

IR's Great Derangement: Climate Change Coverage in IR Journals 2017–2021

Written by George Moody

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GEORGE MOODY, FEB 6 2024

Amitav Ghosh has identified contemporary culture's failure to reflect the critical seriousness of the climate crisis we face as 'the great derangement', noting that given 'what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over – and this, I think, is very far from being the case' (Ghosh 2017, 8). Ghosh, a significant novelist himself, initially focuses on literary fiction, identifying the form of the novel, rather than any failing in the understanding of novelists, as the driver of the 'failure of imagination' that lies at root of this derangement. That is, the structure of literary fiction, built around individual narrative and 'realism' renders the exceptional and the catastrophic 'improbable' or 'uncanny', meaning it cannot grasp climate change and its effects: they lie outside of its ambit, even as the unprecedented and disastrous effects of climate change become the reality shaping the lives of increasing multitudes globally. Of course, the exclusion within fiction is not total. Ghosh points to science fiction and other speculative forms of genre fiction dealing with the issue, but thereby reinforcing the underlying point that it is the gatekeeping of forms to be accepted as 'serious' fiction that lies at the heart of the problem (Thomas et al. 2016).

Ghosh is renowned for both his fiction and non-fiction works, one of *Foreign Policy's* '100 Global Thinkers' (Foreign Policy 2019), and he extends the key insight, that this derangement is a structural effect of cultural forms rather than a psychological unwillingness to address the issue, to the fields of politics and international relations. The core structuring concept of 'realism' for literary fiction becomes 'freedom' for politics and the (denial of) inequality for international relations, with both having the same deleterious impact on grasping the issue within these intellectual frames, and of marginalising any such engagement to a place outside the 'serious' mainstream. *The Great Derangement* is a short work and, while he provides us with a significant indicator of a possible issue in the discipline of International Relations, Ghosh does not explore it in any depth – something I seek to start to do in this article.

Ghosh started from the observation that contemporary literary fiction does not address climate change to the degree one would expect, and one can make the same observation of International Relations. There is a clear gap in the literature where the topic is concerned. My analysis of articles from the five years 2017-2021 from the top 25 International Relations journals (as per Clarivate Journal Citation Report 2020), detailed in Table 1 below, indicates that IR is suffering from its own great derangement: climate change scarcely features, appearing in only 6% of articles. And, where it does appear, it is often in the role of a case study, used for the application of theoretical tools to, for example, climate negotiations, rather than being the substantive focus in and of itself. This confirms the persistence of the earlier findings of Jessica Green and Thomas Hale's analysis of the 2014 TRIP faculty survey data, where only 2.34% of the articles in the TRIP database had a substantive focus on environmental issues (Green and Hale 2017a), and extends the findings of Sending, Øverland, and Hornburg from 2020 that '[o]nly 0.77 percent of the articles in five top international relations (IR) journals between 2015 and 2019 were about climate change' (Sending, Øverland, and Hornburg 2020, 183).

This lack of attention seems particularly surprising as tackling the challenge of climate change is a problem of which the greatest difficulties are resolutely located at the international level, posing precisely the need to overcome conflict to enable collective action in a fractured political system that lies at the motivating core of IR theory of all kinds. Beneath talk of a global problem requiring a global solution lies the international, as it remains the case that

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'any global agreement will have to be chiselled out in the context of states with different interests and power', with the concomitant 'risk that the difficulty of cooperation under anarchy will mean that responses keep being delayed and inadequate' (Møller 2021).

Indeed, when treated with requisite seriousness, the effects of climate change and the need to address it supersede many traditional preoccupations of the field. As Anatol Lieven recently put it as he considered the increasingly urgent need to address this existential challenge, he 'developed a stronger and stronger sense of the comparative irrelevance of most of the issues on which I have been working in the areas of international relations and security studies' (Lieven 2020: xi).

Is IR Deranged?: IR Journal Analysis

To get a sense of the scale of the gap in the discipline where one would expect to find consistent consideration of climate change, articles from the five years 2017-2021 inclusive from the 25 most impactful International Relations journals were analysed. The analysis covered the five years from January 2017 through to December 2021 for the top 25 International Relations journals in the Clarivate Journal Citation Report 2020.

The journals were searched in the Web of Science for research articles (excluding book reviews, corrections etc.) using the keywords: anthropocene; climate change; global warming; and, climate crisis. The titles and abstracts of all articles returned by the search were then manually checked with no false results found. The abstracts of all articles published in the relevant five years in four randomly selected journals (*Cooperation & Conflict*, *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Millennium*) were then manually checked for articles related to climate change, with no discrepancies found between the results returned by the search and human assessment of relevant articles in the time period. A further check and a longer time frame was searched for the three journals with 0% coverage, with the *Chinese Journal of International Politics* having four climate change related articles pre-2017, *World Politics*' most recent being from 2015, and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* having sporadic coverage of eco-terrorism (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2014; Kallenborn and Bleek 2020; Craig, Overbeek, and Niedbala 2021).

