Chapter 5
Globalization and the Challenge of the Anthropocene

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Abstract  Just as globalization was a leading idea in the social sciences from the 1990s to the first decade of the new millennium, the Anthropocene is now a serious contender to be a leading idea in the social sciences and humanities. Controversies around the origins and implications of the Anthropocene mirror those around those of globalization—are they ancient or modern phenomena, are they sustainable or leading us into disaster? Mobilizing ideas on the “silent qualifiers” of globalization (generic, capitalist, and alternative globalizations) I argue that it is fruitful to theorize generic, capitalist, and alternative Anthropocenes. With the mantra of endless growth integral to the survival of both global capitalism and the state system, it seems obvious that these systems are incompatible with planetary survival in the long term, necessitating an engagement with the emerging degrowth movement. Given the failure of governments and corporations to seriously engage with the risks of the Anthropocene, smaller democratically organized communities at different geographic and socio-political scales offer prospects for simpler less ecologically destructive living. Fortunately, the Anthropocene is also a digital era, facilitating cooperative networking between such communities.

This chapter argues that if globalization was one of the leading ideas in the social sciences from the 1990s to the first decade of the new millennium, the Anthropocene can now be considered as a leading idea in the social sciences, the humanities, and also in some of the creative arts. The Anthropocene, strictly speaking, is a geological concept, coined in recognition of increasingly destabilizing human impacts on the planet. The controversies around the origins of the Anthropocene mirror those around the chronologies of globalization—are they ancient or modern phenomena? The label Anthropocene was intended to replace the Holocene epoch (roughly the last 10–12,000 years) in the geological nomenclature (see Steffen et al. 2011) and to establish the discipline of Earth System Science (ESS, see Hamilton, C 2015; Angus 2016).
The idea of the Anthropo-scene appeared around 2015, and was first systematically set out in an article in the journal *Social Studies in Science* to highlight the “rich, inchoate and multi-disciplinary diversity of this Anthropo-scene... [proposing] five ways in which the concept of the Anthropocene has been mobilized: scientific question, intellectual zeitgeist, ideological provocation, new ontologies and science fiction” (Lorimer 2017: 117). Adding the intervention of creative artists, this is a useful way of organizing a vast literature.

**Globalization as Social Science, Anthropocene as Geological Science, Anthropo-Scene as Totalizing Narrative**

The initial popularity of globalization as a motif for the social sciences and humanities was little short of astonishing. Introduced in the print media around 1960, the term first started to be used systematically by scholars and journalists in the 1980s, and by the turn of the millennium it was to be found everywhere, applied to almost everything (Ritzer 2012). In the words of *The Economist* in 2009, “The concept globalization was popularized by an American journalist, Thomas Friedman, in his book *The World is Flat* (2005).” It reached the top of several bestseller lists with its headline message that the world is now just “one big integrated market” ([http://www.economist.com/node/14031230](http://www.economist.com/node/14031230)). The idea of the Anthropocene was “officially” announced to the wider scientific community in a short communication in the journal *Nature* (probably the most influential science publication in the world) entitled “Geology of mankind” (Crutzen 2002)—in retrospect, an unfortunate title. An article in the *Guardian* (London) highlighted the male bias in science in general and in the group leading the Anthropocene campaign in particular—this attracted hundreds of comments (Raworth 2014).

Critics of the ideas of globalization and of the Anthropocene share many characteristics. For example, the literature on globalization is suffused with a good deal of fatalism, popularly known as TINA (there is no alternative). Even some progressive academics, popular writers, and political and cultural leaders seem to accept that there is no alternative to capitalist globalization and that all we can do is to try to work for a better world around it (Giddens 2000). And this is where the challenge of the Anthropocene to existing conceptions of globalization starts to bite. In 2009, the historian of fossil capitalism Andreas Malm, declared: “Forget the Anthropocene, we should call it the *Capitalocene*” (quoted in Moore’s edited book of 2016: xi). While sympathizing with the sentiment, I think that there are many reasons to claim that the Anthropocene is an apt label for the human impact on the planet. It is inclusive of the human enterprise, and though different levels of responsibility can be apportioned, most people on Earth (rich and poor) are understandably complicit through what I have labeled the culture ideology of consumerism (Sklair 2001, 2002). Rebranding Anthropocene as Capitalocene conveniently lets anti-capitalists off the hook to fly around the world critiquing capitalism and making our own ecologically destructive consumer choices. Just as we are all living in a globalized world that world is also
the Anthropocene. And it is taking place within and being intensified through the system of capitalist globalization fortified by hierarchic states.

