Terra - Lefebvre, Geopolitics and the Killing of the Earth


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Abstract

In a few places in his four volume study De l’État, Henri Lefebvre briefly discusses the idea of ‘terricide’—the killing, destruction or death of the earth. He claims the poet Jean-Clarence Lambert as his inspiration, though his source is a mis-referenced dead-end. He also indicates, less directly, the philosopher Kostas Axelos as an inspiration. Lefebvre locates the tensions in the international state system, and suggests that while ‘reason of state’ might be attributed to each of the members, rationality does not characterise the system taken as a whole. His immediate context, writing in the mid-1970s, would seem to be the superpower conflict of the Cold War, but here and elsewhere there are hints that this might be linked to other issues—environmental degradation, modern technology, growth over development, the state mode of production and capitalism more generally. Indeed the term ‘terricide’ is used as the title of books by Ron M. Linton and Hubert Reeves that discuss the environment more directly.

How might Lefebvre’s spur to consider the potential destruction of the earth help us in rethinking geopolitics? Geopolitics is all-too-often seen as a synonym for global politics, international relations writ large, without much thought given to the globe, much less the world or the earth. But if geopolitics was to return to its etymological roots, as a politics of
the earth, it might productively link with discussions of geopower and geophilosophy in the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This piece brings Lefebvre into those discussions.

Introduction

Geopolitics has, today, become effectively a synonym for global or international politics. Armchair strategists still come up with grand plans for understanding and changing the world; critical geopolitics scholars offer broad analyses of such strategies and the interlinked relations of capital, state power, nationalism and territory. But even the critical geopolitics work tends to think of this as global or world politics—new ways for understanding and making sense of that particular scale. Could geopolitics be rethought in a way that was closer to the etymological roots of the word, as earth-politics, yet for progressive political purpose?

Geopolitics literally means politics of the 'geo', the earth, land, planet or world. Each of those terms would need to be thought carefully, both in relation to and differentiation from each other, and from a notion of the global. The focus here and in related work is on the question of the earth. It is the material, elemental, indeed earthy, sense that I want to discuss. A companion paper sketches a conceptual history of the ‘earth’, tracing the threefold etymology of ‘earth’ words in English – from the Anglo-Saxon *eorð* to the German *Erde* to ‘earth’; to the Latin *terra* and Norman French *terre*, which we find in words such as terrestrial and terrain; and the Greek geo-. This includes, of course, all the words like *geography*, *geology*, *geometry* and *geopolitics*.¹

In those terms we are perhaps losing the element of the geo, as earth, and replacing it with other ideas. So geopolitics is being re-conceived as global politics; geometry is a branch of mathematics, abstract and detached; geography is no longer earth-writing but a loose spatial sensibility to work that could equally have been done in International Relations, in Sociology, in Cultural Studies. Perhaps it is in geology that we find the true inheritor of the etymological sense of the term, the *logos* of the geo. Yet as Robert Frodeman notes, the term ‘geology’, while “once identified exclusively with the study of the solid Earth… has lost ground to ‘Earth sciences’… meant to highlight the need for an integrated study of air, water, soil, rock, ice, and biota”.²
The problem is how we can retrieve a more material, earthy, grounded sense of geopolitics without the reactionary politics of Friedrich Ratzel, of Blut und Boden, of Carl Schmitt – The Nomos of the Earth – or Martin Heidegger with his philosophical autochthony. A rootedness in the soil, the earth, seems destined to replicate the worst excesses of colonialist, settler, aggressive geopolitics. The ‘Earth’ paper works this through in detail and tries to highlight the problems.

