

Society in the Anthropocene: Elemental figures of a future politics

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Academic and public framing of the concept of the Anthropocene has hitherto been dominated by the physical and life sciences, especially geology. Yet this concept significantly challenges the boundaries between the social and natural. The Cabot Institute hosted a major international conference - Society in the Anthropocene – on 24 and 25 June 2013, to explore this challenge across the social science disciplines.

The aim of the conference was to ask ourselves collectively, as social scientists, in what ways our core conceptual frameworks were challenged by the naming of a new geological age which wrote human agency directly into the dynamics of change in the natural world? Would this alter underlying assumptions about the relationship between nature and society, the role of rational human agency, the nature of social relations in particular physical settings, or the political possibilities of responding to the challenges emerging from the Anthropocene?

The conference brought socio-legal, political, sociological, anthropological and geographical perspectives to four thematic sessions: Carbon Politics (session 1), Urban Resilience and Global Containment (session 2), Global Environmental Uncertainty (session 3), and Capitalism, Biotechnology and the Biosphere (session 4). As befits the initial and novel engagement of multiple disciplines with a concept that is relatively new to the social sciences, more discussion revolved around identifying the parameters of these debates than providing definitive answers to the questions and dilemmas they posed. It is probably fair to say that not only did we not come up with any clear answers – detractors of the concept were as widespread as in the geological profession, and debates just as heated (at least [one participant noted that the International Stratigraphy Association has not formally defined 'Anthropocene' as a geological period](#)). Nevertheless, certain questions did consistently rear their heads: How do we think about political agency in the Anthropocene? How important is capitalism or neoliberalism? Is the notion of the Anthropocene anthropocentric despite itself?

Figuring across disciplines

While all presenters broadly accepted the premise that human beings have become at least one of the dominant forces shaping the biosphere, several questioned the value of an analytically – even geologically – distinct category to frame and conceptualise these changes for the social sciences. Other contributors expressed wariness at the repeated tendency to embrace an epochal view of social change and noted the proliferation of rival terms elsewhere in social science (such as postmodernity, hypermodernity and transmodernity). It was therefore striking that what might be called 'figures' of different kinds haunted the papers and discussions. These ranged from the body politic (*oikos*, ethical spaces, political economy, and the democratic people) to geology (fire and land) to chemistry and

physics (air and measured impact) to techno-biological bodies (toxic bodies, the pristine foetus, the cyber-mediated client of humanitarian aid).

Political agency

Interestingly, while many of these figures evoked above (the body, fire, land, air) are easily imaginable as objects of (natural) scientific enquiry, there was a strong sense in the conference of the limits of science itself. Poetics and narrative were repeatedly invoked across the two days as sites or spaces that might better capture the contours of the terrain of an Anthropocene age. And despite the title of the conference, political agency rather than social relations were arguably much more central. Of particular interest was the capacity for human action to mitigate or even reverse some of the most damaging effects of anthropogenic change, and the new forms of political community and social relations that such changes might entail. Some presenters argued that novel uses of technology and approaches to reducing energy consumption and encouraging recycling at the local level, could engender positive change in the way in which individual families and communities understood their relationship with and impact on the environment. Others were more sceptical of the anthropogenic dynamics as a transformative political or social force, instead suggesting that their sometimes apocalyptic and often overly-technical nature served to *de*-politicise the issue and deflect attention from the political and social change necessary to transform the political economies of consumption which underpin the catastrophe in the first place. Broadly, a distinction emerged between those who saw positive change as being possible within broadly existing global structures and those who called for a new kind of politics that would transform global politics from the bottom up.

Measurement and impact

A third thread of discussion in the conference concerned the extent to which it is analytically useful to separate out human agency in wider evolutionary and geological phenomena. One approach to this was to suggest that human agency can only be understood as existing in mutually constitutive dialogue with the natural world. Over-emphasising 'human impact' outside of this relationship risks repeating the worst pathologies of the Anthropocene by casting again the human figure as master, albeit an irresponsible master, of the natural world. Others stressed the need for a nuanced genealogy of the metrological disciplines, events and practices that intertwined to bring the Anthropocene concept to the attention of academics and governments. Suggestions for dating the inception of the Anthropocene ranged from the first use of fire by humans, to the 18th century, to 1969's introduction of environmental impact assessment in the US.

Beyond the human?

Finally, an abiding paradox was the question of whether the notion of the Anthropocene decentred or actually recentred humans. When geological time is recast quite literally using the language of human impact, are humans recentred, or refigured as a meddling pin-prick on the edge of vast natural forces which will certainly outlast us and which may (once again?) induce respect, awe or humility rather than the urge to mastery. Could the 'qualculations' (qualitative-calculative measurements) of the diverse economic spaces traced by one presenter become part of the 'impact of impacts' tracked by another, both showing how the Anthropocene sparks new ways of measuring around which novel practices begin to coalesce? These and many other interactions between specific aspects of the papers will be developed in a collection of conference papers which will be submitted to the leading journal, *Economy and Society*. You can find further information on the conference, including draft copies of papers, audio recordings of presentations, and a list of attendees on the Cabot Institute website at: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/cabot/events/2013/206.html>.