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Response to Comments

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

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This forum's commentary constitutes no less than a treatise on the Anthropocene of awesome variety, acuity, and eloquence. As provocateur, I am elated; as respondent, I am daunted: "just what you wished for" coos one inner voice; "be careful what you wish for" scolds another. Rather than the second treatise that a full response would require, I offer here a few reactions on key axes of debate.

Before diving in, let's pause to note our broad alignment on major questions. The point of departure of the exchange is a scientific truth: the alteration of the earth system by human action. As [Richard Falk](#) put it, we accept the Anthropocene as a "dire warning that the human species is headed for disaster, if not extinction, if its ecological footprint is not greatly reduced in the relatively near future." Furthermore, we share the convictions that this condition reinforces the imperative to fundamentally revise reigning philosophical and political orientations, and that the case for a Great Transition is more compelling and urgent than ever.

We are concerned here with the historical origins, contemporary meaning, and future implications of the Anthropocene, not with global change science or whether the designation of a new geological epoch is warranted. As a socio-cultural concept, the Anthropocene, like many big ideas, is at once riveting, evocative, and nebulous. When longstanding passions and worldviews are refracted through this new prism, a wide spectrum of perspectives is revealed. Such robust intellectual and political diversity in service to our common pursuit is necessary and healthy.

Anthropos R Us...Or Not

Many of you addressed the central point raised in my [opening essay](#) that the “Anthropocene” formulation urges an ideological interpretation of the objective fact of earth system disruption. Namely, it implicates our species, rather than the contingent social formations that begot the crisis. A corollary to this premise is that an imperative to grow and dominate the natural world is inherent, rather than forged in the cauldron of social evolution.

Several commenters find that positing a trans-historical “we” (Anthropos) has considerable explanatory force. [Stephen Purdey](#), for example, eloquently defends the essentialist premise of the standard Anthropocene narrative, naming the culprit “humanity as a single super-species” and asserting that “we grow aggressively because we can.” But speculation about a biological imperative underlying human behavior must at least be balanced by recognition of an equally germane attribute—the plasticity of human behavior revealed through the wildly diverse spectrum of historical and cultural experiences. Looking through the Anthropos lens, collective historical agency vanishes leaving only the moral individual to somehow overcome the harsh destiny etched in our DNA. These premises and metaphors, although they tell part of the story, are insufficient for grounding historical understanding, future vision, and collective action.

[Clive Hamilton](#) brings his keen intellectual firepower to defending the Anthropocene idea of an undifferentiated “we” driving the geological shift. He is on point in his pushback against “left” critiques of the Anthropocene formulation that downplay global change science. Unfortunately, it is the case that some (far from all!) radical critics do fail to grasp the world-historic significance of the earth system rupture. Pouring old ideological wine into this new geological bottle will not do: the novel holistic condition we face demands fresh holistic thinking.

But Hamilton, too, decants old ideology in the Anthropocene bottle in glossing over the importance of inequality, conflict, and power, leaving his defense of the “we” premise as shaky as “leftist” arguments he rejects. We need a broader conceptual and finer-grain perspective that averts these polarized shibboleths. The Anthropocene opens our eyes partway, but occludes the ways anthropogenic impacts emerge from and act through societies riven by inequality, bigotry, and domination.

Many commenters develop this point. [Erik Swyngedouw](#) persuasively foregrounds the political dimension by highlighting the “radical antagonisms and conflicts” that shatter simple notions of a collective Anthropos. Transposing the argument, he notes that the idea of Anthropos’s inexorable march to environmental apocalypse is deeply depoliticizing. In different registers, [Arturo Escobar](#) and [Greg Anderson](#) counterpose the pluriverse of cultures and experience to the homogeneity of a Westernized Anthropos.

In the concrete example of climate negotiations, “extreme inequality” undercuts international cooperation. Hamilton is right that honest assessments of the “-cene” today must confront China’s immense carbon emissions and the need to stem emissions in the Global South, too. At the same time, addressing differential responsibilities and impacts—the rich largely caused the problem, the poor will suffer most—is not only an ethical imperative: it is integral to efficacious environmental strategy.

On Labels

One’s comfort level with the term “Anthropocene” correlates with one’s degree of resonance with the narrative underlying the appellation. It is an apt term if the species-as-a-whole is thought to be culpable for the earth system crisis. It is misleading, ahistorical, and uncontextual, and, therefore, depoliticizing, for critics who foreground social history, inequality, and the roots of the crisis in the modern world system.

Certainly, the Anthropocene’s pronouncement of an “age of humanity” sounds the alarm, a loud call to wake up to the contemporary predicament. Nevertheless, on substantive and political grounds, “the Anthropocene” remains an unfortunate epithet for the planetary shift since it flattens historical complexity and misses an opportunity to draw attention to cultural and economic drivers. (Ironically, it’s not a very good scientific term, either, since the earth system disruption transcends the confines of conventional geology—but that’s another story.)

