"Hic Rhodus, Hic Salta!" Postcolonial Remains and the Politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Urban Political Ecology in the Anthropo-obscene

Citing this paper
Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.
“HIC RHODUS, HIC SALTA!”

Postcolonial remains and the politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene

Andrés Fabián Henao Castro and Henrik Ernstson

From Sonora to disruption

When crossing the Sonora desert without authorization, working class-women from Central and South America are transformed into undocumented immigrants in North America. They become hunted bodies, policed through heavily militarized borderlands, rendering their lives disposable. Making the crossing despite the precariousness of the conditions, they also embody one of today’s subaltern experiences that, when placed in view, interrupts not only the smooth surface of late capitalism and globalization—showing the underbelly of the “vibrant” cities of the North—but also current discussions on climate change. According to Humane Borders,¹ the majority of women’s deaths in the desert are due to dehydration or are considered to be heat-related; conditions that are never “natural” but fabricated through the militarization of the border that forces immigrants to take greater risks when crossing in increasing temperatures partly due to climate change. The mortal spectre of climate change is not a future but a present reality, one that conspires against their lives as they embark on the crossing.

Our focus in this chapter will be to examine how the discursive figure of “the Anthropocene”—the idea that humans are acting as a geological force with climate change as but the most notorious manifestation—depoliticizes this equation of mortality and disposability by means of a temporal, epistemological, and practical displacement of subaltern experiences to a secondary stage.² More concretely, we are interested in discussing how postcolonial theory, primarily in the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ian Baucom, has tried to integrate this condition of the Anthropocene at the cost of failing to position the subaltern experiences that these women represent at the centre of its epistemological and normative preoccupations, against its grid.³ We argue that it does so, first and foremost, because the
Anthropocene seeks a depoliticized techno-managerial solution to the problem that it identifies, one in which the voices of these women are, once again, rendered silent. Second, the postcolonial reception of the discourse of the Anthropocene fails them because the urgency of their present precarious position is devalued vis-à-vis the “fully-inclusive” human and human/non-human universality of the future for which the discourse of the Anthropocene speaks. Temporally displaced and politically neutralized, subaltern experiences are, once again, ontologically deflated and marginalized within the constitutive parameters of the discourse of the Anthropocene.

Departing from the experiences of migrant women, we are interested in contesting the theoretical assumptions that render such experiences unintelligible within the discourse on the Anthropocene. In response, we contribute what we call a politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene. This politics hinges on how the Anthropocene has been discursively constructed and “rigged” as a scene—as a stage—giving way to what can be referred to as a post-political death space. A death space is where political change in the here and now is denied as it gets displaced into the future. Indeed, we argue that there is a risk that the political itself becomes categorically unthinkable when scholars—and here postcolonial scholars in particular—try to integrate the Anthropocene as a radicly “new” condition. Here we follow Robert Young (2012) who, against constant efforts at pronouncing the death of postcolonial theory, emphasizes the resilience of subaltern experiences to remain and trouble the politics of knowledge, quite at work in the language of the Anthropocene, by “articulating the unauthorised knowledge, and histories, of those whose knowledge is not allowed to count” (Young 2012, 23).

Our politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene works to clarify the political performativity of the postcolonial remains and how they trouble our contemporary times by means of three performative interruptions in the present. The first interruption is about the politics of time and aims to trouble the ways of being that are rendered invisible within the claims to a supra-historical time in which an all-encompassing notion of humanity co-participates homogeneously in the same geological force. Building on this, the politics of translation within the second interruption troubles the ways of speaking, which are rendered inaudible within the claims to a scientific consensus around the universal condition of the Anthropocene into which we are included irrespective of our constructed differences based on class, race, gender, and other socio-cultural differences. Finally, the politics of the stage, in the last interruption, works to trouble the ways of acting that delivers the proper scale to the experts’ gaze but not to those who engage in the active contestation of their conditions of exclusion.

To this end, our chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first we re-stage a debate between Chakrabarty and Baucom that demonstrates different receptions to the Anthropocene in postcolonial theory. In the second we introduce the three performative disruptions—of time, of knowledge, and that of the political itself—that outline the contours of our politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene.
Eclipsing politics

What happens with emancipatory projects if we take as fact that humanity is a geological force on a par with the movements of continents, the evolution of species variation, and the mixing of the lithosphere with the atmosphere? This political question has produced radically divergent responses. To us, an especially revealing debate which makes visible a whole set of issues that are at stake, is the “Anthropocene debate” between Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009; 2012; 2014) and Ian Baucom (2014). While brilliant thinkers both of them, in the end their (dis)agreement misses the point and risks evacuating and removing the political in a deeply ontological and categorical sense.

To start unpacking this, while approaching the political, we will first move our attention to how Chakrabarty and Baucom could be said to clash over whether humanity can see itself as a “species.” Central to their debate is Marx’s Hegelian sounding idea of “species-being.” This was introduced in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx 1978) and did not simply refer to the reproductive biology of humanity, but to a collective and emancipatory power—in “making life activity itself an object of will and consciousness” (Marx 1978, 76).

