

# Against the Anthropocene

by [Daniel Hartley](#)



The Anthropocene is a term geologists have begun using to refer to a new geological epoch, in which the action of humans has had such a dramatic effect upon the Earth's climate, land, oceans and biosphere that humanity itself must now be considered a geological force in its own right<sup>1</sup>. Whilst there is some disagreement over when precisely the Anthropocene began, scientists generally date it to the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, mainly because of the newly-invented steam engine and the enormous expansion in the use of fossil fuels. The evidence adduced for the 'Anthropocene' is a series of stratigraphic signals – that is, lithological, geochemical and palaeobiological traces that are measured and interpreted by geologists in the present, or which will be read by imagined geologists in the future<sup>2</sup>.

Superficially, of course, there is no real problem with this. Within the strict limitations of geology as an academic discourse, the 'Anthropocene' is a relatively harmless term. The dangers arise, however, when geologists enter the political arena, calling for collective ecological intervention on the basis of their conception of the Anthropocene. For there exists something like a 'spontaneous ideology' of the scientists who have written on the Anthropocene, and whether they are aware of this problem or not, they have produced an implicit philosophy of history. This philosophy has as its theoretical corollary a specific type of abstract, naturalistic materialism, about which Marx himself wrote the following: 'The weaknesses of the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism which excludes the historical process, are immediately evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions expressed by its spokesmen whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality'<sup>3</sup>. It is just such 'venturing beyond,' and the incoherent discourse which inspires it, that I oppose.

At the heart of the Anthropocene lies the *Anthropos*: the human. But what or who is this 'Anthropos' exactly? No clear definition is ever given, and yet the literature on the Anthropocene regularly refers to such phenomena as 'the human enterprise'. The problem with this is that, as Marx pointed out in his 'Theses on Feuerbach,' such a conception of humanity presupposes 'an internal, 'dumb' generality which *naturally* unites the many individuals'<sup>4</sup>, as opposed to a historical conception of humanity as internally differentiated and constantly developing via internal contradictions. To speak of the 'human enterprise' is to make of humanity an abstract corporation in which 'we're all in this together' – the David Cameron maxim of 2009 – thus belying the reality of class struggle, exploitation and oppression.

Moreover, the dating of the Anthropocene to the Industrial Revolution – because of the advent of the steam engine – points to its technological bias. Indeed, the Anthropocene discourse is a prime example of technological determinism: the notion that technological innovation is the motor of history, as opposed to the Marxist understanding in which historical development is driven by class struggle. As Jason W. Moore has observed, the historical roots of the phenomena covered by the term ‘Anthropocene’ lie, not in the invention of the steam engine, but in ‘the rise of capitalist civilization after 1450, with its audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization’<sup>5</sup>; this marked ‘a turning point in the history of humanity’s relation with the rest of nature, greater than any watershed since the rise of agriculture and the first cities’<sup>6</sup>. Thus, inherent to the Anthropocene discourse is a conception of historical causality which is purely mechanical: a one-on-one billiard ball model of technological invention and historical effect, which is simply inadequate to explain actual *social* and *relational* modes of historical causation. The fact that technology itself is bound up with social relations, and has often been used as a weapon in class war, plays no role in this discourse whatsoever. Marx’s dictum that ‘[i]t would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt’<sup>7</sup> is unthinkable within such a purview. To put it bluntly, then, for the Anthropocene technology is not political.

Even from a literary-critical perspective the Anthropocene is problematic. Take this representative passage, for instance: ‘Pre-industrial humans, still a long way from developing the contemporary civilization that we know today, nevertheless showed some early signs of accessing the very energy-intensive fossil fuels on which contemporary civilization is built’<sup>8</sup>. Just as Sartre remarked in *Les mots*, the biographies of ‘great men’ only ever see the child as the retrospectively projected necessity of what came after, thereby voiding the past present of its true contradictory presence, so the Anthropocene can only ever think the past in its proleptic trajectory towards our present. Its specific narrative mode translates the time of initiative and praxis into the time of pure physical necessity. Moreover, precisely because of this, it can only explain *our own present* as part of the empty, homogeneous time of linear succession, which increasingly contracts as ecological catastrophe approaches.

This implicit philosophy of historical temporality goes hand in hand with a Whig view of history as one endless story of human progress and enlightenment. The following two quotations clearly exemplify this tendency:

‘Migration to cities usually brings with it rising expectations and eventually rising incomes, which in turn brings an increase in consumption’

‘The onset of the Great Acceleration [scientists’ name for the period of increased ‘human’ activity following WWII] may well have been delayed by a half-century or so, interrupted by two world wars and the Great Depression’<sup>9</sup> (my italics)

The first sentence seems almost wilfully blind to the history of mass urban poverty, gentrification and accumulation by dispossession, whilst the second seems to claim that the bloodiest century in human history – including Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Dresden bombing, the Gulags, and the Holocaust – is a mere blip on the rising line of progress. Needless to say, such a view of human history is, at best, problematic.

