

The Black Anthropocene

David Chandler

Response to Frédéric Neyrat's keynote, 'Planetary Sovereignty', for the
'Constitutionalizing the Anthropocene' Workshop, Tilburg Law School,
2-4 December 2020

Abstract

Frédéric makes the powerful point that traditional discourses of constitutionalising fail to grasp the problem of sovereignty and the subject; that the human as subject is no longer above or external to the problematic of the Anthropocene but suborned by it: reacting and adapting rather than initiating and shaping. Humans as political and legal subjects are still present, in territorial legal forms as citizens, but also they exist planetarily: in material processes whose forces, intensities and dynamics exceed discourses of political interest or distribution of the national cake. This doubling has echoes of Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on humanity as a 'geophysical force' at the planetary level not merely a cultural/political one. The human is seen doubly: ontically and ontologically, territorially and planetarily, outside and inside, part of culture and part of nature/the 'geo' – fair enough. The problem is that the analysis bleeds the two together providing the human as (legal) subject with an afterlife of 'planetary sovereignty': moved by broader concerns and responsibilities, of enabling the conditions for planetary life itself, rather than merely by short-term self-interest or merely anthropocentric/human-centred concerns. This aligns with the work of Bruno Latour or Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in their doubling of the Human and the Earthbound/Terran, similarly indicating the need for different approaches/ political subjectivities.

In fine, I wish to problematize the assumption that the planetary subject/sovereign can overcome the limits of the national/modern one. While the 'Unconstructable Earth' project is an excellent basis for the critique of modernist approaches to 'Constitutionalizing the Anthropocene', I don't think it goes nearly far enough in its grasp of these limits, which remain at the ontic level, excessive of the time and space of modernity rather than undermining its foundational assumptions. To my mind, Frédéric (like Chakrabarty and Latour) seeks to establish a half-way house, where the human is reformed but the basic anthropocentric, modernist or Eurocentric conceits capable of 'Constitutionalizing the Anthropocene' are still at work. I posit the Black Anthropocene as ontological limit to the Constitutionalizing project. The limits are ontological but manifest simply enough to begin to open up a broader discussion of the desire to constitutionalize, and its conditions of possibility, in terms of ethics, time and space.

- Ethically the constitutionalizing project of 'planetary sovereignty' (the same goes for the similar perspectives in the other two keynotes) does not seek mastery or control but seeks to govern the status quo, to save, preserve, conserve, to adapt, to be more

cautious or humble in its iterative engagements and openness or sensitivity to feedback effects. This imaginary of modulation around the norm only works if you have something to save or preserve. It's clearly elitist or the standpoint/ positionality of white privilege. At least in the past governance was legitimized on the promise of change or transformation. At best, there is nothing of interest here for those who have little stake in the status quo. At worst there is a disavowal of the unequal distribution of modernity's costs and benefits. Ethically the divide could be posed in terms of projects of 'saving' vs those of 'ending' the world.

- The temporicity/ temporality of the claims for 'planetary sovereignty' smuggle in modernist assumptions of linear time and flat space which can enable the universal causal links to be traced in their multiple, overlapping and non-linear transversal of time and space, enabling such humble and iterative responsibilities to be possible. As much as the Anthropocene calls attention to the limits of this positing of subject and world, the discourses of 'Constitutionalizing the Anthropocene' refuse to concede but rather seek to expand, to redistribute, to multiply attempts to know and to govern.
- Spatially, there is always an 'outside' for the governing imaginary, always more to be colonized/constitutionalized as discourses of subjects/agencies/actants/stakeholders expand to build imaginary communities constituted by proliferating catastrophes and every expansion necessitates new cuts, boundaries and borders of efficient friend or threatening foe. The 'planetary' intimates this in the attempt to go beyond the world or the globe, beyond the reductionist world of things to govern relations, intensities and interactions.

The Black Anthropocene problematizes desires to colonize/ constitutionalize, to make the human more real, more relational, more sensitive, more 'planetary'. The missions to reform the 'genres' of the human/ to 'constitutionalize' the subject in new ways - even those that aim to go 'beyond' or be 'more-than' human - all seek to add to the powers and capacities of governing/ colonizing/ constitutionalizing power. The Black Anthropocene works ontologically as an invitation to call into question the demand for constitutionalizing itself. In so doing it enables critical thinking to move beyond merely signalling the ontic limitations of this demand.