

Rebranding the Anthropocene: A Rectification of Names

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“We are as gods and we might as well get good at it.” - Stewart Brand

Introduction

Ongoing attempts to rebrand the geological epoch in which we live have produced a number of impressive suggestions. The conventional term, “Holocene,” is admittedly fairly drab, perhaps in need of a colorful upgrade. Derived from the Greek *holos*, it simply means the “whole” or “entire period” beginning at about 11,700 years ago, a period of interglacial warming. Two appealing alternatives are “Homocene” and “Anthropocene,” both of which evoke the planetary effects of human activity over the centuries. Another contender, “Capitalocene,” advanced by sociologist Jason W. Moore, points to the formative influence of capital in modern times. Also on the candidate list are “Atomicocene,” noting the arrival of nuclear weapons and nuclear technologies, and “Cthulucene,” proposed by Donna Haraway, which pays homage to “Chthonic” entities, ancient spirits of the underworld.

Among these contenders, the term “Anthropocene,” is by far the most popular at present. (Zalasiewicz et al 2011). And indeed, the label has some notable virtues. Sweeping in its implications, grandiose in its aspirations, it immediately evokes some of the most important scientific, ethical and political issues that confront world societies in our time. While there seem to

be credible, even noble, reasons for adopting this designation, however, there is some cause for alarm, namely that the enthusiasm behind the campaign to adopt this marker smacks of an obvious, species-centric narcissism. Human beings naming a whole geological epoch for themselves? How marvelous! How fabulously egotistical! Indeed, how exquisitely Anthropocentric! In my view, the proposed, updated brand name is actually not all that bad as a first draft, a label that Madison Avenue wordsmiths could likely propagate and glorify within flashy advertising campaigns. But given the gravity of the realization in question – the condition of Planet Earth under the influence of human projects – it is clear that there’s a need something more specific, focused, rigorous, and concrete. Since we’re changing a basic category within fundamental scientific nomenclature, it’s important to proceed with perspicuous prudence.

A New Era Begins

In that light, my humble proposal for a suitable alternative to “The Holocene” would be: “Langdonpocene.” It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? It’s succinct, intelligible and bound to appeal to a certain slice of the world’s populace, notably my friends and family. At the same I realize that this suggestion will likely be greeted with howls of derision. “Can Professor Winner be so brash and distasteful to name a several centuries long period of history after himself. Why, it’s absurd! There’s no reasonable basis for that request whatsoever!”

I gladly admit that criticisms of this sort have a valid point. It is definitely beyond bizarre for anyone to name an era of time for him/herself. But before dismissing the idea altogether, please consider my reasoning. In important respects, based upon some highly credible data, it’s likely that I deserve as much credit for overall geological impact as just about person who has ever lived on the planet, past or present. After all, I’ve spent more than seven decades here, living contentedly as an average, middle class American consumer with an active, well travelled professional lifestyle. In those roles I’ve probably burned as much fossil fuel, consumed as many tons of natural resources and defaced as much of the natural landscape as any of the “anthropos” who’ve lived on Earth during the past twelve millennia. I would gladly pit my substantial but largely unintended geological defacements and excessive burning (about 303 million BTU per year) against any and all contenders. (American Geosciences Institute). You see, I’ve been on the “cene” for quite a long while. In fact, it’s likely that my most lasting contribution to the world’s future will be the countless tons of greenhouse gases I’ve emitted into the atmosphere over the years. With any further longevity – if I’m lucky enough to live into my eighties, for example, I could be near the very top of the list of most environmentally destructive human beings ever to walk on Earth. If that doesn’t qualify me for some kind of notice, I don’t know what would.

