



Rosi Braidotti and Hiltraud Casper-Hehne

Abstract The term ‘Anthropocene’ was proposed by the geological and natural sciences community to describe the current geological epoch and show the influence of human activity on the planetary ecosystem and its dynamics. This idea was taken up by Humanities scholars from a wide range of disciplines. It functions within the Humanities as a complex and multi-faceted notion that refers to the simultaneous occurrence of different environmental, technological and social transformations. This focus is particularly marked in the New Humanities, that call for renewed attention for the role of cultural, narrative and social issues in shaping collective responsibility for the future of the Earth. The exact meaning and empirical evidence supporting the Anthropocene however, are also met with criticism. We argue that the concept needs to be supplemented by more specific notions and practices, in order to avoid a growing sense of disciplinary segregation in the emergent areas of Humanities scholarship.

The term ‘Anthropocene’ has been proposed in 2002 by the scientific community as a way to describe the current geological epoch. It aims to show the measurable impact of human activity – notable technological developments and unchecked consumerism – in relation to the ‘glocal’ ecosystem and its dynamics. This has given rise to a rather polemical debate that continues to occupy the academic world and which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We think it is best therefore to approach the notion of the Anthropocene within the Humanities as a complex and multi-faceted idea – both a description of our historical condition and a methodological tool to navigate some of its contradictions. It refers to a complex phenomenon that points to the simultaneous occurrence

R. Braidotti (✉)

Distinguished University Professor, University of Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands
e-mail: r.braidotti@uu.nl

H. Casper-Hehne

Intercultural German Studies, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
e-mail: h.casper-hehne@phil.uni-goettingen.de

of different – and internally contradictory – kinds of environmental, technological and social transformations. At the environmental level, we are witnessing the climate change crisis, the extinction of many species on a depleted planet struck by extreme weather conditions and new epidemics. At the technological level, the traditional understandings of the human have been redefined by the expansion of the life sciences and genomics, neural sciences and robotics, nanotechnologies, the new information technologies and the digital interconnections they construct. At the social level, the joint impact of those two phenomena is causing increasing polarizations and social injustices through the unequal distribution of wealth, prosperity and access to technology. According to Oxfam in 2020, the world's 22 wealthiest people owned more Wealth than the 4.6 billion poorest people.

This acute situation has also been described in terms of the posthuman convergence (Braidotti, 2013), with the Fourth Industrial Revolution meeting the Sixth Extinction. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2015) involves the expansion of advanced technologies, but also their intrusion into the very fabric of living matter – both in humans and non-humans – through unprecedented advances in genomics and the life sciences. This means that the categorical divide between biology and technology, or nature and culture, has shifted significantly. The Sixth Extinction on the other hand refers to the endangered status of many species during the current geological era, as the result of human activity, frantic consumerism and technological intrusion (Kolbert, 2014). These are world-wide or planetary phenomena, which however acquire specific features in different contexts and thus call for multiple perspectives, rather than a mono-paradigmatic approach. They need to be addressed as intersecting phenomena, happening concurrently.

The Humanities in general and especially cultural studies argue that humans' relationship to nature needs some drastic revisions. "Our concept of nature is outdated. Nature is neither an obstacle nor a harmonious other, no longer a power that can be separated from or ambivalent towards human action. Man shapes nature. Humanity finds its expression in the history of the earth" (Scherer & Klingan, 2013: 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic is emblematic of the sharp contradictions of the era of the Anthropocene, in that it combines all the three aspects mentioned above. It highlights the negative effects of undue human interference in the lives of multiple species, and shows how less privileged social classes, marginalized genders and ethnic groups are disproportionately more exposed to the risks and dangers of this condition. The pandemic, however, has also shown and to a large extent increased our collective dependence on the very technologies that lie at the core of our consumeristic and energy-wasting culture. Both information, communication and bio-medical technologies have become all the more important as a result of the Covid-19 contagion.

Thus, the Anthropocene as a marker of this particular moment in history affects social and environmental ecologies, but also the social imaginaries, as well as individual psychological states and emotions. The emotional or affective dimension is of great importance, as it sets a social mood of pain and anxiety, uncertainty about the present and the future. It also imposes on us all the imperative to review

established opinions and to question received notions and understandings of what it means to be human. These affective, ethical and even pastoral care aspects are highly relevant for the pedagogical practice of the Humanities.

The concept of the Anthropocene, which originated in the geological and natural sciences, has been taken up by Humanities scholars in a multiplicity of approaches, across a wide range of disciplines and academic practices. It provides a useful but not linear framework for research practices and broader intellectual debates about the current environmental, technological and social changes. Further, it helps us assess collectively how these material conditions affect our shared sense of humanity, the representations and values we can uphold today. This concept functions therefore like a theoretical navigational tool that assists Humanities scholars in the task of critical reflection on contemporary cultural and socio-economic formations. In this respect, the Anthropocene as a horizon of thought not only entails scientific, technical, social, economic and even cultural aspects, but also raises issues of representation, ethical values and participatory citizenship (Möllers, 2015: 122). The New Humanities in particular call to strengthen the role of the cultural narrative and social issues in shaping collective responsibility for the future of the Earth (Mauch & Trischler, 2013: 9).

