

CHAPTER 3

Anthropocene Conjunctures

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Abstract

The Anthropocene is the proposed name for a new geologic era in which humans are held to be a defining agent of planetary history, a history that is largely the effect of fossil-fuel use in industrial societies. This periodization has itself generated a minor academic industry of publications and theoretical formulations that have alternately challenged and reinforced disciplinary perspectives. This chapter argues for a conjunctural approach to the Anthropocene concept, one that focuses on understanding its implications for discourses of sustainability in relation to the political, cultural, geographical, ecological, economic, and institutional contexts in which it is deployed. It draws on two examples—one from an

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‘ecomodernist’ institute located in California, another from the Indigenous Kichwa people of Ecuador—to illustrate how narratives of anthropogenic change are unevenly incorporated into discourses of sustainability.

A New Era?

The Anthropocene is the proposed name of a new geologic era in which measured changes in the Earth system have been caused by human intervention. While the Soviet geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky proposed a similar concept in the 1920s, the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002) and ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer jointly proposed the term ‘Anthropocene’ for the era in which climate change is the dominant image of human planetary impact. The term has entered popular discourse, as our collective, yet unequally distributed, power to transform environments is accompanied by a growing recognition of ecological and social vulnerability. Transdisciplinary questions have arisen about the era’s start date, its causal origins, and the identity of the *anthropos* at its heart (Toivanen et al. 2017). Each field has its own set of empirical narratives for marking breaks, transitions, and continuities that shape it. This chapter draws on a cultural studies methodology to situate developments in Anthropocene discourse across disciplines, and considers how these approaches are articulated to specific political and ecological contexts within the historical conjunctures of the global economy.

As it spreads rapidly from geology into the broader cultural discourse, the Anthropocene speaks to a desire to identify a moment at which the human impact on the earth requires a redefinition of the human, nature, and culture. As the photographer Edward Burtynsky (2020) puts it, this relationship is one of ‘attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear’. The recognition of this impact produces a sublime derangement, as the effect of a few generations bear tremendously on distant human and non-human futures, while both the scale and intensity of unsustainable extraction accelerates beyond previous eras. An Anthropocene photographer

like Burtynsky, whose work is known for documenting industrial activity that deranges the viewer's sense of scale, risks aestheticizing this condition—that is, questioning art as a symptom of the very crisis it attempts to frame. According to ecocritic Timothy Clark (2012), the Anthropocene produces 'derangements of scale' at the level of reading, which means that readers must struggle to reconcile human and geological frames of meaning. Likewise, the author Amitav Ghosh (2016) refers to a 'great derangement' in contemporary literature's inability (or unwillingness) to address the global epic of fossil-fuel (and mineral, forest) extraction that produces climate change. In their own way, each testifies to the embeddedness of culture within the techno-economic processes that transform human–environment relationships. The task is to remap the relationships between knowledge, culture, and nature within the global present so as to identify sites where sustainable relationships might be made otherwise.

Researchers at the University of Helsinki, led by political scientist Tero Toivanen (Toivanen et al. 2017), refer to 'the many Anthropocenes' as a transdisciplinary challenge, each with differing implications for sustainability. These overlapping narratives of the period are each defined by their unique disciplinary concerns, yet follow four broad types: *geological*, *biological*, *social*, and *cultural*. The *geological* Anthropocene is concerned with the stratigraphic record as a register of a new period. Its 'synchronic' interest flattens human difference to its bare trace across the mineral and chemical record. Considered dates range from the industrial revolution to the atomic bomb, which has coated the earth in a thin radioactive layer. Earth System Science is central to these accounts, as it considers the planet as a system of systems, each feeding back and enabling the reproduction of processes at other scales. The *biological* Anthropocene, on the other hand, refers to a dramatic change in the biosphere, marked by the so-called Columbian exchange in the New World (Toivanen et al. 2017: 189). The transnational movement of species also precipitated the exchange of bacteria and viruses, which radically diminished human populations in the Americas. Likewise, similar accounts of

the biological Anthropocene emphasize the sixth mass extinction as a marker of anthropogenic dominance. However, the shortcomings of these strictly geological and biological accounts often arise from the exclusion of the social and cultural drivers of these biological and mineral exchanges.

The *social* and *cultural* accounts of the Anthropocene are more robust, as they provide historical context to the human practices that transform the planet. Scholars of political economy have identified a metabolic rift in the Earth system (Angus 2016; Foster 1999; Malm and Hornborg 2014). These can be grouped under what Jason W. Moore calls the *Capitalocene* (2017), which argues that modern economies of accumulation have produced a global change in the Earth system. Likewise, anthropologists like Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have developed the *Plantationocene*, which considers the biological and biopolitical management of subject populations, bodies, and natures across the colonized world in a genealogy that includes contemporary globalization (Haraway 2015; Haraway and Tsing 2019). This is consistent with Lewis and Maslin's (2015) proposition that 1610 should mark the beginning of the Anthropocene as it coincides with a temperature drop caused by mass death following the disease and violence of European contact in the Americas.

