

The Politics of the Anthropocene

By John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering

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John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering's book, *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, takes upon itself the challenge of exposing and disrupting the politics and governance that brought humanity into the age of the Anthropocene. It combines Dryzek's expertise in environmental politics and deliberative democracy with Pickering's work in international negotiating regimes and governance of climate change and biodiversity. It also provides a strong narrative of the authors' concerns not only of Holocene institutions and their associated path dependencies, but also of the discourses and dominant concepts that are used to guide action in a time of change, despite having been created under the exceptionally stable (ecological) conditions of the Holocene.

The Anthropocene is the unofficial term for a new geological epoch of human activities becoming the main driving force behind the changes in the Earth system. While natural scientists debate over when the current official age of the Holocene ends, social scientists have engaged with the political and social implications of the Anthropocene. Others find scientific value in the Anthropocene concept for rethinking and reimagining our political and social orders (e.g., Burke et al., 2016), while some believe that it has become an ideology justifying human exceptionalism and more intervention into nature (e.g., Baskin, 2015). Critical scholars blame the anthropocentric and modernist worldviews for the dawn of the Anthropocene. Eco-modernists, on the other hand, profess faith in the power of human knowledge and technology to save the planet. *The Politics of the Anthropocene* straddles these two viewpoints by moving beyond critique and by recognizing the active, unstable character of the Earth system while encouraging human agency and responsibility. In addition to identifying the flaws of Holocene institutions, practices, and ideas, the authors propose several practical recommendations on how societies should deal with the Anthropocene. In doing so, they further the concept of *ecological reflexivity*, which they define by combining a more generic understanding of reflexivity (i.e., "the capacity of structures, systems, and sets of ideas to question their own core commitments, and if necessary, change themselves") with a specifically ecological

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form of reflexivity (i.e., “one that listens and responds to signals from the Earth system, and has the foresight to anticipate potentially catastrophic changes in the system”) (p. 18).

Chapter 1, “Anthropocene: The good, the bad, and the inescapable,” lays out the various discourses contemporary scholars use to conceptualize the depth of the challenges the Anthropocene poses to humanity and the solutions that these discourses—the good, the bad, and the inescapable—propose. It presents the limitations of all three (though gives greater validity to the inescapable) and thus encourages us to start considering the alternatives the authors are offering: ecological reflexivity and deliberative democracy. Chapter 2 takes a step back and describes “Governance in the Holocene.” Here, the authors highlight how many of our current institutions follow a “pathological path dependency.” Path-dependent institutions are problematic in the Anthropocene because they embody “feedback mechanisms that systematically repress information about the condition of the Earth system” (p. 23). This leads to institutions producing and accepting more of the same ineffective ideas, processes, and rules. Even the popular concepts of sustainability, resilience, and adaptation all fall short of facilitating the innovation and transformation needed in the Anthropocene because their promoters often take institutional structures and goals as given, and thus help secure a type of pathological path dependency in concepts created to respond to change.

In Chapter 3, titled “Governance in the Anthropocene,” the authors describe what “ecological reflexivity” entails—processes over models, and continuous foresight and anticipation instead of a mere reaction to ecological crises—and how it could assist in breaking away from this dependency through an iterative process of recognition, reflection, and response to ecological conditions. In contrast to the preservation goal of resilience, ecological reflexivity embraces dynamism even if it necessitates changing, or even transforming, the system and the values preserving such a system. Ecological reflexivity does not rest on traditions and assumptions; it listens to all voices and reflects on them before pursuing an action. Having established the foundations of ecological reflexivity the authors then invite us to exercise the concept in rethinking and reimagining the established values of justice and sustainability.

Chapter 4 takes on the concept of justice and introduces the idea of “Planetary Justice.” Like other environmental governance scholars, the authors consider the concept of justice as fundamental to the way one should conceive of problems and solutions. Indeed, they interpret any response to environmental challenges ignorant of justice as likely to generate greater vulnerability to risk and perpetuate further inequalities and, thus, promote maladaptive responses at best. However, the authors also argue that existing conceptualizations of justice, having been formed by Holocene experiences and ideas, can no longer provide adequate guidance. Not only might Holocene ideas of justice be incapable of fully comprehending future Anthropocene conditions, but such ideas may also be “complicit in accelerating

the ecological risks” humans may face in the Anthropocene (p. 65). For example, and as the authors point out, while the second half of the twentieth century has seen significant progress in attempts to address numerous social injustices, such as those associated with gender, race, and sexuality, such movements have taken place alongside the Great Acceleration³ in material consumption and production. A reflexive justice apt for the Anthropocene must, therefore, be able to represent not only multiple social groupings and generations, but also the perspectives and needs of nonhumans. More than this, a reflexive justice is dynamic, in that its core elements are amendable, open to continual rethinking—rethinking through deliberation—and capable of absorbing non-Western notions of morality.