Finally, and as a logical consequence of the four preceding problems, the majority of the solutions proposed by scientists are technical (mass climate- and geo-engineering projects, and so on) and managerial in nature – often couched in the language of ‘governance systems’ – rather than political. The scientists arrive at such apolitical solutions precisely because they never pose the Anthropocene as a political problem in the first place. Kim Stanley Robinson’s recent claim that ‘Justice has become a survival technology’<sup>10</sup> is practically unthinkable within the presuppositions of the scientific

representations of the Anthropocene. Just as they cannot see *technology* as a *political* force, so they cannot see politics as a material force. Indeed, they have a problematic conception of materiality as such.

Thus, we can see quite clearly that the mode of presentation of a particular problem will to a large extent determine the range and quality of the possible solutions one is able to develop. Sketching out the theoretical basis of a Marxist approach to the same phenomena to which the Anthropocene itself refers may help to make the political stakes – and hence the possible political solutions – somewhat clearer. Jason W. Moore's suggestion that we replace the 'Anthropocene' with the term 'Capitalocene' – the age of capital, which would of course begin with the dawn of capitalism itself – is a very useful corrective, not only because it puts capitalism as an economic and social system at the heart of its theory, but also because it forces us to find a middle way between humanist and post-human thought<sup>11</sup>



## Capitalocene and World-Ecology

Moore defines world-ecology as a 'framework of historical interpretation that dialectically unifies capital, power and nature'<sup>12</sup>. As in Nancy Fraser's recent work, Moore argues for an expanded conception of capitalism, one which goes beyond the purely economic: for him, capitalism is 'a civilization that is co-produced by humans and the rest of nature'<sup>13</sup>. Thus, Moore's principal aim is to overcome all accounts of human (and capitalist) history which are premised upon what he calls the 'Cartesian divide'<sup>14</sup> between man and nature (or nature and society).

Central to Moore's world-ecology is his reconceptualization of Marxist value theory. He writes that '[w]hile Marxist political economy has taken value to be an *economic* phenomenon with systemic implications, I argue that value-relations are a *systemic* phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment'<sup>15</sup>. To simplify Moore's innovation, one might say that classical Marxism has always focused on value as 'abstract social labour' – and its concomitant: socially necessary labour time – within what Moore calls the 'zone of exploitation,' that is, the 'hidden abode' of capitalist commodity production, ruled by the capital-labour relation. Moore does not dispute the classical labour theory of value, but he emphasises its immanent relation to another zone: the zone of appropriation. This refers to all those realms of human and extra-human 'unpaid work'; from women's domestic labour or social reproduction to the colonial expropriation of natural resources. That is, capitalism cannot be reduced to the realm of paid work alone, since without the constant appropriation of unpaid work – again, human and extra-human – it could not expand and perpetuate itself. He summarizes the main points of his position thus:

If we take the nexus paid/unpaid work as our premise – implicitly suggested by ecological and feminist scholars – the implications are significant. Capitalism and value relations cannot be reduced to a relation between the owners of capital and the possessors of labor-power. To repeat: the historical condition of socially necessary labor-time is socially necessary unpaid work. This observation opens a vista on capitalism as a contradictory unity of production and reproduction that crosses the Cartesian boundary [nature/society]. The crucial divide is between the zone of paid work (the exploitation of commodified labor-power) and the zone of unpaid work (the reproduction of life). This contradictory unity works by creating a relatively narrow sphere of commodity production within which labor-power can be said to yield either rising or falling productivity ... This narrow sphere, premised on the exploitation of labor-power within commodity production, operates in relation to a much more expansive sphere of appropriation, through which the diversity of nature's 'free gifts' – including the reproduction of life from the family to the biosphere – may be taken up into commodity production, but not fully capitalized.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, what Moore is emphasizing is that there are *two* fundamental contradictions which structure capitalism as a civilization: that between capital and labour, and that between the zone of exploitation (commodity production) and the zone of appropriation (unpaid work).

