

# Sally Weintrobe: Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis

## Book reviews (/eng/collection/book-reviews)

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At a time when we are all in a state of distress about the many problematic developments weighing on our existence – the pandemic, the economic crisis, the dramatic phenomenon of mass migration – Sally Weintrobe's book about the roots of the climate crisis presents itself as, to use a psychoanalytic language inspired by Bion, the *realization* of something awaited as a *pre-conception*.

Weintrobe's reflections develop through a wide range of detailed studies converging into a cogent research discourse which enables readers to navigate the turbulent waters of the climate and environmental crisis in close correlation with its psychic components in all their complexity.

The text inclines its psychoanalytic discussion towards the relationship between mankind and the environment, placing the focus of its attention on the crisis and the contrasting human feelings and behaviours which come about in the close relation between the psychic mechanisms of *negation, disavowal* and *denialism*, and the models of thought and social action that have arisen over the course of recent history and which today present ever more crucial and radical features.

Weintrobe's book takes as its starting point a critical analysis of how, historically and on the political plane, a global culture has come into being in opposition to a culture of *care* or of *taking care*, one that has, by contrast, established itself in the sphere of hegemonic economic policies and the choices they entail, a scenario that can be likened to a functioning attributable to *omnipotent negation*.

On the societal level, this very well-known type of functioning, so frequently encountered in clinical psychoanalytic practice, represents a sort of imaginary put into action by means of economic policies based on an extreme consumerism and a radical inattention to the limits of natural resources, while at the same time making itself the bearer of values which comply with the demand to encourage development in pursuit of unlimited growth.

The concept of '*Exceptionalism*' – inspired by a 'single' global model of thought along American lines, in that it is a new form of cultural and economic colonialism – tends, as Weintrobe clearly indicates, to provide simplistic, reductive, and one-directional solutions which impoverish, and in a certain sense negate, the complexity that surrounds us.

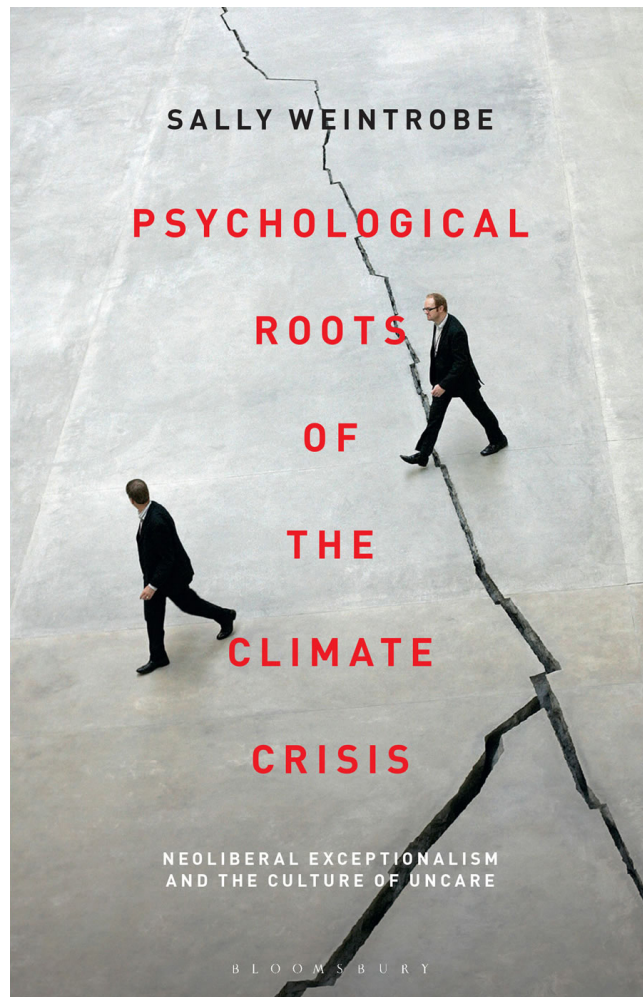
By contrast, *taking care* requires awareness of the complexity of the world we live in, which contains differences and otherness: differences of gender, culture, and biodiversity which demand to be acknowledged and respected. In opposition to this, Neoliberal Exceptionalism produces forms of conformism, racism, and disrespect for nature, along with a lack of interest in the future and in the destiny of the generations to come.

Weintrobe also well describes how this economic model, besides being derived from false democratic values, produces and induces forms of omnipotent negation and a culture of *uncare*, and detaches people from contact both with external reality, which is systematically manipulated, and with psychic reality, distancing them from their own emotions.

Moreover, in an interesting chapter, Weintrobe maintains that this type of media-based politics can be likened to what Orwell, in his famous visionary and proleptic novel *1984*, had identified as Newspeak, a forcibly shared form of communication introduced by a distant and omnipresent government exercising an anonymous and coercive power over individuals.

