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# The Transvaluation of Critique in the Anthropocene

DAVID CHANDLER

*This article considers the transvaluation of critique through the lens of the new affirmative critical approaches of the Anthropocene. The first section introduces the problematic of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch and also as symptomatic of the end of modernist ontological and epistemological assumptions of the divide between culture and nature. The second section then highlights how the Anthropocene thesis poses a problem for critique through fundamentally decentring the human as subject and challenging the temporal claims of Enlightenment progress. The third section analyses the implications of this closure for critical approaches and the shift towards a more positive view of the present: no longer seeking to imagine alternative futures but rather drawing out alternative possibilities that already exist. Critique thus becomes additive, affirmative and constructive. The final section expands on this point and concludes with a consideration of how contemporary theoretical approaches articulate the transvaluation of critique.*

## Introduction: A New Epoch

This article argues that the importance of the concept of the Anthropocene,<sup>1</sup> for the transvaluing of critique in the sphere of global studies and international relations, has as yet not been fully recognised.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one reason for this is the lack of historical comparison for the transformation of social, political and ethical thought that the Anthropocene is held to bring in its train.<sup>3</sup> This transformation performs a transvaluation of critique (in Nietzsche's sense of the term); it is not merely the means of critique (tactics or strategy) that are problematised but the ends themselves, which are revalued.<sup>4</sup> Unlike modernist critique, which, since the Enlightenment, sought to transform the world to put human reasoning and transformative

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1. A concept coined by Eugene Storer in the 1980s and popularised by Paul Crutzen in the 2000s, see Crutzen and Stoermer "The 'Anthropocene'", *Global Change News*, Vol. 41 (2000), pp. 17–18; also Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind", *Nature*, Vol. 415 (2002), p. 23; Crutzen and Will Steffen "How Long Have We Been in the Anthropocene Era?" *Climatic Change*, Vol. 61 (2003), pp. 251–257.

2. The difficulties of raising the importance of the Anthropocene concept in International Relations is dealt with well by Cameron Harrington, see his "The Ends of the World: International Relations and the Anthropocene", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2016), pp. 478–498

3. Perhaps the political, social and emotional creativity of radical thought when the world was "turned upside down" in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century, amidst the English civil war, could be one comparison; see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. London: Penguin, 1991.

4. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist: An Attempted Criticism of Christianity", in Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 93–163.

agency at the centre, contemporary radical critique seeks to transform (or decentre) the human in order to put the world at the centre. The world is to be affirmed as the transcendental agent, saviour, Gaia, or “last God” and the human is displaced to becoming the adaptive, responsive, humble and resilient object of its commands. Critique is the conceptual field through which this reversal of modernist subject-object relations is negotiated. The goal of critique thus becomes that of “learning to adapt to the world” or to listen to what the planet “is telling us”, rather than to “hubristically” seek to direct, shape or control our external world.<sup>5</sup> In order for critique to be transvalued, to have the goal of affirming the world rather than of transforming it, modernist constructions of the world and of the place of the human subject needed to be shaken or disrupted in a radical, in the sense of fundamental, way. The discursive framing of the Anthropocene has been greeted as providing just this fundamental reassessment of modernist assumptions.

The Anthropocene is a disputed term, which refers to a new geological epoch,<sup>6</sup> in which human activity is seen to have profound and irreparable effects on the environment.<sup>7</sup> This attention to a new epoch in which humanity appears to have impacted the earth in ways which mean that natural processes can no longer be separated from historical, social, economic and political effects has powerfully challenged the modernist understanding of the nature/culture divide, separating social and natural science, destabilising the assumptions of both. Thus it is argued that “nature” can no longer be understood as operating on fixed or natural laws, while politics and culture can no longer be understood as operating in a separate sphere of autonomy and freedom. These assumptions, in both spheres, were central to modernist constructions of Enlightenment progress, which is now seen to no longer exist or to have always been problematic.<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Davies argues

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5. Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby and Daniel Levine, “Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2016), pp. 499–523; 500; 507.

6. The previous understanding was that earth was in the epoch of the Holocene, which began at the end of the last Ice Age, 12,000 years ago. The Holocene is understood to be an epoch of relative temperature stability, which enabled the flourishing of human progress: the naming of the Anthropocene as a new epoch calls attention to how human impacts on the earth have brought this period of stability to an end. At the time of writing the International Commission on Stratigraphy had not reached a formal decision on the naming or dating of the Anthropocene as a new epoch.

7. Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’, “What is the ‘Anthropocene’?—Current Definition and Status”, *Quaternary Stratigraphy*. Accessed at: <https://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/>. These impacts include the emissions of “greenhouse” gases leading to global warming, the collapse of biodiversity including debate about whether we can speak of a “sixth extinction”, the acidification of the oceans and changes in biogeochemical cycles of water, nitrogen and phosphate. The earth system scientists of the Resilience Centre in Stockholm list nine planetary boundaries: stratospheric ozone depletion; loss of biosphere integrity (biodiversity loss and extinctions); chemical pollution and the release of novel entities; climate change; ocean acidification; freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle; land system change; nitrogen and phosphorus flows to the biosphere and oceans; and atmospheric aerosol loading. Four of these are currently operating beyond the safe operating space and two are not yet quantified (Stockholm Resilience Centre, “The nine planetary boundaries”, Stockholm Resilience Centre. Accessed at: <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>).

