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Hulme, Mike - *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*, London: Sage Publications, 2017, (pp. 178) ISBN – 978-1-4739-2499-4

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... climate is hard to place and even its existence is questionable. It seems to be everywhere ... and yet it is nowhere People seem to know intuitively what climate is and yet they struggle to articulate an adequate definition of it. And yet if climates *didn't* exist they would have to be invented. ... Climate appears to be a necessary invention if people are to make sense of the world in which they live (Hulme, 2017, p. 1).

The 'problem' of how to deal with changes in a system that is so integral to our lives, has underpinned the political disruptions of the past decade in Australia. Debates over climate change as a scientific phenomenon, disagreement over approaches and policies floated to reduce fossil fuel emissions and consternation over renewal energy initiatives arising from increasing power prices, have dominated the political conversation and the narrative of government since 2007. Prime ministers and leaders of the opposition have come and gone, as have proposed policies couched in a variety of forgettable acronyms: ETS, CPRS, EIS, RET, CET and most recently, NEG¹. Ideologically-driven dissent has raged on both sides of the political divide and bipartisan consensus on ending the so-called 'climate wars' in the national interest remains unlikely. Despite increasingly strident warnings from reputable international scientific organisations about continued rises in global temperature and evidence of the impacts of increasingly unseasonable weather in the form of hurricanes, wildfires, droughts and floods, in Australia in 2017 we remain in policy gridlock and political impasse.

So, what is it about this issue that is so intractable? Why has the conversation about the future of human society as we know it, become so politicised and polarising to the point of largely neutering any seemingly sensible bipartisan political discussion in the national interest? Climate change as a concept remains in Australia, and internationally, what Kevin Rudd's economic advisor Professor Ross Garnaut once labeled 'a diabolical problem'.

To date, most analysis of the difficulties of communicating the need to take warnings about the impacts of the unmitigated build-up of greenhouse gasses, has revolved around the need to explain the science more clearly to lay audiences in order to politically prosecute the case for renewable energy and policies to minimise the impact of climate changes. In *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*, Professor Mike Hulme from King's College, London argues that we need to consider the notion of 'climate' more broadly and to embrace 'a multiplicity of knowledges' that move beyond

the dominant scientific framing of climate and 'climate-change²'. The books' preface for example, notes that:

Because climate-change is a such a pervasive phenomenon and discourse which is re-making the contemporary world, it is important to take a step back and undertake historical, geographical and cultural investigations into the idea of climate itself (p. xii).

What we need, the author says, is a more *nuanced* understanding of the ways in which cultural constructions of climate have underpinned the evolution and development of human societies and cultures, and the manner in which these impregnate our cultural psyche and impact our consciousness. From this starting point, Hulme notes: 'Since climate is a complex and abstract idea, it cannot be understood independently of the cultures within which the idea takes shape' (xii). It is this idea that this book explores.

Weathered develops and extends the insights first proffered in Hulme's (2009) *Why we disagree about climate change: Understanding controversy, inaction and opportunity*. In that book, Hulme systematically dissected and explored the multiplicity of social, scientific, cultural, religious, political, economic and philosophical perspectives which inform and underpin the scientific, political and sociological debates over climate science. Like *Why we disagree about climate change*, *Weathered* is simply structured, extremely well cross-referenced and offers a wide-ranging analysis that encompasses history, geography, art and philosophy. It explores more specifically the variety of ways in which both ancient and modern human societies and cultures have imagined and articulated their human and cultural agency through climate. It argues that climate needs to be understood as more than the sum of its meteorological forms of measurement or as a scientific articulation of a complex, interacting physical system. Cultures imagine and interact with the climate in which they reside via many aspects that define their lives: economic and political systems, rituals and taboos, religious beliefs, customs, social institutions and worldviews.

Hulme's overarching thesis is that:

... climate is better understood as an idea which mediates between the human experience of ephemeral weather and the cultural ways of living which are animated by this experience. The idea of climate introduces a sense of stability or normality into what otherwise would be too chaotic and disturbing an experience of unruly and unpredictable weather (p. 4).

Climate and cultures, he says, 'exist in a dyadic relationship' (56). From this, he surmises that one explanation for our current difficulty in coming to terms with the reality of 'climate-change' (sic), the role of human agency in such a significant geological phenomenon, and the implications of not unilaterally attempting to deal with it, is that the phenomenon confronts and challenges deeply embedded notions of order, stability and predictability in our interactions with our external environment. In other words, our experiences with, and notions of climate provide a psychological means of imposing order on what is otherwise essentially chaos. This is an esoteric, but important idea.

