

# We Should Be Talking about the Capitalocene

Wendy Arons

“Whose Anthropocene?” My answer to this question is that we shouldn’t be invoking that framework at all.<sup>1</sup> When scientists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer popularized the nomenclature at the turn of the 21st century, it had the virtue of succinctly conveying a piece of stunning geophysical news: that the planet had, at some point in the relatively recent geological past, entered into an “Age of Man,” in which human beings had managed to effect the kinds of large-scale changes to atmosphere, soil, mineral composition, species distribution, and climate that had previously been attributable to such large-scale geophysical events as volcanic eruptions or comet impacts.<sup>2</sup> But the term “Anthropocene” is both misleading and obfuscatory, and as an analytic framework it has a serious blind spot when it comes to understanding the conflicts stemming from the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of the “Age of Man”—the very eco-conflicts on which artists in our field ought to be training their focus.

A major problem with the concept of the “Anthropocene” is that both the arguments it supports and the policies and solutions proposed in its name tend to replicate the very problems that the term seeks to illuminate. To begin with, the root of the word, *anthropos*, implies that humanity as a whole is responsible for the changes wrought by human activity on the planet, and as such fails to account for the socioeconomic divisions that have made the majority of people throughout human history—in particular, women, indigenous people, and people of color—victims rather than perpetrators of ecological violence against the Earth (see, for example, Klein 2016; Mirzoeff 2018). As Jessica Horton notes, in “Indigenous Artists Against the Anthropocene,” “[e]ven as political ecology has gained critical momentum, the post-2000s rhetoric of the Anthropocene regularly glosses the concerns of environmental justice with an assumption of human-wide culpability for climate change” (2017:59). At the same time, proponents of the “Anthropocene” nomenclature often draw a connection between “humanity’s” responsibility for creating the ecological crisis and “our” responsibility to solve it—that is, they propose that in the “Age of Man,” “we” will find technological solutions

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1. Portions of this essay have appeared in “Tragedies of the Capitalocene” (Arons 2020) and are reprinted with permission.
  2. The term was coined by US biologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s (see Revkin 2011) and was first popularized by Crutzen and Stoermer in an article published in *Global Change Newsletter* (2000:17–18; see also Crutzen 2002).

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to shape the planet's ecosystems to guarantee the survival of our species. This is a proposition that raises thorny questions about who gets to decide where and how potentially risky geoengineering projects might be deployed (Crist 2016:19–20; Snaza 2018:339–57; Steffen et al. 2011); history tells us that such decision-making nearly always aligns with the interests of patriarchal, colonialist, and white supremacist power. The term “Anthropocene” thus obscures both the history and the future of environmental injustices.

In addition, the notion of the “Anthropocene” also has the drawback that it can be readily aligned with the discourse of individualism; that is, its universalizing of responsibility for changes to the earth's climate also, paradoxically, plays into campaigns that suggest that solutions lie in (collectivized) individual actions, such as recycling, using energy-efficient light bulbs, or adopting a plant-based diet. This is a discourse that has all too frequently been mustered as a diversionary tactic by capitalist entities anxious to forestall profit-threatening environmental regulations, as in the 1970s “Keep America Beautiful” antipollution ad campaign, in which a Native American (played by an Italian American actor) paddled down a polluted river with a tear in his eye while a somber voice intoned “People start pollution. People can stop it.” That advertising campaign was, in fact, sponsored by the soft drink bottling industry, which sought to combat environmentalists' attempts to pass legislation curtailing the use of disposable bottles.<sup>3</sup> As historian Finis Dunaway observes, “By making individual viewers feel guilty and responsible for the polluted environment, the ad deflected the question of responsibility away from corporations and placed it entirely in the realm of individual action, concealing the role of industry in polluting the landscape” (Dunaway 2017). Cultural critic T.J. Demos makes a similar point:

It is not that most of us are faultless [...] yet low-level consumerist complicity is different from structural responsibility. It is the [...] corporate and financial elites, petrochemical industry leaders, [and] growth-obsessed pundits [...] who are doing everything possible [...] to manipulate governments through corporate lobbying, remove sustainable energy options from even entering the discussion, fund climate change deniers, and advocate for continued large-scale and extreme fossil fuel extraction. (2017:55–56)

The same could be said of the “Anthropocene”: it is an idea that, in making every human on earth individually and universally culpable, deflects attention both from the primary perpetrators and from the solutions that would be radically disruptive to those perpetrators' bottom line.

