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Resisting an Authoritarian Paradigm

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

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The discussion on “interrogating the Anthropocene,” starting from Paul Raskin’s elegant [essay](#), has been stimulating. But it has not yet brought to light any ways the unfortunate concept can aid in the debate on the forces and dynamics at play in a Great Transition. While the Great Transition looks at a very real crisis of civilization, the Anthropocene is a “crisis of the Earth system,” which swiftly leads to some authoritarian—even totalitarian—conclusions.

In 2009, Johan Rockström and his colleagues introduced the concept of “planetary boundaries,” natural thresholds from ocean acidification to climate change which humanity is increasingly transgressing. For Rockström, humanity can only thrive if it stays within a “safe operating space,” defined for each subsystem of the earth system. From a fairly neutral concept, based on scientific data to be verified or falsified, “safe operating space” quickly transforms into a call for “earth system governance,” justified by “non-negotiable ecological imperatives” that allow “no compromise.” In such a vision of authoritarian environmentalism, man must take over “the control variables of the earth” for a “planetary management.” From there, it is not far to the eco-totalitarian dream of James Lovelock, who would put democracy “on hold” to allow an authoritarian, top-down transition to a new state of sustainable equilibrium on the planet.¹

The Anthropocene was introduced by biologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s and popularized by him and Paul Crutzen in 2000.² The concept gives color to the idea of mankind as a “planet-transforming colossus” (to quote Raskin), perpetuating the false Promethean image that attributes all modifications of climate, ocean chemistry, the cryosphere, the nitrogen cycle, and biodiversity to human intervention. Yes, man-made transformations make life more difficult

for many species, but would even their worldwide extinction mark the beginning of a new geological epoch?

Couldn't decisions on how to label the present period of earth history be left to a 2521 joint-meeting of The International Union of Geological Sciences and The International Commission on Stratigraphy? The Precambrian era occupied more than four billion years, the Paleozoic lasted more than 300 million years, and the Mesozoic just under 200 million years. Today's Cenozoic geological era is only 66 million years old, and its most recent period, the Holocene, is a mere 11,700 years and begins with exaggerated anthropocentric visions of the great role of mankind on this planet. Only a few decades old, the Anthropocene makes things worse by hiding more than it reveals regarding the nature of Earth's transformation at human hands.

The Anthropocene paradigm originates in the same hubris that created the ecological crisis in the first place. Mankind is really concerned about destruction of the natural foundation for one species, homo sapiens sapiens. If the threat were not that direct, the debate on the depth and reach of man's intervention into nature would interest only a small public of environmentalists and scientists. If mankind continues its course to the point of self-extinction, the impact humans have had on planet earth will be invisible after a short time in the planet's life. Our few scratches will overgrow in some hundreds of thousands of years. Nothing to worry about...if not for the fact there would be nobody around anymore to worry. To be sure, the ecological crisis has opened a new chapter in human history. But how it affects the history of the Earth—we must leave that to future generations to discover.

So, we are back where we started: Planet Earth is doing fine, and nature is doing...okay. That is, in fact, a reason to be worried. Will the course towards self-extinction be viewed as unacceptable on moral grounds, as philosopher Hans Jonas argued at great length?³ The Anthropocene narrative leads along the wrong path, remaining caught in—or, even worse, glorifying—the idea of man's domination over nature. But, as Murray Bookchin and others have argued extensively, Man does not dominate nature. The COVID pandemic has put this into sharp view. The drive to grow and to dominate is not “etched into the genetic make-up of our species”; it is a social construct rampant in large parts of the world. The destructive consequences of man's intervention into nature are

not the result of domination, but of hubris, ignorance, and blunder, and there is no indication whatsoever of a possibility for future global interventions to repair the damages done and create ecological earth system control and management systems.

It is hard to see how the paradigm of the “Anthropocene” will contribute in any way to the endeavor of envisioning and building a decent future. However, the eco-technocratic authoritarian-totalitarian uses of the paradigm are obvious and possibly imminent. To “create a society that elicits and nurtures the better angels of our collective nature,” to quote Paul Raskin, continues to be a political and practical task—in our work and in our lives.

Endnotes

1. Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/main.html>; James Lovelock, *A Rough Ride to the Future* (New York: Overlook Press, 2014).
2. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) Newsletter, 2000, reprinted in “Have We Entered the ‘Anthropocene’?,” International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, October 31, 2020, <http://www.igbp.net/news/opinion/opinion/haveweenenteredtheanthropocene.5.d8b4c3c12bf3be638a8000578.html>.
3. Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

About the Author



Karl-Ludwig Schibel has been an activist and writer on climate change, climate justice, and local climate policies for three decades. He has taught social ecology at Frankfurt University, served on the board of the Climate Alliance from 1990 to 2015, and continues to coordinate the Climate Alliance in Italy. He organizes the annual Fair of Practical Utopias in Città di Castello, which showcases ecological solutions for the economy and society. He holds a PhD from Frankfurt University

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