Our argument is that we need to learn to address these complexities in a parallel and not compartmentalized fashion. We need to confront the contradictions not only intellectually, but also affectively and to do so in an affirmative, ethical manner. This conviction rests on the firm belief that the Anthropocene is not only a crisis for the Humanities, but also a great opportunity for the field to renew and update itself. We equally believe, however, that such a change requires the analysis and revision of set and established ideas, that is to say, a bit more conceptual creativity and methodological innovation.

However, there has also been much criticism of the concept, its exact meaning and range of applications. Paradoxically, the notion of the Anthropocene ends up actually highlighting the anthropocentric dimension, as it “evokes human-centredness” (Crist, 2013: 129).

Donna Haraway is even more explicit: “Please tell me that you share my anger, that in this moment of transdisciplinarity and multispecies everything, in this moment of beginning to get a glimmer of how truly richly complex the world is and always has been, someone has the unmitigated arrogance to name it the Anthropocene” (Haraway, 2016: 545). This designation also hides the relationship of humans to animals and plants and other cycles of the earth, that is to say, the importance of non-human factors and entities.

In other words, exclusive focus on the Anthropocene can result in too partial a picture. Braidotti has argued for instance (Braidotti, 2019) that because of its over-generic nature, the Anthropocene could not stand the pressure of the multiple approaches it generated and has thus become an “anthropomeme” (Macfarlane, 2016). That is to say it has generated a plethora of alternative but aligned notions, such as: ‘Chthulucene’ (Haraway, 2016), ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2013), and ‘Anthropobscene’ (Parikka, 2015). And there are yet others: Plasticene, ‘Plantationcene’ (Tsing, 2015) and ‘Misanthropocene’ (Clover & Spahr, 2014).

Thus, just referring to the Anthropocene is not enough. Rather the concept needs to be supplemented by other notions and practices, in order to avoid a growing sense of disciplinary segregation in the emergent areas of Humanities scholarship. We need to keep complexity and systemic inter- and trans-disciplinarity in mind. The Anthropocene is not complete without an analysis of socio-political conditions and the economic disparities that it entails. Nor can it avoid a serious confrontation with its effects on identities and cultural belonging, and on the formation of subjectivity: what does it mean to do academic research as the planet all around us is dying?

By addressing social justice, ethical and political concerns at the core of the geo-centered discussions, the Humanities also raise questions of self-representation, that is to say the formation of social imaginaries about the current predicament and the societal challenges it throws our way. Most people's perception and understanding of the climate change crisis, for instance, but also of the threats and opportunities of the new technologies, is mediated by cultural, visual, literary and media representations, which constitute the core fields of enquiry of the Humanities. We would even dare to suggest that the Humanities contribute to bring the allegedly 'unrepresentable' dimensions of the Anthropocene into public representation. We think that the construction of the social imaginary and the analysis of these forms of representation of our current predicament are the prerogative of the Humanities as a teaching and research field.

This specific function of the Humanities is especially important as the Anthropocene as a whole is a rather gloomy concept, that often causes a morose mood of pending disaster and inevitable apocalypse. The entertainment industry has been quick in commodifying this mood, turning the catastrophe into a highly profitable genre: disaster movies, extinction series, 'morning after' visions. They are variations on what is becoming known as "Collapsogy" (Servigne & Stevens, 2020), that is to say, a terminal form of cultural pessimism. The future of the human – in this culturally specific inception – is now pre-occupying vast numbers of social commentators and philosophers (Fukuyama, 2002; Habermas, 2003; Sloterdijk, 2009; Pope, 2015). The mood is generally sombre, but the Humanities bring also more affirmative and generative scenarios. They can offer innovative and daring visions for the future, through the study of history, culture, the arts and the literary sources of speculative science fiction and other genres that investigate and design possible futures for our and other species. Comparative intercultural perspectives are then crucial in lifting the West out of its current gloom.

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Rosi Braidotti is distinguished University Professor at Utrecht; Honorary Degrees Helsinki, 2007, Linköping, 2013; Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (FAHA), 2009; Member of the Academia Europaea (MAE), 2014.; recipient Humboldt Research Award, 2021. Main publications: More Posthuman Glossary (Bloomsbury Academic) with Rosi Braidotti, Emily Jones, Goda Klumbyte (ed). *Nomadic Subjects* (2011a), and *Nomadic Theory*. (2011b), Columbia University Press. *The Posthuman*, 2013, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 2019 and *Posthuman Feminism*, 2021, Polity Press.

Hiltraud Casper-Hehne is distinguished University Professor at Göttingen; 2009–2021 Vice President for International Affairs at Göttingen University; since 2021 Director of the network NEH21: New European Humanities in the twenty-first Century; since 2020 member of the Executive Committee of the *European University ENLIGHT*. Main publications: Braidotti, Rosi/Casper-Hehne, Hiltraud/Ivkovic, Marjan/Oostveen, Daan F. (2021) (eds.): *Trajectories for the Humanities in the twenty-first Century*. Edinburgh Publishing House (forthcoming).