

Living in the Middle of Extinction: Climate Change, Philosophy, and the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

We are living in the middle of extinction. Several species have already disappeared, numerous others are endangered, and Indigenous communities have experienced ecological and cultural destruction for centuries. Yet the term Anthropocene places the responsibility for planetary transformation on humanity as a whole. This article questions the human implied in the Anthropocene and examines the political importance of naming and dating the current geological epoch. It considers the Eurocene as a way of drawing attention to European colonialism, and the global expansion of a human centered economic hegemony. The article also examines extinction as a gradual process that is already part of the present. I draw on Indigenous accounts of ongoing apocalypse to argue that human survival depends on relations that capitalism and ongoing colonialism continues to damage. The article concludes by calling for a dialogue between the sciences and humanities and for a renewed understanding of philosophy's responsibility toward the present and future.



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Introduction

We are living in the middle of extinction. Some of its consequences are already visible, while others will unfold over the coming generations. The dominant political and economic preferences of the present therefore require serious reconsideration if future generations are to inherit a breathable planet. The documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* brings this crisis before a broad audience by showing the scale at which human activity has transformed the earth's ecosystems (Baichwal, de Pencier, & Burtynsky, 2018). Such representations are important because the meaning and consequences of the Anthropocene affect people far beyond academic discussions.

The Anthropocene has become a widely used term for the period in which human activity has acquired the power to alter the planet on a geological scale (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Its formal geological status and possible starting point remain matters of debate. The political meaning of the name raises an equally important question. But when we identify the present as the human epoch, we place responsibility for the mass scale exploitation of nature on humanity as a whole.

Anthropocene, or the human epoch, thereby, places humanity, all of it, inside a single wrapped carton and labels it responsible. A person living on the outskirts of northern Pakistan, who may have little access to the luxury and consumption through which nature is exploited, can still bear the consequences alongside someone who heads an industrial complex and makes a living selling bombs. However, their contributions to the crisis remain significantly unequal, despite that both may face a damaged atmosphere and ecological loss.

This article therefore examines the identity of the human named by the Anthropocene. Naming the epoch also defines the history through which the present crisis is understood and the responsibility assigned for producing it. This question becomes more urgent when the Anthropocene is viewed through extinction. Animal species are disappearing and communities on the margins of progress continue to live through forms of destruction that began with colonial-capitalist's adventures. Extinction cannot be approached only as a distant future event but as something immediate and ongoing. We may already be living within the process without being fully conscious of its gravity.

The Politics of Lexicon

The name and proposed origins of the epoch therefore carry considerable political weight. Defining a starting point also produces an account of responsibility by identifying the people, systems, and historical processes involved (Saldanha, 2019). Naming the Anthropocene is more than a geological endeavour because every name carries a particular interpretation of the past (Schneiderman, 2015). Different people have occupied very different positions within the histories of planetary exploitation. Seen from the peripheries of power and progress in a postcolonial country, the dominant agent of this history appears as the European elite white man. He is elite because of class, white because of the racial superiority claimed through colonialism, and man because of the patriarchal structures that shaped modern political and economic power.

But when Crutzen and Stoermer used the term Anthropocene to describe a period in which human activity had become powerful enough to alter the earth on a geological scale (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000), they were naming all human beings irrespective of race, class, and geography. Chakrabarty similarly argues that humans have become geological agents, a collective force that can be compared with forces associated with earlier periods of mass extinction (Chakrabarty, 2009). The difficulty emerges when this geological agency is attributed to the human species as a whole.

The category of humanity gathers together people whose relationships with planetary transformation are diverse and entirely distinct. Some command industries while others were enslaved and colonized. The latter were also forced to live in environments damaged by the systems created by the formers. Treating them as one geological agent removes the history through which large scale exploitation became possible.

