

The Anthropocene is both a problem *of* modern politics, and a problem *for* politics. It is a problem *of* modern politics, for although there is no fixed agreement upon when exactly the Anthropocene might have emerged stratigraphically, the two most relevant proposals for its modern development, the industrial revolution and the nuclear age, are in important ways coterminous with the origins, and the recent, fraught evolution of representative politics. Yet the Anthropocene is also a problem *for* politics. For although it seems unlikely that any kind of politics as we have known it, democratic or otherwise, could unilaterally deal with all the globally connected problems thrown up by environmental threats in the modern age of the Anthropocene, without politics, there is nothing that might authorize, legitimate or constrain any choices peoples might make about how best to proceed in its wake.

The Anthropocene, in other words, raises questions both about how we consider the responsibility of modern politics for having brought about its challenges, while it also raises questions about the theory practice of politics, because only through political action can claims about responsibility be understood and developed. The seven classes for this seminar consider various dimensions of this relationship between politics and the Anthropocene, primarily from the perspective of the overlapping intellectual histories of modern political and economic thought.

We will discuss competing and overlapping temporalities of the Anthropocene and modern politics; questions of economic growth amid finite resources; issues of debt and indebtedness; the centrality of capitalism and colonialism; problems of value and political/humanistic versus scientific argumentation. There is far more material already than can be discussed for a short seminar course, and this reading list will be focused further prior to the actual seminar. What follows, though, is an attempt to signal important and interesting contributions to a still developing subject, whose contours and implications are far from clear.

The course will be run as a seminar and will be based around discussion of particular readings in each week. I will introduce the topic at the beginning of each session, then attempt to manage a group discussion of ideas and issues raised by the topics. Participation and preparation is an expectation of the course, and for those writing for assessment, this will take the form of a 3000 word essay.

Background Reading

(It is recommended you try to read 2-3 of these before the course)

Adeney Thomas, J., Williams, M., and J. Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene – A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Polity, 2020). [useful new synthesis by leading figures]

Bonneuil, C., & Fressoz, J. B. (2016). *The shock of the Anthropocene: The earth, history and us*. London: Verso. [a classic by now of the literature]

Ceballos, G., Ehrlich, P. R., Barnosky, A. D., García, A., Pringle, R. M., & Palmer, T. M. (2015). 'Accelerated modern human-induced species losses: Entering the sixth mass Extinction', *Science advances*, 1(5), e1400253. [connecting the dots of acceleration, anthropogenic climate change, and the sixth extinction]

Crutzen, P. and E. Stoermer, 'The Anthropocene', *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May 2000). [one of several possible starting points for the Crutzen/Stoermer birthing of the term]

Hamblin, Jacob. *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (Oxford, 2013). [political history meets history of science for, particularly, post-war US environmentalism in relation to the research university and military-industrial complex]

Hulme, M. 2012. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*. [clear-eyed view of why climate change is not the sort of thing that could ever be wholly agreed upon whatever the evidence]

Kelly, D, *Politics and the Anthropocene*. Cambridge. Polity, 2019. [my own brief attempt to think about some ways in which the history of political/economic thought connects to arguments about the Anthropocene]

McNeill, J. R., & Engelke, P. (2016). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press. [really useful primer for the new sort of environmental history in the epoch of the Anthropocene, clarifying one possible starting point]

Romm, J. (2018). *Climate Change: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press.

Steffen, W. et al (2011). 'The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 369: 1938. [excellent short overview]

Steffen W. et al. (2018). 'Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene', *PNAS Perspective* 115(33), pp. 8252-8259. [another leading set of scientific perspectives]

Wallace-Wells, David. (2019). *The Uninhabitable Earth*. London. [how there's nothing 'normal' about the 'new abnormal' – a sort of worsening vision of unfolding catastrophe]

*For each seminar, we will try to focus discussion thematically around each set of readings, meaning our 2 hour time slot will have at least three pivots toward each section. We may not cover all the reading in equal fashion, but I hope that we will have enough time to cover each section in part for the purposes of our discussion.

