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On critical hope and the *anthropos* of non-anthropocentric discourses. Some thoughts on archaeology in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In this essay I scrutinize the non-anthropocentric discourses used by the social sciences and humanities narratives and critiques of the Anthropocene. Although not always predominant within the academic Anthropocene debate, such discursive strands remain politically and ethically inspiring and influential in that debate and for the public discourse concerning the epoch. I stress that these discourses inherit the hope for human progress that characterizes critical theory of the Frankfurt school, i.e. 'critical hope', a type of hope that renders the non-anthropocentric discourses self-contradictory. Even when they manage to escape the hold of critical hope, these discourses, I argue, suffer from ethical and political failings due to their inherent lack of focus on human–human relations and largely ahistorical nature. I conclude the essay by advocating an Anthropocene archaeology that remains critical of and learns from the ethical and political shortcomings of non-anthropocentric perspectives and making a related call for a slow archaeology of the Anthropocene.

Critical hope and this essay

> Progress still controls us even in tales of [capitalist] ruination.
>
> (Tsing 2015, 21)

Anthropocene discourses today are varied, incorporating eco-catastrophic anxieties and unduly eco-modernist optimism as much as 'critical hope'. A major focus in this essay is the emerging theoretical and philosophical reflections that problematize the last. Forming flip sides of the same coin with 'critical pessimism', critical hope refers to a specific type of hope in political philosophy that lies primarily embedded within the neo-Marxist ideas of the Frankfurt school (henceforth the critical theory) and is explicitly 'critical of contemporary or modern understandings of progress' (Chandler 2020, 173; see Chandler 2019). What is interesting about critical hope is that, while it involves severe criticism of how human progress (i.e. improving the lives of humans) is understood and pursued by certain – mainly capitalist and totalitarian – interpretations of modernity, it is also the main catalyst for a restless pursuit of that very progress. The key to understanding how such hope for human progress thrives within critical theory is the concept of 'enlightenment dialectics', which treats the European Enlightenment as containing 'both the seeds of its own destruction and the potential of an escape route from that destruction' (Stoetzler 2018, 143). According to critical theory, while the progress of rational human consciousness embodies

the potential to lead to 'false enlightenment', the modern organizing principles of social and political life can always be reworked critically, leading to radical improvements for humanity.

As I lay out below, in current discussions of the Anthropocene, critical hope is incarnated predominantly by non-anthropocentric thinking – a term which in this essay broadly refers to post-/non-humanisms, New Materialisms and more-than-human/object-oriented ontologies. Although neither integral to these non-anthropocentric theories nor predominant in Anthropocene studies, non-anthropocentric voices within the Anthropocene debate are salient: they remain politically and ethically inspirational and influential amongst the deeply and explicitly anthropocentric discussions on the epoch. They play a role in avoiding the treatment of the Anthropocene as 'business as usual' by bringing non-humans into the debate with considerable theoretical vigour. However, the embodiment of critical hope by such thinking, as I argue below, renders it self-contradictory. This is hardly surprising given that critical hope (fixated on human survival, salvation and progress) is inherently anthropocentric. A second point I make in the essay is that even when non-anthropocentric discourses within the Anthropocene debate do not depend on critical hope, they still suffer from severe ethical and political issues. These issues revolve around how to define the *anthropos* in non-anthropocentrism and, more specifically, how assumptions and negligence about its identity might wrongly depoliticize some of the histories and politics of being human. I conclude the essay by proposing an Anthropocene archaeology that remains critical of and learns from the ethical and political shortcomings of non-anthropocentric discourses. Archaeologists, I also suggest, should stop hastening after Anthropocene theories (and methods) to 'valorize' archaeology and, as such, avoid jumping on multidisciplinary bandwagons, for the stakes involve misleading reorientations of humanity's pasts, presents and futures.

Reuniting humans and non-humans in the Anthropocene: post-industrial hopes for 'happy endings' and some ethical and political failures

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), leading philosophers in critical theory, portray the anti-Semitic modern subject as regrettably estranged from his own self and the external world. Like other 'others' could also be, nature and Jews are enemies of the subject who lacks conscious self-reflection on his behaviour and thought and, as such, loses touch with reality. The subject is megalomaniac and paranoid, seeking power and domination over his foes for fear of being dominated. He projects *regressive* hostility, unhappiness and destruction onto his internal and external world. He is alienated. Horkheimer and Adorno go particularly far with their ideas on alienation seeking sources of (self-)destructiveness inherent in the rationalism of Nazi anti-Semitism. While *Dialectic of Enlightenment* forms one of the better-known contexts where the concept is advanced, alienation is a popular field of study elsewhere in critical theory, which builds on Marx's ideas (cf., e.g., Burkett 1999; Foster 2000; Yates 2018). Directly related to the discussion here is the employment of the concept to hold 'Enlightenment man' responsible for 'a kind of species imperialism which would ultimately work to the disadvantage of . . . himself' (Jay 1972, 296). Critical hope for reconciliation with oneself and with nature lies with, among others, authentic art, play and affective life, which are prominently featured in Ernst Bloch's writings.

