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## Paul Sillitoe (ed.) (2021), "The anthropocene of weather and climate; Ethnographic contributions to the climate change debate"

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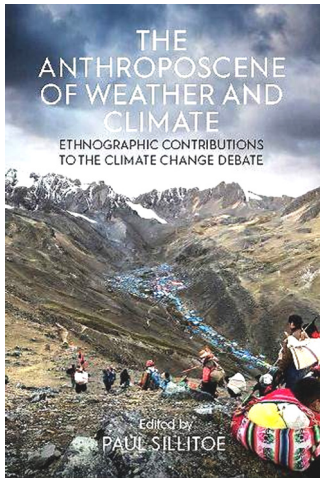
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This is a pioneering volume, that yet hides too much of its light under a bushel.

Billions of ordinary and indigenous farmers have a huge stake in the climate crisis now sweeping the globe. But their voice is muted in the debate about it. This book is a pioneering and agenda-setting effort to bring them into the conversation. They did the least to cause the crisis, but bear the most harm. Treating them as objects rather than

subjects of climate policy continues the ill-considered marginalization that started with the post-war “development” push. The book helps democratize a debate dominated by climatologists and policymakers. It contributes around-the-world comparison and complexity to an otherwise somewhat abstract, universalizing policy discourse.

Its twin focus on *knowledge* and on *politics* constitutes a constructive contribution. Both are potentially radical interventions.

Let us examine knowledge first. Most of the twelve substantive chapters contrast what is in the heads respectively of national policymakers and of the rural folk the anthropologists seek to represent. The former have a clear idea of the ways the entire planetary surface is rapidly changing, and what humans should do to roll with these changes so as not to go under. Maintaining food production is a key concern. The latter have their own ideas about what they can see the weather doing throughout the year, and it is not the same as the hockey-stick-graph-inflected discourse of their official visitors from the city.

Fortunately, the book does not uncritically validate any “indigenous knowledge” that might appear to support pseudo-scientific climate change denialism. (Some anthropologists did go down that route during the covid pandemic). Indeed, the editorial introduction is surprisingly cautious about the value of indigenous knowledge next to its modern rival. Too cautious, I think.

It packs them both into the indeterminate phrase “hybrid and multifaceted knowledge”. Environmental anthropologists already have the reputation of only seeing “the local” (one textbook says they “hope to contribute to global conservation but generally focus on local solutions” (J. Andrew Hubbell and John C. Ryan 2021: 75). Surely ordinary human beings can tell us more about this than that their thinking is “hybrid” or “local”?

Turns out, yes, they can! Inside the book, the case is made with great conviction that indigenous knowledge has much more to offer the world at large. Dan Rosengren (Chapter 1) writes that for the people of the Amazon “the knower and the known are seen as interrelated” (p. 30). He punches home the lesson:

[G]iven that modernist society is the main cause of global warming, instead of teaching nonmodernist people such as the Matsigenka new ways of life, modernist people should probably try to learn from the kind of relational epistemologies that have allowed and enabled nonmodernist people to engage in sustainable practices. (p. 40).

Nastassja Martin and Geremia Cometti (Chapter 3) echo and extend this conclusion. People in both the Peruvian Andes and Alaska have an admirable existential understanding of how to react to the breakdown of cognitive certainties that the climate crisis presents to us all.

[C]oncerned as they are with maintaining animated relationships with the rest of the living world and having to deal with these now out-of-control beings, they might have interesting thoughts on our major and shared problem: how to cope with the world’s rapid metamorphosis [...] (p. 72).

[...] these uncertainties have already been thought and formalized in the distant mythical times of the indigenous societies we work with. In those times, before speciation or while it was happening, nobody was truly themselves yet, but everybody was, for this very reason, intensely, assiduously becoming themselves. (p. 83).

Beyond the existential angle, indigenous knowledge has practical consequences too. Noah Walker-Crawford (Chapter 6) follows an Andean farmer and mountain guide named Saúl Luciano Lliuya on his travels to the 2015 Paris Climate Change Summit. Saúl conveys to his influential audience that climate change is a “moral issue involving translocal relationships” (p. 148). For him, the many technical presentations at the Summit do not go nearly far enough. Statistically laden “technopolitics” fail to address the core issue, which is moral in nature.

