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BOOK REVIEW

Interdisciplinarity and the Challenges of Environmental Sensemaking

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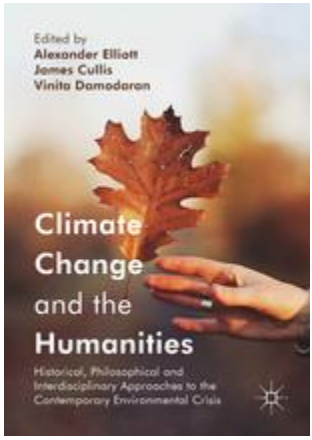
A Elliott, J Cullis and V Damodaran, eds. 2017. *Climate Change and the Humanities: Historical, Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Contemporary Environmental Crisis.* London: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-1-137-55123-8, pp. 271 + XII, INR 7602 (Hardbound).



Climate change has been described as the archetypal "wicked problem" — as one that "does not lend itself to a solution" (Hulme, 2009, pp.334, 359). In several ways, the phenomenon of climate change, in fact, reflects in an intense and unprecedented manner the socio-cultural (Hulme, 2015) and moral (Gardiner, 2006) dilemmas of the present. *Climate Change and the Humanities: Historical, Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Contemporary Environmental Crisis* published subsequent to a momentous event — the signing of the Paris Agreement (2016) — makes a powerful case for re-cantering the criticality of the humanities in the debates over climate change and global warming.

The organisation of the chapters in this volume reinforces the significance of knowing the environment through the overlapping frames of the past,

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present and future: the discussions presented by the contributors emphasise the plurality of human experience while drawing attention to the contradictions and perils of the homogenous discourses on climate change. Through its investigations into the historical, moral, cultural, political and philosophical underpinnings of knowing climate, the volume consciously sets itself apart from the echo chamber of solution-oriented discourses of "'actionable' knowledge" (p. 9).

The volume illustrates that there is ample evidence from history that situates the environment within the realm of the literary and philosophical imaginations, among other fields. For example, this is borne out in accounts of the relationships that are forged between nature and culture in literature and in the political tensions these denote, as Groom convincingly argues in a chapter titled, 'Plastic Daffodils: The Pastoral, the Picturesque, and Cultural Environmentalism'. By referring to the specific cases of William Wordsworth's poem, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', and James Thomson's 'The Seasons', the author offers an illustrative account of the cultural construction of environments and the weather. Groom even shows that these poems were designed to bring about a shift in the type of literary pleasure that readers derived — from a vicarious experiencing of landscapes to a search for physical immersion. Yet, as the author suggests, a critical examination of the literature is incomplete without an acknowledgment of the prevalent socio-economic and political forces of the time — the landed class in 18th century England — that shaped how landscapes were ultimately represented in both the pastoral and picturesque strands of English poetry. Notably, processes of enclosure for instance, were neglected by the poets, who instead leaned towards a romanticisation of the "deserted landscape" as the poetic norm (p.125).

While the appeal of idyllic desertion occupied the imaginations of literary figures past, the contemporary genre of cli-fi (short for climate fiction), as Ryle shows in 'Cli-Fi? Literature, Ecocriticism, History', relies on methods of socio-cultural and historical distantiation to interesting effects — of a sense of awe and rapture that is similar to what might be experienced in evocations of a sublime nature. Ryle's critique of the cli-fi genre is located in a consideration of environmental history and the global politics of development, where the author indicates that the framing of climate change as a future event obscures the marginalised geographies of the global present. Through a strong sub-thematic emphasis on the temporal politics of environmental citizenship, the author offers insights on Margaret Atwood's 'Oryx and Crake' (2004), a notable work of speculative fiction, and Ian McEwan's fictional work, 'Solar' (2010).

Literature, as an arena for creative conversation on climate change, is closely interlinked with questions of ethics and philosophy. Atwood's work, as Ryle shows, engages with this through a problematisation of consumerism and the capitalist mode of production. This chapter is complemented by Calder's investigation of the philosophies of climate, Davies' work on futures, and Mulgan's evaluation of the 'Broken World' scenario through a Rawlsian framework. Calder makes a central "distinction between philosophy applied to the environment and environmental philosophy" (p.170), and provides a direction for further research in the area by revisiting some key scholarly contributions to questions of nature and culture.

Viewed in relation to the need for "situatedness" in understandings of environment (Bäckstrand 2004, 706), the foundations for comprehensive climate philosophies may be expanded by revisiting critiques of modernity and institutionalised discourses through the frameworks of non-western norms, philosophical traditions and imaginations. These areas of philosophy and ethics in climate discourses also intersect with conversations on aesthetics — a point that Brady persuasively makes in 'Climate Change and Future Aesthetics', in order to draw attention to the temporal implications of climate change and its linkages to perceptions of diverse landscapes. Most pertinently, the author argues that climate change need not result in a devaluation of aesthetics, but could rather be viewed as ushering in a shift in the aesthetic calculus of societies, in ways that support ideas of both loss and gain.