Within this horizon, *cultural* accounts of the Anthropocene emphasize the creative and critical practices that are implicated even as they attempt to intervene by producing conceptual breaks (Toivanen et al. 2017: 192). These include historical accounts that examine how the anthropogenic era has become an allegorical narrative (Deloughrey 2019), how extinction has been imagined in art (Heise 2016), and how the non-life of geology has come to figure in the management of life and death in the sacrifice zones of 'late liberalism' (Povinelli 2016). These approaches extend to the imagination of petroleum culture, and likewise question how petroleum fuels historical imaginaries (LeMenager 2013), while also looking to the past to investigate the transmission of environmental memory (Buell 2017). Much cultural theory of the Anthropocene mirrors the speculative turn in both economics and popular

culture, in that its concepts are understood pragmatically; that is, they are seen as a cognitive means to intervene and produce the world in different ways. Thus, the Anthropocene poses a problem for sustainability studies to work through, a problem that likewise enables the telling of histories that link different cultures, species, and beings in a common, entangled existence.

These ‘many Anthropocenes’ come into conflict at the level of academic disciplines and development discourses; therefore, we resist the urge to reduce them to a single narrative. Rather, the task for sustainability studies is to develop a method for articulating, in the sense of linking or connecting, various accounts of the Anthropocene to particular contexts in which these accounts take on additional meaning as they organize practices. To situate a concept like the Anthropocene is to understand what other legitimating stories it draws on and mobilizes as this new periodization becomes a force for reorganizing (or reinforcing) geo-social power. Doing so enables researchers and activists to politically map the ways that anthropogenic change is narratively incorporated into practices of sustainability and research programmes.

Storying the Conuncture

We offer two examples that illustrate how differing narratives of the Anthropocene operate in different contexts. By discursively situating the Anthropocene within the conjuncture—that is, within the state of affairs, events, and discourses—that defines the changing global present, we raise methodological questions regarding the concept’s use in sustainability studies. One must now ask: how is Anthropocene framing deployed by writers? What other discourses does it intersect with, connect, exclude, strengthen, or weaken? How are Anthropocene discourses implicated in certain political projects, or incorporated into national narratives of development? What alternate projects of modernity or decolonial futures does it make possible or foreclose? These are vital questions for sustainability studies in particular because concepts like the Anthropocene propose not only a new periodization

but often carry assumptions about human intervention. But what human; which intervention?

An Ecomodernist Manifesto

An Ecomodernist Manifesto (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015), published by the Breakthrough Institute (located in Oakland, California), is an example of how Anthropocene discourse can reaffirm the present trajectory despite calling for a break with the past. Its authors call for their readers to imagine a ‘good, or even great, Anthropocene’, within an upward history of progress led by enlightened technocrats who will mobilize the near ‘god-like’ potential of advanced societies and technologies. Their aim is to ‘decouple’ the economy from the material environment through urban densification, and to integrate rural economies through nuclear power. In their vision, specialists and technocrats, led by state finance, would maintain economic growth while separating society from the material ecosystem, radically reducing the material footprint per capita. A combination of urban densification and agricultural intensification will separate human spaces from those of a non-human nature, while the latter would be kept at a distance for the recovery of biodiversity. The Institute’s influential book, *Break Through: Why We Can’t Leave Saving the Environment to the Environmentalists* (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2007), is predicated on a coming-of-age narrative in which perceived attachments to values of harmony or balance are rejected as romantic expressions of immaturity. Framed by the Anthropocene, this maturity narrative redeploys the very tropes of modernity that thinkers associated with the Institute, such as Bruno Latour, have elsewhere criticized for its epistemic and cultural biases (1993). Meanwhile, the philosopher Clive Hamilton (2016) finds a troublingly religious narrative—a *theodicy*—embedded in ecomodernist thought. The notion that the ‘great’ Anthropocene of the future will retroactively justify all the suffering, despoliation, and extinction that enabled such techno-political mastery appears as a just-so story that rationalizes the status quo.

The account of the Anthropocene offered by the ecomodernists not only contains long-standing religious and cultural narratives, but also its philosophy takes for granted the political economy of US power in which it is embedded. Even the rhetorical form of the manifesto has a history. As a statement that announces a break with the present order, while simultaneously calling into consciousness a new social formation or organization of beings, manifestos are politically ambivalent interventions. This neither makes them innocent nor frees them from the contexts in which their ideas are put to work.