When environmental destruction is presented as the shared product of humanity, proposed solutions can also concentrate too much on individual behaviors. But locating this destruction in wider systems of colonialism and capitalism, directs our attention toward the systems through which power and resources have been distributed. Naming therefore defines responsibility and influences the political direction taken in response to the crisis.

The term Eurocene offers one way of addressing the problems carried by the universal human of the Anthropocene. The term is credited to Jairus Grove who argues that the violence done to the planet has largely been perpetrated by a select group of Europeans and cannot be attributed equally to all humans (Grove, 2016; Grove, 2019). The term is blunt and directly identifies the responsible actors. Racial superiority and global resettlement were imposed on much of the world through European imperial dominance. Settler colonialism, the White Man's Burden, industrial development, the Great Acceleration, and the expansion of modern warfare all belong to histories that cannot be separated from European imperial power.

Since the debate is politically charged, the Eurocene cannot place blame on all people of European heritage. The term refers to those who carried themselves as agents of change that displaced human communities and destroyed ecosystems. Many Europeans were also exploited by the economic and political systems that expanded through empire. The Eurocene identifies a formation of power and the people and institutions that carried its ambitions across the planet. The concept therefore makes visible a history that the universal category of the human hides. The Anthropocene tells us that human activity altered the earth. The Eurocene asks which humans possessed the power to define modern history and which communities carried the consequences. It also draws attention to colonialism as an important part of the current environmental crisis.

The Orbis Hypothesis

Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin trace to 1610 what they call the Orbis Hypothesis. They proposed this date because the colonization of the Americas brought Old and New World populations into sustained contact. This meeting also led to a geologically unprecedented homogenization of the earth's biota (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). The movement of people, commodities changed the ecological structure of the planet. The deaths of native Americans brought an unprecedented cooling of the atmosphere because of the reforestation that followed the genocide. Orbis hypothesis is a reminder that the current world order was built on the blood of Indigenous people. Connecting the existing order to 1610 places colonial violence within the history of planetary transformation and exposes the violence that resides at its core (Davis & Todd, 2017).

The colonization of the Americas can also be seen as the beginning of a large-scale disruption of human and nature relations and of place and thought harmony. Vanessa Watts's work on place thought helps explain the gravity of this destruction. Indigenous thought cannot be reduced to a belief system placed inside an otherwise lifeless environment. The widening gap between the place in which human beings operate and the consciousness through which they objectify everything around them contributed to the destruction of Indigenous cosmologies and ecologies (Watts, 2013). Resultantly, the separation of humans from nature made exploitation appear natural. Forests

became timber and land became empty space waiting for development. Colonialism and capitalism converted this philosophical separation into a political and economic system.

Lewis and Maslin also suggest 1964 as a possible beginning for a new Anthropocene epoch because of the variety of human impacts recorded during the Great Acceleration (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). This later date brings nuclear explosions, plastics and intensified consumption into view. The Great Acceleration remains important, though its history cannot be separated from the colonial systems that supplied land and labor to the industrial world.

Industrialization increased the speed and scale of processes already present in colonial accumulation. The machines shown in the documentary *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (Baichwal, de Pencier, & Burtynsky, 2018) reveal this acceleration. Excavators used for extracting marble have replaced human workers while making the exploitation of nature easier and faster. The extraction a worker might have carried out in a month can now be completed in a day. The documentary shows that the extraction of marble for monuments and statues devoted to human beings carries a particular irony. In an already human-centered world, natural material is taken from the earth to glorify humanity further. Speedy exploitation also speeds up extinction.

Beyond Anthropocene

Several terms have been presented as possible replacements for the Anthropocene. Donna Haraway's Chthulucene (2016) carries an attractive message of making kin and highlights multispecies unfolding. Davis, Moulton, Van Sant, and Williams argue against it by saying that it minimizes the role of racial politics and can lead to a flattened understanding of making kin that remains inadequate for the creation of just ecologies (Davis et al., 2019). On the other hand, Jason Moore's Capitalocene (2016) effectively exposes industrial capitalism and the rise of cheap nature behind the disruption of the Holocene. Tracing capitalism to its origins reveals the colonial reality within its development.

