

Received: 27 March 2022 Accepted: 25 June 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/joe.v2i1.2247>

Book Review

Horn, Eva, Bergthaller, Hannes, (2020). **The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities**, Routledge, 2020, 192 pages, 14 B/W illustrations. US\$44,95 ISBN: 9781138342477

Susanne Fuchs¹

Still in its early twenties, the concept of the “Anthropocene” is already being criticized as overused and exhausted. Sometimes called a “buzzword,” it has become a shorthand for anything contemporary, urgent, vital—so the lament goes. If you are among the ranks of those tempted to dismiss the term, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller’s volume is for you: it will change your mind. Explaining the concept both comprehensively and in detail, the authors successfully illustrate how the dynamics of the Anthropocene radically challenge our most common perceptions of the world. It can hardly get more relevant than that.

In *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities*, Horn and Bergthaller make a compelling case for the need to revise fundamental concepts such as time, the planetary, and humanity. Their book is structured as a guide through these necessary reexaminations. It is one of the first overview-works within the Environmental Humanities, something that was rightly said to be missing (Clark & Aquilina, 2015, 283). As such, *The Anthropocene* is a very welcome asset to the field. Both an introductory text and a convincing series of original arguments, the volume should prove valuable to any discipline willing to take the present tense seriously.

The subtitle of the English edition, *Key Issues for the Humanities*, marks the volume’s outline. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book consists of ten entries, each adopting one of the eponymous “key issues.” The entries are alternately authored by Horn and Bergthaller and organized into three parts. Several of the waypoints in the book’s first part, *Stratigraphies*, will be familiar to readers conversant with the topic. Similar to other introductory texts, the early chapters account for the emergence of the Anthropocene, its evolution, the numerous critiques leveled against it, and the many different interpretations it endured since its creation (see Ellis, 2018; Hubbell & Ryan, 2022, 39-56; Davies, 2016, 41-68). The second part, *Metamorphisms*, examines the Anthropocene’s transformative impact on key areas in the humanities. It consists of chapters on nature and culture, the *anthropos*, politics, and aesthetics. The last part of the book is entitled *Fault Lines* and explores how the Anthropocene and its attendant notions disrupt traditional humanist epistemic practices. Its four chapters discuss biopolitics, energy, and quantitative, spatial, and temporal scale effects, with a focus on a new understanding of “the planetary” and the concept of deep time.

¹ Susanne Fuchs, Visiting Assistant Professor, Williams College, Williamstown, MA, United States. E-mail: sf7@williams.edu



Following this trajectory, the authors consistently facilitate a meaningful conversation between the humanities, social, and natural sciences. Presenting the work of Earth System thinkers, climate scientists, social ecologists, geologists, and engineers alike, Horn and Bergthaller engage a theoretical interdisciplinarity that “integrat[es] propositions across disciplines” rather than simply enumerates (Klein, 2017, 7). This productive cross-pollination is one of the great strengths of the book and provides an eye-opening synthesis of ideas. In addition to offering a broad introduction, the book also pursues its own objective and probes the epistemological challenges arising from the presented facts and figures. Written from a humanities perspective and for a humanities audience, it puts the open-endedness of its English subtitle—after all, dictionaries define an “issue” as an unsettled matter—to good use as it lays out the ever-evolving facets and implications of the term.

In the first entry entitled “Definitions,” the Anthropocene is introduced as a “multi-focal crisis” (p.24):

[The Anthropocene] sums up such different phenomena as climate change, loss of biodiversity, air pollution, the hole in the atmospheric ozone layer, the proliferation of toxins and microparticles (e.g., microplastics), ocean acidification, changes in the water cycle, and so on. (p.20)

In line with the book’s objective, the description of accumulated disasters is followed by deliberations regarding the framing of such occurrences. Surveying the categories used to account for phenomena comprising the Anthropocene, the authors demonstrate how these categories are increasingly rendered obsolete by anthropogenic effects themselves. The distinction between nature and culture is one of the most prominent examples: Horn instead describes the world we find ourselves in today as a “hybrid world” (p.54). In the same entry, the author familiarizes readers with the field of Earth System science, which focuses on the interplay of organic and inorganic systems consisting of the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and the ever-growing, human-made technosphere. Horn notes how Earth System science deepens the conceptual shifts within the Anthropocene: Earth System thinkers rely on mathematical models, statistics, probabilities, virtual simulations, and other numerical approximations to describe their object—a world represented by such methods cannot be experienced sensorily, but is rendered a “social and epistemic construct” (p.60).

Having introduced this altered reality, Horn and Bergthaller take their readers along to rethink human nature within this evolved context. Here, as often in their argumentation, the authors productively synthesize differing views in existing scholarship. The chapter “The *anthropos*” stakes a meaningful middle ground between the concept of the “anthropos” and the “homo.” Horn summarizes this position in one of her signature aphoristic statements: “To be human is to be both detached from and attached to nature” (p.70). In a later section, the line of reasoning settles on Michel Serres’ description of the human being as a “symbiont” of the Earth (p.125).

