

## **Spinning Anthropocenarios: Climate Change Narratives as Geopolitics in the Late Holocene**

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**Abstract:** This essay reconsiders research programs in environmental studies as they confront the Anthropocene. While scientific investigations are conducted with a commitment to clarifying the scientific record for geological sciences, the interpretation of their goals, methods, and results have also become more fluid cultural, political, and social narratives with complicated and conflicted implications in today's economy and society. Anthropocene studies, which have assembled multi-scale projects of multidisciplinary teams, now aspire to steer geoscience analysis, in part, toward planet-wide management of today's rapid climate change events as they propound new objects of study and control. This study poses some questions about these trends. Is the turn to the Anthropocene, which can easily serve be another mystified narrative for the "rise of the West" since the fifteenth century, an attempt to sustain technocratic projects for centers of power and knowledge based in the West? As with all politics, what decisive struggles are at stake between "who, whom" in these shifting geopolitical debates that now are cloaked in the advanced study of physical and social sciences?

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Cultural Politics, Holocene, Ethnocentrism, Imperialism

### **Introduction**

This essay critically reassesses what appears to be a "new geopolitics" tied to the intense politicization of how to understand the planet Earth's past, present and future ecological conditions.<sup>i</sup> Just as certain scientific conventions were ratified to label the present epoch, the Holocene, a fresh debate has developed about the advent of its proposed successor age in deep time, namely, the Anthropocene epoch. The controversial conceptualization of this new geological time period in the research programs of many learned disciplines, in turn, has sparked considerable attention in academia, government, and civil society.

Ironically, the Anthropocene epoch still has not been formally presented to the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) for official adoption, even though the term has been bandied around for nearly 20 years as a widely recognized concept. Instead the still contested idea of the Holocene epoch<sup>ii</sup> has been formally sub-divided into three ages: the first being the Greenlandian (11,700-8,360 BCE), the second more recent period is the Northgrippian (8,326 to 4,250 BCE), and the third most recent age is our current time, namely, the Meghalayan (4,250 years ago to the present), according to an IUGS directive announced on July 13, 2018.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite these official conventions shifting in prevailing international scientific research organizations, the concept of the Anthropocene remains so attractive that it has morphed to a new narrative. At the same time, this notion has colonized a broad spectrum of scholarship in

cultural, physical or social geography as well as an array of loosely allied pursuits in various environmental humanities and social science networks that are all either weighing the merits or celebrating the attractions of Anthropocene concepts.<sup>iv</sup> Such widespread attention, however, requires asking a tough question. Since the Meghalayan age is unlikely to thrill either humanists or scientists to the same degree as the Anthropocene epoch, why does the unofficial latter term remain so popular? To what degree do these popular, but informal efforts in many disciplines misinterpret a set of new world historical relations, which appear to be mystified in geological deep time discussions in ways that occlude subtle technocentric, racialized or ethnocentric perspectives in the discursive constructs of this new geopolitics?

On one level, the Anthropocene narrative has become an all-purpose cause, effect, and context for almost any discursive project that makes rigorous disciplinary doubt seem irrelevant. Beyond such narratological fashion statements, however, one wonders if more is revealed in the popularity of these temporalized geopolitical ideas than many of their celebrants in many debates and disciplines care to consider? On closer inspection, it seems neo-Orientalist narratives quietly lace together the enthusiastic production and reception of Anthropocene theses, and perhaps the Anthropocene narrative is a stealthy Occidental cartography for mapping embedded cultural, economic and political inequalities with technological, racial or ethnonational coordinates for these new geopolitics at the end of the Holocene epoch in the Meghalayan Age?

The “early Anthropocene” school of thought, for example, reconsiders the significant role of prehistoric and ancient humans around the world (during the Upper Age of the Pleistocene epoch as well as all three of the Holocene’s newly named ages) in causing extensive anthropogenic changes in their proximate environments with early urbanization, the use of fire, and settled agriculture,<sup>v</sup> but it is usually dismissed in these new geopolitical discussions. Such early Anthropocenarios speculate about the environmental impact of all humans everywhere, who had diverse racial roots, cultural heritages and natural habitats in different world regions during the Pleistocene epoch as well as at the decisive turn from the Upper Paleolithic through the Neolithic phase of human technological evolution.<sup>vi</sup> While less extensive in scope and intensive in scale, this school of thought maintains Earth’s atmosphere and biosphere were modified perceptibly millennia ago by anthropogenic factors that are still not yet completely understood. Ranging from the widespread ecological uses of fire by prehistoric hunter-gather societies or practices of early sedentary agriculture to the foundings of urban centers around the world in Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe or the breakthroughs of early metallurgical technologies millennia before the present era, humans already were leaving discernible traces in geological time.<sup>vii</sup> Because these changes were often long ago, far away, and not easily credited to wealthy, powerful centers of technological prowess today, they are downplayed as the curiosities of antiquity almost irrelevant to the debates today.

