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Off the Grid

Environmental Degradation and Citizenship at the Margins

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"If it is not in the file, it does not exist."

Indian bureaucrat, quoted in Akhil Gupta, "Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India"

"Squares, markets, roads, bridges, rivers: these are the critical points in the territory which police will mark out and control."

Pasquale Pasquino, "Theatrum Politicum: Genealogy of Capital – Police and the State of Prosperity"

1. Introduction

A widely known anecdote of 11th century King Canute has it that he once put up his throne at the seashore and demanded the waters to spare him.[1] Obviously, the waves would neither halt nor flow around his seat. Thus, they served as a graceful reminder of the limitations of worldly power in the world; of the irrelevance of kingly conduct when it comes to waves and tides. The conclusions drawn from the anecdote vary greatly. Assuming that the king was actually trying to command the waves, some use the anecdote to illustrate kingly vanity and its necessary failure and suggest that contemporary climate realpolitik falls into the same trap (n.a. 2014). Others read this incident as a staged performance of humility and have it that King Canute ceased, henceforth, to bear royal insignia as truly the king could only be He who creates and masters nature, i.e. God (see e.g. Raglan 1960).

As a spectacle either of vanity or humility, the anecdote draws attention to a set of questions I will engage in this paper. It invokes the intricate relationship of statecraft and nature as it emerges through the persistent problem of hazardous, unruly and encroaching environments. The latest avatar of which is anthropogenic climate change. Threatening lifestyles, ecosystems or planetary life itself, it is now commonly thought as having severe repercussions for the sphere of politics itself. Against this background there is much agreement today on the need to rework economic arrangements, modes of governance or horizons of justice. These involve a reordering of political relations in their respective ways. Yet, the converse seems to be true, too. For environmental changes, including anthropogenic climate change, have to be understood as reworking the sphere of the political itself. Using the anecdote's figuration as metaphor, let me put it this way: Licking at the throne the tides enforce fraught reconfigurations of what the state is. Where it begins, what it includes and whom. Particularly in marginalized lifeworlds, the question where exactly sovereignty ends and who will be

[1] This paper owes its existence partly to my doctoral research funded generously by the DAAD and the Hans-Böckler-Foundation. During write up, a range of further questions sprang up which could not possibly be addressed within the thesis itself. I am thankful to CrossroadsAsia and LMU's Institute of Anthropology, in particular, for providing me the opportunity to engage some of these questions and rethink my data. Discussions in Munich and Martin Sökefeld's critical comments on a draft helped me to clarify the argument. However, errors and limitations are mine.

wetted on its fringes turns out to be decisive. It involves, among others, the question of who has access to state measures and who literally falls off the grid of governance that serves as a precondition to make *tolerated* claims at all (Fassin 2005; Samaddar 2009). Here environmental changes unleash, I propose, yet another potential to profoundly affect the lives of the poor. For environmental changes do have profound effects on spatialized state relations beyond accumulating economic losses and spectacular disasters. It is the transformation of quotidian state relations by dynamic materialities on the ground that accounts, I argue in this paper, for much of the suffering of environmental degradation and climate change at the margins.

In thinking through these dynamics and their repercussions for political articulations, I turn the approach to sovereignty articulated in King Canute on its head. I retain interest in a moment when environmental forces threaten the very naturalization of power; when ephemeral materialities affect governance. Departing from the ambivalences of earthly powers permeating the Northern king, I will reflect the state's being, its texture and modes of inclusion in relation to environmental forces. To be more precise: Instead of focusing on the body politic or sovereignty I dwell on the pressing concerns of citizenship; and instead of focusing on royal insignia I will interrogate the materialities of daily life and their implication in quests for recognition. But there is more to the relevance of King Canute for the problem at hand. The anecdote's figuration – a throne at the edge of the sea – serves to underline the third dimension I will embrace in this paper: territory and, thus, the spatial dimension of politics.

In the present paper I will begin to tackle these dimensions by turning attention to everyday politics as they unfold in degrading environments. In order to contribute to this still rather undertheorized domain of politics by means of fragmentary and eclectic reflections, I will revisit ethnographic material gathered during my doctoral research and bring it into a dialogue with recent theoretical writing. I begin by turning to social dimensions of territory and to the vicissitudes of citizenship at the margins. Thereafter I will have to outline the workings of climate change. Building upon that, I will finally engage the question of degrading citizenship as encountered by marginalized populations and as a theoretical problem.

2. Terrain and Territory

In his provocative history of state relations in upland Southeast Asia, James C. Scott calls for attention to what tends to be blended over in contemporary political thought: terrain and weather. Complementing other factors, weather and terrain prove to be effective limits to "[u]nambiguous, unitary sovereignty, of the kind that is normative for the twentieth-century nation state […]" (Scott 2009: 61). To encounter the vicissitudes of 'terrain' and 'territory', the later works of Michael Foucault are helpful. To be sure, in his influential writing on modern governance he foregrounds 'population' as a problem and analytic. In order to consolidate their rule and to reap in higher yields, modern rulers sought to improve the latter, he argues (Foucault 2007), by measuring, ordering and organizing populations. These insights began to overshadow the equally important role of terrain and the thingness of politics; both, as practice of statecraft and its implications for theories of power. In his theoretical writing on territory, Stuart Elden argues for instance, that territory is complementary, not corollary to population and that it is an equally important factor guiding governance. Thus, he sets forth a relational approach (Elden 2007: 575) that "[…] takes territory not as some static terrain but as a vibrant entity, with 'its specific qualities' which too can be measured [...]."