Alongside ‘abstract social labour,’ then, Moore posits the existence of something he calls ‘abstract social nature’: ‘the family of processes through which capitalists and state-machineries map, identify, quantify, measure, and code human and extra-human natures in service to capital accumulation’<sup>17</sup>. It is those sets of activities and methods that seek out and make amenable to capital realms of ‘unpaid work’ which, following Maria Mies, he summarizes as ‘women, nature and colonies’.<sup>18</sup> Moore distinguishes ‘abstract social nature’ from what Stephen Shapiro has called the ‘cultural fix,’ which Shapiro defines as follows (Moore’s parentheses and emphases): ‘[It comprises those] social and cultural matters involving the reproduction of class identities and relations *over time-lengths greater than a single turnover cycle [of capital]*’, which are ‘*intrinsic, not superficial, to the [accumulation] of capital*’.<sup>19</sup> The cultural fix thus seems to refer to all those hegemonic and ideological processes which legitimate the long-term reproduction of the social relations of production. Moore summarizes the distinction between ‘abstract social nature’ and the ‘cultural fix’ thus: ‘If cultural fixes naturalize capitalism’s punctuated transitions in the relations of power, capital, and nature, abstract social natures make those transitions possible’<sup>20</sup>.

The problem here, however, is that the distinction between abstract social nature and the cultural fix works only so long as it is provisional, yet there is a danger that the distinction will be rendered into discrete categories. There is, in other words, a danger of returning to the very dualism that world-ecology seeks to avoid. For treating mapping and rationalization processes as ‘scientific,’ and ideological legitimation as ‘cultural,’ may prove insufficiently relational. Indeed, retaining the distinction may prevent Moore from taking the step that would finally allow us to overcome the binary of man and nature at the level of theory. The problem originates in the specific aims and focus of the world-ecology framework itself. Moore has developed a truly groundbreaking argument that understands historical capitalism as a series of world-ecological regimes, each of which produces a unique ‘historical nature’<sup>21</sup> arising out of, and ending in, ‘developmental’ or ‘epochal’ crisis (the latter being the case with feudalism and, potentially, neoliberalism). That is, Moore is primarily concerned with the different configurational weights that come into play during both the transition from one accumulation regime to the next and the ‘normal’ operation of those accumulation regimes in the period of their consolidation and boom. But by equating those cyclical periods of transition and stabilization with abstract social nature and the cultural fix respectively, he is in danger of overlooking the extent to which each of these processes is dialectically constituted by the other – and hence the way in which *both* processes are present in *both* periods of transition and consolidation of world-ecological regimes, albeit in shifting relations of dominance. Thus, one possible development of Moore’s work would be to argue that *culture is a constitutive moment of abstract social nature, and vice versa, and hence, more broadly, that it is the dialectical interrelation of abstract social nature and culture which is a constitutive moment of the value relation.*

To try and make this point a little clearer, I shall give two brief examples. The purpose of these examples is not to provide an alternative model of historical explanation to Moore’s but rather to tease out one under-theorized aspect within it. The examples show the mutual imbrication of abstract social nature and the cultural fix within any period of historical capitalism, yet they do not account for the shifting configurations between abstract social nature and culture in any historically *singular* period of transition or consolidation. This would require a far lengthier engagement with the minutiae of Moore’s wealth of empirical examples. Nonetheless, the basic insight still holds.

In his recent book, *River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson describes the way in which slaves’ bodies were standardized for the market: ‘The reports [filed by slaving firms] formalized a system of grading slaves – “Extra Men, No. 1 Men, Second Rate or Ordinary Men, Extra Girls, No. 1 Girls, Second Rate or Ordinary Girls”, and so on – which allowed them to abstract the physical differences between all

kinds of human bodies into a single scale of comparison based on the price they thought a given person would bring in the market'<sup>22</sup>. Here, we see in practice what Moore refers to as 'abstract social nature': the bodies are being standardized and made measurable for the market. But it must be added that one of the conditions of possibility of this process of standardization is an ideological-hegemonic configuration capable not only of legitimizing this practice but of, firstly, producing the callousness of the human gaze necessary to effect this standardization and, secondly, the social and material pay-off for doing so. Indeed, in a later section on the development of racial ideology in the American South, Johnson himself writes with remarkable insight into the co-implication of both what Moore would term 'abstract social nature' and 'cultural fix':

The agricultural order of the landscape, the standing order of slavery, the natural order of the races, and the divine order of earthly dominion were not separable for a man like Harper [a slaveholder]; they were fractal aspects of one another. His eschatology was rooted in his ecology. ... Slaveholders were fully cognizant of slaves' humanity – indeed, they were completely dependent on it. But they continually attempted to conscript – signify, channel, limit, and control – the forms that humanity could take in slavery. The racial ideology of Harper and Cartwright [another slaveholder] was the intellectual conjugation of the daily practice of the plantations they were defending: human beings, animals and plants forcibly reduced to limited aspects of themselves, and then deployed in concert to further slaveholding dominion.<sup>23</sup>

What Johnson achieves in this passage is something approaching a mode of historical writing which fuses 'abstract social nature' and the 'cultural fix'. As already noted, however, a stand-alone example like this tells us very little about the *shifting* mutuality of abstract social nature and the cultural fix through different world-ecological regimes.

