

“Simply” talking about the Anthropocene?

Pluritemporality, multiscalar history, and history education

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Abstract

The Anthropocene seems to be on everyone’s lips these days. Whether as a turning point in Earth’s history, a geological epoch, or as a cultural narrative and metaphor, the Anthropocene is currently being debated not only in the scientific disciplines, but also as a fashionable buzzword in the media, popular culture, and the arts. Conversely, some scholars have argued that the term perpetuates anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, and global inequalities rather than “demystifying” them. Use of the term itself would seemingly encourage ongoing processes of depoliticization. In what follows, I will trace this supposed depoliticization of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, I argue that a critical look at notions of temporality and timescale could not only reveal the politics of the Anthropocene and initiate new modes of historical thinking, but also shake the foundations of history education.

Keywords

Anthropocene, history education, pluritemporality, multiscalar history, historical consciousness

History education at the Anthropocene crossroads

The Anthropocene seems to be on everyone’s lips these days. Whether as a watershed in the Earth’s history, a geological epoch or as a cultural narrative and metaphor, the Anthropocene is currently being discussed not only in the scientific disciplines, but also as a fashionable buzzword in the media, popular culture and the arts — in short, in the public sphere. In times of crisis, the Anthropocene is booming.

History as a discipline is no exception. Alongside pioneers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) in the international context or Franz Mauelshagen (2012), Jürgen Renn (with Scherer, 2015; 2022) and Eleonora Rohland (2018) in the German-speaking world, a number of historians and history teachers are now working on “the” Anthropocene. Even the first instances of its institutionalization can be observed. The University of Zurich has recently appointed a Chair for the history of the Anthropocene, held by Debjani Bhattacharyya. Moreover, journals are now dedicated to “the” Anthropocene or have special issues on the subject. One such journal is *The Anthropocene Review*, which regularly publishes historical articles with an interdisciplinary focus. History education, even though it arrived with a splash, has been a little too late to the party. Nevertheless, there have been various responses to Anthropocene studies in history education: First, in the

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context of the climate crisis, many scholars have recognized the need for conceptual change and have begun rethinking the framework of history education. These scholars are reexamining the notion of knowledge and knowledge production in the Anthropocene (Barsch & Hübner, 2023; Hübner, 2022; Nitsche et al., 2023; Nordgren 2023). Indeed, Kenneth Nordgren gets to the heart of the matter when he writes: “We need to explore what can be powerful historical knowledge to orient in this new normality” (2021). Second, there is a group of scholars who are reevaluating history education itself in addressing climate crises. Some scholars of history education, such as Canadian historians Heather McGregor, Sara Karn, and Jackson Pind, have taken a “radical” approach “in seeking to attune history education to a relational, ecological and ethical future orientation” (2020, 169; also see McGregor et al., 2021). Despite this development, many scholars’ reference to the Anthropocene is still simply a reiteration of Crutzen and Stoermer’s original wording:

Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term “anthropocene” for the current geological epoch. (2000, p. 17)

The concept of the Anthropocene is often reduced to a “tried-and-tested” consensual platitude – and I myself have taken this path: “Humans are now a geological influence and thus a global, geological and existentially threatening (risk) factor” (Hübner et al., 2023, p. 85, trans.). As a result, we lose sight of the need to critically examine the concept of the Anthropocene. After all, the Anthropocene is not only self-referential – Donna Haraway comes to mind (2016, p. 539): “The Anthropocene is thereby produced as a human species act” – the Anthropocene is also “a result of the actions of powerful actors of a global economy and politics of both “old” and “new” imperialism” (Gebhardt, 2016, p. 38, trans.).

The Anthropocene is, in short, a highly political concept – and in this political sense a very Western and Eurocentric concept. However, while the concept reveals the use of time in the context of political action and agency, it also expands the theoretical view of constructing time as a form of social meaning. For the very act of speaking of the Anthropocene in terms of time is a political act, if not one that is also depoliticizing. And, if one follows Landwehr’s understanding of knowledge of time, it has less to do with science than with critical discourse and political practice. Once knowledge of time about the Anthropocene has succeeded in “solidifying itself discursively, that is, in forming specific forms of the true and the real, it must be granted historical efficacy” (2020, 41, trans.). Hence, to declare the Anthropocene a geological epoch can be regarded not only as a “discipline-based construction of time” – one that reflects the study of time as manifested in “rock sediment and fossils, the compression of stones and animal remains marking layers of change” (Gribetz & Kaye, 2023, p. 57) – but it could, as the geographer Hans Gebhardt (2016) warns, also be tantamount to depoliticizing global environmental change: “Powerful actors, organizations, institutions and their spatially differentiated actions in a globalized world disappear behind the ‘human’” (p. 39, trans.).