What, then, does the idea of the Anthropocene have to offer that the immense body of globalization research does not already offer? The first and most obvious answer to this question must focus on the efforts of Earth System scientists to establish connections between the economic, social, and cultural spheres and the Earth System itself. Lorimer makes the distinction between the scientific agenda of the Anthropocene for Earth System science, and its rapid absorption into the intellectual \textit{zeitgeist}. I would suggest, however, that the evidence permits another reading of the situation, namely, that many ESS researchers (including some of the most influential) framed their concept of the Anthropocene in a way that directly invited diverse publics into the fold, creating popular and transdisciplinary appeal. This, I would argue, can be clearly seen from what may be labeled the “official canon” of the Anthropocene as a scientific reality. In their collective introduction to the topic in the authoritative \textit{Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society}, Steffen et al. (2011) conclude that the Anthropocene might be compared to the Darwinian revolution. Even more boldly (and alarmingly) these three leading Earth scientists and one of the most influential world historians of our time state: “Darwin’s insights into our origins provoked outrage, anger and disbelief but did not threaten the material existence of society of the time. The ultimate drivers of the Anthropocene, on the other hand, if they continue unabated through this century, may well threaten the viability of contemporary civilization and perhaps even the future existence of Homo sapiens” (p. 862). Unusually for an article announcing a new field of scientific inquiry in a most prestigious natural science publication, this suggests that the Anthropocene is of direct relevance to planetary survival.

Further evidence of the enthusiasm of the promoters of the Anthropocene concept to welcome the social sciences, humanities, and the arts into the broad tent of “Anthropocene studies” comes from the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG). This was established in 2009 to prepare the scientific community and the general public for the theoretical and practical challenges that lay ahead. The chairman was Jan Zalasiewicz (Professor of Paleobiology at the University of Leicester) who, through his writings, media outreach, and promotional skills, has done as much as anyone to disseminate the idea of the Anthropocene in scientific and public spheres. In December 2009, in correspondence with Davor Vidas (an international law of the sea scholar), Zalasiewicz wrote: “I would be glad to discuss the wider implications [of the Anthropocene] to your field of study, because while we are aware of the general societal implications of this term, the possible practical implications for international law [of the sea] would be of considerable interest in our examination of this term.”

The Royal Society of Great Britain accepted a proposal for a thematic set of papers on the Anthropocene, to appear in their \textit{Proceedings} journal. The first theme was “Historical perspectives and concept of the Anthropocene,” followed by eight geological and ecological topics. The last, “societal responses to the Anthropocene,” is of particular significance for my argument like the article by Steffen et al., wide enough to encourage participation from practically anyone. In his annual AWG report for 2014, Zalasiewicz wrote: “This has been another eventful year in the rapidly
growing field of what one might term ‘Anthropocene studies’.” Also highlighted were major Anthropocene projects at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), and the Deutsches Museum/Rachel Carson Center Anthropocene exhibition in Munich, the incorporation of the Anthropocene as a major theme in the Smithsonian Institution’s “Deep Time” exhibition, three new Anthropocene journals and general books and films on the topic in the pipeline—all examples of prestigious outreach and what research funding bodies term “impact.”

