

MPhil POLIS – Politics and the Anthropocene

Duncan Kelly, POLIS, Lent Term 2023:

7 weekly seminars, 1-3pm, Monday 24th January – 7th March, Location to be confirmed

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 fraught evolution of modern representative politics. Yet the Anthropocene is also a problem *for* politics of most kinds. 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 relationships between our ideas of modern politics, of climate crisis, and the transition to a world seemingly ‘after nature’. 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

(Do try to read 1-2 of the ‘other readings’ listed before the course, there is no ordering, they are all of interest and relevance, doesn’t really matter which, they are all in their own ways important and interesting, but at the very least, read this title asterisked directly below, in advance, combining scientific and alternate perspectives together).

* Zalasiewicz, J., et al. (2021). ‘The Anthropocene: Comparing its meaning in geology (chronostratigraphy) with conceptual approaches arising in other disciplines’, *Earth’s Future* 9, e2020EF001896. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020EF001896>

Other readings

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]

Chakrabarty, D. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago University Press, 2021) [collects some of his celebrated essays on climate/history, and connects to a wider argument about time and the planetary perspective required for thinking in the Anthropocene]

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]

Latour, B. (2019) *Down the Earth* (Polity) [important recent attempt to put in punchy, political terms, Latour’s long-standing critique of ‘modernity’ and its attempt to separate nature/politics; rejecting that, he of course famously thinks that ‘We have never been modern’].

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]

Tooze, Adam 2020. ‘Shockwave’, *London Review of Books*. [<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n08/adam-tooze/shockwave>]. Pioneering attempt to link ecological and economic crisis of covid-19 in the Anthropocene, a shorter, different version of which is found in the *Guardian* piece, below

___, ‘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>

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]

STRUCTURE/EXPECTATIONS

For each seminar, we will try to focus discussion thematically around a set of four readings, two per hour, meaning that in our time slot we will pivot a few times between related writings. Participants will be asked to post weekly responses to some questions driven by these readings, onto a shared document on Dropbox, in advance of the seminars. The readings are listed in order, for the purposes of discussion, and designed in such a way as to try and build up a particular set of arguments/interpretations.

Seminar 1 – Why the Anthropocene is not the same as Climate Change

This seminar will use some of the ideas from the suggested background reading done in advance of the course, to begin a discussion about how we might understand what the Anthropocene is and how it connects to political/economic ideas. If you have read one of the readings above in advance, we can work with some of that when introducing the session. We will then move to consider first, how the Anthropocene differs from climate change, and second, how that difference is often considered with reference to questions of time or temporality.

Seminar Readings:

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

(2) Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Politics of Climate Change is more than the Politics of Capitalism’, *Theory, Culture, and Society* 34. 2-3 (2017), pp. 25-37.

(3) Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, ‘Rethinking time in response to the Anthropocene - From timescales to timescapes’, *The Anthropocene Review* 9.2 (2022), pp. 206-219.

(4) Julia Nordblad, ‘On the Difference between Anthropocene and Climate Change Temporalities’, *Critical Inquiry* 47.2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1086/712123>

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up)

Adeney Thomas, J., Williams, M., and J. Zalasiewicz, *The Anthropocene – A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Polity, 2020), ch. 4, pp. 69-86.

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

François Hartog, ‘Chronos, Kairos, Crisis: The Genesis of Western Time’, *History and Theory* 60.3 (2021), pp. 425-439.

Seminar 2 – Climate, Capital, History

This seminar first uses the work of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, to consider the modernity of the Anthropocene, and its challenge to history/historical writing with climate front and centre. If the Anthropocene has become a problem for politics, but simultaneously something caused by politics too, we might want to consider the history of that climatic shift, as well as some of the problems caused by particular Anthropocene ‘narratives’ and the place of modern capitalism within it. We’ll consider two such critiques in the second half of the seminar.

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

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

(3) Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014). “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *Anthropocene Review* 1.1, pp. 62–69. [OR: Andreas Malm, ‘Who Lit this Fire?’ *Critical Historical Studies* (2016), pp. 215-248]

(4) Jason Moore and Raj Patel, *A History of the World in 7 Cheap Things*. London, 2018, pp. 119-144.

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up).

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

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.

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

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

Seminar 3 – Planetary Politics?

This seminar takes the planetary perspective (drawn from Earth Systems Science) as a focus for the Anthropocene, to ask how historically minded writers concerned with politics and the environment, can engage with politics on earth, amid such 'planetary' perspectives. We will consider some questions of scale, of global versus planetary, of habitability and sustainability, for example, and the idea of a 'war' for the planet.

