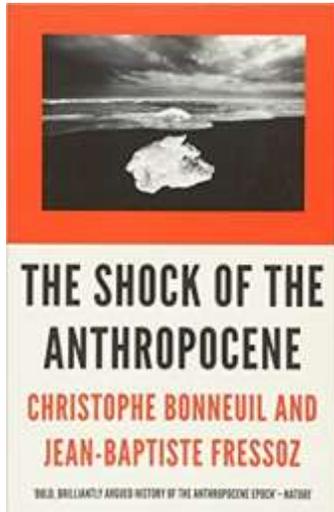


THINKING THE ANTHROPOCENE AND ITS MULTIPLE HISTORIES

The Shock of the Anthropocene

By Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz (Verso, 2017)

Reviewed by Herman Greene



Christophe Bonneuil and Jean Baptiste are historians who work at the French National Center for Scientific Research, the largest fundamental research agency in Europe. *The Shock of the Anthropocene* is based on a history of the Anthropocene course they taught for four years at École des hautes études en sciences sociales. This is one of the most insightful books on the Anthropocene. It describes the Anthropocene, calls for a new environmental humanities, deconstructs the “grand narrative of the Anthropocene,” and offers multiple histories that provide entry points in responding to the Anthropocene.

After a chapter on the physical aspects of the Anthropocene, the authors turn to “Thinking with Gaia: Towards Environmental Humanities” where they state that the Anthropocene is the most decisive philosophical, religious, anthropological, and political concept yet produced as an alternative to modernity. It abolishes the break between nature/culture and human history/Earth history. It destroys the ideas of linear and inexorable progress and endless growth. They say we can no longer think of an external environment, or sustainable development (an oxymoron), or a period of environmental crisis that will pass. We now live in a new condition of uncertainty becoming strewn with tipping points.

They then turn to criticizing or, as they put it, “Deconstructing the Geocratic Grand Narrative of the Anthropocene.” This criticism strikes close to home. I have been one who has studied and in some ways given to others this grand narrative.

Here is the grand narrative:

- Students of the Anthropocene (Anthropocenologists) see three stages
 - Industrial revolution (1760) to World War II
 - Great Acceleration beginning in 1945, a time of growing awareness
 - Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (following on 1992 Rio Earth Summit and Agenda 21)
 - Environmental Accounting
 - Change in distribution of fault – China and other developing countries grow in impact
 - Co-evolution of human species and Earth System
 - History becomes a “science,”
 - Governed by quantities (quantifying nature)
 - Earth organized into compartments (lithosphere, biosphere, etc.)

- Undifferentiated global demographic, economic, and technological growth, which gives a view from nowhere
 - Earth is understood as cybernetic machine – non-linear systems, multi-agent models, adaptive capacity, resilience, and socioecological systems.
- The Grand narrative also concerns a story about “humanity”
 - Humans advance from hunter-gatherers to a global geophysical force
 - Role of Anthropocenologists is to present themselves as guides for a humanity deficient in knowledge recommending it to re-connect with the ‘biosphere’
 - Totalization of all human activities into a single ‘human activity’ generating a single ‘ecological footprint’ on Earth
 - Undifferentiated humanity is to blame – “human” and “humanity” used—though in actuality different humans have very different impacts
 - Humans didn’t know what they were doing until now – when in actuality throughout the industrial period, and even before, there have been many reports on human impact
 - Scientists are the heroes– they are the prophets, the ecological vanguard
 - People still don’t know what to do and need to be enlightened
 - Earth is a global systems subject to control and management by humans
 - As a finale, an undifferentiated human community is give a heroic new geodestiny

Bonneuil and Fressoz criticizes the grand narrative on the basis that it “naturalizes and depoliticizes our geohistory more than it enables us to understand it.” They say things have not turned out as they have as a result of blind, well-intentioned decisions by an undifferentiated humanity. Rather it has been the result of specific political and institutional choices.

Their further criticism is that the narrative’s message is that we should heed the warnings of scientists who have ‘recently discovered’ the truth about what is happening and then yield to the rule of an eco-technocratic government to solve the problems through general engineering of ecosystems and climate. They ask, “Are the [scientists of the Earth system] not bearers of a relation to the world that has precisely produced the danger that they warn us of and offer to save us from?”

The authors believe multiple histories are needed to understand the onset of the Anthropocene, histories that account for why it has occurred and provide entry points in addressing it. Thus they give these histories of the

- *Thermocene: A Political History of Energy and CO2* – there has been increasingly intense use of energy; we have not had an energy transitions, rather we use more of every source of energy and search for still more sources;
- *Thanatocene: Power and Ecocide* – “a history of the determining role of the military in the Anthropocene”;
- *Phagocene: Consuming the Planet* – building the consumerist infrastructure;

- *Pronocene: Grammars of Environmental Reflexivity* – the myth of recent awakening depoliticizes environmental history;
- *Agnotocene: Externalizing Nature, Economizing the World* – building zones of ignorance and disinhibition;
- *Capitalocene: A Combined History of Earth System and World Systems* – capitalism has given rise to “historical systems of domination that each organize in a distinct fashion flows of matter, energy, commodities and capitals on a global scale”; and
- *Polemocene: Resisting the Deterioration of Earth since 1750* – a history of environmentalism of the poor and their resistance to industrialism.

The concluding chapter is titled “Surviving and Living in the Anthropocene.” The authors advise that ‘thinking the Anthropocene’ means

- Taking on board data models of Earth system sciences that say disturbance on geological timescale will radically overturn conditions of human existence;
- Taking the measure of the telluric forces (future possibilities) of industrialization and commodification and of the need for different material foundations;
- Mobilizing new environmental humanities and new political radicalisms – such as, buen vivir, common goods, transition, de-growth, and eco-socialism;
- Challenging the grand narrative of the Anthropocene of the errant human species and its redemption by science alone;
- Bringing scientists’ conclusions into public and democratic discussions, and avoiding a geocracy of technological and market-based solutions to manage Earth (don’t allow the Anthropocene to become a legitimizing philosophy for an oligarchic geopower); and
- Abandoning hope of emerging from a temporary ‘environmental crisis.’

They ask us to consider what histories we must write in order to learn to inhabit the Anthropocene.

- We need to make sense of what has happened. We must produce multiple, debatable narratives rather than a single hegemonic narrative that is supposedly apolitical.
- We need to become aware of the history of disinhibitions that have normalized the intolerable – the norm that technology is always beneficial, the shift in understanding the nature of objects, inappropriate application of GDP, economy, belief in limitless growth, and technoscientific solutions for maximum sustainable yield.

They acknowledge that the account given in the book may seem depressing – that our ancestors destabilized Earth and its ecosystems despite knowing what they were doing. With our present financialized capitalism and ideas of modernity, even more than our ancestors we have our disinhibitions from destroying Earth’s life systems.

We, therefore, need to:

- Abandon the official narrative of Anthropocene to more fruitfully dialogue with the warnings of Earth systems scientists, and
- Free ourselves from repressive institutions and alienating dominations and imaginaries.

Their final declaration is: “This can be an extraordinarily emancipating experience.”

May it be so.