The inaugural meeting of the AWG was hosted and financially supported by HKW in Berlin in October 2014. This meeting included discussion of various technical questions concerning the measurement of the Holocene–Anthropocene boundary, whether the Anthropocene should be considered as “a unit of Earth history or human history,” and the issue of the “Anthropocene as a time unit and a material unit to be visualized by geoscientists and other interested communities.” A session on “Human Impacts and Their Consequences” ranged far and wide over critical assessment of science-political solution pathways, and a “research agenda beyond sustainability, linking scientific practice with societal relevance and local to global strategies of knowledge production.” Zalasiewicz summed up these “exchanges” as follows: “a set of dialogues between members of the Anthropocene Working Group and social scientists, thinkers, and artists, a serial thread of conversations that draws from a vast range of expertise, disciplines, and practices. … engaging with research methods in the lab or field, at the desk or in the studio.” This was followed in June 2015 by “The Anthropocene Project” at the Tate Modern, an exhibition at the Barbican in London, and similar events in many other cities around the world. This suggests that in the case of the Anthropocene the dire warnings of C.P. Snow’s “two cultures” thesis (chronicling the dangers of the separation of the sciences from the humanities and arts) were finally being taken to heart by all sides. My view is that globalization as a sociological concept has always been too frail to sustain the theoretical and substantive burdens loaded on to it. The “global” has always seemed too big and often lacking the specificity necessary for any sort of scientific rigor and no doubt some think the same about the Anthropocene.

Generic, Capitalist, and Alternative Anthropocenes

In order to address political and methodological problems, I originally distinguished three modes of globalization in theory and practice, what we may term the “silent qualifiers” of globalization, namely, generic, capitalist, and alternative globalizations (Sklair 2009). Now, after studying the Anthropocene (and -scene), it appears to me that the same “silent qualifiers” can also be applied—generic, capitalist, and alternative Anthropocenes (same names, different contents). By generic Anthropocene I mean the simple ideas that living creatures have always had a multitude of impacts on the Earth System which itself is constantly changing in various ways, and that the evolution of humankind represented a quantitative
transformation of these impacts (particularly with respect to city building, agriculture, and infrastructure). By capitalist Anthropocene I mean that the industrialization made possible by fossil fuels, exploited via capitalist relations of production, set in motion qualitative transformations of these impacts on the Earth System (Malm 2016). The difference between the generic and the capitalist Anthropocenes and, by implication, between the quantitative and the qualitative impacts on the planet, is caught by the distinction that geologists have made between the Holocene and the Anthropocene. The Holocene represents the previous 12,000 years of relative planetary stability, notably moderate temperature fluctuations and other functions favorable to life on the planet; the capitalist Anthropocene represents an end of relative planetary stability and a far less predictable, possibly catastrophic future. In the opinion of many Earth scientists and Anthropocene popularizers, one possible outcome is the end of life as we know it on the planet. However, like capitalist globalization, in the capitalist Anthropocene such alarming messages are rapidly dealt with by diluting them through a variety of what we might label “reassurance narratives.” For example, the Steffen et al. (2011) paper cited above concludes on an optimistic note reassuring us that human intelligence and ingenuity is prepared for the challenge of the Anthropocene. The most influential statement of this view comes from the prestigious Stockholm Resilience Centre research on planetary boundaries (PB). An authoritative report on the status of these boundaries, while highlighting the dangers (several boundaries already breached, others on the edge) concludes: “Nevertheless, by identifying a safe operating space for humanity on Earth, the PB framework can make a valuable contribution to decision-makers in charting desirable courses for societal development” (Steffen et al. 2015: 475). The ideas of “safe operating space” and the frequently quoted “Welcome to the Anthropocene” are only the most common of the Anthropocene reassurance narratives which have come to be associated with the label “good Anthropocene.” The parallels with globalization as theory and practice are striking. Equivalent reassurance narratives for the downsides of capitalist globalization are “the rising tide lifts all boats” blurring the evidence of global and local class polarization, and “ecological modernization” (also propagated by good Anthropocene enthusiasts) blurring the evidence of global and local ecological unsustainabilities (see Leichenko and O’Brien 2008; Sklair 2002: 48–58)—the capitalist Anthropocene avant la lettre! In the media, these reassurance narratives successfully morph from challenges to opportunities, successfully trumping (no pun intended) pessimism with optimism, pushing existential threats into the shadows. Engaging creatively with the science-politics of the Anthropocene, Stengers (2015) shows that as scientists went public on the Anthropocene before all the geological results were established (waiting for more definitive markers could be catastrophic), the anthropogenic climate change deniers could keep the debate going, opening up the unenviable choice between merchants of fear or merchants of doubt. Latour keeps this conversation going. Science and politics are both frail human endeavors, he argues. Anthropocene politics “is not a rational debate … [it is] incredibly easy to make two sides emerge even when there is only one” (Latour 2015: 147).

