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The return of nature?

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Abstract

Published under the auspices of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Inhuman Nature* is one of the most interesting monographs I have encountered in many years. The questions it raises and the answers it provides are not only relevant to all of human geography's sub-fields (including cultural geography) but to physical geography's component branches as well. This said, Nigel Clark's academic training lies outside geography, and his book's back-cover endorsements come from two sociologists (Myra Hird and Adrian Franklin). But it's not too hard to make direct connections between his plenary analysis of Anglophone social science, the humanities and the Earth sciences, and the way in which Anglophone geographers think about, interrogate and de/politicize 'nature'. Clark's book could, as Franklin justifiably opines, '[be] one of the most important [monographs] ... you're ever likely to read'. I will summarize the claims and contentions of *Inhuman Nature* before identifying its principal implications for research, teaching and 'outreach' activities in contemporary geography. For those willing to be persuaded, these implications are very significant analytically, normatively and practically. However, that willingness presumes readers will find clever ways of tackling - or downplaying - some very significant problems with Nigel Clark's arguments (as I'll explain towards the end).

Keywords

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The return of nature?

Inhuman nature: sociable life on a dynamic planet. By Nigel Clark. London: Sage. 2011. 267 pp. £63.00 cloth. ISBN 9 7807 6195 7256

Published under the auspices of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Inhuman nature* is one of the most interesting monographs I have encountered in many years. The questions it raises and the answers it provides are not only relevant to all of human geography's sub-fields (including cultural geography) but to physical geography's component branches as well. This said, Nigel Clark's academic training lies outside geography, and his book's back-cover endorsements come from two sociologists (Myra Hird and Adrian Franklin). But it's not too hard to make direct connections between his plenary analysis of Anglophone social science, the humanities and the earth sciences, and the way in which Anglophone geographers think about, interrogate and de/politicise 'nature'. Clark's book could, as Franklin justifiably opines, "[be] one of the most important [monographs] ... you're ever likely to read". I will summarise the claims and contentions of *Inhuman nature* before identifying its principal implications for research, teaching and 'outreach' activities in contemporary geography. For those willing to be persuaded, these implications are very significant analytically, normatively and practically. However, that willingness presumes readers will find clever ways of tackling – or downplaying – some very significant problems with Nigel Clark's arguments (as I'll explain towards the end).

Inhuman nature has grand ambitions. It seeks to understand the relations between *homo sapiens* and a biophysical world of land, air and water that's evolved over millions of years. It also spells-out the implications of a 'proper' understanding of these relations. "This book", Clark writes,

is about coming to terms with a planet that constantly rumbles, folds, cracks, erupts, irrupts. It's about living with earth ... processes that have gone on long before our species made its appearance ... It explores some of the issues that arise out of the condition of being sensuous, sociable beings in a universe that nourishes and supports us, but is forever capable of withdrawing this sustaining presence. And it ... ask[s] how better we might live – with other things and ... each other – in the context of a deep, elemental underpinning that is at once a source of profound insecurity (p. xiv).

Clark takes very seriously modern humanity's remarkable ability to modify natural environments to suit its own diverse purposes. But he takes equally seriously the earth's enduring capacity to hinder and harm us. "[M]ost of material reality is not ours' to make over", he reminds us (p. xx) – a point which is blindingly obvious and yet, paradoxically, well worth making. For Clark, the idea of the 'Anthropocene' – which describes a new era in which earth surface processes and forms will change significantly because of anthropogenic forcings – gives far too much credit to global humanity. In his view not only will these forcings merely amplify potentialities

inherent in the processes; what's more, the earth will continue to throw major challenges our way, regardless of anthropogenic environmental change – more earthquakes, more tsunamis, and more volcanoes. Our 'risk society' is thus not entirely of our own making: according to Clark it's partly a product of those elemental forces that make our planet as volatile today as it has been for countless previous generations.

