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THINKING THE CLIMATE THROUGH
ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE CHURCH:
SCIENCE AND MORALITY IN THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

The present climate crisis presents a myriad of challenges for anthropologists attempting to analyze and critique the ways in which scientists and the public think about the world, our relationship to it, and how we make descriptive and moral claims about it. This paper outlines the epistemological problems that arise from climate change's status as a *hyperobject*: Specifically, the necessity to think across scales of space and time, the moral weight associated with claims about the climate, and the need for a single, global account. I compare these problems through three contemporary frameworks: The Western liberal consensus, the work of anthropologists Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, and the Catholic Church's integral ecology. I discuss kin relations and the obligations that come with them, the thread uniting the three frameworks, as a principle for authentically (re)thinking the climate and our relationship to the world at large.

Keywords anthropology of science; climate; morality; epistemology; hyperobjects; integral ecology; kinship

The present climate crisis presents a myriad of challenges for anthropologists attempting to analyze and critique the ways in which scientists and the public think about the world, our relationship to it, and how we make descriptive and moral claims about it. The climate crisis requires us to think on multiple scales of time and space, and to think at once qualitatively and quantitatively, despite anthropology's inclination to ground oneself in the ethnographic present. It

carries a moral weight, which structures the ways in which we construct narratives about it, almost requiring that we configure our accounts as narratives of crisis that emphasize a collective kind of responsibility. In addition, and perhaps most interestingly, its scale and pan-global nature begs for the construction of a single, universal account, a task which appears at first to fly in the face of a number of social scientists' challenges to natural scientists' claims to objectivity (Chakrabarty 2009).

In light of these inherent challenges, three broad approaches have been proposed. The first, championed by politicians and activists in the Anglosphere, will be referred to from here on as the liberal consensus. The second is that put forth by ecologically-minded social scientists such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. The third, and most recent, comes from Pope Francis and his allies within the Roman Catholic Church. Each of these approaches responds to the challenges of shifting scales, narrative and responsibility, and the need for a single account in its own way. Ultimately, by putting the approaches into conversation we may uncover a common thread, a means by which we may refigure our relationship to the world in which we live in such a way as to render climate change thinkable. I argue that this common thread lies in kinship, as defined by a relationship of diffuse, enduring solidarity. Only after we manage to weaken or think past the barrier separating the so-called cultural realm of kinship and solidarity from the so-called natural realm of objects and the claims we make about them can we begin to render the problem of climate change thinkable in a meaningful way.

I. Defining the Problems

As mentioned above, the very structure of the climate crisis as a potential object of thought presents a number of challenges. First and foremost is that of scale: the object we refer to as "the climate crisis," "climate change," or even "the climate" more generally is not like other objects or non-human entities which we may attempt to make claims about, in that it cannot be observed in the same way we might observe and make claims about a mineral sample or a bacterium. It does not exist in the laboratory, and it cannot be studied alongside carefully prepared controls. This lack of clear observability is a product of climate change's status as what Morton (2013) refers to as a *hyperobject*, a category of "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans." In Morton's formulation, hyperobjects are characterized and united as a category by their massive scale and their subsequent ability to evade direct observation. Though one may be able to observe a piece or local instantiation of a hyperobject, one cannot grasp the thing itself, much less the temporal scale on which it exists in its entirety (Morton 2013, 1-4).

While the ontological implications of these objects are multiple and fascinating, we need only concern ourselves with two epistemological consequences in particular. The first concerns climate researchers, and is the fact that those who study and attempt to build an account of climate change only have access to discrete, localized data from which they must attempt to recover the essence or nature of the total phenomenon itself. Most often, this localized data is quantified, taking the form of temperature data from a probe at an individual weather station, tidal data from a particular shoreline, a readout from a flowmeter on a particular river, and so on. The task of making claims about the climate is not simply one of reporting data, but one of stitching localized instances together into a coherent account of something that any one person can never quite grasp.

Frequently, this stitching is accomplished by marshalling data in such a way as to create a spectacle of numbers, reporting tens of thousands of tons of carbon dioxide, tens of millions of displaced persons, and so on. The construction of such discursive spectacles through aggregation, though technically accurate, *undermines*, to use Graham Harman's (2002) term, the climate crisis by reducing the object itself to merely a measurement of it or its consequences.