Capitalocene and Eurocene remain closely connected. Capitalocene identifies the economic system that converted human and nonhuman life into material for accumulation. Eurocene identifies the imperial formation through which this system expanded. Mirzoeff, on similar terms, has called the Anthropocene a White Supremacy Scene because the kind of man implied in the *Anthropos* of the Anthropocene is the imperialist white male (Mirzoeff, 2018). His argument supports the need to identify the race, class, and gender hidden inside the apparently universal human.

The growing number of names also shows how difficult it is to place every aspect of the crisis inside one term. Anthropocene points toward human geological transformation. Capitalocene brings capitalist accumulation and cheap nature into view. Eurocene identifies European colonial power. Chthulucene concentrates on multispecies relations. Each name makes a particular history visible. The purpose is not to find a word capable of explaining every part of the crisis but to show that naming remains important because every name produces a particular account of responsibility.

Living with Extinction

Extinction changes how we understand the Anthropocene. Traditional apocalypse is usually imagined as a sudden moment in which everything is destroyed. Extinction unfolds gradually and can remain difficult to perceive while it is taking place (Masco, 2017). The accelerated loss of species over the past few centuries suggests that a sixth mass extinction may already be underway (Ceballos et al., 2015). A generation can therefore live inside extinction without fully realizing the condition it inhabits.

The point is we are not heading toward extinction but already in it because many forms of extinction are already taking place. Several species have disappeared and numerous others are endangered. Indigenous communities have been displaced and the lands through which they sustained their lives have been rearranged. Extinction appears through the gradual disappearance of relationships that make life possible. The gravity of this situation appears in fictional accounts and Apocalypse is consumed through cinema and literature while its material conditions continue to grow outside the screen. Since extinction reveals itself across generations, the future and present stand inseparable. Our treatment of the present and our willingness to reject the destructive tendencies of global capitalism will shape our fate in the future.

We go back to *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*. The documentary shows that animal life is already becoming extinct and that carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are higher than at any time in the past sixty-six million years. Without nonhuman life, whether vertebrates or invertebrates, the future of human life cannot be sustained because our existence is intricately dependent on nonhumans. Imagining futures without humans can no longer be ignored. Techno fossils and human created objects like plastics and concrete, may survive much longer than the people who produced them. Their aggregate weight is estimated at around thirty trillion tons.

However, this weight of exploitation has to be called something other than the Anthropocene because not the history of all humans is a history of exploiting nature. Many communities have lived through relations that recognize limits, responsibilities, and multispecies dependence. The current crisis emerged through a distinct formation of power. The agents of that formation also influence how the crisis is defined and which solutions are considered acceptable.

It was precisely the ignorance towards multispecies interdependence that triggered the Anthropocene. As Deborah Rose shows Multispecies knots and interdependence means that animals, plants, and other beings contribute to systems of sequence and mutual benefit. Animals pollinate plants and trees. Plants contribute to the conditions through which ecosystems remain breathable. Invertebrates, often considered too trivial to deserve serious attention, sustain ecological processes on which larger forms of life depend (Rose, 2012).

We are bound within a multispecies knot and need to take nonhuman organisms aboard when conceiving any future existence. Extinction reaches beyond the disappearance of individual species and damages relationships between species, places, and communities. When an animal disappears, the plants it pollinates may suffer. Consequently, human communities may lose practices, stories, and forms of knowledge connected with that animal. The extinction of one form of life travels through other forms of life.

A similar process takes place when Indigenous communities are removed from their lands. Cultural destruction and ecological destruction frequently emerge from the same history. What much of the world is beginning to experience has been experienced by Indigenous communities for at least the past four centuries, following the European colonization of the Americas and the world. Natives can therefore see the current situation as a crisis they have already lived through and one that continues (Whyte, 2018).