There is a large literature on climate change denial (Boykoff and Olson 2013), much less on Anthropocene denial (but see the exemplary case study by Casagrande
et al. 2017, where this is conceptualized as “economyopia”). Unsurprisingly, comparisons have been made between climate change denial and Holocaust denial: “Climate change and the Holocaust are not equivalent, but that does not mean there is no climate denial” (Jacques 2012: 10). While it would be quite wrong to identify the slogan “Welcome to the Anthropocene” with climate change or Anthropocene denial, I would argue that even when used ironically it does create an atmosphere of skepticism about the severity of the situation, which can implicitly lead to denial. The slogan adorned a front-page story in the Economist magazine in May 2011, the title of a 3-minute film introducing the UN Rio +20 summit in June 2012, and in 2014 “Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands” opened in the Deutsches Museum, Munich. A review of this exhibition concludes with a sharp critique of what I mean by the capitalist Anthropocene reassurance narrative: “the Anthropocene idea has prompted many scholars and activists to point out the radical environmental injustice of the epoch and to critique the capitalism that has led to it. We see neither in this exhibit. Instead, it offers a relatively benign vision of a changing planet. The change is not pictured as threatening, in spite of being rapid. The exhibit says Welcome to the Anthropocene, not Goodbye to the World You Knew” (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 2016: 237). Several books, articles, and mass media references to “Welcome to the Anthropocene” suggest that there is a middle way between the generic Anthropocene and extreme capitalist Anthropocene denial, and that the idea of the “good, welcoming Anthropocene” provides it. We may, after all, be having to think about planetary survival sooner rather than later.

The debates around Anthropocene ideologies take different forms from those around globalization (see Sklair 2017). Capitalist ideologues generally adopted neoliberal forms of globalization, though by no means all (in and out of the transnational corporations and think tanks) took this position. My fourfold model of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) attempted to demonstrate alliances between corporate, political, professional, and consumerist fractions, but was sensitive to intra-TCC differences and sometimes open warfare between the fractions, though usually resolved in the interests of Big Business and the Big State (Sklair 2001). In the case of capitalist globalization, it was always obvious that there were powerful globalizing forces at work—the consequences of the digital revolution in all spheres of life and social organization made this difficult to deny. The political problem was and is: can capitalist globalization work for everyone or does it have an inbuilt tendency toward class polarization, inequality, and ecological disaster? Chinese President Xi at Davos in 2017 lectured the world with an impassioned defense of globalization and President Trump in the White House in 2018 promised to make America great again by resisting globalization. The politics of the Anthropocene do not rest on such obvious foundations. And, more to the point, I would argue that while globalization and especially climate change regularly appear in the mass media, albeit frequently in misleading and sensationalist terms (Boykoff 2011), the Anthropocene is still relatively unknown outside some bubbles in the worlds of science, academe, culture critique, and creative arts.

Adding to Lorimer’s remarks on science/climate fiction and the Anthropocene (2017: 128–31), I can offer some comments on how the sciences are catching up
with science fiction in a desperate attempt to prepare for the worst-case Anthropocene scenario—namely, what do we do when planet Earth becomes no longer able to support human life? Two issues appear to be paramount, first the practical possibility of physical escape from a doomed planet, and second, the identification of planets that hold out prospects of supporting human life. Both are now being investigated by leading scientists and entrepreneurs with the financial backing of private benefactors and public money. Planning for physical escape from a doomed planet does not receive much publicity, but it is clearly underway. In 2017, BBC2 screened a documentary, “The 21st century race for space.” Hosted by the genial Professor Brian Cox, a leading science popularizer in the UK, it took viewers on a tour of cutting-edge research locations all around the world. Cox explained: “surprisingly, some of the boldest efforts at putting humans into space are now those of private companies started by a handful of maverick billionaire businessmen.”