Of course, I would leave open the possibility that other participants dwelling in our newly rebranded era could share the billing on the marquee as well, for example some notable philosophers of technology - Donpocene, the Andrewpocene, Pieterpocene, etc. - just fill in the blanks. To be perfectly fair, perhaps it makes sense to split the ongoing geologic epoch into smaller segments, perhaps three months long or so, with each qualified individual receiving a name for their designated subdivision. Clearly, this would create the problem of exactly when the basic “cene” began. But that has not been a serious problem so far because thinkers who promote “Anthropocene” branding efforts have chosen several different starting points for the “Anthropocene” – the agricultural revolution, the onset of the industrial revolution, the first explosion of an atomic bomb, and so forth. Characteristic of the label has been a sliding time scale, something that in itself should raise doubts about the idea’s validity. As a much needed corrective, my modest proposal would scrupulously individualize and democratize the whole process of cene-ification, a step that reflects another hallmark of the era of self-absorbed,

consumerist egoism in which we live - the grand tradition of selling vanity plates for automobiles, a metal license embossed with your name on it or perhaps the name of the family cat.

By the same token, an enterprising organization, StarRegistry.org, now enables anyone to name a star in the universe after themselves or in honor of a friend or family member. For \$20 you can purchase a name for a standard star and for \$35 you own the rights to very bright one. I understand there's also an enterprising outfit in Chile that will enable you to buy a whole galaxy and name it for yourself. Hence, my own projected start-up CeneRegistry.com would fill an obvious market niche, a kind of geologic "selfie" not unlike the group photos that fill our smartphones these days.

Who's In This Cene Anyway?

Another reason that richly qualifies "Langdonpocene" over some other leading contenders, I would argue, is that "Anthropocene" includes literally billions of people who have little if any claim to this grandiose geologic title at all. Among them are human beings - "anthropos," if you will - who over many centuries and to the present day have lived modestly with minimal impact on the local or global environs or the Earth's climate systems. Much of the populace of Asia, Africa, South America, the world's island communities, northern Canada and the like, people in the so-called "developing countries" have little if any right to be identified as serious players in this new game of names. No, they should be regarded as mere fakers, pikers, con men, and frauds if ever they pretend to have a stake in labeling the momentous epoch upon which we've embarked. Unlike my own substantial claim, their names would not even appear on any list of plausible nominees for the prize, for their levels of wanton destruction are pathetically miniscule at best.

Outlined in an elegant, well-documented essay, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg have offered similar reasons for criticizing the presumptuous term "Anthropocene." "We find it deeply paradoxical and disturbing that the growing acknowledgement of the impact of societal forces on the biosphere should be couched in term of a narrative so completely dominated by natural science." (Malm and Hornborg 63). They note that the prevailing focus upon the human species as a unified whole tends to overlook the actual social and economic institutions and activities that are clearly the primary cause of the massive effects in the biosphere evident today. "Capitalists in a small corner of the Western world invested in steam, laying the cornerstone for the fossil economy: at no moment did the species vote for it either with feet or ballots, or march in mechanical unison, or exercise any sort of shared authority over its own destiny and that of the Earth System." (64) For example, if one takes into account quantitative measures of actual resource and energy consumption, the gravity of misjudgment about a unified "humanity" in "Anthropocene" discourse immediately becomes clear. "A significant chunk of humanity is not party to the fossil fuel economy at all: hundreds of millions rely on charcoal, firewood or organic waste such as dung for all domestic purposes...Their contribution is close to zero." (65)

The fundamental error in Anthropocenic reveries, Malm and Hornborg observe, is the very one that Karl Marx emphasized in his argument that production comes to be "encased in eternal natural laws independent of history, at which opportunity bourgeois relations are then quietly smuggled in as the inviolable natural laws on which society is founded." (Marx 1993, 87) In this case species homo sapiens as a whole is credited (or blamed) for the voracious enterprises of relatively few members of the group. As Malm and Hornborg argue, this mistake contributes to a misguided emphasis within national and global policies that seek to address the excesses of modern capitalist economies. The proximate agents of a biosphere in crisis are so vaguely identified that reasonable remedies are difficult to organize.

Revival of A Grand Literary Tradition

Today's penchant for linking the activities of modern techno-capitalism and their world altering consequences to the activities of humanity as a whole has a distant mirror in writings about technology, industry, economics, philosophy, and social change common in the mid-twentieth century. Featured in the titles of a great many books, essays and news stories of the period was a ponderous yet puzzling subject called "Man," a collective name for humanity within the broad sweep of history, especially as regards the accomplishments of modern industrial society. Among book titles, for example, one finds *Man and Nature*, *Man and the State*, *Man and Water*, *Man and Technology*, *Man and His Nature*, *Man and His Universe*, *Man and His Values*, and so forth. My search of the "World Cat" interlibrary catalog at my university turned up more than a hundred books published during that period with "Man" as the central character. What a guy!

