Thinking through the Anthropocene

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What a wonderful book! Coherent, ambitious, eclectic and so well written. Arundhati Roy meets Paul Crutzen in chapter one while rocks and discussions of geological epochs coexist with the mundane practicalities of doing the ironing and the dangers of aerial spraying of deconstructed Pacific Islands in the form of superphosphate fertilizer. Planetary multiplicities and stratal analysis juxtaposed with earthly multitudes and a reminder of Hegel’s insistence on the premise of a quiescent earth as the condition for modernity, offers a rich tableau of conceptual innovations which do indeed challenge something termed modern social thought. But it’s precisely these unlikely juxtapositions that are so refreshing, stimulating one to consider the last term in the book’s title and making one, yes, think!

This is a book about thinking, and about the urgent need to do so in ways that throw off the accumulated implicit assumptions that have shaped modern social science. To do so requires an ontological shakeup of received categories. And a careful grappling with the implicit enclosures that bound what qualifies as the social, in which: ‘not having to account for its own material-energetic underpinning or context is the condition of possibility of modern social thoughts’ self-understanding as an autonomous, self-legislating sphere’ (46). The emergence of neo-catastrophist earth system science can but challenge this sphere, premised as it is on simple assumptions of cheap energy, and the ubiquity of fossil fuels, and petroleum in particular. It forces us all to ‘face the Anthropocene’ (Angus, 2016).

Engaging with materials and energies at the scale of the planet puts the social directly into dialogue with the Anthropocene. Hence it’s in dialogue with the possibilities that global capitalism is indeed an earth system changing agent, one that may open up novel planetary configurations. These novel configurations may have shattering effects on the assumptions of an autonomous sphere of the social just as they shatter Indigenous societies caught in various practical binds unable to deal with violent impositions and disruptions inherent in the colonizing impetus of contemporary economics. In Tim Mitchell’s (2011) terms this reductive discourse preoccupied with the ‘science of moving money’, while assuming a stable material context for its operations, needs to confront the dynamic world it is now changing on a vast scale.

This reconceptualization of the economy as an integral feature of the earth system is a key consideration for contemporary politics, and one that has been slow to penetrate academic discussions if not
the consciousness of the youngest of our students, those on climate strike on Fridays. They at least understand the urgency of geologizing the social while simultaneously thinking about planets, and their inhabitability. They realize, even if the owners of space exploration companies don’t, that in practical terms over timescales that matter for current generations, there is no planet B. But this assumption too is a political challenge to modern thinking and to the implicit colonizing contextualizations of social science, and notably its frequently implicit continuationism (Albert, 2020). The past is a very poor guide to what is coming next.

The Anthropocene discussion in this volume is a reminder once again of the crucial importance of fire, combustion and power in the shaping of the earth. Life, social or otherwise is entangled with metabolisms and, on this planet at least, the extraordinary phenomenon of an animal species having learned to start and partially control fires. Carbon life forms and oxygen are the essential prerequisites for fire; organic detritus is fuel even if we forget this in the designation of things as fossil fuels. The resultant firepower when this detritus is repurposed as fuel is key to our current planetary conjuncture (Dalby, 2018). As Stephen Pyne (2009) puts it, in a relatively neglected intervention in geography, the future course of the pyrhytic transition the planet is undergoing is key to the longer term trajectory. Global politics will soon decide whether this is towards something analogous to the recent past, the Holocene period, or towards a much more dynamic and unpredictable future ‘hothouse world’ (Steffen et al., 2018).

Grappling with the forms of scientific knowledge that formulate planetary predicaments is never easy, but here in this volume’s pages is a powerful invitation to intellectual engagement, the kind of book that should be essential reading for all graduate students prior to their selection of a dissertation topic! But to grapple with planetary matters and human life as an earthly activity requires abandoning Hegel’s separations of the social sphere of human possibility from its earthly context. If ever there was a task for geography, then the reformulation of our current context in terms of the Anthropocene offers a key conceptual opening for this crucial engagement. But other social sciences need to take note too!

What’s not in this book is in some ways at least as important than that what is. While the planet is invoked as the necessary premise for social thought, and politics specified in terms of the possibilities of living differently, the contemporary social science that ostensibly grapples with these global matters is noticeable by its absence in these pages. No, not geography, which is represented in these pages, albeit fairly sparsely, despite Nigel Clark’s disciplinary affiliation. The discipline that takes ‘the global’ for granted these days isn’t here. Which isn’t all that surprising because after all its failure to take the planetary seriously is one of its strangest and most pernicious failings (Burke et al., 2016). Too much Hegel!?

What is missing is the whole edifice of international relations and discussions of global governance, global environmental politics, regimes, international institutions and the like. None of the international relations journals are cited, nada, none, not one. Paris Agreement? Kyoto Protocol? United Nations? IPCC? Nope, not one of them either. The implicit critique in their being absent from this text is that they have failed to grapple with the novel circumstances of our Anthropocene existence. The failure to get to grips with the planetary, where ostensibly that ought to be its current task (Simangan, 2020), can be read as requiring a rethink in different terms, ones that require the ontological, grounding so to speak, in the material realities of a planet that has in the past, and may again in the immediate future, change very rapidly and in the process open up multiple possible worlds.

Yet this silence is in so many ways just the point; the discipline that provides the conceptual infrastructure of American hegemony has had immense difficulty grappling with the material realities encapsulated in the Anthropocene discussion. Its focus on regimes and international governance has frequently been distracted into an analysis of empty or decoy institutions, those what distract or divert attention from the problem rather than tackling its root causes (Dimitrov, 2020). Focusing only on the
social arrangements, not the material consequences, the social is all that really seems to matter. As with Hegel and much of contemporary economics, the material context for the struggles of powerful states has until very recently simply been taken for granted. But no longer (Dalby, 2020). Grappling with the necessity to reengage with a dynamic planet is not easy, as the immense intellectual resources Clark and Szerszynski bring to their task demonstrates, but climate change and species extinction are now making questions of the conditions of inhabitation unavoidable.

Reading all this in this volume, the imbrications of heat technology and fabrics in the gendered division of labour, the necessity of thinking about humanity as a fire species, and the conceptual possibilities opened up by raising the question of what a planet is, and the peculiar path our one has taken to emerge in its present form, compels us to challenge the implicit assumptions of modernity, of life on earth. Because this is a silly formulation really; we aren’t on earth, we are earth, vital bits of earth, earthlings in every sense. Some of us have come to write, and think and yes, dramatically change key parts of the narrow envelope that surrounds the planet, the intersection of rock, water, air that constitutes the possibility of carbon forms of life, which in turn are integral change agents in that system itself.

Social forces are rapidly changing the scope and aims of these change agents, and how these are shaped and directed is indeed the political question of our times. But one that can only be comprehended as such if something akin to the planetary sensibility this book outlines is the operational premise for communal action. This is needed to make a future that simultaneously allows for the persistence of numerous humans in modes of living that also allows for the flourishing of many other species. For geographers this is all a reminder of the formulation frequently linked with Yi Fu Tuan’s name, that our task is to investigate the earth as our home, and in the process think about making it habitable. It is also a reminder that planetary housework cannot be neglected any longer if the edifice that the rich and powerful among us are so rapidly remodelling is to remain humanly habitable in the long term future.

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