Against this background, it is important to discuss the politics of the Anthropocene – and so indeed the depoliticization of the Anthropocene – and to speak of individual people and groups. Elsewhere, so the criticism goes, the term would perpetuate anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, and global inequalities rather than “demystify” them. In fact, the term itself would encourage ongoing processes of depoliticization. In what follows, I will trace this supposed depoliticization of the Anthropocene. In doing so, I take an approach that makes use of concepts of temporality and timescales, consider deep-time and multi-scalar notions of time, and ultimately argue that a critical look at notions of temporality and timescales will not only uncover the politics of the Anthropocene and initiate political action but also shake the foundations of German-language history education.

On the depths of deep history

“The ‘Anthropocene’”, notes Christoph Antweiler (2022, p. 224, trans.), “reflects the species category human in the word.” According to Donna Haraway, such a wording inscribes an overestimation of the human species’ agency into the concept of the Anthropocene (2016). Moreover, talk of the Anthropocene, as a number of critics argue, perpetuates a familiar speciesism and exceptionalism content with simplistic solutions. If the anthropogenic climate crisis is the core of all evil, then only anthropogenic science can provide a cure (Antweiler, 2022, p. 226). The pri-

oritization of geoengineering and technological fixes, of “technological openness” and ecological “economic efficiency”, which is a mainstay of political discourse, reflects this understanding of the Anthropocene (see Merz, 2023).

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) took up this criticism early on in his article *The Climate of History: Four Theses* and introduced the concept of species and species thinking, though not without causing some unease among historians. Chakrabarty himself admits that the category of species would evoke memories of biologism, essentialism, and determinism and could thereby obscure the reality of capitalist production and the logic of imperial rule (p. 216), but he nevertheless sees the concept of species as a starting point 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” (p. 213). The basis for this concept is his insight that, on the one hand, the climate crisis “has been necessitated by the high-energy consuming models of society that capitalist industrialization has created and promoted” (p. 217). On the other hand, however, “the knowledge in question is the knowledge of humans as a species, a species dependent on other species for its own existence, a part of the general history of life” (p. 219). Consequently, Chakrabarty argues for an interweaving of the history of capital and the history of species. Following Daniel Lord Smail (2008), Chakrabarty (2009, p. 213) sees thinking in terms of species and all forms of species history as closely linked to the quest for deep history:

Man will have to be placed in the larger context of the deeper history of life on this planet. ... So, our inevitable anthropocentrism will have to be supplemented (not replaced) by “deep time” perspectives that necessarily escape the human point of view. (Chakrabarty, 2017, p. 42)

The fact that Chakrabarty speaks here of an inevitable anthropocentrism is probably due to his phenomenological premises: “We humans”, he says, “never experience ourselves as a species. We can understand or infer the existence of a human species on an intellectual level, but we never experience it as such” (2009, p. 220). Any form of historical experience in the Anthropocene would be ruled out. Historians would hardly be able to cross the threshold of human and nonhuman modes of existence. The threshold between the distant and the familiar, the anthropocentrism of the past and the present, would ultimately remain insurmountable (Hübner 2022). Such a focus on deep history could therefore lead to the depths of anthropocentrism.

Moreover, and it is important to note this before turning to Chakrabarty’s use of the term “species”, the blanket use of the term “human” or “humans” can create a feeling of unease. In many discussions about the Anthropocene, talk of humanity or human action “as such” awakens the impression that they are monolithic concepts, which shows a disregard for global and regional diversity, inequalities, and injustices. Scholars such as Kathleen Morrison have thus called for “provincializing the Anthropocene”, meaning that

we no longer take European agricultural or industrial history as a starting point, or that we stop trying to project (and retrodict) proposed causal relationships between population and anthropogenic effects derived from a limited sample of human economic history, but also that we attend to the ways in which existing “western” structures of thought and disciplinary practice overdetermine modes of agency – “human” and “natural.” (2015)