Hulme explores this notion via the three overarching sections which structure the book. Part 1 is titled 'Knowledges of Climate' and the chapters here overview the different ways, different historical periods and range of different cultural perspectives and contexts, in which cultural, economic, political and imaginative practices have been imbibed and articulated through the prism of climate. In the Old Testament parable of Noah's Ark for example, the Flood was God's means of passing divine moral judgement on immoral human transgressions. Notions of 'climate determinism' were used to justify early European imperialism, notions of cultural superiority, 'civilised values' and the 'white man's burden'. Mythic and literary tropes from *The Odyssey* to *The Tempest* to *Game of Thrones* ('winter is coming') regularly engage climate metaphors as narrative devices. The construct of climate has therefore, long been appropriated and problematised. In broad historical terms, Hulme notes a raft of examples where climate has:

... functioned historically both as index (of weather in places) and as agent (of physical change and social outcome). The idea of climate has been bound up with, *inter alia*, imperial power, chauvinism, identity, nationhood, diet, colonialism, trade, health and morality ... [providing] order and stability to the aggregated relationship between weather and human cultures (26).

He concludes that historically, our innate tendency has been to invoke climate in many forms as a way of assuaging various human anxieties and insecurities related to our mortality and innate sense of powerlessness.

Part 2 is titled 'The Powers of Climate', and in these chapters Hulme explores the diverse range of 'lived experiences' of climate. As he has argued previously, climate change discourse has been dominated by broad scientific, economic and political frames to the detriment of local knowledges, experiences and perspectives. Further, he surmises that our current difficulties in dealing with the possibilities of anthropogenic climate change can be partly explained by our modern technological detachment from the external realities of climate daily via the 'thermally regulated' spaces in which we exist and operate. He notes the human need to construct 'narratives of blame' (71) and assign culpability for unforeseen or uncontrollable climatic events or impacts. The role of human *agency* in the large-scale emission of greenhouse gases which has a range of significant deleterious effects, however, complicates the manner in which we react to the implications by invoking the uncomfortable sense of our 'moral culpability'. He argues:

If the excess in carbon dioxide in the air is the result of a volcanic explosion one would not claim that the volcano is morally culpable. But the situation is different if the carbon dioxide arrived in the air because of wilful combustion of fossil fuels by human agents, in full light of its injurious consequences. ... one might be entitled to claim also that the human agent that perpetuates the action is morally culpable for the consequences (71).

As historians and anthropologists such as Chakrabarty (2009) and Latour (2014) have also noted, the psychological implications of such realisations of culpability are significant. From one perspective, these have invoked a form of political and ideological 'cognitive dissonance'. To acknowledge human agency is to be unable to deny or ignore moral culpability for the outcomes, especially our obligations to future generations. This conundrum casts a pall over both our faith in the innately beneficial nature of unrestrained capitalism and the globalisation project and until recently on the largely unquestioned underpinning principles of neoliberal economics. Climatic disordering, Hulme observes, seriously challenges 'the modernist allusion of human control' (84).

A further complication is that the 'psycho-social condition' arising from what Ulrich Beck (1992) described as 'risk society', will require an increasing level of state intervention and control, an idea that is an anathema to those who believe in both the power and sanctity of free markets and free will. This goes a long way to explaining levels of denial that underpin many of the political difficulties of climate change policy.

Part 3 of the book titled 'The Futures of Climate' is probably the least developed, yet it bookends Hulme's thesis nicely by situating it within with many of the underpinning political issues described earlier. It covers the thinking behind climate models and climate-altering technologies and the local and geo-political problem inherent in climate governance. The notion of 'governing climates' is fraught because they 'become battlegrounds upon which different political visions of the 'well-ordered society' or 'good life' vie for supremacy' (145).

He also notes that embracing the notion of 'the Anthropocene' is central to our broader difficulties but that it is useful as it 'provokes a re-imagining of the place and purpose of human life and action and how people see themselves in relation to the non-human world' (146). In the Anthropocene, he observes, 'people have moved from symbolically creating their many small worlds to materially co-creating their one entire world' (152). This is psychologically challenging, and hugely politically and economically disrupting, because '*change* is now inescapable and

perpetual. There is no normal' (152).

In his most recent book *Defiant Earth: The fate of humans in the Anthropocene* (also reviewed in this edition of GMJ), Clive Hamilton (2017) prophetically asks: '[w]hat kind of creature interfered with the Earth's functioning and would not desist when the facts became known?' (149). Unfortunately, as this book argues, the answer to that question is not that simple as climate is more than an external reality but an important culturally imbibed and psychologically complex concept. While he does not offer any answers, Hulme's perspectives are hugely important in broadening the conversations around how to best deal with this environmental crisis. While scientific thinking and knowledges remain indispensable, the political and psychological difficulties that we are witnessing in dealing with this crisis would indicate that we need multidisciplinary approaches to understanding the crisis beyond mere statistics and meteorological data. *Weathered* makes a valuable and accessible contribution to that discussion.

Notes

1 Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS); Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS); Emissions Intensity Scheme (EIS); Renewable Energy Target (RET); Clean Energy Target (CET); National Energy Guarantee (NEG).

2 Hulme notes that he uses the construction 'climate-change' (hyphenated) 'to 'differentiate the physical and discursive realities of anthropogenic changes in global climate from other expressions of change' (xii).

Works cited

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About the reviewer

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