

Anthropocene?

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What has so far been the blue planet might soon become the “green slime” planet. Already many areas within the waters that cover the 71% of its surface have the muddy appearance of a marsh, and the number of such “dead zones” deoxygenated by an excessive agricultural runoff keeps growing. The warming of the atmosphere, which is also one of the causes of such a phenomenon, might lead to an intensification of the desertification process and to the submersion of vulnerable, poor and overpopulated coastal zones. Great natural lakes whose waters are drained for agricultural purposes are shrinking – lake Chad has been reduced to 5% of its former girth, the Aral sea to 10% of its original area; great artificial lakes are created through the construction of immense dams for electricity generation – in China, the Three Gorges Dam alone has submerged more than one hundred towns and more than a thousand villages, causing the displacement of 1.200.000 people. In the Pacific Ocean in particular, but more and more often also in the other oceans, massive junk and plastic soup gyres that circulate without decaying – at most, breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces - move towards huge garbage patches which make the water look like a cloudy soup. Just as with the ocean floors, so the earth’s surface is disrupted by nuclear tests and by deep drilling for petroleum, to which one should add the effects of huge open-cast quarries, and, more recently, of the ruinous practice of fracking to extract shale gas. Meanwhile, inflated by a disorderly growth driven by brutal socio-economic cycles, megacities keep mushrooming, ready to absorb tens of millions of people, and bound to swallow atmosphere at their core and territory in their huge outskirts and favelas.

If up to now there have been at least five mass extinctions in planetary history – the “big five”, which have seen the disappearance of three quarters of the known species – many signs indicate that we might be in the early stages of a sixth mass extinction. But the very fate of the endangered species, and indeed the whole manipulatory wave that is beating on the planet, pale in comparison of the way in which, in the recent practice of factory farming, reification is taken to the extreme limit of turning billions of subjects, deprived of their natural conditions of life, into segregated and techno-scientifically administered objects.

What is happening? It is well known that, since it first appeared, the species *Homo sapiens* has proved to be particularly aggressive and invasive. But never was its impact – or, better, the impact of its

dominant fraction – as great as it is now. Great to the point of leading a group of experts assembled at the latest International Geological Congress to claim that the planet has entered a new geological epoch, functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene - that “most recent epoch” in which we were supposed to live: the Anthropocene, or the new age dominated by *anthropos*, humankind. The determination of geological epochs is a matter of scientific classification, and, as such, is naturally subject to debate. The so-called Anthropocene hypothesis is therefore at the center of heated controversies ever since Nobel Prize chemist Paul Crutzen popularized it in 2000. Should we, or not, inaugurate the installation of a new “golden spike” – of that small object, that is, which, in the wake of the ceremonial golden spike used in the United States at the juncture of the Atlantic and Pacific railroads, conventionally marks the transition from an epoch to another?

No matter how interesting the scientific controversy might be in itself, however, it seems clear that, in the face of such a bewildering and indisputable host of negative data, the true relevance of the Anthropocene hypothesis lies in its potential to become a catalyst for praxis – in its capacity, that is, to induce society’s critical minority to challenge the trajectory of the historic phase we are presently living in. In other words, as political philosopher Wayne Gabardi has stressed, whether or not it is indeed possible to outrightly speak of Anthropocene, what really matters is to act *anyhow* as if we were moving beyond the tipping point.

Is there a way out – or, as Walter Benjamin would say, a possibility to activate a historical emergency brake? Vis-a-vis the expansive and cannibalistic logic of a late-capitalist mode of production that apprehends everything in terms of manipulation and administration, and that has fully subdued to its purposes an exponentially growing technology, is there a conceivable response which does not simply rely on voluntaristic appeals to individual lifestyle changes based on ethical considerations or even forms of enlightened self-interest, but aims instead at eliciting collective social reactions? For their part, the intellectuals organically linked to the power elites that take profit of the devastating ongoing process, if unable to deny its effects or to allege that they can easily be corrected, have already devised a response: what is needed is more technology, not less technology. Thus, they advocate mega-engineering interventions such as cooling the atmosphere by injecting million tons of sulfur dioxide into its upper strata, or bio-engineering solutions such as mass producing genetically engineered carbon-eating trees, prefiguring a future in which the physical world and living organisms will be reshaped according to a biology and a technology almost coming to merge.

What can instead be the response of that albeit minoritarian area of intellectual opposition able to perceive the moral – and indeed also aesthetical – pathologies that the majority of society still has difficulties in seeing? Aware of the difficulty of directly attacking the heart of the destructive process, some authors have recently formulated the idea of eroding the core moving from the periphery – of building, that is, far from the cities and in not yet disfigured zones, an archipelago of countercultural, interconnected communities. These “oases” or “islands”, based on respect for animals, techno-scientific deceleration, and a deliberate coevolution with the natural environment, would pursue the objective of starting a new model of development by gradually permeating the urban-industrial nucleus of the anthropogenic change.

There exists, however, an alternative which allows to more straightforwardly confront such a nucleus – an alternative which, though obviously affected by the huge asymmetry in power relations, can somehow affect the existing order. It is a matter of articulating and developing, at all levels, what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “heretical discourse” – the discourse, that is, which exploits the possibility of changing the social world by changing its representation. For the power imbalance in favour of the dominant elites, while being extremely significant at the structural level, is much less so at the level of the superstructure. Culture, which imposes the visions and classifications that institute the status quo, can become the site of struggles in which the critical front of society has the opportunity to intervene, contributing not only to disrupting the adherence to existing common sense, but also to constructing a new common sense which might include, by virtue of the legitimation conferred by public manifestation, previously quiescent or repressed perspectives and practices. Though this is undoubtedly an arduous and long-term path, it has nonetheless already produced results in some historical moments and in some social realms, and is thus worth undertaking also in the case of the challenge to the instrumental rationality which governs the commodification and the destruction of the planet and its inhabitants. And, as this exhibition shows, alongside the intellectual realm of a distinctively discursive-philosophical nature, a leading role may be played in such a critical enterprise by that artistic field that, in the face of the outbreaks of latent crises, can often reveal the capacity to anticipate and foster radical transformations.