Throughout *Inhuman nature* Clark's watchwords are 'asymmetry' and 'indifference'. The first refers to the balance of power in the nexus of human-environment relations. Clark consistently highlights the earth's capacity to exceed our most elaborate designs and our greatest works of social and physical engineering. For him, the well-known idea of the human 'domination of nature' massively overstates the case. The second term reminds us that the planet is not designed for our comfort or well-being, even though *homo sapiens* is, as Darwin famously showed, a child of the earth rather than a deity. "What are catastrophes for soft, fleshy creatures like us", Clark observes at one point, "are for the earth merely minor and mundane readjustments" (p. 23). In a chapter focussed on Kant's philosophy, Clark argues that European thinking since the Enlightenment period has been characterised by a failure to properly reckon with nature's power and the moral implications of its indifference towards us. Kant, Clark argues, was not alone in reacting to the disastrous Lisbon earthquake of 1755 by instituting distinctions between nature and humanity, compulsion and freedom. His (normative) idea of the modern subject accented *self*-determination in both mind and body: it focussed attention on humans as the ultimate makers of imaginative worlds and licensed the creation of "... a natural order made over so thoroughly by the collectivity of self-willed agents that it would cease to pose a palpable threat to human existence" (p. 95). Because of this, only *humanly created* disasters – think of Auschwitz or Hiroshima – have been seen to necessitate deep reflection on ethical norms, habits and goals. True, the 'environmental crisis' has inspired much soul searching about our treatment of the non-human world since the mid-1960s. But, according to Clark, **its** hasn't departed from the Kantian template: aside from (say) deep ecologists and committed animal rights activists, most environmental ethics involves *assigning* value to the non-human other as a matter of *choice*. In short, Clark maintains that the Western worldview is profoundly anthropocentric and dualistic: it has, literally, lost touch with the earth beneath and the sky above.¹

This matters for us – for how we understand and relate to each other – as much as for that 'nature' we try to shut-out, manage, control or even (sometimes) 'respect' and 'value'. In three chapters on global 'climate justice', Hurricane Katrina and humans and fire respectively Clark explains why. As international carbon trading and the 2006 Stern Review illustrate, "it is the tight coupling of the imperative to avoid catastrophe while appearing to pursue justice and equity that is pushing climate change policy in the direction of generalizable units of [substance and] value" (p. 113). Measuring earth processes – notably greenhouse gas emissions and sinks – is, via monetary metrics, being hard-wired to normative issues of fairness (realised

through 'compensatory' measures that move resources towards the Global South). This is a particular way of connecting 'facts' and 'values', one that presumes the object-subject dualism favoured by Königsberg's famous philosopher.

However, as Clark argues, it will be nigh impossible to 'measure' harm and institute 'compensation' if future earth systems cross thresholds and behave erratically. In these circumstances, our present-day calculative reasoning practices will come-up seriously short. We need, Clark argues, to consider a less procedural and more generous sense of 'just' action towards others. Recent catastrophes – modern day Lisbon earthquakes – may be harbingers. In Clark's view they can challenge the Kantian insistence that moral judgement and ethical action are *sui generis* – things that, while they may be *inspired* by natural events, are constitutively *independent* of them when all is said and done. Consider Hurricane Katrina – which, let us recall, disabled a very large city-region in a wealthy, highly technologised country. It inspired everyday acts of kindness and assistance towards those afflicted that were not 'measured' and which occurred in the absence of properly functioning disaster management systems. Katrina was a crisis at once local (New Orleans and its hinterland) and national (it affected the whole USA) that, fleetingly, produced what Clark calls 'estrangement'.

This is a key idea in *Inhuman nature*. It describes losing any established sense of oneself or the other, such is the force of natural extremes like tsunamis or major earthquakes. Estrangement can, Clark suggests, foster new senses of community near and far:

The surrender to the demands of others is an incitement to purposive action ... It is our *inability* to truly know and share the 'estrangement' of the other that spurs us to think and act. (p. 72)

... if generosity is truly an opening of oneself, then it ... makes the one who gives vulnerable. The donor too must be prepared to feel hurt, to be chastened, criticized, even rejected. Only in this way might they – we – learn to give more responsibly, as well as ~~responsibly~~responsively. (p. 79)

We can, Clark continues, surrender to the *past* – not only our contemporaries – and should consider the generosity of our *forebears* too. His chapter on pre-industrial, pre-capitalist uses of fire (in Australia and elsewhere) explores the inestimable gift given to modern humanity of how to work with (and around) the volatile power of combustion. Building on this, a closing chapter entitled 'Extending hospitality' proposes a cosmopolitan ethos that is deeply temporal and geographical. It's predicated on a profound sense of our 'horizontal' and 'temporal' locatedness: each of us occupies a point in space-time that is utterly indissociable from the lives of unknown others past, present and future. On this basis Clark advocates for a tolerant, giving, and caring ethic that transcends current human divisions and expands our temporal horizons far into the future. To cite his closing words, whose eloquence typifies much of the book's prose,

A million and one obscure acts of love flare and fade away ... tiny sparks of generosity that arc across the cracks which will not cease to open up in the earth. Improbably, we have made it this far, across unfathomable ruptures and through innumerable thresholds. Improbably, we may make it over the next tipping point. (p. 219)

