

The ecology of humanity: Exploring the roots of an idea

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In this paper I would like to explore the seemingly paradoxical roots of current concerns for planet Earth in earlier strands of politicized resource discourses of a “limited earth” among e.g. geographers, demographers, and geopolitical thinkers, focusing on the short century 1859 to 1939. In the 20th century the idea of “humanity” took on a political significance, embodied in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and in a comprehensive political language of the global collectivity. There are of course older roots of the ideas of collective humanity in Renaissance and Enlightenment thought (Headley 2008) and the links with globalization have become the subject of increasing interest in recent scholarship (e.g. Mazlish 2006). In this paper I would like to turn the focus on emerging scientific ideas of population, genetics, race, and their relations to the environment. While there are certainly a range of older conceptions of formative influences by nature and climate on humans, there is a marked increase of such ideas in a century roughly between Darwin’s *Origin* (1859) and the Second World War. The earth’s resources were putting boundaries on the political economy of modernizing nations but also on the possibilities of mankind as a planetary species. In the same period the concept of ecology emerges, matures and becomes politicized and there are ideas voiced to connect humans with ecology in the form of an environmentally determinist “human ecology”, proposed by Ellsworth Huntington in the 1910’s and with a winding road of progress in the coming decades. What interests me here, however, is not the disciplinary trajectories of human ecology but rather the attempts to articulate the idea of humanity as a global entity defined and restrained by its exchange with the natural world and its resources, in short by its “ecology”.