The results are striking, and relatively uniform across the journals considered as shown in Table 1. The overall rate of articles concerning climate change was 6%. *Global Environmental Politics* is an unsurprising outlier, with 43.4% of articles climate change related. With *Global Environmental Politics* excluded, the range was from 0% (*Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *World Politics*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*) to 12% (*Marine Policy*). It was also notable that while this time period covered several special issues and 'fora/discussions' across the four journals manually assessed, none of these special issues covered climate change, focusing instead on topics such as ontological security, and 'everyday IR' (*Cooperation & Conflict*), and the Covid 19 pandemic, and challenges to the liberal international order (*International Organization*).

As noted above, *Global Environmental Politics* stands somewhat apart from the rest of the group, as a prominent outlet of a subfield, and, as Green and Hale note in their study, the prevalence of climate change related articles therein serves to support the general point: 'IR scholars who want to contribute to scholarly discussions on environmental issues generally do so in journals that are read principally by other specialists, not in the journals that lead the field as a whole' (Green and Hale 2017a, 474).

While there can be dispute over exactly which are the IR journals that lead the field, the top 25 by impact factor serves as an acceptable proxy for the mainstream, and overall it is clear that climate change is not, in journal publication at least, regarded as one of the principal concerns of IR. *Global Environmental Politics* does also point to one of the limitations of the analysis, in that it is focused only on climate change, not the environment or ecology more broadly: a manual check of abstracts in *Global Environmental Politics* ineluctably brought coverage of this wider set of concerns up to 100%. Nonetheless, the manual checks performed on selected journals confirmed Green and Hale's earlier finding that 'environment-related research is focused almost exclusively on climate change' (*ibid*).

The Nature of the Derangement

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There are a number of ways to explain this lack of engagement, and how we get from here to a more healthily engaged discipline is a question of critical importance. Sending and Overland Hornburg suggest more engagement at the conceptual level, offering a five-pronged research agenda where interaction with climate change requires greater scholarly attention across sovereignty, security, the geopolitics of energy, status and reputation, and norms and coalitions (Sending, Øverland, and Hornburg 2020). Jessica Green and Thomas Hale similarly suggest that the 'lack of attention to environmental problems in our discipline is particularly unfortunate because political science has such effective concepts and theories for addressing these kinds of problems', and point to some immediate and practical barriers to consideration in the discipline, such as graduate course curricula, and gender imbalances in publication in top journals: issues that could perhaps have fairly straightforward bureaucratic fixes (Green and Hale 2017b). However, they do also indicate a potential need for some radical reformulation, as 'the reality of politics in the Anthropocene may lead political scientists to more fundamental questions about political order, the nature of contemporary capitalism, and state survival than are commonly tackled in the field' (Green and Hale 2017a, 476). Given the distinct lack of progress in this area since these considerations it is latter direction I follow here, taking seriously the idea of derangement from Amitav Ghosh.

As introduced earlier, for Ghosh the fundamental issue is that the political imagination of modernity is not up to the task of grasping the challenge we face precisely because it is the political imagination of modernity. As Fa-ti Fan puts it in considering Ghosh, the problem is that the 'dominant political theories, organizations, and actions are products of modernity, such as Enlightenment principles (e.g., rights, liberty, and rational democracy), nation-states, and interstate organizations', compounded by the global spread of this approach through Western imperialism (Thomas et al. 2016, 944).

Olaf Corry applies as similar insight in considering the IR discipline. Noting that 'colonisation and later industrialisation and the growth of modern (European) state apparatus all underpinned how knowledge production came to be organised in distinct disciplines' and further that 'European colonialism solidified and spread the 'Cartesian' nature-human divide as an organising epistemological and normative distinction, in the process placing much of the human and non-human world on the 'nature' side of the equation, subject to scientific objectification and military-administrative domination' (Corry 2022, 296).

We should therefore perhaps not expect IR as we know it to be able to address this issue well. All social scientific disciplines are, structurally, in effect reifications of existing social structures, always in danger of becoming artefacts, even relics of societies past, and as our societies have been built on an unthinking exploitation of an assumed to be passive and benign ecology, a fundamentally external and stable natural world, so are our disciplines.