8. Bruno Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 45 (2014), pp. 1–18; Neil Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (Sage Publications, 2010), Kindle Edition; Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin”, *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 6 (2015), pp. 159–65; James D Proctor, “Saving nature in the Anthropocene”, *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, Vol. 3 (2013), pp. 83–92; Eric Swyngedouw, “Whose environment? The end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization”, *Ambiente & Sociedade*, Vol.

that: “The idea of the Anthropocene makes this state of being in between epochs the starting point for political thinking”.<sup>9</sup> As Bruno Latour, one of the most prolific and widely influential theorists articulating the Anthropocene as a break with modernity, highlights: the fact that it is science itself that appears to lead the questioning of modernist constructions of the world is highly significant, as: “No postmodern philosopher, no reflexive anthropologist, no liberal theologian, no political thinker would have dared to weigh the influence of humans on the same historical scale as rivers, floods, erosion and biochemistry”.<sup>10</sup>

The concern here is to demonstrate the importance of the Anthropocene for the deconstruction of the foundations of modernist understandings that enabled critique based on human reason. Thus, for the consideration of the transvaluation of critique, it makes very little difference when the Anthropocene is believed to have started as a geological era:<sup>11</sup> whether in 1492 with Columbus and the European holocaust in the Americas;<sup>12</sup> in 1784 with the invention of the steam engine by James Watt, that ushered in the industrial revolution; with the explosion of the atom bomb in 1945; or with the “Great Acceleration”, the spread of industrialisation across the world since.<sup>13</sup> The conclusion of the discussion, regardless of dating, is a shared one: that today human history cannot be understood as separate to geological history.<sup>14</sup>

Natural time is no longer somehow slow in comparison to the speed of human or cultural time. “What is sure is that glaciers appear to slide quicker, ice to melt faster, species to disappear at a greater speed, than the slow, gigantic, majestic, inertial pace of politics, consciousness and sensibilities”.<sup>15</sup> Nature or the “environment” is no longer to be seen as merely the “background”, but is itself a “protagonist”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the division between agential “man” and passive “nature” is fundamentally challenged, with catastrophic events which seemed to be exceptional or highly improbable in the past, becoming increasingly regular, even in the advanced West: “... in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway”.<sup>17</sup> As Amitav Ghosh powerfully notes, expectations of normality, balance and order that defined the modern world view, appear from today’s vantage point to be a terrible error or hubris: one carried to the point of “great

14 (2011), p. 2. Accessed at: [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1414-753X2011000200006](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-753X2011000200006); Robert Macfarlane, “Generation Anthropocene: How humans have altered the planet for ever”, *Guardian*, 1 April, 2016. Accessed at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever>; Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. London: Verso, 2016.

9. Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016, p. 5.

10. Latour, *Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, Edinburgh, 18th-28th of February 2013* (draft version 1-3-13), p. 77.

11. Any attempt to quantify a political shift in understandings via geological markings or historical events is inevitably going to be unsatisfactory as it is impossible to demarcate a change empirically, when the key aspect is the changing interpretation of the facts rather than the facts themselves.

12. Simon L Lewis S and Mark A Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”, *Nature*, Vol. 519 (2015), pp. 171–180.

13. For discussion, see Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, pp. 14–18.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

15. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

16. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 6.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

derangement".<sup>18</sup> There is a contemporary consensus that: "There can be no more talk of a linear and inexorable progress".<sup>19</sup>

For Timothy Morton: "In an age of global warming, there is no background, and thus there is no foreground. It is the end of the world, since worlds depend on backgrounds and foregrounds".<sup>20</sup> What was taken for granted is now revealed to be much more contingent, fragile and unpredictable; for Morton, the world is no longer an object, fixed, passive and external to us, thus there can be no such thing as a human "lifeworld" shaped within this.<sup>21</sup> Another way of expressing a similar idea is to note that the positions are reversed, as the background becomes foreground. As Latour states: "what was until now a mere décor for human history is becoming the principal actor".<sup>22</sup> So much so that it could be said that the Anthropocene does not just overcome the culture/nature divide, "it bypasses it entirely".<sup>23</sup>

... everything that was part of the background has now melted into the foreground. There is no environment any more, and thus no longer a need for environmentalism. We are post-natural for good. With the end of the political epistemology of the past that insured the presence of an indisputable outside arbiter—namely, Nature known by Science—we are left without a land and without a body politic.<sup>24</sup>

It is striking that in order to appreciate how critique turns into affirmation and how the human is no longer constructed as subject with the world as object, it makes little difference how we understand the causal drivers of the Anthropocene: whether responsibility lies with the Enlightenment, with capitalism,<sup>25</sup> with modernity, with mass consumerism, with the organisation, industrialisation and commercialisation of agriculture, with colonialism and imperialism, with economic theory, with the extraction of and dependency upon fossil fuels, with the rise of the military-industrial complex etc.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of where authors stand on the allocation of blame or responsibility for the contemporary condition—or whether it is named Anthropocene, Capitalocene<sup>27</sup> or by some other concept, such as Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene"—the descriptive and analytical conclusions fall into a similar set of ontological framings. Whatever the driving forces, the conclusion is common across them, that there is no longer a separation between culture and nature:

18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

19. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

20. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. 99.

21. "... there is no meaningfulness possible in a world without a foreground-background distinction. Worlds need horizons and horizons need backgrounds, which need foregrounds ... We have no world because the objects that functioned as invisible scenery have dissolved (*Ibid.*, p. 104).

22. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 4; see also p. 63; p. 100.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

25. See Jason W Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso, 2015.

26. See the extensive discussion in Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, who provide seven, in depth, historical narratives.

27. See Moore (ed.) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016.

there is no longer an “outside” or an “away”.<sup>28</sup> What happens “sticks” with us, like Styrofoam cups or plastic bags that stay in the environment and do not degrade in a human lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

The Anthropocene thesis thus “de-ontologises” the distinction between human culture and nature; this divide instead appears “as an epistemological product mistakenly presumed as a given fact of being”.<sup>30</sup> This transformation in the relation between the human as subject and the world as object transforms or transvalues critique. The next section of this article examines how the Anthropocene, or the intrusion of Gaia and hyperobjects, is seen to confront and end modernist understandings of critique. The sections that follow on from this illustrate how critique is increasingly affirming “life in the ruins”, after the crisis and the demise of modernity. And finally, how this represents a transvaluation of critique, in which left and right politics occupy the background and the world comes into the foreground as the key political subject or agency.

