

Ending the Anthropocene

By Claire Sagan

Predictive models in ecology generally assume that capitalism will be maintained. However, as Claire Sagan argues, adapting to the climate crisis requires that we go beyond the capitalist hegemony, and renounce the notion of “Anthropocene”.

As early as the 1970s, the philosopher Hans Jonas argued that so-called technological “progress” required a modification of Kantian ethics.¹ The latter, he noted, relied on a notion of responsibility that presumed a rational subject capable of self-representation. Such ethics were, thus, unable to take into account either future generations, or the non-human, though both of these were under threat. (Jonas had in mind the threat of nuclear destruction and the possible depletion of natural resources—threats that remain as real as ever, even if nowadays they tend to be eclipsed by our exclusive focus on climate change.)

What Jonas proposed, then, was an “ethics for the future” that was based in an affect of fear. Elites, he maintained, should model their behavior on that of a patriarch protecting his wife and his progeny, and their decision-making should be based on a science of the future, yet to be developed. The aim of this new “futurology,” as Jonas imagined it, would be to systematically evaluate and anticipate both the negative and positive consequences of technological progress. Jonas’s ethical model, thus, had a clear patriarchal and technocratic inspiration, but this was at least explicit. One finds a similar inspiration in today’s environmentalist discourse, but it is more insidious. Thus, my aim in this essay is to propose four critical gestures through which to move beyond this inspiration.

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Moving Beyond the Capitalocentrism of Futurology

First, I propose that we abandon our faith in the objectivity and reliability of the IPCC's (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) predictive models, which the philosopher Emilie Hache recently described as a kind of "futurology."² In particular, it is important that we move beyond the *capitalocentrism* of the IPCC's reports, which tend to interpret both past and future only in terms of how they relate to market economies (as if the "development" of capitalism were somehow the inevitable *telos* of all human history, or a final chapter that is to be endlessly repeated in the future).³ Along these lines, we might also note that in describing climate change as *anthropogenic*, the IPCC's reports conceal the fact that it is industrial capitalism, not *Homo Sapiens* in general, that is to blame for climate change.⁴ Lastly, it is also the case that in the various scenarios that depict possible futures, the IPCC's predictive models systematically assume the continued hegemony of capitalism, thereby ruling out the (very tangible) possibility of its displacement, whether by socialism, barbarism, or something else.

Ideally, we might expect that describing climate change as "anthropogenic" could help us realize that the humanism of *Anthropos* is inseparable from the history of capitalism and the figure of *Homo Economicus*, and we would, thus, realize that this humanism is more historically contingent than universal. But as I have proposed elsewhere, it is better to speak of capitalogenic rather than anthropogenic climate change.⁵ This is, in fact, a crucial corrective, for the accuracy or inaccuracy of our diagnoses will determine the viability of our adaptation strategies. Moreover, it is only by abandoning the capitalocentrism of existing narratives that we stand a chance to recognize the necessity for us to move beyond capitalism itself.

² Emilie Hache, *Ce à quoi nous tenons. Propositions pour une écologie pragmatique*, La Découverte, 2011, p. 161. Hache did so without problematizing the technocratic and patriarchal undertones of Jonas's concept.

³ I am borrowing the term capitalocentric from J. K. Gibson-Graham, who based it upon the model of the Irigarayan notion of phallocentrism. See J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006. For further elaboration on the question of capitalocentric temporalities, see also Claire Sagan, *Capitalist Temporality as Uchronia*, Theory and Event (forthcoming, 2019), and for the epitomy of teleological discourse regarding the purported end of history, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Simon and Schuster, 2006.

⁴ I should note that the history of industrial capitalism can be said to include its state monopolistic and dictatorial variants. See, for instance, Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR* (Routledge, 2013), and Mylène Gaulard, *Karl Marx à Pékin: les racines de la crise en Chine capitaliste* (Demopolis, 2014).

⁵ Claire Brault (Sagan), "Feminist Imaginations in a Heated Climate: Parody, Idiocy, and Climatological Possibilities," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017.

Beyond the Reign of Climate Questions Over Ecological Discourses

Secondly, it is both mistaken and dangerous to think of today's environmental catastrophes only in terms of climate: to do so is to underestimate the systemic character of environmental damage. The truth is environmental justice extends well beyond the problem of the climate, and whether one has in mind the threat of nuclear destruction (whether civil or military), the disappearance of pollinators, our overwhelming reliance on intensive monoculture, or the various problems posed by endocrinal disruptors or by nanotechnologies, it is readily apparent that environmental problems do not lend themselves to monocausal explanations any more than they can be solved by simple changes to our industrial economies.⁶

When we reduce today's urgent environmental questions to the sole question of the climate, it is often because we rely on globalized models that erase both the immense inequalities in the world's ecological transformations, and the consequences of this transformation for human and non-human populations. Matters of environmental justice undoubtedly intertwine with problems of socioeconomic inequality, from the gendered repercussions of ecological damage, or from the insufficiencies of democracy at every level.