Seminar 1 – Anthropocene Times/Scales

This seminar principally uses the work of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, to consider the modernity of the Anthropocene, and its challenge to history/historical writing about climate, and therefore to modern politics. We will discuss these essays thematically, but it might be helpful to read them chronologically first, to see the evolution of DC's thinking.

(1) *Climate and Capital*

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories', *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2014), pp. 1-23.

—, 'The Climate of History Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35. 2 (2009), pp. 197-222.

(2) *Temporality and Scale*

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Anthropocene Time', *History and Theory* 57.1 (2018), pp. 5-32.

—, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/366191/world-making-mass-poverty-and-the-problem-of-scale/>

(3) *Some Wider Perspectives* (have a look at *one* other if you have time).

McNeil and Engelke, *Great Acceleration*, ch. 1.

D. Kelly, *Politics and the Anthropocene*, ch. 1.

Julia Adeney Thomas, (2019) 'Why the Anthropocene is Not Climate Change, and Why it Matters', <https://www.asiaglobalonline.hku.hk/anthropocene-climate-change/>

Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014). "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *Anthropocene Review* 1.1, pp. 62–69.

Seminar 2 – Anthropocene Environments/Planetary Histories

This seminar builds on the development of our understanding of the Anthropocene as a product of the so-called ‘great acceleration’, and looks at the emergence of ‘environmental histories’ of the period, of the origins of modern ideas of ‘the’ environment, and their interconnection with fears about nuclear strategy and fallout, and the seeming ‘invention’ of the economy.

For Discussion:

(1) *Histories of ‘the’ Environment in the age of the Anthropocene*

P. Warde, S. Sörlin, L. Robin, (2018). *The Environment: The History of an Idea*. Johns Hopkins University Press, esp. ch. 1 (chs. 2, 6 also valuable).

EITHER:

Matthias Dörer, ‘The Politics of Atmospheric Sciences’, *Osiris*, 26 (2011), pp. 198-233.

[A precis (and more) provided by Jill Lepore

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/the-atomic-origins-of-climate-science>]

OR:

Etienne Benson, *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (Chicago UP, 2020) ch. 4 – *The Biosphere as Battlefield*, pp. 106-134.

(2) *Environmental Histories for the Anthropocene*

Jed Purdy, ‘Environmentalism’s Racist History’, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history> [further expanded in his book, *After Nature*, which is well worth looking at if you have time]

Either: McNeil and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, ch. 4, OR Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene*, ch. 4, ‘The Anthropocene and Climate Change’, pp. 69-86.

(3) *Planetary Histories, Limits, and Justice*

Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Planet - An Emergent Humanist Category’, *Critical Inquiry* 46 (2019), pp. 1-31.

Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene*, ch. 7, pp. 136-169.

[For an alternative set of reflections: Colin Hickey and Ingrid Robeyns, ‘Planetary Justice – What can we learn from Ethics and Political Philosophy?’ *Earth System Governance*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2589811620300045?via%3Dihub>]

Seminar 3 – Energy Politics/Climate Change

Much interesting historical work on the Anthropocene has focused on the centrality of particular sorts of energy regimes, and their capacity to fuel particular types of economies. This seminar looks at a few of the major ideas about energy and politics from the industrial revolution

onwards, that help make sense of this development, in the context of a debate about the differences between climate change and the Anthropocene.

