

ARE INADEQUATE ACCOUNTS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE PARALYZING US?

Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism

Jason W. Moore, ed. (PM Press, 2016)

What is the historical origin of humanity's current moment of ecological crisis? A standard response might cite the invention of the steam engine, the Industrial Revolution, and the rapid and momentous transition from production powered by biomass to a new era of productive capacity unleashed by the concentrated energy of fossil fuels. While this answer certainly acknowledges one of the catalysts for the severity of crises we face, the scholars featured in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* argue this narrative fails to grasp either the ontological roots of civilization's greatest challenge or its historical development. Moreover, they contend, to appreciate the essential elements of our predicament is to sense the possibility of movement toward appropriate responses, just as to be captive to inadequate accounts of the Anthropocene is to be paralyzed by them.

This collection of seven scholarly essays is not an easy read, but it's certainly a worthwhile read. Each of the scholars is contributing something novel and challenging to current debates around the big questions facing humanity. The Anthropocene is the starting point for the book's central inquiry into humanity's place within the web of life. The value of the conceptual shorthand of the Anthropocene is readily acknowledged: Not only has it crystallized in the mainstream an awareness that geological time on Earth has been fundamentally transformed by humankind, it has also begun to challenge one of modernity's implicit boundaries—the distinction between humanity and nature. Nonetheless, the concept of the Anthropocene as commonly understood hobbles attempts to respond to the very phenomenon it represents by assigning blame for ecological and civilizational crisis to “humanity”: humanity in its totality, or in its essence, or in its generality. By invoking the *Anthropos*—humanity as an undifferentiated whole—the term encodes culpability for all of humanity, as if to say, “Well, there you have it: add humanity to nature, and sooner or later what you end up with is a new geological epoch of severe disruption.” The implication is that the only path available is one of negotiation between humanity and nature—humanity being the force wreaking havoc upon nature, nature being the constraint placed upon our expansion. From the outset, the tendency is to become locked into a mindset of compromise between two opposing forces.

This is where *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* departs from standard environmental narratives and energetically advocates deeper consideration of the ontological roots and the relations between capital, power, and nature that are at play in the emergence of this new geological epoch. Jason W. Moore, professor of sociology at Binghamton University and the editor of this volume, provides a central orienting argument. Moore, an historical geographer, world historian, and foremost proponent of an orientation known as *world-ecology*, frames the development of the Anthropocene in terms of world-historical processes that recognize the “*double internality* of historical change—humanity inside nature, nature inside humanity” (p. 79). World-ecology's methodologies and theoretical premises thus reveal “specific human organizations—such as capitalism” to be both “producers and products of the web of life” (p. 79).

Moore's focus on the causes and conditions of human-initiated environment-making animates his post-capitalist investigation into the origins of the Anthropocene. By tracing the development of early modern capitalism from 1450 to 1750 and its profound re-shaping of environments, he describes the monumental shifts in conceptions of value, social relations, and human-nature relations that occurred as part of this transformation of world-ecology. Stating that capitalism was the first system to organize itself on the basis of Cartesian dualism and the imperative to control the world, Moore primarily sees capitalism as "a new way of organizing nature, and therefore a new way of organizing the relations between work, reproduction, and the conditions of life" (p. 85) that involved "a symbolic-knowledge regime premised on separation—on *alienation*" (p. 86). Central to this account is the importance of *Cheap Nature*, the process by which nature is rendered cheap and available for appropriation by deploying "the capacities of capital, empire, and science to appropriate the unpaid work/energy of global natures" (p. 89). Moore offers insights into the establishment of this regime during the long sixteenth century (roughly 1450-1640), from the essential shifts in mentality that allowed a new system to be born to the English and Dutch agricultural revolutions, the booming sugar market and the accompanying devastation of land and—in the slave trade—of human natures, metallurgy, mining, and the clearance of vast forests in Europe. Long before the arrival of the steam engine, the law of Cheap Nature—which potentially includes all natures, human (outside of the controlling demographics and populations), ecological, or otherwise—had come to dominate production and re-shape global natures. Ultimately, this world-ecology transformation represented a crucial shift in what was valued, from "land productivity under conditions of seigneurial power to labor productivity under the hegemony of the modern world market" (p. 98).

