



HAL
open science

Review of The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch, edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, Routledge, London, 2015, pbk, ISBN 978-1-138-821124-8, pp. 187+xi

Valentin Cojanu

► **To cite this version:**

Valentin Cojanu. Review of The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch, edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, Routledge, London, 2015, pbk, ISBN 978-1-138-821124-8, pp. 187+xi. 2015, 10.46298/jpe.10685 . hal-03710674

HAL Id: hal-03710674

<https://hal.science/hal-03710674>

Submitted on 30 Jun 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License

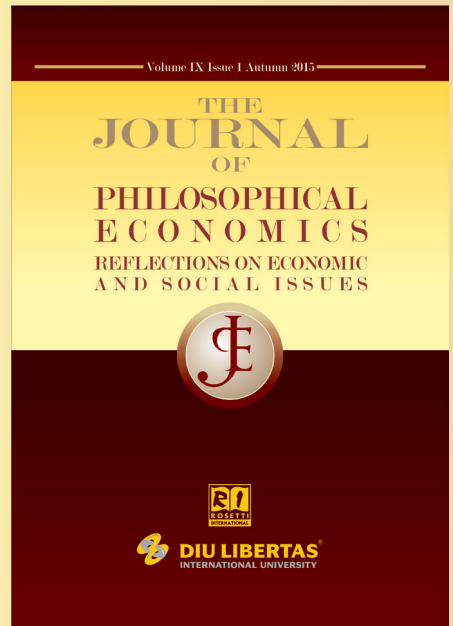
THE JOURNAL OF
PHILOSOPHICAL ECONOMICS:
REFLECTIONS ON ECONOMIC
AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Volume IX Issue 1 Autumn 2015

ISSN 1843-2298

Copyright note:

No part of these works may be reproduced
in any form without permission from the
publisher, except for the quotation of brief
passages in criticism.



*Review of The Anthropocene and the
Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking
modernity in a new epoch,
edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe
Bonnieuil and François Gemenne,
Routledge, London, 2015, pbk,
ISBN 978-1-138-821124-8, pp. 187+xi*

Valentin Cojanu



Review of *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch*, edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, Routledge, London, 2015, pbk, ISBN 978-1-138-821124-8, pp. 187+xi

Valentin Cojanu

This book comes with a straightforward message: *anthropos* has become a force of Earth's transformation. The finding, circling around over scientific community since 2000, tasks social scientists with proposing a new thinking for Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) to an equally overpowering end: 'to think and act beyond human experience' (11). Whether the International Commission on Stratigraphy will or will not formally pronounce the Anthropocene the successor to the Holocene epoch in 2016 or 2017, when an announcement is due, seems not to annihilate this volume's call for 'new environmental consciousness'. As we are told, the Anthropocene is as much about science, as is about narratives or 'geohistories', each one of them 'with implicit or explicit causal factors, with implicit or explicit moral lessons' (18).

The reader should not necessarily peruse this book for ineluctable evidence about the Age of Humans, but expect to be immersed in 'eerie' discourses about onomatophores of geological ages, eschatological representations of *Homo industrialis*, or philosophical shifts in understanding social ontology. The book's core message is thus complemented by several claims less dependent on scientific validity and so more overtly open to debate. The new thinking should emerge from interrelated themes of reflection on

humankind's evolutionary stage, among them most prominently (1) the combined history of nature and culture, (2) democracy and governance, and (3) our modernity.

The need to align the two cultures – of nature and society – in Science is one area of introspection proposed by the book. Several millennia of 'climatic constancy' (36) have come to a turbulent end. The exercise of human power has become manifest in such anthropogenic impacts as sea-level rise, acidification of oceans, species extinction, or disruption of natural processes, for example, the nitrogen and carbon cycles. Human action has become as much part of the forces of nature as other global geological forces, among them volcanism, tectonics, or cosmic radiation. Social scientists must become geophysicists (35) is the blunt yet inevitable inference as they should account for three co-existing histories operating on incompatible timescales: of the Earth system, of life, and of our civilization (44). The new study should be integrated into "the system of geodynamics" (33) defined between civilizational collapse and collective precaution, the only alternatives left to humankind in the Anthropocene. One possible way to test our capacity to live up to this expectation is to tackle the degrowth scenario. Denial of the environmental degradation is a fact of life, and we've got used to it for reasons ranging from cognitive dissonance to anthropological factors grouped under the umbrella of 'specular interaction' (114-118). The future scenarios hinge on our ability to reconstruct social science on premises that subdue volition to environmental consciousness.

