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Introduction

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Jean-Daniel Collomb and Pierre-Antoine Pellerin



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Introduction

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- 1 The word Anthropocene was initially put forward in 2000 at the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program annual conference by the Dutch geochemist Paul Crutzen, who had achieved scientific fame in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to his major contribution to the fight against ozone depletion. According to Crutzen, human activities have reached such a large scale that the human species has morphed into a geological force in its own right. As Christian Schwägerl puts it, the Anthropocene thesis boils down to “proving that humans are turning into a preponderant factor of change in the Earth-system.”¹ The new epoch is believed to be replacing the Holocene, which started 11,500 years ago.
- 2 A whole range of starting points for the Anthropocene has already been advanced, from the advent of agriculture to the industrial revolutions that began in the early 19th century. Crutzen points to the spectacular increase in carbon dioxide and methane concentrations in the atmosphere from the industrial age onwards. He also underlines the importance of massive deforestation, the substantial effects of chemical industrial agriculture (which has been disrupting the nitrogen cycle), dam construction, and overfishing: “Unless a global catastrophe, such as a meteorite impact, a world war or a pandemic, occurs, humankind will remain a major environmental force for millennia.”² There is now a growing body of research in the life sciences on this topic although some geologists have expressed reservations about the validity of the Anthropocene for their discipline.³
- 3 The aim of this issue is to contribute to the fast-developing academic discussion regarding the Anthropocene among social scientists by taking a transdisciplinary approach to this topic. According to the philosopher Pierre Charbonnier, the manner in which the practitioners of the natural sciences respond to this issue differs markedly from the attitudes prevalent among social scientists.
- 4 In the natural sciences, many experts tend to take an ecomodernist stance emphasizing technological solutions while many social scientists hold that the Anthropocene will

force us to call into question our commitment to technological change, which brought about the crisis in the first place, instead of reaffirming its legitimacy.⁴ Consider for instance Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz who have called for the creation of “new environmental humanities [...] which will override the dichotomy between ‘environment’ and ‘society’, established at the beginning of the industrial age.”⁵ Bonneuil and Fressoz also insist on the political ramifications of the Anthropocene⁶ and view it as a vindication for the relevance of environmental history.⁷ This vision is shared by David Biello who has written that the Anthropocene could lead to the reconciliation of the natural sciences and the social sciences, which will overlap and constantly inform one another.⁸

- 5 Bonneuil and Fressoz have also singled out the ethical and conceptual issues raised by the growing success of Crutzen’s theory. They claim that, by putting forward a totalizing vision of humankind as a geological force, Crutzen risks glossing over significant differences in people’s situations, social statuses and responsibilities. Indeed climate change may well be a global phenomenon but a member of the German middle class does not bear the same responsibility and suffer the same consequences as a climate refugee from Bangladesh.⁹ Other critics argue that the notion of Anthropocene implies a homogenization of the phenomenon it describes by adopting a global and universalist perspective that renders local, social, racial and gendered differences invisible. This is what leads Françoise Vergès to adopt an intersectional approach – informed by feminism and decolonialism – of the causes and consequences of environmental destructions.¹⁰ Others like Andreas Malm for instance denounce the anthropocentrism and ahistoricism of Crutzen’s concept, preferring instead to speak of “capitalocene” in a perspective that confronts Marxism and ecology and lays emphasis on the role of industrial capitalism in climate change ; this critique aims at avoiding the development of a form of “ecological fascism” that would hold democracy responsible for the destruction of the common good that nature is.¹¹ Bonneuil and Fressoz add that many would rather turn to technological solutions instead of emphasizing behavioral change or solutions imposed by government. The risk is that humankind might exacerbate the crisis by opting for the continuation of modern *hubris* through more sophisticated means: “After unconsciously engaging in geo-bio-engineering for centuries, we are now asked to interact with Gaia in a conscious, voluntary, and scientifically calculated manner, and convert to comprehensive ecological engineering. Even though it could have made humankind more humble, the Anthropocene is being mobilized to buttress a form of planetary hubris.”¹² Humankind is now grappling with a paradox : as we become aware of the undesirable effects of our activities, we could end up going further down the road to the technological mastery of life on Earth.
- 6 While he does shed light on the threats facing humankind today, Christian Schwägerl has few compunctions about the techno-fixes we might use to address climate change and other environmental challenges. He even calls for human control over the Earth-system. Our task, he writes, is “to turn into cultivators of a sustainable Earth on which humans would engage in destruction only as a way to consciously create a new world.”¹³ Far from being perceived as inevitable decline, the Anthropocene is welcomed as a challenge which will prompt us to fully achieve the Cartesian project of complete human mastery of the natural world. Schwägerl, who defines freedom as liberation from the negative externalities of human activities, states that our realization that the

