

Global Warming, Global Warning

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Every year I teach a course called "global interdependence", and as you might imagine, we cover a lot of grim topics. Appropriately enough one of my friends calls the course "good news for people who like bad news." Perhaps that line describes some of you today – global climate change is a frightening prospect, and nevertheless here you are at 9 am on a Wednesday morning. Now think of this climate catastrophe in the context of the world's poor, and double the bad news. Poor people, as we saw in New Orleans, tend to have far less insulation from catastrophe than rich people do, so the claim that we are all in this together isn't entirely accurate. The people of the Netherlands can build levees with a height and sophistication that is not possible in Bangladesh. The financial press is already full of articles promoting schemes to find profit opportunities in climate change – the capitalists work well with a crisis. With this in mind we see that global interdependence reflects many kinds of global inequalities.

The German writer Walter Benjamin once wrote, living in the shadow of fascism, that "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule." I have always found this a useful and painful reminder. When we project the potential future disaster of climate change, we need to remember that lots of people on our planet *this very day* lead lives filled with tremendous suffering – hunger, violence, exploitation. I know it's deflating to create a hierarchy of crisis and oppression, but it does help us see the variety of reactions to climate change. Reactions to climate issues are likely to be larger among those who are comfortable in the current global order, who imagine disaster rather than live it.

So my first point would be for us here today to think of responses to climate change in ways that keep a broader population in mind. We should be wary of solutions to climate change that are composed entirely by affluent experts. If we are asking people to make drastic changes, we need to do so in a way that makes people feel like they are heard and their concerns are being addressed. I get very nervous when it seems that environmental movements are being led by elites – those campaigns tend not to be successful. When we say that "the science is solid" we must recognize the resistance that can create – many people hear scientific arguments not as a universal language but as an exclusionary discourse. Indeed think about how many people around the world (including the United States) reject key scientific theories on the basis of deeply held spiritual and political beliefs. We could write them off as Luddites, or we could think about why many people are skeptical of

elites bearing alarming news, when the catastrophes they experience gain little concern and attention in comparison.

My second point comes from that old anthropological maxim that our perspectives, like our languages, always have different local meanings. There is no common human relationship to the land, to the air or the water. There is no human nature in regard to nature. We can see that in Minnesota as people disagree about whether natural lands are best experienced through hiking or ATVs, via snowmobiles or cross-country skis. A graduate school friend of mine from urban India called the American love of hiking the most bizarre practice she experienced studying here. In Malaysia, where I have lived for years, many of my city friends and my rural friends have very different feelings about the rain forest. My city friends see the jungle as a serious place that one does not enter casually. My rural friends know what they are doing, and they see the jungle as something to use – for rubber cultivation primarily, but also for fruit and for game. Their biggest concern is with sovereignty – their rights to continue using the forest as they always have. In many places this is the case: whose vision of the environment is going to dominate? Local people? National governments? International organizations? Each of these entities sees the environment in vastly different ways, endowing the landscape with different meaning.

A third point from anthropology: human beings are creatures of habit. The beautiful thing about habits is we don't have to think as we go through our day. I, for example, never wonder if I should have coffee in the morning. The terrible thing about habits is that we don't have to think about the consequences of our actions. Hence the mess we have made of the planet. How fortunate that habits can change. Over the past 25 years in the United States, recycling has become habitual for most of us. A few of my fancy urban friends in Kuala Lumpur now even do it. Thus my surprise when visiting my in-laws last month in Arizona, and no recycling. Throwing away an aluminum can has now become a strange, awkward experience. And yet, my in-laws does far better than my family with the more holy portions of the reduce-reuse-recycle triad. They are of very frugal Yankee stock, and they are masters at reducing and reusing – turning a roast turkey into 8 different meals, clothing my daughters in baby clothes saved from my wife's infancy. We had a conversation about air travel, and my mother-in-law told us she flew for the first time when she was in her 30s. Though I took my first plane flight when I was 20, I have since flown about a half million miles. By age 4, my eldest daughter has been on over a dozen flights. We certainly recycle, but given the structure of our lives – dispersed family, travel needs for work, the busy pace – it is hard for us to reduce and reuse. I wish we could travel more efficiently, but I imagine using that efficiency to travel more – such is the geographic spread of my life.

Jim asked us to try and offer a hopeful vision, and anthropologists are notoriously bad at doing that. Intensive study of the contradictory, complex creatures known as human beings, especially when focusing on inequality, makes it difficult for us to see a ready way out of our many predicaments. Yet all gloom and doom is itself a misleading story to tell. Anna Tsing, an anthropologist who has spent many years researching in the rain forest of Kalimantan on the Indonesian side of Borneo, wrote a beautiful book called *Friction*. She shows how any movement for human transformation is going to create significant amounts of disagreement and conflict. We could look at these tensions as a problem – "oh, if everyone would just agree with me!" or we could see it as the natural consequence of movement, of the tire moving over the road. Thus the question for us is, what are we going to do with all the friction created by our attempts to address climate change? How do we tell good stories, understand those who disagree with us, build coalitions? How do we nurture public support for new policies? How, especially, do we learn to listen? We might think of our need to listen everytime we hear affluent people like us talk about the need to reduce our consumption. Yes, heavy consumers like us would do well to consume less. But how might that call sound to someone who has been on the fringe of the high-consumption community, who hasn't had the luxury of taking affluence for granted? Might we need to consume less so others might be able to consume more? How is that going to reduce our global carbon footprint?

Tsing writes about a successful campaign to protect a small corner of the Kalimantan rainforest and prevent a particularly destructive corporate logging scheme. The campaign included a diverse coalition of local villagers, university students, policy people in Jakarta, and international NGOs. What she found so fascinating was that all the different groups involved understood the struggle in very different terms. There was lots of friction between them because of it: the local villagers were concerned about maintaining their autonomy, the university students strongly romanticized the forest and villagers alike, the policy people wanted to protect the nationalist patrimony of mighty Indonesia, and the international activists were concerned about CO₂ and wildlife protection. In this admittedly rare instance, Tsing shows, we can protect the planet without agreeing with each other. Though such coalitions are fragile, if we learn to listen better and expand our political imagination, organize better, we might be able to bridge some of our divisions. We need to realize that the key challenge of climate change is changing the social climate. Might we protect the environment and build a better global community in the process? I worry that it's not going to happen, but may it be so.