Standing in opposition to this plausible account of early pervasive environmental changes, the “recent Anthropocene” school of analysis looks to the more favored forces of machine technology, European culture, and capitalist modernity almost without qualification. It focuses on the carbon economies of steam power behind the global capitalist modernization launched by white European empires.<sup>viii</sup> As these “first adopters” of carbon intensive life styles imposed exploitative colonial economies on non-white subjugated peoples, the Anthropocene is made coextensive with fossil fuel burning in urban-industrial capitalist Europe following the 1760s,

and excessive petroleum consumption during “the Great Acceleration” after World War II in North America and Western Europe.<sup>ix</sup> On the one side of ledger, how much is this unbalanced reaction can be tied to credible scientific evidence? And, on the other side, to what extent is this response simply the power of narrative overwhelming audiences, which enable this idea’s reception to fit their ethnic, racial, and technological preconceptions, regardless of all other evidence?

### **Anthropocenarian Beginnings**

Anthropocene terminological memes have been circulating without extraordinary celebration within a few biological and geoscience research networks in the Northern hemisphere since the 1980s, especially in work by Eugene F. Stoermer from the University of Michigan. Their use, however, quickly expanded only in 2000 after Paul J. Crutzen, a 1995 winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, protested at an IGBP symposium in Mexico about how a colleague in one session had mapped out the sweep of the Holocene. Well aware of Stoermer’s work, Crutzen exclaimed that era was over and Anthropocene narratives began to proliferate quite rapidly after this rhetorical intervention.<sup>x</sup> To push for the rapid ratification of the Anthropocene in the global science community, these two scientists also tagged the installation of fossil-fueled steam engine technology in Western Europe during the late eighteenth century as the key shift for scientific investigations on behalf of “all Humanity” to mark the demise of the Holocene.<sup>xi</sup>

Here the power of narrative as cause, effect and context in North Atlantic and Western science, in fact, legitimizes a number of explicit and implicit assumptions about the Anthropocene -- what it means, how it matters, and who must do act now to guide others -- as discursive maps for/about the “first adopters” of carbon-based “fossil capitalism.”<sup>xii</sup> This technocentric, racialized, and ethnocentric spin begins turning in Europe’s Industrial Revolution, and scientific analyses are sucked into its vortices, which shrouds these divides and their problematic conceptual origins in earlier “the West” versus “the Rest” discourses.<sup>xiii</sup> Unavoidably, these fashions belie subtle prejudices for Western technoscientific authority, imperialist privilege, paternalistic neocolonialism, or European ethnocentrism becoming embedded in the Anthropocene as a global meme.

By tracking the development of mechanical fossil fueled technologies, and tying their adoption to rapid climate change, the scope of Anthropocene thought parallels other historic developments identified more grandiosely in different triumphalist narrative registers by historians around the North Atlantic Basin, like “The Age of Exploration,” “The Age of Discovery,” or “The Age of Enlightenment.” These overblown civilizational labels connote instances of Occidental collective congratulation or moments of civilizational triumph for the great mercantile empires of Europe.<sup>xiv</sup> In fact, it is difficult to disentangle these discourses from Western ethnopreneurial mythologies that implicitly frame the Anthropocene idea. Those myths mystify how brutal colonization, ethnic cleansing, and settler rule all were essential for the “sustainable development” of the new world capitalist ecologies launched during “The Age of Discovery.” Some have fretted about the ecological devastation cascading from the European “Age of Exploration,”<sup>xv</sup> because it also is brazenly a Western “Age of Expansion,” but many scientists and humanists as well as their audiences still see the footprints of Humanity at large on the beaches of the Anthropocene.<sup>xvi</sup>

While they are, indeed, members of humanity, powerful Western individuals socialized within specific cultures, ethnicities, languages, and class/gender/racial identities also are granted privileged narrative authority and practical significance in such conceptual dynamics. Leveraging Occidentalizing intellectual guile, cultural allure, and brute force, their narratives, like their global empires, dominate Orientalized others within their own societies as well as other countries in addition to almost obliterating those important trends from pre-history with this recent history.<sup>xvii</sup> From one perspective, they perhaps have a responsibility to protect the vulnerable, but they also gain the capacity to mystify the victimizers of vulnerable victims. From another perspective, this power also gives them the discretion to decide when, where, and who to protect. Even then, how long will this protection continue, and for whose benefit?

