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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Historical Summary of Anthropological Thought on Climate Change

Review by Sandra Moore

The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Historical Reader

by Michael R. Dove

Wiley-Blackwell, 2014

As we begin the Anthropocene, an era characterized by humans' "unparalleled dominion over the whole planet" (Ackerman 2014: 9), there is a critical need to identify and understand the interconnectedness between human activity and environmental changes (Folke, Pritchard Jr., Berkes, Colding & Svedin 2007). In *The Anthropology of Climate Change*, environmental anthropologist Michael R. Dove presents twenty-two canonical works spanning thousands of years. These works highlight the intellectual roots and historical development of anthropological thought on climate change and relationships between humans and their environments. As Dove explains in the introduction, since the classical era "theorizing regarding the relationship between nature and culture, between environment and society, has been central to the development of anthropology as a field" (p. 2).

This book begins with a comprehensive introduction from Dove outlining the history of anthropological thought on the relationship between humans and their environments. He also summarizes each of the twenty-two works in this book, which are paired together under eleven thematic areas in four principle parts. The first part, "Continuities," presents works from classical (Hippocrates), Enlightenment (Charles de Secondat Montesquieu), and contemporary scholars (Francis Zimmerman) focusing on themes related to climate theory, "...the idea that climate determines human character, culture, and the rise and fall of civilizations" (p. 2). Part two, "Societal and Environmental Change," consists of works focusing on societal changes associated with climate change from late nineteenth century scholars (Friedrich Ratzel), mid-twentieth century scholars (Betty J. Meggers), and

contemporary scholars (Harvey Weiss and Raymond Bradley). The third part, “Vulnerability and Control,” includes works from modern scholars (Elizabeth Colson) exploring how diverse societies are affected by and cope with climatic perturbations. The final part, “Knowledge and its Circulation,” includes contemporary works (Kenneth Broad and Ben Orlove) that address how extreme climatic events are interpreted and experienced by different social, cultural, economic, and political groups.

In addition to spanning millennia, the works Dove includes in this edited book are also diverse in their focus on specific geographic areas and climatic perturbations. The included works explore a range of geographic specific climate issues including: climatic regional divides in the Maghreb region of Northern Africa (Ibn Khaldûn) and India (Zimmermann); the potential of the Amazon to support civilization (Meggers); the collapse of Norse civilization in Greenland at the end of the seventeenth century (Thomas H. McGovern); post natural disaster assistance in the Solomon Islands (James Spillius); drought in the Kalahari region of Botswana (Jacqueline Solway); rain shrines in Northern Rhodesia (Colson); gendered dimensions of flooding in Bangladesh (Rosalind Shaw); glacial disturbances in Peru (Mark Carey); social and political responses to Hurricane Katrina in the United States (Nancy Scheper-Hughes); catastrophic effects of typhoons in Micronesia (David M. Schneider); colonial politics of climate in Northern Tanzania (Todd Sanders); and the consumption of Northern climate science by Brazilian scholars and policy-makers (Myanna Lahsen).

Dove’s efforts to include works that explore specific places and issues highlights one of anthropology’s main strengths, providing place based understanding of specific issues and concerns. Many of the works in this book are place based case studies of specific communities or regions that directly, or indirectly, adopt a climate theory perspective explaining diversity among humans and civilizations as a result of climatic differences. The opening paragraph of the first article in the book, Hippocrates’s “Air, Waters, Places” affirms that those interested in studying the science of medicine must consider the geographic specific effects of seasonal variability, weather, and the environment on human health. Geographic specificity is the focus of many of the included works to explain societal, cultural, and physical differences associated with environmental variation.

The works Dove included demonstrate a chain of development in climate theory over time. Many of the included works also address the social impacts of climate change, such as Jacqueline Soloway’s “Drought as a 'Revelatory Crisis': An Exploration of Shifting Entitlements and Hierarchies in the Kalahari, Botswana” exploring reoccurring drought in the early 1980s as a catalyst for social change.

As Soloway illustrates, societal change is rarely explained by individual factors; the timing of the extreme drought in the Kalahari co-occurred with extreme social changes in the region including increased commercialization, class formation, and a rapidly growing national economy.

Similarly, the included work by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “The Disaster and its Doubles,” analyzes the impact of Hurricane Katrina in the U.S Gulf Coast and the social and political responses that followed the storm for the already disadvantaged populations living in this region. Hence, extreme climatic events are often catalysts for adaptive or maladaptive social change as competition for scarce resources increase in the wake of these events. However, what we learn from the experiences of specific regions dealing with climate perturbations may not always have universal applicability. Climate change is also a global issue and the universality of science as a discipline may conflict with diverse cultural perceptions and beliefs. One of the last articles in the book, Myanna Lahsen’s “Transnational Locals: Brazilian Experiences of the Climate Regime” discusses how the universality of science may disrupt or bias the discourse between transnational governments with diverse cultural and political realities.

These diverse works are evidence of Dove’s broad focus in compiling the works for this book. As with many edited works, Dove most likely had an abundance of works to choose from to include in this book. Although the twenty-two included works are all well-established works from classical or contemporary scholars, works from anthropologists focusing on cultural ecology would have been a valuable addition. In his introduction, Dove does briefly refer to the founder of cultural ecology, anthropologist Julian Steward. He asserts that Steward’s cultural ecology method for understanding how environmental adaptation impacts cultural change (1955) has had immense impact on the field of environmental anthropology and indigenous views of climate. However, specific reference in this book’s included works to cultural ecology is limited to a brief paragraph in Rosalind Shaw’s article “‘Nature,’ ‘Culture’ and Disasters: Floods and Gender in Bangladesh.”

In conclusion, the works included in this book are interesting, memorable, and a timely contribution to the discourse in anthropology for understanding the various impacts of global climate change from multiple perspectives and contexts. Due to Dove’s broad historical orientation, this book provides a novel framework for introducing undergraduate and graduate anthropology students to climate change and climate theory from an anthropological perspective. Dove’s comprehensive introduction combined with the pairing of relevant and related works under specific thematic areas is useful for class reading assignments and encouraging focused comparative debates. Beyond its usefulness in the classroom, this well-organized book is a valuable resource for any reader who wishes to develop a better understanding

of how climate change has shaped human history and how it will influence human societies in the future.

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