Chapter 5 focuses on the concept, or even discourse, of “sustainability” and, to a lesser extent, its close ally, sustainable development. While the two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, the authors differentiate how the former is far broader than the latter and has the conceptual capacity to consider long-time horizons by emphasizing the relationship between the present and the future. However, despite sustainability “being a hugely popular way of thinking about environmental governance,” the authors are quick to remind us that “the popularity of the idea has been matched by persistent shortfall in practice” (p. 82). This shortfall is discussed in terms of the various critiques of sustainability in the literature, that it is too static, too co-opted, and perhaps impossible. Like justice, the idea of sustainability also needs to be rethought for the Anthropocene. Ideally, sustainability would reconfigure to become reflexive and, in doing so, portray five core characteristics: open (e.g., open to public debate), ecologically grounded, dynamic, far-sighted, and integrated with other values such as justice. In this way, a reflexive conception of sustainability would be able to develop the capacities to rethink the idea of sustainability in the light of Earth system shifts as well as changes in new technologies and societal values.

The authors then make a case in Chapters 6 and 7 for advancing the effectiveness of democratic sensibilities and principles in scrutinizing pathological path dependency and invoking and exercising reflexive governance in the Anthropocene. Chapter 6 poses an important question: “Who will form the Anthropocene?” Working with the idea of “formative agency,” Dryzek and Pickering suggest that formative agents will be the discourse and norm entrepreneurs—scientists and other experts; the most vulnerable; city and subnational governments; as well as nonhumans—as “they give form to what justice, sustainability, and related concepts should mean in practice” (p. 105). Warning their readers about the harmful kinds of agency, the authors also highlight who *should not* form the Anthropocene, namely, states,

3 The term “Great Acceleration” (Hibbard et al., 2006; Steffen et al., 2015), although linked with proposals of the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2002), refers to a much more contained and distinct period of time, from the 1950s onwards; a period of time that has seen the most dramatic change in the magnitude and rate of human imprint in the earth system.

international organizations, and corporations—that is, those who have contributed most to pathological path dependency in Holocene institutions. There are several ways to exercise formative agency, but the authors focus on how formative agents can mobilize using language (reason, rhetoric, and deliberation) and act as the engines of reflexivity.

Building on the notion of formative agency, Chapter 7, “Democratic Anthropocene,” expounds the concept of a formative sphere, described as “the sum of activity encompassing the creation, questioning, and development of principles for collective action” (p. 128). On top of this, the formative sphere is also (or ought to be) democratic, but democratic in a particular way—a deliberative way. It is at this point that the authors are able to demonstrate their scholarly strengths in deliberative democracy. It is only through deliberation, they contend, that (1) experts and scientists will be able to interact beneficially, (2) experts and citizens will be able to engage, and (3) the most vulnerable will be able to keep their advocates accountable such that the discourses emphasized by their entrepreneurs and advocates can be made legitimate and kept in check. By advocating a more deliberative democracy—and deliberative democracy within a formative sphere as opposed to more democracy as traditionally conceived (e.g., aggregative and vote-centric)—calls for more democracy become valid and capable of attending to skeptics.

The book concludes with a practical framing of politics in the Anthropocene. First, the notion of living frameworks for the Anthropocene is introduced, described by the authors as frameworks “flexible enough to respond to feedback from public deliberation and changing environmental conditions, while stable enough to provide a framework for collective, large-scale responses to risks to the Earth system” (p. 152). Unlike a fixed and institutionalized target, such as a rigidly interpreted view of planetary boundaries, a living framework evolves alongside changes in values, risks, and technologies. For instance, although the Paris Agreement has a more flexible approach than the Kyoto Protocol by conducting a periodic review of national targets, the global target to reduce emissions still competes with national priorities of economic growth, priorities that are encouraged and supported by other international institutions. International organizations and domestic political institutions need to abandon their unsustainable practices in order to allow existing sustainability efforts and mechanisms to internalize reflexivity and transform into living frameworks.

