish the academic feat of raising as many questions as it answers. Dalby carries the reader through a series of investigations into the debate on environmental security and, ultimately, readers are presented with his primary argument—that environmental change should be reimagined through the lenses of security, economy, and ecology. The interdisciplinary perspective that Dalby takes in *Security and environmental change* helps to illustrate the complexities of the topic and therefore goes a long way in securing the work as a success in the effort to reframe national security.

There is one thing that we can be sure in the debate, however, which is that there has been a fundamental shift in the global consciousness about the environment. Citizens, non-governmental institutions, religious organizations, and even governments have moved toward the more ecocentric way of thinking, seemingly embracing what it means to "go green," repeating the trite language of "reduce, reuse, and recycle" or "think global, act local." We can view this as an ostensible trending against anthropocentric notions of man being at the top of the ecological hierarchy. This shift in language, however, is not enough for Dalby, or for many who are intimately engaged in environmentalism and its implications for security. An action component must also be employed. There is a pace that is not

being kept. In other words, the rate of climate change is outstripping the rate of any change that can occur as a result of individual actions or government mandates. Something more must be done.

For Dalby, this something is collective awareness and collective action. He notes: Humanity is increasingly in charge of its own fate. Clearly the contemporary climate crisis in particular suggests we have much to learn, and need to learn it quickly. [ . . . ] We now know much more than we did in the early 1970s when the alarm about environment was first on the political agenda. In the process, thinking has gradually shifted from environment as an external entity to be managed to a recognition of the affluent part of humanity as the maker of our collective fate (15).

Although I think that Dalby is correct in his assessment that there is an ongoing shift in thinking, his argument leaves me wondering why he sees this recognition as taking place *solely* within the realm of “affluent part of humanity”? It seems that the poorest among us are those that will suffer the unequal consequences of environmental change.

This is a view that has not only been demonstrated with recent climate catastrophes seen in Haiti, Pakistan, and parts of India, China, and North Korea,<sup>1</sup> but has been widely proclaimed by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In 2007, IPCC Chairman Rajendra Puchari noted that: “It is the poorest of the poor in the world, and this includes poor people even in prosperous societies, who are going to be the worst hit [by climate change].”<sup>2</sup> This perspective is partially brought about by the fact that infrastructure does not exist in the poorest parts of the world to adequately respond to climatological crises, but it also refers to the idea that many of these populations make their living in ecologically vulnerable places in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, B. (2010). The Asian Floods- Signs of Climate Catastrophes to Come? [Available Online]: <http://ecocentric.blogs.time.com/2010/08/09/climate-change-and-the-asian-floods%E2%80%94sign-of-catastrophes-to-come/>

<sup>2</sup> “UN Climate Change Impact Report. Poor Will Suffer Most.” (2007). [Available Online]: <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/apr2007/2007-04-06-01.asp>

The awareness of the potentially fatal consequences of environmental change, it seems, are acutely understood by the international society as a whole, not just the affluent part of humanity. Surely, this is a global problem that should be conceived as a global security issue; this takes us back to the main contention that Dalby maintains throughout the book.

Dalby kicks off his deconstruction of how we have come to understand the concept of “environmental security” with an informative tracing of the evolution of the topic, which evaluates how it has been understood through international treaties, domestic policy debates, media representations, and even pop culture. This genealogy begins with discussion of the infamous Thomas Malthus—the Reverend, the political economist, and the man credited with sparking much of the doom and gloom discourse that surrounds environmentalism. It is not clear whether Dalby intends to channel Malthus in his push for a reframing of the environmental discourse into security terms, but he succeeds in conveying the imperative for doing so. The value of this section of *Security and environmental change* should not be underestimated, as it offers an overview on a breadth of security and environmental scholarship, which would extend the literature review for any aspiring PhD student in the field of environmental security. It is clear through his understanding of the history and emergence of environmental security that Dalby is able to speak across the disciplines, to engage the issue from a variety of perspectives, including political science, sociology, environmental science, anthropology, and security studies, to name a few.

We are left with a question: *why* should environmental security be addressed as a security issue? To address this, we might go further to conduct an investigation of sorts (which Dalby only does indirectly) into the motives for allowing or disallowing a reframing of the topic by politicians, academics, institutions, corporations and citizens alike. The question we should be asking is: *What* and *who* would benefit from moving in the discursive direction that Dalby wants to take us? What is revealed in *Security and Environmental Change* are the complexities and explanations that coincide

environmental change; yet, left uncovered is the question of agency, that is, whether a move toward a framework of environmental security inherently assumes political will.

