

Book review – Sally Weintrobe (2013). *Engaging with climate change: Psychoanalytic and interdisciplinary perspectives*. Routledge

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Ione Lewis, *Professor, Australian College of Applied Psychology*

The editor Sally Weintrobe has edited this ground breaking collection on understanding attitudes to climate change. **Weintrobe** is a practising psychoanalyst and a Fellow of the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London, who has written and lectured extensively on climate change. Her commitment to fostering interdisciplinary exchanges with other theorists about climate change led to this remarkable book. Contributors are from diverse fields of advertising, environmental philosophy, ethics, politics, psychoanalysis, sociology, and science. The book is structured into ten chapters, with a wide range of discussants providing intriguing and thoughtful comments on each chapter. A strong social justice and ethical perspective is expressed by all contributors, which extends beyond a human-centric perspective to the need to ensure all species survive and flourish. The book is characterised by a future perspective and the need to be generous to future generations.

In the *Introduction*, Weintrobe draws on classical psychoanalytic theory to argue that in the face of profound anxiety about climate change and weather “weirding” (p. 2), people use defences such as denial, disavowal, distortion and negation to ward off acceptance of the uncomfortable reality. Even those who accept the reality of climate change filter out information to avoid pain and discomfort about the changing world, for example turning off programs on climate change (or losing this book several times while reviewing it). Developed countries commonly shift blame to developing countries, for example arguing that climate change is China’s fault because of their large population and carbon footprint. These various styles of climate change denial and minimisation are caused by narcissism, entitlement, arrogance and destructiveness, Weintrobe argues.

In chapter two, *What history can teach us about climate change denial*, Clive Hamilton draws on examples from history to illustrate a pattern of social denial. Scientists opposed Einstein’s theory of relativity, and Churchill believed peace could be negotiated with Hitler. Hamilton argues that the Enlightenment is shallow and reality is readily swept away. However, there is a strong relationship between the Enlightenment, with its belief and trust in science, rationality and modernisation, and the damage caused by science and development to ecological systems, which is not questioned in this account.

In chapter three, *The difficult problem of anxiety in thinking about climate change*, Weintrobe provides strategies for tolerating the anxiety and depression that inevitably arise from accepting that the earth and its living species have a doubtful future. We face loss of self, regularity, continuity and the earth. Dependence on our flawed political leaders for economic and industrial change produces even greater anxiety. Climate change denial creates perverse social organisations which persist with industrialisation on the path to disaster (for example, the replacement of Labour's carbon emissions trading scheme with the Liberal government's proposal of a "Green Army" to carry out environmental work and a trust fund for environmental projects).

Paul Hoggett contributed the fourth chapter, *Climate change in a perverse culture*, which focuses on a downward trend in the UK and the US in the proportion of people believing in climate change. Hoggett refers to the disconnection between scientific evidence and public opinion as perverse thinking. He views selves as complex: "torn, ambivalent and in two minds" about climate change and the urgent need to act (p. 57). As a result, perverse thinking and structures develop. Another form of perverse thinking is believing in climate change without taking action, as a result of feeling that individuals can make no difference to the scale of the problem.

Hoggett views Western consumerism and privatisation as perverse cultures which encourage greed. Virtual economies separate out actions such as investment from the impact of economic activity on the real world. As a result, nations' efforts to put in place legislation, policies and targets for emission reduction have failed across the world. Hoggett advocates for governments to disconnect from markets and to develop a wide range of carbon emission reduction strategies at multiple levels.

Cohen provides a sociological perspective on climate change denial by making the point that denial has to make sense individually and socially to flourish. An example of perverse thinking can be seen in the single review of this book posted on Amazon:

5.0 out of 5 stars **Someone's having us on.** March 7, 2013

By Chris B

I gave the book five stars for gall, and recommend reading it, in spite of not having read it myself, to those who want to understand the state of Academia in the 21st century.

I watched a Youtube video on the book launch and had to see if this book was for real. Is it any wonder that there is so little respect for the field of psychoanalysis? "Climate Change Deniers"?

I suppose this goes to show just how gullible and easily led even educated persons can be.

Just how many CO2 atoms can radiate on the head of a pin.

Rosemary Randall contributes chapter five: *Great expectations: The psychodynamics of ecological debt*. She draws on Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* as a parable for people's capacity for self-delusion. Pip progresses from a mistaken belief that his mystery benefactor is Miss Havesham, which creates a sense of being special and

entitled, to the knowledge that his benefactor is Magwitch, the convict he helped escape custody in his childhood. His realisation that Magwitch has provided for his education results in an uncomfortable realisation of his indebtedness.