Anthropocene is happening must prompt us to prepare in order to be able to adapt and to help the Earth-system adapt to our presence.¹⁴

- 7 There is little doubt that not everyone agrees as to the meaning and implications of the Anthropocene. That is why the goal of this issue is to provide a forum for a wide range of views regarding the idea of nature in the context of the Anthropocene. Specifically, this issue is an attempt at determining to what extent the modern understanding of nature has contributed and is continuing to contribute to the Anthropocene. It will also be an attempt at understanding whether the new geological epoch that modernity has accidentally begotten could lead to a radical, and maybe final, questioning of its very legitimacy.
- 8 The intellectual legacy of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, which gave birth to the modern era where we live, act and think today, forms the starting point for much of the current thinking about the concept of nature. By calling for modern man to become a “master and owner of nature”, René Descartes’s philosophical works help shed light on the achievements and failures of our technical odyssey. The ambitious attempts to master nature along with the radical disenchantment of the natural world have led (lest we forget) to remarkable technological achievements and an unprecedented improvement of the living conditions of billions of people; however, they are also responsible for wide-sweeping environmental destruction-with the current climate change and the sixth great extinction being some of its most spectacular instances.
- 9 The destruction of the environment has led environmentalists, nature writers and environmental philosophers to seek a new definition for the relationship between people and nature, one that would provide a break from modernity. From their perspective, science and its technical applications remain important, in that they support an updated vision of a desired moral relationship between humans and nature. Many attractive and worrisome contemporary developments, however, seem destined to subvert the environmentalist indictment of modern hubris and of the quest of infinite growth in a finite world. The stupendous progress of bioengineering, the decisive contribution of Silicon Valley’s techno-libertarians to the energy transition and the prospect of transhumanism seem to mark the continuation of the Cartesian project of taming nature by other means.
- 10 The main goal of this issue will be to discuss the idea of nature in the context of the 21st century and the question of human responsibility in the development of biodiversity, animal welfare and the limitations of the humanistic ethos developed in the Enlightenment. The emergence of new fields of inquiry, particularly in the Anglophone world-ecocriticism, zoocriticism, ecopoetics, green studies and animal studies-has been instrumental in revisiting fundamental concepts and reevaluating increasingly pressing challenges. Each contributor to this issue provides an original insight into the Anthropocene, informed by their academic field but also relevant for other fields. As a result, this issue features a wide range of analytical perspectives, from politics and ethics to visual arts and literature. Ecological destruction and climate change have transformed how nature is represented in literature, art and film and, conversely, these representations themselves have transformed the way we think about and relate to nature. These days, various writers and filmmakers draw on post-apocalyptic or prehistoric themes to talk about nature without men or men without nature, a trend that shows a desire to tell stories taking place before, after or away from human life as

the rise of disaster movies or of new forms of Robinsonades in recent years testifies to. Others attempt to “re-enchant” the world once again through a poetics that would be devoid of dominating impulses and colonial connotations, but such a project may run the risk of re-sacralizing nature.

- 11 First Augustin Berque turns to mesology in order to show how Imanishi’s and Fukuoka’s thoughts could help us transcend the modern understanding of nature. Likewise, Gregory Lee explores the potential of Jacques Ellul’s reflections on the Technological society for our environmental predicament in the 21st century and draws instructive parallels with Taoist thought.
- 12 The next three articles approach the Anthropocene from a literary perspective. Bénédicte Meillon studies three contemporary texts set in the Appalachies (*Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver, *Strange as this Weather Has Been* by Ann Pancake and Ron Rash’s *Above the Waterfall*) and reflects on whether attempts at re-enchanting the world could turn out to be useful and relevant in our day and age. She endeavors to demonstrate that ecopoetics can sap the supremacy of modern science, which tends to separate the human species from other species.
- 13 Sophie Milcent-Lawson analyzes three contemporary novels, the authors of which have tried to convey an animal’s perspective on the world (*Défaite des maîtres et possesseurs* by Vincent Message, *Mémoires de la jungle* by Tristan Garcia, and *Mal de mer* by Marie Darrieussecq). In each of these novels, Sophie Milcent-Lawson probes into the literary mechanisms used to express animal subjectivity.
- 14 Marie Cazaban-Mazerolles looks into *Robinson Crusoe*. Through an analysis of several rewritings of Defoe’s novel, she tries to show how contemporary Western literature allows for a reflexive approach to its poetic legacy as regards the relations between humans and “nature”, including in relation with the issues raised by the Anthropocene.
- 15 Matthieu Duperrex studies strategies in contemporary art in relation to the Anthropocene and their potential implications for the social sciences. His article features an overview of the means by which artists opt for investigative approaches to their subject in order to experience damaged ecosystems more fully.
- 16 The last two articles were written by philosophers. The environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott comes up with an ethical framework to assess human responses to the Anthropocene. After reviewing the distinguishing traits of the Anthropocene, he calls for the emergence of an Earth ethic in which the Holocene and global human civilization are worthy of ethical consideration.
- 17 Sophie Gosselin focuses on transhumanism in the context of the Anthropocene. She views the transhumanist project, which seeks to promote “beautiful” and “good” forms in order to transcend abjection, which is consubstantial to life, as a political, technological, and biomedical project. This leads her to wonder about the legitimacy of such a power and about its potentially devastating consequences.

