

How does the Anthropocene thesis influence writing the history of the contemporary world?

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The Anthropocene, as introduced by chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, is based upon the notion that human activity has had such a profound effect upon the earth's systems that it is forcing humanity towards an uncertain future. While it is more of an idea than a universally agreed upon term, the Anthropocene's future is predicted to be besmirched with climate disasters and irreversible damage, set to fundamentally change how humans will inhabit the earth in the near future.¹ It is supplemented for the current Holocene, described as a "human-dominated, geological epoch".² This essay will be an exploration of the Anthropocene thesis, with close investigation of how it is set to affect humanity's survival and, ultimately, how it could influence the writing of contemporary history. The Anthropocene offers a fresh perspective, which will be pivotal in regard to influencing a new way to view history, with human actions against earth systems at its core. There are heavy suggestions that in order to move forward within the Anthropocene, there is an increasing need for the cross-communication of many fields which concern it, specifically academic, public, and political discourses.

Crutzen published *The Geology of Mankind* in 2002, where he consolidated his idea of the Anthropocene after initially arising its concept during a 2000 talk.³ The Anthropocene is popularly defined as "the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment", and these influences are seen throughout the

¹ Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*, (New York: St. Martin's Thomas Dunnes Books), 2007

² Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind", *Nature* 415, (January 2002), 23.

³ Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind".

earth, especially as climate emergencies become more frequent.⁴ The idea that humans play a significant role in the earth systems is rapidly increasing, with humanity coming to wield a pivotal amount of geological force, making them agents to environmental change and climate disasters.⁵⁶ There is much acceptance across fields, both formal and informal, that irreversible damage at the hands of human activity will be reached by 2050.⁷

Currently, the status of the Anthropocene remains universally unaccepted, however some official organisations have individually confirmed its existence. In 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group, which is a research group committed to the investigation of the Anthropocene as a formalized geological time, recognised it as different from the current Holocene.⁸ The beginning of which was also established around 1945, in accordance with the Great Acceleration which is seen as a rapid, continuous spike in growth rates ranging a number of measures concerning human activity, including population growth, water use, surface temperature and many others.⁹¹⁰ Prior to this, debates heavily focused on the start of the Great Acceleration further back, commonly within the early industrial revolution in 19th century Britain, while others place it to when Europeans brought devastation to indigenous

⁴ Erle Ellis, *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press), 2018.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, (London, Fontana), 1975, 205.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009): 206.

⁷ Walter Dodds, *Humanity's Footprint: Momentum, Impact and Our Global Environment*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 11.

⁸ Jacques Grinevald, John McNeill, Naomi Oreskes, Will Steffen, Colin Summerhayes & Jan Zalasiewicz, "History and the Development of the Anthropocene as a Stratigraphic Concept" in, *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit: A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2019, 9.

⁹ "Anthropocene", National Geographic, last modified June 7, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/anthropocene/>

¹⁰ Will Steffen, "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene", *The Anthropocene Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January: 2015), 81-98.

American populations and ecosystems in the 16th century.¹¹ The Great Acceleration is viewed as a catalyst to humanity's actions hurdling us into disaster.¹²

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Anthropocene is set to mould the context for the future existence of humanity on earth, therefore there are implications that we need to re-imagine our relationship with the planet. This is to be achieved through our study, teaching, and discourse concerning humanity's future actions, which is already being grouped into an important area of concern, coined by Simon Dalby as Anthropoceneology.¹³

The rapid development of the Anthropocene has significantly increased the academic considerations of climate and natural history. With this, there will be considerable influences towards how history is to be seen in the near future, illustrated by new perspectives of the unfolding of more recent history from around 250 years ago. One can consider the prominent motif of freedom as contributing to the making of the contemporary world.¹⁴ Human development in the name of freedom, whether it be freedom from oppressive regimes or freedom of individual economic progress, has made long-term environmental sacrifices in order to achieve short-term positive societal benefits.