In particular, they contest the hyphen that grants “being” to the species, which for Marx is directly linked to emancipatory politics. Chakrabarty (2009) parts with Marx and argues that we cannot experience ourselves as a species, as the non-human, a “force of nature” on par and in interaction with plate tectonics and evolution. He means that we can only experience our being through the social roles that society has produced over historical time, for instance the capitalist and the worker, the colonialist and the colonized. From this it follows, posits Chakrabarty, that under the Anthropocene there is no history left for us to make. Since all major projects of freedom and human emancipation are historical—carried out by real human beings that occupy certain social roles—there is no way we can create and interpret what a human project of freedom at the scale of the Anthropocene would mean since according to scientific descriptions this project needs to operate at the scale of humans as a species.

Chakrabarty’s diagnosis, we believe, will risk eclipsing the possibility of politics altogether. We can (with Baucom) arrive at this by returning to “the younger” Chakrabarty’s work where he developed his political thinking in close conversation with the rupturing possibility of postcolonial remains, something we believe “the older” Chakrabarty is now deserting. In Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty (2000) had famously re-written the old confrontation of labour against capital, use value against exchange value, as the confrontation of History 2 against the totalizing grip of History 1. While most progressive historians and social scientists had firmly focused on how the logic of capital had produced a global and world-historical abstraction of labour (History 1), Chakrabarty (2000, 48) argued that instead of thinking that the abstraction of labour “eventually cancels out or neutralizes the contingent differences between specific histories,” there is instead a confrontation between the forces that work towards the abstraction of labour (History 1), and the
affective form of subaltern history as belonging to differential life-worlds (History 2). This means History 2 is a productive part in the making of history, not simply an “effect”—and that subaltern experiences and life-worlds are performative and harbour projects of freedom. In other words, there is a dissensual postcolonial remain or leftover that is constantly at work and that produces emancipatory imaginaries and practices.7

The subaltern's becoming of living labour was made to interrupt the totalizing thrust of abstract labour. Such interruption was possible because both histories (History 1 and History 2) were, as Chakrabarty (2014, 5) claimed in his reply to Baucom’s article, “ontologically available to us […] accessible to us directly through our shared (and evolved) human capacity to experience space and time.” For the historian this means there are archives—from written sources to oral histories—that can be pressed into service to understand emancipatory projects. The theoretically devastating challenge of the Anthropocene, which for Chakrabarty rendered 25 years of critical scholarship lacking, rested in that no human can experience the planet as such, no history in its proper sense can be made nor written.8 This new condition, a non-ontological mode of existence, severed and cut-off the hyphen and it led Chakrabarty (2014, 6) to affirm, rather categorically, that “we cannot experience ourselves as a species.”

Unlike the irresolvable confrontation between History 1 and History 2, in which a shared experience in the form of abstract labour was always interrupted by a differential experience in the form of living labour, the new formulation eclipsed such a dissensual participation in the making of History. In front of a historically impossible-to-experience new non-historical time of Anthropocenecity, History 1 and History 2 reappear as shared experiences, but with no dissensual leftover. Thus, while Chakrabarty (2012, 14) acknowledges that “[a] place thus remains for struggles around questions on intrahuman justice regarding the uneven impacts of climate change,” the “constant interruption” by History 2 of History 1 has in his view been cancelled in awe of the supra-historical order of the Anthropocene.

Baucom in his turn, contests this conclusion. He uses post-humanist literature and its development of non-human otherness and companion species to politically recharge the situation. He challenges the unitary “orientation of extinction” of Chakrabarty and directs us towards a wider search of more-than-human notions of freedom, and what Jill Bennett (2013, 245) expressed as “the will to belong […] as one species on the planet among numerous others.” Baucom insists that we can recycle young Chakrabarty who argued “that neither ontology nor the ontology of time is singular but plural” (Baucom 2014, 141) and that we can rightfully insist that time is still “out of joint.” For Baucom this means “the historian’s code remains inadequate to an accounting of our ‘situation’” and that political action is still possible if we reconsider Earth as another figure of the post-human that shares the repertoire of political attributes which has until now been wrongly attached exclusively to the human. Augmenting young Chakrabarty, Baucom suggests a History 4°, a methodological notion à la Hegel, capable of picking up the modernist confrontation between human history (History 1 versus History 2) and braiding it
with the non-historical time of humanity as a geological agent (what Baucom calls History 3). Drawing on post-humanist literature and object-oriented ontology (e.g., Harman 2009; Morton 2013), Baucom believes that being can be attached to this new form of the “species” in the era of the Anthropocene, extending History 2 to non-human actants to form a proper History 3.

Our intervention also relies on recycling “young” Chakrabarty. However, unlike Baucom’s attempt to repair the older Chakrabarty’s a-historical Anthropocene with the young Chakrabarty’s conception of History 2 that includes non-humans to form History 3, we work with a “split-Chakrabarty” that is more agonistic than reconciliatory. We do not seek to accommodate the newly won geological agency of a cyborgian humanity (for which object-oriented-ontology and actor-network theory had already prepared the way in Bauman’s interpretation) within Chakrabarty’s work, salvaging postcolonial theory from Chakrabarty’s own seemingly funeral oration. Instead, we want to focus squarely on the political. As we will explain, our politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene thoroughly undermines Chakrabarty’s (2012, 14) own claim that “unlike the problem of the hole in the ozone layer, climate change is ultimately all about politics.” In contrast, we posit that his “all about politics” comes from a view of the Anthropocene as a non-ontological mode of existence, which we argue precisely, and in deeply problematic terms, participates in strengthening the very depoliticizing language that he has otherwise sought to contest. This brings us to our second section.

The politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene: Three interruptions

Our politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene—which aims to return to the political and recharge postcolonial remains—is based on three performative disruptions that structure the rest of the chapter. The first disruption aims to trouble the notion of time. It accentuates the anthropos in the Anthropo-ob(S)cene and seeks to interrogate the temporal displacement of this new human universal into a futurity that, once again, neutralizes the ability to act politically in the here and now, a political hic et nunc of differential history-makings. The present differences of the anthropos are, so to speak, put off-stage by the all-inclusive metaphor of a massive absence into which “we all belong” in the apocalyptic futurity of the world without us, even if belonging is precisely what is troubled by the Anthropocene. The second disruption accentuates the phonetic power of the “-ob(S)” within the semantic neutrality of the Anthropocene. This second disruption troubles the epistemic authority granted to scientific knowledge as once again the language of universality. First articulated by postcolonial theory, we invoke the politics of translation as a performative mode to politically confront the planetary condition of the Anthropocene. The third section is on disruption itself. We accentuate the obscene in the Anthropo-ob(S)cene, the performativity of the political, by reinterpreting the stages of history in the progressive/linear time of historicism. The figure of the Anthropocene shares several features with the stages of history in the theatrical–contingent sense of the term. Obscenity carries a different performative force within this interruption; it refers to
the making-present of that unaccounted supplementary part, to borrow from Jacques Rancière (2004; 2010), that upsets the aesthetic “decency” of a techno-managerial neoliberal regime of power. Obscenity names the stage that leaps; a stage that is not working to separate and organize time into the past-present-future chronological order of (past) revolution and (future) catastrophe, but collapses that time into the historical leap of Marx’s “Hic Rhodus, hic salta!” as a verification of equality by those who are not counted in the hic et nunc of their staged disagreement.10

First interruption: The politics of time—against the futurism of the Anthropocene

What about time, future, and emancipation? What does the human condition now mean under the Anthropocene? How are we defined and what powers do we hold? The World Without Us is the intriguing title of Alan Weisman’s bestselling book on climate change. Chakrabarty refers to this title in his opening and closing remarks in his 2009 article. He was however no longer concerned with the “us” that was articulated within this projected futurity, but the ways in which the present-ness of this newly discovered condition of the human as nature, as a geophysical force, both forces “[us] to insert ourselves into a future ‘without us’ in order to be able to visualize it,” and destroys “our general sense of history” (our emphasis, Chakrabarty 2009, 198). That concern resonates with the ending of Chakrabarty’s (2012) follow-up article on “Postcolonial studies and the challenge of climate change.” There he invokes, with a distinctive rhetorical inflection, Hannah Arendt’s words of the “fundamental change in the human condition” brought up by the event of the Sputnik satellite that was sent up by the Soviet Union in 1957 (Chakrabarty 2012, 15). Chakrabarty interpreted Arendt’s diagnosis of modernity as ambivalent. On the pessimistic side, he meant, Arendt was mourning the spiritual decay of the “mass society” in which the political had shrunk with the disappearance of public spaces and the increasing subordination—in both capitalist and socialist nation-states—of the domain of action to the domains of work and labour in the newly formed “society of labourers” (Arendt 1998, 46). On the optimistic side, Chakrabarty recuperated Arendt for the universal project of undoing History 1 à la Marx, the Sputnik-empowered conception of humankind meant “the survival of the species could [now] be guaranteed on a worldwide scale” (Arendt 1998, 46). Once again, we note that the political (which we understand that Arendt was yearning for) gets displaced by Chakrabarty to the negative pole of pessimism. However, we are surprised to see Arendt enlisted as the theory in charge of suturing the Marxist concern of the worldwide scale of labour’s survival under capitalism, with the universal scale of Earth’s geography.

But what if we invert this interpretation and go against Chakrabarty? What if we make the plurality of the political, which Arendt mourns in The Human Condition—the closing down of action, the disappearance of public spaces—into the positive project that she wanted to revive? And the universal, which in Chakrabarty’s view Arendt optimistically embraces, into her ironic warning against philosophical and scientific tendencies that want to substitute political contestation with technical
expertise? This other Arendt (1998, 9–10) was also the one, against Chakrabarty’s interpretation, who claimed the following:

[T]he human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature […] In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what’ […] On the other hand, the conditions of human existence—life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth—can never ‘explain’ what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely.

The question that this other Arendt might be posing in relation to the hyphen of “species-being,” could be formulated as follows: Is the Anthropocene not the language with which science has successfully substituted the divine in its ability to speak about a who as though it were a what? Arendt, after all, sounded very much like Marx when she claimed that the conditions of human existence never condition us absolutely. Indeed, as Marx said in the famous passage from The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte that Baucom also used to organize his debate with Chakrabarty: humans still make their own history even if they do it under circumstances transmitted by the past. Rather than asking if that absolute conditioning has already been reached with the spatial-temporal limits of the Anthropocene, we should interrogate the anti-political effects of this theoretical frame.

