

Knox Hannah (2020) *Thinking Like a Climate: Governing a City in Times of Environmental Change*. Durham: Duke University Press. 328 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1086-9.

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“How are we to think like a climate?” This may be the first question that arises when reading the title of Hannah Knox’ timely ethnography on climate change governance in the city of Manchester. Is it a mere conceptualisation of climate as a “form of thought” (p.8)? An acknowledgement of “stabilized effects of interactions” (p.8) between interacting entities? Most of all, the prompt to think like a climate invites people to “inhabit global ecological relations and their projection into the future” (p.264). This mode of thinking understands climate in a multifaceted manner, paying special attention to its material dynamics. It brings into view how climate can be understood as a rainstorm disturbing a meeting, and how it is seen in data, spreadsheets, models and documents as well as in activist spaces. *Thinking Like a Climate* explores myriad ways in which planners, politicians, activists and anthropologists can, should and already do try to grasp climate change. The book successfully describes entanglements of city administration and politics, policy-making, activism, climate science and data representations. It starts with theoretical and methodological aspirations that are taken up in two empirical sections and make up the largest part of Knox’ ethnography. Though the kaleidoscopic presentation of empirical findings and theoretical approaches is

at times difficult to follow, it offers various forms of inspiration and promising tools for future ethnographies of climate change: Knox introduces a lively array of concepts that have the potential to steer new questions and answers about current and future climate governance.

Consequently, *Thinking Like a Climate* is of interest to readers from urban studies, climate anthropology, ecologies of infrastructures, political anthropology and anthropology of knowledge alike. What is more, it paves the way for further climate ethnographies in cities by empirically and conceptually bridging urban studies and climate studies.

Knox builds on relational theories of human-environment entanglements, stressing that climate is beyond the “natural”. Rather, it is presented as an ecology of signs brought to our knowledge by mathematical operations. Knox offers a plethora of empirical examples to illustrate the importance of understanding and critically examining these numerical representations in models and their material effects in politics.

In her 2015 article of the same name, Knox outlines how climate’s ontology brings together social and scientific topics and renders them equally interesting in political terms. In the article as well as in the book, she is interested in how

it is possible to take political action to deal with climate's material and representational facticity. Her main point is that climate change makes people more politically aware – the scientist, the homeowner, the local administrator – and, consequently, shifts delineations between science and society that must be viewed as politically entangled in questions of ontology and action (Knox, 2015: 99). In her view, it makes sense to look at mundane practices, too, and find new ways of governance to accommodate this shifting “relationship between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of politics” (Knox, 2015: 105). While she foregrounds the political ontology of climate change in the article, her book focuses on epistemological entanglements. This paves the way for concepts like the *vernacular engineer* and *responsive personhood* (see below) that follow her take on reflexivity as a mode of experimental governance. Simultaneously, Knox' empirical examples hint at a productive tension between theoretically framing climate change as an infrastructure of thought and empirically showcasing the materiality of climate change through knowledge practices.

This tension runs through both empirical sections of Knox' monograph, *Contact Zones* and *Rematerializing Politics*. Knox begins with interrogating the knowledge practices behind numerical operations, representations and percentages in climate science to unveil its entanglements with governmental action at the city scale. Exemplified by Manchester's commitment to reduce 41% of its carbon emissions, Knox addresses how climate change becomes social through people's (political) capacity to participate in achieving such climate goals. Bringing together climate sciences and accounting techniques, she introduces another dimension of thinking like a climate: asking how established ways of knowing climate are unsettled by different footprinting techniques and their implications. In a next step, Knox turns to the (in)ability of climate models to facilitate change, especially in terms of preparedness, with respect to possibly catastrophic climate futures. Here, climate science is but one of many future-making practices at the city scale. She describes how mayors and planners are *stuck in strategies*, struggling to get a hold on climate change as an interdisciplinary, inter-organisational problem. Knox sees remedy in employing an experimental

mode of governance that is open to scrutiny from the outside and within, paying attention to the “ecosystemic relationality of climate change” (p.176).

In the second part, Knox shifts her attention to practical forms of action. Among others, she discusses entanglements of climate change in Ecohomes (ecologically friendly, technologically savvy showhomes) as places where someone can become politically effective by engaging in learning processes as an “expert-amateur” (p.204) or a *vernacular engineer*. Vernacular engineers and their Ecohomes constitute a prime example for approaches foregrounding experimental modes of governance: They ground what is understood as trial and experiment in political processes, locate spaces where different knowledge practices constitute what Knox introduces as an ecology of signs, and they connect climate and sociological reality by means of politically charged engagement with their environments. This also serves as an example of *responsive personhood*, which Knox suggests as alternative to *neoliberal personhood* in order to probe how people relate and respond to their (living) environments by caring for or being attuned to them, rather than choosing between functional options that are offered by their surroundings. Knox suggests that the main contribution of *Thinking Like a Climate* is to move away from a choice-making subject. Responsiveness then is a vital capacity of the entangled human subject. She argues that a turn to the responsive rather than the choice-making version of the subject might open up new directions for an anthropology of climate change. Criticizing a reading of climate change activism as post-political, Knox proposes the term *propositional politics* to denote an in-between position of activist action, inherently open to broader public participation and challenging notions of expertise in policy development.

Knox closes by framing the book as a re-description that aims to make knowledge practices available for discussion, pointing out that such practices do have the potential to be changed. Those who are looking for hands-on proposals on what this change could look like or how to bring it about will be left wanting though. Instead of further discussing possible paths or ideas, in the last chapter of the book she surprisingly turns to

questions of anthropological practices in climate change. Her suggestion is that anthropologists do not stop at descriptions of social worlds but actively engage in political interactions. Her view confirms Susan Crate's conclusion (2011): An anthropology of climate change should be an engaged anthropology. But almost ten years after this claim, we are left astonished by a profoundly engaged climate ethnography that refrains from making a specific proposal towards anthropologi-

cally informed climate governance – a claim we feel Knox' deep immersion in Manchester could meet. In a sense, this reflects where we stand in establishing an anthropological approach to the complex global human-environment relations that we frame as climate change. It also hints at future tasks for our research: to take up (trans-) disciplinary threads and weave them together into a comprehensive anthropological theory of climate change that informs also non-academics.

References:

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