NOTES

1. Christian Schwägerl, *L'âge de l'Homme : construire le monde demain à l'ère de l'anthropocène*, Nicolas Vergnaud, trad., Paris, Éditions Alternatives, [2010], 2012, p. 26.
 2. Paul J. Crutzen, « La géologie de l'humanité : l'anthropocène », *Écologie et politique*, vol. 1, n° 34, 2007, p. 144.
 3. David Biello, *The Unnatural World: The Race to Remake Civilization in Earth's Newest Age*, New York, Scribner, 2016, p. 43. See also Christophe Bonneuil, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'événement Anthropocène : la terre, l'histoire et nous*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013, pp. 17-33.
 4. Pierre Charbonnier, « L'ambition démocratique à l'âge de l'anthropocène », *Esprit*, décembre 2015, pp. 34-35.
 5. Bonneuil, *Anthropocène*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
 6. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-45.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
 8. Biello, *Unnatural World*, p. 59.
 9. Bonneuil, *Anthropocène*, pp. 88-89.
 10. Françoise Vergès, « Racial Capitalocene: is the Anthropocene Racial? », in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (éd.). London and New York: Verso, 2017, pp. 72-82.
 11. Andreas Malm, *L'Anthropocène contre l'histoire. Le réchauffement climatique à l'ère du capital*. Paris : La Fabrique, 2017.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
 13. Schwägerl, *L'âge de l'homme*, p. 85.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
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AUTHORS

JEAN-DANIEL COLLOMB

Jean-Daniel Collomb is a senior lecturer in American studies at Université Jean Moulin (Lyon 3). His research is focused on environmental issues in the United States and on the history of the social movements intent on preserving the environment in the United States from the mid-19th century to the present time. He is the author of *John Muir, parcs nationaux et écologie* (2013) and *Une histoire de la radicalité environnementale aux États-Unis* (2018). He has also written several articles about the opposition between the American Right and the US environmental movement from the early 1980s to the present time.

Jean-Daniel Collomb est maître de conférences en civilisation américaine à l'Université Jean Moulin (Lyon 3). Ses recherches portent sur les questions environnementales aux États-Unis et sur l'histoire des divers mouvements de protection de l'environnement apparus outre-Atlantique depuis la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle. Il est l'auteur de *John Muir, parcs nationaux et écologie* (2013) et de *Une histoire de la radicalité environnementale aux États-Unis* (2018). Il a aussi consacré

plusieurs articles aux relations antagonistes entre la droite américaine et le mouvement environnementaliste depuis les années 1980.

PIERRE-ANTOINE PELLERIN

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin is a lecturer in English at the Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3, where he teaches American literature and translation. His research focuses on the experience and representation of masculinity in postwar American poetry, drama and fiction, particularly on Jack Kerouac autobiographical narratives. He has published several articles on the question as well as on animal and environmental question in journals like *Angles*, *Leaves*, *Transatlantica* or *Theatre Topics*.

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin est Maître de Conférences en anglais à l'Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3 où il enseigne la littérature américaine et la traduction. Ses travaux de recherche portent sur l'expérience et la représentation de la masculinité dans le roman et la poésie américaine de l'après-guerre, tout particulièrement dans les récits autobiographiques de Jack Kerouac. Il a publié plusieurs articles à ce sujet ainsi que sur la question animale et environnementale dans des revues comme *Angles*, *Leaves*, *Transatlantica* or *Theatre Topics*.