The chapter on 'green political theory', set out in a comforting pedagogical tone, reveals a 'narrow margin for manoeuvre' (98) for decision-makers working towards a habitable Earth. The subject matter of eco-politics is 'the action of some and the sufferings of others' (173) against a social order of power asymmetries (21), a neglected dimension in orthodox social science. The evidence is overwhelming, whether collected on the increasing masses of 'environmental migrants' displaced by natural disruptions (floods, earthquakes, droughts, storms and hurricanes, sea-level rise, desertification, deforestation), or on the historically privileged resource consumption in highly purchasing power societies.

There is then the need to introspect our values and reflections about modernity. One widespread yet misleading claim about Anthropocene regards our newly acquired

awareness of the ongoing environmental damage; humanity, it is argued, has marched on from simple to reflexive modernity (21). To debunk the myth, a 'historically grounded narrative' (71) is needed to expose time-honoured intellectual and practical concerns about the management of the biosphere. A chapter, chillingly titled 'Losing the Earth knowingly', reminds us about perennial 'environmental grammars' from the antique vision of Earth as a 'mother that had to be respected' (76) to the scientific, literary, and political environmental reflexivity around 1800, including Buffon's 'Epochs of Nature', of which the last one bears the name of 'the epoch of Man' (74). Eventually, we may find out that 'modernity is impossible', in the sense that humans are not at all 'special' (52), a species organising around itself in disregard of the umbilical relationship with the environment they change intentionally or not.

In sum, probably not surprisingly, we have learnt that the three fundamental needs in rethinking SSH are not exclusively engendered by scientific findings and anxieties billowing in the Anthropocene elevated interest; old and new concerns of thinking about society in the large embrace of Nature resurface with even more vigour and urgency. The implications for social scholars suggested by the book's overall message are at once theoretical and practical. On the theoretical side, reinventing the life of humans is predicated on the premise of unified humanity. Are people able to face and deal with it? Are climate negotiations purposeful enough in the face of the challenges at stake (130)? To what extent does the advent of ecological paradise or collapse depend on the exercise of volition? (117) Will the power of reason withstand successfully agnotology, the willful production of ignorance (148)? This is a series of profound questions with which this book contributes to opening up 'a post-Cartesian era of development of social science' (57).

One may wonder what economics is supposed to add to this debate. The contributors, of whom none is an economist, offer an overall ambivalent perspective. For some, economics takes on the familiar imagery in the mainstream tradition. The discipline dominates the literature on climate policy metamorphosed in what may be called the 'physics of global warming' (46), a way of thinking based on a set of probabilities and proportions that looks even more reductionist than that of climate scientists (48). Other contributors emphasize the accounting role of economics, for example in estimating the

Cojanu, Valentin (2015), 'Review of "The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch", edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, Routledge, London, 2015, pbk, ISBN 978-1-138-82112-4, pp. 187+xi', *The Journal of Philosophical Economics. Reflections on Economic and Social Issues*, IX: 1, 146 - 149

value of the world's ecosystem services and natural capital (128). Finally, economics seems not to convince everybody about the consistency of its reasoning. Traditions of economic writing based on the study of energy associated with scholars like Eduard Sacher, Patrick Geddes, Rudolf Clausius and Frederick Soddy around 1900 (79) were abandoned by the 1930s to complete 'the dematerialization of economic thought' (81). The focus on economics succeeds almost singularly in sending mixed signals about its scholarly weight in a book otherwise characterized by a remarkably unitary vision of the nature-society divide and the challenges of the new epoch.

The Routledge Environmental Humanities series, in which the book has been published, aspires to convey a loud cry for the crisis of the contemporary culture, an enterprise economists should be part of or at least pay considerate attention to.

Valentin Cojanu is Professor of international economics & business at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Founding Editor of *Journal of Philosophical Economics* (cojanu@ase.ro).