Review of Clive Hamilton's *Defiant Earth*

(Allen and Unwin, 2017)

Tom Jagtenberg

This is an important book. At a time when the credibility of politicians has fallen to new depths one would hope that there is more appetite for books that are realistically bleak in their outlook. *Defiant Earth* does not pander to mainstream demands for optimism, leadership, creativity and economic growth. Now that climate change is so alarmingly real in its effects, and the world has got the Donald it so probably deserves, it is time to get real. As Clive Hamilton explains, it is time for a thorough rethink.

Because humanity has so managed to disturb big planetary processes - like the atmosphere and climates, like the depletion and warming of oceans, like the pollution and degradation of the land and food supply, and so on – it has become increasingly obvious that the Earth is a large interconnected system. Planetary warming, mass pollution and species decline are clear indicators of the extent of impacts of human activity on a finite planet. These are probably the main causes for scientists to step up efforts to model Earth in new ways, but for whatever reasons, Clive Hamilton argues that it has only been since the 1990s that some scientists have been experiencing a 'paradigm change' around the perception and study of Earth.

The epoch changing event that Hamilton addresses is the arrival of a new geological era caused by humanity's dominance, the Anthropocene, and the work of natural scientists making that claim - evidence cited includes the world wide deposition of plastics and chemicals in geological strata, and climate change. Not all scientists are on board with this declaration of a new geological era, but finally more scientists now think and research in terms of Earth as a big inter-connected system: 'A new object has appeared, the Earth System. Its arrival gave rise to the new paradigm of Earth System science, and the new science shaped our understanding of the new object' (p. 20-21).

Clive has done due diligence on the basic science (including discussions with leading contributors to Earth Systems science, Will Steffen and Jan Zalasiewicz) and is in contact with the work of leading sociologists and philosophers of science, and 'science studies' people (including Bruno Latour, Steve Fuller and Donna Haraway). This is not academic pedantry because there are many issues that divide experts researching the emergence of this new 'object', the Earth System. Natural scientists are more divided about the details; the rest, including a contingent from the social sciences, arts and humanities (for want of better terminology), are still embroiled in long running paradigm disputes about the general study of human society and history. For instance, the possibility that politics may be a determining factor in all disciplines is still a point of contention that results in very different approaches to the study of history and culture. It is therefore not surprising that thinkers like Clive Hamilton should look to the work of natural scientists to inspire a new approach to the study of Earth. What the effects of this latest round of holistic thinking on other disciplines and human culture will be are not yet known, but *Defiant Earth* is a bold attempt to shape future perceptions - particularly across academic cultures.

In short, one of the main reasons for declaring this an important book is that it addresses the philosophical consequences of humanity's dominance on Earth- and does so in a paradigm shifting way. Clive Hamilton's take on freedom, history and the future, for example, is creative and well timed, not that there will be many takers in academic establishments, or political parties. His position is simple, despite being very profound: what we have understood by freedom, history and the future occurred in the very different context of a largely invisible planet (or as environmental philosophers and activists have said, Earth has been considered to be an infinite resource, and an infinite waste disposal system). Now that humanity has come to dominate the planet and change its system properties, the possibilities and basic meanings of freedom, history and the future are irreversibly changed.

Despite the complexity of the many issues involved, one of the most endearing features of Clive Hamilton's unfolding book writing is his readability, and his dry, dark humour. He really needs these skills with a continuing topic so daunting and divisive as the end of the world as we know it.

In my view Clive Hamilton is actually more upbeat in his pessimism than is warranted – he continues to appeal to God or gods, even though he may be whimsical in his de facto acknowledgement of humanity's need to look elsewhere than on the planet for meaning and purpose; the idea that we are free is a topic of most interest to philosophers; likewise his philosophical concern with ethics and morals is distorting in discourses that understand these concerns to be convenient constructs; and he continues to think of humanity as an amazingly creative species – in effect, we deserve to be dominant because we are so clever. Some of the debates he engages are long overdue – such as the serve he gives to 'post-humanists' (such as Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing) who cannot adequately acknowledge the fact that humanity is so dominant on Earth. It is refreshing to read such forthright critique of leading academics.