I'm with critics like Demos, Timothy LeCain, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Jason W. Moore in advocating that, instead, we should be talking about the “Capitalocene” (Demos 2017; LeCain 2015; Mirzoeff 2018; Moore 2016a, 2016b, 2018). This is a term coined by Andreas Malm and taken up by Moore, who observes that a key problem with much of what he calls the “Popular Anthropocene” discourse is that it tends to identify the accelerated use of fossil fuel since the 19th-century industrial age as the decisive tipping factor into the “Age of Man.” But this commonly understood narrative elides a much longer history of capitalist-colonialist economic relations that have historically pressed every sector of nature, including other human beings, into service providing un- or underpaid labor for the accumulation of capital. Moore would date the beginning of the “Capitalocene” to just before the age of European colonial expansion, an era in which wealth began to depend no longer on the limits of “land-productivity” but rather on the exploitation of “labor-productivity.” Moore argues that this was the point in world history in which vast numbers of humans—slaves, serfs, indigenous people, people of color, and, above all, women—were essentially equated with “nature” in a key way: the cost of their labor—like the true costs of nonrenewable natural resources—never had to

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3. Finis Dunaway notes that “Keep America Beautiful was founded in 1953 by the American Can Co. and the Owens-Illinois Glass Co., who were later joined by the likes of Coca-Cola and the Dixie Cup Co.” (2017).

be taken fully into account (2016b:91).<sup>4</sup> Moore notes that “the genius of capitalism has been to find ways, through culture, science, and the state, to appropriate streams of work/energy for free or low cost” (2016b:90), a process he describes as a “cheapening” of nature. Moore writes, “[f]or capitalism, Nature is ‘cheap’ in a double sense: to make Nature’s elements ‘cheap’ in price; and also *to cheapen*, to degrade or render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price” (2016a:2–3). Importantly, this cheapening of nature both enabled and depended upon the philosophical and ideological separation of (some—few and elite) capital-H “Humans” from “Nature.” Capitalism, Moore argues, was the first civilization system to organize itself on the basis of that separation, and the Nature/Society divide was, he argues,

fundamental to the rise of capitalism. For it allowed nature to become Nature—environments without Humans. But note the uppercase *H*: Nature was full of humans treated as Nature.

And what did this mean? It meant that the web of life could be reduced to a series of external objects—mapped, explored, surveyed, calculated for what Nature could do for the accumulation of capital. (2016b:87)

Demos agrees with Moore, noting that the term “Capitalocene” has the advantage of locating the source of climate change and other disruptions to the earth’s systems “not in species being, but within the complex and interrelated processes of the global-scale, world-historical, and politico-economic organization of modern capitalism stretched over centuries of enclosures, colonialisms, industrializations, and globalizations” (2017:17). Where “Anthropocene” implies that human beings are universally responsible for ushering in an “Age of Man,” the term “Capitalocene” more accurately directs attention to the socioeconomic system that enabled the large-scale transformation of the earth through equally large-scale exploitation of “cheap” natural and human resources.

In addition, the notion of the “Capitalocene” also opens space for consideration and redress of past, present, and future environmental injustices that the universalizing rhetoric of the “Anthropocene” tends to occlude. Important to the “Capitalocene” thesis is the nexus between capitalism and colonialism: as Moore notes, there were usually already people living in that “Nature” that was mapped, explored, surveyed, and appropriated for the accumulation of capital; and the mapping, exploring, and surveying process—all, often, in the name of scientific, technological, and social “advancement”—inevitably resulted in the displacement, enslavement, or extermination of those people. Even some geologists and theorists who would advocate for the term “Anthropocene” point to the ruptures of colonization to argue in favor of dating the beginning of the epoch to the 15th century. In support, they note that the violence of the Columbian exchange—in which the cross-Atlantic transfer of dozens of species of flora and fauna led to a “radical reorganization of life on Earth without geological precedent,” and during which the rapid collapse of indigenous human populations in the Americas due to war, disease, famine, and enslavement resulted in a decline in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and consequent climate change—can be read in the stratigraphic record through pollen deposits and other biogeochemical changes (Lewis and Maslin 2015:174–75; see also Davies 2016:186–87). Thus, even though the scientific debate about whether to designate a new epoch and when to date its beginning is as yet unsettled, there is geological evidence to support the claim that capitalism and colonialism marked the beginning of a new world-system not only in a socio-politico-economic sense but also on a global biogeochemical scale.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Moore’s argument has itself been subjected to criticism: see for example Stoner and Melathopoulos (2018:111–17).

5. That said, Moore also draws a distinction between what he calls the “Popular Anthropocene” (the idea that we live in an “Age of Man”) and the task of defining a geological epoch, noting that “the ‘Age of Capital’ necessarily precedes and precipitates the ‘geological signals’ necessary to discern a new geological era. That era—the Anthropocene—will outlast capitalism by a great many millennia. The biospheric conditions of the ongoing planetary ‘state shift’ will shape the conditions of human organization for a very *longue durée* indeed” (2018:238).

