

Clive HAMILTON, Christophe BONNEUIL, François GEMENE (ed.). *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis. Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. Routledge, 2015, ISBN-13: 978-1138821248, 188 p.

Review by Ana-Maria Deliu
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
anamdeliu@gmail.com

Among eco studies, the *Anthropocene theory* is by far the most unusual in the field of humanities. First and foremost, it differs from the Eco-Marxist criticism in that its grounding is not in critical theory, but in the scientifically traceable changes in the environment, which are then re-politicised. Secondly, its claims pose a certain pessimism, in contrast with the activist optimism that we can still change something about our future as a species. In the *Anthropocene*, humans have changed the face of the Earth in so much that it is irreversible, the industrial man *versus* nature paradigm is now obsolete and replaced by man as a force of nature. Then why is this part of the “studies” series, what critical insight can humanities impose on the gloom data? Hamilton’s *et. al. The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis* gathers theoretical influences as actor-network theory and combined and uneven development, along with a thoroughly analysis of eco-politics and green eschatology, to form a well-articulated response not only to what the Anthropocene is, but also its limitations in viewing humans as species. A collection of studies of reference in the field, the book is structured in three parts: 1) the concept and its implications, 2) catastrophist views in the Anthropocene, and 3) rethinking politics in a way that would explain the specificity of the Anthropocene as a new geological age: the only “natural” shift that is the direct effect of human impact.

The Anthropocene proposes, first and foremost, a new interval in geological history. It comes after the Holocene that begun at the end of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago and that established a mild global temperature “that, with small variations, persisted until humans began changing the global climate measurably”, until the human impact on Earth, through burning fossil fuels and causing a layer of radionuclides on Earth’s surface, started to be enduring

and irrevocable. The Anthropocene is, in this sense, the proposed scientific term for an age that denotes the impact of humans in the geological strata. Secondly, the Anthropocene is an interdisciplinary Earth system science, which claims that the Earth “as a system is experiencing a shift”, hence it does not seek evidence only in geological strata, but in the whole system of the Earth, “stretching from its core to the upper atmosphere” (2). The focus is not on the human influence, but on the shift in the total system. A third acceptance is more broadly related to the relation between civilization and nature, marking the Anthropocene as “the reality that human action and Earth dynamics have converged and can no longer be seen as belonging to distinct incommensurable domains”, that, in short, “humans have become a force of nature” (3).

Moreover, the Anthropocene has to be addressed by social sciences and humanities as a *grand narrative*, one that opposes the humanist subject that dominated the world through reason and technological progress, who objectified nature and treated it as a commodity. In the narrative of the Anthropocene, the actions/projects of the subject are intertwined with natural forces, insofar that the natural history (in the broad geological sense) and the human history can only be thought together. Humans have become a force of nature to the same extent as nature is an actant along with humans in a broad network-system that surpasses human action. In this sense, there is a need for rethinking *the sciences of the human* along with the natural sciences:

So at the moment when both the natural science and the social sciences and humanities were being institutionalised and professionalised, setting the cultural stage of industrial modernity, the world was being divided. On one side there was ‘Nature’, external to society and governed by slow and steady laws, but free of any telos in its history. On the other there was ‘Society’, teleologically oriented by progress towards a freedom understood as humankind wrenching itself out of any natural determination and limit. (...) On one side were the ‘in-human’ natural sciences; on the other were the ‘anti-natural’ social sciences and humanities, each reigning over a separate dimension of the world (6).

However, humanities re-politicise the Anthropocene discourse, precisely by having a meta-consciousness of the plurality of narratives for what initially seems like a “grand narrative” of post-narratives. A narrative is in this sense “selecting a focus and a «framing» that highlights some actors and phenomena while leaving

others in the shadows” (17). Christophe Bonneuil argues that having the human species as the focus of the analysis of the Anthropocene only delimits it from socio-economical and political contexts, as if the “human impact” were not the result of these contexts. He argues not to dispense of humanities’ critical apparatus, as the naturalist narrative of the Anthropocene does, but to employ it in order to observe

asymmetries among humans about nature – unequal access to environmental goods and exposure to environmental bads – and through nature – technical systems organise energy and material flows which co-produce a certain kind of ‘second’, transformed, nature together with a certain kind of social order, entailing unequal social, racial, gender and geopolitical relations (20).

This unevenly distributed resources and responsibilities echoes Badiou’s concerns (expressed in *The Century*) that in the making of the new man, the communist (self-conscious) project of the twentieth century is slowly replaced by the (naturalised) automatism of profit (10). Indeed, Bonneuil argues that what it has been obscured in the “grand narrative” of the Anthropocene is that human impact is uneven and it is driven by economics which have been naturalised, instead of being visible and criticised. It is not surprising that among alternative narratives to the naturalist “grand narrative” we found the eco-catastrophist narrative (the collapse of the industrial civilisation due to malpraxis) and the eco-Marxist narrative (the incompatibility between a capitalist thinking and caring for nature).