He is however arrogant in his apparent dismissal of decades of very similar thinking by others – in particular those of 'green' political tendencies (from deep greens to brown greens, from 'deep' to 'shallow' ecologists, and environmentalists). The idea that Earth is a big system (comprising more than local and regional ecologies) had been discussed by 'deep ecologists' and activists (including the Australian Bob Brown) long before the 1990s, contrary to Clive Hamilton's claim (see p. 12). Perhaps he is just wrong to think that 'ecological thinking' was only ever about biological science. Certainly social ecologists such as Murray Bookchin, Andre Gorz and Carolyn Merchant had limited vision, but they did implicate society and culture in the bigger picture of system Earth. And then there is the place of the pioneering chemist and philosopher James Lovelock to reconsider. It would be wrong to think that he did not have a 'big' systems view in mind in his earliest writings (going back to the 1970s). It is perhaps worth noting that Lovelock's basic idea is that the Earth (or Gaia) is actually 'alive' because of interaction between the various systems that make up the whole. The whole is a process of self-regulation whose purpose is to encourage life. Lovelock might think of his work as competing with the more secular views of the newly minted 'Earth System' scientists. If human life has so influenced everything on Earth who is to say that other life has not effectively engineered the system from the earliest of times?

But in many ways Clive Hamilton is right to pass right over 'old politics'. He recognises that if there is to be a future it will be 'political', but doesn't say much more. Anyone who has experienced the continued dominance of old left thought in Green parties around the world would throw their hands up and try to move beyond human centred preoccupation with social justice, economic equality, and identity politics, as if that were all there was to it. Indeed, any thought that the Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbins of the world will save us, needs to go back to a more ecologically centred, post-sixties take on the world, and start thinking again. This old left tendency cannot get past over-population, over-consumption, and entrenched belief in economic growth as the main drivers of climate change. Any criticism of our unfettered 'rights' to breed, consume and degrade the environment are not what most voters and businesses want to hear, and it would seem that these are not subjects upon which Clive Hamilton wants to dwell.

The idea that Earth has entered a new geological era created by human activity, the Anthropocene, should have been a new starting point 17 years ago with Paul Crutzen's coining of the term in 2000. Yet like most ecological discoveries that threaten to change everything, not much has happened since.

The practice of ignoring ecological disaster stories goes back many more decades – for instance since Rachel Carson's book that publicised the global impact of DDT in 1962, and the Club of Rome Report that demonstrated in 1972 that globally there were 'limits to growth', business and government have proceeded 'as usual' everywhere. In 2017 climate change, over-population and the vigorous pursuit of economic growth and over-consumption are well established as global economic imperatives; the fact that the many 'tipping points' involved are well known has not radicalised human behaviour – not yet.

Paul Crutzen's original naming of the Anthropocene in 2000 may have helped stimulate the new paradigm of 'Earth System Science', but as Clive Hamilton's work shows, the intellectual consequences of thinking about global systems in a holistic way are far from widely appreciated. He doesn't discuss cultural denial in any depth in this book, but clearly there is something weird about institutions and academic fields to be so slow to respond to what is clearly shaping up to be the global 'mother' of all disasters.

This present and future threat is what makes Resilient Earth so important, and so interesting. Clive obviously thinks that there is still need to persuade people, fields and institutions by rational means – and clearly we cannot stop assuming that this is still the case – despite all contrary evidence. Optimism is very important, and despite his dark mutterings Clive Hamilton still carries the enlightenment torch.

25 June, 2017

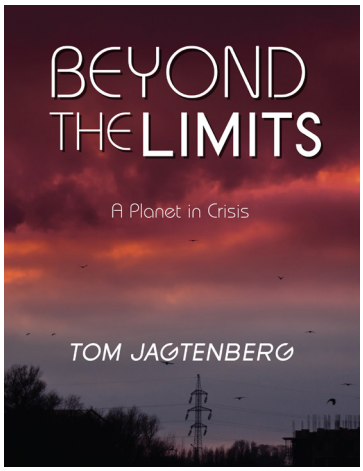
About Tom Jagtenberg

Tom has a longtime interest in the natural world and concern about its decline. His interests, whilst being inter-disciplinary, have always had a focus on nature and the environment.

He worked as a sociologist for thirty years at Wollongong University (where he was a Senior Lecturer) and Southern Cross University (where he was an adjunct research fellow). He is a published author of books and articles about the environment and related cultural fields. Tom has qualifications in science, engineering and sociology – a BE (Chemical and Fuel Engineering, Hons 1, UNSW), an MSc (Liberal Studies in Science, Manchester University) and a PhD (Sociology, University of Wollongong).

Since Tom's student days he has been concerned with the representation of nature in disciplinary fields as diverse as science, sociology, cultural studies and communication studies, natural medicine and political life. He has been a strong critic of the exclusion of non-human interests from academic fields and political parties. As his latest book suggests even Green political parties are limited in the extent to which they can be advocates for other species, their habitats, and even human environments.

Tom retired from academic life to live in Northern New South Wales with his partner. They chose the Northern Rivers region because of its strong ecologically focused community and beautiful environment.



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