What is the effect of saying that the Anthropocene has conditioned us in a way that we can no longer access emancipatory politics? As representative of a wider mood and thinking, take for instance how Ben Dibley (2012, 3) describes Jeffrey Sachs’ (2008) formulation of the advent of a geological era of the human species’ own making:

While, for most of human history, economic activity did not throw the planetary systems into jeopardy, if globalisation continues unreformed, the human species [quoting Sachs], “will hit very harsh boundaries that will do great damage to human well-being, to the earth, and to vast numbers, literally millions, of other species on the planet” (page 57). It is in this context that [again quoting Sachs] “the defining challenge of the twenty-first century” is made apparent: that, Sachs contends, of facing “the reality that humanity shares a common fate” (page 3, Italics in [Sach’s] original).

Notice the temporal displacement, the conditional “if,” which has the effect of projecting human catastrophe to the future of an unreformed globalization, as if “great damage to human well-being, to the Earth, and to vast numbers, literally millions, of other species on the planet” was not a present reality but an expected consequence of not reforming globalization. Moreover, notice the rhetorical force
of the common fate, which “in this context” all of “humanity” now shares regardless of class, race, and gender (or what Chakrabarty problematically calls “anthropological differences”). The temporal inflection of the Anthropocene effects a sort of distorted Derridean différences, in which differences are cancelled in the present through a projected homogeneity in the future catastrophe into which they are deferred. As in front of God, as in front of extinction—we are all alike. Sachs, Dibley, and others are trying to hide the situated and particular within the universal of this projected futurity. In that sense Chakrabarty (2009, 221) is more transparent in how this hiding is done when he claims that, “unlike in the crisis of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.” This explains how the futurism of the Anthropocene is simply that, a delusion to put awe into us.

If climate change is not a dystopia of today, if the conditions of severe dehydration that migrants need to include in their calculations are not a political question of now, it is because lifeboats still exist for the rich and the privileged. The anti-political effect of this frame, used to properly assess the scale of the problem, is to silently make the rich and the privileged the standard with which to measure the all-encompassing humanity yet-to-come. Once again, the universal becomes an attribute of the possessor, not of the dispossessed, and once again, the universal disavows its own particularity by attributing to itself the “all” of “humanity.”

That this all-encompassing futurity provides a stronger motivation to act than particular experiences of subalterns in the present, means that the only act that truly matters for this theoretical frame is the one in which the possessors engage, but not the dispossessed. Otherwise committed to subaltern politics, Chakrabarty’s depoliticizing framework ultimately betrays the same conclusion, since the politics of the particular are abandoned to the meta-politics of a universal that does not even make sense within the parameters of human sensuousness and consciousness, hence requires the expert to speak on behalf of it. This leads us to our second interruption.

Second interruption: The politics of translation—against the universalism of the Anthropocene

Science gestures to occupy the middle point between systems of references, and through the same gesture it denies and hides its own particularity. Chapter 3 of Provincializing Europe wonderfully develops the critique of the ideal of objectivity entertained by Newtonian science. This ideal “aspires to achieve a status of transparency with regard to particular human knowledges” and claims that “translation between different languages” can only be mediated by the “higher language of science itself” (Chakrabarty 2000, 75) Chakrabarty’s example is that of translating the Hindi pani and the English water by means of the scientific notation H₂O. The question that we entertain here is if the Anthropocene, even in Chakrabarty’s articulation of the problem, has not become the H₂O of climate change?

The depoliticizing consequences of the Anthropocene are quite noticeable in the very quotation of Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) that Chakrabarty (2012, 211) includes but fails to interrogate:
[M]ankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come. To develop a worldwide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of ecosystems against human-induced stresses will be one of the great future tasks of mankind, requiring intensive research efforts and wise application of knowledge thus acquired.

*Crutzen and Stoermer (2000, no page numbers given)*

Instead of revolution, protest, and political mobilization, Crutzen and Stoermer want more “intensive research efforts” and more “wise application of knowledge.” One wonders what is the “unwise” application of knowledge that is silently enunciated as a scientific warning in this formulation, and why is this way of framing the worldwide accepted strategy never questioned in Chakrabarty’s work, which is otherwise so good at destabilizing the scientific aspiration to transparency? Rather than questioning the very subject-position that speaks here, in the form of the researcher as the site of the universal, Chakrabarty opts for defending science, claiming against an unnamed contradictor that these are “not necessarily anti-capitalist scholars, and yet they are not for business-as-usual capitalism either” (2009, 219). Obviously, the public institution of science can play, and often has played, a significant role in the struggle against capitalism and inequality, moreover when it makes visible the ways in which climate change affects populations differentially in the present and not homogeneously in the future (Camacho 1998; Klein 2014; Dean in Chapter 11, this volume). That science can, and often has, played such a role is different from letting science’s claim to universality pass unexamined, especially when it carries such a strong depoliticizing force, suggesting research funding rather than public contestation.  

