

Climate Change and its Disastrous Impacts on Earth and Humanity

Reclaiming Our Memories: how can we face a future of climate change if we have forgotten our past?

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Climate change along with the disastrous effects it will have on the earth and humanity is being ignored by much of society. I differentiate between the earth and humanity because many people only relate to the problems that humans might suffer, not fully understanding that what damages the earth also damages us. During the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, media headlines were screaming “We’ve only got 20 years to save the earth!” An environmentalist dryly pointed out, “No. The earth will survive. We have 20 years to save humanity.”

But we cannot even begin to contemplate our own extinction. So those twenty years passed and no meaningful actions were taken. We have compromised our survival. Twenty vital years, during which we could have learnt to change our behaviour, control carbon emissions and put in place a better, cleaner way of living. Governments and corporations blocked any real changes. We must not stand in the way of ‘progress’, they said. And by and large, the public remained totally unengaged.

A few years ago some British [historians](#) recognised that part of the problem was a failure of education, and started to demand that historians and all other academics, whatever their speciality, should include climate change in their thinking and in their teaching. A similar [demand](#) of universities was being made in the United States. Just over 12 years ago a new [concept](#) entered the conversation, the word for which is ‘anthropocene’. Some earth scientists say we are now in a new geological age – the anthropocene – because of the changes visited upon the earth by man. There are those who challenge the argument as a scientific conceit. But they surely cannot deny that the whole basis of life on earth, from the smallest microbes to the largest trees and mammals, is now hugely affected by the activities of man, and we need some way of describing this.

A [seminar](#) in Chicago earlier this year also addressed the problem, saying that “most of the relevant research on climate change has focussed on how it will affect the material conditions of life on this planet.” Yet this threat to the earth, caused by human activity, will affect every area of human life; not just the physical. Our emotional, spiritual and intellectual lives will be in turmoil. It is time that those of us who care about what the coming changes might do to the future of humanity started to engage our fellows on things other than the physical disasters, floods and droughts, mass migrations, food shortages and

all the conflicts that could arise out of the struggle to survive.

For most of our history human activity has harmed the earth that sustains us. We are so proud of our intellectual achievements, our history of creating civilisations, yet almost all civilisations have depended on some form of energy use – the more advanced the civilisation, the more dependent it becomes on energy. And civilisations have almost always included militarization, weapons and war. But – imagine a future of no future, of no schools or universities, no musical instruments or theatres, no art, no writing, no research, no science. All that will disappear if humanity is overwhelmed by climate change. Then who will be left to mourn the silencing of Beethoven and Brahms?

This isn't just a problem for academicians. It concerns all of us and our sense of history is a good place to start seeking an answer. The thing about history is that it simply doesn't exist if there is no one there to witness it, to record it, to remember what happened and, just as important, why. And even with a record, if there is no one there to read it and understand it, no one to whom the knowledge can be passed, no children who can sit and listen to their elders tell the lore of their tribe, then history is dead. Climate change may take away our future and without a future there is no past.

But there is more than one kind of history. There is the history taught in school, long processions of kings and popes and presidents, dates of battles won and lost – the usual parade of men of power. Little is recorded about those at the bottom, and when it is, it is normally recorded by the elite, the literate and educated. And rarely do they attach names to those that Bulwer-Lytton stigmatised as the Great Unwashed; those who grew the food, sheared the sheep, wove the wool, made the clothes, built the houses and did all those necessary things to keep the world of men ticking.

There is never any recognition of how much the state depended on these nameless people, no admission that without them those in the palaces and great halls would have starved and gone naked. The temptation is always to write the history which is based on power and money, using the records of the powerful. This is how we remember history, and how we teach it to the children.

There are few records of the lives of the common man and woman, the poor and powerless. For most of history the majority of them were illiterate and what they had to say would not have been considered that important or worth preserving. Parish records show births, marriages and deaths, but nothing of the lives lived between those events. There are some books that give a more complete picture of a community – *Montaillou* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is a good example. But it is based on the records of outsiders and is a study of a community in crisis, not a record of the humdrum every-day activity that kept nations alive.

