Rachel Carson Center
Perspectives

How to cite:

Barnes, Jessica. "Rifts or Bridges? Ruptures and Continuities in Human-Environment Interactions" In: "Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses,'" edited by Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2016, no. 2, 41–45.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Deutsches Museum

LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

Jessica Barnes

Rifts or Bridges? Ruptures and Continuities in Human-Environment Interactions

In a brightly lit office on the sixth floor of the Ministry of Water in Cairo, I sit in front of a bank of computers. It is June 2014 and the cool air conditioning provides welcome respite from the 43°C (110°F) temperatures outside. I am meeting with a group of engineers from the ministry whose job is to forecast the flow of the Nile in the coming days, weeks, and months. Recently, they have been expanding their time horizons. Responding to the interest of a group of government officials and international donors as to how climate change will affect the river that provides 96 percent of Egypt's water, they have been looking at Nile flows on decadal timescales. One of the IT specialists clicks through a series of screens, showing me the regional climate model they have been working with to project future climate in the Nile Basin. He types a command line and a window comes up with a shaded map showing what precipitation might look like over the basin in the year 2050. The map's swirls of reddish-pink (rainfall decline) and greenish-blue (rainfall increase) are the key to projecting Nile flows.[1] For those sitting in this room, climate change is a familiar object—something they talk about, give presentations on, write reports about, and discuss in journal articles. They, like a number of international and Egyptian water specialists, are concerned about how climate change will affect this resource, which provides almost all of the country's drinking water and feeds Egyptian fields.

Six years previously I sat in another meeting room, this one in an agricultural cooperative in the rural province of Fayoum, several hours from Cairo. In the absence of air conditioning a fan whirred overhead, circulating the warmth. A group of farmers was meeting with an engineer from the Ministry of Water. They, too, were concerned about Nile water, or rather about the lack of Nile water flowing through their irrigation canal. "The main problem," began one farmer "is stealing. There are 60 (unauthorized) pumps on the canal and the *bahhar* (the lowest-level irrigation official) is just standing there!" Another farmer spoke about an upstream canal—if it did not take so much water, they would have enough. "Now we're in June," he said. "In July and August it will only get worse, what with the

1 Despite the clear outlines of this image of future rainfall patterns, the way in which climate change will affect Nile flows is in fact highly uncertain. For more on this uncertainty and how it is interpreted and negotiated by differently positioned scientists, see Jessica Barnes "Uncertainty in the Signal: Modeling Egypt's Water Futures," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (Supp) (2016): 38–58.

cultivation of rice." An old man with less than an acre of land chimed in. "It's all the large farmers' fault," he said. He's gone to complain many times, he told the group, "but nobody listens to me." The situation's unfair, they concluded: we are wronged (*mazloom*).

In these vignettes we see two groups that share the same concern—the volume of Nile flow. Yet they perceive that water in different ways. The scientists in the modeling unit of the water ministry look at the Nile in terms of the climatic event that generates that flow—precipitation over the East African Highlands where the river begins. The Egyptian farmers who use 90 percent of this water, on the other hand, see fluctuations in flow in terms of other farmers buying illegal pumps and growing rice, local *bahhars* not enforcing the rules, engineers allocating more water to another canal, and their complaints falling on deaf ears. They recognize the political and technical decisions that act as intermediaries between the water falling from the sky as rain and them receiving it.[2] While climate change is common currency to the first group, in 16 months of fieldwork in rural Egypt, I have never heard a farmer talk about changing rainfall patterns.[3]

I start with these two vignettes to get at the central question I want to raise here. What exactly do we gain from a statement of novelty, be that about the human condition (humans as geophysical agents), current condition ("after nature"), geological epoch (the Anthropocene), or contemporary challenge (the end of sustainability)? Is there anything that we lose in a claim to the unprecedented or in defining a rupture with the past? By focusing on the rifts, do we lose sight of the bridges?

I read the four fascinating papers by Dipesh Chakrabarty with great interest. As someone from an interdisciplinary environmental background, climate change is something that I think about quite often. I have no doubt that humans are changing global climate in an unprecedented fashion. Yet I am also aware that this way of seeing the world comes from my particular educational training and the cultural context in which I live. Among the Egyptian farmers with whom I have been working since 2007, climate change is not something that they are thinking about. Although they are directly reliant on a climate-derived resource—water—they see that resource not as a function of a climatic process

2 Jessica Barnes, *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

3 See also Jessica Barnes, "Scale and Agency: Climate Change and the Future of Egypt's Water," in *Climate Cultures: Anthropological Perspectives on Climate Change*, eds. Jessica Barnes and Michael Dove (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 127–45.

but of politically mediated decision-making. I am therefore cautious about interpreting Anthropocenic climate change as signaling a new form of humanness, or a shift to a new epoch. I see this theoretical move as attributing a certain dominance to climate change that eclipses other dimensions of human-environment and societal interaction, which may be far from novel. I wonder: Does the notion of the Anthropocene make it harder to think about people whose worldview is not climate-focused? If the Anthropocene is predicated on a notion of rupture with the past, how might it impact our assessment of other knowledges that do not conform to the same temporal boundaries and spatial scales?