The second implication of thinking at this scale is closely related to the first, and concerns political claims made about the climate. Due to the distance between local instantiations and the phenomenon itself, normative claims about instances of climate change are more likely than other political issues to fall prey to the difficulties inherent in thinking through what Choy (2011) calls "ecologies of comparison." This term refers to environmental and political systems in which those involved must continuously oscillate between thinking in terms of local exemplifications, such as a particular flood or weather event, and those of abstract universals, such as the general phenomena of increased flooding and previously unusual weather events (Choy 2011). This oscillation has important political implications, for it can lead local and international actors, who ought to view their interests as shared with regards to the climate crisis, to speak in unintelligible, competing terms, a problem which I will return to later.

In addition to the issues brought about by scale, discourse about climate change is uniquely prone to narratives of crisis. The choice of the term "climate crisis" in contrast to "climate change" or the now-outdated "global warming" is a conscious one made by scientists and activists in light of the potential for catastrophic consequences that the phenomenon presents. As Schuetze (2015) argues, narratives of crisis have the potential to reinforce themselves out of a sense that evidence to the contrary could be considered a cynical or ill-intentioned plot to downplay a clear and present danger, creating what she describes as narrative fortresses (Schuetze 2015). While the reality of climate change has long been established within the scientific community, the creation of narrative fortresses based upon a liberal morality, which envisions moral action as primarily that of the individual, still poses a problem. Structurally, this challenge is very similar to that of scale in that it involves the aggregation of individual instances into a larger phenomenon. The difference here is that what is aggregated is a sense of moral imperative; crisis narratives based upon a moral outlook that considers the individual to be the absolute foundation of moral decision-making turn the task of articulating a global moral cause into one of demanding action on the part of abstract individuals. Although actual individuals may be in different material positions and have different moral responsibilities and available paths of action, this aggregation can result in a crisis narrative which mistakes those who cannot act on climate change as persons who choose not to act on it.

Thirdly, the catastrophic and global nature of climate change uniquely necessitates the creation of one, undoubtable account of the phenomenon. While this may appear to be an obvious consequence of the above difficulties, the fact that it does pose a problem for recent movements in post-Kuhnian, feminist, and postcolonial science studies is significant enough to deserve a discussion of its own. These movements have advocated for an approach, or in fact a multiplicity of approaches, which treat scientific knowledge as a variety of knowledges, each to some degree separated and uniquely situated in its own setting, colonial, postcolonial, or otherwise (Haraway 1988; Harding 2008). The immediate reaction of any good, relativist anthropologist is to opt for an

approach which can handle a multiplicity of claims to truth. However, a phenomenon like climate change chills this reaction somewhat, leaving us looking for a way back to making effective and lasting claims that must be accepted as true by all of us.

II. The Liberal Consensus

Though now it may appear a bit quaint, Al Gore's 2006 documentary and monograph *An Inconvenient Truth* can be credited with popularizing the climate change phenomenon and informing much of contemporary public discourse on the issue in the Anglosphere. Upon returning to it, I am struck by the degree to which Gore's responses to the challenges outlined above appear almost obvious in 2020. Gore responds to the issue of thinking about a phenomenon at this scale by highlighting a litany of local effects, such as the gradual disappearance of glaciers on Mt Kilimanjaro, Glacier National Park, and the Tibetan plateau, and illustrating the correlation over time between these effects and localized measurements of the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air (Guggenheim 2006, 36–64). This essentially limits the discussion of the phenomenon to the atmosphere, a thing which the book's introduction portrays as cosmically miniscule and fragile (10–15). Gore credits an undergraduate professor of his, meteorologist Roger Revelle, with kindling his interest in climate change, describing Dr. Revelle as “first and foremost a hard-nosed scientist devoted to careful and methodological experimentation and patient analysis . . .” (38). From Gore's perspective, the use of exact, local measurements is a net positive, for quantification leads to precision, and precision bolsters one's case. A narrative of crisis, based upon precise observation of local phenomena, is then an obvious and useful conclusion. Because the atmosphere necessarily covers the entirety of the earth and changes in the atmosphere affect all (or nearly all) humans, the single account that this approach entails must come from humanity, a united and equal “we” made up of empowered political subjects. It would ideally follow that such an account, authored by the world's scientists, would be enough to demand action through our preexisting democratic institutions, action which would ultimately take the form of industrial regulations.

