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## Learning from Nature

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

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More than a new epoch, the Anthropocene is a transient anomaly in geological times or a human-made crisis. The Anthropocene cannot be reduced to a Capitalocene or an Anglocene, even if capitalism, industrialism, utilitarianism, or colonialism have been key catalysts.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the drive of humans towards performance (used here to refer to the combination of efficacy—i.e., reaching one’s goals—and efficiency—i.e., with a minimum of means) is a central feature of the Anthropocene and is shared in all political systems—capitalist, communist, or religious states. In the end, the Anthropocene crystallizes the concept of counterproductivity (as conceptualized by Ivan Illich), i.e., when each performance increment reduces robustness.<sup>2</sup>

The Anthropocene is an era of risk and uncertainty. In fact, in the Anthropocene, our only certainty is the maintenance of uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> We shouldn’t view it solely as a time in which humans have taken control over the whole planet. This is rather a time when humans realize that they have lost control. It is a time of deep humility. In that sense, the etymology behind the Anthropocene is quite ironic, as this “new human” refers to a species realizing it is under the highest threat ever.

A very productive aspect of the Anthropocene in scientific circles is the attempt to unify the many issues of our time under a single umbrella, highlighting the many interdependencies with Earth (sometimes more distantly, e.g., how the digital and ecological revolutions share the same roots).<sup>4</sup> This word praises systems thinking. Conversely, this unification may hide a central issue: the contradictions in the different discourse and solutions provided. As Mike Hulme writes, “One Earth, many futures, no destination.”<sup>5</sup>

We probably need to shift away from the trap of promoting performance even further (e.g., geo-engineering, in the “good Anthropocene”) with the associated increase in risk level, or from the naïve view of a world becoming slow (a negative limit is unlikely to engage action). In other words, the Great Transition shall not be reduced to a great addition or a great regression (respectively). We are in fact living a Darwinian moment where the idea of performance is questioned more deeply. We are at a tipping point where our values and trajectory are driven away from performance to embrace resilience thinking.

The past 500 years have taught us very little on resilience. Biology can offer some interesting insights on this question, simply because living organisms always put resilience before performance: they have been selected on their ability to face uncertainties during evolution. In that sense, they have not prioritized efficiency but adaptability. Of course, such a standpoint should not be applied to human societies without care (e.g., humans would want to keep intention and objectives, whereas living systems are fundamentally under probabilistic rules, and their trajectory happens a posteriori). However, some key principles may be put forward, and could help to avoid the trap of fast versus slow adaptation.

## Endnotes

1. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (New York: Verso, 2016).
2. Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
3. David Vallat, “Apprivoiser les cygnes noirs : enseignements de la crise du coronavirus,” *The Conversation*, April 6, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/apprivoiser-les-cygnes-noirs-enseignements-de-la-crise-du-coronavirus-135481>.
4. Stéphane Grumbach and Olivier Hamant, “Digital Revolution or Anthropogenic Feedback?,” *Anthropocene Review* 5 (2018): 87–96.
5. Mike Hulme, “One Earth, Many Futures, No Destination,” *One Earth* 2, no. 4 (April 2020): 309–311.

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## About the Author



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