



February 2021

Reasserting Radical Politics

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

Erik Swyngedouw

The controversies over the Anthropocene by both natural scientists searching to identify a globally identifying stratigraphic signal to establish its date of birth and assorted social scientists, humanities scholars, and artists arguing over the wider meaning and implications of this allegedly new geological era seem to suggest that the inauguration of the Anthropocene indeed harbors the potential—if properly thought through and acted upon—to launch “humanity” onto a new—possibly more benevolent—future trajectory. Paul Raskin’s [essay](#) already points out the fallacies of assuming that the debate over the substantive content of the term promises to open a new terrain that might permit embarking on a truly humanizing planetary transition. In fact, the very cacophony of voices and opinions reveal emptiness at the core of the “Anthropocene” signifier. The very dispute over the social, scientific, or environmental meaning of the notion of the Anthropocene covers up or disavows what is really at stake, i.e., an intense political conflict and struggle over the future trajectory of planetary socio-ecological change. If indeed the debate over “the Anthropocene” points to a further depoliticization of the existing socio-ecological order, perhaps the term should be abandoned altogether or left to the musing of the geophysical academic profession.¹

As Paul Raskin’s essay indicates, an intense conflict is already under way (and has been for a long time) over how to organize future socio-ecological life—and in whose interests. Put simply, there are those who, by all means possible, want to make sure that the present capitalist-liberal socio-ecological order, with its “mad dance of accumulation” and deepening socio-ecological inequalities, will continue for a while longer. And they insist on a fantasy that eco-technological adjustments and innovations, minor institutional reconfigurations, and a more reflexive socio-

environmental management can procure the continuation of “civilization” as we know it. On the other hand, there are those who insist that only a profound transformation of the dominant socio-ecological relations can inaugurate a more socially inclusive and ecologically sensible world. This view gathers all manner of social and political actors, ranging from those who insist on a new imaginary of what “humanity” is all about to those who argue that aligning the commons of the earth with a common humanity requires abolishing the private ownership of nature and the commodification of everything, and establishing the common democratic management of the commons of the earth.

Although this sounds very much like the “old” political right-left divide, I maintain that this struggle will continue to shape the contours of our terrestrial existence in the future. Asserting the “political,” therefore, and outlining the dividing lines as they crystallize remains paramount. Foregrounding the political as a key terrain implies, among others, the transformation and re-symbolization of the imaginary upon which the need and urgency of environmental action is legitimized and sustained. The hegemonic and symptomatic base upon which the urgency of the environmental discourse and practice is predicated rests upon two repressed traumas, both of which are displaced onto a phantasmagorical imaginary. Opening up different future political-ecological trajectories requires transgressing the fantasy that conceals these traumas.

First, the environmental emergency is articulated around the insistent construction of a dystopian, quasi-catastrophic future if no urgent and appropriate action is taken. This argument sustains the view that it is not too late yet, that the forecasted future can still be changed or averted if appropriate and determined action is taken, if a Great Transition is inaugurated. However, many people around the world already live the socio-ecological apocalypse, demonstrated by the large numbers of climate refugees and mounting socio-ecological problems in the poorest parts of the world. While the elites nurture an apocalyptic dystopia that can nonetheless be avoided (for them), the majority of the world already lives “within the collapse of civilization.”

Sustaining and nurturing catastrophic imageries are an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism for which the management of fear is a central leitmotif and provides part of the cultural support for a process of environmental-populist post-politicization.² At the

symbolic level, apocalyptic imaginaries are extraordinarily powerful in disavowing or foreclosing social conflict and antagonisms. In other words, the presentation of environmental change as a global and universal humanitarian cause produces a thoroughly depoliticized imaginary, one that neither revolves around choosing one trajectory rather than another, nor identifies clear adversaries. It is an imaginary without specific political programs or socio-ecological projects or transformations.

