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Ruptures of the Anthropocene: A crisis of justice

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Abstract

The Anthropocene and associated sense of crises, most prominently climate change, have opened up an urgency versus justice dilemma. While an epochal thinking drives the urgency, it is essential to attend to the ruptures illustrated by historical events like colonisation that shape the fabric of the Anthropocene and its impacts. Historical patterns of extraction and racialisation that underline the Anthropocene and climate change fit neatly into the schema for contemporary and future energy transitions shaped by an apolitical discourse of urgency and emergency. Attending to the historical ruptures helps root universal and apolitical urgency in justice for/from particular places and peoples and reframe ideas like climate emergency and climate crisis as more accurate climate *justice* emergency and climate *justice* crisis.

Introduction: welcome to the Anthropocene

I have argued before that the Anthropocene throws humans a challenge of uniting while keeping a politics of difference alive (Kumar, 2022). This is also a dilemma that demands urgent unified action that is firmly embedded in justice – urgency versus justice. The urgency is derived from the epoch, and justice is rooted in the events that shape this epoch. These events are ruptures that fracture the universal framing and universal urgency of the Anthropocene. Mahanty et al.'s (2023) detailed and useful analytics make this link clear as they explain ruptures as 'specific episodes of intense and punctured change' anchored in specific places and times. Although a more significant chunk of the Anthropocene literature attempts to circumnavigate intra-human politics and focuses on the urgency of uniting as 'one humanity'

while putting (our) difference(s) aside, there is a growing body of justice-oriented narratives for the origin of the Anthropocene from decolonial, indigenous, and critical race scholars (Davis and Todd, 2017; Yusoff, 2018). With these in mind, I find Mahanty et al.'s (2023) conceptualisation of ruptures helpful for developing strong counter currents to the global-scale, depoliticising and homogenising drivers of the dominant Anthropocene discourse. However, I suggest that we need to 'stay with the trouble' of the Anthropocene while constantly juggling between the events and the epoch to make climate justice a common cause.

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Saldanha (2020: 14) explains that the Anthropocene 'alert[s] publics of the possibility that imminent catastrophes are to be appreciated on the scale of millions of years, requiring concomitantly epochal forms of responsibility, solidarity, and upheaval'. While the epochal scale gives the benefit of decentring homocentric thinking (Chakrabarty, 2018), an overwhelming techno-scientific narrative raises the idea of an apolitical planetary emergency, which needs to be addressed urgently. There is much scientific evidence (IPCC, 2019) and political failure to warrant this sense of alarm. Yet, critiquing this 'one humanity' narrative, Yusoff (2018: 27) posits this as an attempt to 'structure a color line of agency' that simultaneously tries to 'absolve the positionality of Western colonial knowledge and extraction practices' and pave a future for 'a Western frontier of pioneers armed with eco-optimism and geoengineering'. While people around the world face the stark realities of climate change, enquiring about the history and epistemology of the Anthropocene fractures the contours of this 'one humanity' narrative. Davis and Todd (2017: 767) explain that what this new epoch is named and when it is deemed to start shape our understanding of the formation and destruction of *worlds* and 'have material consequences, consequences that affect bodies and land'. Therefore, the events that mark the Anthropocene's start dates are critical ruptures that 'signal a form of crisis' rooted in 'specific places and times, and their historical material contexts' (Mahanty et. al., 2023). In the context of the dominant Anthropocene discourse of uniformity and urgency, this is *a crisis of justice*.

Events and epochs: an Anthropocene shaped by ruptures of human history

Many climate-concerned scholars argue for the industrial revolution (~1800) as the start of the Anthropocene. This implicates capitalism or 'white captains of the capitalist system' (Saldanha, 2020: 13) and points out the critical nature of intra-human justice within the Anthropocene. This starting point dominates the critical discourse and re-centres Europe, via factories and steam engines, as the Anthropocene's origin point (Yusoff, 2018).

Yet, events from the 'prehistory of capital' (Yusoff, 2018: 40), and pre-history generally (Chakrabarty, 2008), not only fracture the contours of the Anthropocene but also dislocate Europe (yet crucially not Europeans) as central to this story.

Lewis and Maslin (2015) identify a marked decline in atmospheric CO_2 in the year 1610 from ice core data. They link this to the forest regeneration and carbon sequestration resulting from a drop in the population of the Americas from 15 million people in 1492 to about 6 million in 1650 as a result of the European colonisation. The European colonisation of the Americas was one of the most powerful, epoch-defining events which led to the 'largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years, the first global trade networks linking Europe, China, Africa, and the Americas, and the resultant mixing of previously separate biotas' (Lewis and Maslin, 2015: 174; Yusoff, 2018). Sylvia Wynter goes a step further to propose the year 1452 as the 'beginning of the New World' when the first enslaved Africans were put to work in Portuguese plantations (Yusoff, 2018: 33). This, for Wynter, began the process of 'reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land under the impulsion of the market economy' (Davis, 2015: 212). This move is crucial to what follows for energy extraction in the Anthropocene epoch, where some humans are racialised and imagined as disposable and nature as marketable. Both are framed as 'resources'.