Eventually this practice of naming ceased as it dawned on people that, lo and behold, there were also women, not just men, who had made and were making substantial contributions to developments within the domains of life and work under discussion. Imagine that! Hence, a standard anthology in Science and Technology Studies of the 1970s and 1980s, *Technology and Man's Future* (Teich 1972), eventually changed its title to *Technology and the Future* in its later editions. (Teich 1993) Of course, much of the credit for this awakening is due to the increasing presence of women scholars and feminist perspectives in scholarship and publishing as the years moved on. "What were we thinking?" was a comment frequently heard in university corridors as this much needed correction took place.

Beyond its blatant sexism, another problem with the "Man and ..." construction was that it implicitly – sometimes even explicitly – portrayed humanity from the point of view of the European and North American populace, a suggestion that such folks were at the very apex of all human creativity. The "Man" who had mastered the land and seas, conquered The New World, brought new kinds of knowledge and technology to prominence was transparently composed of people living in London, Paris, New York, and other hubs of Western industrial influence. Of course, a common underlying intention here was generously, inauspiciously to include the billions of other humans who live on Earth or who have ever lived here as parts, albeit lesser parts, of the populace in question. Writers in the "Man and ..." tradition seemed to find it magnanimous to include all those other people beyond Europe and North America within the pronoun "we" employed throughout their books. But any knowledgeable, focused attention to the lives and contributions of other large and diverse cultures around the globe was seldom part of these univocal histories. A strong implication in the "Man and ..." literature was that scattered others around the globe should be simply be gratified to learn that the powerful males in Western Civilization had now given them in a nice little tip of the hat, recognizing their otherwise insignificant offerings to the grand story of "Man – kind."

Looking at the rise and fall of the "Man and ..." literature and its pungent underlying point of view, the rise of the "Anthropocene" appears as nostalgic revival of some deplorable habits. A good many geologists, philosophers, social scientists, journalists, and other prominent thinkers have – yet again! -- taken it upon themselves to speak for the diverse populations of human beings who have lived over many generations, deploying ingenious labels and seldom questioned judgments about who it is that truly matters. In this case, blanket identification of those responsible for the widespread, often calamitous reengineering of the Earth's biosphere are placed in the lap of "anthropos," a category that includes literally billions of people, living and dead, many of whom have had an almost negligible effect upon the world gouging endeavors the new geologic label recognizes and (alternately) celebrates or bemoans.

The Sixth Extinction

Granted, there is no longer any doubt about the enormous scale and significance of the impacts upon Earth and its creatures that the activities and projects of some human groups have brought about. In fact, a truly welcome feature of today's vogue for the label "Anthropocene" is the light it sheds upon deteriorating condition of the biosphere and its life sustaining features. This includes growing awareness of a phenomenon known as the "Sixth Extinction." Scientists have identified five previous mass extinctions of plant and animal life, including the mass die-off at the end of the Cretaceous, sixty-five million years ago, the one that killed off the dinosaurs, evidently caused by the effects of one or more massive asteroids or comets striking the Earth. While estimates of the extent of today's death rate vary according to method and categories of analysis, most of them are starkly ominous. In its Living Planet Report 2016 the World Wildlife Fund estimates that on average there has been a 58% drop in numbers of vertebrates—fish, mammals, birds and reptiles—around the globe between 1970 and 2012 (World Wildlife Fund 2016). This does not bode well for human settlements that depend upon biodiversity for their livelihood. According to researchers from the United Nations Environment Program and University College London, "For 58.1% of the world's land surface, which is home to 71.4% of the global population, the level of biodiversity loss is substantial enough to question the ability of ecosystems to support human societies. The loss is due to changes in land use and puts levels of biodiversity beyond the 'safe limit' recently proposed by the planetary boundaries -- an international framework that defines a safe operating space for humanity" (University College London 2016).