This also hides that the first critical discourse on climate change was not articulated by scientists, but by those forms of indigenous knowledge whose claims to truth have been, and continue to be, devalued as not quite “proper” knowledge. One wonders here what remains—if anything at all—of the (young) Chakrabarty that troubled the scientific attribution of universality in its linguistic capacity of becoming the middle term that was capable of translating all particular languages, in relation to the (old) Chakrabarty that feels the need to defend science’s framework against those critics of globalization that have not yet grasped the proper scale of the problem. If anything of the postcolonial remains, it is its ability to contest such claims to universality by means of articulating unauthorized knowledge. In the case of climate change, this knowledge refers to indigenous forms of knowledge that once again appear as too old, outdated, passé—an exclusion in which even postcolonial criticism participates.

The troubling of History 1 by History 2 cannot reach the proper scale of the problem because:

[T]hese critiques [e.g. indigenous knowledge] do not give us an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than
capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations.

Chakrabarty (2009, 212)

Chakrabarty’s underlying assumption is that we can only understand the scale of the problem if we properly place it in the pre- and post-capitalist scale in which the Anthropocene operates, or in other words, that the boundary parameters of human existence are not only independent of capitalism and socialism but actually rest beyond human history. We wonder, what is the hold here and who does the holding? Furthermore, we note that when the very possibility of agency abandons the human and becomes transformed into a geophysical force, then it is apparently only researchers that are able to assess the situation and determine the proper scale of the problem. We should clarify that we are not questioning Chakrabarty’s invitation—which we welcome—when he claims that:

[T]he task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital.

Chakrabarty (2009, 213)

The problem lies in the depoliticizing deliverance of truth to a scientific language that wants funding and wise application, instead of political mobilization and public contestation of the status quo as the arbitrator of such a union.

To uncritically accept that science holds the proper locus of knowledge is only one part of the problem with the politics of translation. Chakrabarty (2000, 57ff.) has earlier recognized his indebtedness to Spivak’s seminal article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), when he abandoned what he characterized as the theoretically innocent position of the subaltern studies collective, which was trying to make the subaltern into the “subject” of his or her own history. Spivak had successfully challenged the very idea of subjecthood that, once again, had rendered the subaltern speechless as the subaltern’s deeds and actions were already coded in the colonial or nativist discourses available. Chakrabarty abandoned the very uncritical attempt at “upgrading” the subaltern to the full status of European “subjecthood.” Yet, the way in which speechlessness is structured by the discursive binary from Spivak’s analysis did not translate into Chakrabarty’s articulation of climate change within postcolonial theory.

Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the section that precedes his discussion of the Anthropocene, entitled, “The Human in Postcolonial Criticism Today” (Chakrabarty 2012, 5). This section opens with Chakrabarty’s endorsement of Homi Bhabha’s description of “the new subaltern classes of today” (p. 5), being in Bhabha’s words: the stateless, migrant workers, minorities, asylum seekers, and refugees. What surprises Chakrabarty, in a positive sense, is Bhabha’s turn to the deprivation that the human condition suffers in such circumstances. Against Michael Hardt and
Antonio Negri’s (2000) celebration of this precarious condition as the promise of a post-imperial form of emancipatory nomadism beyond the grip of the nation-state, Bhabha (2008) reads the subaltern politics of cultural survival “not only as a zone of creativity and improvisation—which it is—but also as an area of privation and disenfranchisement” (Chakrabarty 2012, 6). Following Bhabha’s more ambivalent analysis of the new subalterns than that of Negri and Hardt, Chakrabarty nevertheless reproduces the very distribution of the real and the ideal, of real deprivation in the form of cultural survival and ideal enfranchisement according to the framework of the bourgeois state that the subaltern’s theory was seeking to contest.

Like Spivak’s subaltern, the new subaltern classes with which we also opened this chapter are trapped (silenced) between the two discourses available: (i) either a rejection of the human abstraction of the enlightened subject in Negri and Hardt, which rendered their deprivation illegible in an apparently uncritical celebration of their creativity; or (ii) the legibility of their precarious condition that continues to posit full inclusion within that very European form of subjecthood as the aspirational ideal. Against the temporal displacement of subaltern agency (in our first interruption) and its political neutralization (here in the second), the politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene proposes an alternative route to recharge postcolonial remains. We now turn towards such an interpretation, which rests on the relationship between the political and the performative.

Third interruption: The politics of the performative—against the Anthropocene

The performative has been linked with the political. That is to say, actions that take place in front of others (i.e. an audience of some form) can change or rupture the organization and definition of what is in common. This performative conception of the political has been traditionally interpreted as referring to an ontological mode of existence, a tendency that can be traced from Aristotle to Arendt, Marx to Heidegger, and Chakrabarty to Virno. Within this tradition the political always describes a specific form of being, different from others. By doing so, this tradition inevitably makes the very border that separates one mode of existence from another, to a border between proper political space and pre- or non-political space. It is precisely because of this that Rancière’s post-foundational performative theory of the political is so important to us. Politics, although still performatively linked to aesthetics, is non-ontological in Rancière’s work; it needs no ground and it is radically contingent. It is also through this insight that we can understand how deeply depoliticizing the current reception of the Anthropocene has been in postcolonial discourse, but also how postcolonial remains can be made politically active again.