Hence, the need for an intersectional notion of a “racial capitalocene,” as put forward by Françoise Vergès, which clarifies the links between colonialism, racism, and ecological destruction.⁷ These are problems that must be considered together and in relation with one another, and this is a difficulty we fail to confront when we adopt too narrow a focus on climate change, or think of it monolithically as something that can describe the entirety of the ongoing catastrophe.

To illustrate this reductive tendency, we need only consider some of the phrases by which we commonly describe said climate change. Take, for instance, the often-heard idea—whether in political discourse, in the media, or even in scientific discourse—that anthropogenic climate change is somehow the “cause” behind this or that particular event—say, a flood, a fire, a typhoon, etc. It may be helpful here to recall Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and, in particular, his account of the peculiar doubling that occurs in language and through which our reality is construed as the work of sovereign subjects and their deeds. As Nietzsche points out, German grammar would have us think that lightning “flashes,” as if lightning were somehow the *cause* of its brightness, when that is patently not the case.⁸ Rather, lightning and thunder are but different perceptions of the same phenomenon (one is

⁶ This points to the importance of the distinction between environmentalisme and écologie politique—the latter's approximate translation would be “environmentalism” on the one hand, and “ecologism,” mostly in Great Britain, or “environmental justice,” in the United States and other anglophone countries, on the other.

⁷ F. Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited by Gaye Theresa Johnson and A. Lubin, Verso, 2017.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

visual, the other auditory). Similarly, the flood, the fire, or the typhoon cannot really be said to have been caused by climate change; in truth, they are but manifestations of it. “There is no ‘being’ behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it,” writes Nietzsche.

Likewise, the warming of the Earth should be understood not as one globalized, abstract entity but as an ongoing global phenomenon composed of countless local events. And to the extent that dominant narratives about global climate change tend to erase this complexity, they also leave us ill-equipped to carry out a much-needed radical critique of capitalist political economy. Simply put, the question is not whether Hurricane Irma was or was not “caused” by climate change.⁹ Rather, the question is how we might resist the deafening silence and astonishing inertia of American and French colonial powers in face of a climate event that so devastated both Puerto Rico and Saint Martin—territories which these powers purport to administer.¹⁰

Beyond the Notion of Crisis

Thirdly, we must stop describing the ongoing ecological devastation as a “crisis,” lest we think of it as merely transitory or cyclical. As far as humans are concerned, at least, our so-called “crisis” might instead be described as an irremediable catastrophe, though surely not a universal (let alone egalitarian) one (as the terms *humans*, *humanity*, or *Anthropos* might lead us to believe). To describe this catastrophe as irremediable, incidentally, is not to suggest that it is necessarily insurmountable. After all, while humans will indubitably become extinct eventually, we do not know whether the current changes will be the cause of their extinction. To speak of this catastrophe as irremediable, then, is simply to insist that there will be no going back to a previous situation, as might otherwise be the case, if this were merely a crisis.

Earlier in this essay, I mentioned the need for us to overcome capitalocentrism. Marxist theorists have already pointed out many times (and with good reason) that no economic system lasts forever, and that capitalism will be no exception. But as many people have taken this to mean that capitalism would soon be collapsing, unfortunately, what might have served as a useful reminder about historical contingency has now lost much of its

⁹ It took more than 20 years for the IPCC (created in 1988) to place questions regarding inequalities a bit more in the center of its reflection—relatively to the initial reports it produced. Furthermore, in its last report, published in October 2018 in response to the invitation made at the Paris agreement last year, the IPCC persists to identify climate change as “anthropogenic,” when it actually focuses on the contrast between pre- and post-industrial levels of greenhouse gases. See <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

¹⁰ I use the term colonial rather than neocolonial here, as these examples are not territories suffering the effects of economic dependencies and legacies from a former colonial past, as underdevelopment theorists have described. Rather, Puerto Rico and Saint Martin are instances of territories that remain under direct political and economic control of colonial powers. One may note, however, that many similarities exist between global inequalities, retention of assistance, and neoliberal forms of assistance, in the event of so-called “natural” catastrophes, both in colonial and neocolonial contexts.

credibility, and what it calls to mind instead is the story of the boy who cried wolf (especially in light of all the “end of history” triumphalism that followed the Cold War).

Moreover, now that there is clear evidence of what some Marxists would call a *metabolic rift*—something that is both more profound than any crisis and of a completely different nature—it is also clear that all the crises that capitalism has undergone are partly what made it so resilient.¹¹ In fact, though it was always conceivable that capitalism might succumb to one of its various crises, each of these ultimately provided only further occasions for consolidating power, or reconfiguring the various inequalities foundational to empire.

In light of all this, then, it is important to acknowledge that what we are now dealing with is not a crisis but a limit, a rift, an ecological *catastrophe*. And, here, the philosopher Isabelle Stengers is particularly helpful. As Stengers makes clear, capitalist economies are quite remarkable: they tell their own history by ignoring countless other histories, like the history of the planet. They also assemble under the guise of a form of transcendence, as if beyond the reach of our understanding: everything about them is excessive, and the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.¹² But as Stengers also points out, this excessiveness or transcendence of capitalism is nothing compared to that of Gaia, which could wipe capitalism with a mere swipe, as one might scratch an itch, or squash a parasite.¹³ As far as Earth is concerned, in fact, it is not at all clear that our present situation really amounts to a crisis, and to describe it as such would imply, much like the concept of the Anthropocene, that humans are both referees and players in a game that is sure to last longer than human history itself.