On the one hand, the close coevolution of Anthropocene developments and devastating imperial atrocities in the imposition of racial domination over the past 250 years cannot be denied.<sup>xviii</sup> Nevertheless, it is slightly shocking, on the other hand, to see how the exclusionary logics of race/gender/class embedded in Occidental empires, neocolonial networks and corporate globalism since 1492, 1918 or 1945 have not lessened, much less ended, in these debates. In what manner then is the Anthropocenarian debate about managing today's anthropogenic climate change itself becoming another subtle rearticulation of neoimperial, exclusionary, and racial privilege for key anthropogenitors of this destruction? And, how can these tendencies persist in explicit and implicit research agendas of the physical and natural sciences, which naively attribute all of the current costs of rapid climate change to "Humanity as species being" all the time? With the more recent reaffirmation of vitalist philosophies (once so popular and celebrated during the hey-day of Victorian and Edwardian scientific racism and imperial expansion), fresh collectives of "new materialist" thinkers are forming their ranks. As they gather, many assign decisive agency in today's new geopolitics to mystified social/cultural assemblages of "vibrant matter" around the Earth (seen now as "Gaia"), whose human and nonhuman actants are depicted as shaping the Anthropocene as much by accident as by design.<sup>xix</sup>

The power/knowledge couplets these concepts thrive upon, however, are still derived from "Enlightenment" reasoning.<sup>xx</sup> With potent new mixtures of greater Western power pitted against Non-Western comparative powerlessness, and Western knowledge displacing non-Western superstition, belief or ignorance during the last three centuries of modernization and development, these trends also are linked directly to the Anthropocene in a "New Environmentalism."<sup>xxi</sup> While many believe relations of imperial inequality were at least partly suspended, if not decisively ended, by waves of decolonization, national liberation, and self-rule that rose in the twentieth century, it often appears that the Anthropocene reinscribes civilizational power, position, and privilege into contemporary history, not unlike Samuel Huntington's accounts of "The West" struggling against "The Rest?" Furthermore, is this clash of civilizations, which is linked to racial, ethnocentric, and class-centered barriers of days past, now again in play with Anthropocene thinking about "first adopters" and "late adopters" of fossil capitalism?

### **Taking the Anthropocene Turn**

When speaking of the broader sweep in Anthropocene thought, there is no fixed formal agreement with regard to all of its causes. Yet, most proponents repeatedly suggest with nearly complete certainty that an agent known as Man, or "the Anthropos," is causing this destructive

chaos at the conjuncture of geological and historical time.<sup>xxii</sup> And, those effects definitely are shifting the course of nonhuman and human history.

Implicitly imperialist dialects, carrying strange tones of Victorian arrogance, have returned with the initial popular characterizations of the Anthropocene over the past decade, and frequently in the elite press of the world's major economic and political powers. *The National Geographic* in March 2011 with an article by Elizabeth Kolbert announced, for example, "Enter the Anthropocene--Age of Man" to spotlight "a new name for a new geologic epoch--one defined by our own massive impact on the planet"<sup>xxiii</sup> to mention only one of many such declarations in the popular press conveying the same civilizational presumption of authority for this vague contemporary American "our-ness" in "the West" over and against "the Rest."

Who gains from such intellectual declarations, and why issue such historic pronouncements? These geopoliticizing stories fret about the fate of all Humanity, and they explicitly tag Humanity *per se* as the cause behind the Holocene's demise. Still, the Anthropocene largely cashes out as the energy-intensive workings of a few very privileged groups of humans in powerful Western empires and nations that tie together extraordinary economic power and technological knowledge. Moreover, these social forces are invested professionally in specific cultural institutions, ideological practices, and economic interests that largely remain wealthy, white, and Western. These scientific assessments of the destructive ecological impact of the Anthropocene, even when they focus upon particular networks of small elite populations over the past few centuries, always attribute this degradation to all Humanity as species being. The Anthropocene discourse also now supports deputizing an even smaller cluster of elite scientific experts to rescue "Humanity" and "the Earth" over the next few decades, even though those groups also are small in number and not widely dispersed around the world. These campaigns for legitimating the Anthropocenarian narratives, then, simultaneously are condemning the actions of Man since the eighteenth century for causing catastrophic environmental changes, and then stepping forward to redeem both Man and the Earth with the same tools, only now under more enlightened projects of implementing climate engineering, planetarian governance, and a new geopolitics.

The "Age of Man" was a dominant ideological meme in post-1885 Victorian and Edwardian era narratives of Manifest Destiny, Exploration and Discovery, Civilizing Missions, Imperial Grandeur, Progress and Wealth or even Survival of the Fittest, because a few dominant world powers directly coded this "Age of Man" as the high times of wealthy, white, Western man. Such technocentric, ethnocentric, and chronocentric reasoning is another implicit quality in Anthropocenarian thought. On the one hand, it applauds Western cultural, economic, and racial superiority, while, on the other hand, it frets over why all Humanity has caused today's environmental catastrophes.