For Discussion:

(1) *Climate Change versus Anthropocene Temporalities*

Julia Adeney Thomas, Mark Williams, Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene*, ch. 4, pp. 69-86.
Julia Nordblad, 'On the Difference between Anthropocene and Climate Change Temporalities', *Critical Inquiry* 47.2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1086/712123>

(2) *Carbon Democracy and Fossil Capital*

Andreas Malm, 'Who Lit this Fire?' *Critical historical Studies* (2016), pp. 215-248 (for wider discussion, see his mammoth book, *Fossil Capital*)
Tim Mitchell (2010). *Carbon Democracy*. London, esp. chs. 1-2; or see his article, 'Carbon Democracy', *Economy and Society* 38.3 (2009), pp. 399-432
(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03085140903020598>)

(3) *Planetary History into Conceptual Histories of Energy and Limits*

Fredrik Jonsson, (2011). 'The Industrial Revolution in the Anthropocene', *Journal of Modern History* 84.3, pp. 679-696.

Frederik Jonsson (2014), 'The Origins of Cornucopianism', *Critical Historical Studies* 1.1, pp. 151-168.

Supplementary Readings for context/ background:

Vaclav Smil, *Energy and Civilization – A History* (MIT)

Tony Wrigley, *Energy and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge)

Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (eds.) *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Johns Hopkins)

Seminar 4 – Anthropocene Growth?

This seminar returns to earlier arguments about finitude and the limits to growth, particularly those that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, amid crises of democracy and the end of the so-called *trentes glorieuses*, focused around the exponential threats of overpopulation, resource depletion and capacity, centred around the Club of Rome. Can the economy 'slowdown', and offset those inequalities that are already heightened in times of crisis (particularly global health crises)?

(1) *Limits to Growth*

D. Meadows et al [The Club of Rome] (1972). *The Limits to Growth* (available here: <https://www.clubofrome.org/report/the-limits-to-growth/>) – you can skim this to get the gist

Fred Hirsch, 1972. *The Social Limits to Growth*. London, Introduction (pp. 1-14)

Tim Mitchell, 'Economentality: How the Future Entered Government', *Critical Inquiry* 40 (2014), pp. 479-507.

(2) Context

Read *either* Schmelzer *or* Benson if pushed for time.

Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 245-266.

Etienne Benson, *Surroundings*, ch. 6, 'The Human Planet – Globalization, Climate Change, and the Future of Civilization on Earth', pp. 163-192.

(3) Globalization, Green Growth or Degrowth (Read at least one of these)

K. Aronoff, A. Battistoni, D. Aldana Cohen, T. Riofrancos, 2019. *A Planet to Win: Why we Need a Green New Deal*. London (Short, and much covered online too;
<https://www.vlebooks.com/Vleweb/Product/Index/2067537?page=0>)

Robert Pollin, 'Degrowth versus a Green New Deal', [there are a number of debates following this thread in *New Left Review*, but here is Pollin's essay:

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii112/articles/robert-pollin-de-growth-vs-a-green-new-deal>

Hickel, J., & Kallis, G. (2020). 'Is green growth possible?' *New political economy* 25(4), pp. 469-486.

Giorgos Kallis *et al*, *The Case for Degrowth* (Polity, 2020) [Another v. short and punchy book, but esp. chs. 1, 2, if you have time]

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/15/humans-resources-coronavirus-democratise-work-health-lives-market?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Seminar 5 – Coronavirus and the Capitalocene

Many, particularly Marxist, critics of a singular Anthropocene narrative suggest instead that ecological extraction and crisis, go hand in hand with the evolution of capitalism. Hence, for some, the better term of art is the 'Capitalocene'. This seminar considers some of the leading investigations in contemporary scholarship on this 'scene', focusing on the centrality of extraction in terms of colonialism and debt, and on some of the technological implications of geo-engineering. We begin by following from last time, to discuss the 'first economic crisis of the age of the Anthropocene' (Tooze)

(1) Covid-19, Climate Emergency, Anthropocene

Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency* (Verso, 2020), esp. chs. 1, 3.