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

(2) William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary* (Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 15-37.

(3) Duncan Kelly, 'Wartime for the Planet?' *Journal of Modern European History*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221113281>

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

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up).

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

Will Steffen, et al., 'The Emergence and Evolution of Earth System Science,' *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 1, 54–63 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-019-0005-6>

Will Steffen et al. (2018). 'Trajectories of the Earth System in the Anthropocene', *PNAS Perspective* 115(33), pp. 8252-8259.

Seminar 4 – Back Down to Earth?

This seminar considers the work of Donna Haraway/Kathryn Yusoff, and Bruno Latour, as critics of the Anthropocene concept, in favour of process, connection, networks/terrestrials, or 'making kin', as attempts to think politically outside of the confines of the terms of art bequeathed to politics through 'modernity'. We should consider how successful these strategies are, how difficult it is to write without reference to established categories, and wonder about the disconnect between political critique and political strategy.

(1) (a) Donna Haraway (2015). 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene - Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6 pp. 159-165; (b) 'Tentacular Thinking', *E-flux*,

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>

[Those ideas are more fully outlined in: Haraway, (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke University Press, if you want to pursue more].

(2) Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 65-85, 'The Inhumanities'

(3) Bruno Latour, 2018. *Down to Earth*. Polity (a short book, but if you don't have time, then look at the short article here (2014). 'Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene', *NLH* 45. 1 pp. 1-18.)

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

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up).

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the Universe*, Princeton, 2018, esp. Part III, skim if pressed for time.

Anna Tsing et al, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*

B. Latour (eds.) *Critical Zones – The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (Zone Books)

Seminar 5 – States of Nature

If the Anthropocene is a problem of and for modern politics, how might the modern state, or a modern conception of politics, evolve to engage with the challenges of the Anthropocene? We also ask to what extent poetry/literature can add to a sort of environmental political analysis, perhaps by suggesting alternative ways into our subject by re-connecting with histories of empires/colonialisms, but also to consider if or how climate change prompts a rethinking of human relationships to land and the state.

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

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

(2) Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (Chicago, 2016), esp. Part III: 'Politics'.

(3) 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 [and if you want to follow through, consider Charbonnier's brief thoughts about ecological *Realpolitik* in contemporary China:

(4) Either (a) J. Dryzek 2019. *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Oxford, ch. 7, or (b) Pierre Charbonnier, 'For an Ecological Realpolitik', <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/114/365035/for-an-ecological-realpolitik/>

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up).

(1) 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, but this piece is short]

(2) William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness - Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', *Environmental History*, 1.1 (1997), pp. 7-28 [A classic statement – perhaps consider with reference to recent discussions about re-wilding as 'solution' to climate crisis]

(3) P. Warde, S. Sörlin, L. Robin, (2018). *The Environment: The History of an Idea*. Johns Hopkins University Press, esp. ch. 1 (though chs. 2, 6 also valuable) – on the conceptual history of the ‘environment’

(4) 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>]

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

Seminar 6 – Carbon Democracy and the Energy of ‘Growth’

Much interesting historical work on the Anthropocene has focused on the centrality of particular energy regimes, and their capacity to fuel particular types of capitalist/extractive economies. This seminar looks at some of these ideas about energy politics and democracy, in order to think about how forms of knowledge about politics are constructed by claims about limits/energy, and about growth particularly.

(1) 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>)

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

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

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

Some Additional References (if you choose to follow anything up).

[If you don’t know much about the wider ‘limits to growth’ moment, see the introduction to the seminal volume, 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]

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

Tony Wrigley, *Energy and the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge)/*The Path to Sustained Growth* (Cambridge).

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

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

Cara Daggett, *The Birth of Energy* (Duke, 2020).

Seminar 7 – Green Growth or De-Growth?

If growth/energy lie at the root of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene and anthropogenic climate change, why does it prove so difficult to move politics towards alternative models of economic change. This seminar considers the opposition between calls for a Green New Deal,

versus the challenges of ‘de-growth’, and tries to bring together some of the wider themes of our seminar.

(1) 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>) Selections to be determined.

(2) Either (a) 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> or (b) Hickel, J., & Kallis, G. (2020). ‘Is green growth possible?’ *New political economy* 25(4), pp. 469-486.

We will probably focus on only one of the following books for the last hour of the seminar, but can determine that based on interest nearer the time.

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

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

(4) M. Schmelzer, A. Vetter, A. Vansitjan, *The Future is Degrowth* (Verso, 2022) – sections to be determined, as the book has only just come out.