For Rancière, a (non)ontological mode of existence is always first and foremost expressive of a non-totalizable arrangement of the sensible world, one in which something about that world is rendered non-sensible or supplementary. This is the crucial difference between theories of the political influenced by a Heideggerian
A.F. Henao Castro and H. Ernstson

Hermeneutics of being (Arendt, Virno, and Chakrabarty) and the renovated theory of the political advanced by Rancière. While the former works with already agreed upon ideas of where politics takes place, this reliance is cast into suspicion by Rancière. Politics, according to Rancière (2004), takes place when the part that exceeds the count of the parts, hence has no part in the ontological distribution of existence, makes an appearance that troubles the totalizing count. This supplementary part, by means of its very appearance, renders contingent the regime of power that organizes the distribution of the parts, of some bodies to the working space and others to the space of leisure, of some bodies to the private sphere and others to the public one, of some bodies to the first-class migration of the rich in private airplanes supplied with lifeboats and others to the vulnerable journey across potentially lethal and severely (para)militarized deserts (Cacho 2012).

The performativity of the political is no longer an ontological attribute of an already existing space, but the dissensual capacity to trouble the configuration of a particular space. The space of labour, for example the factory, can always become a political space once the dominant logic that organizes and distributes which bodies are seen, governs what they can do, and polices what can they say, is upset by a different articulation of that space. This happens when workers emerge as proletarians in the midst of a factory strike, rearranging the distribution of intelligence on how to run the factory and the (national) economy; or when a desert exists simultaneously as the site for the exercise of national sovereignty and as the site for the resilient affirmation of people’s freedom of movement. This alternative articulation of a space can render any distribution unstable and call into question the legitimacy of its foundation.

This means that there is no archi-political principle of the political. Instead, the arché of the order is always artificial, revisable, undoable. As Rancière (2010, 35) claims in his sixth thesis on politics: “the essential object of political dispute is the very existence of politics itself.” This form of politics has no ontological foundation; all we are left with is conflict, the contingent dissensus that emerges whenever the world of equality clashes with the world of inequality. This occurs whenever migrants’ affirmation of their equal freedom to move clashes with the sovereign reproduction of hierarchy through the fantasy of policing an arid borderland. In this case, what politics first troubles, as Rancière’s third thesis on politics states, is the very necessity of that property with which the community organizes the distribution of its parts and its shares, the arché, which could for instance be the document that authorizes one to cross a border, only to de-authorize another (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Expressed by Rancière as the “the distribution of the sensible,” politics disrupts the taken-for-granted configuration of perception, meaning, sensibilities that allow a community to recognize itself. This distribution of the sensible conditions what arguments can be made, which voices can be heard, and which bodies can be seen and felt—and recognized as such (as legitimate arguments, voices, bodies) by the community. It is in this sense that politics is always an-archic, that is, it is always dissensual with respect to the “proper” principle that organizes what can and cannot be sensed by the community.
form of the political is always performative, as the assertion of a common world happens “through a paradoxical mise-en-scène that brings the community and the noncommunity together,” as claimed by Rancière (1999, 55).

In bringing this into our chapter, we claim that the potential grouping together of History 1 and History 2 into a shared space in front of what Baucom calls History 3 (the Anthropocene form of humanity’s species agency that Chakrabarty refuses to consider as a History in sensu stricto) constitutes the new arkhê with which to cancel today’s dissensus. In other words, Baucom’s solution with History 3 is also deeply depoliticizing and flawed. Rather, the two worlds that clash in today’s paradoxical mise en scène are the Anthropocenic world of “full-inclusion,” and the Anthropo-ob(S)cenic world of differences; the world in which the impossibility of the rich having lifeboats grants its overreaching universality, and the world where individuals participate asymmetrically in the oppressive effects of climate change in the now.

Rancière qualifies the political act that stages dissensus as scandalous. Those who were put in the shadows, as unauthorized migrants, acquire visibility through their contentious occupation of the public spaces from which they are disavowed. In being, speaking, and acting where they are not supposed to, because they lack the proper documents to do so, they redistribute the order of saying, the order of doing, and the order of being—and this is done through their very acts. Migrant organizations, and more concretely their demonstrations of equality in the performative sense, of the irrelevance of the “proper” in organizing the terms of belonging to the community, constitute an exemplary case of today’s politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene.

The obscenity of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene refers to this sense of scandalous appearance. Obscene comes from the Greek ob-skene, which means off-stage, more accurately the space hidden from view in which sexual violence, grief, and strong feelings were enacted in classical Greek tragedy. Sexual violence has frequently been reported by women crossing the Sonora desert, many of them taking contraceptive pills in anticipation of the sexual violence they know they will suffer. Foregrounding the otherwise unnoticed obscenity in the Anthropocene means refusing the distribution of the sensible that grants visibility to “proper” bodies such as climate change scientists, but not to other highly vulnerable but still capable bodies.

The obscenity of this other “anthropos” makes present what is now subordinated to the past in a theory of the Anthropocene that over-invests in the future. This obscenity rearranges and struggles for equal voice with those who are not quite at the proper scale of the problem, nor quite at the right level of scientific expertise. The political today is the refusal of History 2 to be History 2; to be reduced to playing the role of pure difference, yet not having its constituents fully counted within the all-encompassing accountability of Anthropocenic time. The political departs today from a resolute refusal to futurism, to the constant deferral of equality into the future by means of its verification in the present. Such verification of equality requires a troubling of the logic of inequality at work in the very distribution of intelligence among those researchers properly situated in the present...
conjuncture of the human as a geophysical force, at the expense of the outdated conceptual repertoire of the rest, still trapped within the leftovers of History 2 versus History 1.