Randall (p. 88) draws an analogy between Pip's moment of realisation and consciousness of ecological debt, which "lays bare the relationship between people and the goods they consume". "If you have a lifestyle that pushes an ecosystem beyond its ability to renew itself, you run up an ecological debt" (Sims, 2005, as cited in Randall, 2013, p. 88).

She draws on examples from the Climate Conservations movement to demonstrate psychic states that people move into as they come to terms with having an ecological debt they cannot repay: shock and recognition; reconnecting with the relationship between lifestyle and climate change, and experiencing appropriate sadness, guilt, reparation and proportionality; and identity changes in reparation.

There is a fear of vengeance from those who have been robbed, whose ecologies are damaged, and a need for forgiveness. It is interesting that younger people do not feel the same guilt as those in older generations, as they feel less responsible for climate change and more angry about the damage to the world.



Photo: BHP Wollongong Steelworks

The most widespread strategy used to shift people into recognition and lifestyle change is a social marketing approach, which focuses on small steps in reducing consumption. However, only 40% of the population is likely to become seriously concerned about climate change. There is a need for psychological support for activists, and political leadership that acknowledges the need for individual and social change on a major scale.

Chapter six: *The myth of apathy*, is written by Renee Lertzman. Apathy is a way of describing a lack of response and action. However Lertzman argues that people exposed to information on climate change experience complex states of conflict, ambivalence and loss. Psychoanalysis is an effective way to work with the meaning of climate change and our contradictory impulses to act and to hold onto privilege.

Lertzman draws on her field work in the ecologically challenged Great Lakes region of the US to unpack the concept of apathy. She elicited contradictory accounts of individual, deeply internal attachment to the environment, with empathic concern about changes, and simultaneous distancing from environmental threats. As the water was polluted and subject to invasive species, people were in mourning and expressed nostalgia for past experiences of unpolluted water. She found a communal state of environmental melancholia which was responded to either with suspended engagement (apathy), or an enhanced appreciation for the environment in the present. The desire to love and restore

results in reparation. She concludes that effective climate change campaigns must deliver complex information that simultaneously provokes and offsets anxiety, to ensure that states of conflict and inaction are not provoked.

In chapter seven, *Unconscious obstacles to caring for the planet*, John Keene proposes that climate change sceptics are using primitive processes of wish fulfilment and magical thinking to ignore reality, and that social and individual responses reflect dangerous tendencies. People fail to take notice of slow, uneven changes to climate that do not affect all countries equally, and react more immediately to current weather and economic risks as a result of orientation to the present. Survival by its very nature depends on the “now”. Simplifying public issues and allocating blame are other dangerous tendencies which prevent meaningful engagement with climate change.

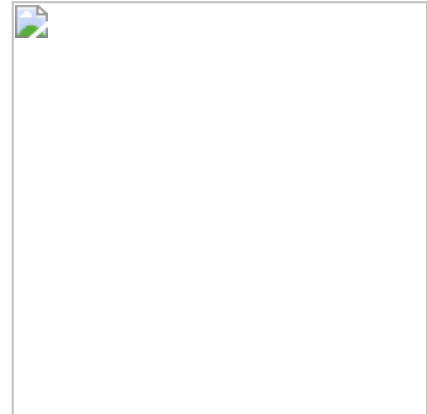


Photo: BHP Wollongong
Steelworks

Keene uses Klein’s image of the baby plundering the breast as evidence for the ruthless capacities of human beings. We use the earth, he argues, as a “toilet mother” (p. 146). He provides examples such as the false belief that waste can be channelled into and cleaned up by the ocean, and large scale pollution caused by multinational companies such as BP and Union Carbide. The Seattle Convention of 1999 accepted “zones of sacrifice” of communities who would be destroyed with continuing economic development (Keene, 2013, p. 153).

Keene draws on the work of psychoanalytic theorists on group functioning such as Bion to show why climate change has not been widely accepted. Conspiracy theories about false climate science, or lack of certainty about global warming, abound as a result of splitting as a defence against anxiety. Social and cultural norms formed through group loyalty become more important than facts and evidence. Politicians in particular are subject to these group norms, and rivalries and competition overrides their care for the environment. Political parties and governments have various means of ensuring that change that undermines the *status quo* does not take place – a need for consensus in decision making, for example, and setting up committees and enquiries to delay action.

Societies that rein in dangerous impulses to create destruction and develop realistic plans for reparation are those able to re-examine their core values. Any re-evaluation must include a commitment to the future citizens of the world, and a desire to leave the world a better place.

In chapter eight, Michael Rustin asks *How is climate change an issue for psychoanalysis?* He summarises the existing approaches to climate change as: evidence provided by the physical sciences, including measuring the impact on life forms; proposing technological solutions such as reducing energy consumption and moving to renewable energy forms; economic calculations of the cost of acting and not acting; sociological theories about

changes to society; political science, which analyses barriers to taking action and conflicts of interest between corporations, nations, electorates and social movements; and issues of cultural representation about how these complexities are communicated to communities.