There can be little doubt that the terrain is indeed overshadowed by the population in Foucault. Yet contrary to Elden it is not entirely absent. Re-reading Foucault amidst the recent turn towards materiality and ontology across the social sciences, Thomas Lemke unearths, for instance, relevant passages and conceptualizations in the former's vast work. However fragmentary and underdeveloped, Michel Foucault repeatedly acknowledges intimate relations between humans and their non-human surroundings. Crucial here are his attempts to think and re-think the milieu. According to him (Foucault 2007: 21f. cited in Lemke 2014: 7f.), the latter consists of "[…] a set of natural givens – rivers, marshes, hills – and a set of artificial givens – an agglomeration of individuals, of houses etc. … [It is an] intersection between a multiplicity of living individuals working and coexisting with each other in a set of material elements that act on them and on which they act in turn." While Lemke strives to integrate these formulations into a posthumanist approach, I am concerned here with the more conventional, yet somewhat neglected repercussions of 'terrain' for political relations. A good entry point to these are the governmental techniques invented to get a grip on a given territory in order to control and ultimately to improve it.

Paralleling the well documented rise of a biopolitics concerned with the improvement of bodies and populations we see the emergence of another, complementary biopolitics concerned with the improvement of terrain, nature and climate.[2] The spectacular rise of demography, in other words, had been coupled to the equally spectacular advances of mapping and other practices aiming at virtualizing terrain. Akin to population and bodies, the terrain became an object of hierarchical gaze, of control and modernist interventions (see i.e. Basu 2010). As a precondition and at the same time as a means of these interventions, a given

[2] Against the background of environmental determinism the improvement of the terrain has to a certain degree be understood as the improvement of the populations dwelling therein. Yet there is much more to it. The increase of revenue through improved harvests following ecological interventions or through intensified economic exchanges following an improved navigability of the terrain may be sufficient examples here.

terrain came to be seen as territory. Elden (2007: 578) argues, “[t]erritory is more than mere land, but a rendering of the emergent concept of 'space' as a political category: owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled.”
With the advances of western modernity, this approach to space became highly influential, but unevenly spread and differentially articulated. Here, too, the project of unilinear development stands in tension with the actual practice of statecraft across entangled global regions. The practice of mapping has emerged as a crucial moment and technique for the emerging colonial statecraft in South Asia. Not only were colonial possessions sought to make intelligible through spectacular, literally ground-breaking mapping enterprises across the continent. But they were precondition and often concomitant with exact boundary-works. The notorious Permanent Settlement is instructive here in several ways. With British rule consolidated, it aimed at settling the question of land ownership and thus the modalities of tax revenue supposedly once and for all (Guha 1982). Lasting over several decades it proved to be an extremely tedious, expensive affair that involved large parties of cartographers, assessors, lawyers and bureaucrats and was shrouded in perennial contestations and conflicts. On the surface the Permanent Settlement brought about the consolidation of a set of social relations: By fixing ownership rights, the Settlement cemented particular relations of people with settled lands and subjected all lands not hitherto owned by identifiable persons to the sole authority of the state. At the same time, the settlement operations established tax liabilities and, thus, a crucial relationship between state and people. All this was possible only through supposedly accurate measurement techniques. Thus, the already time-honored and reliable technique of trigonometry was used to virtualize terrain in the form of a map and to meticulously plot private property and fallow lands therein. While the practice of trigonometry was actually aligned to further virtualization techniques and never seems to have been relied upon exclusively, it serves as a blueprint and in a sense as metaphor for those socio-spatial arrangements I call the grid. Trigonometry relies on the use of measurement points in the landscape. Whenever possible they were permanently anchored in the ground, marked and guarded. It was paramount that three of these points were visible to each other. Taken together they formed a triangular field whose size was calculated and situated within a continuous, encompassing web of fields spanning the landscape whole. By calculating single fields, relating them to each other and adding all parts up, the whole of India could be mapped and quantified. As a visualisation technique, it involved the layering of a grid of artificial points over the terrain and facilitating, thereby, to transform it into a territory. Likewise, this grid involved the production and reinforcement of a second order map. It involved the web of administrative units into which each trigonometric field, each property and each village was definitely to be plotted. It can be imagined as a web of dots, of nodes unifying the map and subjecting it to direct state administration. For along the nodes of the second order web, the towns, markets and warehouses, the state administered revenue, facilitated interventions and ruled populations (see Neale 1962: 17). As the other grid, it came to consist of points fixed in space ordering the whole and relating each point to every other. It was to connect offices and warehouses, towns and courtrooms through information networks, roads and canals. It was to span out to outposts and neighbouring districts with their nodes and, thus, towards an ideally complete web of power. It seemed to spell the dream of control and sovereignty through an endless network of elite, mofussil and quotidian things and spaces.

The grid and its nodes are, I argue, far from a being a means of virtualization alone. I understand these points to be nodes of power relations, as nothing less than vehicles of administrative control. They are tied and partly synonymous with infrastructure, which appears to be "[…] quite the opposite of overt political regulation […]" (Mukerji 2010: 403), yet is inherently tied to governance. Included in wider webs of obligation and compliance directed towards centralized power, they served as anchors from where localized architectures of taxation, debt and rule were to unfold. As nodes they proved to be quintessential for the contingent processes of 'statemaking' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). That is, they became means by which governance was enacted from above and mediated by its actors. Similarly, along the grid the state came to be encountered from below. The imagined territory of the state is complemented – in other words – by localized points of access to or frictions with the state and its actors. It is through these points that state measures – such as colonial drought relief or postcolonial poverty reduction schemes – were and are accessed (Sharma 2001; Gupta 2012). Furthermore, relation toward nodes of the grid, its officers and the interactions one is drawn into, have sustained the imagination of the state as much as they have spelled survival or demise for populations.

This, of course, is not to say that the grid, its nodes and inherent relations persist unchanged across centuries. Without doubt all its constituents have changed. But the mode of governance introduced here – its dependence on spatial categories to map individuals and to rule them – remains alive to this very day. What is more, the intimate relation of personhood and ownership implicitly fostered in and through these operations. Mapped into space and made legible through grids and nodes, individuals came henceforth to be known by the state as owners of particular plots. Persons became such, in other words, as proprietors or at least as holders of certain rights to distinct pieces of lands. While this approach has certainly been complemented by their assumed membership within 'communities' (Chatterjee 2004), it nevertheless became a powerful way of knowing and forging the populace. Indeed, it has to be understood as one of the principal modes along which being a person and ultimately Being itself came to be constituted in capitalist modernity. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013: 12f.) argue, "[i]n the political imaginary of (post)colonial capitalist western modernity and its claims of universal humanity, being and having are constituted as ontologically akin to each other; being is defined as having; having is constructed as an essential prerequisite of proper human being."