A universalist appropriation of the Anthropocene that depoliticizes the concept in a political sense stands in sore need of correction. As Frank Biermann et al. – and similar voices above all in sustainability and environmental studies – recognize, the Anthropocene is instead a “political term” (2016, p. 348). Hence, Biermann et al. have pointed out:

[T]he Anthropocene notion ... has been criticized for picturing an overly simplistic and globalized view on human agency. ... While we recognize that the Anthropocene concept can be powerful in raising awareness of the overall human impacts on our planet, we claim that it risks being framed and understood in a way that is too “global” and monolithic, neglecting persistent social inequalities and vast regional differences. (2016, p. 342)

From multispecies to multiscalar histories

In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty (2021) has responded to the criticisms of his ideas. Roughly speaking, he distinguishes between two forms of historiography: first, he speaks of a global history, or rather a history of the globe, that is, a human-centered history of the Earth over the past 500 years, which is closely linked to the history of European expansion and colonialism. And second, he distinguishes a history of the planet from this first form, which, through the category of the planetary, removes humans from the center and places them in other, longer timescales:

The globe, I argue, is a humanocentric construction; the planet, or the Earth system, decenters the human ... the doubled figure of the human now requires us to think about how various forms of life, our own and others', may be caught up in historical processes that bring together the globe and the planet both as projected entities and as theoretical categories and thus mix the limited timescale over which modern humans and humanist historians contemplate history with the inhumanly vast timescales of deep history (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 4).

As Zoltán Simon notes, Chakrabarty is attempting to break the dominance of anthropocentrism through the figure of the dual nature of man:

Thus, the notion of the “doubled figure of the human” ... gives way, later in the book, to a tripartite distinction between the internally divided humanity of the sociopolitical domain and humanist histories, the human as a species in the history of the species, and the human as a geological agent in Anthropocene/planetary history (15). These conceptions of the human and their respective histories intersect and interact as the global discloses the planetary. (Simon, 2023, p. 327)

Historians such as Marek Tamm and Zoltán Simon (2020) address this very point and argue for concepts of multi- and pluritemporality in the writing of history. In this, Tamm and Simon differ from other historians such as Achim Landwehr (2020) and Caroline Rothauge (2017 & 2021), who also discuss concepts of pluritemporality, but hardly problematize humanocentric perspectives. When Landwehr and Rothauge speak of pluritemporality, they often refer to a meaning emphasizing that a “variety of times existed in parallel and that individuals as well as collectives therefore were living in, living with and actively producing a multitude of temporal modes” (Rothauge, 2021, p. 225). Landwehr and Rothauge thus do not include “more-than-human times” and pursue a “chronoanthropocentrism”, to employ a term introduced by Helge Jordheim (2022, p. 423), which falls short of Johann Gottfried Herder’s ideas of polytemporality: “In fact, every changeable thing has the measure of its time in itself; this would exist even if there were no other; no two things in the world have the same measure of time” (1799, p. 75, own translation). Marcia Bjornerud, a geoscientist and environmentalist, sees the first impulses for polytemporal thinking in art and cultural projects such as that of the photographer Rachel Sussman. In her explorations, Sussman portrayed the oldest living creatures on Earth: a brain coral whose appearance she dated to the time of Plato, pine trees whose age she estimated at over 4,000 years, and soil bacteria that have lain dormant in the Siberian permafrost for over 700,000 years (Sussman cited in Bjornerud, 2022, p. 198). All these creatures, we might readily conclude, create time horizons that transcend generational orders of time, call for alternative narrativizations of time(s), and point to a new kind of relationship to time. For historians, it initially seems somewhat absurd to think of such alternative narrativizations of times beyond cognitive-linguistic narrativizations without slipping into the realm of abstract speculation.

Furthermore, historical animal studies have recently shown how nonhuman actors can become the protagonists of source-based historical narratives. The historian Mieke Roscher (2022) traced the life and myth of “Darwin’s” giant Galápagos turtle Harriet, who was hatched from an egg on the Ecuadorian islands of the same name around 1830 and died in an Australian zoo in 2006. Although there is some doubt as to the veracity of this story, since Darwin never visited the island where Harriet originally came from, the turtle has nevertheless left her mark on historical narratives of evolutionary history (Roscher, 2022, p. 20). Still, with this nonhuman biographical sketch, Roscher has opened up a completely new way of reading the history of the 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries (see also Krebber & Roscher 2018).