### The Anthropocene: After Critique

To grasp the new critical discourses of the Anthropocene, they need to be placed in the context of a broad demand that we accept that the way we understand the world has to change along with the way in which we act within it. The Anthropocene, in this respect, symbolises more than the threat of global warming—rather global warming is seen as the harbinger of a new awareness of our more humble position in the world: the end of the reassuring assumptions of liberal modernity. To be more precise, it is held that modernity itself was never how we understood it to be. As Bruno Latour has pointed out, modernity was a paradoxical condition, in that the more that we imagined ourselves as subjects separated from the world, developing knowledge of how we could direct and control “natural” processes, the more humanity grew entangled within these processes. Modernity itself was the midwife to processes that were no longer “natural” nor amenable to external control or direction by human subjects seen to have all the powers of agency while the rest of the world—of nonhumans—was seen to be merely passive objects of our intentionality.<sup>31</sup> As Timothy Morton argues, the awareness of human-induced climate change and of our dependence upon nonhuman agency has “done what two and a half decades of postmodernism failed to do, remove humans from the centre of [our] conceptual world”.<sup>32</sup>

28. Cf. G. Baker, “Critique, Use and World in Giorgio Agamben’s Genealogy of Government” *Global Society* 33, 1, 2019.

29. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 1; p. 60. As Myra Hird and Alexander Zahara note (“The Arctic Wastes”, in R Grusin (ed.) *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 121–145, p. 123): “waste constitutes perhaps the most abundant and enduring trace of the human for epochs to come”.

30. Etienne Turpin, “Introduction: Who Does the Earth Think It Is, Now?”, in Turpin (ed.) *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013, 3–10; 3–4.

31. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

32. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 181. It is important to note that this position has been criticised by those who share these conclusions but see theorists like Latour and Morton as dismissing the existence of a rich non-Western tradition of thought which was never “modern” in terms of the centrality of the culture/



Isabelle Stengers captures well the shift at stake, in her argument that it is “as if we were suspended between two histories” both of which describe the world in global and interconnected terms.<sup>33</sup> In one history, governance frameworks are clear, based on clear evidence and with straightforward goals of economic growth and social progress. The other seems much less clear with regard to what governance requires or how to respond to ongoing processes of change. In this sense, as Haraway argues, it makes more sense to see the Anthropocene as a “boundary event” rather than an epoch: “The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before”.<sup>34</sup> Latour eloquently describes what is at stake in this shift beyond the boundary, in the recognition of the Anthropocene:

What is so depressing in reading the documents of the sub-commission on stratigraphy, is that it runs through exactly the same items you could have read in any 20<sup>th</sup> century listing of all the glorious things that humans have done in “mastering nature,” except that today the glory is gone, and both the master and the slave—that is, humans as well as nature—have been melted together and morphed into strange new geological—I mean geos-torical—forces.<sup>35</sup>

This is echoed by Nigel Clark’s view that “the Anthropocene—viewed in all its disastrousness—confronts “the political” with forces and events that have the capacity to undo the political, along with every other human achievement, by removing the very grounds on which we might convene and strategize”.<sup>36</sup>

As Bonneuil and Fressoz state, the Anthropocene is not a transitory crisis: “the Anthropocene is a point of no return. It indicates a geological bifurcation with no foreseeable return to the normality of the Holocene”.<sup>37</sup> Clive Hamilton writes: “it can no longer be maintained that humans make their own history”.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, the Anthropocene appears to confirm that we are living in an age of “manufactured uncertainty” or “manufactured risk”; in which societal threats can no

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nature divide and to which decolonial and other “post-critical” approaches in global and international studies are increasingly paying heed. See, for example, Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017; Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take On The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word For Colonialism”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2016), pp. 4–22; David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, “Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2017), pp. 293–311.

33. Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Paris: Open Humanities Press, 2015, p. 17.

34. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 100.

35. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, pp. 76–77. As Claire Colebrook notes, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual”, in R Grusin (ed.) *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 1–20, p. 16, discussion of the Anthropocene, “lends more weight to Walter Benjamin’s claim that every document of civilization is a document of barbarism”.

36. Clark, “Geo-politics and the disaster of the Anthropocene”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 62 (2014), S1, pp. 19–37, p. 28.

37. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, *op. cit.*, p. 21

38. Clive Hamilton, “Human Destiny in the Anthropocene”, in C Hamilton, C Bonneuil and F Gemenne (eds) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 32–43, p. 35.

longer be seen as external but rather are immanent to social processes<sup>39</sup> undermining the modernist separation between security referent and security threat.<sup>40</sup> It is held that modernity comes up against its own limits with the end of the culture/nature divide: the end of a “nature” of laws and regularities somehow external to human interaction. The Anthropocene is an era of “multiple entanglements” according to Stengers, between natural or “non-human” forces and human (in)action, or, as Connolly describes this, of “entangled humanism”.<sup>41</sup> In the face of this entanglement, continuing to rely on modernist epistemologies, leaving us “armed only with the results of externalized and universal knowledge” would be, we are informed, the road to “doom”.<sup>42</sup>

In this more complex, contingent and inter-related world, the “reductionist” causal connections, generalisations, and “lessons learned”, which shaped modernist critical ideas of progress and development, are no longer seen to be tenable.<sup>43</sup> Without the “outside” of “nature”, counter positioned to the “inside” of “culture”, Enlightenment assumptions of there always being possible solutions and “happy endings” no longer make sense, instead, if humanity is to survive in any recognisable form, new forms of political imagination need to be much more humble, “reflexive” and “adaptive”.<sup>44</sup> Isabelle Stengers calls the end of this division the “intrusion of Gaia”, the intrusion of natural forces into every aspect of social and political governance:

The intrusion of ... Gaia, makes a major unknown, which is here to stay, exist at the heart of our lives. This is perhaps what is most difficult to conceptualize: no future can be foreseen in which she will give back to us the liberty of ignoring her. It is not a matter of a “bad moment that will pass”, followed by any kind of happy ending—in the shoddy sense of “problem solved”.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the lexicon of international political discourse is beginning to carry with it an asserted recognition of the Anthropocene as a fundamental challenge to previous epistemological and ontological assumptions about how we know and how we govern/secure in a world that is no longer perceived as open to linear temporalities of cause-and-effect.<sup>46</sup> As Latour argues, the system of the Anthropocene

39. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), p. 4; Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

40. David A Baldwin, “The Concept of Security”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 23 (1997), 1, pp. 5–26; David Chandler, “Neither International nor Global: Rethinking the Problematic Subject of Security”, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, Vol. 3 (2010), pp. 89–101.

