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A Cultural History of Climate Change

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Cultural History of Climate Change

TOM BRISTOW AND THOMAS H. FORD
(EDITORS)

LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2016
244 Pp. £110.0 HARDCOVER

REVIEWED BY TATIANA PROROKOVA

Considering the vital importance of the biophysical environment for most forms of life on earth, it is unsurprising that any transformations that happen within our environment become of primary interest both to scholars and to a general audience. Climate change is perceived to be among the most important of them. While numerous disciplines have been studying the problem of climate change, cultural studies offers a unique view of this intricate phenomenon by examining various artifacts that not only help one understand the history of climate change but also shape it through multiple representations.

Some of the recently published books, including William M. Covert's (2016) *The Smoke of London: Energy and Environment in the Early Modern City*, Amitav Ghosh's (2016) *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Geoffrey Parker's (2017) *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, and Stephen Siperstein, Shane Hall, and Stephanie LeMenager's (eds.) (2017) *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities*, reveal the intricate connection between history, culture, and climate change. John A. Duvall's (2017) *The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century* and Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann's (2016)

Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen examine cinematic representations of the environment to foreground the power of cinema to visualize various ecological issues, including the problem of climate change. In a similar fashion, Antonia Mehnert's (2016) *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature* and Adam Trexler's (2015) *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* skillfully demonstrate that climate change has been widely discussed in fiction, not only to stress the ability of literature to deal with such a serious issue as climate change but also to uncover the complex relationship between literature and climate change.

While this scholarship offers detailed examinations of cultural representations of climate change, Tom Bristow and Thomas H. Ford's edited collection *A Cultural History of Climate Change* by no means repeats the existing research but instead, through the book's cultural analysis of the long and complex history of climate change, significantly expands it. The scholars suggest looking at the problem of climate change from a historical perspective to understand the irrevocable changes that our planet has been experiencing for centuries, and to rethink the notion of climate today. The editors divide their study according to three topics, examining climates of history, climates of writing, and climates of politics, thus both expanding and explaining the notions of climate and climate change.

In the first part of the book, the contributors offer a comprehensive analysis of various activities and phenomena that have provided some parameters for the current atmospheric environment. The essays in this climates of history section focus on such issues as weather, seasons, geology, and pollution. Opening the first section, Deb Anderson challenges the reader to think of the co-dependency of culture and climate. Zeroing in on the problem of extreme weather, the scholar not only foregrounds the importance of oral history but also underlines the fact that climate helps one understand oral history as a tool through which one can study climate change.

Continuing to investigate cultural representations of weather, Chris O'Brien analyzes seasons through the prism of colonialism and argues that despite the existence of so-called "Western notions of time" (38), the aboriginal understandings of climate, nature, and time are still relevant and they "incorporate a temporal flexibility that allows for seasons which don't happen at an exact time, but come nonetheless in a cyclical sequence, though occasionally a season does not come at all" (39). O'Brien outlines the history of forecasting weather and accentuates the imperfection of individual interpretations which might result in dangerous misinterpretations when it comes to climate. While the weather, as the essay demonstrates, is, indeed, a crucial phenomenon to examine in relation to climate, weather changes can be only the consequences of the bigger problem – climate change.

Jerome Whittington investigates the role of imagination and speculation in the measurements of the "temperature of interplanetary space" (56) and the complex relationship between science and imagination when dealing with the greenhouse effect. Linda Williams's essay touches upon similar issues although from a different perspective and examines how "social processes that emerged in the long seventeenth century from 1550 to 1750 not only exacerbated global climate change, but also provided a robust foundation for ecocritical responses to the advance of global climate change in the twenty-first century" (87). Knowledge as a combination of the scientific and the imaginative is the key term in these two essays, but also in the one by Tom Bristow and Andrea Witcomb who address the problem of cultural visualization of climate change, focusing on an example of a contemporary Australian museum.

The next section of the book—climates of writing—provides analyses of literary representations of climate change to highlight the power of writing to deal with the problem of climate. From the fictions of the Enlightenment to Victorian literature and beyond, the contributors in this section examine the

connection between literature from various periods and the scientific views on climate change that existed in those times. The contributions in this section are made by Jayne Lewis, Karen Pinkus, Roslyn Jolly, and Thomas H. Ford, and analyze various narratives, among which are Helen Simpson's short-story cycle *In-Flight Entertainment*, Zola's *Germinal*, Upton Sinclair's *King Coal*, Robert Louis Stevenson's "Ordered South," and Henry James's "Daisy Miller" and "Longstaff's Marriage," to outline the way how literature constructs one's cultural understanding of climate through the portrayals of human and nonhuman lives. The authors meticulously examine how literature from various periods tackles the problem of climate change, suggesting that climate change texts help the reader understand the history of this phenomenon. Such knowledge, the scholars argue, is important to be able to prevent the drastic ramifications of climate change today. The section concludes with Ford's investigation of climate history through literary history. Ford demonstrates the intricate and tight bond between such notions as climate and meaning (157), and reveals climate "as a central category of cultural understanding in the naturalist model of literary history proposed by Hippolyte Taine" that is still crucial in literary studies (10).

The final section of *A Cultural History of Climate Change* is titled climates of politics and provides a historical overview of how climate change has influenced politics and vice versa. Here, the scholars, among whom are Nick Mansfield, S. Romi Mukherjee, Nicole Rogers, and Timothy Morton, examine such issues as sovereignty, eco-nihilism, apocalypse, activism, and lawfulness to portray climate change as, indeed, a global phenomenon, to reveal the current ideological views on climate change, and to demonstrate how climate change and various cases of political injustice have been made invisible throughout history. The section unveils political, social, and cultural dimensions of climate change and outlines them as the key trajectories to understand climate change both as a current and a long-existing phenomenon.

A Cultural History of Climate Change is a unique piece of scholarship, for it analyzes the issue of climate change from three significant perspectives: historical, literary, and political. The collection foregrounds the role of humanities in understanding and dealing with the problem of climate change through history and interpretation. It foregrounds the complex nature of climate change and demonstrates that humanities largely contribute to the study of this phenomenon. The successful attempt to compile various views from the humanities on climate change makes this edited collection an outstanding academic achievement. The crucial observations made by the contributors—cultural studies scholars and historians—help the reader understand the multifaceted nature of climate change. The book is an important contribution to the existing scholarship on climate change, for only being fully informed about the problem humanity can find ways to solve it. *A Cultural History of Climate Change* will be of interest to academics and students in the fields of environmental history, ecocriticism, political science, and cultural studies, as well as to anyone who wants to learn more about history and culture of climate change.

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