Saúl and other indigenous voices in this book are doing the world a service when they bring ethics back to centre stage. Anthropology is best placed to amplify those voices. David Shankland, initiator of the conference that gave birth to the present volume, confirms this in his Afterword: “[I]t is often forgotten that the anthropology of morals and ethics, which at present is a growing subfield within social anthropology, was started by Westermarck in

his great work *The origin and the development of the moral ideas* (1906-08)". Whilst Shankland noted that Westermarck acknowledged "a plurality of ethical systems in the world that are contextualized within their respective cultural mores," he added: "this does not mean that reality itself is refracted and splintered, nor does it mean that there is an ineffable barrier to communication between different societies" (p. 326).

Human relations with the earth have been understood as *primarily* ethical since time began, but modernism has deliberately abandoned this knowledge for the sake of instrumentalizing her. The Norwegian ecological philosopher and activist Arne Naess put his finger on the problem when he spoke of "our inability to question deeply what is and what is not worthwhile in life [...]. Our culture is the only one in the history of mankind in which our culture has adjusted itself to the technology, rather than vice-versa" (Stephen Bodian 1995: 27). The moral failure dates to the birth of modern science in the early nineteenth century, and it lies at the root of the climate crisis. Anthropologists can contribute to a positive alternative by rediscovering ethics. They are in a position to identify the real problem humanity faces. As Mauro Van Aken (Chapter 10) writes in his chapter on Palestinian farmers, it is the one of "denying environmental relatedness, born out of cultural models that have constructed a managed nature at human disposal" (p. 268). When indigenous people say natural disasters are caused by human moral failings, anthropologists would hope to persuade policymakers to perhaps sit up and listen.

The second constructive critical light somewhat hidden within the pages of this book concerns climate politics. The term "climate justice" is prominent only in the chapter on Saúl's Paris intervention. Yet, many other chapters imply the same: the main problem is not the ignorance of local people but the malfeasance of powerful climate change regime architects who frame the political agenda in ways that shift the burden to anybody except themselves. This does imply a fundamental change of agenda, so it prioritizes less destructive modes of interacting with the nonhuman (one in which, for example, "snow" also acquires vital agency, as in Herta Nöbauer, Chapter 5).

Of course, it is true that crop failures due to extreme weather and shifting seasons are already so serious we arguably cannot wait for the systemic change a radical agenda requires. Such reasoning no doubt explains the *practical* interventions described for Argentina (Chapter 7) and Indonesia (Chapter 8). There, anthropologically informed education work takes local farmers seriously as human beings, without going too much into either the philosophy or the politics. After all, most farmers today are "moderns" who produce for cash, to feed an urban society irrevocably dependent on them.

Yet I feel pragmatism should not have the last word in a review of this pioneering volume. Nor should vague formulations of the political problem such as those found in the Afterword: "[C]limate change is a wicked problem, the result of complex global systems of natural forces interacting with interrelated and interdependent human behaviours that have evolved over

centuries.” The problem is in principle not that complex. Climate change is caused by uncontrolled fossil fuel use unleashed by the historically recent invention of capitalism. A vast imperial over-reach by industrial civilization made its ideology of greed global. Corporations tie the world to their apron strings by promising that continual growth creates political stability. The devastating ecological consequences of this flawed promise are clear in the history here of deforestation in the Sundarbans (Camelia Dewan, Chapter 12).

Agricultural extension workers in Nepal (Chapter 9) and Brazil (Chapter 11) are trying seriously to counter this flawed narrative. Their governments acknowledge the gravity and the cause of climate change, honour the principle of climate justice, and make out lots of money to local communities. Even so, their success remains patchy. It is a pity the island nations of the Pacific Community [<https://spc.int/>] are not represented in the book. Some coverage of their international activism, out of all proportion to their size, could have pointed the way to what is actually possible for everyone.

For all that, this is a good book. I have no hesitation in recommending this anthropologists’ guide to future work on the Anthropocene.

#### REFERENCES

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