### **The Clash of Westernization and Resternization**

This tacit pride in technological attainment, energy efficiency, scientific capacity, and material wealth in the West carries at its conceptual core a darker object-oriented ontology and vital materialist epistemology than those celebrated in studies of "the fragility of things"<sup>xxiv</sup> or "vibrant matter."<sup>xxv</sup> It is another fracture line in today's "clash of civilizations" for the "remaking of world order."<sup>xxvi</sup> Taking hard-won wealth, power, and position creates a big carbon footprint,

and keeping these strategic economic and political capacities requires as much, if not more energy extraction and expenditure. For decades, these processes have been understood as the distinctive attributes of “Westernization” as certain Western nations perfected these capabilities, and a few other non-Western nations struggled to emulate, equal, and perhaps exceed them to avoid lessened power, prestige, and privilege in the parallel process of “Resternization.”

Over the past 150 years, far-flung regimes of many types, like Qajari Persia, Chakril Thailand or Ottoman Turkey, Tsarist Russia, Ching China or Meiji Japan as well as their contemporary successor states, aspired to become as carbon-based, resource-exhaustive, and energy-intensive as England, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, or the United States. Yet, only a few, like Japan, the Russian Federation, and parts of India, Brazil, or the Peoples Republic of China have succeeded. Arguably, their relatively greater wealth comes from having shifted urban-industrial segments of their economies and societies to utilize more carbon-intensive energy.<sup>xxvii</sup> The residents in dozens of other non-Western countries, however, must endure material existences far less energy-intensive than those enjoyed by most in the West. And, they now teeter on the edge of remaining “Resternized” by “the first adopter Westernized” as well as “the late adopter Westernizing Restern” countries. Again, the fossil fueled power of the West is affirmed as mighty enough to change the climate; but, it also empowers those at the top of the world’s geopolitical hierarchies to police the ultra-modern frontiers of “the West” against intrusions from the still failing modernization efforts of “the Rest.”

In the abstract, the Anthropocene epoch is not a new limit imposed upon human freedom any more than modernity constituted an escape from the constraints of Nature’s necessity to realize greater human liberty in the workings of the Economy, Society or State. The relatively stable predictabilities of biospheric conditions in the Holocene, as it is changing or even ending in the Meghalayan age, are less certain. Still, the Anthropocene epoch has implied losing the more stable conditions of the Holocene. Climate scientists have, more or less, accurately estimated the ecological costs of, and the physical limits to human fossil fuel burning--as threats to the biosphere--for 30 to 45 years, but they have been largely ignored in policy circles until recently.

Widely discussed plausible knowledge of “ecological overshoot”<sup>xxviii</sup> prompted little effort before 1991 to scrupulously respect or even notionally acknowledge these biospheric limits. Winning the Cold War mattered far more than warming up the planet’s biosphere, so those repeated worries and warnings were ignored. Indeed, the decades with the greatest human exploitation of natural resources have come over the past 40 to 50 years. Human population levels have more than doubled, nonhuman species declined in numbers and variety, urbanization became the dominant form of everyday life, and almost as much fossil fuel has been burnt in the last 35 years as was consumed during the prior 200 years. Heedless license to spur countries to seek greater economic growth has, time after time, trumped conscientious respect for rigorous ecological or economic limits.

The ambiguities implicit in differentiating the Holocene from the Anthropocene, if one does not accept the pre-historic interpretation of Anthropocenic shifts in climate with early agriculture, metallurgy, and urbanization, push many authorities to endorse the later advent hypothesis (the proliferation of steam engines after the 1760s fueled by coal) or the most recent assessment (the “Great Acceleration” thesis dated more precisely as beginning in the years of the great post-WW

If economic boom from 1945 to 1973), if only due to the greater emissions of chemical pollutants, chimney smoke or automobile exhaust. Given the inherent propensity of living intellectuals to date modern historical watershed moments as coterminous with their own lives, it also is no surprise to hear mostly the findings of scientists and technicians born after 1939 touting the validity of Anthropocene ideas.

The Anthropocene thesis, as its tenets have been propounded in Canada, the United States, Australia, European countries or Japan, anchors a geopoliticized claim about endangerment and empowerment. Very particular social forces in these countries claim to have recognized the threats first, and they are now also ready to counter their ill effects. For other nations, economic development needs to be attained, and the natural resources required for sustaining developmental growth must be expanded to legitimize their social contacts with their populations. If growth itself is the greatest danger to the Holocene, then it is not a surprise to see the largely white Western countries--where fossil capitalism has had the strongest, oldest, and greatest impact on everyday life--now demanding ultimate control over its future expansion everywhere.<sup>xxxix</sup> From 1945 through today, it is evident to all that largely Western technology is the monstrous force behind the Great Acceleration, and the prime directive of New Environmentalism “to love your monsters.”