Imagining a dystopian future is easier for people who possess the privilege of having avoided such destruction in their own pasts. Even the visualization of apocalyptic futures can become a privilege exercised by people who consider their present existence calm and stable. Their fears appear in climate fiction and cinema because the present still seems visibly different from the future being depicted. A protagonist, frequently white and male, tries to save the earth from a vengeful and

uncontrollable nature. This figure rarely confronts the history through which his own civilization turned nature into an object and built its wealth through colonized lands and people.

The meaning of future apocalypse therefore depends on whose time is being discussed. For communities that have experienced colonial invasion and cultural destruction, apocalypse belongs to the past and continues in the present. The future feared by dominant societies resembles the historical experience of communities that were forced to survive the destruction of their worlds (Whyte, 2017; Whyte, 2018).

Philosophy in the Times of Extinction

Questions concerning extinction, apocalypse, and the Anthropocene belong neither exclusively to science nor exclusively to the humanities. Whether we are living in Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Eurocene, or White Supremacy Scene remains contested and a matter of discourse and debate. Every name carries a political narrative that defines the past and anticipates possible futures. Schneiderman writes that it is healthy for science to endure questioning from within and outside the scientific community (Schneiderman, 2015). Oreskes and Conway construct a fictional narrative from the future in which later communities view science as one of the institutions that failed to prevent the collapse of Western civilization because its predictions were specialized and buried in journals (Oreskes & Conway, 2013).

The role of the humanities, especially philosophy, also needs reconsideration. Climate change is a scientific fact and an ethical dilemma concerning our responsibility toward present and future generations. The concerns of people living decades or centuries from now will be affected directly by the decisions of the present generation. Addressing these concerns remains a central responsibility of philosophy. Philosophy has a moral responsibility to address questions concerning the environment, economic systems, and the political outlook of the world. Its own future as a discipline depends on unshackling it from elitist academic systems and placing it in the present, in the now, in which humans and nonhumans continue to suffer.

Alain Badiou believes that if philosophy is to remain useful to life, it must propose the possibility of a real future or examine the conditions required for such a future. Philosophy is a potential of possibilities. A world without philosophy would be a world without possibilities (Badiou, 2015). A world without possibilities is a world devoid of any real future because the future remains future only when it differs from the present. Without the possibility of concrete change, the future becomes an extension of the present.

The work of philosophy involves reinterpreting the world as it is through sustained engagement with how it ought to be. Philosophy remains a critique of the way things work. A dialogical relationship between science and philosophy can help address the problem of visualizing a sustainable future while taking seriously the ethical and structural complexities such a future requires. This dialogue must also include Indigenous thought and the knowledge of communities living through environmental destruction. Indigenous experiences of apocalypse challenge the future orientation of dominant environmental discourse and the separation of humans from nature. These contributions can change the foundations from which the crisis is understood. The possibility of imagining a different future rests on this dialogue.

Conclusion

The debate concerning the Anthropocene carries consequences beyond the formal name of a geological epoch and shapes how responsibility is distributed. The name Anthropocene identifies the scale of human influence while placing unequal histories inside a universal category. But every

human being does not carry the same responsibility for those consequences. The history of environmental destruction belongs to particular systems and agents. Its effects extend beyond them and increasingly shape the conditions of life for humans and nonhumans across the planet.

The narrative of the current epoch needs to make central the destructive productions that built the modern world. Accumulation and colonial imperial expansion operated through violence at several levels. A different and a livable planet might have emerged through agents who respected the traditions and privacy of different cosmoecological truths. Such a possibility remains conjectural, though it reminds us that the present world was never the only world that could have existed. The present was produced through political choices, philosophical assumptions, and economic systems. The future remains connected with the choices being made now. Philosophy must participate in understanding the crisis and making its urgency visible by confronting the systems that have made extinction part of the present.

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