This prophecy in critical theory of an alien and unreconciled 'nature' lashing back against human civilization (Stoetzler 2018, 153) haunts the Western world in the Anthropocene today, arguably – and ironically – mainly through non-anthropocentric discourses. Even though these discourses are rooted in multiple intellectual traditions and attempt to distance themselves from critical theory, they often coopt fears embodied within critical theory that consider alienation from nature as a form of regress for humanity. These fears are based on imaginaries of a 'great divide' between humans and non-humans that non-anthropocentric discourses treat as a severe conceptual and discursive error. The discourses intend to diagnose or undo the epistemological and

environmental damage caused by that imagined divide and the domination of 'man' (specifically, affluent, white, Europhone, able-bodied, masculine, urbanized, heterosexual, liberal citizens of the Western world; see Braidotti 2017, 23). They make attempts to rethink the Earth in terms of socio-ecological systems, hybrid species, more-than-human cyborgs, assemblages, affective life and so on (Wakefield 2014, 452). The great divide – or in Marxist terminology, the metabolic–ecological rift (cf. Foster, Clark and York 2010; Wark 2015) – in question is considered to be caused by capitalism. However, the original sin is often thought to be inherited from modernity, which is considered to have the potential to foster the tendencies innate in capitalism (and as some emphasize, also in socialism) to go against nature and nature's instrumental treatment in order to pursue human progress.

Among many examples of these approaches is that of Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016, 19) who consider the Anthropocene as a concept that "abolishes the break between nature and culture, between human history and the history of life and Earth." They suggest that the epoch reveals at last how the world is "an intricate network in which social and natural arrangements mutually reinforce each other" (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 35). They propose to politicise the Anthropocene with the sole purpose of being alert about the contradictions and limitations of modernity that brought it about and "to explore what may be infinitely enriching and emancipatory in those attachments that link us with other beings on a finite Earth" (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 41–42). In a widely cited article Chakrabarty (2009) makes comparable points. He suggests that irrefutable scientific evidence pointing to a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, accentuates humans as a recently emerged geological agent. The only way for humans to understand and eventually think of a way out of the current predicament brought along with the epoch, according to Chakrabarty (2009, 213), involves the consideration of "human history as part of the history of life on this planet." In other words, he argues for admitting to the "collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" (Chakrabarty 2009, 201) to address the Anthropocene (see also, e.g. Burke et al. 2016; Harrington 2016; Moore 2015; Head 2016; LeCain 2015).

As may already be clear through these examples, despite its pessimistic outlook, non-anthropocentric critique of the Anthropocene is in essence very hopeful, following in the footsteps of critical theory (see Chandler 2019). It attempts to rework existing relations of alienated humans with their non-human others where; the ultimate aim is to come up with new treatments of the latter by the former so that humans can continue to thrive. It is hard at times to miss the theological and romantic undertones in such thinking, i.e. the yearning for an imaginary, pristine, Edenic nature (unspoiled by humans, and eventually by modern capitalist industry) where everything is entangled and, as such, is 'simultaneously human and natural' (Harrington 2016, 490; see Lane 2015, 489). This is, in fact, critical hope in action, aiming for a self-reflexive, softer and more enlightened relationship between humans and non-humans (see Stoetzler 2018, 152–53). It serves to open up possibilities for the post-industrial Western world to redeem past mistakes and make a new start.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance and inspirational nature of non-anthropocentric discourses when it comes to avoiding the treatment of the Anthropocene as 'business as usual'. Such treatment would, without any doubt, play 'directly into the hands of ecomodernist arguments' which suggest that 'we can manage change through [yet] more sophisticated technology or economic growth' (Fagan 2019, 58). However, it should also not pass unnoticed that the primary concern of the hopeful critique within non-anthropocentric discourses is *to save 'humanity'*, whomever that may refer to (see below), and *to save the human planet*, i.e. the planet that is home for humans, that is not indifferent to them and that embodies a sense of meaning for them (Chandler 2019). In other words, this is not a struggle to 'save the planet' of rats, crows and cockroaches who are most likely to survive the sixth mass extinction event anyway (Pievani 2014, 92). At the root of the enthusiasm to reunite humans and nature, to overcome 'modernity's detachment from entangled and affective life' (Chandler 2019, 701) and to acknowledge the unavoidable

intimacy between humans and nature is a very anthropocentric desire: to survive this crisis by learning from mistakes, making vows to 'never again' and to live, sort of, happily ever after (see Chandler 2019; 2020). Paradoxical as it is, while for non-anthropocentricism the most loathed characteristic of modernity is, obviously, anthropocentrism, what we are witnessing here is a cunning return of anthropocentrism in disguise: acknowledging the significance of and befriending non-humans for humans' sake.

