MPhil POLIS – Politics and the Anthropocene

Duncan Kelly, POLIS, Lent Term 2021

**Time: 2-4pm Tuesday, starting on 26th January 2021.**

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, due on 19th March 2021.

**Background Reading**

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

Bonneuil, C., & Fressoz, J. B. (2016). *The shock of the Anthropocene: The earth, history and us*. London: Verso.

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.

Crutzen, P. and E. Stoermer, ‘The Anthropocene’, *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May 2000).

Hamblin, Jacob. *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism* (Oxford, 2013).

Hulme, M. 2012. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*.

Kelly, D, *Politics and the Anthropocene*. Cambridge. Polity, 2019.

McNeill, J. R., & Engelke, P. (2016). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the*

*Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press.

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.

Steffen W. et al. (2018). ‘Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene’, *PNAS*

*Perspective* 115(33), pp. 8252-8259.

Wallace-Wells, David. (2019). *The Uninhabitable Earth*. London.

**Seminar 1 – Anthropocene Times**

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.

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

\_\_, ‘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.

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

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

Simon Lewis, (2018). *The Human Planet: How we Created the Anthropocene*. London.

**Seminar 2 – Anthropocene Environments**

This seminar focuses 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.

McNeill, J. R., & P. Engelke, (2016). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the*

*Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press, 2015, esp. ch. 4.

Tim Mitchell, (2014). ‘Economentality, How the Future Entered Government, *Critical Inquiry*.

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

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

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

**Seminar 3 – Anthropocene Energy Politics**

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.

Andreas Malm, ‘Who Lit this Fire?’ *Critical historical Studies* (2016), pp. 215-248.

Tony Wrigley, *Energy and the Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge, esp. chs. 1, 2, 9.

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.

Tim Mitchell (2010). *Carbon Democracy*. London, esp. ch. 1-2.

McNeill, J. R., & P. Engelke, (2016). *The great acceleration: An environmental history of the*

*Anthropocene since 1945*. Harvard University Press, 2015, esp. ch. 1.

**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 threat of overpopulation, resource depletion and capacity, centred around the Club of Rome. Can the economy ‘slowdown’, and learn to offset those inequalities that are already heightened in times of crisis (particularly global health crises)?

D. Meadows et al [The Club of Rome] (1972). *The Limits to Growth* (available here: <https://www.clubofrome.org/report/the-limits-to-growth/>) [cf. the later, 30 year update]

Fred Hirsch, 1972. *The Social Limits to Growth*. London.

George Monbiot, *Out of this Wreckage*. London.

Danny Dorling. 2020. *Slowdown*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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

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

**Seminar 5 – Anthropocene Capitalisms**

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.

Jason Moore, *Capitalism and the Web of Life*. London, esp. chs. 6-7, 10.

Jason Moore and Vijay Prasad, *A History of the World in 7 Cheap Things*. London.

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

Rikard Warlenius, Gregory Pierce, and Vasna Ramasar, (2015). ‘Reversing the Arrow of Arrears- The Concept of “Ecological Debt” and Its Value for Environmental Justice,’ *Global Environmental Change* 30, pp. 21–30.

K. Yusoff 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes, or None*. Minnesota.

Holly Buck, 2019. *After Geo-Engineering – Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration*. London.

**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 Harraway, 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 trade, particularly shipping, that expose political aspects of the Anthropocene in new ways still.

Donna Haraway (2015). ‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene - Making Kin’, *Environmental Humanities*, 6 pp. 159-165.

\_\_ (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke.

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

Bruno Latour, 2018. *Down to Earth*. Polity.

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

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

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

**Seminar 7**

**Anthropocene States**

If the Anthropocene is a problem of and for modern politics, how might state theory evolve to think about the ecological challenge of the Anthropocene, especially in the context of the recent covid-19 pandemic; is there a case for democracy in the age of the Anthropocene; and what of the possibility of a Green New Deal, or a new sense of the public land/space in which the Anthropocene might develop? The seminar will end with some discussion of these relatively well-known positions now, in the context of the previous six sessions.

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright (2018). *Climate Leviathan*. London.

Jed Purdy. 2019. *This Land is our Land*. Princeton.

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

Naomi Klein. 2019. *On Fire. The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. London.

K. Aronoff, A. Battistoni, D. Aldana Cohen, T. Riofrancos, 2019. *A Planet to Win: Why we Need a Green New Deal*. London.

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