Pointing at the obvious example of slaves they go on to argue that "certain bodies […] are excluded from this classic definition of the biopolitical, which forges a constitutive connection between life, ownership and liberty." Without levelling historical particularities or patterns of violence, this may well be extended to various forms of dispossession in the present. For several of these entail a denial of proper personhood which is rooted in the absence or disruption of property relations. Seen in this light, the plight of refugees emerges not only as one of statelessness, but also as one of disrupted relations within a given state and its territorial figuration. Dispossession unfolds its calamitous consequences, to apply Arendt (1958: 296), "[…] in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective." It stands to reason that these insights may be extended onto the workings of environmental degradations and the dispossession they entail. But before I can turn towards these dynamics I have to reflect on citizenship at the margins.

3. Citizenship

Contrary to modernist expectations, citizenship remains a contested terrain in large parts of the world. A rich set of scholarly contributions has demonstrated that the formation of post-colonial states did not succeed in transforming teleological ideals pervading nationalist imageries into reality (e.g. Holston and Appadurai 1998; Desai and Sanyal 2012). Bureaucracies have often enough turned out to be far from rational, while institutions mediating between state and people are unevenly accessible and at times even blocking particular populations from participating. Most importantly, however, citizenship continues to be a fragile and contested matter and far from uniform.[3] The legitimacy of individuals as citizens *of* the state and hence their claims *onto* the state far from certain (see e.g. Randeria 2003; Baviskar 2004; Rao 2010). The effective denial of full citizenship has severe consequences among those large populations in the Global South that have to face economically or ecologically volatile conditions as part of daily routine. Here uneven citizenship rights translate into effectively denied entitlements or practices of care and even into subjection to draconic measures. The vicissitudes of belonging or not belonging to the polity are at the very roots of diverse forms of social suffering - ranging from the absence of meaningful means to counter multidimensional vulnerabilities of the poor over state-administered dispossession towards mass starvation. Cutting short of a fuller engagement with this fascinating scholarship I want to emphasize two related insights. One consists in the very fragility of citizenship and the contingent, necessarily localized nature of state-populace relations at the margins. While the other underlines an embrace of the state and situated struggles for a somewhat fuller inclusions into its fold.

Writing on the postcolony, Partha Chatterjee famously argued that the interface between state and subjects is infused with dynamics and infrapolitics[4] transgressing the neat and normative model of Western democracy. While civil society does play an important role for at least certain segments of society, others clearly fall beyond its reach. According to Chatterjee this is, of course, not rooted in ignorance or simple failure, but rather in the messy dynamics of legality and illegality at the margins of the modern state. Excluded from official procedures that favor 'proper' citizens, marginal groups make their claims onto the state along negotiations with local powerbrokers and in specific, situative bargains. He shows (Chatterjee 2006: 64) that these claims are "[…] often grounded in violations of the law [yet are] made consistent with the pursuit of equal citizenship […]." Prominent examples are struggles for legitimacy waged by urban squatters or quests for development measures by disenfranchized rural poor. The vehicle of these negotiations is what he frames as 'political society' (Chatterjee 2006; Chatterjee 2008; Chatterjee 2011). The latter consists, he argues (2006: 40f.), of "[…] recent forms of the entanglement of elite and subaltern politics […]" through which distinct groups claim particular amenities or entitlements in the language of universal rights and through moralising discourses.

[3] To be sure, these messy dynamics do not only apply to the Global South.

[4] In departure from James Scott's usage of the notion 'infrapolitics' I am not so much concerned here with hidden forms of resistance he dwelled upon (Scott 1990: 19), but rather with the way these politics oscillate between and navigate both legal and illegal spheres (see also Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009).

Most relevant for this paper are spatialized dimensions of this particular kind of politics. For it is the residence in administrative units, or, in the case of illegal arrangements, in entities within spatially demarcated boundaries that emerges as crucial moment for these negotiations (Chatterjee 2011: 14 – 16). They serve as precondition and often also as object of these contestations. In other words, it is the Inclusion into spatialized containers that allows for deals between politicians, powerbrokers and 'ordinary' people to become meaningful. In both directions: it enhances legibility and control of an unruly territory and its populations from above; and it allows for inclusion into state measures sought by groups otherwise beyond its fold. In theory are all subjects, of course, are entitled to certain social measures regardless of their neediness, background and location. Yet in practice these are often either extremely limited or defunct. Let me give one famous example from India: the often praised and well documented flagship instrument to curb rural poverty, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA). On paper it guarantees paid labour as a means to counter hunger across the country. It has been shown not only to fall short of its promises, but to deliver its services along localized practices of power. The legally granted right to approach *any* office of the rural government anywhere in the country and to be offered work (and if no work is available than the wage without work), has been reported to be widely denied (Right to Food Campaign 2007). To become beneficiary of the scheme depends, in many cases, on pre-existing political relations that are place-based in character. The universal rights proclaimed and perhaps strengthened (Corbridge et al. 2002) are thus counterbalanced by the 'dirtiness' of politics (Ruud 2000). Again, it is not so much a granted right of citizenship that matters, but the administrative unit along which development measures may or may not be secured. Along the grid of these governmental and necessarily spatialized units, populations are labelled and included into development measures or become the actual beneficiaries of entitlements. In an intellectual climate highlighting moments and figurations where states are eluded or opposed by subaltern groups for various reasons, the turn *towards* the state might emerged as perplexing at first. Indeed, the fragmentary and ambivalent nature of claims on the state has to be acknowledged. For the claims are often embedded in complex tactics accommodating embrace and retreat, claim and resistance. Yet, the fact remains that citizenship is actively sought for and that it emerges as a crucial resource for dignity and survival across Asia.

