

Transforming the “anthropogenic” for climate adaptation and resilience

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Open pit mine in the tar sands oil fields of Alberta, Canada. photo (cc) Dru Oja Jay, Dominion

Policies to decarbonize economies without changing how we live in relation to each other and the natural world are unlikely to address the climate and biodiversity crises.

Human inequalities drive climate change and hamper efforts to address it. ***The ways of thinking used to tackle anthropogenic climate change are currently largely drawn from the ways of thinking that produced the crises in the first place.*** Our situation has been caused by a refusal to work within earth’s ecosystems and planetary limits, and our demand for technological ‘solutions’ to the challenges encountered in our pursuit of mastery. If we depend on this approach now, we will only make things worse.

Addressing the causes of climate change to support adaptation and resilience is not something that can be delivered hierarchically by experts and intergovernmental policy. ***All of humanity needs to be involved in the process of understanding, describing, visualizing and addressing ‘anthropogenic’ causes. This requires translation between conceptual tools and vocabularies, experiences, perspectives and forms of life.***

The problem: climate scientists and policy-makers do not currently treat climate change as anthropogenic.

While it has been demonstrated that climate change is caused by human activity, strategies for adaptation and mitigation are framed around science-based ‘solutions’ that pay little attention to these human causes. This may be a major reason why decades of campaigning by scientists and environmentalists for ‘change’ has not achieved the necessary public and political traction. Currently research and international discussion has focused on identifying and managing the effects of climate change, not the root causes. Unless the causes are addressed, the deterioration of planetary conditions can only accelerate and will make the future of much life on earth bleak. Humanities and Social Sciences expertise is essential to this research.

What are ‘anthropogenic’ causes of climate change?

Climate change is caused by more than the greenhouse gases emitted by human societies. It is the product of the historical forces that we usually understand as ‘development’ and ‘progress’. These can be traced back over millennia of human state-building, impacting on all human societies in diverse and highly unequal ways. They involve the extraction and use of planetary resources to increase wealth and build human civilisations. Since not all humans benefit equally from such changes, they have been promoted to populations through values, ideologies, hierarchies, coercion and violence. Ideological strategies have been varied, but tend to displace, delegitimise and destroy other views of how human communities might live together with non-human life and planetary environments. Civilisations have seen themselves in expansionist terms, not recognising planetary limits. It is celebratory narratives of a human ‘triumph’ over nature and dreams of infinite expansion – even beyond the planet – that entrench the present disastrous trajectory.

How can studying these causes help us to tackle climate change more effectively?

There can be no ‘solutions’ and no ‘adaptation’ without proper attention to understanding and transforming human societies, ways of thinking, narratives, ideologies, politics, histories, hierarchies and entrenched inequalities. Developing academically robust explanations of how human ‘progress’, state-building, resource-extraction, and civilizational values have brought life on earth to the brink of disaster will give societies far better tools to imagine and demand the necessary change. These should open space for essential contributions that are currently missing or disregarded, creating new collective thinking through translation of concepts and experiences across culture and communities.



Landfill, South Tangerang, Indonesia

How can the ‘anthropogenic’ be transformed?

Some projects from the Climate Crisis Thinking in the Humanities and Social Sciences network:

‘Climate translations’

We propose ‘climate translations’ or stories that move between different registers to imaginatively engage with and express life in the Anthropocene. These include sensory interactions and perceptions; not just spoken languages. Climate translations are important to confront climate sceptics, denialists, and conspiracists who continue to dispute the facticity of climate change. They are required in order to better conceptualise what climate change is actually about; to build up a richer array of climate imaginaries. Finally, climate translations can help overcome problems intrinsic to the concept of the Anthropocene: its domination by the Natural Sciences and the neglect of the Humanities, as well as the lack of awareness of the sharp power distinctions within and between human societies.



From human to more-than-human

The belief in human capacity to dominate the planet needs to be challenged. We do so by moving away from anthropocentric accounts of the world to centre instead - through a range of methods - the perspectives, emotions, voices of animals. We challenge those who depict animals as incapable of expressing themselves or as possessing intelligence, and show them not as abject beings but rather as agentive and articulate. Our project, Animal eyes on the planet?, with the Universität der Künste Berlin, aims to produce podcasts, images, exhibitions, poetry, and different forms of academic writing that centre animal lives - and deaths - on the planet.

Transdisciplinary climate education for future generations

Few if any countries cover climate and environmental crises adequately in schools or universities. It is taught in a few selected subjects but ignored in most. This means new generations are poorly equipped to understand the world they inhabit, while being educated to perpetuate current, unsustainable, systems and values. Materials must be developed to teach these issues across all disciplines. The aim is to enable young people to understand the anthropogenic roots of the present situation and prepare future generations with the skills and conceptual grasp needed for the work of addressing it.