The driving force of Moore's argument is that standard narratives focusing on industrial change miss the critical point of capitalism's historical specificity, either reinforcing modern biases toward technological- and resource-determinism or laying blame on all of humanity for what is more accurately the result of an "historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital" (p. 94). The sharp focus on social relations and the elucidation of some of the core underlying mechanisms and ontological positions that have fueled our current world-ecology and world-economy are valuable contributions to post-capitalist discourse. Adherents of ecological economics, deep ecology, and related fields will find much to resonate with and may well be enriched by Moore's ability to ground abstract framings within historical analysis. At times I found myself wanting a more complete exploration of the nature of *capital accumulation* within this particular world-ecology account, a concept that is invoked often but that I felt could have benefited from clearer definitions and counterarguments. Ultimately, the analysis gives rise to insights into the current state of the program of Cheap Nature and cost externalization. Moore concludes that capitalism has always relied on new frontiers of unpaid resources. As the sources of these free gifts of nature are exhausted and it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the consequences of their depletion, what we are witnessing is the end of Cheap Nature possibilities and, thus, a shift toward a strategy of shifting costs either to the future or merely to different actors already in the system through further financialization and wealth polarization, neither of which are capable of sustaining the modern economy as we

know it for long. “Capitalism has been able to outrun the rising costs of production by co-producing manifold Cheap Nature strategies” (p. 114), Moore writes. With nowhere left to run, we are now enduring “not the march of the Anthropocene,” but “the end of the Capitalocene” (p. 113).

Moore’s trenchant essay is one of seven in the volume, each with distinct subject matter though all ambitious in their challenges to dominant narratives. Donna Haraway posits a further intriguing alternative to the Anthropocene: the *Chthulucene*, in which the sympoietic—rather than autopoietic—nature of life is duly recognized. Haraway articulates a process-oriented, partnered perspective of life that invites deep reflection. Eileen Crist’s framing of an ecozoic vision, drawing on the work of Thomas Berry, pairs well with aspects of Haraway’s *Chthulucene*. Justin McBrien builds on Moore’s *Capitalocene* to offer one of the starker takes on our new geological reality, suggesting—with strong supporting arguments—that the Anthropocene, which is more accurately the *Capitalocene*, is also, in fact, the *Necrocene*—“the accumulation of potential extinction.” Among other things, Elmer Altvater illuminates a paradoxical dynamic in our current economic framework as he contrasts the need to externalize costs with capitalism’s natural path forward—geo-engineering—which is, in some ways, an attempt at a mass internalization of accumulated costs to the biosphere, the likely failure of which illustrates the magnitude of these accumulated externalizations and the current system’s inability to respond to the “many interdependencies in society and nature” that “cannot be expressed in terms of prices” (p. 151). Daniel Hartley offers novel cultural insights into the development of humanity’s place in the web of life in the modern era. Christian Parenti closes by arguing that the state is in fact the central actor in capitalism and the agent that, in its alignment with capital, makes accumulation possible.

“Crises are not easily understood by those who live through them,” Moore notes in the introduction and he goes on to say: “Modes of thought are tenacious. They are no easier to transcend than the ‘modes of production’ they reflect and help to shape. This collection of essays is one effort to extend and nurture a global conversation over such a new mode of thought” (pp. 1-2). The authors do, indeed, attempt to push the frontiers of understanding and of ontological analysis, and as can be expected, the parameters of these new territories—these new modes of thought—are in their formative stages. As someone who is drawn to the synthesis of historical context and emergent understandings, I was immediately engaged by this work, and I highly recommend it to anyone with similar leanings.

Perhaps most encouraging are the possibilities for responding to the Anthropocene that this reformulation—as *Capitalocene*, *Chthulucene*, *Necrocene*, or otherwise—yields. Ultimately, the reframing of our geological epoch gives rise to newly conceived responses. Here, the authors offer potent insights into our current economic and political realities and our potential futures. As we read in Moore: “Popular strategies for liberation will succeed or fail on our capacity to forge a different ontology of nature, humanity, and justice—one that asks not merely how to redistribute wealth, but how to remake our place in nature in a way that promises emancipation for all life” (p. 114).