Material conditions and infrastructural interventions play in themselves a double role within these fragile arrangements. They serve, first and foremost, as objects of drawn-out negotiations and struggles. The significance of pumps and pipelines bringing in water; of latrines and sewers flushing waste away; or of power poles harboring electricity for localized politics at Asia's margins has now been widely demonstrated (see for instance Anand 2011). But there is more to it. While these instruments and access-points integrate distinct localities into wider webs of material flows, they are imagined also as means of inclusion into the socio-political landscapes. Pipes, pumps and poles are invested, therefore, with a sense of access to the polity by those marginalized populations who managed to get hold of them. Beyond the stream of potable water or functioning drain, these objects situate an illegal assemblage and its population on the map of legal politics. Being an outcome of often rather shady transactions, they serve to connect to the somewhat greater schemes of politics, to circuits of legitimate politics. Far more than merely objects, they signify achievement in themselves (Fuchs 2005), anchor future prospects and enhance governmental legibility of the locality as much as they move the not-yet-legal settlement somewhat closer to legality. The very exist-

ence of the locality becomes, in a word, suffused with a sense of factuality. While this is an important outcome in itself, it entails also a firmer grip on citizenship rights by societies otherwise excluded from it. Reflecting on everyday politics in a New Delhi slum, Veena Das relates infrastructural interventions and a range of other objects to what she frames as incremental citizenship (2011). Stepping beyond the idea that rights are simply given or not given, she centers on (Das 2011: 327) "[…] strategies of creating rights." Akin to the incremental growth of illegal settlements – from occupying a space over building a shack towards stone walls, tin roofs and further rooms atop –, rights and citizenship are incrementally claimed by its population. Thus, she emphasizes (2011: 330) "[…] the labor in securing objects on whose agency they can call on to establish incremental citizenship that creates new forms in which citizenship can be actualized." At the very least these objects are used as further steps on a trajectory leading towards the integration into the state machinery as licit citizen; towards eventually being allowed to making legible claims.

In the wake of modernity, it still seems to be rather difficult to *not automatically* think of infrastructural improvements and incremental citizenship as *continually* growing or deepening. If only because teleological notions of progress reappear in implicit assumptions of an ever expanding development, of cumulative measures to lay out infrastructure and to expand the state by integrating populations according to its own preferences. Relentlessly and one step at a time. Yet, environmental degradations serve as limitations here. Particularly in places where they involve the dismantling of interventions or the destruction of governmental nodes and, thus, governance itself. To the dimensions of politics unmade or, to say the least, profoundly reworked by environmental degradation I will turn to now.

4. Environmental Degradations

Discussions of climate change are troubled by its complex causalities, uncertain outcomes and, fundamentally, by its evading texture. After all, climate cannot be directly experienced (but only weather events), leaving its incremental changes virtually inaccessible. Yet the specter of climate change entered public debates first and foremost as a particular form of disaster.[5] Consequentially, the imagery of looming environmental disasters enjoys a prominent standing to this day. Of course, there is reason to it and I am not suggesting that the imagery of the disaster is entirely wrong. But rather that its drama and morbid splendor tends to overshadow that other face of climate change – i.e. slow degradations and transformed weather patterns. Feeding, on one hand, into large-scale disasters,[6] these changes will also have grave consequences for large populations in themselves. Changing rain patterns, retreating glaciers, hotter annual temperatures or rising seas will bear a high toll among predominantly poor, highly agriculture-dependent populations across the Global South. To illustrate what I have in mind I will briefly dwell on desertification.

In arid zones regional effects of climate change are predicted as much as already experienced to feed into and to increase wider patterns of environmental change. To be more precise: they accelerate dryness and inflict profound changes of social life unfolding therein: when, for instance, farmlands are losing their fertility, grazing grounds disappear or drinking water becomes increasingly difficult to arrange for. Put differently, local populations witness process that make life increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible by erasing essential features such as water availability, soil qualities or architectures of shade. In a sense, these processes inverse the very hospitability of distinct spaces and deny habitation by marginal populations who hardly find the means to counter such broad environmental degradations on their own and over prolonged periods.

Seen in this way, slow desertifications mirror permanent inundations of low-lying coasts by Sea Level Rise. Regardless if rising waters are washing away lowlands or if receding waters leave arid land increasingly barren - – affected spaces loose in either case their very placeness. To be sure, to an ecologist both processes result merely in regime changes. That is, neither submerged coasts nor deserted scapes turn into non-places but rather into spaces that are dwelled in and used along different figurations. Yet – and this is the point I want to take as departure here – these spaces lose their hospitability to large rural populations forcing them to leave or to develop other, rather impoverished ties to the land. Complementing the important issues of mobility and belonging, these dynamics have important political dimensions in a narrowly defined way as well. For the loss of place is to be complemented by

[5] To be sure, moral, social political dimensions were conflated here and it matters greatly to look carefully at what kind of disaster precisely it is spoken about. For it ranges obviously anywhere between something like a universal disaster of apocalyptic proportions, chronic but all-encompassing severe deteriorations and the prognosis of intensified, but particular environmental shocks.

[6] Tropical cyclones plaguing South Asia are a telling example. Rising over the Indian Ocean in the heat of summer, their velocity is widely predicted to increase as the world is warming and weather patterns change. As highly mediatized events, cyclones outshine normalized changes. This holds true for generalized degradations as much as for changes that critically influence the genesis and effects of cyclones themselves. Rising sea levels might, for instance, translate into fiercer storm surges, while chronically eroding coasts increase social vulnerabilities among its dwellers allowing for storm events to turn into a disaster in the first place.

the disappearance of political relations sustained through particular places and spatially rooted networks. I will illuminate this dimension on the pages to come.

