

Symbolic Power, Climate Change, and the Politics of Event Attribution Science

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An aspect of symbolic power is the naming of phenomena and offering (or controlling) authoritative interpretations of the meaning of “events.” This aspect can be conceptualized with respect to a temporal dimension, that is, regarding past, current, and future events. Regarding the past, events may be punctuated with commemoration (Palestine’s Nakba, Ukraine’s Holodomor, the storming of the Bastille, etc.). In the present, phenomena can be interpreted nearly in real time, most notable in cases of disaster, surprise, armed conflict, or rapid-onset economic or political change. Future events can also be named, illustrated, imagined, or predicted. Prophecy, portends, promises, and declarations (e.g., of progress, decline, risk, or threat) involve symbolic power insofar as they bridge an interpretation of the not-yet to the structuring or governing of social conduct in the present. This paper applies this theorization of symbolic power to an emergent sub-field of climate science, “event attribution science,” which interprets weather events and socio-ecological impacts in terms of whether or not the events can be attributed to anthropogenic global warming. This field is increasingly oriented to explaining (and predicting) social, political and economic outcomes including famine, armed conflict, and sociopolitical risks. Through analysis of the individuals, institutions, and technologies involved in event attribution science, I generate an empirical historical-comparison between current climate governance and prior forms of climate futuring that connected science and politics in various nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial state formations. The paper thus build’s upon Bourdieusian theory of symbolic power, specifically the claim that “the constitutive power of

(religious or political) language, and of the schemes of perception and thought which it procures, is never clearer than in situations of crisis” (Bourdieu 1991:128) in this case, climate crisis.