

The Anthropocene Debate and (Post-)COVID-19 Challenges

Welcome address to the first network event 'Creating Better Anthropocenes' | 14 May 2021

Bernhard Malkmus

In January, 2020, I found myself embroiled in a discussion with a friend in a coffeeshop in Whitley Bay on the coast, just outside Newcastle. She wanted to know what the Anthropocene is. She was impatient. She thought it was just yet another neologism that would quickly melt into thin air. I switched into the raconteur mode, as many of us do in such situations: we are telling stories to capture people's imagination – stories about the Neolithic Revolution, about Ecological Imperialism, the „Orbis Spike“, the Industrial Revolution, the Great Acceleration. Then I switched gear and talked about the necessity to complicate our concept of agency – to move away from our exclusive focus on intention, deliberation, anticipation in how we conceive of agency.

I provided examples that had stood the test of many classroom discussions:

- 1- The consistence of the cotton fibre that was traded in Liverpool and Manchester, as opposed to the more durable one traded in London, may have exerted the kind of pressure that led to the development of the steam engine and thus triggered the Industrial Revolution;
- 2- Malaria imported to Virginia by fieldworkers from East Anglia may have played a role in the establishment of slavery in the United States;
- 3- And what about "England's pleasant pastures": Did humans domesticate sheep, or sheep humans?

The friend in Whitley Bay nodded politely, but clearly didn't buy into my intellectual antics.

A couple of weeks later I received an e-mail from her – a months into the covid-19 pandemic: "You were right, but you wouldn't have needed to unleash a pandemic to prove me wrong!"

a. The 'Anthropocene' – much used, ill understood

The 'Anthropocene' is no longer a word we need to spell, no longer a strange Greek neologism, no longer a piece of jargon. And yet, the paradigms it is supposed to shift haven't shifted with the popularization of the term: in many regards, even a lot of Anthropocene scholars are pretty Holocene-hardwired in their habitual social, historical, cultural imaginaries:

Examples:

- the authority of the globalised and upscaled European **science culture**;
- the **narrative of progress** – much critiqued, but never really challenged;
- the **privileging of the ‘individual subject’** and its longevity as the sole undisputed parameter for a contemporary ethics of well-being.

At the same time, we have to observe the inflation of the term ‘Anthropocene’ during the past decade. It has become a catch phrase of the academic publishing industry, a favourite piece of jargon of museum curators, an evasive term in political ‘greening’ discourses – often meaning little more than ‘the age of climate change’ or even just ‘our present times’. The academic profession, with its relentless drive towards innovation and its self-image marked by hyperboles of innovation has played a major role in this inflation. The downside of this inundation with publications, conferences and exhibits that sport the ‘Anthropocene’ in their titles is troublesome. We have to ask ourselves:

Is the concept being normalised and bereft of its critical edge? Is it becoming a victim of the rhetorical fate of catastrophism?

Is it a term that is losing its intellectual bite by being appropriated into a cultural climate that desensitises humans against the dilemmata of the future?

Has our academic discourse on the subject poisoned the Anthropocene as a fertile soil for thinking about the future?

b. The paradox of COVID-19

I think all of us are, maybe for different reasons, convinced of the urgency and importance of the Anthropocene debate: scientifically, culturally, politically and ethically. What unites us also requires a form of resistance against the use and abuse of the term ‘Anthropocene’ as a vehicle for disciplinary self-perpetuation and autopoiesis of individual disciplines. What we need to stand up for is what Mark Williams and Jan Zalasiewicz, who are here with us today, and others have called a “**multidisciplinary approach**”; or what others, who have been involved with the Rivers of the Anthropocene project in Indiana and Newcastle, have called a “**transdisciplinary approach**”. In other words, an approach that maintains the integrity of disciplinary methodologies, but tempers it with the humble awareness that there are other valid approaches that may be as valid and useful. Or, in the words of Hamlet’s polemic against Horatio:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The hypercomplex challenges that we are facing in the Anthropocene cannot be encompassed and addressed by the „philosophy“, mindset or methodology of a single academic discipline – or by the *universitas litterarum*, for that matter.