Formulations of loss and gain, as too of environmental aesthetics, are informed by broader historical narratives which prompt an examination of the epistemic politics of climate change. In 'The Importance of the Humanities to the Climate Change Debate', Elliott and Cullis observe that the emergence of interest in climate is not a recent phenomenon — on the contrary, they show that accounts of it are found distributed across the annals of history. Early philosophical writings, designs for colonial expansion and narratives of environmental determinism are all part of a historical corpus of imaginings about the climate. The authors illustrate that the dominant discourse of climate change, with its focus on the universality and objectivity of scientific knowledge, has led to the erasure of other situated, and equally legitimate, epistemic domains. They show that the persistence of a dichotomous categorisation of knowledge into "utilitarian" and "esoteric" strands (p. 21), as pertaining to science and the humanities respectively, impacts on any project for the diversification of climate change discourse, and as this chapter shows, reflects the hegemonic undertow of global politics.

The chapters in this volume offer nuanced and detailed perspectives on the challenges of knowing and representing climate change. They reveal that a far more complex rendering of climate can be achieved by engaging with the humanities than any story that is exclusively generated by science. In 'Understanding Climate Change Historically', Staley shows how a critical approach to the politics of knowledge production is germane to a wider discussion on the relevance of historical analysis in scientific research. The Anthropocene constitutes an important frame within this debate, where the historian of science occupies a unique position — as a narrator who is able to address "scientists' histories" while contributing to "historians' histories" (p.46). What this chapter, and the others in the volume collectively emphasize, are questions of *who, what, where, when, how* and *why*, in the languages of climate change.

These questions also pervade the sphere of climate change communication, where Happer, in 'Belief in Change: The Role of Media and Communications in Driving Action on Climate Change', explains how climate skepticism is given monetary encouragement by American and British corporations with vested interests. A considerable part of the current discourse on climate change in the western media points to the complexities of navigating campaigns of disinformation. Happer's chapter, in particular, captures the subtleties of these discourses through primary data. In a striking exploration of the *why* aspect of skepticism, the author shows, through the accounts of a set of research respondents, that their stances have more to do with a lack of faith in political actors and democratic procedure, than with a repudiation of the phenomenon of climate change itself. The core arguments made by the author about the "circuit of communication" (p. 191) on climate change, may also be useful to revisit in the light of recent global civic mobilisation against climate change inaction and the need for a historical contextualisation of environmental concern.

One important example of the history of environmental concern (and alarm) is to be found in Grove's account of early environmental legislation on the island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean. In 'The Culture of Islands and the History of Environmental Concern', the author shows how the passage of the Kings Hill Forest Act (1791) was situated in a climatic theory of sustainability, which subsequently shaped colonial era legislations particularly in island states through an emphasis on "desiccationism" (p. 72). This form of environmentalism was supported by a tripartite structure of knowledge production and circulation that comprised: the "professionalisation of science" through the identification of experts; the formation of global information networks, such as in the field of botany;

and, the collection of experiential information on degradation in the island states (p. 72). In critical ways, the contributions to this volume collectively emphasise the need for the humanities to engage with the idea of climate across scales in a historical context.

Imaginings of climate gain "persuasive power" (Jasanoff 2010, 236) from their ability to attend to the discursive and material particularities of heterogeneous locales. In 'The Locality in the Anthropocene: Perspectives on the Environmental History of Eastern India', Damodaran articulates this idea in a compelling way through an investigation of locality and indigenous subjectivity in eastern India. The key sites in this chapter —Jharkhand and Orissa, both states marked by high levels of poverty — contain natural resources and minerals that have been the focus of extractive multi-national corporations. These are also sites that continue to bear witness to state violence against Adivasi and peasant communities, alongside the intensification of armed struggle by Naxalites. Damodaran's account of the environmental history of this region raises important questions about the construction of indigenous identities in the present, historical claims to space, state responsibility and the institutionalisation of violence. By travelling between the concepts of locality and landscape, the author also implicitly offers a distinctive theoretical direction to negotiations of space and place in environmental history, with possibilities for creative theorisation in future research.

Climate Change and the Humanities has come at a crucial global moment that appears increasingly to be folding into a lexicon of "deadline-ism" (Hulme 2019, 2). The contributions to this volume reassert the centrality of viewing climate change historically, of engaging the humanities in accounts of representative knowledge, and of situating peoples and socio-economic and political undercurrents in narratives of past, present and future. Together, they provide an extensive overview of a set of cross-temporal environmental themes and make a forceful case for interdisciplinary conversations on climate change.

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