41. William E Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

42. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

43. See, for example, Melanie Mitchell, *Complexity: A Guided Tour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. ix–xiii; Ilya Prigogine and Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (London: Fontana, 1985); Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding Complex Systems* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998).

44. Jan-Peter Voss and Basil Bornemann B “The Politics of Reflexive Governance: Challenges for Designing Adaptive Management and Transition Management”, *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 16 (2011), 2, art.9; Fikret Berkes, Johan Colding, and Carl Folke (eds) *Navigating social–ecological systems: building resilience for complexity and change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

45. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

46. See Madeleine Fagan “Security in the Anthropocene: Environment, ecology, escape”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 23 (2017), 2, pp. 292–314.



or Gaia “is anything but unified or unifying”; it is “not a cybernetic system designed by an engineer” but the product of multiple dispersed and interacting agencies, so there is no such thing as the “balance of nature” or the “wisdom of Gaia”.<sup>47</sup> We have therefore “permanently entered a post-natural period” where traditional science, based on stability, laws and regularities can no longer help negotiate the problem: “Climate scientists have been dragged into a post-epistemological situation that is as surprising to them as it is to the general public—both finding themselves thrown ‘out of nature’”.<sup>48</sup>

The one thing that critical Anthropocene theorists agree on is that there can be no technical fixes. The Anthropocene is not a problem to be solved (in a modernist sense) but an opportunity to be grasped (for rethinking human agency in more humble and less hubristic ways). It is precisely because the Anthropocene is ontologically constructed as a critique of modernist discourses of problem-solving that there can be no “comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious”.<sup>49</sup> No presence of geoengineering solutions “which will ensure that it is possible to continue to extract and burn, without the temperature rising”.<sup>50</sup> No possibility of fixed relations capable of regulation in the imaginary of “spaceship Earth.”<sup>51</sup>

However, some authors have understood the Anthropocene, and the rise of new digital technologies, as an opportunity for extending modernist ways of governing and enhancing human progress. This idea of a humanist or modernist solution, positing the idea of a “good Anthropocene”<sup>52</sup> is, nevertheless, anathema to those who seek to affirm the Anthropocene as “after the world of modernity”. As Claire Colebrook states: “Any “good” Anthropocene would be possible only by way of countless injustices”.<sup>53</sup> The modernist perspective is seen as the “managerial variant” of the Anthropocene, where the concept could potentially be captured and “become the official philosophy of a new technocratic and market-oriented geopower”:<sup>54</sup>

Whereas it should mean a call to humility, the Anthropocene is summoned in support of a planetary hubris ... [exemplified by] the Breakthrough Institute, an eco-modernist think-tank that celebrates the death of nature and preaches a “good anthropocene”, one in which advanced technology will save the planet ... sentiments characteristic of early infancy, lie at the basis of such “post-nature” discourse, participating in the dream of total absorption of nature into the commercial technosphere of contemporary capitalism.<sup>55</sup>

47. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

49. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

50. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, p. 8; see also Stengers, “Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 116 (2017), 2, pp. 381–400, p. 384: “whatever the geoengineering method, it would require that we keep extracting and mobilizing the massive necessary resources, to keep on feeding the climate manipulating machine ...”.

51. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, *op. cit.*, p. 66

52. See, for example, Andrew C Revkin, “Exploring Academia’s Role in Charting Paths to a “Good” Anthropocene”, *New York Times*, 16 June 2014. Accessed at: <https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/exploring-academias-role-in-charting-paths-to-a-good-anthropocene/?mcubz=2>.

53. Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene”, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

54. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii; p. 49.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

While for Bonneuil and Fressoz eco-modernism smacks of “early infancy”, Clive Hamilton argues that this view of welcoming the Anthropocene epoch with imaginaries of geoengineering is “reminiscent of Brian’s song on the cross at the end of *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*”.<sup>56</sup> For others, such as Richard Grusin, the imaginary of the “heroic agency of geoengineering” is merely another failed attempt to impose “many of the same masculinist and human-centred solutions that have created the problems in the first place”.<sup>57</sup> Simon Dalby asserts that any attempt to problem-solve in the manner of “contemporary earth system science syntheses of the human transformation of the biosphere ... [with its] assumption of separation as the starting point for governing a supposedly external realm is now simply untenable”.<sup>58</sup>

In response to this closure, new critical possibilities are held to be inherent in existing communal forms of living and socio-technological forms of interconnectivity and networked community, building on new ways of making connections and seeing relationships.<sup>59</sup> It is this need for a fluid awareness of relations in their specific and momentary context that has enabled the new critical frameworks analysed in the following two sections. For Anthropocene epistemologies and ontologies, the actual existing reality contains much more possibility and potential than has been traditionally recognised by policy makers and academics.<sup>60</sup> The task is that of engaging more imaginatively with the constantly emerging present, alert to the fact that these relationships need to become a matter of care, attention and opportunity.<sup>61</sup> Thus, contemporary critical theory makes a fundamental break with previous, or modernist, forms of critique. This article analyses this shift and stakes out two claims: firstly, that approaches that conceive of our contemporary time as the Anthropocene increasingly operate on the basis of affirmation; and secondly, that this shift necessarily operates through the transvaluation of critique.

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56. Hamilton, “Human Destiny in the Anthropocene”, p. 41; see also Hamilton, *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).

57. Richard Grusin, “Introduction: Anthropocene Feminism: An Experiment in Collaborative Theorizing”, in R Grusin (ed.) *Anthropocene Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. xii–xix: p.ix.

58. Simon Dalby, “Autistic Geopolitics / Anthropocene Therapy”, *Public Imagination*, Vol. 10, No. 42, 22 June 2017. Accessed at: <http://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/june-2017/autistic-geopolitics-anthropocene-therapy>.

59. For example, J K Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene”, *Antipode*, Vol. 41 (2010), s1, pp.320–346.

60. See, for example, Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 77, p. 183.

61. In this regard, the implications of the Anthropocene accord closely with perspectives forwarded by a wide range of critical theorists associated with posthuman, new materialist and speculative realist approaches among others (for example, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (London: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010); Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (London: Duke University Press, 2013); Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010).