In a neo-Marxist paradigm, (re)politicising means making visible who can have a share in what is common, revealing the naturalised relationships that sustain the “distribution of the sensible”, in Rancière’s terms. In world-system theory, the cultural “sensible” and the material resources are not evenly distributed. Capitalism as a world-system is “the way in which capitalism is lived” (Warwick Research Collective, 14), the co-existence of realities from radically different moments of development. In this light, the unintentional geological shift that humans, as an undifferentiated species, provoked conducts only to a mystification of political practices of specific social groups. As Bonneuil argues, we need to shift again the focus of the Anthropocene narrative from the naturalist stance to a more politically self-aware system-analysis:

Clearly, a smarter and subtler Anthropocene studies curriculum is to be recommended, if not for polar bears then at least for humans who seek scientifically more explanatory (and politically more helpful) socio-ecological dynamics than the black box of the 'human species'. In such a curriculum, the 'anthropos' that triggered and triggers the Anthropocene is not a merely biological agent but the product of complex belief systems, socio-technical trajectories and political-economical dynamics (21).

More than the actual introduction, Bonneuil's contribution, "The geological turn: narratives of the Anthropocene", is the most useful for introductory purposes, since it critically passes through the eclectic directions of the Anthropocene theory, neatly systematized and theoretically re-politicised. The beginning of the study resembles a new historicism manifesto and a post-Lyotardian stance:

Stories matter for Earth. Indeed, the stories that the elites of industrial modernity have told themselves – about nature as external and purposeless, about the world as resource, about human exemptionalism, about progress and freedom as an escape from nature's determinations and limits, about technology as quasi-autonomous prime mover – have served as the cultural origins and conditions of the Anthropocene. (...) In the same way the kind of stories we tell ourselves today about the Anthropocene can shape the kind of geohistorical future we will inhabit (17).

The Anthropocene is both the science, the evidence that we imprinted on Earth, and the story of how "we" (with different reference in different narratives) arrived at this state. Although anticipated before, it is worth mentioning that the four narratives/directions that Bonneuil systematizes are: 1) the naturalist narrative (the mainstream one criticised above in the light of world-system analysis and combined and uneven development), 2) the post-nature narrative, 3) the eco-catastrophist narrative, and 4) the eco-Marxist narrative (18).

The second narrative shakes the modern view of human and nature/ values and facts/ humanities and science as separate reigns, following Latour's theory that modernity is an assemblage and a negotiation of the forces above. There are even more sub-narratives here that Bonneuil identifies:

"the transhumanist project to re-engineer the human species, the (Marxist) accelerationist project to unleash technology's productive forces from capitalist and

neoliberal constraints, and the geo-constructivist project of eco-pragmatics (...) to achieve a technical stewardship of the Earth as a whole” (25).

This view is criticised, in short, for using Dr. Frankenstein’s monster as an object to be improved and dominated in the name of technological emancipation. We can see here the same premises that constructed the debate between Hayles’ transhumanism and Wolfe’s posthumanism: should we limit ourselves to use technology for the maximum benefit of human beings, or should we strive to achieve better means for all forms of life together with constructing a framework that legitimises them? As with politics, it is usually a matter of either/or. In the field of the Anthropocene, the studies of Virginie Maris (“Back to Holocene: a conceptual, and possibly practical, return to a nature not intended for humans”), Isabelle Stengers (“Accepting the reality of Gaia: a fundamental shift?”), Bruno Latour (“Telling friends from foes in the time of the Anthropocene”), and François Gemenne (“The Anthropocene and its victims”) fit into this discussion.

The eco-catastrophist narrative is almost self-explanatory. If earlier reports focussed on the limited resources of the Earth, the Anthropocene along with Earth-systems science focus on “the limited capacity of Earth biogeochemical processes to buffer human-accelerated cycles of carbon, water, phosphorus, nitrogen and so on” (26). These views will be later developed and intertwined with cultural images in the studies of Luc Semal (“Anthropocene, catastrophism and green political theory”), Michael Northcott (“Eschatology in the Anthropocene: from the *chronos* of deep time to the *kairos* of the age of humans”) and Yves Cochet (“Green eschatology”).

The last part of the book, *Rethinking politics*, is the reason why humanities should invest further research into this field. It coincides only partly with what Bonneuil identifies as the eco-Marxist narrative: apart from his study, only two other studies engage directly with this theoretical approach: Alf Hornborg’s *The political ecology of the Technocene: uncovering ecologically unequal exchange in the world-system* and Ingoluf Bluhdorn’s *A much-needed renewal of environmentalism? Eco-politics in the Anthropocene*, both of them using the theoretical prostheses we already mentioned.

As it becomes clear, a world-systems analysis reveals the uneven distribution of agency and responsibility, working its way to reconstruct the man as a historically and politically self-aware project. It resembles the nonhuman turn

in viewing the human as an 'assemblage' that deconstructs itself, but it also restores agency and intentionality (this time unevenly distributed across a socio-economical network). In this sense, Bruno Latour's proposal to shift from a science-versus-politics to a science-with-politics is the only way out of the self-imposed isolation of the 'anthropos' from the Anthropocene.