Anthropocenarian thinkers admit rising affluence does have irrational, destructive, and far-reaching effects. These outcomes, however, are endangering the ecological services of key planetary systems, while indelibly marking the impact of “Humanity’s mastery over Nature” attained during recent historical times within the materialities of geological deep time. To save the planet, these trends must be redirected radically. In turn, wealthy Western powers want control over this redirection through new geopolitical conditions and specify who will direct how, when and where new advances will be made to save the Earth.

Such Western technocratic tendencies resonate in the neoimperial assessments of Anthropocene-based analysis mobilized in policy-making and scientific communities in the US and Europe today. Seeking to repurpose climate trends, drought data, flooding reports or weather information into actionable intelligence for policy-makers, NASA researchers, for example, have asserted the last 15 years in the Middle East are among the most extreme drought years of the past 900 years.<sup>xxx</sup> Using weather information and tree ring records from North Africa, Greece, Turkey, Jordan, and Syria compared to data from southern France, Italy, and Spain, analysts for NASA at its Goddard Institute and the Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University concluded the last two extraordinarily dry decades also have been years of economic stress and social turmoil. While these abrupt changes were attributed to general anthropogenic causes, their specific impact fell hardest in Syria where agricultural production broke down rapidly, forcing 1.5 million farmers into Syria’s cities.

Even though such analyses are heavily contested,<sup>xxxi</sup> the resultant loss of productivity, food sources, employment, and water supplies in the Levant has been cited as worsening the political instability of the whole region, triggering civil strife in Syria, and fueling the rise of ISIS in 2010-2011.<sup>xxxii</sup> These researchers regard such geopolitical developments across the region as tragic, but the obvious worry at center stage here was about the West, not the rest of the planet. A flood of refugees from the Levant was spilling into Europe along with thousands of other

displaced peoples from across Africa and the Middle East. In addition to countering the ISIS security threat, the never-ending need to generate safe spaces and provide jobs is presented as falling on the backs of Western powers as these displaced Resternized populations struggle to escape their homelands and gain greater security in Europe or North America.

Naturalizing these economic, political and social events in Syria since 2011 as “environmental disasters” downplays, or even misconstrues, how the civil strife, economic stagnation, and state failure engrained by the West in these areas since 1918 are the bigger factors at play. State failure, and not climate change, could also be regarded the main cause of a diminished capacity to adapt to agrarian crises, cultivate civic resilience, and prevent population displacement. Despite the strategic mistakes made by London, Paris, and Washington after 2011 in coping with the Arab Spring across Syria, Western experts regard this, and many other geopolitical events around the world, as the product of natural causes.

To highlight only this one case, the narrative of the Anthropocene serves as their geopolitical pretext to manage these sites, monitor the worst ecological effects locally, and mitigate further losses globally by assuming authority, when and where they can, to allay comparable disasters elsewhere in the future.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Again, Westernizing technoscientific power is affirmed as mighty enough to change the climate, but also ready to respond to other crisis events with continuous military surveillance, sporadic rescue actions, and emergency relief effort in Restern regions to police the frontiers of wealthier Western “tame zones” against the rest of the world’s impoverished “wild zones.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

At the same time, however, the Anthropocenarian monitors and managers in the world’s advanced industrial societies also speculate that they can mitigate these dangers effectively through cybernetic, physical, managerial and social science as it has developed in laboratories and universities tied into key governance centers--headquartered mainly in “the West,” or Canada, the United States, Australia, European countries, and Japan. To save the biosphere, adapt to climate change, and safeguard biodiversity, the Anthropocene bloc of technicians, scientists, and other experts are lobbying hard to sell these particular plans as those needed by all men and women everywhere. The mass media’s “welcome to the Anthropocene” comes expectedly in *The Economist* or *New York Times*. Predictably, intrepid Western experts demand the authority to call out its causes, track down its effects, and mitigate its dangers, which will, in turn, empower these particular Anthropocenarian cadres. Pivoting off Huntington’s analyses, their politics embodies “Western” enlightenment reason itself facing down the barbaric chaos and conflict of the “Restern” zones that too many Anthropocenarios represent as plaguing the world today.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that sustaining rapid on-going global development perpetuates the exposure of the non-Western world’s human populations to endangerments that also justify these Western scientific experts’ great empowerment. This unconscious presumption of prime authority could be made easily in the 1950s and 1960s when the liberal capitalist democracies of the West maintained a strong monopoly over most scientific knowledge creation.<sup>xxxv</sup> With the UN’s far-reaching multinational, multicultural, and multidisciplinary organizational efforts, however, in the UNEP in the 1970s, as well as the inclusion of more non-Western scientists during the years from the 1992 Rio Conference and 2012 Rio + 20 Conference in the IPCC

subcommittee's reporting on climate change in the 1990s, what was once a small exclusive club of Western experts has opened up for new recruits. That said, this club's culture is ethically and politically unrelenting; hence, its newer experts essentially share this larger neo-Occidental vision of the Anthropocene and its management.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