Still, “the Anthropocene” meme is here to stay. This offers a teaching moment for challenging its conceptual deficiencies and fallacies, while unflinchingly affirming the threats to the earth system it signals. In this context, we need to inject into the public discourse a more capacious term for our

moment. Until a better phrase comes along, I'm sticking with the "Planetary Phase of Civilization," coined by the Global Scenario Group over twenty-five years ago.

Consciousness vs. Structure

The old debate about the primacy of worldviews or institutional structures in shaping social evolutions resurfaces in the search for the historic roots of the Anthropocene. Some commenters underscore the emergence of forms of consciousness that separate humanity from nature and grant us dominion over the natural world. Others stress modern institutional formations, especially a voracious, self-expanding capitalist system.

[Tim Weiskel](#), for instance, persuasively writes of the power of metaphor in shaping worldviews, specifically, the importance since 1492 of the metaphor of the frontier. This perspective, although offering food for thought, attributes too much causal power to the world of ideas. Ideas are tethered to the material engines of technological and social innovation, modes of production, and class conflict in an ongoing dance of subjective and objective conditions.

Thus, some commenters remind us of the fundamental role of institutional evolution in driving social-ecological change. [Fred Magdoff](#) usefully provides a bill of particulars indicting capitalist institutions as the source of the contemporary crisis. Indeed, the inherent growth and divisive impulses of capitalist dynamics—lurking restlessly even when tamed by its most humanized social democratic forms—propagate inequality, domination, and environmental degradation. Still, taming capitalism—a Policy Reform scenario—must be on the critical path to an ultimately transformative Great Transition scenario.

[Lisi Krall](#), too, highlights social evolution in the march toward the Anthropocene, but in a different way. She roots the Anthropocene in the ascent of social hierarchy some 10,000 years ago, thus letting modernity, capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution off the hook. Indeed, there is much to learn from this long view (and from what is called the "early Anthropocene"). But drawing an unbroken historical line from the first great transformation (agriculture and early civilization) through the great transformation of modernity to the Planetary Phase is questionable. The revolutionary shifts along the way transformed everything—even the character of social hierarchy.

The indictment of capitalism by Magdoff stands as a valid part of the Anthropocene's origin story. Still, it is also true that capitalism released and stimulated a capacity for greed and feckless individualism preexisting in the human psyche and reinforced by modernist ideology (and, as [Heikki Patomäki](#) astutely points out, non-capitalist modern structures had similarly deleterious environmental impacts). The critique stands: the Anthropocene narrative essentializes and dehistoricizes such behavior, downplaying how different social formations elicit different dimensions of human potential. Still, it carries a grain of truth about our species.

Historiographies that privilege consciousness or structure risk one-sidedness. Especially in transformative eras, no doubt novel ideas and institutions coevolve in a reciprocal process of coevolution. So the twentieth-century “vulgar Marxism” of the Soviet era that held ideas to be epiphenomena of modes of production has thankfully been left in the dust. At the same time, we need to tamp down antipodal formulations that root contemporary realities in the advent of certain ideas, such as mechanistic physics or domination of nature. Modes of consciousness and modes of production are both parent and offspring in the dialectic coproduction of social-ecological change.

Implications

I opened these remarks by noting our broad consensus on the ecological significance of the Anthropocene. Still, [Jeremy Baskin](#) finds the Anthropocene “not an especially novel insight,” and, indeed, if all it meant was anthropogenic impacts at global scale, that would be an old story writ large. But the erosion of the integrity and resilience of the earth system is more than the sum of environmental impacts. A change in the state of the system would be something ontologically new on the face of the earth, carrying profound implications for civilization.

Many commenters believe that this condition calls for fostering new forms of consciousness along two distinct dimensions: our relationship to nature and our relationship to each other. For instance, [Pella Thiel](#), a visionary for the cause of the rights of nature, finds new momentum for efforts to codify those rights in international law. [Greg Anderson](#) and [Arturo Escobar](#) urge a recovery of the sense of human embeddedness in nature that is found in premodern societies and persists in contemporary indigenous cultures. From this perspective, the Anthropocene is thus not a predetermined or inevitable feature of history, but the culmination of the modern era that can be reversed. Surely, we have much to learn from premodern ways of being that ought to be carried

forward in envisioning a Great Transition. But we are on a one-way journey into the unprecedented Planetary Phase with no return ticket, and the nostalgic temptation to romanticize or mythologize the past, and mistake it for the destination, should be resisted.

[Stephen Purdey](#) and [Herman Daly](#) forcefully remind us that our species, while embedded in nature, is endowed with “transcendent” capacities that enable the flowering of human culture. Daly goes further, suggesting that the human spirit transcends nature itself. He argues persuasively that the dominant scientific philosophy of mechanistic materialism cannot account for higher human endowments. But he gives short shrift to alternative materialisms (such as philosophical emergence) that can accommodate human consciousness, reflexivity, and culture.