Given the unhappy plight that evidently awaits countless non-human species in the years ahead, a section in print and online newspapers called "Anthropocene News" could well become a suitable replacement for the portion of the paper now called "Obituaries." Sticking with the convention of proposing names with Greek roots, however, a classy alternative label might be "Thanatopocene," the epoch of death, or perhaps "The Sixth Thanatopocence" to recognize its place in within a sequence of mass die offs. This would closely match a central theme in many of today's most popular movies and television series, that of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic crises along with a profusion of zombie narratives. On my own university campus, a popular student organization at present is the Humans vs. Zombies Club, one that "prepares players for the impending zombie apocalypse." In their own fun loving ways, young people seem to be preparing for, perhaps even yearning for, Anthropocenic futures that include encounters with the walking dead. Playing one of the deceased creatures as opposed to a living human is actually a cherished role in these games.

Descriptions of the "Sixth Extinction" emphasize not only the pervasive effects of carbon emissions upon global warming, but also ambitious enterprises that involve transforming and exploiting of vast stretches of the natural landscape, projects often identified as signature accomplishments of the "Anthropocene" era. Tom Butler's astonishing photo essay *Overdevelopment, Overpopulation, Overshoot* offers vivid portraits of many of those affected. (Butler 2012) Included on the list would certainly be the huge expanses in the Amazon rain forest now being cleared for lumbering, cattle raising and other kinds of profit-making enterprise. As an afterthought, one ingenious attempt to preserve some forested areas and the species of flora and fauna in them is the creation of "islands" of forest habitat within zones subject to commercial development, large patches of land in which the trees and plants are left intact. Proponents argue that policies of this kind will preserve the vitality of the forest and its creatures, while allowing economic enterprise to flourish. Despite what may initially seem to be good intentions, engineering fixes of this kind often compound the magnitude of damage. During her visit to an islands of forest in the Manaus region of the Amazon, noted science writer Elizabeth Kolbert spoke with ornithologist Mario Cohn-Haft who explained, "What happened when you cut down the surrounding forest is that the capture rate—just the number of birds you captured and the number

of species sometimes, too—went up for about the first year.” Kolbert notes that, “Apparently, the birds from the deforested areas were seeking shelter in the fragments. But gradually as time went on, both the number and the variety of birds in the fragments started to drop. And then it kept on dropping.” “In other words,” Cohn-Haft continued, “there wasn’t just suddenly this new equilibrium with fewer species. There was this steady degradation in the diversity over time.” Kolbert concludes, “And what went for birds went for other groups as well” (Kolbert 2014, Ch. IX).

Recognizing the devastation wrought upon many of the planet’s ecosystems, some biologists and eco-philosophers have begun recommending immediate, large scale measures to shelter pieces of land and ocean from any further so called development and to set aside vast portions for recovery. Thus, E.O. Wilson has proposed what he calls “Half Earth,” a plan to devote the space of half the planet as permanent shelters for the millions of non-human species that exist here. “The way it could done,” he observes, “is to take the remaining wildernesses of the world, on both sea and land, and set those aside as inviolate, while we go on with our chaotic and unpredictable, destructive future. ...The big task is to settle down before we wreck the planet” (Dvorsky). Thus, the Half Earth proposal amounts to a call to cease the massively destructive tendencies that have been characteristic of Anthropocene so far, the creation of an Anti-Anthropocene, if you will.

Beyond Narcissism

A hallmark of the discourse of renaming a geological epoch and imagining its astonishing features, is that it brashly reaffirms what the writings of many ecophilosophers and environmental activists have long called into question – the distinctly anthropocentric standpoint for human reflection about the world in which we live. Thus, the arguments in the philosophy of “deep ecology” offered by Arne Naess and others criticize the traditional, often unstated prejudice that humans ought to be the crucial point of reference in all our reflections (Naess 1993). Given the vast plurality of living creatures and habitats on Earth, wouldn’t acknowledging their presence be a more reasonable starting point, a better way to launch our thinking? Philosophies that fundamentally recognize the situations other creatures and their needs would likely be far more revealing than one that merely restates, amplifies and tacitly celebrates the identification hubris of the past several centuries in the West.