### **Anthropocenarios in Action**

The appeal of the Anthropocene cannot be easily disentangled from the blatant neo-Promethean implications of its grounding in technological rationality. Latour asks some interesting questions of the vague global "us" about who constitute the abstract human "we," namely,

How can we remain unmoved by the idea that we are now as dangerous to our life support system as the impact of a major meteorite? How can we have the same definition of ourselves, now that all the terms which earlier were metaphorical (terms like "upheavals," "tectonic shift," and "revolutions") have become *literal*: yes, indeed, collectively we are just as powerful as what caused three or four other mass extinctions-- some scientists use the word Anthropocene to describe this new geological era. Do you feel proud of that? Some might, actually, so big, so mighty!<sup>xxxvii</sup>

At the same time, Latour's ironic questions fall flat. Far too many Western social forces actually are proud of this evident power, and the technoscientific control it creates is worth any effort to forestall any effort to at all lessen their domination over world science and technology.

The Anthropocene, then, now unfolds, in part, as another neoimperial Western narrative. This fact is reflected explicitly in the Great Acceleration's onset, since the radioactive traces of America's first atomic bombs serve as this era's initial hard scientific indicators of anthropogenic world-altering change.<sup>xxxviii</sup> On the one hand, European and American scientists working in a vast hidden complex of many underground nuclear laboratories on weapons of atomic mass destruction in the Manhattan Project were lionized for decades as extraordinary talents whose genius made possible humanity's power to change life on Earth almost instantly. Yet, on the other hand, this myth is yet another crude neo-Victorian mystification of geopolitical privilege, because all Humanity does not have this nuclear power. The USA, and then the USSR, Great Britain and France did acquire it first. And, the Manhattan Project and its "Project A" initial trio of atomic explosive devices did not immediately change life in the future all over the Earth forever. Rather these changes arrived gradually with toxic mine dumps, poisonous industrial wastes, and horrendous atomic mishaps suffered by too many people at certain places. In the USA, it was more immediate--Oak Ridge, TN; Hanford, WA; Los Alamos, NM, Alamogordo, NM, while outside of America it came quickly at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the war-time atomic bombings of Japan.

Neoimperial Western privilege, in turn, has imposed its prerogatives through nuclearity on heavily policed; less Westernized places, including many internal colonies within Western homelands, to evince the alleged power of all Humanity over Nature. This historical myth about nuclear power, however, is a complex racial, cultural, technological, and now geopoliticized ideology masked by technocratic geosciences. Largely white, European, North American, and male scientists, soldiers, and statesmen imposed these ideologies as slow or quick violence in New Mexico, Japan, the Belgian Congo, Nevada, French Polynesia, Tennessee, the Marshall Islands, Kazakhstan or many other far-away nuclear reservations. The nuclear exceptionalism at

the core of the Anthropocene's atomic authenticity is another implicitly racist narrative dressed up as scientific progress by and for all of Humanity rather than America's secret technology to create a strategic nuclear monopoly in the West. Only in 1964 did the Western monopoly on nuclear weapons start to crack, but the USA, Russia, the UK, and France still sit at the head of the nuclear table today.

Not all of us, but the national command authorities of the USA and USSR (now the Russian Federation) have had immense powers in hand for nearly seventy years to change the Earth forever. A few thinkers sought to redefine the human condition in the glare of thermonuclear explosions, but such reflection was short-lived, and soon forgotten once nuclear testing went mostly underground in 1963. And, the nuclear winter long feared by strategic planners remains a possibility well into the future, even as the decision-making bodies in charge of carbon capitalism and liberal democracy tolerate accelerating rapid climate change, ocean acidification, massive species extinction, and sea rise with every barrel of crude oil lifted, refined, sold, and burned to sustain automobilized development.

Among those few millions, who have large strategic nuclear forces, own millions of automobiles, reside in hundreds of cities, and endure only small ecological irritations every day as they toil away to gain more wealth, one finds the material interests to prevent others from controlling the narrative. Furthermore, they want to closely command and control the characteristics of the Anthropocene to protect the life support systems behind their power and privilege. Might makes right, and they intend to thrive during the Anthropocene by preserving their cultural identity, conserving their material relationships, and sustaining their literal Earth-altering imperialist positions in the vague name of the nebulous other that many ideologically call "us." All of their military power, of course, could do little to nothing to prevent the next planet-killing asteroid strike. Yet, in the meantime, the other Earth-degrading immense powers that do exist are not being materially checked. Hence, one finds post-environmentalists who feel little remorse knowing the Arctic ice cap is melting, Kiribati can go under the waves, Dhaka will flood, or African and Afghan refugees drown in the Mediterranean escaping drought back home. The environment, they say, is always changing, and not all environmental rescues are necessary, or even possible. One needs just to accept and adapt to the changes.

