

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Robert P. Marzec, *Militarizing the Environment: Climate Change and the Security State*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780816697229 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816697236 (paper)

On the first page of *Militarizing the Environment*, Robert Marzec names the shift that propels the text a “general trend to decentralize and expand the security society by replacing the nation-state collective fantasy of national security with the new planetary ecological-state collective fantasy of natural security” (p.1). Despite its scope, this is an analytical claim, and a historical one, but it is also unquestionably a geographical assertion. And yet it is the *national* security state that haunts the book: even before this initial argument, Marzec opens with a “Climate Change War Game” staged by a think-tank called the Center for a New American Security.

The juxtaposition of the national and the planetary as different scales of security—as geopolitical horizons—is not an irresolvable combination. Indeed, the history of the United States suggests that the pairing is nothing new. More broadly, the relationship between imperialism practised by some form of a nation-state, and that state’s global aspirations, is well known. Marzec’s more substantial claim, then, concerns a shift in a *type* of security, characterized by “the extension of the military and the national security state into the arena of environmentalism” (p.1). The “collective fantasy of natural security” is therefore still very much a national one, even if the search for natural security reaches beyond the state and the invocation of security exceptions to claim “the true order of life itself” (p.200).

This matters, because it aligns with the significant ambitions but hazy contours of Marzec’s project. For most of the book, the US stands in for “the national”. And while vaguely defined, the “militarization” of the title is unquestionably an American process, with the armed forces of the US (again, treated more or less homogeneously) and the associated world of

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American think-tanks, boosters, and contractors at the heart of the story. There are other actors present in the drama, but when the American participants fade from view, it is largely because Marzec moves backward in time, prior to the advent of the US “security society” that he dates to World War II and particularly the initial, mushroom-clouded years of the Cold War. But as the book’s title and the introductory anecdote suggest, Marzec’s intervention is ultimately a near-present one, located in a “post-Cold War, post-homeland security” period (even if the evidence for the second term is scant). To be sure, as my colleague Emily Gilbert (2012:1) noted in a paper which anticipated a number of Marzec’s concerns, over the last decade the US Department of Defense (along with other militaries) has used scientific consensus to explicitly tie environmental change to national security, and to present climate change as what it calls a “threat multiplier” (see also p.2).

Although distinct (as “multiplier” suggests), the recognition of climate change as a military threat should also be understood as just one more phase in a lengthy—even ancient—interest in “hostile nature”. Whether or not Marzec is entirely successful in the attempt, the achievement of *Militarizing the Environment* is to recognize and explore this longer history and its affiliations with the present. The risk, of course, is that historical and geographical specificity dissipate, in order to suggest, for example, following Alfred Crosby (1986), that “the relationship between the military and the environment spans the entire length of the modern era and extends even several centuries before Columbus’s arrival in America” (p.11). This sort of comment sits awkwardly alongside the more specific reinvention of the US military as a supposedly environmentalist force in the early 1990s (Ross 1996), or the mid-20th century militarization of a global *set* of environments while the US built an unprecedented “base world” that persists today (see Farish 2010; Vine 2015). If what Marzec calls *environmentality*, or “environmentalism turned into a policing action” (p.4), is both a symptom of the present and a much older condition,

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this, like “globalization”, would seem to encourage historical and geographical care (for an earlier, unacknowledged use of the term, see Agrawal 2005). However, Marzec, a literary and cultural critic, is after a different sort of contribution, evident in his reliance on a modest set of secondary sources for much of the historical excavation in the book.

A brief search suggests that substantial portions of *Militarizing the Environment*—or earlier versions of this content—have appeared in journal article form, although these debts are not entirely apparent in the final product. One acknowledged predecessor is an intriguing essay in *Public Culture* (Marzec 2014), which has been repurposed as part of Chapter 1. Already a bold piece, “Militarized Ecologies” was nonetheless directly concerned with Indigenous demonstrations against dam construction in Brazil, alongside a discussion of militarized environmental imagery. In book form, however, the associated chapter begins with a discussion of the Manhattan Project and total war; segues into an extended exploration of Paul Virilio’s theory of “accidents”; returns to nuclear testing; pivots briefly to recent evidence for climate change; pulls back to a discussion of the older military desire for a “transcendent view from above” (p.48); finds a notable example of this “view” in the early-Cold War SAGE (or Semi-Automatic Ground Environment) computer system; adds a few paragraphs on the CIA’s (recently concluded) MEDEA climate research initiative; and *then* moves to the Amazonian rainforest, with a generous dose of Agamben and Rancière to boot. Some of this material is deftly handled, even provocative, and some of it did receive a lighter treatment in *Public Culture*. But collectively, for this reader, it was too much—in a single chapter, no less. To take the slice I am most familiar with, Marzec’s historical discussion of SAGE, a fascinating project, is drawn almost exclusively from Paul Edwards’s (1996) well-known study *The Closed World*, a valuable if inevitably incomplete account that deserves supplementation.

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Other chapters feature similar blizzards of possibility. While more focused, Chapter 3, for example, which ostensibly concerns “the human species as a geological force in the Anthropocene” (a characterization made, as Marzec notes, by Dipesh Chakrabarty; see Chakrabarty 2009, 2012), begins with atomic testing, but also includes the Prisoner’s Dilemma, a long summary of the thought of Manuel DeLanda, early computing and the military-scientific management of Vannevar Bush, and then finishes with the more recent military interest in “C3i”—command, control, communication, and information. Marzec’s salutary aim is to document the crucial (US) military role in the emergence, largely in the second half of the 20th century, of “a new version of the human”, one of potential “territorial transcendence” (p.151). To do so, though, he moves rapidly over ground that has been carefully covered by historians and other scholars of Cold War technoscience. And the combination of DeLanda with Chakrabarty (an uncomfortable one, in my view), along with a rather breathless emphasis on military initiatives, only increases the tendency toward universalism that has been diagnosed in many discussions of the “Anthropocene” (see, for example, Todd 2015).

Marzec is not alone in these predilections, and others will have more tolerance for his detour-prone approach than a historical geographer obsessed with two decades of US history. But surely the hubris—the critic’s privilege—of roaming across space and time carries some costs. A modest one, as I have mentioned, is the selective employment of secondary literatures—not just on military technoscience, but on colonialism and enclosure, on the material manifestations of “greening the military”, and other threads. These, moreover, are profoundly geographical topics, so the absence of geographers—Gilbert, or Scott Kirsch (2005), for example—is not just a matter for petulant complaint. There is obviously much in Marzec’s study that is proximate to geographical inquiry, but there is also a great deal that is distant, sometimes troublingly so, and this complicated combination invites important questions about the environmental humanities, at

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a moment when studies like Rob Nixon's (2011) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* are inspiring many inter- and trans-disciplinary conversations. Marzec's debt to Nixon, who heartily endorses *Militarizing the Environment* on the back cover, is clear. But even as Marzec's diagnosis of environmentality seems essential to understanding the relationship between (one form of) geopolitics and climate change, this *particular* relationship calls out for a more precise, lucid engagement (for a potential alternative, see Masco 2015).

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