Operating from the premise that we are, in fact, living in the Anthropocene Era in which human activities have had a significant impact on ecological systems, *Security and environmental change* evaluates not only the impact that human activity has had on the environment but also the potential for human activity to address the consequences of these very actions. While this is a salient point, I also believe that there needs to be a recognition of the arrogance (albeit idealistic sentiment) that is inherent in many efforts to engineer our way out of environmental change. This is a length to which the author is not willing to go. But, just as Dalby contends, climate crises and environmental degradation are the impetus for a wholesale rethinking of governance and require action; the conversation of environmental security is merely a beginning, but it is important because it frames the discussion in the light of securing the earth for all of humanity, not just for the greed of corporations, for the interests of political elites, and for the luxuries of the richest one percent. Anthropocentric modes of thinking are outdated, and what is needed is an embracing of the knowledge that we are intimately connected to our biosphere. Dalby contextualizes this very point for his reader by saying:

Posing the question of whether our society is facing collapse so bluntly, in other words as an existential threat, does suggest that environmental matters ought to be thought of in terms of security. Environmental security is, in this sense, about the conditions that make civilization possible, and these need to be secured as the precondition for all other human activities; therefore if ever there is a security issue this is surely it! But specifying precisely what those conditions are isn't so easy, given the adaptability of human societies and the possibilities for additional technological innovation in the immediate future (35).

It is not the technical innovations that Dalby sees as an obstacle to overcoming our failure to address environmental change. Instead, it is at the societal level that the most work is left to do—specifically in the consumer culture of the core Global North developed countries.

Interestingly enough, Dalby seems to illustrate the fracture between the awareness of citizens in industrialized countries as to their complicity and responsibility in the broader scheme of climate change and their willingness to activate change. He states:

Understanding the ecological consequences of our actions suggest the extreme folly of such heroic individualism fostered in contemporary commodity culture. The greatest challenge for both the physical and social consumption culture that celebrates human 'domination' of nature as virtue (159).

Ultimately, with this statement, Dalby is talking about the importance of keeping the human at the center of the discussion on security because in the end, what good does it do to secure economic flow of resources or political office if the Earth cannot sustain human life? Time and again, Dalby returns to this familiar refrain throughout the book. He is trying to find a common vocabulary to bridge the disparate languages of environmental science and security studies and enable them to mesh in a way that makes intellectual sense and overall, his argument is successfully made.

Securing the environment can be interpreted in many ways and for many purposes. For example, the environment can be secured in the sense of obtaining land for the single-minded purpose of resource extraction and economic gain. Securing the environment can also be understood in terms of preventing against the failing infrastructure in the developing world. However, Dalby makes the argument that we should secure the environment from further deterioration as a matter of national and global security. It seems that his argument has been taken up, to a large degree, by governments and militaries around the world. The idea does not appear as contentious as it once did for there is a general collective acceptance that environmental change is happening, that we are living in the Anthropocene, that climate change and catastrophe are real security issues that should be addressed by the international community. Dalby has succeeded in reframing the issue and has also succeeded in bringing this topic to the forefront of scholarly literature.

But, the discourse does not die in academia; there is also a move toward “environmental security” within other epistemic communities as well. Indeed, climate change and the resulting impacts have been identified by the Pentagon as one of the major threats that the U.S. military will face in the coming years. In 2009, the *New York Times* reported that “Recent war games and intelligence studies conclude that over the next 20 to 30 years, vulnerable regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, will face the prospect of food shortages, water crises and catastrophic flooding driven by climate change that could demand an American humanitarian relief or military response.”<sup>3</sup> Even in one of the most reticent places for adoption of the idea that moving toward a more ecocentric way of life (the United States) would be best for all of humanity, the reframing of the issue into the context of national security seems to get people on board.

Throughout *Security and environmental change*, Dalby asks us to consider whether discussing environmental concerns in the context of security is the right approach. By the end, it seems that we can respond with a resounding ‘yes!’ However, there are still questions that should be considered for the future. What exactly are we securing by moving toward a new frame? Is it the status quo of the human condition? Is it economic progress? Political position for elites? Or, perhaps, it is the resources of the Earth? Security for *whom* and at *what* cost? Of course, unpacking these questions would result in an exceedingly tangled mess that would result in no single answer.

*Security and environmental change* illustrates the complexities of our contemporary political, environmental, social, and economic world. Dalby’s reframing of environmentalism into terms of security allows us to question notions that have been filed away, perhaps for too long, on the shelf of Truth. Although conflating environmentalism and security may serve to coordinate the international community for a much-needed response to environmental change, there are some limitations to

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<sup>3</sup> Broder, J. (2009) “Climate Change Seen as a Threat to U.S. Security.” [Available Online]: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/science/earth/09climate.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/science/earth/09climate.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)



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Dalby's approach. While intended to paint the picture of environmental security with broad strokes, it would be interesting to see a deeper discussion of responsibility and agency from Dalby. Throughout the text, there are allusions to this very thread, but it is not one that Dalby highlights effectively enough. Overall, Dalby offers a convincing case and demonstrates the need for flexibility in language—a tool that could be a very powerful force for good in the case of securing the Earth's environment for the future of humanity. It is apparent that Dalby understands the strength of discourse and that there is one very uncomfortable "truth," that we should become accustomed to—that the discourse sometimes needs to be manipulated, needs to be changed, needs to evolve in order to get us out of stale ways of thinking on how we might address the problems of our contemporary world.