Mahanty et al. (2023) suggest that ruptures are 'tangible and far-reaching that cut across spatial boundaries and have longer-term cascading effects'. What follows from these particular ruptures of the Anthropocene are uses and abuses of physical and fossil energy underlined by slavery and indentured servitude propped up by colonisation and racial exploitation. For example, Lennon (2017: 24) frames Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the 'first industrial-scale energy infrastructure', and Cowen (2019) and Ranganathan (2020) remind the centrality of Chinese and Black labour physical energy in the construction and operation of fossil-fuelled North American railroads. This racialised physical energy was central to steam-powered modernity, and the deep-seated impacts of racialisation and European modernity continue to cascade.

Emergency of the epoch: A caution for a climate emergency devoid of history

A dominant discourse of the Anthropocene-driven universal urgency becomes apparent in the case of climate change. Since UNFCCC COP21, there has been a growing discourse of urgency and reframing of climate change into climate crisis and climate emergency, with many governments worldwide declaring a climate emergency. In 2021, driven by arguments from scientists, several news outlets around the world began using the term 'climate emergency' to 'clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat' and to 'tell it like it is' (Fischetti, 2021; Moomaw et al., 2021; Ripple et al., 2019). In 2019, citing the UN Secretary General and the Pope (among others), the UK newspaper, the Guardian updated its house style to favour 'climate emergency, crisis or breakdown' rather than climate change (*The Guardian*, 2019).

As an urgency driven by a discourse of emergency gains more traction, it is prudent to take a brief pause to ask what this emergency means, what it hopes to drive and what it actually drives. It is helpful to examine the definition of emergency. Cambridge Dictionary explains an emergency as 'something dangerous or serious, such as an accident, that *happens suddenly* or *unexpectedly* and needs fast action in order to avoid harmful results' (emphasis added). However, climate change, while dangerous and serious, and now at a stage that requires swift actions (with many harmful results unavoidable now), has neither happened suddenly nor unexpectedly. The Cambridge Dictionary explains climate emergency as 'serious and urgent problems that are being caused or likely to be caused by changes in the world's weather'. While emergency has a historical-temporal idea of the suddenness of an event attached to it, climate emergency seems rooted in current conditions and future-looking actions. Climate emergency reflects the outcomes – the future – but fails to acknowledge the causes – the history. The dangers of losing a sense of history within the idea of climate emergency are worth reflecting on. This question of

history is, after all, as I discuss in the section 'Events and epochs: an Anthropocene shaped by ruptures of human history', central to an Anthropocene defined by sustained violence and 'punctured events' (Mahanty et.al., 2023).

The Anthropocene and climate change stem from a racialised extraction of bodily and fossil energy. Driven by an apolitical discourse of urgency, the patterns of contemporary and future energy transitions neatly map onto the historical schema of extraction and racialisation that underpinned fossil energy. Renewable energy deployed in this manner shows patterns of dispossession similar to fossil energy. Here following Yusoff (2020: 5), we need to examine the 'kinship between the extraction of bodies and the extraction of Earth' in places where 'genocide and ecocide' overlap in neo-colonial projects for the extraction of minerals like Lithium and Cobalt that are central to multiple technologies of future energy transitions (Hernandez and Newell, 2022).

Conclusions: of not losing sight of events or epochs

While in agreement with Mahanty et.al. (2023) that thinking about ruptures helps develop strong counter currents to the global-scale, depoliticising and homogenising drivers of the dominant Anthropocene discourse, I contend that we need to 'stay with the trouble' of the Anthropocene while constantly juggling between the events and the epoch.

The events of 1610 and 1452 (and many others before and after) help establish culpability and responsibility. These events and their outcomes, which are so profoundly embedded in the fabric of the Anthropocene, while establishing that climate change has not happened suddenly or unexpectedly, also provide warnings of what is at risk in an unqualified, undifferentiated 'global' emergency that might demand 'falling in line, putting questions of difference, justice, rights, and responsibilities aside: uniting by putting (our) difference(s) aside' (Kumar, 2022: 3).

The epoch is an index of the profound changes in the Earth's system and their future outcomes. Together the events and the epoch strengthen the long-standing yet shaky principle that made climate change a common cause: common but differential responsibility (Okereke and Coventry, 2016; Sultana, 2022). The events are the ruptures that, by attuning us to history, might help reframe climate change into what it really is, not a climate emergency or climate crisis but a climate *justice* emergency or a climate *justice* crisis. We need to keep an eye on the epoch and recall the events that shaped it to truly work towards a 'universal' climate justice in our unified response.

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