Obscenity carries a different performative force within this, our last interruption, as it refers to the scandalous claim to the equality of knowledge and being of those “improper” bodies. It upsets the protocols of “decency” that naturalize the epistemic locus of scientific discourse as the authorial site of claims to knowledge. There is no proper foundation, neither humanistic, nor geological. That is the scandalous obscenity with which the subaltern anthropos—the claim to universality from the disavowed position of History 2—works to continuously trouble the cancellation of its dissensual capacity not by the archi-political form of History 1, but now by the meta-political form of History 3.

Against the distribution of the past to History 2, the present to History 1 and the future to History 3, the obscenity of the subaltern anthropos enacts the hic et nunc a political/theatrical performance of equality that brings all the times together in the present rupture of the arkhê. The dissensual power of History 2 can still interrupt the allure of an undifferentiated anthropos that results from a politics-free scientific standpoint. Such dissensual power can still exercise the historical leap that Marx (1852) famously enunciated with the performative statement “Hic Rhodus, hic salta!” (Here is the rose, dance here!). Against the temporal deferral of the problem to the future, against what Lee Edelman (2007) has criticized as the ideology of reproductive futurism, the Anthropo-ob(S)cene replies: here is climate change, dance here!

Conclusion

With their lives conditioned by militarized borderlands, migrant and unauthorized women of the Sonora desert tie together wider political ecologies that run through their heat-stressed bodies as they cross the desert. Here we have foregrounded these embodied experiences as an entry point to interrupt the Anthropocene. Against pronouncing the death of postcolonial theory, we have tried to understand first and foremost how subaltern experiences can remain to trouble the post-political death space of the Anthropocene where real political change in the here and now is denied as it gets displaced into the future.

In this sense our chapter should be read as engaged in the necessary mode of autocritique that Young (2012) attributes to postcolonial theory, seeking to show how Chakrabarty’s framework of the Anthropocene limits the reach of his own radical politics. The political is gone, to the extent that its proper location in the future is yet-to-come. Baucom, in his turn, contests this conclusion and tries to use post-humanist literature to update Chakrabarty, who in his earlier writings has argued that subaltern and postcolonial experiences can indeed become platforms for emancipatory projects. What should be accentuated, however, is less a methodological notion of History 4° that supplements Chakrabarty, which is what Baucom suggests, than a rethinking of the political towards a politics of the Anthropo-ob(S)cene of the present.
The necessary tasks lie in developing situated accounts of struggles against conditions of exclusion. But beyond that, we must also build toward re-launching the political performativity of subaltern experiences, which lies at the centre of postcolonial theory and its epistemological and political preoccupations. Occupied with the questions of temporality and scale, the epistemological translations among different forms of knowledge-production, and the location of dissensual politics across scenes of disruption in varied geographies and ecologies, such as a desert, a street, a store, or a shop floor, the “postcolonial” remains a radical theoretical source for proper politics in the here and now.

Notes


2 We have chosen to write the concept in upper case for consistency with the rest of the book. For references on its history, see Chapter 2 in this volume.

3 We have chosen to use the term postcolonial since it is the term used in the debate between Baucom and Chakrabarty, which is the debate we use as the entry point to our discussion. However, we are sensitive to the critiques of both Anne McClintock (1992) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) of the widely employed term of postcolonial theory. Quite early McClintock adequately exposed how postcolonial theory problematically re-centred global history around the single rubric of European colonialism, granting it the site of proper history (the rest being pre or post) and subordinating all other differences to their positionality vis-à-vis a colonial order that was declared dead despite continual forms of economic dependency, new forms of postcolonial US imperialism, and remaining forms of settler colonialism (as in Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory or US occupation of Puerto Rico). An alternative term for us, with some modifications, could have been decoloniality, see for instance Maldonado-Torres (2006).

4 We take inspiration from the courageous effort of these women at defying today’s global apartheid through their migratory strategies. We also acknowledge our privileged position and we are by no means saying that we are speaking for these women. Our responsibility in this chapter lies in departing from their location to launch a political reading of how globalization, urbanization, and ecological crisis are intertwined.

5 See other chapters of this book, in particular Chapters 1 and 2.

6 Note that Chakrabarty states that he never used the word “species-being” but only “species” as “I do not claim that a species can have a ‘being’ that becomes itself over time (as the young Marx suggested in his 1844 manuscripts)” (Chakrabarty 2014, 2–3).

7 If Marx’s analytics of capital gave Chakrabarty the tools for reinterpreting History 1, and Heidegger’s hermeneutics of being gave him the tools for understanding History 2, it was the Subaltern Studies tradition, and more specifically Gayatri Spivak’s crucial contribution to it, that provided him with the most important political insight: that of reinterpreting the “standing fight” between the being of capital and the becoming of living labour, not in the
form of a “dialectics of the other” but in that of a “constant interruption” (Chakrabarty 2000, 60ff).

8 There is a revealing quote where Chakrabarty (2009, 199) honestly states that in spite of all his readings in “theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years,” he had not received the intellectual tools to confront the idea that humanity could be a geological force.

