

## **Machinic Mobilities: The Ontopolitics of the Anthropocene**

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The question posed for this workshop is 'How does the Anthropocene concept - which "implies the end of 'the bifurcation of nature' or the final rejection of the separation between Nature and Humanity that has paralyzed science and politics since the dawn of modernism" - help us to think through environmental change and migration?' The organisers provide a guiding suggestion for the discussion: that it enables us to develop an "analytical framework, which studies processes of human mobility within their specific, hybrid socio-natural contexts". I'm not sure that that the guidance provided properly grasps the work that the Anthropocene concept could, or, in fact, does do. This presentation seeks to briefly sketch out an alternative construction based on grasping the Anthropocene concept as one that calls forth an ontological rather than merely ontic politics: that of machinic mobilities.

### **The Holocene**

Methodologically, perhaps it is useful to start with what the Anthropocene doesn't do, i.e. how the question of climate/environmental change and migration was addressed in the Holocene, imagined as a time of stability where solutions to problems were linear and the Nature/Humanity divide was unquestioned.

There were two ways of addressing the problem of climate and migration:

1. *Move* - migration was seen to be a possible solution: human migration followed the changing climate/environmental - geological as well as socio-economic - changes. The population shift from the 'Old World' to the 'New

World' was a classic example of migration following population pressure and changes in land use.

2. *Stay* - the development of science and technology and its application to agricultural productivity, landscape and land-use changes to enable population sustainability was the alternative solution. This enabled populations to cope with climate/environmental change without migration.

Holocene solutions to climate and migration were spatially differentiated, either population migrated to 'new' or 'underpopulated' areas or scientific and technological changes enabled populations to sustain themselves in situ despite changing climate conditions.

### **The Anthropocene**

One thing we know about the Anthropocene is that the solutions that were available in the Holocene are no longer feasible:

1. Migration is no longer possible or to be encouraged. The first law of the Anthropocene is that 'there is no outside', 'there is no "away"'.<sup>1</sup> If humans could just move somewhere else then we would not be in the Anthropocene.
2. Scientific and technological solutions can no longer evade the problem. The second law of the Anthropocene is that 'pseudo-solutions' or 'coercive resilience', which tries to prolong the inevitable, merely stores up greater problems for the future. Environmental change cannot be prevented or slowed through science and technology.

So, the first thing we know about what the Anthropocene concept does when thinking about climate/environment and migration is that 'human mobilities' cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, p.26.

concern questions of space.<sup>2</sup> The modernist, or Holocene, binary of ‘move or stay’ cannot make any sense when considered from the perspective of the Anthropocene – i.e. the end of the Nature/Humanity divide – because the spatial choice is merely a question posed at the ontic level of politics (where the Anthropocene goes unrecognised, reduced to the technical problem of climate change).<sup>3</sup> The Anthropocene concept works at the ontological level and the politics that relate to this level are necessarily ontopolitics.

### **Machinic Mobilities**

While Holocene approaches to climate and migration worked at the ontic level of the spatial, the Anthropocene involves temporal understandings of mobility. Machinic mobilities refer to the need for mobility of the ‘human’ i.e. work on the problematic of climate/environmental change on the basis of the need to change the conception of the human: work on the ontological rather than the ontic level. Machinic mobilities refer to more-than-human assemblages of adaptation after the end of the world (of the Nature/Humanity divide). Machinic mobilities can be distinguished in terms of their relation to time (to the linear, causal constructions of time as progress) rather than space. The Anthropocene is not a spatial concept but one that concerns a politics elaborated and negotiated in the sphere of temporality.

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<sup>2</sup> As Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts, the Anthropocene is a ‘species’ problem: there is nowhere left to relocate to. The Holocene choices of development or relocation, in fact, went together as the exponential growth of the human population depended upon fossil fuels and artificial interventions in agricultural production – the forces which closed these options constituted the Anthropocene as a ‘planetary’ not a ‘global’ condition, amenable to a (human-centred) political solution. ‘The Anthropocene and its Histories’, in Hamilton, Bonneuil and Gemenne, ‘Thinking the Anthropocene, in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*. London: Routledge, 2015, pp.44-56; 50-55.

<sup>3</sup> Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francois Gemenne, ‘Thinking the Anthropocene, in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*. London: Routledge, 2015, pp.1-13; 9.

There are three types of machinic mobility, with differing temporalities of adaptation:<sup>4</sup>

1. Mapping: the science of resilience as an autopoietic process of learning from the appearances of the world. Events reveal the processes of path dependency unfolding from the virtual to the actual. Cholera could be mapped to see the relation between outbreaks and stagnant water, Hurricane Katrina revealed the relations between environmental measures, economic inequality and racial exclusion. This is necessarily post-hoc, working backwards to see the actualisation of the virtual as a process.
2. Sensing: the science of the digital or the virtual, enabling correlations made in virtual space, through machine-learning, pattern recognition and high tech algorithms, to enable adaptations in 'real-time'. Rather than autopoietic this process could be understood to be homeostatic – maintaining the rhythm or modulation of flows, 'pre-eventing' the appearance of crises. Operates in the present: at the moment of transition from the virtual and the actual.
3. Hacking: the science of life as adaptation – of continual recombination, repurposing, reassembling and repositioning – operates without a distinction between the virtual and the actual.

All three machinic mobilities of the Anthropocene disrupt the Nature/Humanity divide. This disruption is not spatial but temporal – disrupting the temporal linearity (the liberal telos) of cause and effect. Discussions of the spatial mobility of people operate at the formal or ontic level of spatial politics/global politics with its concerns of sovereignty, rights and citizenship: important as these discussions are they have no relevance to the conceptual problematic of the Anthropocene.

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<sup>4</sup> These could be seen as shifts from the modern or linear temporality of 'progress' - in which the Human is imagined as initiator or causal actor, working in the world of representation/the actual (a world of fixed determinations and relations) - to an increasing sensitivity to the superpositions of the virtual.