Widespread and certainly dramatic as these dynamics are, they are difficult to measure precisely or to isolate among a range of socio-economic dynamics impacting local lives. They are hardly to spin into uniform plotlines and tie to clear-cut places or people. As much as the spectacle and eventful nature of social disasters seem to invite narration, gradual changes seem to deny it in their very normalization. In a programmatic formulation, Rob Nixon recently included the processes I am emphasizing here into what he calls 'slow violence'. Pertinent as it is, I quote him at length (Nixon 2011: 2):

> By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, […] deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively.

Embracing the now long tradition to engage environmental dynamics through the lens of social vulnerability and uneven development (see Oliver-Smith 2009), he emphasizes the complex issue of the very invisibility of environmental degradations. Elusive and sometimes invisible deteriorations are met by a similarly impaired visibility of despair. As a particular set of experiences, the slow violence of degradation, pollution or anthropogenic climate change evades the now robust analytic of disaster as much as it evades the procedures of disaster risk reduction. Its effects harbor in no single space nor time large devastations or collapsing institutions; they may do so only in retrospect and across dispersed populations (Harms 2012). Taken together, the outlined environmental transformations and socio-cultural dynamics force us to rethink questions of adaptation and mobility. Reiterating longstanding anthropological insights several writers argue, that mobility is in itself an adaptation strategy (see i.e. Black et al. 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). Far from fleeing mechanistically, populations have been demonstrated to navigate environments afflicted by degradation or disaster through diverse patters of mobility. Migration or translocal lifestyles emerge, thus, as strategies that allow for the continuity of villages, families or homes throughout distress. For the continuation of peasant lifestyles against all odds. On the other hand have both these patterns and permanent forms of outmigration been shown to largely unfold within regional theatres. The victims of environmental changes are, in a word, often simply too poor to migrate (Hunter 2005).

Against this background it is imperative, I contend, to turn to lifeworlds trapped in degrading environments and patterns of small-scale, multipolar mobilities. Particularly as there is reason to think of this predicament as being among the most salient features of climate change for large marginalized populations across the world.

5. Degrading Citizenship

When farmlands turn into deserts and coasts are permanently inundated by rising waters, this involves a shrinking of hospitable landscapes – particularly in places where the government is not willing to lay out effective countermeasures. Furthermore, the workings of slow violence have a deep impact on property relations among affected population. Here I am mainly concerned with ownership and usage rights of farmland and dwelling space upon which rural populations across Asia highly depend. In contrast to many other essential possessions like livestock, tools, papers and even houses, land is immobile but immediately susceptible to environmental degradations. It is useful here, too, to situate these infringements on a scale reaching from reduction of its quality towards nullification. Sunken islands or retreated coasts would serve as one extreme. Yet the impact of environmental degradations begins, as I have shown in coastal India, long before the land disappears (Harms 2012). The increasing proximity of the sea to one's homestead aggravates the salinity of the soil and, thus, reduces harvests. To the effect that once fertile and costly farmlands rapidly lose in socio-economic value.[7] Who, after all, would invest in lands whose demise is within hindsight? Farmlands turning into deserts are comparable here. They, too, lose value and slowly cease to produce enough (see e.g. Tschakert, Tutu, and Alcaro 2013). In many cases is this increasing, relative loss of significance of land surely balanced by mobile lifestyles: By daughters and sons sent onto distant labor markets and by an increasing dependence on remittances to uphold peasant lifestyles (Badiani and Safir 2009). Yet, the fact remains that a crucial element of political relations becomes cumulatively impaired: Ownership of land and, to say the least, relations to lands suitable for economic activities.

Beyond spatial shrinkage and impoverishment, it also amounts to the slow dismantling of infrastructural interventions, of objects and access points of governmental care. Without stripping victimized populations of their agency, it is still helpful to think of these dynamics as a moment where persons and groups fall off the grid. They do so as the very degradation of environments – disastrous yet hardly visible at all – serves as threat to fragile or uncertain claims on citizenship.

Let me illustrate this point by engaging the powers of environmental degradations along the political dimensions introduced so far. I begin by contrasting their slow violence with better researched rapid-onset environmental disasters (see Wisner et al. 2004). When, for instance, a Tsunami shatters a coast, this inflicts a sense of horror and hardly bearable pain on most. With infrastructure in rubbles, the administrative grip on given regions is weakened. Particularly in contexts shaken by highly mediatized disasters, the rubble and absence of human resources or buildings has shown to be a set of opportunities to some (Miller and Bunnell 2011; Swamy 2011). For new roads, offices, schools, markets and houses will have to be reestablished. Beyond a boom of certain industries and a refreshed integration into economic flows, this may also entails shifts in state-administered political regulation and social engineering. In either case, most disaster zones will be swiftly brought back onto the canvas of state administration.

[7] Here I am indicating several figurations of value invested with land: land to sell, to lease out in times of distress, to enhance credit-worthiness, to use as leverage within political ambitions or to signify status.

Different is the case, I argue, when it comes to sinking coasts, buried villages or desertifying scapes. For when landscapes lose their habitability, disappear beneath debris or do literally dissolve, there often is simply no space to build upon once again. On rapidly shrinking coasts or in emptying deserts, office complexes are left to crumble and will hardly be remade. This leaves the bureaucracy in a curious position: without an anchor in space, with populations quickly dispersing and without an inhabited territory to govern, in a sense, it loses itself. Durable and adaptive as bureaucracies certainly are, threatened politicians and clerks enter increasingly conflictive relations with neighboring and overarching bureaucracies securing their respective domain.
To flesh out what I have outlined so far, I will now turn to ethnographic snippets and encounters that forced me think about political outcomes and the bearings of environmental hazards on citizenship.

