

A Cultural History of Climate

Review Number: 925

Publish date: Thursday, 1 July, 2010

Author: Wolfgang Behringer

ISBN: 9780745645292

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £17.99

Pages: 280pp.

Publisher: Polity Press

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Mike Hulme

I received the invitation to review this book during the same week – 16-20 November 2009 – that over 1,000 emails to and from climate scientists in the Climatic Research Unit at my university found their way into the public domain. In the months since, climate science and climate scientists, and particularly these scientists who were concerned with reconstructing past climates, have been subject to phenomenal scrutiny. The so-called ‘Climategate’ has triggered a scientific controversy that will in due course play a central role in any cultural history of climate in the 21st century.

The author of *A Cultural History of Climate*, German historian Wolfgang Behringer, could hardly have foreseen this latest turn in the story of climate change. The book was originally published in German as *Kulturgeschichte des Klimas* in 2007, but has only recently been translated into English. Yet Behringer was prescient in using the so-called ‘hockey-stick’ graph – a graph showing estimated land temperature for the northern hemisphere over the last 1,000 years – as his opening framing device for the book. He observes that our efforts to reconstruct histories of physical climate can never be separated from the meanings that become attached to such reconstructions, and that these meanings emerge from particular political and cultural contexts. For Behringer, this key observation would seem to provide the rationale and motivation for his book. As he concludes on p. 217: ‘We cannot leave the ‘interpretation’ of climate change to people ignorant of cultural history’.

In the 200 or so pages between these opening and closing remarks, Behringer offers an account of how changes in physical climates over 10,000 years have influenced human societies and how such changes have been understood by those societies. He is concerned to show not only the changeability of physical climate and the adaptiveness of societies to such change, but also how the ways people think about and make sense of climate and its variations – the ‘behaviour’ of climate we might say – are themselves mutable. Our present moment at the beginning of the 21st century offers a particularly powerful narrative about climate change, its causes and its consequences. Yet it is a narrative which, as well as being powerful, is sufficiently plastic to allow many different knowledge, policy and moral entrepreneurs to work with and exploit the idea of climate change in different ways. It is a plasticity that I explore in my own book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*.⁽¹⁾

Behringer wants to offer a deeper historical context to this interplay between the climatic and the cultural,

between the physical fortunes of climate and the ways human societies think about what they observe happening around them. In so doing he follows in the footsteps of other climatic historians and historical geographers who have taken climate as their subject – historians such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Hubert Lamb, Brian Fagan and Lucien Boia. The ground Behringer covers is therefore not unfamiliar. He starts with a broad outline of the world's evolving physical climate during the period of human evolution; he is interested in mid-Holocene climates and the emergence of human civilisations; he makes brief forays into Roman and medieval climates, including the obligatory stop in Greenland; and then he sojourns longer with the colder (European) climates of the early modern and Enlightenment centuries.

This is all very good, but we have heard a lot of it before. Where Behringer is perhaps at his most distinctive is in his narration of the cultural engagement of European societies with the cooling climate of the early-modern period, an era he has written about elsewhere especially on the subject of witchcraft and climate. And his account of the changing moral economy of European climate during the 15th to 17th centuries is pertinent to our current discourse about climate change and morality. For Behringer, the strong link between the 'little ice age' and witch persecutions 'came neither from the church nor from the state; it came 'from below' (p. 132). It came from the populace through their search for accountability and meaning. What we are seeing at work today in our own society is a struggle between elitist and popular presentations of climate change and of its moral and political meanings.

Behringer's exploration of these issues in different historical contexts carries its own distinctive style which, one presumes, is well captured in this translation from the German. His is a less impressionistic study of the 'long Holocene summer' and the 'little ice age' than are Brian Fagan's parallel studies (2) and is less analytic in approach than Jean Grove's exhaustive study of the 'little ice age'. (3) It is less philosophical than Lucien Boia's historical account of climate and the human imagination. (4) If it is less impressionistic, analytic and philosophical than these other studies, what is Behringer's characteristic style? It is perhaps most reminiscent of Hubert Lamb's classic book *Climate, History and the Modern World* (5), which was published in 1982 and which left an indelible mark on me as a young geography student. Behringer offers less original scholarship than did Lamb (in his 1982 volume and in his other monumental studies), but with a rather straight-forward, unembellished style of writing Behringer brings the same sense of immediacy and authority as one gains when reading Lamb.

