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Anthropology Book Forum

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The Time and space for Earthly reckoning is here and now

Review by Martin Gren

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Ialenti, V. 2020. *Deep Time Reckoning. How Future Thinking Can Help Earth Now*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press.

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We live in planetary deeply troubling times, let us not pretend anything else. Dire predictions of and for the future of the Earth and us humans abound. In a recent article, “Frontiers in conservation science,” it is stated that future “environmental conditions will be far more dangerous than currently believed. The scale of the threats to the biosphere and all its lifeforms - including humanity - is in fact so great that it is difficult to grasp for even well-informed experts” (Bradshaw et al, 2021, p.1). The message from science about the planetary condition appears to be unequivocal; “What is at stake is the fate of humanity and most living species” (Ceballos, Erlich and Raven, 2020, p. 13601).

In other words, the time and space for earthly reckoning is here and now. Vincent Ialenti, the author of the book at hand, knows this very well indeed. As the title indicates, and as I understand his overall argument, “future thinking” is not only for a future that lies ahead of us, as in a modern utopian spatio-temporal framing. More importantly, it can actually help the Earth and us humans in the present. This is not to be understood in a general sense, but more specifically in response to what Ialenti distinguishes as two overlapping crises. The first is the Anthropocene, which signals an ecological crisis unfolding at planetary scale and that ushers in a new understanding of what it means to be human in relation to the Earth. In his own words, it “challenges entire populations to reimagine their ways of thinking, acting, and relating to better sync with the Earth’s environment’s radical long term” (p.xiii). The second crisis is “the deflation of expertise” (p-xiii) that refers to a contemporary political atmosphere that undermines the authority of science. In effect, this means that scientific expertise cannot function as an arbiter that puts an end to political disputes, in this case those that pertain to our life-supporting relations with the Earth. When surrounded by a short-term political regime, where “opinions” dismisses and triumphs “facts,” it also becomes difficult for the expertise of science to effectively contribute to climate action politics.

This cocktail of double crises leads to a situation where we are “poorly equipped to grasp the scale of Earth’s ecological death spiral” (p.1). For Ialenti this is intrinsically linked to his argument that there is an urgent need for developing our skills in “future thinking,” notably in relation to the deep-time reckoning we face in the context of the Anthropocene. Throughout the book he provides plenty of imaginative exercises by which we can train and develop our own capacity for long-term thinking. These include, for example, how to model millennia and far away futures, engaging with analogue and multiple lines of reasoning, and how to learn “about long-term landscape evolution” (p.61) our own geographical surroundings. The exercises in future thinking are derived from material that originated from Ialenti’s own anthropological field work on a nuclear waste safety project in Finland and which forms the basis of his book. “The Safety Case,” consisting of various experts tasked with figuring out all kinds of risks that the deposit of nuclear waste may face in faraway futures, is essentially steeped in deep-time issues and questions. In a style of writing that is at the same time analytically sharp and accessible, the author shares his ethnographic observations by both zooming in on the everyday work and practices of those involved, and by zooming out to larger contexts that circles around future thinking and thinking about the future. While reading the book it often feels like Ialenti manages to gradually reveal the secrets of deep-time and its reckoning(s).

This is sorely needed in the context of the Anthropocene, where the collective of humans is now a geo-force that affects both the present functioning of the Earth System and its future trajectory. As a recent UN report on human development puts it: “For the first time in our history the most serious and immediate, even existential, risks are human made and unfolding at planetary scale” (UNEP, 2020, p. 21). As important as it is to develop our skills in future thinking, particularly at this point in planetary history, one could also suspect that something has happened with both “deep-time” and “the future.” For example, the UN secretary general António Guterres has ever since his inauguration not only characterized the present planetary climate situation as an existential threat to humanity, but he has also urged all nations to “declare a climate emergency.”

This implies that the time for climate action, in other words to help the Earth and thereby ourselves, is now. It also means, as I understand it, that the consequences of climate inaction in the present is that the future-Earth is actually moving closer towards us. To think deep-time will continue to be important in order to grasp its presence among us in rocks and fossils, but temperatures and the levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide are on the rise in “real time” as we write and speak. This suggests a new braiding of human and geological history, and therefore some kind of reshuffling of temporalities and also what counts as that thing or state we have been accustomed to refer to as “the future.” In times of the climate emergency, one may question if it really is “[t]he next handful of

decades [that] will determine whether humanity has the capacity, will, and wisdom to manufacture forms of collective life compatible with long-term ecological realities, or whether, instead, there is an expiration date on the grand human experiment” (p. vii).

Perhaps this can be understood as a small question mark on Ialenti’s take on deep time and the future, but it is certainly also another affirmation of its contribution in envisioning alternative futures. If “[e]mbarking on these sort of multiscale, multiangle, multiperspective learning-journeys can be useful to today’s deep time reckoning experts and to society as a whole” (p.118), then it has been useful also for me. The books provides a convincing case that future thinking, time-literacy, and an engagement with deep-time is highly important and, if applied more widely, it could hopefully also “help the Earth” and its haunting presence in our daily Anthropocene lives. I hope that it will also help to “reverse the deflation of the expertise” (p.90).

References

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Martin Gren is a human geographer who is trying to understand, and give conceptual figure to, the “new” foregrounded Earth that humans now have to reckon with in the planetary climate emergency. He has published books and articles and teaches at the Linnaeus University in Sweden.



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