

Review essay

Tracking climate change science and policy: 25 years of public engagement

Exploring Climate Change through Science and in Society: An Anthology of Mike Hulme's Essays, Interviews and Speeches. By MIKE HULME

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Anthologies are not easy volumes to compile, since they can easily appear dated, self-indulgent or stilted. Conversely, a well produced selection of writings can prove interesting, instructive and illuminating. Mike Hulme's new volume undoubtedly fits the latter category since it brings together no fewer than 55 pieces that he has written over the last quarter century, most of them fairly short interventions spread over a range of academic, popular and media outlets that would be difficult to access and collate. As such, they are also written in an accessible style, seeking to inform and illuminate the pressing issues and debates of the day. He has always avoided hyperbole, invective and bias, thus making even the older articles still very readable and valuable as windows onto the evolution of climate change research, discourse and policy.

The book opens with an introductory essay that contextualises the author's approach to organising the material over the period of his employment at the University of East Anglia (UEA) (1988–2013) and how his own positionality has evolved from a mainly scientific concern with climatic variability in African drylands to his recent engagement in discursive interpretation of the multiple meanings of climate change. In the process, as reflected well in the book's title, his belief that the uptake of scientific research results would make the world a better place has shifted to a belief that the idea of climate change can improve individuals. Hulme is also careful to point out that this volume is neither a history of climate change nor of relevant research and discourses, but rather an account of his own evolving research, interpretations and beliefs. That said, the rump of this chapter offers an overview of the evolution of the dominant international political and scientific discourses on climate change encapsulated in the IPCC and UNFCCC agendas (recently dubbed 'the plan'), its gradual reframing in an increasingly multipolar world, and the various counter-discourses

that have arisen since the late 1980s. These emanated from quarters as diverse as Greenpeace, Indian activist scientists Agarwal and Narain, and a powerful coalition of corporate interests and climate deniers.

Hulme's essays are organised chronologically within an eight-fold thematic structure addressing respectively Research, Researching, Culture, Policy, Communicating, Controversy, and Futures, and finally Reactions to his important 2009 book, *Why we disagree about climate change* (WWDACC). Each section commences with a brief introduction by the author. It would be neither sensible nor feasible within the constraints of this review to refer to all or even most of the individual contributions, but a fascinating aspect of the book is how short, journalistic pieces are interspersed with longer popular or academic articles, giving a clear sense of how the author's own science and understandings of the broader scientific literature and associated debates and controversies found expression in concise newspaper articles interpreting such complexity for the general public. Several of the early articles in the Science section, for instance, were originally published in *The Guardian's* Science column and as reviews in *New Scientist*. Here we are reminded that already in 1990, Mike Hulme was reporting on non-Western indigenous research and recommendations for addressing the problems, and identifying regional variations in the effects of global warming. In March 2000 he explained the recent disastrous flooding in Mozambique's lower Zambezi valley in terms of anthropogenic impacts interacting with purely 'natural' weather events.

The Researching section contains more recent material, starting with Hulme's launch speech for the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in 2000 and progressing through items emblematic of his own epistemological and methodological shifts away from conventional climate change research into more culturally framed analyses. These include his 2007 'Boundary Crossings' contribution to *Transactions of the IBG*, which many readers of this journal will recall. Together with the preceding article in the section, a review essay published earlier that year, it heralded his exploration of divergent discursive understandings of climate change and of the need for diverse forms of culturally embedded and framed research into climate/environmental change that reconnects people and multi-scalar, relational understandings of place. In a

sense, therefore, this was a foretaste of what became his 2009 book mentioned above.

It is entirely logical, therefore, that the next section should address Culture. This comprises a series of short interventions in diverse outlets from the Tate Britain's magazine (an essay on Constable's painting, 'Cloud study') to *OpenDemocracy online* and a review in *Nature and Culture*. This is followed by the Policy section, the contributions in which address the evolving multilateral negotiation agendas from the third UNFCCC Conference of the Parties in 1997, through the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol and publication of the Stern Review and the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report in the mid 2000s to scepticism that a single integrated global approach to Earth Systems Governance could succeed, and a (2012) critique of the Two Degrees target for mitigation efforts.