I'll offer some summary judgements about *Inhuman nature* shortly, but first let me consider its implications for geographers – and not only those who profess an interest in human-environment relations. Clark's book makes no mention of the discipline most readers of this journal call home, but its arguments hit home nonetheless. *Inhuman nature* both identifies, and calls into question, a particular 'culture of nature' that its author believes dominates a number of social science subjects. It suggests that many of us are Kant's progeny, knowingly or not – including those on the Left of academia who point to the social character of nature or else aim to dissolve the nature-society dualism altogether. This is, perhaps, obvious in writing that, through the 1990s, focussed on the 'construction' of 'nature' – with the latter term always in scare-quotes to denote the unnaturalness of its referents. It is, Clark implies, equally obvious in 'de-naturalising' approaches to investigating 'natural hazards' – approaches that, in Geography, can be traced back to the 1970s writings of Ben Wisner, Ken Hewitt and Phil O'Keefe, among others. But Clark's more arresting claim is that even recent 'symmetrical' investigations into how humans interact with the world – for example, those of Bruno Latour – fail to reckon with the material force and ethical charge of nature (a term that, minus any scare-quotes, Clark uses unapologetically throughout his book).²

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In sum, despite the erstwhile differences between what Kate Soper³ called 'nature sceptical' approaches and the 'new materialisms' of Latour and fellow-travellers, Clark believes they have much in common:

[If] ...is the core premise of critical, radical or progressive social thought [is] ...: the belief that the realities we inhabit can and should be ~~changed.2 p. 50~~ – but they're right.

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"Paradoxically... the outcome of [recently], affording more agency to nonhumans ~~has [paradoxically]have~~ been a massive ~~expansion~~ of the dominions of being upon which collective human agency imagines it has purchase. ("p. 50-51, emphasis added)

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In contemporary human geography, this view raises questions about the novelty and purchase of research inspired by Actor-Network Theory or that which explores affect, the 'non-representational' and human embodiment. By routinely focussing on micro-scale 'encounters' with the non-human does this research screen-out those important meso- and macro-scale processes that are not at all up for 're/negotiation' (materially or ethically)? What do we, our students and others with whom we speak lose by our seeming denial of those intractable, often destructive, aspects of nature's agency?

This is an interesting question, and it speaks to the hoary subject of whether a properly 'human' geography can proceed absent any deep or sustained engagement with the procedures and findings of physical geography. Despite the attractions of doing local level, case-based, data-intensive research (involving detailed field and laboratory work), many physical geographers are deeply interested in regional, continental and global scale events and processes. Bleeding as it does into the wider earth sciences, it's this kind of research that underpins much of Clark's argument (along with certain currents of European 'biophilosophy').⁴ Who would have thought that geoscience could inspire human geographers to ask the kind of Aristotelean questions Clark poses: are we unreflectively reproducing dangerous habits of thought and practice?; what sort of world is our research and teaching actively trying to produce (or prevent from coming into being)?; even when we think we're 'taking the debate forward' are we unwittingly part of 'the problem' rather than 'the solution'? For me, the early chapters of *Inhuman nature* caused some deep soul searching about my own professional *modus operandi*. They challenge the conceit that it's social science and humanities scholars who have all the answers to these questions, while the scientists simply tackle the Platonic questions (and who sometimes need reminding that these questions secrete value judgements and ethical commitments of their own). The interdisciplinary dialogue Clark has in mind looks nothing like those presupposed in conventional discussions about the need for more 'unity' in Geography. By Clark's lights, these discussions would appear far too Kantian in cast. Something else is called for.

Since Clark's book speaks to profound issues about the purpose and quality of human existence it also obliges us to think about ourselves in the round, not simply as 'academics'. Despite their enduring interest in human-environment relations, geographers have played little or no part in shaping public and political discussions about the 'big environmental questions' – at least on the human side of Geography. In the early 1970s the nascent Left of the discipline didn't really ride the new wave of radical environmentalism. More recently, only Jared Diamond (who has no background in geography though he's now in a Geography department) has visibly tackled the big issues of global natural resource exhaustion. For all its manifest flaws, Diamond's public scholarship constitutes an attempt to step-off the usual academic tram-lines. To be sure, Clark's book remains resolutely scholastic, but its arguments enjoin us to produce forms of knowledge that are avowedly 'worldly' and also unsettling. If you buy into the arguments of *Inhuman nature* then their implications cannot be contained in the academic arena alone – mere grist for the next seminar discussion. Rigorously pursued, the answers to Clark's nature-inspired Aristotelean questions break-down false divisions between work and home, public and private. By reformatting our own habits of thought and practice Clark asks us to help others do the same. It might be timely to heed Clark's plea for some serious self-reflection about

all aspects of our lives, professional and personal. As things stand, a number of earth and environmental scientists are saying far more radical things about human-environment relationships than almost all human geographers⁵. Most of us haven't yet taken seriously these scientists' arguments in our own research, teaching or private lives.