9 Baucom’s connotation is History 4°, i.e. history four degrees, which is in reference to the average number of degrees Celsius that the planet could heat up due to climate change.

10 Marx’s “Hic Rhodus, hic salute!” is a version of Hegel’s translations of the Greek maxim from Aesop’s fable of a boasting athlete. Marx adds quickly in German, “Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!”, which is not really a translation but a spin on Hegel’s idea that when overwhelmed by the sheer enormousness of their task, people do not act “until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: Here is the rose, dance here!” (Chapter 1 in Marx 1963 [1852])

11 It is not the case that to deny the universality of scientific language, and to contest the position of authority that it derives from occupying and reproducing such locus of enunciation in the current hierarchical organization of knowledge, is in any way equivalent with denying climate change. Such a risk, notwithstanding, might be one of the motivating forces in many uncritical defences of scientific knowledge and in relation to climate change in particular.

12 As Young (2012, 24) argues, “indigenous activism uses a whole set of paradigms that do not fit easily with postcolonial presuppositions and theories— for example, ideas of the sacred and attachment to ancestral land. This disjunction, however, only illustrates the degree to which there has never been a unitary postcolonial theory—the right of return to sacred or ancestral land, for example, espoused by indigenous groups in Australia or the Palestinian people, never fitted easily with the postmodern Caribbean celebration of delocalised hybrid identities.” One should also keep in mind that it is through these forms of knowledge that Baucom suggests History 3 as a more expansive form of History 2, able to accommodate the scales of geophysical agency characteristic of the Anthropocene. See also von Heland and Sörlin (2012), who used the screen play Avatar to stage the contestation and ontological politics between Western science and indigenous forms of knowledge in relation to climate change and so called “planetary boundaries.”

13 There is no space here to develop how science, in various ways has increasingly been wedded to neoliberalism. A balanced and historically grounded account is given by Moore et al. (2011) who show how industrial-capitalist interest has since the 1970s increased its influence over science as a “quasi-autonomous” field. This includes how the advent of a knowledge economy pushed forward an “academic capitalism,” a view of universities as capitalist productive units with increasing use of business related managerial procedures to steer academic departments. But also the far-reaching tendency of breaking down public policy in narrower and more expert-laden fields. This has pushed forward what Jürgen Habermas as early as 1970 called a “scientization” in politics that involved an increasing orientation of state actors “to strictly scientific recommendations in the exercise of their public functions” (Habermas 1970, 62), what later authors explored as “New Public Management” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Politically this “scientization” and “expertization” have placed the management and decision-making of public concerns, both environmental or social, outside of democratic people-elected structures. Broader-based issues of justice or equality, which tend to place social groups and classes in agonistic relation to each other, have been replaced (within these narrower fields) with terms such as efficiency, accountability, and measurability, terms that are not only framed by scientific experts, but
that can only also be answered by them, leading to an increasing dependency on “experts.” While Moore et al. (2011) show how social movements have been able to exploit some of the deliberative arenas that have emerged as an effect, this tactic is still conditioned broadly by terms set by experts. Erik Swyngedouw (2009) takes New Public Management as a hallmark of the consolidation of what he refers to as “post-political arrangements,” which “runs parallel to the rise of a neoliberal governmentality that has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic management” (Swyngedouw 2009, 604; for applied analysis, see e.g. Ernstson and Sörlin (2013) on “ecosystem services,” and von Heland and Sörlin (2012) on “planetary boundaries”). For us here, it means that to proclaim that agency has abandoned the humans, while simultaneously gesturing that the interpretation of our situation lies primarily in the hands of scientists, should be viewed within a context of a deepening scientization of our public and people-elected agencies, something which quite surprisingly, neither Chakrabarty nor Baucom reflects upon.

Arendt (1998), based on Aristotle’s distinction between poiesis and praxis, distinguished three ontological modes of being—action, work, and labour. Labour was the organic reproducibility of the human body and work the artificial fabrication of a world capable of housing that human body. Action, which was the space of politics, was the artificial invention of a “space of appearance,” where men [sic] in the plural were able to collectively and agonistically co-create their symbolic identities in shared actions and discourses. Chakrabarty in turn drew upon Heidegger to identify his politics of difference, namely the distinction between human’s relationships towards their tools. Naming them History 1 and History 2, he identified the political with the conflictive interaction between the instrumental and objectified way of using tools (as in the factory), and the everyday and pre-analytical ways of using them, as in the “intimate and mutually productive relationship between one’s very particular musical ear and particular forms of music” (Chakrabarty 2000, 68). Like Chakrabarty, Virno (2004; 2005) also problematized Marx’s view of the musician as representing “unproductive labour.” He linked the political and the social through the image of the virtuosity of labour, which undoes the Arendtian ontological separation between action, work, and labour that was considered no longer tenable under postFordist conditions of capitalist accumulation. While Arendt, Chakrabarty, and Virno all invest in the performativity of politics, they depart from identifiable ontological modes of being, which Rancière’s notion of politics breaks with.

There are other post-founding political thinkers, although with important differences (Marchart 2007).

This clarifies how “new materialism” and object-oriented ontologies, which Baucom draws upon, work to cancel the political in deeply problematic ways. For further treatment of this, see Chapter 2 of this volume, which show how object-oriented ontologies run the risk of disavowing proper politics.

References