Lefebvre’s notion of Terracide

This contribution, in distinction, introduces the notion of 'Terracide' within this project, a concept taken from Henri Lefebvre. It comes from a book that provides continual inspirational to my work, De l’État, parts of which appear in the State, Space, World collection I co-edited with Neil Brenner. In a few places in that four volume study, Lefebvre briefly discusses the idea of terricide—the killing, destruction or death of the earth. Lefebvre locates the tensions in the international state system, and suggests that while reason of state might be attributed to each of the members, rationality does not characterise the system taken as a whole. His immediate context, writing in the mid-1970s, is the superpower conflict of the Cold War, and he hints at the potential for the wholesale destruction of the earth. But here and elsewhere there are hints that this might be linked to other issues—environmental degradation, modern technology, growth being privileged over development, the state mode of production and capitalism more generally. Much of the book, especially its first volume, serves as an outline of work to come, though not all of that was actually accomplished.

This is the most extensive discussion of the idea, coming in the first volume:

The least that we can say today is that in the ‘state system’, the rationality attributed to each member is turned into its opposite. Some have called the ‘international system’ a structure of contradiction. It could be that this formulation signifies nothing other than a moving hierarchy and little structure of contradictions. Indeed, the contradiction opposes itself since it is a force directed towards the structure and breaks it apart [la fait éclater]. Whatever its theoretical definition, this system threatens the death of the planet. To deicide, parricide, matricide, regicide, genocide, ethnocide – in this escalation of crimes, a crime of a magnitude
previously unknown. To declared ends and countless murders, is added terricide [le terricide] (thus named by J.C. Lambert in the journal Opus International no 50).

Like a gigantic Easter Island, planetary space is covered with colossal forms, monstrous and fascinating statues, which are contrasted with the pettiness of those who erect them. What a spectacle for the galactic navigators whose possible arrival stimulated many fantasies! Astonishing, morally repugnant? A liberal and moral challenge, that of the ‘citizen against powers’ (the title of a book by the philosopher Alain) which believes itself profound but only represents the Protestantism of the state. No. First, understand; taken as object, not only as State, but also and above all the worldwide State system, provided that there is a system.

The planet only has an existence which is put in question: the terrestrial only becomes world which threatens, through uncertainty and the absence of a pre-ordained destiny. The philosopher says that the planet, in order to deserve its name which signifies errancy, must run the risk of destruction and that of man, to assert, through its self-negation, self-destruction. So that cannot be achieved only through this event and that the worldwide revolution and the death of the planet (planetary death) are so close are contained in the ‘play of the world [le jeu du monde]’ (K. Axelos). Death extends its domain to the stars, to galaxies: and the will to live only deploys only in the background, in refusing the will to death.

Lefebvre suggests that he takes this idea from Jean-Clarence Lambert, in Opus International, no. 50. Unfortunately, that issue of Opus International, while there are three short pieces by Lambert, does not contain a discussion of terricide. Clarence's website doesn't offer any help. Did Lefebvre did take this from Clarence but another source; or from a source he mistook for Clarence; or misremember it entirely? This is regrettably all-too-common with Lefebvre's references - the work that went into the notes for Key Writings and State, Space, World was extensive. The work of Kostas Axelos is, though, a crucial point of reference – one who Lefebvre frequently referred to in the 1960s and 1970s. Lefebvre does little with the idea, beyond these suggestive passages.

Terricide beyond Lefebvre
What happens to this notion of terricide? There are very few places anywhere that the notion of ‘terrice’ is ever discussed. But, as well as being the name of a video-game, a metal band, the word ‘terrace’, spelt with an ‘a’, does appear to be used in a few more instances. James A. Tyner’s The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide and the Unmaking of Space has the term in the back cover blurb, and at least one review, though it does not make an appearance in the text itself. There is at least one instance of the word ‘terrace’ being used to describe US involvement in Vietnam in 1972. Of course, related terms such as ‘urbicide’ are increasingly commonly used to describe the targeting of the environment in works like Martin Coward’s Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction or Stephen Graham’s Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism. The notion of ecocide, as the destruction of lived environments, has been discussed since the 1970s, with ten countries having laws against it on their statute books. Additionally Sarah Jane Meharg has identified a number of other terms that she relates to the notion of genocide, including ethnocide, topocide, gendercide and memoricide; proposing the term identicide as a precursor to genocide.