For Anthropocenarian partisans of this New Environmentalism,<sup>xxxix</sup> idealized notions of natural order, biospheric stability or ecological constraints, which have been allegedly lost to the past, or can be defined separate and apart from today's urban-industrial civilization, are moral fictions, modelling constructs or materialist speculation. Human beings are the main terrestrial life forms, Nature/Society are one, humans and nonhumans coexist in coevolving forms of life, and they always have. The dividing lines between the natural and artificial, nonhuman and human, environments and societies have always been driven by abstractions, assertions, and artifices.<sup>xl</sup> What is on the Earth, and of the Earth, perhaps should be treated, as Latour argues, as "matters of concern" rather "matters of fact"<sup>xli</sup> for all earthlings. In many contemporary debates, then, the Anthropocene is being treated, like Latour's "matter of fact," as a purposeful transformative term of political art. Indeed, it is becoming an all-purpose primal predicate to prompt new discursive advances in many fields as well as propagandize for environmental engineers to take command of planetary management.<sup>xlii</sup>

Thus, this one rhetorical term -- the Anthropocene -- becomes the perfect narrative. It simultaneously proclaims the advent of historic change, affirms its foundational shifts, proposes a fusion of deeper geological and shallower historical time, and establishes the requirements for new theories and practices in public and policy discourses. By means of one speculative predicate, environmental technocrats divide “Humanity” into the dominant and the dominated in so many ways that race is very visibly an axial matrix of oppression.<sup>xliii</sup> With this turn to the Anthropocene, the humanities, natural/physical sciences, and social sciences all care being called upon by Anthropocenarians to reinvent the basis of “Civilization” mainly for the West(-ernized), clashing with most other societies that remain largely the Rest(-ernized).<sup>xliiv</sup> All of these swirling rhetorical influences can be felt at work in today’s new geopolitical struggles to capture control over interpreting and managing reality as “The Great Acceleration” as its planetary urbanization spins up local and global cyborganicity in the rapid climate changes of the twenty-first century.<sup>xlv</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Multiple inconsistencies become more evident here, even though they have been continuously exposed as the raw nerves of power and its asymmetries at global climate change negotiations since Kyoto. First, the Anthropocene is, in the final analysis, the by-product of largely Occidental fossil-fueled growth. The “Great Acceleration” event in which “Humanity” is made equivalent to a planet-killing asteroid strike has been darkly feted in the West, and directly envied among the Rest, as world-historical progress as its modernization and development have made some affluent, a few super rich, and many more than comfortable since 1945.

Second, in another ruse of reason, decrying the advent of the Anthropocene is praising implicitly the powers not of “Humanity” but rather the West, which has degraded its own lands and peoples as well as those of the Rest to attain these pinnacles of power. And, when mostly “Western experts” have proclaimed all “Humanity” caused this damage, one must be cautious about accepting their claims at face value. Today it now largely is these Western scientists and technicians who intend--consciously or unconsciously--to define the ecosystems being damaged by all Humanity, and then intend police the consolidated plans for planetary governance meant to constrain and correct this on-going damage for Western advantage, whether it is direct or indirect. The political hegemony of the West in recent human historical time across the entire world, then, is implicitly rendered into a writ of empowerment to direct the arrows of nonhuman geological time (and historical time) moving forward.

As nationalist Occidentalism before 1939 has morphed into neo-Occidental globalism after 1945 during the Great Acceleration, Western privileges shared with, or seized by, Restern zones have tipped many ecosystems into full overshoot. Just as the putative conquest of Nature was first attained by the West, and then managed poorly by great North Atlantic empires bearing “the white man’s burden” for their benefit, or “Progress,” it appears now that the management of these Nature/Culture hybridities in the Anthropocene will be the “Occidentalized person’s burden.” As the Westernized keep what they have, the Resternized others strangely share complete blame for the Anthropocene as all “Humanity.” In the meantime, they await the Westernizing vision of planetarian ecomanagerialism known as “adapting to the Anthropocene” to shift its favors around with a mental composite of new geopoliticized strategies, working through multiple channels of oppression.

At this level, it is a radical mistake to ignore the material forces of small affluent and powerful elite groups developed over the last three centuries by wealthy Westerners--either on their own or in other countries--who are the human beings largely managing, and mainly benefiting from, the titanic changes in energy use by mobilizing the Anthropocene thesis to chalk this catastrophe up to all mankind since its prehistory. White Western liberals, who say the Anthropocene represents the advent of a “New Earth,” and then attribute its origins to “the consequence of the everyday life choices of over 7 billion people” now living on the Earth, are being somewhat simplistic.<sup>xlvi</sup> This claim essentially mystifies a few hundred million people, who mainly are white, Euro-American technocratic experts that design, manage, and package the regimes for “Earth System Governance” in the world market. Their decisions are what steers the planet’s other billions towards how to make better “everyday life choices,” and they usually serve the interests of the West, first and foremost.

