

## Climate and Culture

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Climate is an old idea, but an idea which retains tremendous power, versatility, and utility. Whereas we can imagine an unbroken sequence of moment-by-moment weather on the Earth pre-dating humans, the idea of climate was invented in the human mind. Perhaps the Greeks were the first to leave an articulate account of climate, but they would not have been the first people to seek to make sense of the incessant flow of atmospheric phenomena to which all sentient life is exposed. The idea of climate was a way of ordering an unruly (weather) world. For the Greeks with their close association between climate and latitude or solar inclination, *klima* offered an explanatory framework for human diversity and a moral guide for navigation. Climate worked both as index and as agency, and this dual function of climate has recurred throughout human cultural history and it works too in contemporary discourses about climate change. The distinction between climate as index and climate as agent is as important for understanding the power of climate in cultural life as it is to appreciate both the imaginative and material manifestations of climate.

Ideas about climate are always situated in a time and in a place. As history gets re-written and geography gets re-shaped, ideas of climate also change. The physical attributes of climate are also diverse and variable. Climates change physically—as we are now only too well aware—but climates can also change ideologically. What climate *means* to different people in different places in different eras is not stable. “Human beings live culturally,” as the anthropologist Mary Douglas put it. But one might also say that human beings live *in* climates—amidst the particular fluxes of weather that they encounter in different places, visceral experiences which are interpreted through their imaginative worlds. If culture is concerned with how human meaning, symbolism, and practice take on substantive and material forms, then studying climate through culture is likely to be a fruitful activity.

Although the relationships between climate and culture appear everywhere, and have been extensively written about in an eclectic set of venues and outlets, there lacks a coherent literature which treats this rich interaction between climate and culture in a systematic way. The early emphasis of much published work on the subject is rather conjectural and highly fragmented across many different disciplines and journals. The number of standard reference texts on climate and culture is very limited—Boia (2005) and Behringer (2010) are noteworthy exceptions, as are the edited collections of Strauss et al. (2003) and Crane and Nuttall (2009).

So this is justification for my project to write a monograph on climate and culture, backed up by a SAGE Major Reference Work which I have been commissioned to edit. These two items will therefore serve as a valuable synopsis of a diffuse discourse, as well as a core reference work for scholars and practitioners in a wide range of fields. They will capture and organize some of the most important writing on climate and culture that has appeared since the 1980s and provide a structure within which the recently growing body of work in human geography, anthropology, sociology, and religious studies can be placed.