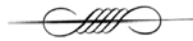


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The Historical Sociology of Climate Change



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Pászka, Imre (2016): *A társas világ környezetei. Történet- és tudásszociológiai tanulmányok.* [Environments of Social Life. Studies on Historical and Knowledge Sociology.] Szeged, *Belvedere Meridionale*. 262 p.

Imre Pászka's book entitled *Environments of the Social Life. Studies on Historical and Knowledge Sociology* was published last year (2016) in Hungarian. The book comprises 4 parts, respectively 7 chapters, the first four of which forming one, thematically contiguous unit.

The first chapter entitled *Inter-relations between Anthropogenic and Natural Factors* (pp. 9–29) introduces the methodological background. One of the newest concerns that sociological research has directed its focus upon is the social effects of factors that are external to society, such as climate change. The importance and the relevance of Pászka's endeavor is obvious, the current rate of climate change is there to render it significant.

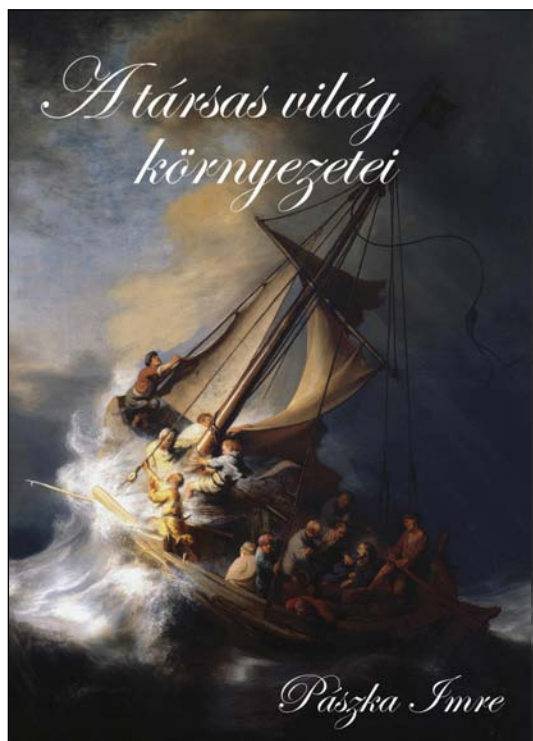
The second chapter is entitled *Climate: Warming Up / Cooling Down* (pp. 30–42). In this part, the author relies on the new science of environmental history to present the slow, natural and cyclical changes the climate undergoes. During the last two thousand years, Europe has seen four distinct climatic periods, the so-called Little Ice Age between the 14th century and the second half of the 19th century being the most commonly known. Pászka's interest is directed towards

the warming period preceding this Ice Age between the 9th and the 13th centuries. The period is referred to under several names, some call it the Medieval Climate Optimum, the Medieval Warm Period and it is sometimes called the Medieval Climatic Anomaly and there is no consensus among scientists regarding the exact duration of the period either. What is known, though, is that temperatures during the period rose by 1–2 degrees Celsius above normal mean temperatures, moreover, the temperature in Northern Europe is thought to have been 4 degrees higher (p. 35). According to some sources, Europe during that period was warmer than it is today. As Pászka emphasizes, *“(Medieval) Warming up is only a dominant tendency, the weather of the seasons is not free from some extremities, even in the periods of warming up, neither is their fluctuation identical in different regions. ...The beginning and the end of the warming up both warn us about regional differences and diversities which are further refined by regional microclimates.”* (p. 239). One of the defining features of climate change today is that the warming is much more accentuated in the Antarctic region than in more moderate climate zones and there are significant regional differences as well – e.g. the warming is higher in the Carpathian Basin than it is outside of it.

There is one aspect that Pászka does not address, but is worth noting, namely that climate sceptics often reach out and use the Medieval Optimum in their arguments, pointing out the natural factors that led to its appearance. Consequently, they argue, the dominance of natural factors cannot be excluded when addressing the global warming process as we experience it today, therefore it is unnecessary to limit CO₂ emissions and to reduce the combustion of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas.

