
Books Forum Introduction

Navigating a new geological era with papal guidance and Keeling curve

Edited by Nicolas Langlitz

Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research, New York, NY, USA.

E-mail: LanglitN@newschool.edu

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The Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen (2002) proposed that, since the burning of fossil fuels in the eighteenth century began to alter the planet's atmosphere, *Homo sapiens* supplanted the Holocene by a new human-dominated geological epoch, which he dubbed the Anthropocene. In the past decade, this geological term also enabled humanities scholars and social scientists to comprehend their time's transgression of the nature/culture divide in thought. This Books Forum examines some of the resulting publications from the environmental humanities and animal studies, but also a book that some readers might be surprised to see reviewed in *BioSocieties*: Pope Francis' encyclical on climate change.

Martin Skrydstrup reviews two monographs on the global warming controversy, which examine how science came to define political discourse as various publics translate climatological findings into action. While Joshua P. Howe's *Behind the Curve* follows the rise of the Keeling Curve measuring CO₂ levels in the atmosphere from the 1930s to the present, Candis Callison's *How Climate Change Comes to Matter* compares how such facts are currently adopted by five communities in the United States: indigenous peoples in Alaska, Evangelical Christians, corporate social responsibility executives, science journalists, and science policy experts. Skrydstrup's reading of these books makes him wonder whether we actually need more scientific data to politically decide about our planet's future.

The publications reviewed by Gregg Mitman cater to the need for new stories and ethics intertwining ecologies and economies to inform our relations with other life forms at a time of their mass extinction under anthropogenic conditions, only comparable in its scope with the loss of biodiversity at the end of the Mesozoic Era. As human activities drive more and more species out of previously shared ecosystems, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Thom Van Dooren's *Flight Ways*, and Jamie Lorimer's *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* highlight our supposedly increasing entanglement with both parting and persisting creatures. Mitman reads these books as case studies of how humankind now gardens in the ruins of pristine nature, finding new business opportunities in foraging for matsutake mushrooms or conserving elephants for ecotourism. But the books do not focus solely on this gardener. Mitman embraces their multispecies perspectives as an antidote to the hubris implied by the notion of the Anthropocene, which reinstates a primacy of *Homo sapiens* over all other life forms.

The sensibility and ethics of interconnection underlying these accounts is now commonplace, Gaymon Bennett points out in his review of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*, informing not only a budding multispecies historical ecology, but also contemporary Catholic social theory. In Bennett's eyes, however, historian of science Naomi Oreskes' introduction to this papal letter fails to notice the metaphysical difference between the cybernetic metaphor of interconnection so popular in Science and Technology Studies and a participatory ontology, which is not just about causal relations but reminds us that we are dust of the earth, breathe her air, and receive life from her waters. What ties together Oreskes and Conway's (2014) recent semi-fictional *The Collapse of Western Civilization* and Francis' *Encyclical on Climate Change*, Bennett maintains, is that both revive a long-neglected genre of spiritual and political thought, the Stoic and early Christian tradition of *praemeditatio malorum*, preparing one to face future rigors without fear. As the Anthropocene drives home the critical limitations of modernity, Bennett reads the Pope's nonmodern

Nicolas Langlitz is an Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy as well as the intersection between primatology and the human sciences in chimpanzee ethnography.



(but not antimodern) tract with anthropological curiosity while taking it seriously as an untimely intervention into current cosmopolitics, which cannot be based on science alone.

This burgeoning literature on the Anthropocene invites both readers and editors of *BioSocieties* to understand human and not only human life within a geologic rather than an exclusively biological context.

References

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- Oreskes, N. and Conway, E.M. (2014) *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*. New York: Columbia University Press.