One of the most intriguing of the book’s original arguments is the discussion of human agency, which also weaves through several chapters. The authors differentiate between the intentional exercise of power (e.g., individual action) and the unintentional, uncontrollable exertion of force (e.g., the accumulative effects of individuals’ actions). Exhibiting their readiness to cast a critical eye on prevalent ideas, the authors reject simplifying depictions of



individual responsibility by emphasizing the distributed agency of “*modern terraforming assemblage*,” consisting of humans, non-humans, and technics (Woods, 2014, 138; p.151-2).

This discipline-linking notion carries its own epistemological implications: distributed agency defies traditional behavioral theories and ethics focusing on single agents. Rather, it requires high-level conceptual thinking across systems and scales. Horn uses private car ownership to illustrate the ensuing complexity:

Only when it is multiplied by billions can the act of switching on a car’s ignition become a cause of climate change or biodiversity loss. But understanding this causal force also requires us to reconstruct the interconnections of such practices at the local and the global scale, such as the link between the combustion engine, carbon dioxide emissions, the structures of suburban life, and the greenhouse effect. (p.151)

The Anthropocene then suggests a new form of agency which is “an effect of the interplay between technologies, geophysical forces, and biological organisms, both human and non-human” (p.151).

Though the text does not explore this direction, I see the assemblages and their interplays concisely delineated in these passages as a possible framework for meaningful collective action. Horn invokes the notion of the local and defines it as the site of origin and impact. When considered in conjunction with the planetary, the local offers a potential and concrete site of resistance to homogenizing forces (p.154). Following such argumentations into their nuances, one may see *The Anthropocene* as a practical guide among discourses conceding too much power to either individual choice or the hopeless fatalism of late capitalism.

The final entries of the book are fully dedicated to the epistemic shifts entailed in scale effects and the emergent properties of the Anthropocene. As this section leaves linear logics behind and offers up time itself for consideration, the readers greatly benefit from the authors’ ability to render complex matters lucid. Emergence and scale are exemplified with the help of mathematician Phil Anderson’s maxim “more is different.” Horn expounds: “The Anthropocene is precisely this effect of a ‘more’ giving rise to something entirely ‘different,’ leading from a growing array of local ecological damages to a global change in the Earth system” (p.145).

The last “key issue” of the book looks at deep time and invokes Hamlet’s cry that “time is out of joint” to stress one of the book’s central premises: building on Timothy Clark’s and others’ work, Horn underscores that the Anthropocene cannot be thought of as a discrete segment in time. Rather, it must be understood as a threshold concept, an event, a disparate series of leaps. At this point, Horn briefly attends to what lies ahead and anticipates a future “marked by tipping points and episodes of sudden, profound change” (p.167-68). Here and in other parts of the book, the text never betrays its analytical and serene tone. Some may find, however, that the contrast between the placid style and the merciless implications of the presented creates its own particular and chilling effect.

There is one slight drawback to the book’s masterful explications of theories and concepts: as it adheres closely to developments in natural and system sciences, analyses closer to the humanities and social sciences fall short in a few areas. One such instance is the book’s abbreviated discussion of the Anthropocene’s intertwinement with economic systems. This, in turn, compromises the analysis of related asymmetries between responsibilities for and

impacts of human-induced changes in the Earth System. Similarly, the book comments on demographic distributions of the Anthropocene's causes and impacts, but stops short of exploring the topic systemically.

For example, the conclusion entitled "How Western is the Anthropocene?" steers the reader's attention towards the socio-economic and political developments in Asian countries. Bergthaller points out that by 2050 a projected 80% of the global middle class will live in Asia (p.171). Given the emissions related to consumption, this is a significant fact rarely accounted for in Western Anthropocene-literature and a welcome correction to U.S. exceptionalism and eurocentrism. The related suggestion of the irrelevance of the Global North's historical debt is, however, more difficult to uphold when past and present economic and geopolitical developments are taken into consideration. Since just transitions and climate adaptations require considerable means, their implementations are particularly challenging for countries that continue to suffer the impacts of neoliberal policies controlled by a few rich nations.

Deeper discussions of the legacies of capitalist and extractive practices will further complicate some of the book's argument and thereby support Horn and Berthaller's own critical agenda dedicated to exploring historical and contemporary system intricacies. In the same vein, a review of postcolonial critiques and Black critical thought attending to the Anthropocene could only strengthen the work by shedding additional light on the numerous tensions and fault lines already examined in *The Anthropocene* (see, e.g., Yusoff, 2019; Giuliani, 2022). The chapters "politics," "biopolitics," and "energy" provide numerous seeds for these conversations and might be brought to fruition in a next edition—which may very well happen soon, given that the original German version saw a second edition within a year of the first (Horn & Bergthaller, 2020).

Room for expansion notwithstanding, the volume exceeds expectations, especially given the scope of the task it undertakes. Offering some of the most exquisite interdisciplinary writing in the field, *The Anthropocene* is a demanding and multifaceted introduction as well as a relevant work for those who wish to dig deeper. Though not necessarily a quick read, I hope that its reception will extend beyond the academy; I sincerely recommend the book to all theoretically minded readers, academics or not, who are committed to thinking through the past's implications for where we find ourselves today and the present's implications for where we are going in the future. It is a book that helps us see just how out of joint traditional frames for understanding the world are and models the clearheaded, rigorous, and systematic way of thinking that we will need no matter where we are headed.

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