These include Richard Branson (Virgin Galactic), Jeff Bezos (founder of Amazon and Blue Origin) and Elon Musk (Spaceport America and SpaceX) and their initiatives in privately financed space flight, space tourism, asteroid mining, and dreams of colonies on Mars. But, says Cox, “their true ambition is to ensure the survival of the human race by crossing our solar system and colonizing Mars in the next decade.” Building space ships is one problem, the next is ensuring the voyagers survive the journey, and then to find somewhere eventually for them to land and make a home. This is the search for a new planet Earth. The late Stephen Hawking had for some years been arguing that the human species will have to relocate to a new planet within 100 years. This documentary gave him one more platform to disseminate his views.

The search for another planet Earth or a planet that can be terra formed to serve as a new home for humans is also underway. Professor Hawking and several other distinguished scientists worked with Breakthrough Initiatives, a program of scientific and technological exploration, probing the big questions of life in the Universe. The website (https://breakthroughinitiatives.org) explains: “Are we alone? Are there habitable worlds in our galactic neighborhood? Can we make the great leap to the stars? And can we think and act together—as one world in the cosmos? … Breakthrough Listen is a $100 million program of astronomical observations in search of evidence of intelligent life beyond Earth. …A complete survey of the 1,000,000 nearest stars, the plane and center of our galaxy, and the 100 nearest galaxies. All data will be open to the public.” This is serious money supporting serious efforts by serious scientists in what has been labeled exoplanet studies, namely, the study of planets outside our solar system that orbit a star. A recent publication on exoplanet astrobiology states: “The discovery of seven new exoplanets orbiting the relatively close star TRAPPIST-1 forces us to rethink life on Earth. It opens the possibility to broaden our understanding of coupled system dynamics and lay the foundations to explore a path to long-term sustainability by entering into a cooperative ecological-evolutionary dynamic with the coupled planetary systems” (in Kelley 2017). Behind all this effort is the fear of the worst-case Anthropocene scenario, a fear that seems to put all forms of globalization into a new, rather parochial, perspective. However, this would be a premature judgement.
Conclusion

I have argued that the emerging discipline of Anthropocene (and -scene) studies is poised to absorb globalization as the new meme for twenty-first-century thinking about our world as a whole and possible future. The Anthropocene has the unique capacity to pose questions about planetary survival, and globalization has the unique capacity to explain local–global dynamics. The critical point will arrive if and when sufficient numbers of ordinary people all over the world begin to realize that geoengineering, new technologies, and Artificial Intelligence machines will not save us from the ravages of the Anthropocene. Stephen Hawking, for example, campaigned vigorously against AI, warning that robots could destroy humanity—another sphere in which capitalist globalization confronts the Anthropocene. 15 If it is not too late to secure planetary survival, alternative Anthropocenes (i.e., intelligent reworkings of human impacts on the Earth System and its constituent ecosystems) may start to replace the current dysfunctional capitalist and state systems that exacerbate existing problems. A necessary aspect of these reworkings would be innovative reformations of global–local relations. Such initiatives are already under way in thousands of small communities all round the world, seeking routes to zero-carbon living, producing their own food, and detaching themselves from the growth obsession of capitalism and its variants. It is important to acknowledge that diluted versions of these strategies are also to be found in the rhetoric of the capitalist “good Anthropocene,” propounded by corporate interests, national governments, and international organizations in terms of getting to grips with climate change. Climate change summits over the last 50 years have made some progress at local, national, and global levels, but the optimism of the negotiators and most of the mass media often seems pathetically naïve in comparison with the evidence-based pessimism of many Earth System scientists.