Adam Tooze 2020. 'Shockwave', *London Review of Books*. [<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n08/adam-tooze/shockwave>]

Adam Tooze, 'The First Economic Crisis of the Anthropocene', *The Guardian*, 2020:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/07/we-are-living-through-the-first-economic-crisis-of-the-anthropocene>

Mike Davis, 'The Monster Enters', <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii122/articles/mike-davis-in-a-plague-year> [upscaled as *The Monster Enters: Covid-19, Avian Flu, and the Plagues of Capitalism*]

For wider background reading if desired:

Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities – The Modern Plagues*. California. Esp, ch. 10.

Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

(2) *Capitalocenes and Cheap Life*

Moore, J. W. (2017). 'The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis', *The Journal of peasant studies* 44(3), pp. 594-630.

Moore, J. W. (2018). 'The Capitalocene Part II: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(2), pp. 237-279.

[Or, discussion continues in: Jason Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life*. London, esp. chs. 6-7].

Jason Moore and Vijay Prasad, *A History of the World in 7 Cheap Things*. London, esp. pp. 119-144.

[Also interesting, though not compulsory reading, is Moore's review of Mike Davis's Late Victorian Holocausts, appearing as 'Ecology and Imperialism', *Monthly Review* (June 2003), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270468113_Ecology_and_Imperialism; and a wider *Monthly Review* discussion from John Bellamy Foster, here: <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/11/01/value-isnt-everything/>]

(3) *Technologies for the Capitalocene?*

Elmar Altvater, (2016). 'The Capitalocene – or Geoengineering against Capitalism's Planetary Boundaries', in J. Moore (ed.) *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*, Oakland: PA Press.

Holly Buck, 2019. *After Geo-Engineering – Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration*. London, Verso, either or both, chs. 1, 9.

Seminar 6

Anthropocene Networks

This seminar takes a broad approach to networks, looking at the way in which a philosophy of connection or kin with nature, permits a different sense of the Anthropocene, one inspired first by the work of Donna Haraway, but which also reflects upon the centrality of networks and processes in the sociology of Bruno Latour applied to climate change. Finally, we will also consider networks of democracy and trade, that expose political aspects of the Anthropocene in new ways still.

(1) *On/Around Haraway*

Donna Haraway (2015). 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene - Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6 pp. 159-165. [More fully outlined in: Haraway, (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke University Press).

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the Universe*, Princeton, esp. Part III.

(2) *On/Around Latour*

Bruno Latour, 2018. *Down to Earth*. Polity (short book)

— (2014). ‘Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene’, *NLH* 45. 1 pp. 1-18.

Adam Tooze, ‘After Escape’, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/367062/after-escape-the-new-climate-power-politics/>

(3) *On Democracy and other Anthropocene Networks:*

J. Dryzek 2019. *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford, ch. 7.

Either: Martin Arboleda, 2020. *Planetary Mine*. London, esp. chs. 1, 4.

OR: Laleh Khalili. 2020. *Sinews of War and Trade*, London, esp. chs. 1, 3.

Seminar 7

Anthropocene States and Places

If the Anthropocene is a problem of and for modern politics, how might state theory evolve to think about the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene, especially in the context of the recent covid-19 pandemic; is there a case for thinking about a democratic state form in the age of the Anthropocene, or a new sense of the public land/space in which the Anthropocene might develop? The seminar will end with some discussion of these positions, with reference back to work undertaken in the previous six sessions, and has plenty of space/scope for wider interpretation(s).

Robert Frost, *The Gift Outright*: (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53013/the-gift-outright>) A touchstone in Purdy’s analysis

State Theory, Realpolitik, Landscapes

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018). *Climate Leviathan*. London, esp. chs. 2, 6, 8, but see what you think of the opening gambit of the book anyway.

Pierre Charbonnier, ‘For an Ecological Realpolitik’, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/365035/for-an-ecological-realpolitik/>

Jed Purdy. 2019. *This Land is our Land*. Princeton (short book, but esp. Preface, ch. 1, 5)

Clark, B., & Foster, J. B. (2009). ‘Ecological imperialism and the global metabolic rift: Unequal exchange and the guano/nitrates trade’. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 50(3-4), pp. 311-334