The second example comes from Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, in which she explicates the systematic violence perpetrated against women in the transition to capitalism. This included not only the enclosure of the commons, which had been such a vital source of sociality and relative power for women in the Middle Ages, and the patriarchy of the wage – in which only men had the right to the wage, and women's labour was simply appropriated – but also a whole series of legal, spatial, disciplinary and ideological attacks. An entire discourse was developed with the sole purpose of the vilification and inferiorization of women. Thus, if, as Marxist-feminism has made clear, women's unpaid labour has been historically vital to the functioning of capitalism, then we must conclude from such examples that culture is not only a force of ideological legitimation, but is itself a materially constitutive moment in the value relation. The ideological attacks on women were precisely about controlling them and making their unpaid work appropriable by capital. Thus, whilst 'abstract social nature' and 'cultural fix' can be *analytically* separated, in practice they always go together.

The *political* upshot of all this is quite dramatic, since, at the extreme, it means that the battle against the capitalist production of climate change must be waged at several levels simultaneously: of course, we must attack self-evidently 'ecological' phenomena such as new oil pipelines, deforestation, fracking, and such like, but – and this is crucial – we must also attack those elements of capitalist civilization which appear to have no immediate relation to ecology, but which are in fact internal conditions of its possibility: violence against women both literal and symbolic, the structural obscurity of domestic labour, institutional racism, and so on. For, at its outer limit, ecological struggle is nothing but the struggle for universal emancipation. In this light, it then becomes clear why 'world-ecology' is potentially politically relevant: it unifies these struggles at the level of theory.

I wish to end on a more polemical note. In an otherwise thought-provoking and sophisticated 2008 article on the Anthropocene, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote that global warming will ultimately affect rich and poor alike: 'Unlike in the crises of capitalism,' he says, 'there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged'<sup>24</sup>. Consequently, he suggests that we should understand humanity, not as a 'Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history, or a

universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis,' but rather as a 'negative universal' that 'arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe'<sup>25</sup>. Chakrabarty's argument must be categorically rejected for two reasons. Firstly, it is an example of the genre that we might call 'survivalist reasoning': that type of reasoning which places human survival in the abstract and at all costs above all other political commitments. I argue, however, that if Marxism for Althusser was a theoretical anti-humanism, then it should also be seen as a theoretical anti-survivalism. There is no commitment more vital than the overthrow of capitalism, and – paradoxically – if there is even to be any hope of human survival in the abstract, it will come about only through the struggle against capital.

Secondly, Chakrabarty's argument is also an example of the genre we might call 'catastrophism': that type of reasoning which sacrifices all determinate negations in the face of the one abstract negation of a general doom. Marxism, however, must also be a theoretical *anti-catastrophism*. Its ultimate horizon is not the impending doom of ecological catastrophe and human extinction: it is the capitalist mode of production and its dismantlement. Martin Luther, when asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, replied that he would plant a tree; the Marxist should reply: we will call for a general strike. I jest, of course, but it is only by fostering such indifference to catastrophe that we can ever hope to avert it.

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<sup>1</sup> Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2011; Zalasiewicz et al. 2011

<sup>2</sup> The temporality of the Anthropocene as a periodising category is bizarre indeed, shifting as it does between the present, a retroactively posited past and an imagined future

<sup>3</sup> Marx 1981: 494

<sup>4</sup> Marx 1975: 423

<sup>5</sup> Moore 2014a: 5

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 17

<sup>7</sup> Marx, 1981: 563

<sup>8</sup> Steffen et al. 2011: 846

<sup>9</sup> Steffen et al. 2011: 850;

<sup>10</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson et al (et al. 2010: 213)

<sup>11</sup> One of the many paradoxes of the current theoretical conjuncture is that at the very moment in which scientists are using the term Anthropocene – forcing us to focus on our natural existence as a human species and collective human agent – the speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists are trying to problematize or go beyond the 'human' as such. The two appear to be flip sides of one another and, arguably, equally politically toothless.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, 2014a: 2

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*: 1

<sup>14</sup> 2014b: 3

[15](#)(*ibid.*).

[16](#)2014b: 9

[17](#)*ibid.*, 12

[18](#) cited in Moore 2014b: 22, As an example, one might think of those nineteenth-century American land surveyors who measured, mapped, rationalized and parceled out the land in order to sell it to investors Cf. Johnson 2013: 34ff

[19](#)cited in Moore 2014b: 15-16;

[20](#)*ibid.*: 16

[21](#)*ibid.*: 12-19

[22](#) 2013: 41

[23](#)Johnson 2013: 206-208

[25](#) 2009: 221

[25](#)*ibid.*: 222