These responses are largely unsatisfactory. The tactic of presenting a procession of images of shrinking glaciers and graphs of carbon dioxide measurements may make for a compelling narrative for some. However, it cannot hold up to the objections of a determined Humean skeptic who demands to be shown the point of contact between the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and human action, much less human responsibility (Hume 1993). As Ghosh (2016) expertly highlights, the standard liberal consensus on climate change figures the moral relationship between humans and the environment as an “individual moral adventure” undertaken by each of the individuals who are aggregated into the “we” of humanity (Ghosh 2016, 127–30). The individual moral adventure traces a person's experience through time and space as a solitary actor, encountering and judging the world in their own terms, each discovery and judgement being an expression of some inner authentic self. Gore and Dr. Ravelle assume the place of such moral adventurers in the text, demonstrating to the reader the proper personal response to the phenomenon. More recently, the moral adventure trope became more literal as Swedish activist Greta Thunberg embarked on a transatlantic voyage by sailboat to attend a round of climate conferences in the Western Hemisphere. Thunberg made the choice to travel by boat in light of the carbon emissions of a transatlantic flight (Guardian Staff 2019). In being “carbon neutral,” the trip

was also morally neutral. The price of conceiving of morality in this way, Ghosh argues, is that it entangles one's claims with one's own being such that purity and sincerity serve as preconditions and guarantees of one's judgements about the world. Suddenly, the means of transportation which climate activists use on the day of a protest or the use of plastic straws by a climate scientist are drawn into the political arena, offering avenues for those who wish to discredit the narrative of crisis as inauthentic. Recall, for example, the furor from conservative voices in the Anglophone press which arose over the transportation of an alternate crew by air for Thunberg's return across the Atlantic in late 2019. Rather than leaving us grounded in the terms of our own narrative fortresses, crisis narratives based on individual morality leave us floating adrift in narrative balloons waiting to be punctured at the first sign of personal inauthenticity.

III. Anthropological Perspectives

In light of the deficiencies in the liberal program for thinking about climate change outlined above, a number of science studies scholars have proposed new ways of thinking about science, its conditions of possibility, and our relationship to the nonhuman. Two such scholars, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, each offer radical critiques of the ways in which scientists endeavor to make claims about the world with particular emphasis placed on the issue of climate change. In Haraway's earlier works, she formulates a feminist critique of the notion of objectivity as it is usually understood. In scientific accounts coming from institutions in the West, objectivity is constructed as a radically disembedded view, a view from nowhere. In reality, Haraway writes, each perspective is inevitably situated in a particular political or historical setting, a fact that is obscured by rhetoric and institutional authority in what Haraway calls the "God-trick." In light of this, Haraway advocates for an understanding of scientific observation as active and interested combined with an effort to bring perspectives from the margins of power, which will be less likely to fall for the God-trick, into our accounts of the world (Haraway 1988). In her more recent work, Haraway clarifies this critique and applies it to contemporary environmental politics, calling for a refiguration of our mode of engaging with the world away from making observations or making accounts to "making kin." Such a move, she argues, allows us to consider the nonhuman entities we live beside as more than disinterested objects, as things with which we may enter into more meaningful relationships and live beside with greater potential for "response-ability" (Haraway 2016, 2–6). Haraway's recommendations then respond to the challenge of scale through active incorporation of different perspectives in a critical manner, aware of the limitations of a saintly objectivity. Furthermore, Haraway makes the ingenious move of refiguring crisis as an opportunity, inviting us to stick with, rather than disengage from, the challenges it poses in the interest of stirring up "trouble" in the form of provocative analyses and kin relations with non-human beings which may bring about new possibilities. The transition away from making accounts to making kin is a productive one, for it moves the question of moral engagement with climate phenomena away from being a matter of personal adventure for enlightened individuals to a question of shared obligation.