Lefebvre means this term in a way that is rather more concrete and specific: the actual killing of the earth or the death of the planet through nuclear war, and especially through the imbalances created in the move from the “(bounded [limitee]) rationality of the state to the irrationality of the state system”. So in distinction to ‘reason of state’, the ‘rationality’ of the state, the state as a realisation of reason, we have the irrational, anarchic, world system. It is this, more than an environmental perspective, which is at the forefront of his term – though the environmental angle is undoubtedly one that could be developed with resources from his work.

This notion is not dissimilar to the category of ‘exterminism’ proposed by Edward P. Thompson in the early 1980s. Thompson suggests that “Exterminism designates those characteristics of a society—expressed, in differing degrees, within its economy, its polity and its ideology—which thrust it in a direction whose outcome must be the extermination of multitudes... Exterminism is a configuration of this order, whose institutional base is the weapons system, and the entire economic, scientific, political and ideological support-system to that weapons-system—the social system which researches it, ‘chooses it’, produces it, polices it, justifies it, and maintains it in being”.
essay, Rudolf Bahro elaborates things in a more Heideggerian direction: “The first precondition for the arms race is, of course, modern industry as such. Exterminism is rooted in the very foundations of this system and its innermost driving forces. Exterminism does not just find expression in nuclear weapons and power stations; it is the quintessence of the whole complex of tools and machines operative on humanity and the planet”. Implicit, rather than explicit, here, is the destruction of the earth itself, and not merely the life existing upon it. And it is with regard to that element that Lefebvre’s suggestive notion is helpful.

From a more environmental point of view, Ron M. Linton’s 1970 book Terricide: America’s destruction of her living environment, and Hubert Reeves’s more recent Terricide (a translation of a book originally under the title Mal de terre) looks at similar issues. Linton has a more local and national focus, and Reeves a more global one. Linton looks at examples of air, water, noise pollution and the damage of pesticides, industrial dumping, and powerplants. Most recently, Tom Engelhardt at TomDispatch.com has written an article entitled “Terricide and the Terrarists: Destroying the Planet for Record Profits”. Engelhardt suggests that

We have a word for the conscious slaughter of a racial or ethnic group: genocide. And one for the conscious destruction of aspects of the environment: ecocide. But we don’t have a word for the conscious act of destroying the planet we live on, the world as humanity had known it until, historically speaking, late last night. A possibility might be “terracide” from the Latin word for earth. It has the right ring, given its similarity to the commonplace danger word of our era: terrorist.

He notes: “Thanks go to my colleague and friend Nick Turse for coming up with the word "terracide."” Turse is, of course, not the beginning of the use of the term. In English, Linton surely deserves that credit. But even if the term has a more complicated history the point is well made. The ‘late last night’ comment is in relation to the passing of the 400 parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere, recorded on 10th May 2013.

Perhaps, then, integral to a critical evaluation of the politics of the earth – a rethinking of geopolitics; a regrounding of geopolitics – is the possibility of its destruction. Yet this means we are moving from earth as an element, a ground, a process, to the Earth as planet, the
Earth, which is an inquiry that would go in different directions to the material, elemental notion. Nonetheless, Lefebvre is a useful point of reference in all this work.

On the Anthropocene and Capitalism

With the recent resurgence of interest in Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of geophilosophy, especially in relation to the work done by Elizabeth Grosz on the notion of ‘geopower’, these conversations might be usefully brought into relation with Lefebvre. One of Grosz’s comments on geopower is especially telling:

“The relations between the earth and its various forces, and living beings and their not always distinguishable forces, are forms of geopower, if power is to be conceived as the engagement of clashing, competing forces… Power—the relations between humans, or perhaps even between living things—is a certain, historically locatable capitalisation on the forces of geopower.”

Lefebvre’s focus on the world, and as a theorist of mondialisation (rather than globalisation); as a theorist of space, and the state, and of state space; and the political economy angle he introduces with the state mode of production add some crucial elements into all of this. 