Tamm and Simon, in a similar way, seek to transcend the anthropocentrism of conventional historiography with their approach of a “more-than-human history”. The two authors suggest that, if the Anthropocene has taught us anything, it is that time and historicity are not specifi-

cally human. Accordingly, they continue, a new concept of historical temporality is not just about extending our temporal horizon deep into the past, that is, into deep time. Rather, it is about a pluralistic understanding of temporality, open to different rhythms, events, and processes at different scales. In short, it is about multiscalarity (Tamm & Simon 2020, p. 211f.).

Like Chakrabarty, Tamm and Simon operationalize the concept of species and consequently speak of a multispecies history, which, intertwined with a multiscale history, does not mean putting an end to historiography about the human world, but rather opening up a potentially new historical knowledge that would be inconceivable within the boundaries of a modern concept of history that focused exclusively on humans. Such a concept of history would include all forms of life, reach far into the past, support the interaction and integration of multiple timescales, and take seriously the transformative events and interruptions on a deep timescale (Tamm & Simon 2020, p. 214).

From a scaling of time towards a critique of historical consciousness

The dominance of anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene, it should be noted here, is also conditioned by a humanocentric scaling of time and temporality. Chakrabarty counters this scaling of time with the concept of species and deep time, Tamm and Simon with the concepts of multispecies and multiscalar history. Both approaches are linked to acts of political behavior. For the political is reflected in the scalings of temporality, especially in the scalings of a history of the globe and a history of the planet, in the meeting of human and nonhuman scales. “Global” scalings of temporality unfold at the level of histories of capital, consumption, and colonization, and see human-centered sustainability as a central concern. “Global” scalings are thus not only anthropocentric, they also always blur social and planetary inequalities, promote differentiation, and are hegemonic and Eurocentric. In contrast, “planetary” (or even multiscale) scales do not refer to humans but focus on a complex and multicellular life that makes the habitability of the planet sustainable not only for humans.

The “planetary age”, or rather the planetary scaling of temporality, hence opens up a perspective for political action in the Anthropocene: “We are interwoven with a history”, Chakrabarty explains, “that is not our own. And this perspective can inspire political action” (2022, trans.). Political action, he continues, should therefore be understood as something that “on the one hand helps people to think beyond their lifetimes and to be at home on earth.” On the other hand, and this would certainly be in Chakrabarty’s spirit, a planetary scaling of temporality could point the way to educational approaches beyond the usual Eurocentrisms. The provincialization of Europe could be achieved through the concepts of the Anthropocene and multiscalarity, and the historical responsibility of the Western industrialized countries in the so-called Global North could be discussed.

Donna Haraway admittedly leaves such an elaboration of the Anthropocene concept somewhat annoyed: because, as Haraway explains in a roundtable discussion:

If you propose to call the present time Capitalocene, as I and others have done to highlight these processes ... you will be accused of being political. Propose Anthropocene and you are simply talking about the human impact on the planet that is now of a geological scale. (Haraway et al., 2016, p. 5)

In a sense, then, Haraway associates the concept of the Anthropocene with a concealment of the political dimensions of its underlying processes. However, and despite the discrepancy with Chakrabarty’s positions, her statement also makes one thing clear: the question of politicizing the Anthropocene is essentially intertwined with the scaling of temporality. Talk of the Anthropocene therefore not only challenges the (non)politicization of history but is also intertwined with a politicization of temporality and time consciousness. To put it more clearly, the very concept of time consciousness is — from Chakrabarty’s and Haraway’s perspective — a political concept. This means that talk of the Anthropocene, whether it is conceptualized through approaches such as the planetary age, multispecies history, multiscalar history or the like, is rather controversial for history education: first, the “dimensions” of temporality or temporal consciousness appear more political than ever. With reference to discussions on the Anthropocene, it can hardly be denied that the lifeworld perception of the temporality of experience and action (see Pandel,

1987) and its development is closely intertwined with a scaling of temporality that not only focuses on people, but also makes “one’s own” scaling of temporality the norm in a quasi-self-referential act in relation to “other” scalings. Furthermore, and this is where I would like to end for now, one of the foundations of history education needs to be reconsidered, namely, historical consciousness, the conventional interpretation of which undoubtedly promotes a humanocentric, “hegemonically Eurocentric and nation-state shaped culture of history and memory” (Yildirim & Lücke, 2020, p. 150).

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Review

This miniature has been reviewed by the editors of the HTCE journal.

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