The key, in my view, is the issue of degrowth, now a rapidly expanding transnational intellectual and social movement (D’Alisa et al. 2014). With the mantra of endless growth integral to the survival of both global capitalism and the state system, it seems obvious that capitalism and the centralized hierarchical state are incompatible with planetary survival in the long term (perhaps even in the shorter term, if we are to take Stephen Hawking and others like him seriously). However, the proponents of degrowth, like everyone else, are yet to deal convincingly with the formidable problems of existing global inequalities and their root causes. Studying more carefully small-scale self-reliant communities and their strategies of disengagement with the capitalist market and the state may “highlight the US and Italy… not only because Tarrant drew inspiration from both, but also because both have become important contemporary laboratories of dangerous ideologies.” Fortunately, the Anthropocene is also a digital era, which raises the possibility for opportunities to create local democratically organized communities, networking on many different geographic and socio-political scales. This, in my view, is the best prospect for alternative globalizations and alternative Anthropocenes. So, if the worst comes to the
worst, even this remote possibility of long-term planetary survival might become a little less remote and the future for our descendants a little less desperate.\textsuperscript{16}

Notes

1. Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) was a more technical article on the Anthropocene in the newsletter of the International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme. Stoermer is also credited with introducing the term (see Angus 2016: 33ff., Ellis 2018: Chap. 1).

2. In 2009, Vidas organized a major international conference on “The World Ocean in Globalisation,” perhaps the first scholarly conference to link globalization and the Anthropocene. Unattributed quotes below can be accessed from the AWG website newsletters dated from 2009 to 2014, \url{https://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/}.

3. On these and other scholarly and creative art events, see Robin and Muir (2015), Anderson (2015) and Swanson et al. (2015).

4. See \url{http://s-f-walker.org.uk/pubsebooks/2cultures/Rede-lecture-2-cultures.pdf} The major figure for the Anthropocene in this context is the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009, 2018) See also Hamilton, C. et al. eds. (2015).

5. I deal with generic and capitalist Anthropocenes in this section, for alternative Anthropocenes see my conclusion.

6. The institutional support for these views could be labeled the “Philanthropocene” (philanthropic institutions and foundations propagating “good” Anthropocene narratives).

7. See Oreskes and Conway (2012). Relevant here is the literature on consensus in science—the multidisciplinary survey of Cook et al. (2015) has had more than 300,000 downloads.

8. For a thorough discussion of debates around the “good Anthropocene,” see Dalby (2016).

9. Compare: “Welcome to the Anthropocene” with “Welcome to the Holocaust” or the prizewinning book “Adventures in the Anthropocene” with “Adventures in the Holocaust” or the art exhibition and conference entitled “Postcards from the Anthropocene” with “Postcards from the Holocaust” or “Romancing the Anthropocene” with “Romancing the Holocaust.” These comparisons might seem ridiculous (even offensive) now, but if the worst comes to the worst…

10. For an edited collection based on a research project to establish how the Anthropocene is represented in the mass media in local languages all over the world, see Sklair ed. (2021).

11. Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel, \textit{Mars Trilogy}, tells the story of the colonization of Mars. The richness and remarkable prescience of Robinson’s writing are ample rewards for the effort required to read all three volumes. See Wark (2015: ch. 4), and Knoespel (2012), who provides a useful glossary of the main themes.

12. See \url{https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/media/bbc-two-the-21st-century-race-for-space(50aba912-8932-4dd2-8e28-c72a7821be49).html}. 
13. Usually, terraforming is defined as making other planets more like Earth. However, I consider it more fruitful to expand the definition to include Earth and bring terraforming into debates about nature, infrastructure, technology, and bio- and geoengineering.

14. Kelley summarizes the paper—originally published in the journal *Anthropocene*. I do not cite it because I do not entirely understand it; however, the conclusion in Kelley, quoting one of the authors, seems to imply something like the relationship between Earth and Mars in Robinson’s trilogy.

15. In the long *Harvard Business Review* (July 2017) cover story on AI, notable for their absence are the words citizen, democracy, ethics, morality, responsibility, and values.

16. For example, https://transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/activism-in-the-anthropocene; see also Sklair (2016). As the coronavirus epidemic (frequently blamed on globalization) and the intensifying of the ecological crisis have demonstrated, the necessity for genuine system change is more pressing than ever.

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