The third chapter bears the title *Climate Optimum of the Middle Ages: Warming up / Upswing* (pp. 43–148). This long part is dedicated to the discussion of the relationship between climate warming and socio-economic prosperity. The author provides separate accounts of the effects of the warming on the population, on the environment, on technology, on the markets and of the city as well as on starvation and on diseases. In his argument Pászka relies on a trend that is commonly accepted in professional literature: *“Namely, literature includes a trend which assumes correlation between the emergence of cultures and civilization and warming up, as well as between cooling down and the decline of cultures”.* (p. 239)

Climate cooling in Medieval Europe was undoubtedly accompanied by economic and social decline, while periods of warming came with economic growth and social boom. *“It is a fact that ... the flourishing three hundred years of the Middle Ages were included in this period of warming up.”* (p. 238). However, what Pászka also emphasizes is that *“as for the time periods, the optimum of the Middle Ages does not cover the period of the boom, the boom occupied a shorter period, and shall not even be considered as something general throughout the European Continent, as it has a kind of insular and isolated nature”.* (p. 146) The author states the following: *“The demographical starting framework conditions for the boom were defined as the repression*



of an external (invasions) and an internal (vendetta) factor. ... (W)e highlighted the multifunctional role of the Church (as the dominant institution of the age), which was able to create the conditions for the beginning and the progression of the boom". (p. 239) "A slowdown of the prosperous years could be sensed as early as before the period of warming up (the turn of the 13–14th centuries)." (p. 240) As we are currently unable to determine exactly the point in time when the Medieval Climate Optimum came to an end and such a point is most probably impossible to identify, the later statement seems debatable. I consider climate change to be a huge stressor that society must accommodate to with the help of coping methods such as the development of new farming tools and technologies. This also means that Medieval society had to accommodate to the warming that characterized the climate of the time, therefore the argument that social boom lagged climate warming does not necessarily indicate the absence of causality.

"However, the believed/real stimuli of climatic/weather factors could be sensed throughout the continent during the period of warming up, and above-average and outstanding development and growth was accomplished by some regions only: Northern Italy, and Northwestern Europe." (p. 147) "Processed data imply that institutional factors play a determining role in booms, and climate as well as its concrete manifestation, the weather played a rather associated and partial role, while balanced climatic periods had a somewhat stabilizing effect" (p. 146). I fully agree that the beneficial effects of Medieval warming were not direct and automatic, but were channeled through a stable social structure that had the Church at its center in the period. I also agree that this institutional system had its limitations that could halt social development even if climate conditions were otherwise favorable. However, I find it difficult to consider the social impact of climate change as being "rather associated and partial". The way I perceive the world, in my paradigm, if you like, a significant change in climate produces significant social change in an a priori, that is, in an inevitable and invariable manner, but I admit that this is a difference in philosophical approach between the author and me.

The fourth chapter, that is at the same time the last chapter in the first part of the book, is titled *Structures of the Market System* (pp. 149–175). It provides the reader a thorough scientific account of the development of the market system, but unfortunately, it is only vaguely related to the previous part, with very little consideration for aspects related to climate history.

The next three parts, respectively chapters have the following titles: *The Possibility of a "Text-Based" Social Science* (pp. 176–205), *Dialogic Situations: "Me-You" Relations* (pp. 206–217) and *The Knowledge Milieu of a Sociologist* (pp. 218–237). The papers in these parts of the book are aimed at understanding and interpreting the social positions of individuals, being trapped in everyday situations and in the events of the social world. The second through the fourth part of the book are different from the first part not only in terms of length, but also in terms of the methodology used. The author tries to provide a common interpretation framework for these papers that show significant diversity in terms of the topics addressed as well as in the methods employed. I do not consider the attempt to be unsuccessful, but I think the entire book could have been much more reader-friendly, had the author focused only on the first part, that is, on the socio-historical aspects of climate change.

In its entirety, Pászka's book explores a very exciting topic that belongs to the forefront of modern socio-historical research: the relationship between climate change and social transformation in Medieval Europe and it provides exciting insight into this interesting borderline area of science not only for experts, but for the average reader as well.