On the other hand because it adopts such a synoptic stance across such a broad reach of human history, his account suffers from being rather disjointed, lapsing at times into a string of historical climatic factoids packaged in their cultural correlates. What I therefore most missed in *A Cultural History of Climate* was a theoretical framework for thinking about the ways in which climates and cultures interact with and shape each other. It is a book lacking a big idea, or it is a book lacking at least an articulated and consistent perspective from which the reader can make sense of what is going on. Without such a framework in place, Behringer too frequently seems to be reading history through the lens of climate, a project which carries similar dangers as our contemporary obsession with trying to invent the future through the lens of climate (see below).

The author is too sophisticated a scholar to be lured too far down the line of climatic determinism, although at times he seems to get rather close to such reasoning. The Swiss, British and Scandinavian wars of the 1310s, for example, are implied by Behringer somehow (it is not clear how) to be linked to the cold winters and wet summers that have been suggested for that decade (pp. 103–4). Elsewhere, however, he is willing to challenge the one-dimensional thinking of determinism, for example in refuting the supposed causal link between the ‘worsening climate’ of the early Middle Ages and the out-migration from the Roman Empire contributing to its decline (p. 66). The difficulty here is one of scale and resolution. The more closely the history of an era, a period or a place is written, the more contingent and opaque becomes the role of any given weather phenomenon or climatic perturbation. The greater depth and resolution at which any historical event is examined, the more it emerges that human contingency dominates the direct physical effects of weather and climate. Only by staying at the macroscopic level of generalisation – at the synoptic scale – do cause-effect propositions about climate and society make any sense.

This methodological problem is linked to the difficulty of moving forensically between weather and climate. In most of these types of explorations of relationships between climate and society, documented weather events and extremes too easily become for authors symptomatic of ‘sudden climate shifts’ or an ‘unpredictable change in climate’. This is a problem Behringer is alert to: ‘For people living at the time, short-term changes [in climate] had greater importance than medium to long-term ones’ (p. 89) and yet most documented accounts of medieval and early modern Europe contain ‘observations about the weather [rather] than about the climate’ (p. 89). Although at times acknowledged, I would like to see this difficulty examined more explicitly in a wider theoretical and methodological framework.

Otherwise, the danger by extension is what I have elsewhere called ‘epistemological slippage’.⁽⁶⁾ This is a danger we see in our present climate-obsessed imaginations. Because scientists make the claim that future climate can be predicted, the future starts to emerge in our imaginations as a future that is climate-shaped. The predictive claims of the Earth system scientists bring along in their wake a motley collection of environmental scientists, geographers, engineers and so on, who make their own ‘predictions’ of what the future human impacts of such putative climates will be – rather losing sight of the radical social, cultural, technological and political upheavals that await us over the next 50 to 100 years. Epistemological slippage occurs.

The same danger applies to our reading of the past. Because scientists make the claim that past physical climates can be reconstructed, the past begins to emerge in our imaginations as a past that is climate-shaped. It is harder to understand the prevailing social, cultural and political milieu of the 16th century than it is to see that rivers were flooded and glaciers enlarged. Epistemological slippage again can occur – as in Behringer’s assertion that ‘the fall of Mayan civilisation has been re-enacted in climate models’ (p. 71). I really would like to see how his has been done! The author therefore navigates between the twin dangers of determinism and epistemological slippage and without articulating a theoretical framework to keep all the pieces in place, there is a constant danger of allowing climate to intrude too far into his story.

Another methodological question emerges when one reflects on why these types of historical enquiries are undertaken. Are we interested in such accounts of changing climates and cultures because we are seeking to reveal through cultural artefacts and practices the physical properties of past climate – to contribute to a project of reconstructing climate ‘as it really was’? Or are we intrigued because we are interested how the idea of climate – and hence too its perceived physical behaviour – is fashioned by culture? It is not always easier to know where Behringer stands on this.

The directionality of causation implied is very different. For example, Behringer argues for a ‘strong link between the Little Ice Age and witch persecutions’ in Europe (p. 132). But did the physical climates of the 17th century make possible (explain?) the persecutions of witches or do the persecutions of witches in the 17th century tell us something about the prevailing physical climate? It is not clear which way Behringer is arguing. And this methodological difficulty can end up leading to circular reasoning. In his discussion of the

decline of the Roman Empire, Behringer points to the abandonment of many settlements north of the Alps in the early Middle Ages. This, he argues, points to 'changed climatic conditions that made the cultural hiatus necessary' (p. 67). What evidence is being used here to reveal changes in physical climates, as opposed to how changes in climatic conditions are being used to explain cultural change? These difficulties are not unique to *A Cultural History of Climate*; for example one can also find similar ambiguities and circular reasoning in some of Brian Fagan's work. But they do point to the need to develop a more sophisticated theoretical and interpretative framework for talking about climate and culture.