The pandemic has created a paradoxical situation for us. The virus as an agent that has disrupted and is disrupting human lives has hammered home, far more effectively than the most powerful academic institutions ever could have, one of the central insights of the Anthropocene debate: **the scaled-up systemic knock-on effects of anthropogenic changes to Earth systems, in particular the biosphere**. In the case of COVID-19, it is in all likelihood the loss of ecosystems resilience through anthropogenic **ecosystem simplification** and the **homogenization** of human-engineered domestic lifeform that created the conditions for the virus to flourish and for zoonoses to ensue. At the same time, the virus has deepened a sense of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the “**negative identity**” that are acquiring as a species through the macrosystemic changes that we have brought about collectively. Bruno Latour has even regarded the shared sense of threat experienced during the pandemic as a “dress rehearsal” for the public response that will be necessary to confront the climate crisis. I think this is premature. And yet, it is very clear, that the period immediately following the pandemic, in spite of all the terrifying insights it will give us into its full scale and long-term consequences, is indeed also paradoxically a small window of opportunity – an opportunity for creating the multidisciplinary, educational and cultural framework for facing the major challenges of the future that are defined by our planetary boundaries.

This network meeting wants to create a platform for reflecting on our very specific historical moment and assess the learning curve we have been going through as individuals, citizens of specific societies, researchers in a global scientific culture, and members of *Homo sapiens*.

Our guiding questions will be, among others:

- How can we contextualize this historical moment within the epistemologies we have narrated around the Anthropocene so far?
- In what ways has our awareness of the Anthropocene as a concept and narrative changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How can we seize the moment of the brief window of opportunity during which we emerge from the pandemic?

And as an integral part of to these important questions, we need to ask ourselves practical questions such as:

- How can we translate these insights into concrete collaborations that can ensure that the historical momentum is not lost but remains a durable motivation? What new forms of

collaborations can we devise among each other as researchers from different disciplines to preserve this historical momentum and put it to good practice in the way we respond to the challenges of the future?

- Who are our partners and stakeholders outside academia? How can we forge partnerships that help us do this translation work? What kind of partnerships help us turn a sense of “negative identity” as a species into a positive culture of taking action?
- What kind of partnerships help us to move from a paradigm of Sustainability (where we don’t quite know what we are trying to “sustain”) to a culture of Habitability (that allows us to think of the future of life in terms of cohabitation, collaboration, coevolution)?

c. Alexander von Humboldt and Paul Crutzen

At the beginning of their appraisal of the academic Anthropocene debate, *The Anthropocene: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams and Jan Zalasiewicz evoke the German naturalist and writer Alexander von Humboldt as an Anthropocene thinker *avant la lettre*. They single out what Humboldt himself, inspired by the incredible profusion of human self-reflection in Central European cultures during the late 18th century, would have called ‘transcendental’. In Enlightenment philosophy, this term is a shorthand for: ‘reflecting the conditions for the possibility of knowledge’. Humboldt’s science writing is not only proto-ecological in its rigorous focus on the interrelatedness of biotic and abiotic agencies in the world and his ability to integrate accounts of natural and human history; Humboldtian science is also a transcendental art of writing: a mediation of science that, in the act of mediating, reflects on the conditions and the blind spots of the kind of knowledge it is generating. The result is twofold: a **metareflexive ability** to understand the limits of the knowledge produced and a **humble attitude** towards the world as a whole while attempting to turn it into an ‘order of knowledge’.

Maybe Alexander von Humboldt and his transcendental method of conveying and reflecting knowledge is a good starting point for exploring our historical moment with its specific geological momentum. I would thus like to open this virtual roundtable in a Humboldtian spirit by paying reverence to one of the great Humboldtians of our Age: Paul Crutzen, the atmospheric chemist, to whom we owe, among many things, the integrity of the ozone layer today and the career of the term ‘Anthropocene’, died in January. May our work also be a tribute to his work – and a testimony to his inspiration.