Large scale usage of fossil fuels within this period provides the context for rapid human development. It therefore becomes clear that by viewing history through Anthropogenic consideration one can begin to view the prominence humanity places on short-term survival at the detriment of earth systems, causing the environmental consequences which are apparent today.¹⁵ While current writings of history largely fail to recognize the geological link between human actions and Anthropogenic disaster, which is

¹¹ National Geographic, "Anthropocene".

¹² Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde, *Nature's End: History and the Environment*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan), 2009, 1-19.

¹³ Simon Dalby, "The Anthropocene Thesis", *The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies*, (December 2018), 14.

¹⁴ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," 208.

¹⁵ Edward Wilson, *The Future of life*, (London: Abacus), 2003, 210.

mainly the fault of a lacking universal agreement on the significance, there are clear links of our damage which only becomes more uncovered as the studies expand.¹⁶ For instance, there is countless evidence for the devastation humanity has caused ecosystems, both local and global, due to the horrors of war which swept the globe, from the Napoleonic wars to the introduction of nuclear warfare once the United States dropped the Atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Such effects include the constant threat of acid rain within Sweden threatening the Baltic Sea, its wildlife and its ecosystems.¹⁷ The consequences of human activity and its effects upon earth systems have forced the intertwinement of humanity and nature, closing the gap which separated histories, and allowing those histories to culminate.¹⁸

The history of modern capitalism, which has dominated world history for the past 250 years, can be viewed under this perspective too. As stated by McNeill and Hornborg, capitalism and the constant hunt for profit has defined humanity's new relationship with nature.¹⁹ The burden of economic needs significantly hinders the progress towards sustainable development which is pivotal to fixing the climate crisis. Similar to the freedom motif, capitalism puts the needs of human survival before natural survival, even if capitalism proves to help only a minority of people. On the other hand, it must be kept in consideration that these themes can be viewed as hindrances to development even today, thus forcing us to start considering how we can move forward as a society in beginning to fix the problems caused. Some suggestions for progress include the limitation or the downfall of capitalism which can be seen in the contemporary world as not just a human detriment but one to the natural world too, as it acts as a catalyst for human selfishness and greed which aid the

¹⁶ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses".

¹⁷ John McNeill, "Energy, Population and Environmental Change Since 1750: Entering the Anthropocene", *The Cambridge World History*, (April 2015), 80.

¹⁸ Christophe Bonneuil, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, (Abingdon, Routledge), 2015, chp 3.

¹⁹ Alf Hornborg and John McNeill, *Rethinking Environmental History: World-System History and Global Environmental Change*, (Plymouth, AltaMira), 2007, 381.

problem at hand. Some examples of the destruction caused by capitalism include 19th century British domination, forcing others to follow and serve the industrial capitalism model which many attribute to the beginning of the Anthropocene. As stated by Bonneuil and Fressoz, “The history of the capitalistic world-economies lies at the heart of the change in the Earth’s geological regime.”²⁰

Through the investigation of popular motifs from recent history, one can begin to view how considerations of the Anthropocene can influence the writing of contemporary history, placing natural history to the forefront, conveying its pivotal significance. This allows the narrative that human effects are long-term, and illustrates how humanity shows no clear sign of stopping even when made aware of the potential consequences. The work of future historians will have an increased consideration of this lens as the need for human intervention will only become greater.

Expanding from this idea, the Anthropocene increases concerns for human life, with nature becoming more and more vital to global politics every day; intertwinement of human actions and nature is solidifying.²¹ Taking this into consideration, it is clear we are no longer sole contributors to our history, as nature is becoming more central in defining humanity’s future. The challenges we face are tying the world together under the same crisis, leading to the encapsulation of a “wider cultural sphere”, pushing humans towards greater awareness and fresh perspectives on how they view nature and its role in recent history.²² To illustrate, the Great Acceleration is quickly spreading its influences throughout powers such as China, Russia, and India with no clear signs of slowing down. These such countries with massive

²⁰ Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, (London, Verso), 2016, 298.

²¹ Simon Dalby, “Framing the Anthropocene: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly”, *The Anthropocene Review*, (April 2016), 34.