My reading of *A Cultural History of Climate* leaves me with one final question that needs further scrutiny. It is a question equally relevant to our creation of future climates as to our reading of past climates. How do different climatic indices gain their moral polarity? Throughout Behringer's book – and indeed more broadly in most historical accounts of the interactions between climates and societies – the notation 'warm + wet = optimum' and 'cold + dry = pessimum' applies. Thus paleoclimatologists talk of the optimum Neolithic climates of 6 to 8 kyr BP, while Behringer labels his section on Roman climates as the 'Roman Optimum': 'It should be noted that climate historians consider [climatic] conditions to have been favourable at this time' (p. 64). Favourable for what and for whom – for the Roman elites or for the Roman's slaves? And did the Romans themselves believe their climate was worsening?

In climate and history literature we therefore frequently have climates 'worsening' and 'improving' and climates becoming more or less conducive for human development. Is a cold climate a 'bad' climate? Is a warm climate a 'good' climate? Or is the only 'good' climate a stable and predictable one? And in other contexts we use the language of 'normal' and 'abnormal' climates (7), a phraseology which again reveals our normative judgements.

Such unreflexive and universalising tendencies to moralise climate have allowed our contemporary discourse about climate change to make the ultimate reductionist step: the signature of global climate is reduced to a single index of 'global temperature' and global warming becomes constructed as undesirable, if not dangerous. Yet this reverses the polarity of other discourses of climate change. European medieval warmth is usually presumed 'good' and later coolness is presumed 'bad' – this seems to be Behringer's position – while the pioneering scientists of the later 19th and early 20th centuries theorising about carbon dioxide increases and climate change, generally regarded such human-induced global warming as a 'good' thing.

The relationship between climate and society is much more subtle and particular than is suggested by such crude moral indexing. As Behringer himself observes 'nature is not a moral system' (p. 212) and how climate gains its retrospective (and prospective) moral polarity is always an exercise in power. This is nicely illustrated in the case of the Ming dynasty in China. Behringer suggests that the peasant insurrection of 1643 which ended the dynasty was catalysed by extreme weather and yet three centuries earlier a 'similar climate-induced crisis' (p. 114) had brought the Ming dynasty to power. Whether one describes either of these climatic perturbations as 'good' or 'bad' depends on one's political allegiances.

There remains much work still to be done in gaining richer understandings of how the changing contours of climate – both changes in physical climate and changes in our imaginative ideas of climate – interact with cultural life around the world. We have far from exhausted investigations into how such ideas from different historical, geographical and contemporary cultures work with and against each other. *A Cultural History of Climate* is largely a cultural history of European climate, although Behringer occasionally visits non-European cultures from time-to-time. It would be good to see companion studies from outside the boundaries of Europe. Tim Sherratt and colleagues have attempted one such effort for Australia (8) and William Meyer similarly for North America (9), but neither of these extend further back than the early 19th century. But if our ideas of climate and climate change are indeed culturally inflected, then we need accounts that emerge from Brazil, China, India and Kenya before we can claim to have a world history of climate and culture. For example, I would like to know how the new Moghul rulers of India in the early 16th century understood and managed the variability of the Indian monsoon and how, as the Spanish set about

establishing their New World empire at a similar time, the weather of central America was talked about.

We know that the weather and, by extension, our climate are important to us. And we know that this importance changes, just as we change. In reflecting on the place that climate has in our interior and exterior worlds we are too easily tempted to reduce climate to simple physical descriptive indices and/or to reduce the importance of climate to a simple determining role. Behringer's *A Cultural History of Climate* falls tantalisingly short of giving us the conceptual and analytical tools we need to resist these temptations, although he shows us why it matters that we do.

Notes

1. M. Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (Cambridge, 2009).[\[Back to \(1\)\]](#)
2. B. M. Fagan, *The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilization* (London, 2004); *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300–1850* (New York, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. M. Grove, *The Little Ice Age* (London, 1988).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. L. Boia, *The Weather in the Imagination* (London, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. H. H. Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London, 1982).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. M. Hulme, *Reducing the Future to Climate: a Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism* (2011, submitted).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. M. Hulme, S. Dessai, I. Lorenzoni and D. Nelson, 'Unstable climates: exploring the statistical and social constructions of 'normal' climate', *Geoforum*, 40 (2), 2009, 197–206.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. *A Change in the Weather: Climate and Culture in Australia*, ed. T. Sherratt, T. Griffiths and L. Robin (Canberra, 2005).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. W. B. Meyer, *Americans and Their Weather* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(9\)](#)

Other reviews:

[\[2\]](#)

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/925#comment-0>

Links

[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4817](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4817) [\[2\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/](#)