Chakrabarty's argument is highly nuanced. In setting out three images of the human—the universalist-enlightenment view, the postcolonial-postmodern view, and the Anthropocenic view—he notes that these views "do not supersede one another. One cannot put them along a continuum of progress. No one view is rendered invalid by the presence of others. They are simply disjunctive."[4] Yet as Chakrabarty's argument and the broader notion of the Anthropocene are taken up in diverse arenas of debate, I fear we lose some of this subtlety. In place of the nuance, I see a trending towards what Mike Hulme terms "climate reductionism"—a way of viewing the world as a place in which the future of societies and environments is seen in terms of climate alone.[5]

"Does the notion of the Anthropocene make it harder to think about people whose worldview is not climate-focused? If the Anthropocene is predicated on a notion of rupture with the past, how might it impact our assessment of other knowledges that do not conform to the same temporal boundaries and spatial scales?"

Such reductionism, Hulme argues, has become a sign of our times as increasing concern about anthropogenic climate change has led to disproportionate attention being placed on climate over other factors that shape societies and their interactions with the physical world. The scholarly act of defining a new era (based of the emission of greenhouse gases) and a new form of humanity (based on humans' ability to alter global climates) to me seems to contribute to this narrowing of the vision.

4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 2.
5 Mike Hulme, "Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism," *Osiris* 26 (2011): 245–66.

The Anthropocene has become something of a trendy term among anthropologists, geographers, and scholars in a number of related disciplines. Indeed at the 2014 annual anthropology meeting, there were ten panels on the Anthropocene. But beyond sparking some animated discussion at the bars of the conference hotel over exactly how the word should be pronounced (ANTHropocene versus anTHROPocene?), I still wonder what exactly the term can offer us. One of the key shortcomings of the Anthropocene as a new universality, it seems to me, is its claim to the novelty of the current human condition. Chakrabarty writes that in the case of climate change—as the fundamental crisis of the Anthropocene—unlike in the crises of capitalism, "there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged."[6] He gives as an example "recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California." I am not fully convinced by this argument. As a large body of scholarship within environmental justice and political ecology has demonstrated, the burden of environmental risks, whether climate change-related or not, falls unevenly on different social groups, mediated by class, race, gender, and ethnicity.[7] Fires in a wealthy neighborhood may be devastating, but are probably less devastating to households that have home insurance, have invested in fire safety measures, or own cars to flee in response to warnings.[8]

In the Egyptian case—however much or little water enters Egypt as climate change alters precipitation patterns in the river's East African source regions—access to water will always be a question of political control, with winners and losers. Whatever the nation's water supply, the richer, more influential farmers are likely to be able to obtain the share of that supply that they need to cultivate their crops of choice. The ability to access this livelihood-supporting resource is ultimately more about questions of power and inequality than rainfall. These questions are not fundamentally new. The terrain of influence may shift over time and space, from British colonial officers exerting their control over the irrigation system in the late nineteenth century[9] to large

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 221.

7 See, for example, Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard, and Bob Evans (eds.), *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview, 2000); Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

8 See, for instance, Timothy Collins, "Households, Forests, and Fire Hazard Vulnerability in the American West: A Case Study of a California Community," *Global Environmental Change Part B: Environmental Hazards* 6, no. 1 (2005): 23–37. For a broader discussion of the relationship between fire, human agency, and the Anthropocene, see Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–69.

9 Claire Cookson-Hills, "The Aswan Dam and Egyptian Water Control Policy 1882–1902," *Radical History Review* 116 (2013): 59–85.

agribusinesses appropriating land and water resources today,[10] but the significance of these sociopolitical relations in shaping human-environment interactions prevails. To me, therefore, the defining of an Anthropocenic era, with its implications of rupture with the past and narrowing to a climate-focused vision, remains more stifling than productive.

Selected Sources

Barnes, Jessica. *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Barnes, Jessica, and Michael Dove, eds. *Climate Cultures: Anthropological Perspectives on Climate Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Hastrup, Kirsten, and Martin Skrydstrup, eds. *The Social Life of Climate Change Models: Anticipating Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hulme, Mike. "Reducing the Future to Climate: A Story of Climate Determinism and Reductionism." *Osiris* 26 (2011): 245–66.

Sayre, Nathan. "The Politics of the Anthropogenic." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 57–70.

10 Marion Dixon, "The Land Grab, Finance Capital, and Food Regime Restructuring: The Case of Egypt," *Review of African Political Economy* 41, no. 140 (2014): 232–48.