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John M. Meyer

Politics *in*—but not *of*—the Anthropocene

“The planet,” to speak with Spivak again, “is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system.” And “yet,” as she puts it, “we inhabit it.” *If there is to be a comprehensive politics of climate change, it has to begin from this perspective.* The realization that humans—all humans, rich or poor—come late in the planet’s life and dwell more in the position of passing guests than possessive hosts has to be an integral part of the perspective from which we pursue our all-too-human but legitimate quest for justice . . . — Dipesh Chakrabarty¹

We need what Chakrabarty describes here as a “comprehensive politics of climate change.” And his claim—echoing critical theorist Gayatri Spivak—that this politics must begin by recognizing that Earth is simultaneously the familiar place we inhabit *and* alterity (possessing an alien quality or otherness) is apt. That we are home, but can never be fully “at home,” captures a central insight of contemporary talk of the Anthropocene. Yet what are the consequences of beginning a consideration of *politics* here? What are the possibilities and pitfalls of doing so? In this essay, I consider three ambiguities that are important in addressing these questions. The first regards the “newness” of the idea of humanity as exhibiting geophysical agency. The second concerns the relationship between this idea of the Anthropocene and particular prescriptions for political or policy change. The third considers the public resonance of the Anthropocene idea. In drawing out these three ambiguities, I aim to take the idea of the Anthropocene seriously, yet push against any attempt to derive a political prescription from it as being dangerously at odds with the need to “pursue our all-too-human but legitimate quest for justice.”

1) What is new about the Anthropocene?

Chakrabarty draws a valuable distinction between conceptions of the “global” and the “planetary.” The former are human processes, including globalization, capitalism, and industrialization. Yet climate change—anthropogenic though it clearly is—is not

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 1 (2014): 23, emphasis added.

a human process in this sense, but a planetary one, because “long-term Earth-system processes [are] coactors.”² An understanding of the Anthropocene, then, requires the simultaneous recognition of human power to transform the nonhuman world *and the limits of intentional human action*, given our inescapable embeddedness in planetary processes that are beyond human control.

Is this recognition of our mutual constitution with processes beyond our control—though not beyond our influence—*new*? On the one hand, recognition of humans as inescapably embedded in ecosystem processes, and therefore also recognition of the unintended consequences of human action, has been a staple of environmental thinking and scholarship over the past generation. Its lineage stretches back far longer, a point that Chakrabarty seems to acknowledge in referencing George Perkins Marsh’s 150-year-old classic *Man and Nature* as an example.³

On the other hand, Chakrabarty asserts a discontinuity between even this understanding of ecological embeddedness and contemporary planetary notions. His point is echoed in Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald’s recent argument that the Anthropocene is not a product of “ecological thinking” but could only result from new “Earth-system thinking” and therefore “the Anthropocene is a new anthropogenic rift in the natural history of planet Earth rather than the further development of an anthropogenic biosphere.”⁴

In our workshop, Chakrabarty concluded that rather than resolving whether Anthropocene-thinking was *new*, it is more appropriate to ask whether it is *fresh*: Does it do useful work, does it energize our thinking? With Chakrabarty, I think the answer is that an Earth-system perspective might provide this freshness. Yet for it to do so, we ought not imagine—as Chakrabarty also has—a pre-Anthropocene world in which humans were living autonomously and human history was not integrally tied to natural history.⁵

2 Ibid., 21.

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Geophysical Agency of Humans and Climate Change,” *Global Energy Affairs* 2, no. 3 (2014): 16–17.

4 Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?,” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 67.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 201–7. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 10.

This notion of a (recent) past in which human history proceeded autonomously has always been a fiction. Certainly, many academics and others have thought, written, and acted as though this notion of human autonomy was real, and it has been particularly influential in many theories of modernity and modern freedom. Yet what has often been true in theory belies the always already embedded character of practice. Bruno Latour captures the fallacy of the idea of modernity as an age in which humans have achieved autonomy from nature succinctly, asserting ironically that “we have never been modern.”⁶

2) How does the Anthropocene relate to prescriptions for political change?