With all of these contributions to the climate change debate, he asks what additional contribution psychoanalysis can make. Psychoanalysis surfaces uncomfortable realities that are not held in consciousness and understands there are conflicting impulses in human nature, particularly when faced with anxiety-provoking threats to survival. Psychoanalysis understands that to enable rational thought and actions, anxiety must first be addressed. He proposes that change will also require a reduction in dichotomising nature and human beings. There is a danger in over-idealising pristine nature in climate change debates, which denigrates those who will be affected by changes in policies to reduce carbon emissions, and alienates potential supporters.

Weintrobe contributes chapter nine in the book: *The love of nature and on human nature: Restoring split internal landscapes*. She suggests that engaging with our loving, caring feelings for nature will increase our daily mindfulness of the damage caused by climate change, which is fuelled by consumerism and ever increasing carbon footprints. Cultural, historical and political forces have formed us as entitled consumers of nature rather than nature lovers who engage with all the senses. She draws on Hudson, a twentieth century writer, to demonstrate our long history of engagement with the natural world for comfort, restoration and feeling fully alive and embodied in the world. This relationship is internalised in our inner landscapes. In splitting between love and greedily consuming nature, Weintrobe argues, we lose touch with our anxiety and grief over the damaged world. We become blank and thoughtless.

The final chapter is written by Harrison: *Climate change, uncertainty and risk*. Harrison summarises the findings of climate science that demonstrate climate change is a reality, and the areas of uncertainty. While recognising that climate has always been variable, nonetheless there is consensus that greenhouse gases accumulating in the atmosphere have warmed the earth's surface at a faster rate than natural variation can account for: 0.08°C in the twentieth century, affecting the Arctic regions more than any other. Extreme weather events are now more common. How high the temperature variations caused by global warming will reach is not known precisely, and may vary between 1.5°C and 4.5°C, with a mean estimate of 3°C. Greater temperature increases will occur in the Northern Hemisphere.

Local weather systems such as the El Nino Southern Oscillation interact with global warming and make accurate estimates of temperature increases difficult. Estimates of changes in rainfall and sea level are even more uncertain than temperature predictions. However, the West Pacific region (which includes Australia) is experiencing sea level rises of three times higher than the global average. A rapid rise in sea levels is likely due to deglaciation as ice sheets melt.

The ten chapters and discussions provide the reader with a rich tapestry of perspectives on climate change and a sophisticated framework about how recognition of global warming and blindness to climate change co-occur, to contain anxiety and the need to take action.

Societies that rein in dangerous impulses to create destruction and develop realistic plans for reparation are those able to re-examine their core values. Any re-evaluation must include a commitment to the future citizens of the world, and a desire to leave the world a better place.

Limitations

As Weintrobe herself acknowledges, this book does not represent how people from other cultures, nations and economies other than England and North America think and feel about climate change. In the course of research in Papua New Guinea, I find people point to coastal erosion as a sign of climate change in a way we rarely do in Australia. A predominantly rural people who make a living by selling produce from gardens in a tropical climate, they express fear about the impact of temperature increases as a result of global warming.

Dedicating the final chapter to climate science provides greater prominence for psychoanalytic and social critiques of attitudes to climate change in the earlier chapters. However, as many writers based their work on the assumption that climate change is fact, and that those who deny climate change are being irrational, the scientific findings of climate science needed to be introduced in the opening chapters.

The understanding of psychoanalytic theory portrayed in the book is at times simplistic and reflective of classical rather than relational models of psychoanalysis. There is a primary focus on intrapsychic conflict between concerned, reality-oriented parts of self, and the more narcissistic, entitled parts that hate reality when it thwarts our wishes or deflates our view of ourselves. This internal splitting of self and its manifestation in the external world is used to explain mechanisms underlying climate change denial and disavowal.

An interesting voice in the collection is Bob Hinshelwood, who voices concern that psychoanalysts are turning the climate into a “patient” and in doing so ascribe to become “good” environmental advocates who stand up to “bad” environmental exploiters. He asks whether climate advocates are carrying the burden of being helpful and caring for the rest of society and whether this split helps nations move forward on climate change.

Conclusion

This complex book, written by a multitude of contributors from diverse disciplines, aims to assist in understanding and working more effectively with the range of human responses to climate change.

Randall (2013, p. 97) describes a woman trying to make personal changes in her lifestyle to reduce climate change who was asked “what would you like on your gravestone?” She replied, “She tried”. The thesis of this book is that we all need to try. Understanding our contradictory inner responses to climate change is a place to start the change process.

This book review was completed on 17 November 2013, the National Day of Action on Climate Change.

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