The temporality and artificiality of the disciplinary matrices we place over reality is something of which IR should be inherently aware – thanks to its relatively recent creation in a specific Anglo-American context (and synchronous with the invention of the departmental structure of universities in the US, Waever 2020) combined with its penchant for frequent reference back to holistic, pre-disciplinary antecedents, often right the way back to the fifth century BC and Thucydides – though it does not always seem cognisant of its disciplinary effects, or particularly interested in a sociology of disciplinarity and the role of external factors in disciplinary developments (Rosamond 2006; Waever 1998).

Thinking on disciplinary identity and development has long been structured by the 'great debates' over meta-theory and paradigms within the discipline, with more recent disciplinary twists and 'turns' also explicitly concerning themselves with, and having been understood in terms of metatheory or the sociology of the discipline internally (e.g as a Bourdieusian field) (Baele and Bettiza 2021; Heiskanen and Beaumont 2023). Recently, Ole Wæver has reasserted the importance of the 'great debates' framework to the discipline's identity and structure in an overall argument stressing disciplinary stability and continuity over time. For Wæver, the disappearance of a field or reorganisation of the social sciences is unlikely, even to 'get away from the nineteenth-century assumptions about society, state and international built into the current disciplines' (Waever 2020, 310).

Wæver may be right, but it is worth reflecting that our discipline has only really existed during the continuity of one dominant overarching 'Western idea' (Fukuyama 1989, 3) and, as we do not know how climate change will drive

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social change, it may well be salutary to look to the other side of the experience of the 'end of history': salutary as, while we do not know, there is a good chance that the response to climate change, managed or otherwise, will involve tectonic shifts to the current social structure and parameters.

Prior to its collapse, political science and IR as disciplines did not exist in the USSR. Research in this area was 'conducted under a series of different disciplinary labels (scientific communism, philosophy, history, regional studies, law and sociology)' (Chulitskaya *et al.* 2022) and training in international relations was offered 'only in the two elite Soviet universities that trained future diplomats – Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Institute of International Relations (Kiev State University, Ukraine)', and seen as an empirical/historical rather than theoretical area of study (Sergunin 2023).

The Soviet disciplinary matrix, within which the concerns of political science were seen to be found at the 'meeting point of scientific communism and legal sciences' and felt to be covered between them (Brown 1986: 450), was designed to further the sociocultural project of the USSR, with the higher education system seen as an important player in the formation of the new Soviet man and as an instrument of economic progress (Smolentseva, Huisman, and Froumin 2018). Marxism, which served as an official theoretical basis for the social sciences, unified this matrix, and 'both ontologically and epistemologically, presented an important challenge to Western social sciences and international relations' (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010; also Sergunin 2023). Of note on internal barriers to change within a discipline (and of relevance to Wæver's discussion of the contemporary discipline introduced above), the mix of paradigmatic uniformity and perceptions that new disciplines would present a threat to existing institutional and disciplinary interests meant that even where weaknesses in the approach to international relations of this disciplinary structure were recognised, they did not lead to the establishment of IR as a discipline. (Brown 1986).

With the collapse of the Soviet model came a post-Soviet disciplinary restructuring and the 'task of establishing IR and political science departments in the Russian universities in the early 1990s' (Sergunin 2023, 39), which transformed the nature of theorising on the international away from Marxism, including by excising the economic aspect in an interaction with the simultaneous state and social restructuring taking place (see Stone 2007 for an interesting insider discussion of the role of disciplinary restructuring in creating the cadre necessary for this socio-political transformation). This variegated history to IR in the former Soviet states, in which 'global IR' and the Soviet experience are combined with national pre-Soviet approaches to IR has created a diverse and interesting contemporary discipline there, and, more immediately important for us, clearly reveals the relation of the disciplinary matrix to the external political-economic structure of a society.

However, we need not concern ourselves here over whether one of these particular competing matrices is somehow normatively superior to the other, or even, more reflective of social reality, because, from our advantaged – albeit rather existentially precarious – standpoint we can see that both of these academic structures reflect the respective society's dominant ideological understanding of the variation of modernity seen in their society, and, of most importance, they do not have the nature of the relationship with the ecological as constitutive. Neither bear immanent within them the required political imagination.

The post-Communist world underwent shock therapy, a big bang of transition, and this was reflected in the mode of the restructuring of their social sciences, with a radical transformation and imposition of a Western model. The transition to a society that can successfully address the challenge of climate change may not be such a shock but is likely nonetheless to lead to a deep restructuring in the social scientific field, with the analysis of our current great derangement above indicating why this need be so.

Table 1: Climate Change Articles in Top 25 IR Journals 2017–2021

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