In his provocative book, *The Age of Missing Information*, Bill McKibben zeroes in on the kinds of personal self-absorption that characterize our time. Based upon several months of a bizarre experiment in which he did nothing but watch a month of video tape recordings from more than a hundred television channels, McKibben argues that the underlying message content of television and other information technologies is predicated almost exclusively upon people’s desires, longings and an obsession with personal identity. He writes, “The idea of standing under the stars and feeling how small you are - that’s not a television idea. Everything on television tells you the opposite – that you’re the most important person, and that people are all that matter” (McKibben 1992, 225).

“Anthropos” perhaps?

McKibben argues that hollowness of modern society suggests a need to shift focus and come to reacquaint ourselves with broader, deeper realities. “Human beings – any one of us, and our species as a whole – are not important, not the center of the world. That is the one essential piece of information, the one great secret, offered by any encounter with the woods or the mountains or the ocean or any wilderness or chunk of nature or patch of the night sky.”

In light of what Arne Naess eloquently argued and what McKibben so painfully discovered, the unvarnished, breast thumping pride in the reassertion of humans as all that really matters on

Planet Earth is the truly astonishing feature of the emerging vogue for Anthropocenism in our time. Yes, it is true that a number of serious thinkers have seized upon the category and its narrative as a way to express malaise for the excesses of modern civilization and to express their pleas for strong restraint grounded in an ecological vision (Morton 2016). But another prominent group within the debate regard what is called the “good Anthropocene” as an occasion for high technology activism, a chance to extend the power of industrial civilization into exciting new dimensions (Hamilton 2013).

A prominent advocate of this view is Erle Ellis, professor of Geography and Environmental Systems at the University of Maryland. He writes, “Creating the future will mean going beyond fears of transgressing natural limits and nostalgic hopes of returning to some pastoral or pristine era. Most of all, we must not see the Anthropocene as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geologic epoch with human directed opportunity” (Ellis 2012). Along with a good number of others who’ve advanced this position, Ellis favors “geoengineering” as a promising response to climate crisis. “Geoscientists are ever more actively involved in geoengineering to counter global warming by injecting sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere, industrial carbon sequestration, and other massive technological alterations of Earth’s systems” (Ellis 2009). His vision is that of ever expanding management of the workings of the planet with increasing recognition of “human responsibility,” of course.

The basic sensibility that emerges from the notion “Anthropocene,” I would argue, is one that blends a familiar, threadbare, human-centered worldview, often with lavish infusions of techno-triumphalism, the latest version of a narrative tradition that includes “progress,” “development” and “innovation,” this time enhanced with austere rituals of hand-wringing (Winner 2017a; Winner 2017b). Its terms are pungently expressed in Stewart Brand’s famous maxim offered at the very beginning of *The Whole Earth Catalog*: “We are as gods and we might as well get good at it.” (*Whole Earth Catalog* 1968, 1). Brand admits that he borrowed this idea from anthropologist Edmund Leach who was even more explicit in his embrace of a theological vision of modernity.

Men have become like gods. Isn't it about time that we understood our divinity? Science offers us total mastery over our environment and over our destiny, yet instead of rejoicing we feel deeply afraid. Why should this be?

Why, indeed? At this point why are ideas mastery needed at all? Why are they still so appealing? How in the world are they helpful and to whom?

Conclusion

My position here echoes a passage in *The Analects of Confucius* in which a conversation takes place between The Master and his companion Tsze-lu.[i] Tsze-lu said, “The ruler of Wei has been waiting for you, in order to administer the government. What will you consider the first thing to be done?” The Master replied, “What is necessary is to rectify names.” “So! Indeed!” said Tsze-lu. “You are wide of the mark! Why must there be such rectification?”

The Master replied, “How uncultivated you are, Yu! A superior man in regard to what he does not know, shows a cautious reserve. If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success” (*Confucius*, Ch. 16).

In short, in the interest of rectification of names, I would gladly relinquish the silliness of “Langdonpocene” if others ease up on their insistence upon the bombastic pomposity of “Anthropocene” along with its prideful, pedal-to-the-metal implications for planet Earth and all its

living inhabitants. Perhaps simply returning to “Holocene” would be a good idea. It’s a perfectly serviceable label and not freighted with the risible baggage of its triumphalist alternative.

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