



February 2021

Technofix and Armageddon

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

Jeremy Baskin

I enjoyed reading Paul Raskin's beautifully written [opener](#) and the many thoughtful responses to it. I will limit myself to sharing two thoughts here.

My starting point is that the "Anthropocene" is not a fact, it is a paradigm. Global warming is a fact. Accelerating rates of species extinction is a fact. Deforestation is a fact. The Anthropocene is not a fact, not even amongst geologists where there is substantial opposition to the term's adoption. Rather, the Anthropocene is a lens, a way of seeing. As with all lenses, we must ask if it helps us see and understand the world better, if it reveals more than it conceals.

I can understand the attraction of the term for those in earth system sciences, for example, where the limitations of adopting a purely physical view of the workings of the earth have become increasingly apparent in recent decades. The recognition that climate change today is largely anthropogenic and that there is a need to incorporate an "anthroposphere" (so to speak) when modeling the cryosphere, atmosphere, or hydrosphere and their interactions, is undoubtedly important, and perhaps the Anthropocene has been helpful. But here we are interested in the usefulness of the concept in helping to understand, as Raskin puts it, "who we are, where we are going, and how we must act." In this, I am more skeptical that the Anthropocene paradigm/concept has much to add.

At its most useful, the term is used as shorthand for recognizing the role of humans in the workings of the earth system and the ecological devastation and planetary overshoot which are features of the world today, and in urging us to "think together" human activities and the more-than-human world and understand these as linked systems. But this is not an especially

novel insight. Further, this *observational* aspect of the concept (describing the magnitude of human influence) is typically attached to a range of *explanations* as to how this situation came to pass (capitalism, industrialization, agriculture, human nature, some humans but not all, etc.), and manifold *prescriptions* (both hubristic and humble) about what should be done. The range of explanations and *prescriptions*, even as many are plausible in their own terms, acts to empty the larger concept of meaning. At best, we are left with an injunction to think together the human and more-than-human worlds. At worst, we have, in the term, too capacious a conceptual umbrella to be analytically useful.

My second thought on Raskin's opener relates to his identification of three options as dead-ends: "hubristic techno-fix, voluntary simplicity, and ecological Armageddon," and his call to "transcend modernity, not re-engineer it, shrink from it, or succumb to it," as he so elegantly puts it. For me, voluntary simplicity sits uncomfortably here: I would not dismiss it so quickly (although perhaps the "voluntary" aspect needs interrogating). Nor would I dismiss degrowth as "wishful thinking," even as I am not naïve about the difficulties in making this objective reality.

But the point I wanted to make here concerns the other two dead-end options. The techno-fix crowd argue that their interventions are necessary to avoid ecological Armageddon. The Anthropocene concept is sometimes recruited in support of this eco-modernist claim. But what if technofix and Armageddon are not options but conjoined twins? What if our current trajectory has us heading *towards* both hubristic techno-fix and ecological Armageddon, not explicitly nor as a stated objective of course, but both together in the name of development and modernity? Would such a troubling path, where "nature is us" as some have put it, be reconcilable with at least some version of an Anthropocenist view? I suspect, worryingly, that it would be, and that this is where the rich and powerful in today's world are taking us. Perhaps there are two options—Technologies of Hubris + Armageddon on the one hand and ??? on the other?

About the Author



Jeremy Baskin is Senior Fellow at the Melbourne School of Government and the joint coordinator of a cross-faculty network of Science, Technology & Society scholars at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on the legitimacy and accountability of knowledge experts in policymaking; climate and energy policy; the notion of the Anthropocene; labor market policy; and changing understandings of the authority of science. His most recent book is titled *Geoengineering, the Anthropocene and the End of Nature*. He hails from South Africa, where he was intimately involved in the anti-apartheid resistance and post-apartheid reconstruction. He is currently working on a PhD at the Australian National University looking at “expert advice and the Covid pandemic.”

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Jeremy Baskin, “Technofix and Armageddon,” contribution to GTI Forum “Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy,” *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/anthropocene-baskin>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.