Elevation and Cultural Theory

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Cultural theorists and political scientists have emphasised a number of categorical ways of figuring specific social agonisms. In recent years, cultural theory has foregrounded general concepts such as mobility and space, or identity categories such as race and gender. The globe is sometimes divided into east and west, or the global north versus the global south. But little attention is given to elevation and the role it plays in generating or being co-constructed by the social. In this brief meditation, I will explore some possibilities for elevation and cultural theory. In particular, I foreground two case studies as exemplars for future research: elevation and sea-level rise resulting from global climate change; and elevation and its historical relationship to nonstate spaces or resistance to the state form.

The concept of elevation is often confused with terms such as 'altitude' and 'height', even in specialist publications.[1] Elevation refers to 'the vertical distance between a point on the land surface and a reference point, usually taken to be the mean sea level.' Altitude, on the other hand, refers to 'the vertical distance between an object … and a reference point or stratum, where the object *is not in* direct contact with the reference point/stratum'; think of an airplane. Height measures the vertical distance between 'the top of an object … and the land surface, where the object *is in* direct contact with the ground'; think of a building. So, unlike altitude, elevation refers to geographic locations on the surface of the earth; and unlike height, elevation is not measuring an object on the surface of the earth. Of course, this definition is strictly geographical and positivist.

Elevation has recently become a more significant concept for cultural analyses primarily because of anthropogenic global climate change and the concomitant rise in sea levels, which is primarily attributed to melting polar ice caps in Greenland and Antarctica. Over the past 140 years, global average sea levels have risen approximately 195mm.[2] Recent studies suggest that sea levels are rising about 60 percent faster than anticipated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007, or an annual increase of 3.2mm.[3] Scientists from the British Antarctic Survey and University of Bristol recently declared that there is a 5 percent chance that melting ice could ultimately add 84cm to sea levels.[4] Sea-level rise until at least 2050 has already been determined by historical greenhouse-gas emissions, setting aside, of course, any sudden accelerations of the process due to feedback loops; contemporary emissions will determine sea-level rise beyond 2050. In other words, the material tendencies related to anthropogenic warming and sea-level rise for the coming decades cannot be changed by human activity.

Cultural theorists should therefore be examining the power differentiations created by elevation. Sea-level rise is not a homogeneous phenomenon with universal consequences for all coastal regions; nor are its impacts limited to coastal regions. Parts of Asia and Africa, for example, will be much more affected by sea-level rise than other parts of the world. Therefore, in addition to factors such as imperialism, racism and capitalist globalisation, elevation is also a critical concept in understanding culture, as the sea levels rise and new forms of precariousness and migration emerge, and new infrastructure projects protect, connect or segregate populations. For example, Nicholas Stern, economist and Chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environmentat theLondon School of Economics, predicts that climate change will make 'hundreds of millions homeless'.[5] Bangladesh faces a host of catastrophes as a result of sea-level rise, which include flooding, salinity and high tidal waters that could displace millions: 'Experts say a third of Bangladesh's coastline could be flooded if the sea rises one meter in the next 50 years, creating an additional 20 million Bangladeshis displaced from their homes and farms.'[6] Elevation could be the difference between life and death, land on which to live or permanent displacement as a climate refugee. Huge coastal urban centres will have to decide whether to commit resources to infrastructure that may provide greater resilience for the existing city, or whether to abandon certain spaces as hereafter uninhabitable.

Another powerful example of the relevance of elevation to the project of cultural analysis is in James C. Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott misuses the term 'altitude' synonymously with 'elevation' to describe the region known as Zomia, which encapsulates 2.5 million square kilometres of

land sitting from 300 to 4,000 metres above sea level and bordering five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma), northeastern India and China. Approximately 100 million people live in Zomia.[7] It 'is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet fully been incorporated into nation-states'.[8] Scott describes these 'hill peoples' as 'runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.' The relatively secluded region of Zomia forms part of what Scott calls a 'history of deliberate and reactive statelessness'.[9] 'The mountains as a refuge for state-fleeing people, including guerrillas', writes Scott, 'is an important geographical theme'.[10] While he clearly establishes that there is no inherent relationship between high elevation and what he calls 'nonstate space' – for example, in the Andes the states are in the hills and the nonstate space is in the lowlands – in some instances high elevations combined with 'inaccessible terrain' provide 'havens of refuge for peoples resisting or fleeing the state'.[11]

It is important to reiterate that elevation should be treated by cultural theorists not as a fixed topographic reality, but instead as a site of convergence for different discourses, objects, and practices. Port cities constructed on the flows of global capitalism, for example, played major roles in the economies of exchange that transformed the climate. Now, some port cities will become contested spaces for gentrification projects and the intensified commitment to ecocidal capitalism. The Port of Liverpool is building a £350 million Deepwater Container Terminal for completion in 2014, which will double the current cargo capacity of the port, despite the peak and decline of global oil supplies, and despite the fact that, according to a UK report on sea level, from 1920 to 2011 the sea level at Liverpool rose 515mm and continues to rise.[12] From 2007 to 2011 alone, the sea level at Liverpool rose 236mm. At an elevation of only 70m above sea level, Liverpool is particularly vulnerable to climate-induced sea-level rise. But as a postindustrial port city, it must also address a declining population and precarious economy. The decision to build an even bigger port terminal with expanded capacity seems to obscure elevation in favour of the priorities of global capitalist flows. If elevation were treated as a cultural concept and not simply as an economic one – in the sense that the economic dictates of Liverpool's place in world trade compel its industrial elites to expand its port terminal in defiance of resource depletion and climate change – the debate surrounding its future may have included more sustainable options.

1 Tim R. McVicar and Christian Körner, 'On the use of elevation, altitude, and height in the ecological and climatological literature', *Oecologia*, Vol. 171, No. 2, February, 2013, p.335.

2 John A. Church and Neil J. White, 'A 20th century acceleration in global sea-level rise', *Geographical Research Letters* , Vol. 33, No.1, January, 2006.

3 LiveScience Staff, 'Sea Levels Rising Faster Than Predicted' *LiveScience.com*, 28 November 2012, http://www.livescience.com/25097-sea-levels-rising-faster-ipcc.html, accessed 7 August 2013.

4 Louise Gray, 'Sea levels rise could mean floods in London', *The Telegraph*, 14 May 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/10056941/Sea-levels-rise-could-mean-floods-in-London.html, accessed 7 August 2013.

5 Quoted in Robin McKie, 'Climate change "will make hundreds of millions homeless"', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/may/12/climate-change-expert-stern-displacement, accessed 7 August 2013.

6 Masud Karim, 'Bangladesh faces climate change refugee nightmare', *Reuters* (14 April 2008), http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/14/us-bangladesh-climate-islands-idUSDHA23447920080414, accessed 7 August 2013.

7 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* , Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009, p.ix.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p.x.

10 Ibid., p.xi.

11 Ibid., p.13.

12 'UK Sea Level', UK Department of Energy & Climate Change, 26 June 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/48651/1719-summary-report-on-sea-level-rise.pdf, accessed 7 August 2013.

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