Snippet One – Architectural Structures as Anchors of Governmental Care. Following an interest in long-term coping with environmental disasters, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the lowest reaches of the vast Ganges delta. Here – where mighty rivers meet the sea across an intricate web of islands, bars and flows – the polity has indeed been reworked by coastal currents. Not so much through sudden events or spectacular ruptures as might be assumed at first, but rather through normalized, hardly visible and continuous processes of what geomorphologists refer to as coastal erosion. A considerable part of my research has been devoted to experiences of disastrous losses and the afterlife of sunken lands in the lives of displaced islanders. Working with islanders who had been forced to move out from various watery edges of the delta, one tiny and remote island emerged as particularly significant. Not because it had harbored unique vulnerabilities or distinct environmental relations, but rather because it had disappeared into murky waters after barely 80 years of an extremely out-of-the-way existence. Although many of my interlocutors called it home in the flexible ways of spatializing belonging articulated in these shifting lands and undisturbed by the fact that the islet continues to make a speck-like appearance even on current maps, it was only very loosely tied to the governmental grid. By all standards. Having the proportions of a single village including farmlands, it had never been serviced by public infrastructure. Neither wires nor pipes of any kind reached here, no police was present and no officially recognized ferries plied between the islet and the mainland. Yet the state was not entirely absent. One of the extremely rare interactions with the state involved the primary school on the islet. Built, staffed and maintained by the postcolonial state as part of its emphasis on rural development, the school was in itself testimony to state involvement – at least by way of its mandate to deliver officially sanctioned education. Similarly, the school building became in itself a node through which the state reached out to the island population and yielded influence on – or one might even say constituted – the polity. By the same token, the islanders used the school building to make claims onto the state.

The primary school began to be burdened with these heterogeneous political dimensions at a time when the island's overall existence was not yet threatened, but the erosions had already taken a heavy toll. By then, the school building itself was destroyed by yet another cyclone. To be sure, the disruption of schooling following the building's demise had not been a major concern for bureaucrats. Only the fact that the school had doubled as election booth ultimately propelled state actors in action with another round of elections coming up. To

ensure smooth proceedings of the plebiscite, bureaucrats struck a deal with the school secretary. They would pay him a sum with which he was to ensure the construction and maintenance of a new school building further away from the crumbling shore. Two outcomes of this deal seem worth emphasizing here. On one hand, this deal and the therein cemented relation between bureaucrat and teacher became as stepping stone for a village leader in the making. From here on the teacher managed to become a spokesperson for the islanders and acted as negotiator with an otherwise largely disinterested state. He was it who sent out petitions pleading the government to take care of the islanders when submergence seemed imminent; he was it who received bureaucrats on their inspections to take stock of the situation; and he was it who managed to take charge of the resettlement operation on a nearby island when they were cleared by the government.

The building itself served, on the other hand, as means through which the population of this marginalized island made claims onto the state. It became not so much a site of contestation, as it rather evolved as a *thing* through which the attention of state actors could be grabbed and directed toward the otherwise severely neglected problem of encroaching coastal erosions. By investing into the building, the state actors demonstrated commitment to the school and acknowledged environmental destructions. Thus, the island had not only been situated on the map of state activities through the school, but the latter could be used to remind the bureaucrats of the island's perilous state as much as of the suffering of its inhabitants. Led by the teacher islanders used the building and its increasingly threatened state to voice their plight and their demands. It became the reference point both for personal relations towards a forgetful state and the measure stick to proof coastal erosions. Particularly when the waves were circling in on the building (and the houses surrounding it), the school emerged as symbol along which the devastations could be demonstrated in ways that were reliable in the eyes of bureaucrats. After all, they had sanctioned funds for it to be built in safe zones and the melting away of the safeguarding distance between building and sea could hardly be denied.

It is, therefore, justified to state that it had not been their plight as displaced islanders, as citizens in severe distress that made the state swing into action, but it flowed from situated, spatialized negotiations around mundane architecture. To be sure, it all comes down to social relations between political actors, but they came into being and have been mediated along mundane, material things. When a few years later the island was sinking completely, the second school building had disintegrated already. At that point, the relation between the erstwhile teacher and the state bureaucracy remained somewhat intact and those displaced islanders who enjoyed good relation with the teacher himself were soon to take possession of a piece of land handed out by the government as resettlement effort. However, all others who not had enjoyed good relations now were also deprived of materialities and things along which they could try to tap in governmental resources. With citizenship being unstable, the demise of things not only meant ever greater hurdles to grasp attention, but also to be cast off the grid to make claims and to see one's citizenship further deteriorating.

More than merely dramatic instances of decay and dissolution, these figurations offer glimpses into the remaking as much as the unmaking of political relations through the very transformation of the landscape. For the literal dissolution of the very spaces the administration occupies or is tied to and an ensuing displacement of bureaucratic nodes has doubtlessly wide ranging ramifications among those populaces depending thereupon to tap into government care.

This scenario is certainly comparable to landscapes implied in desertification. While not disintegrating that quickly, political relations will be similarly transformed in drying lands. Here, too, administrative spaces will fade and bureaucracies face displacement – not as a result of physical erosion, but of shifts in hydrological cycles, administrative de-prioritization as well as due to the rerouting of economic activities and so forth. It is tempting to think of these transformations as shifts in the presence demonstrated by the state at the margins. Or better: as a further removal of the state within a figuration of varying degrees of absence.

Snippet Two – Eroding Territory Entails Eroding Political Relations. The village of Botkhāli forms the southeastern, sea-facing shore of Sāgar Island situated in the western extremes of the Ganges Delta. It has not always been in this exposed position. Just a few decades ago it had been sitting in a comfortable distance to the sea. By then two villages, patches of mangroves and parallel lines of embankments had acted as a shield against diverse environmental hazards. Yet unruly tides and currents had peeled away all these one after the other. The twin dynamics of encroachment and erosion had literally swallowed up all that stood between Botkhāli and the sea. Battered and in itself disintegrating, the once flourishing village now served as the island's outer line. In a strange turn of events it has been caught up by the sea and transformed into the shore. Besides scattered remains in the shallow waters – as, for instance, the remnants of a sluice gate or tree stumps – only narrations of islanders as well as administrative maps stood witness to what once lay beyond today's embankments.
To be sure, it remains deeply problematic to identify a moment when the erosions began and, thus, to isolate a temporal baseline or an original coastline in this rapidly transforming a landscape. For there can be little doubt that changes in the coastline have been virulent throughout the deltaic island's existence. But talkative islanders hardly take this into account. For them a process of impoverishment, of loss and retreat *set in* at one point that ultimately was to culminate in the destruction of villages. In their eerie inability to accommodate changes, most available maps, on the other hand, also propose an original coastline: a shape and an outer limit of the island as if it was fixed in space and time. With all their authority they attest that villages form the outer fringes of the island which have long gone since. The two villages of Biśvālākṣmīpur and Sītāpur which once stretched out between the ruins of Botkhāli and the sea are a telling example. Their erstwhile residents have all had to flee literally liquefied and washed away spaces. Two patterns to live with environmental changes emerged. While the wealthier and better connected islanders had the means to look elsewhere, many others saw themselves propelled into poverty and landlessness by the retreating coastline.

