

RUNNER-UP

Writers' Award XXVIII:
Climate

A better Anthropocene

by Natasha Chassagne

“The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves.”
—Rachel Carson

Our globally connected planet is changing faster than we could ever have imagined. For much of 2019, the lungs of our Earth – the Amazon rainforest – was burning; while only months later, our sunburnt county was doing the same. Both were blanketed in soot and black smoke visible from space. This year a heatwave swept over the Arctic as Siberia’s tundra was set ablaze by wildfire. This is the last place on earth that should be on fire, yet more than a startling metaphor for global warming, it starkly exhibits the urgency of the situation that is climate change.

In the depths of the Arctic ocean, temperatures are warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet. Indigenous coastal communities are feeling the absence of ice as life as they know it is destabilising fast. On the other side of the globe, on the plains of India, the majestic yet once hardy and shrewd Indian Cheetah, known for its stellar survival skills has died out. Last year, it joined the growing list of extinct species, succumbing to intense desertification due to human activity.

These events are far from being geographically isolated. Each one of these changes has a flow-on effect that impacts the global climate and has consequences for every one of us.

The blue planet is turning shades of red, not (yet) literally, but metaphorically. As the greenhouse gases in the

Earth’s atmosphere increase, heat from our sun intensifies and is trapped like a thermal blanket, slowly suffocating life and cutting off our oxygen. Humans have had an astonishing and shameful effect on this planet we call home. We make up only 0.01 per cent of all life on Earth, but since the beginning of the agricultural and industrial revolutions have managed to cause the loss of 83 per cent of all mammals, causing, according to scientists, the sixth mass extinction of life.

Our impact on this planet has been so great that it is understood to have pushed us into a new geological era: the Anthropocene, a new dawn born by human influence. The term, coined by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, came about in a scientific meeting in Mexico in February 2000, after a presentation



Eyes and ocelli of an orchid bee, by Alejandro Santillana

Crutzen attended at which a group of scientists were drumming on about the Holocene, the current epoch which began approximately 11,700 years ago, after the beginning of the last Ice Age. Crutzen was becoming increasingly agitated by the term when he blurted out “Stop saying the Holocene! We’re not in the Holocene any more.” This was not a prepared speech, so in the midst of his outburst Crutzen threw out the term “Anthropocene”, as an era influenced by human (anthropogenic) activity. The word stems from the Ancient Greek *anthropos* meaning “human” and *-cene* (or *kainos* in Ancient Greek).

Crutzen was convinced that we had entered a new era on the geological time scale – a system which helps us understand the periods in Earth’s

history. Later that year, Crutzen, along with ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, wrote an article for the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Global Change Newsletter 41 that argued, rather convincingly, that we are indeed living in a new human-influenced geological epoch.

As we stand at the crossroads of human civilisation, on the boundaries of an epoch that we have created, the social and environmental philosophical questions we pose now could dictate the future of our planet. If we continue on the current trajectory, we are heading for dystopia: an uncontrollably chaotic world in which ecosystems face total collapse and human suffering extends beyond that which is physically tolerable. The rich will get richer, but the poor will become

so inexplicably destitute as our natural resources will struggle to support basic life systems.

Do we accept such an ominous outlook, or should we strive for a better Anthropocene?

Rather than desperately surrendering to a gloomy fate like the doleful Indian Cheetah, we can argue that society does have a responsibility to try and confront the social and environmental challenges brought on by the Anthropocene by transcending the very causes of these changes. The Anthropocene is underlined by anthropogenic (human-influenced) climate change. We have created it. We can make it better. We can still aim for utopia. Even if we never reach it, our journey along the way would shake things up.

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Some scientists argue that we may have already reached a tipping point. The unprecedented changes like the Arctic ice melt and the Amazon forest fires are indicative of this. The point is, though, that we cannot continue doing things the way we always have and magically end up with a better future. 'Sustainable development' has only offered us a patchwork of solutions, primarily designed to uphold business-as-usual – the sort of business that has led us to a climate emergency in the first place. Ideas like sustainable development have been useful in tinting the global narrative green, but as long as the predominantly western proposal has been around, climate change and social injustice have intensified. What does this tell us?

The fundamental, undealt issue is connection: to each other, within our communities, and to our environment. A better Anthropocene will be enriched with environmental and social justice. It will ensure ecosystem health so that we may live within the fragile planetary boundaries.

In a better Anthropocene, we will approach things differently. We will think differently. We will act differently. Instead of taking an anthropocentric view of our life on this Earth, we will be more biocentric in how we live and interact with each other and nature. We will nurture a more treasured relationship with the natural environment. Governments might even customarily give rights to nature as both a moral and legal imperative to respecting the limits of that relationship.

There are already many societies around the globe with a similar worldview, such as the Latin American philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, the South African *Ubuntu*, the Indian *Eco-Swaraj*. What these all have in common is a vision for collective social and ecological wellbeing. For Indigenous peoples, this nature-human connection is innate. By taking notice of these alternative ways of thinking and doing, we can already see that pockets of better futures are starting to emerge, as we struggle and stumble our way through this next great era of our planet.

Let's take a closer look at *Buen Vivir*, for example, where connection to each other and to our environment is the central tenet of how to live life. *Buen Vivir* is translated as the Good Life. Unlike western notions of placing primacy on human needs and individual wellbeing, *Buen Vivir* values both collective human and environmental needs equally, leading to greater levels of environmental and social wellbeing. Thinking of ourselves as part of nature, rather than separate from it, influences how we behave and act and can help recover the delicate equilibrium between nature and society. It changes how we consume and how we approach our relationships. We may have reached a tipping point with irreversible consequences, but we can still look to balance the scales of social and environmental justice.

This is not a simple move, but a necessary one, and rather than looking at the situation from an overwhelming macro-political perspective, there

is much to learn from other cultures and communities and their ways of looking at nature. Connection is the keyword. Connection to each other and connection to our Earth. Through solidarity, community, and ecological justice we can help each other, and our planet to flourish.

Puerto Rican writer and historian Aurora Levins Morales declares, "Solidarity comes from... the recognition that, like it or not, our liberation is bound up with that of every other being on the planet, and that politically, spiritually, in our heart of hearts we know anything else is unaffordable." Connection. And, if there is one thing we have learned in 2020, it is that we can no longer ignore the way in which our fate is intertwined with each other and the planet that sustains us. We may not be able to halt a changing world, but we can make our experience of it better.

To recognise the anthropogenic changes we have inflicted on our planet is to confront the reality that we are intimately entangled with the health of our Earth, and that we must build a better culture of nature that includes humans, not at the core, but in the cycle of life. To make these changes is to strive for a utopian future. In the words of Eduardo Galeano, "Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. As much as I may walk, I may never reach it. So, what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking." It is with this momentum that we may create a better Anthropocene. ▣