

ENTREVISTA

Jonh Vogler (Professor, Ph. D, Keele University)

About the interviewed

John Vogler holds a B.A. in Modern History and Politics from Reading and an M. Sc (Econ) and Ph. D in International Relations from the London School of Economics.

His doctoral work was on the international settlement of internal wars and his first teaching appointment was at the Liverpool Polytechnic (subsequently Liverpool JMU) where he became head of Politics. He was also taught and undertook course development at the Open University and through the 1990s was concerned with the development of the ESRC's Global Environmental Change research programme.

In 1992 he founded, and then convened for 20 years the British International Studies Association's Working Group on the Environment. In 2001 he was appointed to a chair in International Relations at Keele. He led an EU Marie Curie Fellowship programme which brought doctoral students from across Europe to study environmental economics and politics at Keele.

From 2009 he was a grant holder and member of the ESRC Centre for Climate Change Economics and Policy and in 2012 became a professorial research fellow while continuing to teach on undergraduate and postgraduate courses and to supervise research students.

ORCID: 0000-0003-1829-8506

E-mail: j.vogler@keele.ac.uk

1. Why has the environmental agenda become a relevant topic in International Relations?

John Vogler – The study of IR as a discipline tends to follow trends in actual international politics, so there was always some interest in environmental problems when they crossed national boundaries and caused disputes. Another concern was with natural resources as constituents of national power – this was arch Realist Hans Morgenthau's concern. However, environment stayed at the periphery of IR for a very long time. What changed things was a rise in 'green' environmental politics within Western polities during the 1960s and an awareness that as well as transboundary problems, such as acid rain, there was a clear link to economic development.

Such issues were at the heart of the first great UN environment conference held at Stockholm in 1972. Here the trade off between the environmental quality as pursued by the North and development, demanded by the South, began to be discussed in terms of 'sustainable development'. While there was an acknowledgement that transboundary problems required solutions through international cooperative action, during the 1980s there was a new scientific understanding of the global character of problems such as stratospheric ozone depletion and climate change.

A key moment was -probably the most important UN environment conference ever held – UNCED or the ‘earth summit’ held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. From then on the study of the IR of the environment grew strongly with an initial concern with how necessary international cooperation could be achieved in a fragmented world of nation states. Central concerns were the successful 1987 Montreal Protocol on stratospheric ozone and the much more problematic UN climate change Convention (UNFCCC). Most, but not all, students followed a liberal institutionalist line. Elsewhere, there was growing awareness of the military and security implications of rapid environmental change, especially in Africa.

2. What is the world’s perception regarding Brazil’s role in the environmental agenda?

JV – I can only give you my personal impression and there may be more systematic work on this that would give a better answer. My general view would be that Brazil is regarded as one of the big players in international politics. For a start it is a member of the BASIC group that includes South Africa, China and India. This is a climate change alliance that brings together the big ‘emerging’ economies of the South which are indispensable to any solution to the problem of dangerous climate change. Most specifically, as everybody is aware, the Amazon rainforest is the important world ‘sink’ for carbon dioxide plus being a very significant store of critical biodiverse resources.

Hence, there has been world wide concern as to Brazil’s internal policies towards Amazon development especially under President Bolsonaro who achieved a certain infamy alongside US President Trump as an enemy of international climate action. When the new President elect Lula appeared at COP 27 there was widespread relief and enthusiasm in environmentalist circles. Neither should it be forgotten that Brazil also possesses, as yet unexploited, hydrocarbon

resources. To sum up, what happens in Brazil is critically important to the wellbeing of the rest of the world. It is a heavy burden of expectation to carry!

3. How to evaluate in degree/scope/dimension the environmental issues for the great powers?

JV – In general I would take the recent statements by UN Secretary General Guterres on the climate emergency and see how well or badly the powers have responded to them. Another test would be IEA chief Fatih Birol’s demand that there be no new fossil fuel developments from now on. Very specifically we could analyse their Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement, something that will be the subject of the ‘global stock take’ during 2023. I fear that none of the powers will emerge from this with great credit. If we count the European Union as a power (which it is in climate trade and development diplomacy) then it probably has the best record and prognosis with its ‘Fit for 55’ proposals, which are, however subject to internal disagreement between member states.