### Critique as Affirmation: After the “End of the World”

This section argues that the Anthropocene is seen to call forth new ways of thinking critically. These are ways that are less human-centred or anthropocentric, driven first by the certainty that science and progress are enabling the move away from modernity and second by the need to affirm—rather than mourn—its ruins. These challenge the epistemological and ontological framings of modernity, from a position of radical scepticism grounded upon a new set of metaphysical certainties. For authors, like Latour and Morton, it is held to be the advances of science itself, which has revealed the world to be much more entangled and complex than modernity imagined. Science has itself called a halt to modernity in its recognition of the Anthropocene condition. In this respect, according to Morton, global climate change could be seen as a “saving power” or a candidate for Heidegger’s “last god”, enabling humanity to come back to the world after realising the terrible errors of modernist assumptions.<sup>62</sup> This return to the world is not a happy but a humbling one, “made precisely through our advanced technology and measuring instruments, not through worn peasant shoes and back-to-Nature festivals”.<sup>63</sup> For Ray Brassier it is science itself that has “uncovered the objective void of being”.<sup>64</sup> For Morton: “... our cognitive powers become self-defeating. The more we know about radiation, global warming, and the other massive objects that show up on our radar, the more enmeshed in them we realize we are ... Increasing science is not increasing demystification”.<sup>65</sup>

The Anthropocene, in fact, appears to be driven by new scientific advances, understood as enabling us to overcome the limitations of modernity. As Morton argues: “Science itself becomes the emergency break that brings the adventure of modernity to a shuddering halt”.<sup>66</sup> William Connolly focuses on the geo sciences revealing that the Earth’s “planetary force fields”—such as climate patterns, ocean conveyor systems, species evolution, glacier flows and air circulations—have always exhibited self-organising capacities that can go through volatile and rapid changes. Thus the Anthropocene is not new, except in the fact that human impacts amplify the non-linear and interactive effects of these forces in increasingly unpredictable ways.<sup>67</sup>

The Anthropocene thus spells the end of science as the cheerleader for modernist discourses of progress, rather than the end of science per se. Science as uncertainty is seen to free us from narrow or blinkered approaches that assumed a “happy ending” in the future, based on the assumption of a telos of “progress”. This is now off the table. It is the present not the future that is important. There is no possibility of debating what the future “ought” to be like “when it is the *what is* that obstinately requests its *due*” (emphasis in original).<sup>68</sup> There is no modernist future, regardless of whether we were ever modern or not, because we would need another five Earths “to push our endless Frontier to the same level of development as North America”.<sup>69</sup>

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62. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

64. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 25.

65. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160–161.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

67. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

68. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

69. *Ibid.*

Perhaps emblematic of this shift, and the implications that this has in terms of moving from transformative to affirmative forms of critique, is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015). Her starting assumption is the end of the modernist dream of progress, based on the division between humanity and nature: "Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life, and men and women can express themselves without the strictures of a parochially imagined rationality".<sup>70</sup> The importance of the book as an exemplar of the affirmation of the Anthropocene is that it self-consciously does not set out to be "a critique of the dreams of modernization and progress", but rather to think past their end; to take up the radical "imaginative challenge of living without those handrails, which once made us think we knew, collectively, where we were going".<sup>71</sup> The Anthropocene thus enables us to think "after failure", "after scientific progress", "after the end of the world".

For Tsing, living with the end of modernist dreams of progress need not be a negative experience. Rather, we can come to realise that modernity itself was a barrier to living fuller lives. Our assumptions of progress, the modernist telos that striving harder would lead to collective betterment, now seem no more emancipatory than religious promises of justice in the afterlife. Precarious and contingent life in modernity's "ruins" can be empowering and creative, full of new possibilities which modernity foreclosed. As Tsing states: "Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns ... agnostic about where we are going, we might look for what has been ignored because it never fit the time line of progress".<sup>72</sup> Her work, therefore, is constructed as a work of enablement, allowing the reader to make the transition from mourning modernity to embracing its demise:

I find myself surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs. I argue that only an appreciation of current precarity as an earthwide condition allows us to notice this —the situation of the world. As long as authoritative analysis requires assumptions of growth, experts don't see the heterogeneity of space and time, even when it is obvious to ordinary participants and observers ... To appreciate the patchy unpredictability associated with our current condition, we need to reopen our imaginations.<sup>73</sup>

Critical approaches of the Anthropocene are thus affirmative and constructive rather than deconstructive.<sup>74</sup> As Bruno Latour declared, in his widely cited 2004 article "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", critique needs to be transformed, from detracting and deconstructing to an ethos of adding to reality and construct-

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70. Anna L Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. vii.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

74. Cf. P. Bargaúes-Pedreny and P. Finkenbusch, "From Critique to Affirmation in International Relations" *Global Society* Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019).

ing.<sup>75</sup> For affirmative critical theorists, this world is fuller, livelier and more entangled than the soulless, simplified and atomised world of modernity. As Quentin Meillassoux argues, the Anthropocene welcomes us to the “great outdoors”,<sup>76</sup> what really exists rather than what exists in the stunted modernist imagination. For Tim Ingold, the question: “is not how to represent the world but: “How to turn the world into something “real”, how to make the world “present””.<sup>77</sup> As Tsing argues: “Precarity means not being able to plan. But it also stimulates noticing, as one works with what is available”.<sup>78</sup> The greatest tragedy would thereby be not the death of modernity in itself but rather the refusal to see beyond this: “If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope—or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin”.<sup>79</sup> If we refuse to affirm the Anthropocene, we are told that we are left only with the choice of nihilistic pessimism or with naively repeating the tragedies of the past. In fact, the Anthropocene is apparently serendipity itself, enabling us to develop just the sensitivities and new ways of affirmative thinking and being that we need to adapt to our new condition:

What if, as I’m suggesting, precarity *is* the condition of our time—or, to put it another way, what if our time is ripe for sensing precarity? What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the centre of the systematicity we seek?<sup>80</sup>

In the ruins of modernity there is more life than could possibly have been imagined by modernist human subjects convinced of their separation from the world. Our realisation that we can no longer go on in old, modernist, ways, enables us to appreciate rather than fear the Anthropocene condition. This drive to affirm the Anthropocene is particularly clear in the field of international relations, where leading theoretical journals, such as the *European Journal of International Relations*, seem keen to flag up critical work that highlights that the Anthropocene should not be confused with the problem of ecology or of climate change and thereby fitted into an extension of traditional modernist international security discourses.<sup>81</sup> For example, Madeleine Fagan argues:

This matters for thinking about security because to give the modern subject a home is to secure it; it is to reproduce the claims about universality and particularity that constitute the modern subject. Ecological security cannot

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75. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30 (2004), 2, pp. 225–248, p. 232.

76. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London: Continuum, 2008, p. 50.

77. Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 135.

78. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

81. While there is plenty of interesting critical work on climate change governance, in the field of International Relations (for example, Eva Lövbrand and Johannes Stripple, “Making climate change governable: accounting for carbon as sinks, credits and personal budgets”, *Critical Policy Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2011), pp. 187–200), the assumptions are always those of modernist ordering and control, ones that sit much less easily with the very different critical work that is done in relation to the Anthropocene.

offer an alternative to the account of security whose subject is the securing of the modern subject.<sup>82</sup>

Whereas modernist approaches read the Anthropocene as a problem of addressing climate change, critical affirmative approaches to the Anthropocene challenge international relations' discourses of security and strategic thinking at the most fundamental level of the subject of security itself. As Audra Mitchell states, in the same journal, it is "because IR [international relations] is so invested in human survival that it renders the assumption of its possibility unquestionable—and therefore renders extinction unthinkable".<sup>83</sup> Importantly, she argues that rather than seeing the problems as solvable on the basis of alternative forms of securing, it is the drive to secure itself which is problematic; "only questioning the dogma of survival can enable us to critique this condition, and possibly (although not necessarily) to transcend it".<sup>84</sup> Modernist assumptions of securing the human against the world are held to be precisely the problem that needs to be overcome.<sup>85</sup>

Realising our precarious condition brings us back to the world: the Anthropocene is like an unseen force, imposing a new sociability and new set of sensitivities on the basis that we are no longer separate, no longer in control, no longer not interested in other actors and agencies with which we cohabit. The Anthropocene is thereby less a world of doom and gloom and extinction than an invitation to be curious, imaginative, exploratory, playful even<sup>86</sup> in the need to be attuned to what the world is telling us rather than focusing on what we want to do to the world.

### The Transvaluation of Critique

Whereas, for the moderns, politics carved out a separate human sphere of freedom and autonomy in distinction from nature, for the no longer moderns of the Anthropocene the situation is reversed and it is the world itself that shapes and directs the content of politics. As William Connolly has argued, modernist social and political thought had neglected the ontological assumptions upon which it depended, treating them as a background that could be taken for granted.<sup>87</sup> As considered above, it is precisely these assumptions that are challenged in the Anthropocene. A new set of ontological assumptions is beginning to inform contemporary social and political thought and thus the new modes of governance and critique, which this final section encourages to recognise and interpret as the transvaluation of modernist values.

The new critical framings of the Anthropocene privilege the "is" of the world over the "ought" of attempts to carve out a separate human space. Modern politics

82. Fagan, "Security in the Anthropocene", *op. cit.*, p. 308.

83. Audra Mitchell, "Is IR going extinct?", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2017), pp. 3–25; p. 12.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

85. See Scott Hamilton, "Securing ourselves from ourselves? The paradox of "entanglement" in the Anthropocene", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, First Online: 29 July 2017.

86. See object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost's *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, The Uses of Boredom, & the secret of Games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

87. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–4



was oriented around the problem of the “ought”, how the world could be governed or organised in ways in which humanity could prosper. The struggle (often broadly construed in terms of a continuum stretching between Left and Right) was also a contestation over forms of knowing and acting in the world. This contestation was cohered around differing assumptions of human nature, such as whether humans were rational or irrational, individualist or collective, and the extent to which states or governing authorities needed to intervene upon this basis. Today, this view of politics as a contestation over the nature of the human and how humanity can best be served is seen to be less central to contemporary concerns: and no longer as the “be all and end all” of politics.

Perhaps an obvious analogy could be made with how the struggles of the warring kingdoms of Westeros, in the “Game of Thrones” TV series, begin to pale into insignificance in comparison to the looming collective threat posed by the coming of winter and the White Walkers. Like the coming of winter, entry into the epoch of the Anthropocene is held to displace the modernist framework and context of political contestation. Modernist politics assumed that the “is” of the world would look after itself, i.e. that nature or the environment was just the backdrop or the stage for the great struggle between Left and Right. Today the positions seem to be reversed, winter/the Anthropocene is seen to push the politics of Left and Right from the foreground to the background. As Nigel Clark argues, “the impression that deep-seated forces of the earth can leave on social worlds is out of all proportion to the power of social actors to legislate over the lithosphere” (the earth’s upper mantle and crust).<sup>88</sup> The relation between humanity and nature appears to be reversed:

What does it mean to say that life, or the earth, or nature, or the universe are not just constellations of material and energy with which humans forge connections, but realities upon which we are utterly dependent—in ways that are out of all proportion to life, nature, the earth or the universe’s dependence on us?<sup>89</sup>

The reversing of the background and foreground is not entirely politically neutral. In fact, it is the aspirational politics of the Left, in its desire for greater freedom, autonomy and equality in social and economic life and for an increase in material wealth and its broader distribution, which appears to be particularly problematic. As Sara Nelson and Bruce Braun argue: “In the context of these entanglements it is not clear what autonomy means, politically or ontologically”.<sup>90</sup>

As evinced in the notion of “immaterial” production and an emphasis on the revolutionary possibilities offered by cognitive and communicative capitalism, the material conditions of this new economy of extractivism and the globalization of manufacturing remained unacknowledged ... The understanding of human potentiality ... depends on a sharp distinction between life and nonlife, human and nonhuman, and the movement’s

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88. Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (Sage Publications, 2010), Kindle Edition, Kindle location, pp. 220–221.