I had not previously read Hulme's critical assessment of the impressive, 700-page Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change but I found myself in full agreement. Hulme does not challenge the evidence mustered or the key findings about the economic arguments for tackling climate change now rather than postponing action for future generations. Instead, he focuses on how the report, its timing and the fanfare of its launch were carefully orchestrated by the Labour government of Tony Blair to carry the authority of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the World Bank, of which Sir (now Lord) Nicholas Stern had previously been Chief Economist. This played internationally to Britain's then aspirations to global climate change leadership in promoting global economic security and domestically to the government's determination to institute tough emissions reduction targets so as to demonstrate its environmental credentials. He highlights the peculiarly British nature of the report, '... no other nation on Earth could at the present time have delivered such a bold and pedagogic message about climate change... Put another way, a review of the economics of climate change commissioned by the Ministry of Finance in Beijing or Djakarta would look and feel very different...'. (p. 164). Having then posed the twin questions of how effective it will be and what difference it will make, he rightly anticipated that it would not constitute the expected watershed in climate policy and action because of how humankind behaves:

Climate change is not a problem awaiting a solution... Climate change is a phenomenon embedded in almost the entire diversity and geographical spread of human activity, enterprise and fulfilment, it emerges from the sense of identity and purpose we have (unfortunately) created for ourselves... If we continue to measure 'progress' in the perverse way we do, if we continue to tolerate gross inequities in our contemporary social world, or if we continue to discount the value of the natural world, we will need to get adept at living in a

world with a continually warming climate. No remedy will be in sight (p. 165).

The section on Communicating offers further penetrating insights, perhaps inevitably sometimes overlapping with other essays in this and other sections, e.g. on how important it is to be clear about the ways in which each of us frames our interventions on climate change since this influences the nature of subsequent debate. For many readers, though, probably the most intriguing section will be that on Controversy, focusing as it does on the almost simultaneous 'Climategate' controversy over the content and interpretation of hacked email correspondence among leading scientists at the UEA's Climatic Research Unit, and over the accuracy and reliability of the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report in 2007. These controversies in 2009–10 were intimately linked and carefully orchestrated, it subsequently emerged, by powerful vested interests seeking to discredit the emerging consensus on the anthropogenic contribution to climate change and the urgency of tackling it in the weeks prior to the Copenhagen UNFCCC CoP, which was intended to seal a global agreement.

As a former CRU researcher, some of whose older emails formed part of the published cache, but also as a colleague at UEA and public intellectual in the climate change debates, Mike Hulme's reactions and subsequent reflections are a must-read for anyone interested not just in the climate change controversies as such but also in the nature of science and research results in relation to wider uptake, how they feed into public discourses on controversial subjects and how such debates can be driven, misrepresented and exploited for commercial, political or other partisan purposes. These essays should be read consecutively to gain a sense of how Hulme reacted initially to the curious combination of illegal email hacking, the impugning of reputed scientists and his misgivings about the nature of the scientific discourses and IPCC reporting process, and then how his thinking evolved. The final essay, written specifically for this book, reflects with the hindsight of three years on the legacy of both controversies and – typically for Hulme – makes points that some readers may find unexpected or even paradoxical. I shall certainly be using it, perhaps in conjunction with selected other pieces in this section, as the basis for MSc and PhD seminars on environment-development theory, policy and praxis.

The final section of essays, Futures, forms a neat bridge between the reflections just outlined and the concluding essay on reactions to his 2009 book, *WWDACC*, in different arenas and contexts. This constitutes the ultimate 'impact case study' of the sort that British academics are now required to compile as part of departmental submissions to the Research Excellence Framework, and testifies to how significant a contribution Hulme has made to public under-

standing of climate change science, discourse and debate, including what he calls the cultural turn in climate change studies (p. 298). Some of the critiques of the book were entirely predictable, some of the misinterpretations perhaps less so. But Hulme confesses that the reactions overall have forced him to think more carefully about power (hard, soft and diffuse) and climate change and his own positionality, which he acknowledges to have been weaknesses in the book (p. 297).

So where does he stand now? Perhaps marking the extent of his epistemological evolution, he concludes the book with the bold assertion that 'Climate change is a synecdoche for our confusion and anxiety about the goals, ambitions and destinies

we foresee for ourselves and our progeny, even before we worry about whether or not we can realise them' (p. 298). I cannot but agree, and this mild sceptic about the value of autobiographical anthologies has found a gem.

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References

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