Transgressing this fantasy cuts through this deadlock. To begin with, the revelatory promise of the apocalyptic narrative and the redemptive, but impotent, insistence on the key importance of behavioral and techno-managerial change have to be fully rejected. In the face of the dystopian imaginaries mobilized to assure that the apocalypse will not happen sometime in the future (if the right techno-managerial actions are taken), the only reasonable response is “Don’t worry, you are really right, the environmental catastrophe will not only happen, it is too late, it is already here in the actual present conditions of planetary life.” The socio-environmental ruin is already here for many. It is not some distant dystopian promised future mobilized to trigger response today. It is only within the realization of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge. Directing the environmental gaze to the perspective of those who are already barely surviving within the collapse of the socio-ecological conditions opens up a wide range of new ways of grappling with socio-ecological realities and opens a vast terrain of different political and socio-technical interventions other than the presently dominant ones.

Second, the consensus climate discourse is mobilized through insisting on the imminent dangers environmental change poses to the future of humanity. Humanity in this context is not just understood as the sum total of humans living on planet Earth but rather as human civilization, characterized by a range of shared and common beliefs, ethics, and principles. As Maurice Blanchot argued in the early 1960s (in the face of a then potential nuclear Armageddon), this view is predicated upon the fantasy that “humanity” actually exists, that there is a global human civilization, that human history has demonstrated the making of a common “humanity,” one that requires or deserves salvation. However, the Real of the human presence on Earth of course exposes the empty core of such “humanity.”³

The pervasive inequalities, the rampant uneven power relations, and the continuous objective and subjective violence inflicted by some humans demonstrate the radical antagonisms and conflicts that cut through the human collective and signal that a communitarian “humanity” has never existed. It may never do so unless a sustained political fidelity to the possibility if not necessity, of its making is inaugurated. The disavowal in the environmental discourse of the barbarism that also characterizes humanity is a classic form of traumatic repression. As Blanchot argued, the issue is not to assure the future of a non-existing humanity as we know it, but first and foremost the creation of a humanity.

Indeed, a significant post-truth imaginary seeps into the dominant environmental discourse, a phantasmagoria of an abstract and virtual, but nonetheless threatened, global humanity. In doing so, the Real of class and other antagonisms that cut through the semblance of humanity is considered irrelevant or at least subordinate. Traversing the present fantasy of the possibility of a just transition through techno-managerial and (neo)liberal consumerist adjustments requires recognizing the trauma of the non-existence of humanity and that it is precisely this non-existence, i.e., the class and other dimensions that cut through humanity, that has already caused the environmental catastrophe. Traversing this fantasy is predicated upon reversing the dominant argument: recognizing that it is already too late—the apocalypse has already happened—and the only possible thing left to do is to engage in a process of constructing a real “humanity,” of producing a human world in the world. The latter necessitates foregrounding radical politicization: namely, if we really want to take the ecological condition seriously, we have to displace the question of ecology onto the terrain of agonistic politicization, animated by a sustained fidelity to what Alain Badiou calls a passion for the real possibility and necessity of creating an egalitarian common world. It is through such political project that a common and enabling environment might be constituted. First and foremost, we must insist that indeed there is no alternative.

Endnotes

1. Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson, “Interrupting the Anthro-po-obScene: Immuno-biopolitics and Depoliticising Ontologies in the Anthropocene,” *Theory, Culture, Society* 35, no. 6 (2018): 3-30.
2. Erik Swyngedouw, *Promises of the Political: Insurgent Cities in a Post-Democratic Environment* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2018).
3. Maurice Blanchot, “l’Apocalypse Deçoit,” in *Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 118-127.

About the Author



Erik Swyngedouw is Professor of Geography at Manchester University. His research interests include democracy and political power, environmental politics, and the politics of globalization. Previously, he was professor of geography at Oxford University and held the Vincent Wright Visiting Professorship at Sciences Po, Paris. His books include *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water*, *Liquid Power*, *Promises of the Political: Insurgent Cities in a Post-Political Environment*, *The Post-Political and its Discontents* (co-edited with Japhy Wilson), and *Urban Political Ecology in the Anthro-po-obscene* (co-edited with Henrik Ernstson). He holds a PhD from Johns Hopkins University.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Erik Swyngedouw, "Reasserting Radical Politics," contribution to GTI Forum Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/anthropocene-swyngedouw>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.