And, in a third sense, it marks the dominance of specific life, natural or physical scientists with the privileged positions, which grant them authority to reinterpret how the world changed with the onset of industrial-urban modernity. Despite decades of slow violence and deliberate disaster, they also ironically aspire to continue directing these changes going forward. And, their self-serving reinterpretations of the entire world remade by their actions are being conducted in ways that dilute, diffuse or distract critical efforts to give more attention their special role in causing many of the most negative effects of the Anthropocene in the first place.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> This brief essay is extracted and adapted from a longer study presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers, March 29-April 1, 2016.
- <sup>ii</sup> [www.stratigraphy.org/ICSchart/ChronostratChart2018-07.pdf](http://www.stratigraphy.org/ICSchart/ChronostratChart2018-07.pdf).
- <sup>iii</sup> Laura Geggel, “We are now Living in a New Geologic Age, Experts Say,” *Live Science* (2018).
- <sup>iv</sup> Rolf Lidskog and Claire Waterson, “The Anthropocene: A Narrative in the Making,” *Environment and Society: Palgrave Studies in environmental Sociology and Policy* (2018), 25-46.
- <sup>v</sup> William F Ruddiman, *Plows, Plagues, and Petroleum: How Humans Took Control of Climate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- <sup>vi</sup> William F Ruddiman *et al.*, “Late Holocene Climate: Natural or Anthropogenic,” *Review of Geophysics*, 54 no.1 (2016), 93-116.
- <sup>vii</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “On the Politics of the Anthropocene,” *Telos* 172, (Fall 2015), 139-162.
- <sup>viii</sup> Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016).
- <sup>ix</sup> J.R McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
- <sup>x</sup> Christian Schwägerl, *Anthropocene: A New Planet Shaped by Humans* (New York: Synergetic Press, 2014), 4.
- <sup>xi</sup> Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene” *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, Global Change* 41 (2000), 17-18.
- <sup>xii</sup> Malm, *Fossil Capital*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 183-245.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization*.
- <sup>xv</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- <sup>xvi</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- <sup>xix</sup> Bruno Latour, “A Plea for Earthly Sciences,” *British Sociological Association* (2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); and William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
- <sup>xx</sup> Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 220-223.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters: Post-Environmentalism and the Anthropocene* (Washington, DC: The Breakthrough Institute, 2011).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Schwägerl, *Anthropocene*.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> [ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/03/age-of-man/kolbert-text](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/03/age-of-man/kolbert-text).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization*, 81-124.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Vaclav Smil, *Harvesting the Biosphere: What We Have Taken from Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> William R. Catton, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).
- <sup>xxix</sup> Schellenberger and Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters*.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Danielle Cheslow, “NASA Study shows Mideast Drought in 1998-2012 Worst in 900 years,” *Roanoke Times*, March 6, 2016.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Michael Hulme, “Is Climate Change Really to Blame for Syria’s Civil War?” *The Guardian*, May 2015.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Cheslow, “NASA Study shows Mideast Drought.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “Geoengineering as global climate change policy,” *Critical Policy Studies* 4, no. 3 (2010), 111-126.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “Discourses of Disintegration, Texts of Transformation: Re-Reading Realism in the New

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World Order,” *Alternatives: A Journal of World Policy* XVIII, no. 2 (1993), 229-258.  
229-258).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Latour, “A Plea for Earthly Sciences,” 2.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Finney and Edwards, “The ‘Anthropocene’ Epoch: Scientific Decision or Political Statement,” *Geological Society*.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Schellenberger and Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters*.

<sup>xl</sup> McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*.

<sup>xli</sup> Latour, “A Plea for Earthly Sciences.”

<sup>xlii</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “Developing Planetarian Accountancy: Fabricating Nature as Stock, Service, and System for Green Governmentality,” *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 26 (2009), 129-159.

<sup>xliii</sup> McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*.

<sup>xliv</sup> Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization*.

<sup>xlv</sup> Timothy W. Luke, “Urbanism as Cyborganicity: Tracking the Materialities of the Anthropocene,” *New Geographies 06*, ed. Daniel Ibáñez and Nikos Katsikis. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Design, 2014).

<sup>xlvi</sup> Karen Litfin, “Person/Planet Politics: Contemplative Pedagogies for a New Earth,” *New Earth Politics: Essays from the Anthropocene*, ed. Simon Nicholson and Sikina Jinnah (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 118.

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