It is notable that Lefebvre is a crucial inspiration for the work Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid are doing on the ideas of concentrated and extended urbanisation.

This idea is developed in a separate paper by Brenner, and forms one of the key conceptual underpinnings of Brenner and Schmid’s forthcoming book *Planetary Urbanization*.

Concentrated urbanization looks at agglomerations, the standard focus of urban work. Extended urbanization are the implications beyond such agglomerations, not as a ‘rural’ that is understood as ‘not urban’, but as a terrain that

“has been neither empty nor disconnected from the process of agglomeration; it has actually evolved dynamically through a complex, constantly thickening web of economic, social and ecological connections to the heartlands of urban concentration across every zone of the world economy. Though largely ignored or relegated to the analytic background by most urban theorists, such transformations—materialized in densely tangled circuits of labor, commodities, cultural forms, energy, raw materials and nutrients—simultaneously radiate
outwards from the immediate zone of agglomeration and implode back into it as the urbanization process unfolds. Within this extended, increasingly worldwide field of urban development, agglomerations form, expand, shrink and morph continuously, but always via dense webs of relations to other places, whose historical patterns and developmental pathways are in turn mediated ever more directly through their modes of connection/disconnection to the hegemonic zones of urban concentration”.

The extended urbanization thesis is a major contribution, both strikingly original and perceptive. And, coupled with the potential of terricide/terracide, can help to make sense of a range of contemporary questions relating to capitalism, the urban condition, globalisation and the earth/world. How does Brenner and Schmid’s rethinking of urbanisation, and my work on territory help us to understand the world? Not a world divided into territories, but a territorialized world. Not a world that contains urban centres, concentrations or agglomerations, but an increasingly urbanized world? And the latter not as a world that has a majority urban population, but where concentration and extension operate in manifold ways. Lefebvre is helpful, in part, because of his insistence on the crucial role of capitalism in these changes.

In addition, Lefebvre’s work on nature has been picked up, developed and critiqued by various geographers, including of course Neil Smith, and related inquiries by Noel Castree, Bruce Braun and others. These ideas of nature, its production and destruction are crucial if we are to make sense of what Simon Dalby has called ‘Anthropocene Geopolitics’. In that, at least, we should insist on a serious, critical, focus on the notion of the ‘Geo’, more than there has been in past, even in critical geopolitics.

The ‘Anthropocene’ has been criticised as being anthropocentric, which of course, it is. In a sense, that is precisely the point. Questions have raised of how posthumanism or more-than-human geographies might be related to this. But the term ‘Anthropocene’, as Noel Castree noted in his discussant comments to the first RGS-IBG session on Geo-social Formations, is the term being used, and being discussed. While we might be more theoretically sound if we tried to replace the term, we are likely to end up being outside of the conversation. So it may be better to keep the term and complicate its meaning than try to replace it with another. The same might be said of ‘geopolitics’, and why ideas of
‘political geology’ and so on might divert from the crucial issues at stake. As Peter Dicken said of globalisation and geography, debates about the Anthropocene should not be another “missed boat”.

Thinking the relation between the Anthropocene and capitalism is one way to make sense of these questions. The geographical perspective is, of course, crucial in this. But if we are to make sense of the geopolitics of climate change, the advent of the Anthropocene as perhaps a new form or threat of ‘terracide’, we should not turn the ‘geopolitics’ into a synonym for international politics. Rather we should try to think the geo-politics, the earth-politics, the processes and transformations of geo-power. Lefebvre may be of use in such an inquiry, especially between of his understandings of capitalism, nature and the world.

Notes

1 See Stuart Elden, “Earth”, in progress.
5 The word ‘planet’ is, literally, wanderer, from the Greek ‘wandering star’, ἀστήρ πλανήτης.
8 http://www.jeanclarencelambert.org/


Lefebvre, *De l’État* Vol I, p. xv; *State, Space, World*, p. 98.