Having highlighted the provocations of *Inhuman nature*, let me close with some critical comments. The force of Clark's argument rests directly upon the force nature is said to exert on us. However, momentous though events like the 2010 Haiti earthquake manifestly are, the fact is they appear *not* to shake our collective commitment to the Kantian settlement Clark criticises. They strike us as aberrations and exceptions – at least 'us' in the world's richest countries. We see them as occasions for providing emergency relief to needy others or implementing better disaster mitigation measures, not the basis for a trial by 'estrangement'. In large part, this is because those aspects of 'nature' that we *can* control allow many of us to enjoy considerable day-to-day stability (and high living standards). There's a sense in Clark's book that nature will release a sort of primordial sensibility that's been contained for centuries, as if existing cultural norms and habits can be broken-down by biophysical shocks and more 'authentic' ones created. But he surely realises that this is utopian. If massive biophysical changes lie ahead of us – as many climate scientists predict – what's to stop us responding *even more forcefully* than Kant did to the Lisbon earthquake?

These changes are also as likely to create suffering and conflict as compassion and new forms of community. Clark accepts that Kant made a choice, yet – contrary to this – implies that nature will make us see that there's really only ever been *one* option. Today, the choices made to continue with business as usual – even in the face of biblical events like the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami – are, I'd argue, possible because of persistent wealth asymmetries. The rich world dispenses aid and calculates 'just compensation' because it *can*; ordinary people make charitable donations to emergency helplines because they live far from the (typically poorer) regions where most extreme natural events occur. In light of this, Clark's arguments – while inspiring and moving – lack what Marx famously asked of critique: that it identify real potentialities *immanent* in the object of the critic's animus. If Nigel Clark is ahead of his time, 21st century environmental change will (I hope) prove his humane arguments to have been more than wishful thinking. In the meantime, his readers can choose whether to help dig new cultural ground for a more volatile world that might reset global humanity's compass.

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Endnotes

¹Just to absolutely clear here, Clark is not (i) predicting a future catastrophe that will erase much of humankind (cf. Cormac McCarthy's acclaimed novel *The road* [New York, Picador, 2006]), (ii) advocating a return to pre-modern modes of existence, (iii) allying himself with nature-first ethico-political movements like Earth First!, (iv) opposed to high-technology, or (v) suggesting that there are 'too many people' on the planet, neo-Malthusian style.

²I suggest something similar in N. Castree, 'Geographies of nature in the making', in S. Pile *et al.* eds, *A handbook of cultural geography* (Sage, London, 2002), pp. 168-83.

³K. Soper, *What is nature?* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995).

⁴Clark makes extensive use of certain works authored by Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, George Bataille, Isabelle Stengers, and Emmanuel Levinas (among others).

⁵See, for example, K. Anderson & A. Bows, 'Beyond 'dangerous' climate change: emission scenarios for a new world', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* **369** (2011), pp. 20-44; and J. Rockstrom *et al.*, 'Planetary boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity', *Ecology & Society* **14** (2009), pp. 1-21. Inevitably, there are exceptions to this rule. For instance, Clark's arguments are strongly echoed by the following: P. Harrison, 'Corporeal remains: vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world', *Environment and Planning A* **40** (2008), pp. 423-445. (2008); D. Lulka, 'The residual humanism of hybridity', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **34** (2009), pp. 378-93; and N. Thrift 'Donna Haraway's dreams', *Theory, Culture & Society* **23** (2006), pp. 189-95. Meanwhile my sometime coeditor Bruce Braun has recently articulated Clarkean arguments in several essays. I suspect many human geographers have shied away from talking about powerful natural forces for fear of being seen as hard-core 'environmentalists' pronouncing the looming 'ecological catastrophe'. The left of human geography also, I think, equates talk of 'environmental crisis' with the spectre of 'natural limits' to human fulfilment – having taken strong issue with 'limits talk' since David Harvey's influential critique of neo-Malthusianism 40 years ago (in the pages of *Economic Geography*). However, as many in the worlds of literary fiction and the visual arts are now showing us, there are many alternative ways to figure the future and to stimulate a deep rethinking of our present day practices.