89. *Ibid.*, Kindle location, pp. 917–918.

90. Sara Nelson and Bruce Braun, “Autonomia in the Anthropocene: New Challenges to Radical Politics”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 116 (2017), 2, pp. 223–235, p. 224.

historical analysis and political imagination rely on a knowable, reliable, “always there” nature that is neither used up nor filled with surprises.<sup>91</sup>

As Jason Moore has illustrated, one of the key problems for those who believe in material progress as the key to human betterment has been that capitalism did not just exploit unpaid labour power but also the productive power of non-human labour. Thus, for Moore, it is not only that, as Marx noted, there is a tendency of the rate of profit to fall but there is also a tendency for the rate of “ecological surplus” to fall,<sup>92</sup> with the depletion of energy and mineral resources.<sup>93</sup> The drive to overcome boundaries to the appropriation of “cheap nature” as well as “cheap labour” gave capitalism a productive dynamic not based purely on the invisibility of human labour of unpaid reproduction (highlighted by feminist scholars, like Silvia Federici)<sup>94</sup> but also on the invisibility of non-human labour and resources (an invisibility which is now all too visible). What was seen to be the expansion of progress and human potential can be read as actually the extractive machine of capitalism ceaselessly seeking new untapped resources to exploit on the “cheap”. This form of organising nature has now reached its limits, ironically because of the resistance of non-human “nature” rather than a rebellion of humanity.<sup>95</sup> As Stengers notes: “Today all Marxist or post-Marxist scripts must confront a perspective of destruction that Marx could not anticipate ... which deeply perturbs any theory indifferent to the new, dramatic restriction of our historical horizon”.<sup>96</sup>

Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that “logically speaking, the climate crisis is not inherently a result of economic inequalities”; if we had lived in a “more evenly prosperous and just world” then “the climate crisis would have been worse”: “Our collective carbon footprint would have only been larger—for the world’s poor do not consume much and contribute little to the production of greenhouse gases—and the climate change crisis would have been so much sooner and in a much more drastic way”.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, part of the problem of “population” is “due surely in part to modern medicine, public health measures, eradication of epidemics, the use of artificial fertilisers, and so on” and therefore “cannot be attributed in any straightforward way to a logic of a predatory and capitalist West”.<sup>98</sup> Any imaginary of capitalism paving the way to socialism as a more progressive system, as Stengers argues, needs to be rejected on the basis that it “would instead herald the perfect socioecological storm which systematic extraction is now unleashing”.<sup>99</sup>

91. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

92. Highlighted as a “metabolic rift” by McKenzie Wark (*Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*. London: Verso, 2015, p.xiv): “where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don’t return so that the cycle can renew itself”.

93. See, Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

94. See, for example, Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

95. See discussion in Jason Read, “Anthropocene and Anthropogenesis: Philosophical Anthropology and the Ends of Man”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 116 (2017), 2, pp. 257–273.

96. Stengers, “Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 116 (2017), pp. 381–400, p. 383.

97. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Anthropocene and the Convergence of Histories”, in C Hamilton, C Bonneuil and F Gemenne (eds) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 44–56, p. 49; see also Chakrabarty “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35 (2009), 2, pp. 197–222.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

99. Stengers, “Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia”, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

As Amitav Ghosh asserts, colonialisation can be understood to have held back climate change: if the European empires had been dismantled earlier, for example, after the First World War, there is every chance that the economies of mainland Asia would have accelerated earlier.<sup>100</sup> Thus the concept of human freedom that developed with the Enlightenment is held to disappear in the Anthropocene, as it is realised that humankind can never shed its dependence or transcend its constraints:<sup>101</sup> “... the Anthropocene challenges the modern definition of freedom, long conceived in opposition to nature ... A freedom understood in this way sets human emancipation against nature, against the Earth as a whole”.<sup>102</sup> For Chakrabarty and others, the problem of global warming and climate change challenges political discourses of progress, based upon social justice and global equality and freedom from oppression: there is a “growing divergence in our consciousness of the global—a singularly human story—and the planetary, a perspective to which humans are incidental”.<sup>103</sup> Nelson and Braun argue that we are forced to accept that modernist or radical views of human autonomy and human freedom can no longer be credible today, “if the Anthropocene represents the farcical realisation of human autonomy in the form of planetary devastation—in which the “production of man by man” appears to lead to his extinction”.<sup>104</sup>

Taking a broader approach to problematise modernist politics in its entirety, William Connolly emphasises that the problem is epistemological rather than narrowly “political”—or to do with capitalism per se. Modernist political frameworks of Left/Right contestation lacked an appreciation of the planetary processes, which are recognised today. While thinkers of the Right and the Left may have fundamentally disagreed over many issues they all shared a “sociocentrism” or “human exceptionalism”, which placed humans as somehow above and separate from the world. They acted as if social, economic and political processes were all that mattered; that the “environment” was merely the backdrop to the great human drama of social and political struggle. If the moderns considered changes caused by non-human forces and assemblages, these were considered to be set on a different and slower temporality than that of human or cultural transition and transformations:

Sociocentrism, in individualist, nationalist, communist, neoliberal, and republican traditions, assumes that a political economy is either in charge of nature, or that the limits nature poses to it are set on long, slow time, or, in a more attenuated version, that if we lift the human footprint nature will settle down into patterns that are benign for us. Given any of these assumptions, questions of agency, explanation, and belonging in practice tend to devolve around attention to internal cultural practices.<sup>105</sup>

As Connolly and many other authors insist, modernist conceptions of politics, of belonging and community, of ethics and ideas of human freedom and human exceptionalism, based on modernist epistemological and ontological assumptions

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100. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, *op. cit.*, pp. 109–110.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

102. Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

103. Chakrabarty, “The Anthropocene and the Convergence of Histories”, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

104. Nelson and Braun, “Autonomia in the Anthropocene”, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

105. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

of reason and causal linearity all need to be reformulated and reconsidered. The contemporary consensus is that “the Anthropocene concept obliges us to embark on a deep reconceptualisation” of the categories and concepts of political science, including the understandings of human agency, of history, of politics and of democracy.<sup>106</sup> “Yet political theory, stuck in the Holocene, has been slow to recognise the Anthropocene and what it means. Most insights have come from philosophers and sociologists”<sup>107</sup> less tied to the assumptions and binaries of the formal political sphere of states and citizens.

