

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (translated by David Fernbach), New York: Verso, 2016. ISBN: 9781784780791 (cloth); ISBN: 9781784780814 (ebook)

“We already live in the Anthropocene, so let us get used to this ugly word and the reality it names. It is our epoch and our condition...the sign of our power, but also of our impotence”: so begins the first attempt to survey what we might call the “Anthropocene”—that is, the plethora of spokespeople and their discourses now variously promoting the idea that humans have entered a “no analogue” situation, such is our collective impact on the planet. Written by two French historians of science, the book strongly emphasises the power of narratives to shape thinking, emotion and action. Narratives organise discourses so that there is a beginning, middle and end, characters and events, problems and solutions, villains and saviours. The authors argue that the advent of the Anthropocene should revolutionise our understanding of people and planet, but show that many narratives are far from revolutionary and may serve to compound the very maladies they ostensibly seek to redress.

The book is very well written and highly readable: one would never know that English is not the authors’ first language (the book was first published in France in 2013). *The Shock of the Anthropocene* comprises 11 chapters and a conclusion. Part one recounts the science story, making it clear that the authors take seriously the “take homes” of Paul Crutzen, Johan Rockström, Will Steffen, and various geologists associated with the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy. However, part two then criticises the “official narrative” that, in the authors’ view, is intimately linked to the science. Here Crutzen and others are shown to be barriers to a full realisation of what the Anthropocene means for us, for future generations, and for non-humans. Bonneuil and Fressoz, like others before them, identify problems with the “global” scientific gaze and the undifferentiated “anthropos” said to be taking the Earth away from the Holocene boundary conditions that have allowed *homo sapiens* to flourish this last 12 millennia. Both things feed into a managerial mind-set, they argue, one that presents the Earth system as something to be managed by experts on behalf of humanity via elected governments. This mind set,

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as I have argued in the pages of *Antipode*, contradicts the otherwise revolutionary implications of the underpinning science (see Castree 2015).

Part three, the book's largest, then take us through a set of alternative narratives replete with overarching neologisms (e.g. the "Thermocene" and the "Thanatocene"). Here different stories of what human actions have taken us out of the Holocene are recounted, each having rather different normative implications and diverse practical consequences. One of these chapters surveys the work of Jason Moore and others pertaining to the "Capitalocene". But some of the other chapters cover ground that may be less familiar to readers of *Antipode*, such as the one focussed on the destructive environmental consequences of modern wars.

The authors do not favour any one of these alternative narratives. They simply argue that the official narrative is too tame by half and threatens to undermine democracy if the others do not get heard. To paraphrase the poet Jeanine Salesse (who the authors quote from approvingly on page 289), Bonneuil and Fressoz believe that we must sow new narrative seeds if the gardens of the world are to be fertile again. Otherwise the shock of the Anthropocene may be no shock at all, its implications safely contained by those who prefer not to acknowledge its profound consequences for identity, morality, politics and everything else.

I recommend the book highly. It is currently the most lucid and comprehensive introduction to "Anthropocene discourse". Certainly, it is less US-centric than Jedediah Purdy's (2015) book about the Anthropocene, *After Nature*. But there are a couple of problems with Bonneuil and Fressoz's treatment of the scientific part of the "Anthropocene". First, they do not explain how the underlying science can somehow be beyond discussion—something whose implications ought to "shock" us—while the official narrative it supports is there to be deconstructed. Second, the authors seem far too confident that the Anthropocene will, in some narrative form, end-up having a visible and influential discursive life. But it seems to me that the term could go the way of "postmodernism", which never entirely escaped its academic home to shape public understanding more widely and enduringly. One reason the term may not gain societal recognition is because of the science that Bonneuil and Fressoz trust so much. Consider the recent career of climate science in the public domain, which suffered at the hands of sceptics. Given the "shocking" implications of

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Anthropocene science, I'd be surprised if sceptics did not, for the usual extra-scientific reasons, attack it in the years ahead. This would not be hard to do—for instance, compared to the IPCC it's pretty unclear how the membership of the Anthropocene Working Group was selected. If attacks occur even the official narrative might struggle to get a foothold, never mind some of the alternative and more progressive ones that the authors rightly wish to highlight.

References

- Castree N (2015) Unfree radicals: Geoscientists, the Anthropocene, and Left politics. *Antipode* DOI: 10.1111/anti.12187
- Purdy J (2015) *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

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