Sympathetic to Haraway's critique, Latour in *Reassembling the Social* (2007) outlines a methodology referred to by him and his colleagues as actor-network theory (ANT). This methodological framework seeks to make claims about the world based upon a conception of "the

social” which views groups as always being made and remade, agency as distributed among assemblages of human and nonhuman beings, and the task of writing accounts as one of building rhetorical laboratories in which the actors the researcher tracks may bring new combinations of ideas and things into the world (Latour 2007). Consequently, ANT rejects causal claims that seek to *explain* phenomena as the result of “social” forces like collective effervescence, false consciousness, or abstract “power” in favor of accounts that *trace* the connections between the various actants, human or otherwise, that make up a system. In this earlier work, one can see the beginnings of a critique directed toward thinking about climate change specifically, heavily implied in Latour’s closing recommendation to develop accounts that may pull more and more agencies into the totality of knowing, acting beings which he refers to as the “collective” (2007, 254–55). Latour explicitly outlines this critique in *Down to Earth* (2018), identifying the current moment as one defined by a realignment of the political spectrum away from the poles of Left and Right towards the emerging poles of the Out-of-This-World (currently taking the form of nationalism and ever-increasing accumulation) and the Terrestrial. The Terrestrial serves to represent what Latour identifies as the “Critical Zone,” the integrated assemblage of beings and forces which make up the habitable layer of the Earth’s crust and atmosphere. Importantly, Latour argues, a politics of the Terrestrial requires that we rework the category of “nature” in such a way as to allow us to think of a world which is not made up of objects, but of agents (Latour 2018). Latour’s response, then, can be summarized as an attempt to reformulate the climate crisis in the terms of actor-network theory.

I choose to highlight these two authors because each of their approaches to climate change illuminates deficiencies in the other’s. To begin, Latour’s critique of contemporary accounts of “the social” certainly applies to Haraway’s own approach to compiling and integrating subaltern perspectives into our scientific accounts. Returning to Ghosh momentarily, there is a crucial sense in which recognition requires some prior familiarity, that there is something which must come before we *re*-cognize a perspective other than our own (Ghosh 2016, 9). For this reason, there is a risk that we may only compile those perspectives which are already attractive to whoever ends up doing the compiling. Latour’s program, on the other hand, runs the risk of playing into a God-trick of its own; the ANT researcher is a very particularly situated figure, a person with access to all levels of interaction and organization, flying from the forest to the corridors of power to the elite laboratories and back again, recording perfect, repeatable observations. On top of this, these two perspectives fail to account for our third challenge, the one of making a single account in a satisfying way. Al Gore at the very least defined who the “we” is that ought to be acting upon the world; from reading Haraway and Latour, it is unclear who exactly it is that is going to go around making kin and forming a politics of the Terrestrial. If one thing is certain, their audience of academic readers are not institutionally equipped to bring about such grand changes in perspective.

IV. The Church’s Integral Ecology

Recently, the first Pope from the New World has entered into the climatic fray and begun to solidify the Roman Catholic Church’s response to environmental degradation and climate change. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls for the formulation of an “integral ecology” as a part of the Church’s ongoing efforts to renew its status as a missionary force in the world. Drawing inspiration from the writings of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Pope uses the term to

refer to an approach to the environment which “calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.” Historical accounts of Saint Francis’s life are taken as the model for this approach, highlighting in particular the Saint’s “reflection on the primary source of all things” and subsequent choice to “call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ and sister” (Francis 2015, 10). In October of 2019, Pope Francis called the Special Assembly of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region (known simply as the Amazon Synod), a monthlong meeting of high-ranking bishops and indigenous faith leaders from across the Amazon Basin. Among the matters discussed was the issue of what exactly an integral ecology would look like in practice. The Synod’s final document articulates an integral ecology as one which simultaneously serves to integrate more and more of the world’s underserved into the Church’s sphere, in the sense of conversion, while simultaneously integrating a concern for the “abuses of creation” and the “cries of our sister the Earth.” Materially, this is achieved through the extension of Church services into regions which the state does not serve, the creation of Vatican offices designated to building coalitions with and advocating for indigenous groups, and calling upon people and firms to examine their supply chains for social (that is, human) and environmental (non-human) sustainability. Pope Francis would later incorporate the Synod’s conclusions into his Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, in which he articulates a forceful call to:

... overcome the various colonizing mentalities and to build networks of solidarity and development. The challenge, in short, is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization. Alternatives can be sought for sustainable herding and agriculture, sources of energy that do not pollute, dignified means of employment that do not entail the destruction of the natural environment and of cultures. At the same time, the indigenous peoples and the poor need to be given an education suited to developing their abilities and empowering them. These are the goals to which the genuine talent and shrewdness of political leaders should be directed. Not as a way of restoring to the dead the life taken from them, or even of compensating the survivors of that carnage, but at least today to be *authentically human*. (Francis 2020, 17)