Under President Biden, the ‘Inflation Reduction Act’ shows that the US is making moves towards a net zero target with specific economic benefits but at the cost of accusations of protectionism from the EU and elsewhere. China and India can claim special treatment as developing countries but their relative lack of short term ambition and continuing addiction to fossil fuels is concerning.

The overall problem with environmental policy is that governments tend to take a short-term view (often determined by 4-5 year electoral cycles) while both industry and the environment require a much longer term perspective. There is therefore an urgent political incentive to go for immediate economic growth even if it is unsustainable. Most recently, the environment has lost salience because of the pressing need to deal with Covid 19 pandemic.

China and the US are responsible for the lion's share of global greenhouse gas emissions and it is difficult to envisage a stable future without cooperation between them. As their political and strategic relationship deteriorates it has affected most elements of their bilateral relationship – except, perhaps, climate and environment. US envoy John Kerry has tried to keep this on track as an oasis of cooperation, but it has been very difficult.

4. What are the biggest challenges in the short, medium and long term regarding the environmental agenda?

JV – A proper answer would require many essays – even books! Anyway, for now, we are facing in Europe the very immediate crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequences in terms of energy prices and shortages, especially in Africa, of food and fertiliser. The possible environmental consequences, if the war is allowed to escalate across the nuclear threshold, are unthinkable but we can only hope unlikely. A pressing issue is how to manage energy shortages.

On the one hand there is evidence of a reversion to fossil fuels, reopened coal mines and serious competition for LNG supplies to make up the shortfall of Russian gas. On the other, high fossil prices ought to provide the opportunity for demand reduction and above all to accelerate the introduction of renewable power sources. How this will pan out is unclear and major energy investors, which include nation states, are still not following the advice of the IEA and abandoning subsidies to fossil fuels. In fact, engorged with windfall profits, some of the oil majors (BP for example) are retreating from previous commitments to fund renewables. It is also not encouraging that the next climate COP will be hosted by the UAE and presided over by someone with a background in fossil fuel energy.

My comments above relate directly to the medium term prognosis which I take to be the

seven years until 2030. We must take the IPCC and UNEP seriously when they state very baldly that this period is absolutely critical if a 2 degree 'dangerous' increase in temperatures is to be avoided by the end of the current century – let alone 1.5 degrees. The trend of greenhouse gas emissions has to start to decline very rapidly and there is little sign that this is happening as ghg. concentrations in the atmosphere move ever upwards (currently at 419 ppm against a preindustrial figure of around 280ppm). So far the international climate regime (compared to stratospheric) ozone regime has been an abject failure. Fully half the carbon dioxide emissions since the end of the eighteenth century have occurred since the foundation of the UNFCCC in Rio in 1992!

I have looked towards the end of the century in terms of climate change, but there is a growing realisation that in the longer term the many facets of environmental degradation are inter-related in what some have called a global 'permacrisis'. It is particularly important to realise that there is also a biodiversity emergency, recently addressed by the UN Convention on Biodiversity (also signed at Rio in 1992) in its COP 15. This was moved from China to Canada as a result of the pandemic. It recognised the scale of enormous losses of natural plants and animals and agreed a target of protecting 30% of world resources by 2030. Such ambitions have been thwarted before (see the 2000 Aichi targets) and rely upon hard pressed governments to institute and enforce the necessary safeguards. There are issues for consumers and the corporate sector too. To give just one example – and there are many- If climate and biodiversity targets are to be addressed to any extent there needs to be a major change in dietary habits away from the inefficient conversion of proteins that are involved in meat production.

Interviewers: José Renato Ferraz da Silveira and Cláudio Andrés Téllez Zepeda