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ESSAYS FEATURE

Anthropocene and Negative Anthropology

Return of Man

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Despite all proclamations to the contrary, we still don't live in the Anthropocene. Instead of hailing this new era, and **to the annoyance of many**, in July 2018, the International Commission on Stratigraphy introduced a more detailed subdivision of the Holocene, our current epoch, which the Anthropocene was either to replace or succeed. Besides the Greenlandian and Northgrippian periods, there is also a name for the last 4250 years: Welcome, you now live in the **Meghalayan**! Geologists continue to discuss the possibility of introducing the Anthropocene, but it remains unclear when or what they will decide. Even in bureaucracy, geology is used to thinking in expansive time scales. It took the discipline 102 years to formalize the Holocene.

In contrast to the natural sciences, the question of official adoption plays virtually no role in the humanities, which have taken up the concept of the Anthropocene with relish. Its attraction lies in its omniscient radiance: Not only a geochronological coinage, it implies an ontology, a theory of history, and an anthropology — categories thus within the purview of the humanities — while its normative consequences remain vague. It may, as Dipesh Chakrabarty **already showed ten years ago**, explode the classic separation between the history of nature and that of mankind. What it doesn't do is clearly provide a new guiding scheme. This has led to the paradoxical situation that both posthumanists and neohumanists

have claimed the Anthropocene, but draw from it radically different conclusions. The former see it as a further empowerment of the human, the latter as its continued decentering. The concept of the Anthropocene, then, is the site of an interpretive struggle about the discursive return of “man.”

Him Again: The Return of “Man” in the Anthropocene

For the longest time, few could have imagined that talk of “man,” of all things, would return. But that was the very stunt pulled by the Anthropocene, the very name of which relies on a hypostasized “man,” the “Anthropos,” as an agent on a planetary scale. Inadvertently, it challenged the antihumanism dominant in the humanities for the last forty years or so. The famous final sentence in Michel Foucault’s *Order of Things* promised that “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” Even though Foucault spoke only of “man” as the epistemic central figure of the modern sciences humaines, the disappearing human face became an emblem for something like an antihumanist consensus, to which belong, among many others, Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, but also Heidegger, Adorno, Kittler, and Luhmann.

These otherwise highly different thinkers were united in their critique of a humanism which, in [Kate Soper](#)’s now-classic definition, “appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood.” This aversion to an essential core humanity has been synthesized since the mid-nineties in posthumanism, which brings together feminist, postcolonial and process-ontological arguments. “Universal ‘Man,’” as [Rosi Braidotti](#) summarizes the posthumanist position, is unmasked to be “masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity.”

In view of this consensus it is not surprising that the Anthropocene was brought into the discourse of the humanities from the outside, through the natural sciences. Natural scientists reveal themselves to be untroubled by antihumanist scruples as soon as they turn philosopher and begin to draw normative and ethical conclusions. In the majority of cases, these result in one or the other version of a model of the human as Prometheus, as homo faber. If the Anthropocene is the epoch in which “the human” itself has become a force of nature, then it only marks the full realization of what it has always implicitly been. This diagnosis is not necessarily pessimistic, for the possibility of self-extinction does not have to indicate catastrophe, but can be further evidence of humanity’s dominance. The practical consequence of these theories is the model of stewardship: their power nominates humans as guardians of the earth.

Paul Crutzen, who together with Eugene Stoermer [popularized the concept of the Anthropocene](#), speaks of an “Age of Man” that should be embraced: “we should shift our mission from crusade to management, so we can steer nature’s course symbiotically instead of enslaving the formerly natural world.” Steering is certainly not the same as symbiosis; what he calls for, rather, is technical ingenuity as a way out of the climate crisis. This is also the demand of the [ecomodernists](#), who imagine a “good anthropocene” and see in it an opportunity for “man” to continue the transformation of the earth in a self-determined way and to his own advantage. One of its representatives, the geologist [Erle C. Ellis](#), therefore speaks of a “second Copernican revolution,” which makes “man” and earth the center of the universe yet again.

Geographers [Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin](#) invoke the same image. For them, too, the Anthropocene is nothing less than the reversal of that modern decentering of “man.” Where Copernicus and Darwin (Freud is not mentioned) robbed humans of their elevated status in nature, “Adopting the Anthropocene may reverse this trend by asserting that humans are not

passive observers of Earth's functioning." In this view, as Bruno Latour notes in his [Gaia Lectures](#), the narrative of human self-assertion in modernity, which Hans Blumenberg developed in his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), has, in the Anthropocene, become a scientifically measurable reality. New is the demand not to pursue self-assertion at the expense of self-preservation, but "the human" denotes much the same: the Anthropos is still a Prometheus.

