

Call for papers

Climate Change, Empire and the Legacies of Environmental Determinism

LMU Munich, 18-19 March 2024

A two-day workshop exploring the imperial legacies of environmental determinism in an age of changing habitability and climatic crisis.

We live in a time when concern about human effects on the environment and climate are greater than ever. For much of human history, however, the opposite was true, and environments' and climates' effects on people were often the more pressing concern.¹ Environmental or climatic determinism – the idea that people are shaped physically, culturally and even morally – by their environments has a long and often insidious history. Determinist thinking had particular utility in the age of European and global empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, taking on new forms amidst attempts to expand and justify imperial dominance. Everything from 'energy' to racial characteristics and from 'civilisational success' to the limits of habitability were seen as environmentally and climatically determined.

The historiography has traditionally suggested that imperial forms of environmental determinism peaked in the early 20th century, with the likes of Ellsworth Huntington, Ellen Church Semple and Friedrich Ratzel reaching racist and Eurocentric heights that are still being unravelled by geographers and historians dealing with the dark pasts of their disciplines. Despite an alleged mid-20th century lull, ideas linking climate and 'civilisation' never really went away (not least in debates about desertification). Today, these ideas are once again being reconfigured in new and troubling ways, such as in the deterministic language sometimes employed around climate and migration, which risks echoing racist, early 20th-century visions of 'nomadic hordes'.

In a world where our futures are increasingly understood as entangled with anthropogenic climate change, scholars have recently examined various forms of neodeterminism and 'climate reductionism', recognising the need to understand the legacies of the environmentally determinist imperial categories that still shape our geographical and environmental imaginations.² With the Anthropocene concept placing human and planetary histories and futures on the same scale, tracing the language of environmental determinism has similarly become imperative.³

This workshop aims to contextualise environmentally determinist ideas historically and to examine their reconfigurations in the face of today's climate crisis. To do so, this workshop will consider, among others, the following questions:

- Why have environmentally determinist ideas been so persistent and pervasive, and how did they serve global empires?
- How did environmentally determinist thinking feature in imperial debates about 'improvement' and the appropriation of land, people and resources?

- How, on the other hand, were determinist explanations rejected by some imperial agents who instead sought to manage and manipulate climates through advances in medicine and terraforming and geoengineering schemes (especially to enable settler-colonialism)?
- How are environmentally determinist notions embedded in the related ideas of ‘habitability’, ‘uninhabitability’ and debates about demography and the limits of where on Earth we can live?
- How were environmentally determinist ideas adapted into new understandings of climate change and stability in the 19th and 20th centuries, including at a global scale?
- Beyond its simplicity, why has environmental determinism so often appealed to scholars in explaining historical phenomena, from the fall empires to the movement of peoples, and what disconnections emerge from this?
- How do the imperial legacies of environmental determinism inform thinking about climate change today, for example around ‘climate refugees’ and migration?

While primarily historical in its methodological focus, this conference also welcomes contributions from adjacent disciplines, including the history of science, art history, anthropology, geography, literary studies and environmental humanities. Papers from early career (including graduate) researchers dealing with the theme of empire and environmental determinism from the 19th to 21st centuries (in any part of the world) are welcome in addition to those from established scholars.

The workshop will take place in-person at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect at the LMU Munich, Germany. Accommodation in Munich will be provided and some support for travel may be available. To express your interest in the workshop, please submit a 300-word abstract and a short CV by Friday 8 December 2023.

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¹ Alison Bashford and Sarah W. Tracy, ‘Introduction: Modern Airs, Waters, and Places’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 86, no. 4 (2012): 495-514.

² Mike Hulme, ‘Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism’, *Osiris* 26, no. 1 (2011): 245-66.

³ Georgina Endfield, ‘Reculturing and Particularizing Climate Discourses: Weather, Identity, and the Work of Gordon Manley’, *Osiris* 26, no. 1 (2011): 142-62.