What sets the book apart from hubristic or apocalyptic framing of the Anthropocene is its humble take on the political landscape of human civilization. It celebrates the independent agency of nature and decenters human exceptionalism by encouraging ecologically aligned values, practices, and structures. *The Politics of the Anthropocene* unpacks the reasons why, despite the plethora of frameworks and institutions advanced to mitigate the symptoms of the Anthropocene, human societies remain at the brink of ecological destruction. It offers a theoretically grounded diagnosis of the Holocene

as well as a realistically informed antidote for the Anthropocene. This antidote is not another checklist of static and perfunctory action items embedded within the existing technocratic and state-centric approaches to the causes and consequences of the Anthropocene. In fact, Dryzek and Pickering shy away from proposing a new model of governance as *the* solution. They believe that our society's obsession with fixed models, and their preservation despite being ecologically destructive, is what brought about the Anthropocene. Instead, the authors propose a way of responding to the Anthropocene by challenging us to identify our pathological path dependencies and overcome the institutions and practices that feed them through ecologically reflexive thinking and action. Fulfilling this challenge, however, does not guarantee an ecologically just and sustainable future, rather, it promotes diligent reflection and transformation. As the authors state in the final paragraph of the book, "we may not escape the Anthropocene, but we can escape the path dependencies that threaten the pursuit of reflexive sustainability, planetary justice, and ecological democracy" (p. 161).

The book is a refreshing perspective, distancing itself from the tendency to preach critical postmodern and posthumanist perspectives, which advance human–nature entanglement but are failing to navigate the political contours of the challenges of the Anthropocene. The authors interrogate the dominance of Holocene institutions, but they also outline specific and practical suggestions for developing the capacities for ecological reflexivity: "It has to start from where we are now" (p. 155). However, "where we are now"—the starting line for deliberation and transformation—varies greatly. Although the authors acknowledge the differentiated vulnerability and diverse agency of human societies, there is an implicit assumption in the book of a significant level of uniformity across institutions of different societies, and that these institutions are already equipped with the capacity to listen, reflect, and respond to ecological shifts. This assumption is understandable since the book deals mainly with political and economic institutions at the international setting. However, at national and subnational levels, armed conflict, political violence, and economic downturns could disrupt or diminish the capacity for deliberation and transformation of these institutions. So, the question remains: How can the formative agents of unstable institutions, such as in politically unstable societies where short-term self-preservation is prioritized, start the path of transformation, especially when they do not have the capacity or willingness for self-scrutiny?

The global character of the Anthropocene ultimately requires a totalizing response, which is advantageous for inspiring a unified global action. On the other hand, a universalizing logic also tends to sideline the diversity of experiences in the Anthropocene, especially of those who will be hit the earliest and the hardest. This universal narrative is echoed, for example, in the dominance of Western paradigms and marginalization of the Global South in the Anthropocene scholarship (Marquardt, 2018). A universalist approach could reinforce historical injustice and existing socioeconomic inequalities by silencing the differentiated agencies

and vulnerabilities within human societies. It could also jeopardize the provision of context-specific requirements of vulnerable populations, considering that some of the implications of the Anthropocene are invisible from international and state levels, as demonstrated in the community-level analyses that regularly appear in this journal. This necessitates a critical inquiry into contemporary systems of governance since, according to Dryzek and Pickering, the development of capacities for ecological reflexivity starts with the examination of the current state of governance institutions, and such examination reveals that these institutions are not monoliths. The authors' consideration of indigenous knowledge and of the formative agency of the most vulnerable in their discussion contributes to this inquiry. However, it could have been furthered by articulating how diverse narratives, including those of postcolonial, indigenous, and marginalized societies, could inform global action and how multi-level perspectives could bridge the implementation gap between global agreements and regional, national, or local contexts.

The book is a timely and important contribution to academic and policy research on socioecological issues and responses to planetary changes. Readers will find themselves immersed in the clear and engaging prose of the book, and challenged or inspired by, if not agreeing with, the authors' vision of an ecologically reflexive governance system in the age of the Anthropocene.

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