Importantly, though, not all non-anthropocentric critique of the Anthropocene debate embodies critical hope; some, in fact, outright rejects the back-to-nature approaches discussed above. The main emphasis in these studies instead is on reunderstanding Earth via new ontologies that involve, among other things, 'dark ecologies' where a humiliated humanity struggles with finding meaning and hope in a world of 'hyperobjects' (Morton 2016; 2013) as well as subtle ways of 'dis-hoping' while engaging with the Anthropocene (Latour 2017, 13). However, even then, serious issues remain with such critique when we simply ask the question, who are the *anthropoi* of non-anthropocentric discourses? Or, put differently, which humans does modernity – deceptively claim to (Latour 2017; 1993) – separate from nature and centralize according to the non-anthropocentric critique (see Mirzoeff 2018, 123)? As has been rightly pointed out on various occasions, answering the question of who bears responsibility for the environmental degradation that marks the Anthropocene requires that the definition of the *anthropos* be narrowed down (e.g. Malm and Hornborg 2014; Witmore 2019). This is to avoid having the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene become a misleadingly universal category: placeless, classless and lacking historical context (Ruddick 2015, 1115; Yusoff 2014, 454; see Yates 2018, 1507–8; Latour 2017, 121–22). Likewise, the *anthropos* in the context of non-anthropocentric discourses must be narrowed down. In this case, however, epistemological and ontological preoccupations arguably hinder appropriate adjustments.

Specifically, the *anthropos* in question here can obviously not be, for example, the black lives enslaved in the course of modernity. Suggesting that would grossly neglect their histories and how they were considered a form of animal life or 'thing' that could be bought, sold and treated accordingly (Mirzoeff 2018, 123). However, even when this history is acknowledged and the definition of the anthropos is narrowed down accordingly, does not the inherent lack of focus on human–human relations within the non-anthropocentric discourses risk neutralizing, decentralizing and depoliticizing that very history (Fagan 2019)? It appears as if the environmental crisis, which is feared to shake the foundations of the modern way of living in comfort and in material abundance (a way of living enjoyed mostly by the upper classes of the West), carries the implicit right to treat the history of human oppression as a nuance. It is as if the situation 'humanity' faces right now is of a much more crucial essence, requiring a hasty response in the form of rethinking 'humans' as inseparable from 'things', 'machines', 'nature' and 'other species'. For earth system sciences studying the Anthropocene, humans are geological agents (and history is geohistory) or nothing at all. Do the non-anthropocentric discourses within the Anthropocene debate enable a tacit way for the humanities and social sciences to agree?

The *anthropos* in the question above cannot be indigenous people either, given the timing and urgency of the non-anthropocentric call. After all, indigenous people have long endured many hardships akin to those in the Anthropocene (such as ecosystemic and economic collapse, biodiversity loss, forced displacement and cultural disintegration) due to colonialist and capitalist exploitation, and their being perceived as part of 'nature' in the process (Whyte 2018, 226). The horror of these hardships has become apparent to a large proportion of non-indigenous people (and, as such, appears to truly matter to the non-anthropocentric discourses of the Anthropocene) only now. Discourses with non-anthropocentric tendencies get energized by indigeneity only when inquiries into resilience in the Anthropocene hope to reunite humans with an increasingly unstable, complex and unsafe nature (Grove and Chandler 2017). The implication is, then, that the rest of humanity can learn survival strategies from indigenous people (e.g. Bardsley and Wiseman 2016; Salick and Ross 2009). In such contexts, where we meet critical hope again, the reference to indigenous intimacy with nature is not only romanticized, but also tainted. The

discourses treat indigenous local knowledge as an untapped resource, *untouched* or at least *unharmed* by modern colonial histories (Whyte 2018, 236), a resource ready to be used for finding solutions to the Anthropocene crisis and for the salvation of 'humanity' (see Chandler and Reid 2019). These perspectives serve as yet another means to centre the *anthropoi* of non-anthropocentric discourses within the Anthropocene debate, this time as those in charge of 'planetary emergency management' (Rothe 2020, 151) with the specific task 'to manage and ultimately master the ecological crisis' (Roelvink and Zolkos 2015, 47).

