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Science Against Ideology

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

Clive Hamilton

Paul Raskin's [opener](#) to the forum is an excellent introduction to the issues and poses some hard questions for those of us anxious about the future of the planet and life on it. Here, I would like to comment on the central theme of the opener and the wider debate among social scientists surrounding criticism of the term "Anthropocene."

Summarizing the concerns, Paul writes that by "indicting a homogeneous 'we,' rather than a spent stage of history, the Anthropocene [label] conceals a contested social system from scrutiny and shields it from culpability." Such criticisms, however, are misguided.

First, does the term "Anthropocene" actually conceal anything? Isn't it true that everyone involved in the debate already sees the world through a homogenizing lens or through one of social division and conflict? Even the earth system scientists most involved in Anthropocene studies are, for the most part, fully aware of the social divisions behind the climate crisis. People like Will Steffen write about it often. Yet it suits the narrative of some social scientists to focus on an old opinion piece by Paul Crutzen on "the geology of mankind."

Secondly, some who disparage the scientific term for its alleged blindness to social divisions, colonialism, climate justice, and so on take it upon themselves to rename a geological epoch. The stratigraphers who will make the formal decision look on with amusement (if they notice the fulminations of social scientists at all). Some social science and humanities scholars are epistemologically confused. They not only want to rename geological divisions according to the social processes that gave rise to them, but they also want to define the Anthropocene by social rather than geological criteria. The rocks don't matter. The confusion of science with social

science is, in my view, a doleful hangover from post-modern French philosophy. The anti-science of so much left theorizing plays straight into the hands of climate science deniers who characterize climate science as a political project. Progressives worried about climate change should not undermine science. As I have said elsewhere, climate change is too serious for post-modern games.

Thirdly, Paul writes of “the differential responsibilities of colonizers and colonized, haves and have-nots, capitalists and workers” and, on this basis, suggests that “Capitalocene” is the best alternative name for the new geological epoch. I can track back to 1998 my own writing and speaking about the fundamental moral fact of climate change—the rich caused it, the poor will suffer most—but the traditional left view about the world divided into exploiters and exploited (rich North versus global South, colonizers versus colonized, capitalists versus workers) has been shattered by one decisive historical fact: the rise of China.

Consider these facts. China’s total CO2 emissions are double those of the USA, and the gap is widening each year as China’s grow and America’s fall. While the US is closing down coal-fired power plants, China is building new ones. As a result, the average Chinese person’s carbon emissions are higher than those of the average European. Describing China as “capitalist” requires theoretical contortions that obscure more than they reveal.

As a carbon polluter, India is coming up behind China, as are other large nations of the South, like Brazil. Big polluters China, India, and Brazil are not colonies of anyone. They are not victims, even if Tuvalu and the Maldives are. Although aggregate historical emissions from the South, led by China, will take another decade or two to match those from the North, the fact is that the future of the world depends predominantly on what the half dozen largest nations of the South do over the next two to three decades.

In light of these facts, simple divisions between the rich, exploitative, colonial North and the poor, exploited, colonized South no longer have any meaning. It is not the geologists’ “Anthropocene” that conceals the reality, but the social scientists’ “Capitalocene,” because it mobilizes stale and misleading ways of framing the problem. Capital = power is no longer a helpful assumption in the climate change debate. Climate science denial made the leap from corporate campaign to political culture years ago (see Trumpism).

The world is much more complicated than simple notions of exploitation allow. For example, “the people” in wealthy democracies have had the opportunity to elect governments promising to slash emissions. They have often voted otherwise, and it is frequently “the workers” who show least concern. In Australia, most business groups and big corporates want an assertive carbon reduction programs. The conservative government is resisting business pressure while the Labor Party is watering down its climate commitments to win votes.

All of this suggests that, while acknowledging deep social and international divisions and conflicts, there is value in considering the Anthropocene problem as one of the relationships between humankind in general and the earth system we have disrupted.

About the Author



Clive Hamilton is Professor of Public Ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra. He has held various visiting academic positions, including at the University of Oxford, Sciences Po, and Yale University. He served for fourteen years as the executive director of the Australia Institute, a progressive think tank. His books include *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering*, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, and *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*. He holds a PhD from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.

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