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The Anthropocene and global politics: Rewriting the Earth as political space

Last year, the [Anthropocene Working Group](#)—a group of researchers responsible for investigating a potential formalization of the Anthropocene—agreed to recognize a new geologic epoch to mark humans’ profound impact on the planet. If the Working Group’s forthcoming proposal planned to [2021](#) is accepted by the [International Commission on Stratigraphy](#), the Anthropocene will replace the Holocene—the 12 000 year of relatively stable climate since the last ice age—as the current [geologic time interval](#).

The concept of the Anthropocene has already inspired interdisciplinary discussions across research fields. In recent years, the concept has been picked up by scholars in global politics and it has since prompted critical debate about basic assumptions in International Relations (IR). Based on a recent article in [Earth System Governance](#), this WritePeace blog describes how the Anthropocene is interpreted in global politics and rewrites the Earth as a political space. Three major discourses have been identified: (a) the Endangered World; (b) the Entangled World; and (c) the Extractivist World. Before describing these discourses and how they view nature and politics, a brief overview of the concept of the Anthropocene is provided.

The human epoch

The Anthropocene concept was coined in the early 2000s after Paul Crutzen, atmospheric chemist and Nobel Laureate, used the term to describe [a new phase in planetary history](#). Together with biologist Eugene Stoermer, Crutzen [argued](#) that humans have become a driving force of geological change and are likely to remain so for millennia to come. Over the course of a few generations—a brief moment in the planetary history—humans have [drained](#)

fossil fuels that were formed over millions of years, transformed at least 30–50 per cent of the planet's land surface and caused air pollution that far exceeds the sum of all natural emissions. The speed and scale of this global environmental change has set a new trajectory for the planet, one that humans are part of as much as any natural process with a geological footprint. The future of the Earth and humanity are now closely interrelated.

Two decades after Crutzen first described the Anthropocene, the concept has spread, evolved and diversified. While Crutzen and Stoermer theorize about the geological characteristics of the concept, others have explored its sociological, philosophical and political implications. According to Dahlia Simangan, many disciplines in the social sciences 'have engaged with the discussions surrounding the Anthropocene by offering critiques of human activities and solutions to global environmental challenges.' Within IR, researchers have begun to explore approaches to security that account for the changing climate. The Anthropocene has been described as a 'watershed moment' for IR and it is argued that security and the environment can no longer be acted upon in conventional ways. Although the engagement with the Anthropocene in the IR discipline is still marginal, the interest in this concept has increased in recent years. The concept has even been discussed by high-level politicians in international settings. Perhaps the most recognized example of this is when Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany spoke about the implications of the Anthropocene for global security at the 2019 Munich Security Conference.

Anthropocene worlds

To better understand how the Anthropocene is interpreted and approached in IR research, 52 peer-reviewed academic articles from relevant fields were analyzed. Instead of focusing on the material consequences of a changing environment, the representational politics of the concept were explored. Based on different 'ontological claims, analytical themes and political concerns' three Anthropocene discourses were categorized: (a) the Endangered World; (b) the Entangled World; and (c) the Extractivist World. These discourses, or worlds, share the idea of an interconnected and fragile setting where conventional distinctions between the Global North, the Global South, us and them, and inside outside are challenged. However, they each contest what needs to be secured and by whom.

The Endangered World

The Endangered World recognizes the Anthropocene as a break from the stable Holocene and suggests that the great acceleration in human development and economic activity after World War II pushed the planet into a dangerous situation. Since the middle of the 20th century, human activities have had a global impact on the Earth system. They have exceeded some of the 'great forces of nature' in magnitude and happened much faster than natural climate variability. This has caused socioeconomic unrest, altered the geopolitical map and triggered dangers that often are complex and transboundary. The Endangered World interprets the Anthropocene as a threatening situation that is difficult, but not impossible, to escape.

Although climate change may threaten specific countries and populations, the biosphere is the primary referent of security in the Endangered World. The entire system that enables life on Earth is at risk and responses must therefore be global in scope and transcend political boundaries. The ultimate goal for global politics in this discourse is to regain control of human wellbeing and security by restoring a Holocene-like state. Scientific assessments are deemed necessary and in line with liberal institutionalism, it is believed that strong global institutions will facilitate coordinated responses. The current liberal democratic order, with the United Nations and its specialized agencies as the leading forum for addressing transnational issues, remains critical in the Endangered World. However, the UN must be adapted to the new and complex interdependencies of the Anthropocene.

The Entangled World

The Entangled World is a discourse that challenges modernist ideals and related forms of global politics. It interprets the Anthropocene as an uncertain era that cannot be reversed and describes a new reality where human societies and ecosystems coexist in complex relations. The so-called Cartesian separation of nature and culture has ceased and been 'replaced by much more contingent, fragile and unpredictable networks of relations.' In this world 'marked by melting ice caps, thawing permafrost, acidified oceans, accelerating deforestation, degraded agricultural lands and dramatic species loss' human activities have affected everything around us, meaning that humans and what used to be nature practically have become indistinguishable.

This new reality forces us to fundamentally rethink conventional assumptions and beliefs in global politics. Given the far-reaching entanglement, security can no longer be about protecting objects or ideals from external threats. The other is always so close to us that it is irrelevant to distinguish between inside and outside. According to Scott Hamilton, 'if humans are nature, and the Anthropocene demands the securing of humanity (and all life) from the unpredictable planetary conditions "we" are "making", then the aim of security ultimately becomes that of securing oneself from oneself.' The Entangled World sees the Anthropocene as an invitation to fundamentally rethink current institutions, regulations and commitments, and to form collaborations based on solidarity and justice beyond humans and states. Yet, distinct political alternatives to replace the state-centric structures remain to be explored.

The Extractivist World

The last discourse, the Extractivist World, focuses on the global capitalist system and its destructive consequences. It recognizes that industrialized economies have a history of damaging ecological systems and people on the fringes of western societies. Now, due to rapid globalization in recent decades the relation between humans and nature has been affected on a whole new level. The overwhelming growth in extraction, production and consumerism has created an ecological context of destroyed lands, polluted waters and extinct species. In the Extractivist World, the 'speed and scale of destruction has ruined the biosphere's capacity to recover.'

The Extractivist World opposes universalized stories about humanity's imprint on the global environment. Climate change is the result of a political economic systems that unreservedly consumes fossil fuels at the expense of vulnerable people and ecosystems. Attempts to overthrow these structures are resisted by political and economic elites because it threatens liberal consumer lifestyles and white patriarchal privileges. Since capitalism is perceived as the root of the problems in the Anthropocene, responses must resist marketized measures and explore 'security beyond the circuits of capital.' In the Extractivist World, technological solutions will not resolve the ongoing crisis. Instead, policy and security measures will emerge from alternative social movements and grassroot experimentation with sustainable relations and lifestyles.

Lasting implications

The 52 articles analyzed in 'The Anthropocene and the geo-political imagination: Re-writing Earth as political space' are inspired by different research traditions, such as Liberal Institutionalism, Posthumanism and Neo-Marxism, in their attempts to understand our troubled world. The three discourses are neither definitive nor perfectly delimited, but they clarify significant aspects of human relations to the planetary system. And though they tell conflicting stories about policies and security in the Anthropocene, they all describe a state of global politics where nature no longer is a stable basis for human undertakings. This human era challenges basic assumptions in IR, not least geographical and political ones. While it still is too early to tell what the lasting implications of this reassessment will be, it is presumed that the advent of Anthropocene will affect the study and practice of IR for years to come and increasingly alter global politics.

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