As feminists pointed out in the 60s and 70s, instead of HIStory we need HERstory. History is about winners and losers. Herstory is about continuity. History is about one-off events and people who did extraordinary things, sometimes glorious but often short-sighted, self-seeking or horrifically cruel. Herstory is about everyday life where often the most extraordinary event is surviving for another day. It is the story of the little people, women and men, people who again and again picked up the pieces of shattered lives and carried on. We wouldn't be here now without them, but we may well not be here in the future because of the leading players of History.

Forget the big names and the battles, the empire building and horse trading. Study instead

the remarkable ability to survive that the nameless millions have shown over the centuries, their ability also to live in relative harmony with neighbouring communities. This is truly social history. The little people need to be recognised, they need to know who they were and are, and the vital part they have played, unsung, through the centuries. Most of all, they need to know and understand how important they are now to the survival of the human world.

Gone are the days when children used to sit by the fire and listen to grandparents recounting their long yesterdays, tales that made up the roots of who they were, who their family was, what their community was. And who these days records the births, marriages and deaths in the family bible? From a time when family and tribal lore informed us of our place in the world we have reached a time when our local history is merely a hobby for an interested few.

Modern life has meant that families and communities have fractured, split up and been flung far apart. It is part of modern life that we should move away from where we were born, lose touch with the networks that raised us, lose our feeling for our native soil. But for many people, those who can, it is only the ability to look back into our childhoods that can help us see how great the changes are that are happening now, to our lives, to the climate and to the earth.

Without ancestral recall, our memories have become purely personal. And we have lost the amazing capability to use our memories in the way our ancestors did. How accurately can you remember what the street where you live looked like even 3 years ago, before that house got built, those trees chopped down or the road widened? Things change so quickly now and each change erases part of our memories. We end up only remembering the now. How can we take climate change seriously when the weather has always been like this – hasn't it?

So much of climate change happens little by little, year by year. We blink and we may miss it. Unless we live for long enough in just one place (and are willing to pay attention to our environment) we simply do not see those changes. The gap in our knowledge is even greater if we cannot relate our family memories to what we are experiencing.

In George Monbiot's book *Feral*, which looks at how we can 'rewild' parts of the earth, he says that for many people this concept doesn't mean allowing the earth to run things its way, but returning the earth to 'the way it was'. And what they mean by that is returning it to how they remember it was when they were young – which may be no more than 25 years ago, when the environment was just as badly treated by man as it is now.

A Welsh hill farmer speaking to Monbiot about the damage the Forestry Commission did to communities during the middle decades of the 20th century, the clearance of people and the burying of the farms, the houses and barns under blanket plantings of spruce, and his fears that rewilding would do the same, said, "With blanket rewilding you lose your unwritten history, your sense of self and your sense of place. It's like book burning. Books aren't written about people like us. If you eradicate the evidence of our presence on the land.... you write us out of the story. We've got nothing else."

We have lost the memories of our more distant past that were kept alive by our grandparents; the ancestral memories of our communities that connected us to the earth; the links with our forefathers that told us what the flooding history of the local river was, or

how often the good harvests came. They could have told us exactly how they survived a long drought, or how they dealt with pests in an age when there were no chemical sprays. We have nothing left to compare with the way things are now. We have lost the lessons we should have learnt, and we'll only recognise the loss when things get so bad as to be damaging to our lives.

In *Soil and Soul*, Alastair McIntosh shows how important it is for our physical and spiritual wellbeing to maintain our feeling of being rooted in the land of our forebears. The effects of global warming will always matter more to people with roots than those without. For those without, climate change will be a case of finding refuge, a place where they can survive. But for those with roots it will also mean the destruction of something they love, their home, the place that tells them who they are.

To put it another way, those with a sense of their roots have more reason to try to halt the process of climate change; those with a past have more reason to plan for the future. The right kind of history doesn't just teach us what happened; it teaches us how to remember what happened, and how to make use of the lesson it contains. Rescuing and restoring the history that is part of our roots can only encourage us to take action.

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