To pose this question, we must first reject a common assumption that a politics of the Anthropocene—that is, a singular, rational prescription—can be *derived* from the concept itself. This assumption echoes a long-influential view that normative political theory could, and should, be derived from a proper understanding of nature and/or human nature. In that case, the key task was to get nature “right,” since determinate guidance for political order would follow. Evidence of this assumption is widespread, and can be found among many environmental thinkers and activists.⁷

The claim to derive political prescriptions from the idea of the Anthropocene worries many critics. Donna Haraway, for instance, has challenged the focus on humanity as such (*anthropos*), suggesting that it would be more accurate to speak of the “Capitalocene.”⁸ While these criticisms may elide distinctive planetary dimensions that Chakrabarty highlights, they are driven by the justified concern that Anthropocene talk might lead to the flattening of human differences and the forced imposition of top-down solutions upon society. Critics rightly worry that problematic political prescriptions—reflecting unexamined assumptions about power, privilege, justice, and injustice—will follow from its widespread embrace. To do so would neglect what Chakrabarty refers to as the “quest for justice.”

6 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

7 I explore this “derivative” approach in John M. Meyer, *Political Nature: Environmentalism and the Interpretation of Western Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

8 Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble,” paper presented at the conference “Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,” University of California, Santa Cruz, 8 May 2014, <http://vimeo.com/97663518>.

If we distance ourselves from the derivative relationship, however, we might then hold onto both recognition of the geophysical agency of humanity *and* of the deeply unequal distribution of this agency—and the widespread injustice of its effects. Rather than a politics *of* the Anthropocene, here we would recognize that politics *in* the Anthropocene will—as always—be refracted through diverse human experiences, positions, affects, cultures, and views of justice and injustice.

While the desire to use rationality to transcend this refractive process has deep roots in the Enlightenment and can be traced back to Plato, it has always been in tension with actual politics and human freedom. This point is essential. For while it is important to notice—with Chakrabarty and Timothy Mitchell—that modern notions of freedom grew along with a fossil-fuel economy,⁹ it is false and dangerous to conclude that the restriction of this freedom will allow societies to better address the challenges of living in the Anthropocene. This, it seems to me, is what is required by Chakrabarty's call for us to think “disjunctively” about the human condition.¹⁰ His own deep grounding in histories of postcolonialism and the subaltern allow him to navigate this terrain more judiciously, and hopefully convey this message more persuasively, than many others.

3) How does the idea of the Anthropocene promise to resonate—or not—with the publics that academics and activists might hope to reach?

If we are to think disjunctively and yet acknowledge that the mutual constitution of the human and nonhuman is not something wholly new, then we must evaluate Anthropocene talk in terms of its potential for public resonance. Here, the Anthropocene moves most clearly from being a geophysical hypothesis to a normative argument.

Hamilton and Grinevald, noted above, clearly believe that a recognition of the ways in which the Earth system itself has been altered by human actions can prompt a greater sense of urgency. By contrast, Giovanna Di Chiro has recently argued that for those involved in movements and organizations for environmental and climate justice, the notion of the Anthropocene has not gained political traction, nor does it seem to make

9 Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013).

10 Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” 2.

historical or political sense.¹¹ I suspect that this is for reasons that go beyond the concerns with derivative politics outlined earlier. These activists are already intimately familiar with the mutual constitution of human and nonhuman systems. As such, Anthropocene talk can appear to reframe already pressing concerns in more abstract or universalizing language. In this context, a rhetorical appeal to the Anthropocene seems more likely to appear patronizing than enlightening or mobilizing.

More broadly we must ask whether, and in what contexts, stories about the Anthropocene (or the geophysical agency of humanity on a planet we cannot control) are likely to facilitate awareness, understanding, or action not already prompted by more established discourses about climate change. If we are to seriously pursue a politics *in* the Anthropocene, this question will remain one of the most important to ask, precisely because the answer is not at all clear.

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¹¹ Giovanna Di Chiro, "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, eds. Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 362–81.