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## The Power of a Unifying Story

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

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Understandings of the Anthropocene seem to move in two directions. One is a matter of scientific criteria designating a distinct geological epoch. The other, far broader and more variable, generally signifies a human-transformed earth—inviting us to contemplate its meaning and implications in our own ways.

Clearly, the Anthropocene has implications for the possibility of a Great Transition—a turn *away* from the troubled futures to which business-as-usual leads and *toward* a civilization of enhanced environmental resilience and human well-being. I am happy to let the scientists hash out the remaining details of the technical definition and focus on the term's cultural and historical significance. In sum, I tend to favor a bigger-picture view of the Anthropocene for its potential, as Raskin says, “to stimulate a new consciousness attuned to our shared planetary fate.”

### Historical Scales

To be historical is to capture human actions and their meanings and consequences. With countless possible perspectives, such treatments will necessarily vary. One differentiator is scale. Some make general observations about civilization and humanity, while others take a narrower view—focusing the spotlight on particular peoples, economic systems, technologies, and so on. This variety is good, but each approach has pros and cons.

Raskin underscores the risks of invoking an undifferentiated “we” in discourses about the Anthropocene. The notion of “humanity as a whole” has been criticized for obscuring the culpability of influential systems and actors. There is value in acknowledging the role of significant agents in the contingent and unfolding human story, but there are risks as well.

In particular, I would highlight the risks of *presentism* and *reification*. A disproportionate focus on recent history and the immediate concerns of the day tends to elevate the degree of emotional involvement with which we interpret and react to events. This diminishes our capacity to see clearly and act calmly, contributing to a vicious cycle. And while the current transgression of planetary boundaries is surely an indictment of certain actors and systems, we should be careful not to reify those concepts in ways that perpetuate division and attribute categorical “guilt” or “innocence.” This obscures the roots of the crisis, implying the existence of some zero point at which the problems in question (e.g., exploitation, expansion, overconsumption) began (e.g., the advent of colonialism, capitalism, modernity) and to which we can return if only we can identify and eradicate the offending party or system. By contrast, history shows, rather, that the quest for “more”—so amplified and accelerated in recent years—extends back through ages of empire, going at least as far back as agriculture, but certainly long before Europe, capitalism, fossil fuels, and other usual suspects.

So yes, let us hold perpetrators accountable to the degree that is possible. Let us identify problematic structures and rearrange them. This work requires more fine-grained historical analysis, but it needs to be undertaken with caution and, ideally, in concert with a more expansive view.

## Catching Up to Reality

The focus on “humanity” in the concept of the Anthropocene is not only warranted, but also useful in several key ways.

(1) *It fosters our capacity for greater detachment.* The perspectival distance afforded by the notion of a human-changed world counteracts the excessive emotional involvement that contributes to escalating dangers. Being situated in a larger whole enables us to see beyond our immediate concerns and supports the development of our capacity for greater detachment (i.e., a more dispassionate view of ourselves and our place in the world).

(2) *It gets at deeper roots of the problem.* How far back in history to go depends on the particular questions asked and outcomes sought. For me, the implications of our current trajectory and the aim of shifting course raise questions about the worldviews, practices, and relational patterns

underlying human activities and their impacts. In particular, we need to better understand the socio-cultural conditions that feed or suppress the impulse for conquest, expansion, and oppression.

(3) *It's true.* "Humanity" is a genuinely useful concept, especially in the context of our "planetary phase"—where interdependence binds "humanity and Earth into a single community of fate."<sup>1</sup> As Norbert Elias pointed out, even if the term once served as a symbol of a far-fetched ideal beyond the reach of scientific inquiry, "at a time when all the different tribes, all states of the world, are drawn together more closely, humanity increasingly represents a purely factual frame of reference."<sup>2</sup> Will Steffen and his co-authors on the landmark "Great Acceleration" article acknowledge what the term obscures but, notably, point out that in the twenty-first century "humanity as a whole" may be edging closer to becoming a reality.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that most people's sense of things has not yet caught up.

(4) *It furnishes the big story we need.* Illustrating the reality of interdependence and the far-reaching impacts of our activities, the Anthropocene concept can help us see, and feel part of, a real bigger picture. Past peoples, for whom social and ecological interdependence was simply part of lived experience, didn't need scientific proof. But they did rely on stories to help them remember and transmit this basic understanding of reality. We who live at a much farther remove from the socio-environmental consequences of our activities, it seems, need both.

### **Anthropocene as Macroscopic and Microscopic**

Historically, the heavens (among other natural phenomena) inspired stories which helped people imagine and understand their place in the universe, a crucial aspect of growing up. These myths cultivate a shared sense of the larger world and offer lessons which inform appropriate action in people's respective "heres" and "nows" (or, as an alternative, you could replace with "places and times").

Similarly, the Anthropocene offers a much-needed global story. In whatever diverse forms it gets told, the gist of this scientifically grounded story zooms our focus out, to show the far-reaching consequences of human actions, and in, to consider the ramifications of our own choices. In this sense, perhaps paradoxically, this species-level story can inform the localization that appears to be both necessary and inevitable.

We need to be able to withstand the tension of moving in two directions at once—building shared global understanding and local capacity, balancing global collaboration with local autonomy and action. The Anthropocene, as simultaneously science as story, can help.

## Endnotes

1. Paul Raskin, *Journey to Earthland* (Cambridge, MA: Tellus Institute, 2016), <https://greattransition.org/publication/journey-to-earthland>.
2. Norbert Elias, "The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4 (1987): 223-47.
3. Will Steffen, et al., "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* (2015): 1-18.

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## About the Author



Debbie Kasper is a sociologist and Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Hiram College. She specializes in sociological theory, environmental sociology, community resilience, and social change and offers a wide variety of courses related to these themes. Her latest book is *Beyond the Knowledge Crisis: A Synthesis Framework for Socio-Environmental Studies and Guide to Social Change*. She holds a PhD from Pennsylvania State University.

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