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Mark Levene, Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts (eds),

History at the End of the World?

History, Climate Change and the Possibility of Closure

(Humanities Ebook, LLB, in association with Rescue!History,

Penrith, 2010), pp. 250

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although the message is unchanged.

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Sincerity and passion blaze from this book. It takes the dangers of climate change as deadly serious and the need to learn from History as equally urgent. All simplistic assertions that ‘we cannot learn from the past’ are rightly given short shrift. We live upon one planet and our species has acquired a magnificent stock of knowledge about that evolving planet, acquired over time. Hence humans must learn from the data of past history, since we cannot learn from the future that has not yet happened.

So far so very good – or bad, in the light of the coming crisis. But what follows from that historical awareness? This collection of essays is not concerned with the science of climate change but with the human responses to present danger. The title is designed to shock readers into perception and action. Very shortly, the conditions for human life on earth threaten to turn highly adverse, propelled by our short-sighted and reckless burning of fossil fuels. The world itself will not end, but the human tenancy will become problematic. Extreme weather conditions, with consequent floods, famines, desertification, and environmental degradation, may well reduce the numbers of people drastically, while inducing ever greater conflicts for scarce resources among the survivors.

Nonetheless, the volume's title includes a question mark. There is still a chance for constructive change. As hellfire preachers of the imminent end have long known, a prophecy of doom which is too overwhelming may prompt defeatism and inertia, or even an element of defiant insouciance in the face of disaster: 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow etc ...'. In this case, the authors clearly hope for averting action rather than despondent gloom. The editor Mark Levene expresses a residual optimism that the world can be healed (p. 33). Incidentally, he adds wryly (p. 19) that the menacing title of these collected essays uses the same phrase as Francis Fukuyama's optimistic paean to the global advance of American-style political liberalism, Fukuyama's

meditations on *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) showing that both optimists and pessimists can appeal to the trends of history.

Here the fourteen contributions come from a network of campaigners, independent researchers, and academics, who are linked together as *Rescue!History*, founded in 2006. They do not offer a complete green history of the world or a complete explanation of the background to the current crisis. That latter task has already been undertaken by authors such as Mick Hulme's *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (Cambridge UP, 2009). Instead, the essayists provide a series of meditations upon humans and climate change, taking historical examples from an impressive range of periods from Neolithic times to the present. Such breadth is a bonus in itself. Student readers, at whom the book is targeted, are thereby encouraged to take a broad view – thinking 'long' about how our species has lived on the earth and how it has repeatedly adapted to survive. The stress is upon agency, not defeatism. And the collective message highlights the urgent need to change cultural/ideological attitudes, as much as to transform economies, big business and governments.

Having said that, it must be admitted that the fourteen contributions are not all of equal helpfulness or clarity. They are grouped into six sections. The first relates to the remote past of 'deep history'; the second takes case-studies from the fall of Rome to sixteenth-century Europe; the third focuses upon what is

conventionally known as the European Enlightenment; the fourth and fifth sections discuss the implications of twentieth-century technology, such as nuclear power; and the sixth concludes by exploring current conditions for survival and renewal. Cramming such big issues from such a wide range of periods into one short volume results in some undue compression.

On the other hand, the value of taking a multi-topic approach, with examples from many different eras, is stimulating in itself. Attitudes have changed in the past, in the light of collective experience. The blowing of the Deepwater Horizon oil-well in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 constitutes a particularly devastating manifestation of the problems that may follow from hectically ransacking the earth's resources to fuel the techno-economy that is contributing to climate change. Hence it may well be that such a drastically visible crisis, in a leading gas-guzzling economy, will concentrate attention on the problems and, as a result, will help to change public opinion.