This call to action is remarkable in its justification. Rather than being based in one’s own personal moral adventure or in one’s particular efforts to make kin or enlarge the Terrestrial collective, it is justified as an authentic state of humanity as a whole. Francis ties the pursuit of this authenticity with the communion of the Church community, calling for us (“the People of God” and “all Persons of Good Will,” to whom the Exhortation is addressed) to “enter into communion with the forest” (Francis 2020, 56). Materially, Francis envisions this communion as the development of Church activities in the Amazon in cooperation with indigenous faith networks to advocate on the behalf of the region in the face of global capital.

What stands out in the Church’s response is the ease with which the Church can speak in terms that are capable of matching the scale of the climate crisis. This is, after all, the universal scale at which the Church itself has operated for a millennium. Unlike the United Nations and other statist international institutions on the one hand or the academy on the other, since the period after 1492 the Church has operated just about wherever in the world there are people. This is made possible by a particular organizational structure which recognizes the autonomous operation of a

large number of subsidiaries while following principles shaped and promulgated by a central body. This response is also noteworthy in its acknowledgement of the simultaneous value and limits of purely scientific categories. As was the case with Haraway and Latour's recommendations, the Church recognizes that the problem of making actionable claims about the climate is as much a political problem as it is a scientific one. Nonetheless, the Church's reliance upon the category of "nature" and its fundamental separation from the human presents another obstacle for enforceability. Conceptualizing nature as a separate domain from the human, one in which agency and thus original sin are entirely absent and the divine law is constantly and essentially implied, is deeply ingrained in Western Christian theology and is primarily expressed through appeals to "natural" law in Catholic social teaching (see Aquinas 1954; Leo XIII 1891). The "communion with the forest" that Francis calls for is not one made up of human and non-human entities, but rather one made up of people who recognize nature as a place of immense value. This cornerstone of Roman Catholic thought and practice makes for an account that still limits us to considering humans as naked and alone in a world that changes despite us.

V. Conclusions

The common thread which unites each of the three responses is an appeal to kinship as a mode of thought and an impetus for action. Gore's pictures of a lonely, fragile globe ground a claim about the value of the togetherness found in speaking as a "we," as one human unit. Haraway explicitly calls for the creation of new kin of all varieties, provoking us to think about the nonhuman as something to which we can have an intimate sense of being connected. The Church's approach to the climate is the same as its approach to most global problems (such as human rights violations and the threat of nuclear war in the 20th century), one of emphasizing a sense of fraternity both with our brothers and sisters in humanity and with our sister the Earth herself (see John XXIII 1963).

Importantly, these notions of kinship illuminate the potential of kin relations to serve as something more than a poetic device. Precisely, kin relations can serve as a transcendental principle upon which an understanding of a phenomenon on the scale of climate change can be grounded. This idea is not new within the history of kinship studies; one needs only to think back to Evan-Pritchard's ethnography of the Nuer people to find an example of kin relations serving as a means to comprehend relations through space-time (Evans-Pritchard 1940). By considering our relationship to the object of climate change not as one defined by the observation of local instances but as one defined by our entrance into relations of obligation with a larger web of human and nonhuman entities, we can begin to move past the challenges in thinking and acting on climate change we have explored. Descriptively, such relations would allow us to overcome Hume's problem of induction by refiguring what was once a relationship of observation instead as a relation of interdependence that must be actualized. This can be achieved by substituting the production of empirical claims, which we can only hope will be true in the future, with formulating synthetic claims from principles about reality and our relationship to it, i.e. the degradation of the environment and our obligations to live together morally. Morally, this helps with the challenge of operating at the scale of climate change by providing a transcendental, *a priori* basis which could replace the personal moral adventures that have informed contemporary liberal climate politics. In

effect, the obligation that comes with kin relationships takes away choice. This can have powerful consequences, chief among them the dissolution of one of the great fictions of our time: the notion that choice and liberation go hand in hand. The problem with the status quo is that we are given the choice to maintain it. By modifying the way we think about climate change from that of observing a natural phenomenon which is apart from us to that of participating in a collective phenomenon to which we have obligations, we may be able to think past the problems of scale, narrative, and collective responsibility and formulate a new science and politics of our world before it's too late.

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