



The South China Sea as Asian Mediterranean: A 'Fluid' Concept

By Professor Phil Steinberg

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Wednesday, 12th February 2014 @ 2:30 p.m.

IAS Meeting Room 2.27, Level 2, FASS Building

Speaker's Profile



Philip Steinberg is Professor of Political Geography and Acting Director of the International Boundaries Research Unit at Durham University. He has written extensively on the ocean and the ways in which cultural perspectives on the land-sea relationship influence and reflect economic uses and legal governance systems for both regional and global seas. His most recent publications focus on three areas: The ways in which ocean governance systems do and do not account for maritime geophysical processes; the Arctic (with particular attention to the ways in which the presence of ice complicates expansion of state and commercial interests there); and the notion of regional seas. In the latter area, he is particularly interested in the concept of mediterraneanism, looking in particular at how it has expanded beyond the Mediterranean Sea to other 'inner seas' including the Caribbean, the Arctic, and, most recently, the South China Sea.

Professor Steinberg is Associate Editor of *Political Geography* and serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* and *Island Studies Journal*. He is also a member of the Executive Board of the International Geographical Union's Commission on Islands.

Abstract

Amidst calls for appreciating the South China Sea as an 'Asian Mediterranean' we should not lose sight of the many ways in which the Mediterranean concept has already been applied. From the Arctic Ocean (the 'Polar Mediterranean') to the Gulf of Mexico / Caribbean Sea (the 'American Mediterranean') to the Mediterranean Sea itself, the concept of 'mediterraneanism' has been used to signify a broad range of geographies. Across these 'mediterranean' regions, the term alternately has been used to identify an arena of maritime trade and circulation, a hearth of civilization, a zone of potential investment, a field for asserting hegemony, or a zone of geostrategic concern. Through an investigation of the concept and how it has been applied around the world, this paper identifies a number of complex ambiguities and contradictions underlying 'mediterraneanism'. It concludes by suggesting that, although the application of this geographic referent has the danger of facilitating simplistic understandings, the ambiguities inherent in the referent make it a powerful tool for conceptualising and understanding the historic and emergent South China Seas region.