Moore and other advocates for using the term “Capitalocene” to describe our present moment in geo-history situate their argument within a “world-ecology” framework. From that perspective, “human organizations are at once producers and products of the web of life, understood in its evolving mosaic of diversity. [...] Capitalism becomes something more-than-human. It becomes a world-ecology of power, capital, and nature” (Moore 2018:239). Within such a framework, the history of capitalism exerts its effects beyond the borders of self-identified capitalist systems; as Moore puts it, in response to critics who suggest that the idea of the “Capitalocene” elides the experience of Communist projects, “to what degree either the Soviet or Chinese projects represented a fundamental break with previous waves of capitalist environment-making is an important question but beside the point. The question is whether or not such partial moments overwhelmed the ‘developing patterns of history’ established and reproduced in the capitalist world-ecology over the *longue durée*” (2018:241). In contrast to the “Popular Anthropocene,” which minimizes the importance of capitalism and capitalist relations to our current planetary crisis, the “Capitalocene” connects the world-economy to the world-ecology and seeks to understand human relations of power, production, and environment-making in, and in relation to, the web of life.

The concept of the “Capitalocene” has the potential to dissolve symbolic boundaries between humans and nonhumans with an argument grounded in neo-Marxist economics: it shines light on the extent to which “capitalism ‘works’ because it organizes *work* as a multispecies process, a process in which most of the unpaid (environmental and other) costs are borne by those species—humans among them—doing the work” (Moore 2016b:93). As such, the idea of the “Capitalocene” provides a framework for understanding human impact on the global environment in terms of social and political history, that is, in terms of struggles for control over resources and in terms of conflicts over what constitutes fully enfranchised ecological “beingness” in the social, political, and economic arenas. But caution is also in order with regard to the term “Capitalocene.” Jessica Horton asks:

[W]hat historical culpabilities are quietly excused when we substitute modifiers such as “anthro” or even “capital” for “Euro” and “American”? [...] From the perspective of a field shaped by misnomers that arrived on Spanish ships and have stuck around for half a millennium, the scramble to newly brand an era of earthly devastation looks a bit like claiming the discovery of an old story [...]. For many Indigenous people, apocalypse concerns the past as much as the future. (2017:59–60)

Such a perspective is an important reminder that “Capitalocene” will be a useful and ethical framework only insofar as it allows us to center the perspectives, histories, and futures of indigenous peoples and people of color.

But these are stories that theatre and performance are well-positioned to tell; indeed, unlike the concept of the “Anthropocene,” which perpetuates the obfuscating idea of a universalized Human/Nature divide, the “Capitalocene” provides an ideological framework for dramatizing social, racial, and gendered eco-inequalities. The tragedy of our current epoch is not the tragedy of our species writ large; to buy into “Anthropocene” thinking is to replicate the ideological sleight of hand that keeps the true cost of resource extraction off the books and renders its (mostly BIPOC, female, and nonhuman) victims invisible. Instead, we should be talking about the tragedy of the “Capitalocene,” and look to our field to dramatize the relentless pursuit of the accumulation of capital at the expense of both humans and the environment and to use performance to render visible those dysfunctions vis-à-vis the nonhuman world that have been normalized into invisibility. Many writers have begun this important work, some of whom I have included on my list of what I like to call “Tragedies of the Capitalocene” (see also Arons 2020):

- Bilodeau, Chantal. 2015. *Sila*.  
 Canady, T, Genevieve de Mahy, B Kleymeyer, and the Single Carrot Theatre Ensemble.  
 2022. *Kiss Me, Mr. Musk*.

- Clements, Marie. 2003. *Burning Vision*.
- Coble, Eric. 2019. *My Barking Dog*.
- Coffee, Steve, et al. 2019. *Rain Follows the Plow: a dust opera*.
- Corthron, Kia. 2010. *A Cool Dip in the Barren Sabaran Crick*.
- Enelow, Shonni. 2014. *Carla and Lewis*.
- Lewis, E.M. 2010. *Song of Extinction*.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 1996. *Heroes and Saints*.
- Murphy, Colleen. 2019. *The Breathing Hole*.
- Nottage, Lynn. 2009. *Ruined*.
- O'Neill, Dan. 2012. *Victor Frange Presents GAS*.
- Schenkkan, Robert. 1993. *The Kentucky Cycle*.
- Shawn, Wallace. 2009. *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*.
- Soutar, Annabel. 2012. *Seeds*.
- Waters, Steve. 2010. *The Contingency Plan*.
- Varma, Rahul. 2004. *Bhopal*.

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- Moore, Jason W. 2016b. "The Rise of Cheap Nature." In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore, 78–115. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
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Steffen, Will, Asa Persson, Lisa Deutsch, et al. 2011. "The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship." *Ambio* 40, 7:739–61. doi.org/10.1007/s13280-011-0185-x

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