"We're fucked": Neohumanist and Posthumanist Responses

Motivated by the popularization of the natural sciences, the humanities' hand is forced when it comes to the discursive return of "man," regardless of whether they are posthumanist or neohumanist in character. For the neohumanists, who believe their time has come, the Anthropocene is the final proof of humanity's special place in the cosmos. Another strand of neohumanism, more philosophical than technocratic, argues against the ecomodernists' optimism, and demands meditating on hopelessness as an ethical attitude. In Roy Scranton's handy formula: "we're fucked." If a reversal of climate change is no longer possible, our job is "learning to die in the Anthropocene." Since Socrates, Cicero and Montaigne, this has been an arch-philosophical task, and the importance of the humanities becomes salient again as "we will need a way of thinking our collective existence. We need a vision of who 'we' are. We need a new humanism."

With less pathos, the Australian philosopher Clive Hamilton similarly pleads for a "new anthropocentrism," but he does so with a twist borrowed from Kant: Hamilton need no longer merely posit that "man" occupies a special position, as this has now been factually proven through climate change, from which follows humanity's ethical responsibility for the earth as a whole. Because this responsibility has so far been rejected, we are simply not anthropocentric enough for Hamilton. The Anthropocene, in other words, becomes a Kantian 'sign of history' that gives meaning to the existence of mankind. Hamilton calls this "a kind of negative of teleological anthropocentrism." By virtue of his destructive power, "man" now has the destiny to save the earth for which he is responsible – but rather by abstinence and the renunciation of consumption than by artificial atmospheric change.

In the camp formerly attached to antihumanism, on the other hand, the concept of the Anthropocene "has arisen at a most inconvenient moment," as philosopher [Timothy Morton](#) admits. With anthropogenic climate change, however, the reality of "man" has become undeniable: It is "caused by humans – not jellyfish, not dolphins, not coral." And with the rising sea levels, Foucault's image of the face in the sand has changed its meaning, and now points at the imminent extinction of the species: "the human returns at a far deeper geological level than mere sand." The cultural theorist [Claire Colebrook](#) finds in humanity's malignant power undeniable evidence of its reality: "the notion that there is no such thing as the human [...] must give way to a sense of the human as defined by destructive impact. [...] One effect of the Anthropocene has been a new form of difference: it now makes sense to talk of humans as such." And in this sense, even the avowed posthumanist [Rosi Braidotti](#) admits that the Anthropocene represents a unity "of the negative kind, as a shared form of vulnerability."

For Colebrook, Braidotti and Morton, however, this does not imply the necessity of a new anthropocentrism, as Hamilton and Scranton would have it, even if they all strive to take the concept of "the human" seriously again. This is especially true of Morton, who aims at redefining "humankind" as an ontologically reductive quantity: If all entities are always references to and composites of countless others (as flat ontologies usually claim), then the entity "humankind" is in reality smaller than every single real subject that appears in it. Extending it to animals and things is then a simple task. But why an element of this "humankind" should denote something substantially different than the concept of "person,"

as it has long been used in animal ethics, is just as unclear as the practical consequences: Morton, too, continues to place his hopes in collective action — and he addresses his appeal not to jellyfish, corals or dolphins, but humans.

Species Being: The Human as Collective, Reductive, and Scalar Quantity

Posthumanist responses to the Anthropocene are often characterized by this difficulty in coordinating ontological and ethical issues. The best example is Donna Haraway, who pursues Morton's goals through a reverse strategy. She rejects the concept of the Anthropocene as too anthropocentric. Her counter-suggestion, the "Chthulucene," does not designate an epoch or humanly segmented time, but rather the "tentacular" all-connectedness of living beings. Yet by dissolving people into unbounded assemblages while opposing the pessimism of the "we're fucked" anthropocenists, Haraway begins to question whether the perpetrators of climate change can be determined at all: Because humans have always existed in interdependent relationships with other living beings, the Anthropocene is no longer a "human species act." Questions of responsibility and agency, as with Morton, are in danger of disappearing from view.

Marxists, too, have put forward a critique of the concept of anthropocene, albeit less with an ontological rather than a socio-economic thrust. Historian **Andreas Malm** and ecologist **Alf Hornborg**, for example, query the concept of "man" as a collective singular: It implies an undifferentiated humanity, obscuring the unequally distributed responsibility between the global North and South for the ecopathologies of capitalism. Further, they argue, the assumption of a process attributed to the human species denaturalizes climate change by recognizing it as human-made, while at the same time renaturalizing it, since it appears as a result of inherent human characteristics rather than as an effect of economic processes.

The dissolution of philosophical pseudo-problems and -entities – here: "man" – has an honorable tradition; in methodological terms, however, one must ask whether the reduction of the term is not accompanied by a reduction in explanatory power. What phenomena does the anthropocene describe that can't be explained by capitalist dynamics alone? Dipesh Chakrabarty has **argued** against Malm and Hornborg that the anthropocene can't be reduced to capitalism because it concerns the "boundary conditions that human or all other life on earth needs." In the long run, all people are affected by this without exception, whether poor or rich, which is why "a policy of even more far-reaching solidarity is needed than mere solidarity with the poor" – solidarity, in other words, among people as such.