Where there is a problem in this volume comes in identifying the 'villains' of crisis history. One target for criticism is the socio-economic-political system of 'capitalism', with its clamour for endless growth, and, in particular, the pathology of 'disaster capitalism' (borrowing a trenchant phrase from Naomi Klein), rushing headlong to resolve one technologically-generated problem with even more grandiose technological plans, which may well generate yet further difficulties in their wake. However, other forms of political-economic

organisation, such as techno-communism, have a terrible track-record of damage to the natural environment too.

A tersely effective essay by Rob Johnson (pp. 148-65) assesses the long history of environmental challenges on the high heartlands of central Asia, from the remote past until recent times. The most notorious example has come from hubris: the Soviet construction of the Karakum irrigation canal in 1954 was intended to divert north-flowing rivers southwards to water the cotton crops and newly growing cities. Fifty years on, the great inland Aral Sea has almost disappeared into the desert, its fisheries and local industries devastated, while the cotton fields are heavily salinated and local health hazards are multiplying for both humans and livestock. In other words, high technological hopes for a massive environmental fix led not to 'progress' but to what could be equally dubbed 'disaster' communism. At this point, it would have been helpful for the author or the editors to have confronted explicitly the rival assumption, that capitalism is the chief 'villain'.

In reality, no single political-economic system can shoulder all the blame. The problems are deeper than that. Hence for most of these essayists, the real target is an unquestioning belief in science and technology, known as 'scientism'. One essayist links this malign mind-set directly to 'the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment' (p. 81). Another attributes it to a pervasive

western-model of ‘modernity’ (p. 95); and another, less kindly, to ‘modernity’s all-encompassing systemic dysfunctionality’ (p. 199).

Again, however, such totalising explanations of environmental crisis may in themselves tend to promote defeatism. They underestimate the capacity of humans to adapt their thoughts and actions when confronted directly with danger. Moreover, references to an all-pervasive ‘system’ of thought imply that there are no alternatives. But there has been a growth of support, if unfocused, for ‘greenery’; and there are campaigners calling for substantive change, as are the essayists within this book.

‘Modernity’ and ‘Enlightenment’ are not totalised systems that exclude or preclude pluralism. Indeed, the reverse could well be argued. ‘Modernity’ is a loose term, used even more loosely, for a variegated range of sometimes conflicting trends over recent centuries. And the Enlightenment both led to and encouraged a plurality of voices. Thus Kant’s intellectual motto from the 1780s – ‘Dare to think’ – could easily double as the message propounded by the essayists in this volume.

Furthermore, an unquestioning appeal to science is by no means endorsed by all, as indicated by the current debates over genetically modified foods. Indeed, one of the most clarion twentieth-century calls to reject a simplistic scientism came from an iconic figure within the scientific community itself. In 1954, Albert Einstein wrote: ‘We need an essentially new way of thinking if

mankind is to survive' (p. 187). It is true that he did not succeed in achieving nuclear disarmament, which was the immediate context in which he wrote; and Dave Webb's essay on the continuing nuclear dangers (pp. 166-87), which aptly quotes Einstein's words, makes for sobering reading. Yet military thinking about the use of nuclear weaponry has changed over time. There are still-continuing efforts for nuclear disarmament and checks upon nuclear proliferation. And humanity sometimes manages to muddle through, with *de facto* compromises rather than immediate logic.

Overall, the continuing need for fresh thinking about climate change and measures to avert or to reduce the process is undoubted. As these essayists collectively suggest, the responses will not necessarily all be new ones but might entail a return to older ways of thinking and relating to nature. This volume does not present one collective answer. And its value for students is reduced by the lack of an index, thus making it hard to link and cross-check big themes and data. Nonetheless, this collection of essays will stimulate students on courses on long-span human history and/or environmental history. The authors prompt fresh thoughts about the genesis of widespread attitudes, such as confidence in scientific 'progress'. They also provide ample evidence of resistance to such attitudes, as well as their adaptation, sometimes slowly and grudgingly. Above all, the volume stresses that humanity can learn from the experience of history. Hellfire or no hellfire, amen to that.