Weintrobe's discussion unwinds through the book like a ball of thread, and in the introduction she invites us to read the book in our own way, matching the fluidity of her discourse with a creative reading as if we were looking into a kaleidoscope. At the same time, the levels of the discussion are continually woven together, enabling us to pass easily from one level to another. For example, we can follow her observations on the historical, economic, and sociological level, and find ourselves penetrating into more properly psychoanalytic contexts, or pass from an analysis of the psychic components of macro-social processes to events and experience related to personal and individual life, clinical vignettes, and artistic, literary, and poetic delights.

Furthermore, she never tires of emphasizing that if we really want to stand against a culture of egoism and *uncare* from a psychoanalytic standpoint, we cannot fail to take account of the contrasting emotions and conflicts which we all experience, especially in relation to the problems posed by climate change. From a perspective largely inspired by object relations psychoanalysis, Weintrobe leads us onto the strongly ambivalent terrain of a region of the individual psyche which is also social, where we find ourselves facing multiple and varied aspects of the Self which simultaneously concern both the dimension of care and that of *uncare*.



The possibility of moving within this sphere of conflict may enable us to effect social and behaviours and, in the broad sense, policies which, without denying our dark and destructive part, enables us to put effective forms of reparation into action.

Over the course of the book, the author becomes an active subject who reveals herself, putting her own doubts and uncertainties into play. Some episodes that she recounts, such as standing at the bus stop and doubting the integrity of her own conduct, or being at a dinner with friends, or meeting a scientist on a train, and other situations like these, become a reason for self-analysis, examining the presence, even in someone as firmly oriented as she is towards support for the environmentalist cause, of deep emotions and contrasting feelings which have to do with the complicated management of feelings of guilt and shame connected to the fact that every one of us is implicated in the impact of human actions and behaviour on the environmental crisis.

As a consequence, we are all exposed to the risk of yielding to what Amitav Ghosh has called the '*Great Derangement*' (2015), also because – if we think of ourselves as part of a complex system that contains mankind, our cultural forms, and nature – the emotions and feelings, and the wounds that we are inflicting on 'Mother Earth', are hard to tolerate since the degradation of nature and the acceleration of climatic changes entail the prospect of a point of no return in the disastrous losses of environmental equilibrium and the possibility of our species *Homo sapiens* becoming extinct.

This is why Weintrobe describes, and examines in detail, the various manifestations of a type of anxiety which relates to concern about the environmental crisis, one that puts us all in the front line of a powerful distress about a looming catastrophe. And so, Weintrobe introduces us to the concepts of *Eco Anxiety*, *Climate Trauma*, *Eco Shame*, *Solastalgia*.

These are manifestations of sufferings directly connected to the impact on the psyche and, on a larger scale, on the individual, social, and group mind, which the various environmental disasters are producing. In a different way, the anxiety, trauma, and shame are expressions of how hard it is to tolerate and think about dramatic environmental processes that dominate us and exceed our elaborative capacity.

Hence, we sometimes do not wish to see what is happening before our eyes when it comes to problems for which, even if only to a small extent, we share the responsibility.

At this point, Weintrobe offers us a reflection on the importance of the part played by certain characteristics in leaders who have set the direction of environmental (and other) policies. In this respect, there are bad leaders and good leaders, and she identifies the former in well-known 'personalities' like Donald Trump, Boris Jonson and Vladimir Putin, while acknowledging the leadership status of Greta Thunberg in a new movement like *Fridays for Future*, the former representing a politics of uncare while the latter represent a high level of moral attention to taking care. The former are intent on subjugating science by manipulating it to serve their own interests, while the latter listen to it as an ally in knowing the world and striving to find the truth.

Weintrobe concludes the book by warning us not to feel like Gods, or chosen by God, as a way of avoiding the catastrophe, as if living out a fantasy of being snug in the ark like Noah, reassuring ourselves with the idea of living safely in an ideal world or looking forward to a possible exodus to other planets.

According to Weintrobe, on the psychic level and in their social aspects, these solutions give centrality to guilt which, if connected to the possibility of corresponding to strong reparative tendencies, may be reframed while not being denied. Then our hostile and destructive parts, our *inner alien*, may coexist with equally strong empathic tendencies towards the forms of otherness, which may be those other than the Self, or 'Nature' itself, once we take into account that, however uncanny in a Freudian sense, Nature is part of us and we belong to it, both in our present existence and in the deep time of the evolution of life on earth, and we will share its future developments.

Sally Weintrobe's book is an important contribution to the subject and a wide and exhaustive study of the premises and the psychological developments, from a psychoanalytic perspective, in the complex relationship experienced by each of us individually and by the entire human race with the ecological and environmental context we live in.

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