Kawsak Sacha

In contrast to Anthropocene narratives that reinforce ontological divides between humans and non-humans, and that fail to challenge the inequalities of power that reproduce the planetary crisis, one finds alternative narratives not only in the protest movements of the Global North but also in indigenous movements in the south. *Kawsak sachá* is one such cultural and ecological concept; it is also an important political strategy initiated by the Sarayaku community in Ecuador and has spread to other Amazonian nationalities (Pueblo originario Kichwa de Sarayaku 2015). The strategy has evolved through decades of struggle and judicial action by Amazonian peoples against the state to defend their territories from oil and mining corporations that are backed by military forces. The state has granted deals to enterprises, often with legal trickery against the resident communities, with the justification that while the surface may stay under the governance of Indigenous communities, the subsoil layers and fossil resources remain state property. In light of this situation, Kichwa people have recently engaged in a more complete formulation of their needed territorial unity, not only horizontally but also into the vertical depths, as an indivisible ecology. Their negotiations are now taking the form of conservation plans, called *planes de vida*, that have as a main goal the preservation of the *kawsak sachá* from capitalist extractive violence.

The concept *kawsak sacha*, which translates into ‘living forest’, contains a narrative that human actions are a part of the world with other beings. The Kichwa cosmology of the Mother Earth, the *pachamama*, is based on the persistence of meaningful worlds that constitute the basis of all living beings in mutual ecological and spiritual relation. The earth is a sacred domain, and the *kawsak sacha* has the power to regenerate vital ecosystems. As Patricia Gualinga, the human rights defender of the Pueblo Kichwa de Sarayaku, puts it: ‘Each mountain and the larger trees intercommunicate through invisible networks of threads where the Supay, or higher beings of the forest, mobilize, and communicate throughout the rainforest’ (2019: 224). Within these networks, people maintain relations through socio-ecological ancestral knowledges, adapted organizations, livelihoods, and cultures, under the guidance of wise persons, the *yachags* (shamans), whom she describes as ‘true scientists’ (2019: 226). Thus, the notion that the Anthropocene marks a new period that challenges distinctions between culture and natural history does not come as a shock. Rather, the disruption comes from incursions of extractive industries that undo this fabric of connection by divorcing the well-being of the forest from the livelihood of its human inhabitants.

Indeed, Indigenous peoples have experienced the inconsistency of the irresponsible, depoliticized narration of the Anthropocene and its impacts on the environment. On the contrary, they recognize and name other phenomena with precise features and with a historical genealogy that lends credence to *Capitalocene* and *Plantationocene* formulations. In this context, the world-changing rupture is the Spanish colonization that started 500 years ago and continues through the white-mestizo state structures (Roitman and Oviedo 2017). The latter are based on a pervasive political economy of resource extractivism that causes deforestation and contamination as an uncounted externality. It is not a generic Anthropocene, but rather capitalism and state racism, that is the cause of this geography of deterritorialization. It creates peripheral areas and people, divided into oil blocks that serve the main centres of capital accumulation. It likewise produces

intersectional violence on multiple scales, from the bodies of Indigenous women to their villages and ancestral territories (Vela-Almeida et al. 2020).

As elaborated by Indigenous organizations, these newly defined environmental conservation plans, called *planes de vida*, embed the term *life* to emphasize the struggles of the ‘living forest’. This is positioned against and beyond the necrotized interventions that the world calls ‘Anthropocene’, but which Indigenous peoples see as the dominating mode of dispossession and disaster caused by the state and Western corporate powers. In this struggle, *kawsak sacha* is a powerful concept for downsizing the dominant image of the human compared to other beings, and for culturally delinking the socio-ecological changes from the binary views that separate human and non-human worlds. Moreover, they challenge the Capitalocene arrangements that create conditions of violence. By putting forward their own narrative of human–environment relations, they reclaim communicative agency in the struggle to decolonize environmental spaces and politics, allowing the persistence of alternative thinking and diverse forms of lives.

Conclusion

These two examples do not begin to exhaust the uses and contexts of the Anthropocene as a concept, but are meant to illustrate how similar concepts may be put to quite different ends, and even transformed, based on where they are situated and encountered in the conjunctures of politics, ecology, and culture. A single narrative of the Anthropocene may only reinforce the dominant distributions of power in the global economy. On the other hand, perhaps our hope lies in certain concepts travelling beyond their point of origin, being taken up and creatively put to new uses by those who encounter similar challenges in other locations. This is what the humanities, drawing on posthumanist geography and cultural studies, has to offer sustainability science: the understanding that, under changed conditions, concepts can turn against their old meanings and open toward new worlds.

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