REVIEW

David N. Livingstone
The Empire of Climate: A History of an Idea
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David N. Livingstone's *The Empire of Climate* arrives at a time when the impacts of climate and climate change across all facets of society are widely discussed. Livingstone aims here to historicise the many and varied ways climate has been thought to shape human destines. In this rich book, he unpacks the long history of environmental or geographic determinism; that is, a collection of ideas about how people have been shaped physically, intellectually and even morally by climatic factors ideas which have long been reached for as a framework for assigning historical causality. Livingstone's starting point is that 'the empire of climate has continued to extend its influence over more and more regions of human life and culture' and 'in the wake of prevailing concerns over the consequences of rapid climate change, it looks set to maintain its imperial rule into the indefinite future' (here the title, *The Empire of Climate* explicitly echoes Montesquieu's oft repeated adage that the 'empire of the climate is the first, the most powerful of all empires', p. 3).

The Empire of Climate represents the culmination of Livingstone's more than three decades of writing and thinking about environmental and climatic determinism, with work on acclimatisation, empire and 'moral climatology' especially in the 'tropical world' dating back to the 1980s. Livingstone picks up on these themes but greatly expands them, structuring the book around four key spheres in which climatic determinism has been seen to shape human destinies, namely 'health, mind, wealth, and war' (p. 11). The sometimes sprawling chapters range from medical climatology to eugenics; from cognition and human evolution to mental health and meteorology; from climate and macroeconomics to labour, race and slavery; and from 'climate conflicts' and migration to the securitisation of climate change. The book thus takes a wide-ranging tour of the way climatic influences have been thought about in the past, but Livingstone also remains very interested in what this means for the present. Throughout, he diligently links historical case studies to contemporary journalistic and popular instantiations, and aims to 'set these preoccupations in a much wider historical context' (p. 11) in order to trace 'explanatory hold climate retains among professional historians, science journalists, and popular writers alike' (p. 3). Indeed, woven throughout the chapters are extensive engagements with the uses and abuses of deterministic

explanations in the twenty-first century, from claims about droughts and civil war in Syria to questionable research on heatwaves and crime.

Ultimately, Livingstone hopes that 'shedding light on how climate has been implicated in the reproduction of racial ideology, the justification of slavery, the rationalizing of conflict, the nurturing of eugenics, and the psychological and cultural stereotyping of major zones of the globe' will make it 'a little more difficult for a guilty humanity to stray into the habit of blaming the weather instead of undertaking to weather the blame' (p. 412). One of the key takeaways of the book is that deterministic explanations have a kind of insidious simplicity and flexibility that has seen them used to support some of the darkest imperial and social policies in human history – and that we would thus do well to better recognise and understand these tropes. Throughout, Livingstone also addresses the convoluted career of determinism in the disciplinary status of geography, concluding that 'the history of climatic determinism with its aura of fatalism and fanaticism reveals just how crippling a force it can be on human agency, equality, and empowerment' (p. 412). Livingstone points out that modern scholars are generally aware that the label 'environmental determinist' is pejorative, but this does not necessarily ensure they manage to avoid its traps. Here Livingstone points to the widely read work of Jared Diamond, whose explicitly anti-racist attempts to explain the 'rise' of Europe nevertheless problematically strip away choices and agency.

For a historical tome with one eye firmly on the present, this is nevertheless in many ways an unabashedly old-fashioned book. This is not least seen in Livingstone's self-conscious – and perhaps deliberately provocative – positioning of the work as a 'history of ideas'. Here Livingstone quotes Lorraine Daston's reflection that '"until very recently, and perhaps still … in the corner of the academic map that I come from, to call someone a historian of ideas is tantamount to calling them a tax evader or a cat murderer!"' (p. ix). For Livingstone, this risk is offset by allowing for bigger picture questions; or, as he puts it, working with the telescope rather than the microscope. Livingstone's implicit critique that scholarship has sometimes become too narrow is not without merit. However, standing behind a 'history of ideas' frame perhaps also allows Livingstone to sidestep innovative recent trends in global history and historical geography. Indeed, the scope of the book is expansive, but the focus is almost wholly on a *longue durée* of European thinking about climate stretching back to Hippocrates (with a notable exception given to Ibn Khaldūn's fourteenth century ruminations on climate and civilisation in the *Muqaddimah*). Livingstone's stated aim is to trace 'the intellectual architecture of the persistent conviction that climate exerts an ineluctable power over the human species', but the subset of humanity represented by the thinkers he discusses is ultimately quite small. Of course, Livingstone is well aware

that there are 'distortions and silences on my map' (p. 402), and figures like Montesquieu and Jean Bodin do matter for modern thinking about climate. This focus is thus not unjustifiable, but some greater acknowledgment and engagement with these choices and limitations would have been welcome.

The Empire of Climate fits into a particular tradition of *longue durée* analysis within historical geography, echoing classic scholarship like that of Clarence Glacken and Denis Cosgrove. Livingstone is acutely aware, not least given the sometimes episodic nature of his case studies over such a long timeframe, that not all ideas about environmental determinism are the same, or all instantiations of climatic causality for the same ends. As he notes, climatic explanations have been both monocausal and part of a range of factors amidst a 'longstanding fluidity about what the designation "determinism" actually names' (p. 10). In taking on a long chronology, this is cast as a history of continuities, not least in the way climate and climate change are sometimes assumed to mean the same or similar things at different times (though Livingstone does acknowledge that the recent recognition that humans can be planetary scale agents might represent a rupture). Here, Livingstone suggests that 'for all the differences between the recent tempo of global warming during what has come to be called the Anthropocene and earlier rates of climate change, there remain remarkable continuities in the history of ideas about climate's influence on human populations' (p. 408). Livingstone is also in dialogue with recent scholarship in geography, especially Mike Hulme's work on 'climate reductionism' and the way that climate is sometimes rendered as an all-encompassing predictor, stripping the future of agency, ideology and values. Livingstone thus contributes to the project of unpicking the ways in which deterministic arguments matter to climate-changed futures. As Livingstone acknowledges, he is not alone in engaging with the problematic persistence of deterministic explanations, but *The Empire of Climate* is undoubtedly the most expansive analysis now available.

Ultimately, Livingstone's book can and should be read as a warning. As he explains, 'the ancient idea that climate controls or conditions, determines or directs, human life in a myriad ways has resurrected itself in new incarnations in our own Anthropocene-conscious era' (p. 399). Deterministic tropes need to be recognised, understood and questioned, and this book goes a long way towards historicising them. Given that the spectres of climatic determinism and reductionism raise issues not only for historians and geographers, but journalists, policymakers and the public alike, this is an important book that should have a wide audience. But it also cannot be the last word, and more is needed – for example, on the ways these deterministic framings were plucked from the realm of ideas and incorporated into imperial practices on the ground (or stemmed from them), as well as genealogies of environmental determinist

thinking outside a mostly elite, mostly 'Western' tradition. As Livingstone is right to conclude, 'the empire of climate' is unlikely to loosen its grip any time soon. This book is thus an invaluable starting point for geographers, historians and those within and beyond the academy interested in the long history – and present and future – of assigning historical causality to climate. Frankly, this needs to be all of us.

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