Non-anthropocentrism in Anthropocene archaeology

In archaeology, non-anthropocentric thinking have formed a relatively small but vigorous strand among other attempts to formulate responses to the dire challenges that characterize the Anthropocene. Such thinking includes efforts to enrich archaeological practice and thinking in the Anthropocene via object-oriented ontologies (Pétursdóttir 2017); to develop strategic theories for heritage (Harrison 2015; Solli *et al.* 2011), to define the totality of archaeological strata at a global-scale as the "archaeosphere" and treat it as a hyperobject (Edgeworth 2018); to rethink existing concepts prominent in the discipline such as 'artefact' (Hudson 2014), 'landscape' (Kelly 2014) and 'past' (Olivier 2020); to set new priorities for environmental ethics (cf. Shaw 2016); and to affirm both the dialectics between human and non-human vectors in the Anthropocene and the overwhelming nature of this tension for humans (Pétursdóttir 2020; Witmore 2019). Critical hope is prominent (or at least apparent) in many of these studies which orient towards a better present and future for humanity and/or better protection or understanding of the human past. There are also obvious affinities between the ethnographic and/or historical attempts to use indigenous knowledge to survive the crisis, as discussed above, and archaeological attempts to valorize the discipline by using archaeological pasts for environmental crisis management (cf. Pétursdóttir 2017, 180–81). The latter is then bound to be overburdened by the ethical failings of the former.

Importantly, Pétursdóttir (2017; 2020) and Witmore's (2019) approaches to the epoch stand out here as they illustrate how non-anthropocentrically oriented Anthropocene critique can effectively exclude critical hope and, as such, self-contradiction. They depict a world in which humans struggle to find meaning, a world deprived of promises for human salvation and survival, and of inspiration for human progress. Given the pervasive ethical and political issues discussed above, however, it still stands that while it is 'a useful theory in some cases, the Anthropocene topic is a great example to illuminate both ... limitations, and important epistemological implications' (Ion 2018, 192) of non-anthropocentric critique.

Acknowledging these limitations and implications makes it vital to start a discussion within archaeology on how to take steps towards an Anthropocene critique that learns from the ethical and political shortcomings of non-anthropocentric discourses (see also González-Ruibal 2018a, 18–19; cf. Bauer & Bahn 2016; 2018 for studies in this direction). The larger aim is, of course, to contribute to the formulation of correct archaeological responses to the challenges of the epoch – a massive historical responsibility. 'Correctness' in this context is neither to be defined in relation to a drive towards human salvation or progress (i.e. critical hope) nor by a stable and reliable referent for truth and a resulting set of moral judgements (i.e. deontological ethics; González-Ruibal 2018b). One quality of such 'correct' archaeological responses to the Anthropocene will have to be attentiveness to new possibilities of 'political ethics' (see Dewsbury 2003; Hamilakis 2007). That is, they will need to be evaluated on the basis of how they might successfully work to turn the Anthropocene, as a concept and empirical reality, into opportunities for new types of, more ubiquitous and more affective ethical and political encounters and considerations (see Popke 2009).

The critical hope incarnated by non-anthropocentric discourses surely energizes a range of historically familiar and comforting imaginaries that soothe Anthropocene anxieties and promise human survival, salvation and, despite all odds, even progress. As such, it is hard to escape its hold. Yet, as Mirzoeff (2018, 124) puts it, 'however the Anthropocene is to be defined . . . interpretations of world history will be bound up with it' – so will understandings of *present* and *future*, *here* and *there*, and the many agents involved in shaping these temporalities and spatialities. This is all the more so given the popular interest in the topic which would amplify the effects of any discursive error made within academia. Importantly, non-anthropocentric discourses appear to percolate into public consciousness with relative ease when the mainstream media reporting on the Anthropocene and related subjects (such as climate change and a sixth mass extinction event) clearly get informed and inspired by them (see, e.g. Gee and Anguiano 2020; Kofman 2018 among many examples). It is for these reasons that as a final point, I would like to advocate taking our time to establish Anthropocene theories in archaeology rather than hastening to incorporate discourses popular or at least influential elsewhere in academia for the stakes are very high (see also Hussain and Riede 2020). If this is another call for slow archaeology, it is surely the most pressing one, given the implications of the epoch for social and environmental justice (see Bauer and Bahn 2018: xiii). No archaeological project (big or small) can possibly avoid being entangled in the biological, physical, social and economic changes the Anthropocene brings about and will keep doing so ever more unpredictably in the future. During this process of building Anthropocene theories, archaeology will most probably have to switch its prime/explicit critical focus from the modern episteme to the destructive forces of capitalism (see Hamilakis and Duke 2007). After all, picking the right fights is absolutely crucial in responding impactfully to the mess and disaster named the Anthropocene today. This is especially true now as it becomes increasingly clear that organising collective political action to face the challenges of the epoch remains a difficult possibility as long as the reckless exploitation of the Earth and its people through capitalist practices prevails.

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