I have shown elsewhere that it has been a widespread strategy among those too poor and not well connected enough to *not* move away permanently from the encroaching sea (Harms 2012; Harms in print). That is, many poor islanders were retreating along with the moving shoreline, yet they would stay in the vicinity. I like to think of these miniscule flights, of these recurring departures and arrivals as micro-migrations. Many of my interlocutors looked back, therefore, on repeated displacements, on houses moved several times and lives rebuilt anew after they had been caught up by the sea all over again. In a nutshell, being displaced time and again they had been staying back deliberately in the hazard zone and were populating the ruins, embankments and mobile roadside shacks as landless squatters depending on what Foucault labelled 'tolerated illegality' (2012: 82 – 86). And so did villag-

ers from Biśvālākṣmīpur and Sītāpur. But there obviously was a limit to this strategy. To be tolerated as squatters along the roads and embankments in itinerant rural slums was one thing. But to entertain political connections which allowed one to tap into state backed poverty alleviation measures as much as to hope for inclusion into official resettlement schemes was something else. To be successful here one needed grown, localized and infrapolitical relations. But these relations had often enough imploded with the wealthier, better connected islanders leaving the eroding coasts for good.

Put differently, with their own villages and many a contact long gone and the waves now attacking villages further inland, they had to compete with those affected now for extremely scarce state funds. What made their life increasingly difficult was not the simple and worrisome fact that the number of displaced persons had been swelling, but rather that they had increasing difficulties in activating networks and localized arrangements to tap into state funds. Particularly bitter was the fact that the money spent on infrastructure work seemed to bypass them as the shifts and, thus, essential earnings went to others. They went to better connected residents who more effectively made use of their contacts with local politicians and, thus, their rootedness in still functioning spatial arrangements of administrative units and informal networks towards these. With their networks weakening due to erosions and the outmigration of influential actors, the remaining villagers were in a sense stranded.

Obviously, the encroaching salty waters had affected their everyday lives in many ways. Beyond enforced mobilities and the loss of immobile properties, it had spelled a significant distancing from the reaches of governmental control and care. Let me put it this way: While the sea had been encroaching on them, the state had been fading. Both developments were intertwined insofar as that the destruction of spaces had translated into the erosion of precisely those localized networks, arrangements and materialities that *were* the local state. To be sure, state relations are first of all *social* relations and might appear to be independent of space or its demise; particularly within the framework of universal citizenship underlying much of contemporary political thought. Yet, they involve local politicians literally to be in place as much as they require the presence of materialities along which state relations unfold. Both are, I argue, seriously thwarted when environmental degradations culminate in the destruction or negations of spaces.

This brings me, finally, to objects being tied to claims of citizenship and rights. Serving as access to basic amenities these objects are as localized as they are vulnerable to environmental degradation. Pumps, roads or poles are literally implanted into landscapes and are thus subject to the radical transformations of embedding environments. What is – from a human perspective – a decaying landscape ultimately spells devastation of all sorts of infrastructural achievements dotting the latter. It is one thing that pumps may cease to produce water or embankments be razed by tidal incursions. It is another that the claims made on citizenship through these very objects fade in the processes of these degradations.

What emerges, therefore, is a citizenship made uncertain by the very workings of environmental degradation. That is, in the latter's abilities to further infringe on the very base of citizenship: on property relations, residence in administrative units as well as the relevance of anchored objects in struggles for recognition.

6. Decay and its Other: Encountering Degradation

Much of what I have noted so far may fairly well be read as a meditation on loss: As remarks on hardly reversible degradations and its hidden, yet immense costs inflicted upon poor populations across the global South. Now one could ask, how does it matter for anthropological inquiry? For a discipline focusing on societal and cultural articulations and not on the submergence of nodes, venues or options, these very disarticulations and dispossessions might appear to be negative conditions of inquiry. Here I propose two approaches to overcome this impasse.

One pertains to what the philosopher Edward S. Casey called the 'implacement' of being. He writes that there is no being conceivable beyond a space or place within which it unfolds (Casey 2009). What is called commonly displacement – i.e. the forceful ousting from one site or space – always involves and precipitates, therefore, a sense of emplacement: A shift to another site, an arrival and beginning. Yet, these movements do not necessarily translate into a production of similar places or the reconstitutions of preceding socialities and feed into new relations, subjections and articulations of power. Life in camps – and, thus, lives lived in the spatial form recently framed as paradigmatic for our age (Hailey 2009) – is a telling example here. The arrival and settlement in one of the countless, extremely diverse camps spread across the world is perhaps best understood as a non-linear, coeval simultaneousness of reconstruction and invention, of past burdens brought into conversation with present demands under conditions of precariousness. This clearly pertains also to political relations.