²² Yadvinder Malhi, “The Concept of the Anthropocene”, *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, (2017), 99.

populations and influences are set to catalyze the Anthropogenic disaster.²³ As predicted by the UN, the Anthropocene is set to displace over 50 million adults, along with a huge number of children and animals due to oncoming disaster. Additionally, those most at risk are set to be the poor, disadvantaged children and non-humans, especially as developing nations can find it difficult to tackle such problems while attempting to foster their economies and levels of education.²⁴ As a collective, humanity is in desperate need of universal cooperation in order to even begin to face the problem of the Anthropocene which will come to affect us all in some way or another. This includes, for example, aiding less wealthy countries and nations in achieving sustainable development, while continuing to confront the issues already caused. Investment in children across the globe has proved critical in moving towards eradicating poverty; it allows families to reach their full potentials, which according to Malone, does wonders in creating contributing citizens, which is vital to helping fix the problem we collectively face.²⁵

The main critique here is the endless proof that humans have failed time and time again to solve the problems that they are aware of, with the most likely solution being ignorance of the problem until it forces them to face it. Those capable of change, the wealthy, mostly northern countries, have created a landscape of inequality stretching the globe, where many such people “find their advantages multiplied in these...fragile times”.²⁶ This idea of human selfishness is repeated throughout history, which suggests that it will only continue. Although, what this does help is the pushing for an increasing need for the cross-communication of academic fields, along with public and political discourse. In the current

²³ Steffen, “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene,” 83.

²⁴ Karen Malone, “Children in the Anthropocene: Rethinking Sustainable Development and Child Friendliness in Cities,” (London, Palgrave Macmillan), 2018, 249.

²⁵ Malone, “Children in the Anthropocene: Rethinking Sustainable Development and Child Friendliness in Cities,”, 251.

²⁶ Malone, 249.

state of globalization, concerns are made more aware to us than ever before, perpetuating the need for change, which is highly suggested to force those who are capable of helping solve the climate crisis to do so.

In adhering to this need, humanity can move towards working under the same umbrella in order to attempt to achieve the same conclusions. Separated fields achieve very little, with, for example, historians taking more liberal positions on setting dates for periods, while geologists prefer precision, which only furthers debates which distract from the problem at hand.²⁷ Moreover, as awareness for the problem grows, the need for intercommunication does too, as propelled by the idea of englobement put forward by Antonella Romano, whereas globalization has significantly contributed to reinforcing the concerns as a collective humanity.²⁸ This can thus heavily influence the writing of history in the near future, with greater consideration of the exchanges and the circulations between humans globally and nonhumans.²⁹ The Anthropocene is therefore set to “redirect the future of the planet”, along with the ways in which humanity will have to go about solving such problems, harnessing the power and wealth of nations capable of making a difference, who tend to be those causing much of the problems. 18.8% of the population of the north, for example, are responsible for 72.2% of carbon dioxide emissions collectively from 1850, which will be contributed to by rising powers, especially those which harness larger scale industrial power.³⁰

To conclude, the Anthropocene is clearly an imminent problem for humanity. Since the introduction of the thesis in 2000, and its consolidation in 2002, the threat posed has only

²⁷ Grégory Quenet, *The Anthropocene and the Time of Historians*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2020, 171.

²⁸ Antonella Romano, *Impressions de Chone, L'Europe et L'englobement du monde*, (Paris: Fayard), 2016, 7-26.

²⁹ Philippe Decsola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2013, 309-35.

³⁰ Andreas Malm & Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative”, *The Anthropocene Review*, (January, 2014), 62

continued to increase.³¹ Threats such as climate emergencies and disasters, which occur globally and increasingly consistently and are only propelled by the rapidly growing influence of the Great Acceleration. It forces an intertwining of histories and experiences with the natural world, which thus causes complete consideration of humanity's actions. These actions have become extremely apparent, seen most prominently through the investigation of distinguished motifs of recent history, especially freedom and capitalism. The discourse around the Anthropocene is becoming increasingly incorporated into public and political life, therefore acting as a powerful drive for action. This said drive is the beginning of a forcing of intertwinement of communications across academic fields which is absolutely vital to making significant progress. Thus, there are heavy suggestions that this is set to change not just how history is viewed, but influence how history is received and written about in the near future.

³¹ Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind".

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