For Chakrabarty, the return of the human is thus attached to a humanity that must be undifferentiated because it faces questions of bare life. The lessons of postcolonialism and Marxist critique should not be forgotten, but must be relegated to their respective explanatory planes. He places **three conceptions of the human in parallel**, without wanting to reduce them onto one another: the human as the subject of enlightenment, i.e. as the same rights bearer everywhere, who must still be able to be invoked in the human rights discourse; the human as a postcolonial subject that is differentiated along the axes of class, race, gender, ability, etc.; and the human as the subject of the anthropocene, as that collective quantity that only acquires its meaning qua collectivity.

This distinction emphasizes the status of the Anthropos as a scalar concept: It reveals emergent qualities that go beyond the mere summation of all individual humans on earth, and beyond the constitutional conditions of the human, which are described by any "philosophical anthropology." In fact, Chakrabarty argues, one cannot perceive oneself as a member of the species. This identification of the Anthropos with the species is, of course, tentative for him: on the one hand, it is desirable to keep a continuity with the descriptive

work of the natural sciences, but the term “species” also has the function of marking a desideratum of future orientation narratives. In a passage reminiscent of Benjamin, Chakrabarty **writes**: “‘Species’ is perhaps the placeholder name for an emerging, new universal history of mankind that flashes at the moment of the threat posed by climate change.”

In the Balance: The Negative Anthropology of the Anthropocene

The debate about the Anthropos in the Anthropocene is a complex one. But what it shows is that “man,” at least as a discursive object, has again taken center stage in the humanities at the very moment when his final farewell seemed certain. While the tradition of antihumanism continues, its reluctant apostates, such as Morton or Colebrook, indicate that one can neither live completely with nor completely without “the human.” But this precarious return does not automatically mean a restitution of substantial anthropologies, as if the antihumanist critique had never existed. The world-builder homo faber, which the “good anthropocene” celebrates, and the strict distinction between humans and nature – here posthumanism is right – shouldn’t be resurrected. But in talking about the Anthropocene, it is also impossible to avoid referring to humans. Be it as an addressee of ethical demands, political actor, cause of climate change and responsibility for reversing it, the human remains an operative, but precarious term.

The most intelligent attempts at negotiating antihumanist and neohumanist positions often employ a negativistic rhetoric. Rather than declaring new positives, the negative modality offers alternatives to relying on concepts of the human or struggling to overcome them. They know what it is not, or what it shouldn’t be, and often this becomes the most pertinent and precise thing they can say about it. When Chakrabarty calls for a “negative universal history” of the human species, he finds an echo in Hamilton’s conception of a “negative of teleological anthropocentrism.” And Colebrook’s talk of the human “defined by destructive impact” takes up Braidotti’s concession that the Anthropocene helped to birth a “negatively indexed new idea of ‘the human’ as an endangered species.”

The evocation of the negative modality refers, on the one hand, to a kind of minimal anthropology that describes the human by its demonstrated destructive power on a planetary scale. At the same time, it refuses any final determination, lest the unproblematic core humanity of the homo faber returns as an equally essentialist homo delens. And both factors – the determination through negation and the negation of determination – show an astonishing similarity to a discourse from twentieth century German philosophy I would like to call negative anthropology.

Negative anthropology, as I understand it, describes an approach that eschews any definition of an “essence of man,” but still insists on making the human the main focus of its attention. This distinguishes negative anthropology from posthumanism. For where the latter wants to banish the human completely, negative anthropology still holds on to it as a variable that is impossible to solve, but which can’t be canceled out from the equation, either.

Such a negative anthropology has a certain tradition in German post-war philosophy. Two examples: Ulrich Sonnemann, a peripheral Frankfurt School thinker, wrote in his 1969 book **Negative Anthropologie** that the task of such a philosophy is to disclose the open potential of the human being “from the negations that refuse and deny it.” Formulated as a utopian project against all totalizing theories of the human, Sonnemann is the model case for the negation of determination. Determination through negation, the other pole of negative anthropology, can for instance be found in the work of the philosopher **Günther Anders**, who with this term describes “humanity” as awareness of the nuclear bomb; this idea could easily

be transferred to some of today's Anthropocenists: "We are now one humanity not because of a common natural origin, but because of a common future without a future, because of the unnatural end that is approaching us together."

Negative anthropology is the surprising convergence point of a geological proposition and the scruples of a specific tradition of the humanities. It denotes the movement of a decentering that turns into a recentering again – but unlike Ellis or Lewis/Maslin discuss it in the image of the Copernican Revolution. It rather evokes what Hans Blumenberg described in his *Genesis of the Copernican World* as "geotropic astronautics": For him, the photograph of the blue marble as an icon of the space age becomes a symbol of what Montaigne had called "a secret turning back onto ourselves," for in the face of the vast expanses of space all astronautic efforts refer us back to earth as the life-worldly ground of our existence. The philosopher Hermann Lübbe called this a "post-Copernican counterrevolution," which restores to the earth the central position that Copernicus had taken from it, but without cosmologically returning to the Middle Ages. Similarly, the return of "the human" currently underway is a turning back without returning. It seems as if negative anthropology is a good description for our geotropic astronautics in the Anthropocene.

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