Beyond the Anthropocene

My fourth and final point follows from all that I have just explained but also harkens back the opening gambit of this essay, about the need to move beyond the hubris of technocratic environmentalism. *Anthropocene*, I submit, is a term that functions as an incentive to discourse. As such, it makes it more difficult to grasp the meaning of what is happening to us; by presenting the phenomenon as something homogeneous that could be described under a single, universalizing and globalizing label, the notion of the Anthropocene ultimately paves the way for would-be geoengineers—sorcerer’s apprentices whose normalization does not

¹¹ See for instance, B. Clark and J. B. Foster, “Ecological Imperialism and the Global Metabolic Rift: Unequal Exchange and the Guano/Nitrates Trade,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 3–4, 2009, pp. 311–334.

¹² Isabelle Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, Open Humanities Press, 2016.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

bode well for the prospect of a truly democratic or genuinely ecological approach to environmental justice.¹⁴

In conclusion, let me refer once again to the work of Isabelle Stengers. As Stengers points out in the English-language edition of her book *In Catastrophic Times*, in recent years, a new kind of narrative has developed, and it appears to be taking the place of so-called “climate-skepticism,” according to which climate change is simply not occurring. In this new line of argument, “the only solution [to climate change] is geo-engineering, which will ensure that it is possible to continue to extract and burn, without the temperature rising.” As Stengers explains further,

One need not be paranoid in order to ask oneself if the success [of the word Anthropocene] ... doesn't signal a transition from the first phase—of denial—to the second phase—that of the new grand narrative in which Man becomes conscious of the fact that his activities transform the earth ... and that he must therefore take responsibility for the future of the planet.¹⁵

Along these lines, I would note that, while many critics of the term readily cite the chemist Paul Crutzen's 2002 article in *Nature* and its early mention of the “Anthropocene,” very few ever point out that Crutzen was also the first to evoke in a scientific journal the possibility of geoengineering research.¹⁶ And more generally speaking, it would seem that critics of the term are often content simply to decry the notion as imperfect, as universalistic, or as erasing socioeconomic equalities (which it does), but, in the end, they redeploy the term, placing Man once again at the center of everything (albeit, this time, as a destructive force).

One might think that the patent anthropocentrism of the concept of Anthropocene would suffice to invite a clear opposition, and, yet, even as we critique the concept, it seems we are only able to feed into it.¹⁷

¹⁴ For more detail on the mainstreaming of geoengineering, see, for instance, Clive Hamilton, *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering*, Yale University Press, 2013. For my own feminist critique regarding the recent integration of certain geoengineering technologies within “overshoot” IPCC scenarios and their ethico-political implications, see my cited 2017 essay.

¹⁵ Isabelle Stengers, p. 8.

¹⁶ See P. J. Crutzen, “Geology of mankind: The Anthropocene,” *Nature*, vol. 415, no. 23, 2002; and P. J. Crutzen, “Albedo Enhancement by Stratospheric Sulfur Injections: A Contribution to Resolve a Policy Dilemma?”, *Climatic Change*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2006, pp. 211–220.

¹⁷ Many critics have contested the notion qua various alternative proposals, from the term “capitalocene” (see, for instance, Elmar Altvater, Eileen Crist, Donna Haraway, Daniel Hartley, Christian Parenti, and Justin McBrien, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Pm Press, 2016), to the phrase “racial capitalocene,” mentioned above. These interventions mostly denounce the universalist homogenization performed by the concept of Anthropocene, which flattens and violently negates deep inequalities among humans, both in terms of responsibilities and of effects. Donna Haraway and Dorion Sagan's contributions, which respectively offer the terms Cthulhucene and Cyanocene, add a more-than-human, anti-anthropocentric element to this contestation. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulhucene*, Duke University Press, 2016, and D. Sagan, “Coda. Beautiful Monsters: Terra in the Cyanocene,” *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, edited by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al., University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

As Foucault might point out, “We, Victorians,” whose discourse on sex is oh-so-repressed, nonetheless repeat over and over how we cannot speak of sex.¹⁸ Likewise, “we, critics of the contemporary environmental condition” may well think of ourselves as denouncing *Anthropos* (this aging and decrepit figure of man in a globalized and capitalist world on the verge of collapse). But in so doing, are we not insisting that scientists have somehow invented a concept—the Anthropocene—capable of describing the misdeeds and the responsibilities of *Anthropos* himself? And with this concept, do we not reiterate and reproduce the problem at least as much we denounce it? If environmental justice is to move beyond the futurological temptation, it will also have to move beyond Anthro-scenic discourse, itself a cornerstone of technocratic environmentalism.

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¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, translated by R. Hurley, Vintage, 1990.