Turning to intra-human affairs, how might the Anthropocene influence consciousness? [Debbie Kasper](#) argues that the term helps provide the detachment necessary for us to reflect with depth and breadth on the current moment. For [Maurie Cohen](#), the Anthropocene brings the potential (not the certainty) of cultivating a culture of reciprocity built on the necessity of mutualism. Many commenters stressed new urgency in the wake of the Anthropocene for policy action, e.g., to mute climate change, to build new economic institutions, and, more generally, to learn from nature and turn from growth to resilience (as [Olivier Hamant](#) pointedly notes).

Indeed, the planetary jolt will stimulate these kinds of progressive responses. Yet, the scope for a unifying vision and systemic change will depend on countering less felicitous responses to the Anthropocene, such as technocratic geoengineering or a culture of despair. [Karl-Ludwig Schibel](#) is pessimistic, warning that the Anthropocene paradigm could lead to “authoritarian—even totalitarian—conclusions.” It is certainly plausible that the chaos of crisis could beget a Barbarization scenario.

But the meta-irony is that the Anthropocene, in naming “we” as the cause of the crisis, may help constitute a global “we,” a movement to mute its worst consequences. This kind of “we” would offer another path to the dismal scenarios I summarize in my essay as “hubristic techno-fix, voluntary simplicity, and ecological Armageddon.” Here, let me clear up a misunderstanding. [Jeremy Baskin](#) argues against including “voluntary simplicity” in this dead-end gallery, advocating “collective self-restraint” as central to a GT. I agree, but by “voluntary simplicity,” I refer to individualistic lifestyle

changes, rather than needed collective efforts for degrowth, sustainable consumption, and post-consumerism.

In this spirit, several comments argued that the Anthropocene opened new possibility and heightened urgency for collective transformative action. [Martha Van Der Bly](#) sees the potential for a new era rooted in “nurturing instead of dominating.” [Mimi Stokes](#), drawing from classical dramaturgy, locates the foundation for such action in the lesson that the “human actor in living systems has agency on a planetary scale.” [Uchita de Zoysa](#) reminds us that the times are ripe for actions to crystalize unified action: “a movement for mass mobilization is begging for attention.” Amen.

Where Are We?

A basic tenet of GTI is that a profound historical shift is underway that binds people, places, and Earth in one encompassing system. The emergent social-ecological epoch—which I refer to as the Planetary Phase of Civilization—has numerous manifestations and consequences, notably the step-shift in the state of the planet (aka “the Anthropocene”). In my essay, I argue that the Planetary Phase is the circumscribing predicate for the Anthropocene. We face a host of other global risks and entanglements. [Richard Falk](#), long an indispensable guide to this larger reality, reminds us that the world still brims with violence and the existential threat of nuclear weapons. The list of potential systemic horrors could be extended to include future pandemics, economic meltdowns, political upheavals, food system breakdowns, and so on.

Situating the rupture in geological history—the Anthropocene—in the rupture in world history—the Planetary Phase—is the key to a robust understanding of our moment. This understanding is essential for nurturing a defragmenting global movement for a Great Transition. The Anthropocene concept helps jolt consciousness, but cannot substitute for a theoretical framework attuned to the inherent uncertainties, power cleavages, and choices that punctuate the zigzag history that brought us to this pivotal moment, and will carry us into the indeterminate future.

I will close with a note to the colleagues who, impatient with the abstract tenor of this discussion, stayed on the sidelines. Indeed, their message—rise from our armchairs and act!—should be heeded. At the same time, let us not forget that good practice and good theory go hand-in-hand:

theory without action won't get us anywhere; action without theory won't get us where we want to go.

Coda: On Ontology (and on?)

Above I challenged [Herman Daly](#)'s view that philosophical materialism underlies the degradation of Earth by suggesting that a non-reductionist materialism—"emergentism"—might be an alternative to both mechanistic science and supernaturalism. Daly gives this short shrift, but [Heikki Patomäki](#) brilliantly summarizes emergence as a way of setting the stage for his own sweeping meditation on history. I worry that the anti-science tendency detectable even in this exchange improperly confuses reductionism with science, a concern I believe worthy of a future forum.

About the Author



Paul Raskin is the founding president of Tellus Institute. His work has focused on visions and pathways to a decent future from local to global scales. He has developed widely used integrated assessment models for energy (LEAP), water (WEAP), and sustainability (PoleStar). In 1995, Dr. Raskin convened the international Global Scenario Group, whose valedictory essay—[Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead](#)—became the point of departure for the Great Transition Initiative that he continues to direct. His most recent book is [Journey to Earthland: The Great Transition to Planetary Civilization](#). He holds a PhD in theoretical physics from Columbia University.

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