This shift fundamentally alters the nature of politics and governance. Politics is no longer “all about us” in the sense of what we might think a just or equitable world might be and instead “all about the world itself”. Stengers captures this nicely in her view that, while the problems of the Anthropocene may be caused by the coupling of the material processes of capitalism and geological forces of nature, the brutal intrusion of the planet or Gaia means that “Struggling against Gaia makes no sense: it is a matter of learning to compose with her”.<sup>108</sup> Stengers emphasises that “*there is no choice*”.<sup>109</sup> This entails:

... cutting the link ... established [in the nineteenth century] between emancipation and what I would call an “epic” version of materialism, a version that tends to substitute the tale of a conquest of nature by human labor for the fable of Man “created to have dominion over the earth”. It is a seductive conceptual trick but one that bets on the earth available for this dominion or conquest. Naming Gaia is therefore to abandon the link between emancipation and epic conquest, indeed even between emancipation and most of the significations that, since the nineteenth century, have been attached to what was baptized “progress”.<sup>110</sup>

For Stengers, the modernist discourse of “progress” and of the possibility of a “happy ending” is over, but this is far from a matter of regret, in fact, this is a real “emancipation”, our emancipation from modernist illusions of human exceptionalism. Rather than going to war against the Earth, through geo-engineering and the mobilisation of technological solutions, she suggests “slowing down”, “caring for entanglement” and “learning the art of paying attention”.<sup>111</sup> As an exemplar of the practice of critique as affirmation she emphasises: “it is also a matter of joy, sometimes dolorous joy, but joy indeed, when you feel your thought and imagination affected, put into (e)motion, attached to what was previously indifferent”.<sup>112</sup> It goes without saying that this transvaluation of the ends of critique, encouraging joy in the present through the affirmation of what exists, rather than inspiring future-oriented thinking based upon the possibility of transforming and

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106. Hamilton, Bonneuil and François Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene”, in C Hamilton, C Bonneuil and F Gemenne (eds) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–13, p. 9

107. *Ibid.*

108. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Stengers, “Matters of Cosmopolitics: On the Provocation of Gaia (in conversation with Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin)”, in Turpin, *Architecture in the Anthropocene*, 171–182, 179.

112. *Ibid.*, 179–180.

overcoming social and technical limits, depends on the acceptance of the Anthropocene thesis and the end of modernist assumptions. In a seemingly very different world, the Conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher also famously declared that “There Is No Alternative”, articulating her own version of the critique of intervention to transform and adapt social processes to human-centred ends. Forty years later it appears that affirmation is gaining much greater acceptance, but it is Gaia’s planetary limits that must be affirmed, rather than the planetary limits of market forces.

## Conclusion

Key to the current transvaluation of critique is the contemporary perception that modernity is over. The arrival of climate change and global warming, indicating a new set of problems and potential limits to progress and development, seems to have coincided with an already existing exhaustion of the modernist episteme, creating a potent dynamic.<sup>113</sup> As Claire Colebrook notes: “The Anthropocene seems to arrive just as a whole new series of materialisms, vitalisms, realisms, and inhuman turns require us to think about what has definite and forceful existence regardless of our sense of world”.<sup>114</sup> This is why, for many critical theorists, the Anthropocene appears as something that is non-negotiable. Jessi Lehman and Sara Nelson, for example, argue that: “In the Anthropocene, we are always already living in the aftermath of the event”.<sup>115</sup> The delayed dynamics of climate change mean that its impact is unavoidable while the entanglement of human and geological factors mean that human agency can never again be imagined in modernist ways. Stephanie Wakefield asserts that: “the crisis is the age. It is on this terrain of an exhausted paradigm—both historical and metaphysical—that a battle is underway”.<sup>116</sup> This sense of modernity as “an exhausted paradigm” has enabled the new formulation of critique in the Anthropocene to rapidly cohere and appear to be powerfully vindicated in every extreme weather event or unexpected accident or disaster.

This article has argued that critical approaches in the Anthropocene can be increasingly understood as putting the nature of entangled being at the centre of politics rather than the designs or goals of the human as subject. The contemporary critical assumptions of the Anthropocene do not raise the possibility of alternative futures but rather of fuller and more meaningful presents, seeking to affirm the world as it currently exists. Any forwarding of alternatives would merely, once again, reconstitute the view of man as a knowing subject separated from the world. Thus, contemporary critical sensitivities necessarily affirm the idea that

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113. Cf. P. Bargaés-Pedreny and J. Schmidt, “Learning to Be Postmodern in an All Too Modern World: ‘Whatever action’ in International Climate Change Imaginaries”, *Global Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2019); Pol Bargaés-Pedreny, “Connolly and the never-ending critiques of liberal peace: from the privilege of difference to vorarephilia”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 30 (2017), 2/3, pp. 216–234.

114. Colebrook, “We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene”, p. 7. In fact, Richard Grusin, “Introduction”, p. viii, argues that “the concept of the Anthropocene has arguably been implicit in feminist and queer theory for decades”.

115. Jessi Lehman and Sara Nelson, “Experimental politics in the Anthropocene”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38 (2014), pp. 444–447, p. 444.

116. Stephanie Wakefield “The crisis is the age”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 38 (2014), pp. 450–452, p. 451.

“there is no happy ending”.<sup>117</sup> As Danowski and Viveiros de Castro note, today we appear surrounded by a cacophony of contemporary voices, with new and sophisticated arguments, all determined to “end the world” and even advocating that the “real” world, “in its radical contingency and purposelessness, has to be “realized” against Reason and Meaning”.<sup>118</sup> There is little doubt that these affirmative views are powerfully expressive of the underlying sentiments driving the new critical framings of the Anthropocene. It is these underlying sentiments, based on a real material experience of the defeat of left and transformative aspirations, which makes it difficult to assume any return of the modernist critical project.

### About the Author

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117. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

118. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.