Climatic Change (2012) 113:91–93
DOI 10.1007/s10584-012-0409-5

Reflections on the cultural spaces of climate

David N. Livingstone

Received: 21 November 2011 / Accepted: 16 January 2012 / Published online: 8 February 2012

The observations of two prominent Western thinkers—the Enlightenment political theorist Montesquieu and the early modern English statesman and champion of Natural Philosophy Francis Bacon—have been running through my mind as I have read through the range of papers presented at the conference session on "Cultural Spaces of Climate". Montesquieu, in concluding his observations on the innovations that Peter the Great was introducing into Russia, famously observed: "The empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful of all empires" (Montesquieu 1750, Bk. XIX, Chap. XIV, p. 427). As we know from his celebrated *The Spirit of the Laws,* Montesquieu attributed everything from human physiology and national character, to social customs and moral standards, to the influence of the climate. The Baconian aphorism I have in mind, comes from his *Novum Organum* of 1620*,* where he appealed for the accumulation of what he called "Singular Instances" as critical to overthrowing *a priori* thinking, impromptu generalisation, and the syllogistic reasoning so beloved of contemporary natural philosophy (Bacon 1620, Bk. 2, ¶ XXVIII).

The papers gathered together in this special issue seem to me to amply bear out the insights enshrined in these two declarations. First, to take up Montesquieu's dictum, contributors have demonstrated the expanding arenas into which climate extends its imperial force and power. These include: the human body—whether in the form of medical climatology or flesh barometers; the literary imagination as in the case of the novelist L.P. Hartley; the realm of the affective and the emotional in the phenomenology of quotidian lived experience; the psyche of isolated hill farmers in harsh and vulnerable Welsh environments; urban architecture, planning and engineering; celestial aesthetics; the digitised data sets that inhabit the memory banks of computerised virtual worlds. The list could of course go on; my intention is only to indicate the remarkable scope of the terrain that the notion of 'the cultural spaces of climate' so far encloses. Doubtless that territory will continue to grow.

Second, to allude to the Baconian plea for the amassing of singular instances, these papers amply display the fertility of this essentially chorographic impulse applied to climatic inquiries. This is the case for both spatial and temporal specificities. The folly of disregarding small-scale responses to climate in the urban environment, of allowing what I call the

D. N. Livingstone (✉)
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK
e-mail: d.livingstone@qub.ac.uk

'tyranny of the mean' to exert its statistical power in climate discourse, of failing to attend to the micro-climates of the indoors, and of ignoring the anomalous in favour of trading in the currency of general trends, have all conspired to keep hidden—to use a term from one of our paper titles—climate as it is actually experienced by individual people in specific places. The same is true for particular times. Inquiring into the experience of a single exceptionally hot summer or one remarkably harsh winter—as our contributors have shown—not only shape a local community's immediate encounter with climatic realities, but also cast lengthy shadows over future memories.

What unites both of these impulses—Montesquieu's imperial trope and Bacon's enthusiasm for singularity—of course is spatiality. The terrain, both material and metaphorical, over which Montesquieu sees climate extending its rule is anything but a flat isotropic plane; it is uneven, differentiated, variegated. Bacon's enthusiasm for singularity likewise speaks to a world that is diversified, individuated, and location-specific. This realisation advertises the fruitfulness of bringing geographical scrutiny to bear on climate as both a natural and cultural construct. A fully fledged historical geography of the science of climate and climatic discourse more broadly construed, in my view, is a real *desideratum*. But that project can not be satisfactorily accomplished until a host of particular inquiries of the type we have encountered here have been accumulated.

For that task though, I want to suggest three imperatives—three maxims if you will—prompted by reflecting on the articles in this special issue, that might profitably be kept in view. In all of these, I believe, taking seriously the spatial, the geographical, the location-specific, will pay handsome dividends.

First: *problematise climatic knowledge*. The idea that climate knowledge is either stable or secure or self-evident is rendered deeply problematic by the insights of several of our contributors. At one level, the whole tradition of work in the geography of scientific knowledge has highlighted the insecurities inherent in such scientific procedures as the standardising of metrology, the disciplining of observers, instrumental recalcitrance, network management, and the like (Livingstone 2003). All of these contribute towards demonstrating the problems inherent in constructing knowledge of what might be called 'distributed phenomena' like climatic conditions. Besides this there are good grounds for querying the idea that climatic knowledge is any kind of singularity. In a variety of ways contributors here allude to expert-, amateur- and lay-climatic knowledge, and various species of hybrid crossover, each with their own protocols of expertise and experience. Some are quantitatively produced, others visually driven, yet others experientially derived. In some cases, not least with amateur climate-watchers, accumulated experience is of critical importance—rather like what Michael Polanyi meant by connoisseurship and tacit knowledge in the process of discovery over against an obsession with the validation or refutation of theories and models in conventional scientific thinking (Polanyi 1958). All these constitute climate knowledge whatever their register, and it is question-begging to prioritise one form of epistemic warrant over others.

Second: *particularise climatic experience*. What I am after here is the need to attend to the particular, the specific, the located in the inquiring into human experiences of climate. What we have learned about the Welsh winter of 1847 and the Norfolk summer of 1900 points to the significance of understanding very particular temporal moments in very specific venues if we are to grasp the just how communities form their impressions of climatic realities. In other times and places, it is the particularity of experience that has stimulated the production of bio-polar systems of classification that extolled certain climatic regimes as salubrious, others as sickly; some as enervating others as debilitating. All this is because what climate means to people is conditioned by the places people occupy, the histories they

share, the cultural values they absorb. Presumptions about what the idea of climate change must—or should—mean to people fall foul of precisely this careful interrogation of particularity.

Finally: *pluralise climatic meaning*. The papers published here advertise in many ways the fact that climate is not circumscribed by any single meaning. It is, to use the words of the political philosopher W.B. Gallie, an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956). Like art, justice, democracy, science, religion, and the like, it defies specification in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Climate inhabits different worlds—to borrow a choice metaphor from one paper. We have heard that climate means different things in the digital world of climate science and in literary imaginations; in the mindset of isolated Welsh hill farmers and Cornish coastal walkers; for Victorian urban architects and engineers, nineteenth century medical topographers, and Quaker industrialists concerned about mortality rates among mine workers. To these a host of others could be added. I myself have been working on how climate has been construed by Enlightenment philosophers, scientific travellers, Victorian artists, practitioners of tropical medicine, racial theorists and eugenicists, champions of immigration restriction, and students of hominid evolution. In all these situations climate means, and is made to mean, different things.

Problematize knowledge claims. Particularise experience. Pluralise meaning. These are three principles that I, for one, will take away from this arresting set of papers.

References

Bacon F (1620) The New Organon, or true directions concerning the interpretation of nature (1620). In: Spedding J, Ellis Robert L, Heath DD (eds) The works of Francis Bacon (vol. VIII). Taggard and Thompson, Boston

Gallie WB (1956) Essentially contested concepts. Proc Aristot Soc 56:167–98

Livingstone DN (2003) Putting science in its place: Geographies of scientific knowledge. University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Montesquieu, de Secondat M, Baron de (1750) The spirit of laws. Translated from the French. London, Printed for J. Nourse and P. Vaillant

Polanyi M (1958) Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London