Let me apply these considerations to the subject of this paper. If environmental degradations translate into the loss of territory and forced flights into erosions of citizenship, and both of these converge, in a sense, to constitute falling off the grid, there is a complementary dimension to it. The other side of the coin, really. For the process most likely involves the re-entering of territories, political relations and states of volatile citizenship. It amounts – to continue the metaphor – to the entering of a grid. Perhaps not *the* grid, but at least *another* one of a comparable kind. For there are no reasons to doubt that what we know from the plights of the urban poor in general will be experienced by environmentally displaced groups, too. That is, they are left to enter grids, to re-ground themselves – as Ahmed and her colleagues put it (Ahmed, Fortier, and Sheller 2003) – in volatile and vulnerable conditions. Here the slow, uneventful nature of environmental degradations and the hidden impoverishment they entail come together. Far beyond the spectacle of natural disasters and grand schemes of reconstruction, their dis-possession and re-possession seems to be silenced. Surely also because it has become so difficult in these circumstances to identify what has befallen society; to charge responsibility for something as elusive as environmental degradation or climate change.

For what we know it does not seem to be relevant, whether trajectories of displacement and re-rooting extend across rural or urban sites. In either case do those displaced by degrading environments move into vulnerable zones as, for instance, hazardous floodplains, slopes or inner fringes of cities. One crucial difference rests in the texture and density of respective state encounters, which has a bearing on, as Spencer notes (2007: 111f.), "[…] the unruly

capacity of the people concerned to respond in their own way to what had been planned for them." I only wish to extend Spencer's apt formulation by emphasizing the equally unruly capacities to respond to situations saturated by the marked absence of planning, by neglect and dispossession.

To research and think re-rootings, the notion of the grid may be complemented by Elias' concept of the figuration (Elias 1970). For that is what emerges really: networks across scattered sites and situated relations within territorial arenas, particular nodes of power and frames of citizenship. The routes of displaced groups unravel, in other words, along networks and micro-histories of arrival. To be sure, in contemporary debates on migration the latter constellation has become a commonplace. What I want to add to the picture is merely the social life of environmental degradations or, to be more precise, their multiple bearings on disposable or barely not-disposable life on the fringes (cf. Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 19f.). Environmental degradations are certainly not limited to be a factor pushing certain populations off the grid. But they affect ordinary life also there where the grid is entered again, where a foothold – so to say – is sought and fought for. Rather than framing environmentally induced displacement as a neatly contained fact, we have therefore to engage multiple, repeated and non-linear experiences of environmental degradation along the routes across Asia. We have to engage the repeated infringements of proper citizenship and the ways dislocated, relocating and yet-to-be localizing populations lay claim on territory, rights and belonging.

The considerations voiced so far have, on another level, to be related to the notion of regional assemblages and the analytic of the nation state. This relates to the translocal and, indeed, the delimited nature of nature and flows. Obviously, neither the slow violence of environmental degradations nor enforced mobilities are stalled by borders or encompassed by regional constructs. Yet, they are clearly mediated by socio-environmental relations which are intimately bound up with, as Malkki aptly puts it (1995), the national order of things. Flows of migration unfold together with circulating imageries of the (national) elsewhere and particular border regimes. The latter applies to the workings of environmental degradations, too. For these dynamics are rooted in entangled histories and continue to be experienced along shared, but uneven trajectories (Randeria 2006). Paradoxically, thus, as globalized dynamics, both migration and degradation are intimately related to borders and cannot to be experienced beyond the state. At present at least. For there is reason to assume that these divergent, but aligned flows challenge the national order mediating them by virtue of their delimited and threatening nature. This applies most strongly, of course, to climate change's environmental degradations themselves. The latter are, as Ulrich Beck notes (2008: 39 emphasis in original), at the same time "[…] hierarchical *and* democratic."[8] They are hierarchical insofar as the increasing risk is unevenly distributed and deepens inequalities. But at the same time, the increase of risk on a planetary scale reduces, he argues, the very ability of the richest persons or societies to stay afloat. Beck therefore understands climate change as opportunity, too. To anticipate future apocalypse invites a decidedly cosmopolitan perspective. He claims (Beck 2008: 41) that it "[…] opens up the opportunity to transgress the nation-state narrow-mindedness of politics [*die nationalstaatlichen Borniertheiten der Politik zu überwinden*] and to develop a cosmopolitan realism in the national interest."

[8] This and the following translation from the German original are mine.

While it still remains to be seen when and under which circumstances climate change will have such an effect, there is little doubt that the encroaching nature of associated environmental degradations will emerge as sites of new articulations of citizenship. Particularly when the ranks of those falling off the grid will increase and when assets of elite actors will become endangered on a larger scale. It is therefore crucial, to focus on emerging socialities and architectures of claim giving rise to what Ayesha Siddiqi recently called 'disaster citizenship' (2013: 100). Within the narrow framework of the nation, but also within a more distinctively cosmopolitan figuration.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have presented some preliminary thoughts on political repercussions of environmental degradations on the margins. In order to do that I have embraced two approaches derived from political theory. First, I have reflected on the significance of 'terrain' and 'territory' insofar as they are overlaid with what I call the grid of property relations and bureaucratic spaces. The latter serves, I argued, as a means of governing populations and terrain. At the same time, they serve also as fraught access points to essential schemes, means and goods distributed by the state. I have framed them as nodes to access the state from below. In a second step I have reflected on the fragile state of citizenship and localized arrangements with power brokers in the lives of the poor for which spatial categories and quotidian objects are crucial.

Against this background I have shown that environmental degradations amount at times to a dismantling of these fraught and fragile political relations. For they partly unmake access to state-administered schemes by dismantling the grid by destroying bureaucratic nodes and displacing bureaucracies.

By way of these preliminary and fragmentary reflections I have identified what I consider to be research themes that are both urgent and stimulating. For they allow to focus on hardly visible domains of politics that play an essential role for marginalized lifeworlds. I suggest that thorough research on these dynamics and engagements will stimulate applied approaches to suffering in the Anthropocene. A fuller consideration of these dynamics, their actors and materialities will similarly help to further scientific understanding of the texture of the state at the margins. In this regard the anecdote of King Canute opening this paper is instructive: It would be preposterous to deny the impact of material conditions on the practice of statecraft and the dialectical relation between politics and environment emerges as a site of surprising reformulations. Ranging from King Canute's humility to Beck's metropolitan perspective and beyond.

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