

SIX

Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the Problem of Culture

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The object of world-ecology is contained in the word “culture.” Originally denoting “the tending of something, basically crops or animals” (Williams 1983, 87), during the sixteenth century culture came to mean a process of human development. Thus, Francis Bacon could write of the “culture and manurance of minds” in “a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction” (Eagleton 2000, 1). A cognate of “civilization,” culture came ultimately to mean three things: (1) a “process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; (2) “a particular way of life”; and (3) “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Williams 1983, 90). Given that world-ecology aims to overcome a philosophy—and narrative—of human history premised upon the “Cartesian divide” between man and nature (Moore 2014b, 3), *culture* is clearly a very important—yet deeply problematic—term. As Eagleton writes, “it is less a matter of deconstructing the opposition between culture and nature than of recognizing that the term ‘culture’ is already such a deconstruction” (2000, 2). The problem is to think “culture” in its historically recent sense of a way of life or set of artistic activities—or even, as we shall see below, as “hegemony” or “ideology”—whilst never losing sight of its etymological roots in the soil. Like world-ecology itself, “culture” denotes a historical, philosophical and conceptual problematic.

In what follows, my intention is to explore this problematic of “culture” in conversation with world-ecology as a philosophy and historical method that seeks to move beyond dualisms, especially the Nature/Society binary. I do so in three principal steps. I begin by considering the increasingly popular discourse of the Anthropocene. This discourse claims that

“humanity’ has become a geological force in its own right (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2011; Zalasiewicz et al. 2011). Yet the Anthropocene’s implicit philosophy of history is deeply problematic, leading to practical proposals that are apolitical and narrowly technological, and a grasp of modernity that is entirely ignorant of the complex historical processes at the heart of the capitalist world-ecology and its cultures. Turning to Moore’s far more convincing term, “Capitalocene” (the Age of Capital), I briefly set out what I take to be the major claims of the world-ecology perspective before returning to the problem of culture. I conclude with some tentative suggestions as to how the study of culture may inform the evolving world-ecology conversation—and our understanding of the Capitalocene.

The Anthropocene Discourse: Five Problems

As a way of talking about geological changes, the Anthropocene discourse is relatively harmless. Danger arises, however, when geologists enter the political arena, calling for collective ecological intervention on the basis of the Anthropocene. For there exists something like a “spontaneous ideology” of Anthropocene scientists; they have produced an implicit philosophy of history. It is an abstract, naturalistic materialism, one that “excludes the historical process,” and whose weaknesses “are immediately evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions expressed by its spokesmen whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own specialty” (Marx 1977, 494). It is just such “venturing beyond,” and the incoherent discourse which inspires it, that warrants a radical critique. The Anthropocene’s abstract materialism gives rise to five problems that deserve special attention.

1. Ahistorical, Abstract Humanity

At the heart of the Anthropocene lies the *Anthropos*: the human. But what or who is this *Anthropos*? No clear definition is ever given. Yet the literature on the Anthropocene regularly refers to such phenomena as “the human enterprise” (Steffen et al. 2011a, 849). Such a conception—of humanity in general—presupposes “an internal, ‘dumb’ generality which *naturally* unites the many individuals” (Marx 1975, 423). A historical conception of humanity, in contrast, would see humans as internally differentiated and constantly developing through contradictions of power and re/production. To speak of the “human enterprise” is to make of humanity an abstract corporation in which “we’re all in this together” (the David

Cameron maxim of 2009), thus belying the reality of class struggle, exploitation, and oppression.

2. *Technological Determinism*

The dating of the Anthropocene to some time around 1800 points to its technological bias—the steam engine changed the world. But did it? Technological determinism is always tempting, and much easier to communicate than the messy processes of class struggle. As Moore observes, the historical roots of the phenomena covered by the term “Anthropocene” lie, not in the invention of the steam engine, but in “the rise of capitalist civilization after 1450, with its audacious strategies of global conquest, endless commodification, and relentless rationalization” (Moore 2014a, 5). This marked “a turning point in the history of humanity’s relation with the rest of nature, greater than any watershed since the rise of agriculture and the first cities” (ibid. 17). Inherent to the Anthropocene discourse is a conception of historical causality which is purely mechanical: a one-on-one billiard ball model of technological invention and historical effect. But that is simply inadequate to actual *social* and *relational* modes of historical causation. The fact that technology itself is bound up with social relations, and has often been used as a weapon in class war, plays no role in Anthropocene discourse whatsoever. Marx’s (1977, 563) dictum that “it would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt” is unthinkable within such a purview. To put it bluntly, then, for the Anthropocene technology is not *political*.

3. *Annihilation of the Time of Praxis*

Even from a literary perspective the Anthropocene is problematic. Take this representative passage, for instance: “Pre-industrial humans, still a long way from developing the contemporary civilization that we know today, nevertheless showed some early signs of accessing the very energy-intensive fossil fuels on which contemporary civilization is built” (Steffen et al. 2011a, 846). Sartre once remarked that the biographies of “great men” only ever see the child as the retrospectively projected necessity of what came after, thereby voiding the past present of its true contradictory presence, i.e., as a time of multiple possibilities leading to a range of potential futures (Sartre 1964). So too the Anthropocene can only ever think the past in its proleptic trajectory toward our present. Its specific narrative mode

translates the time of initiative and praxis into the time of pure physical necessity. For precisely this reason, it can only think *our own present* as part of the empty, homogeneous time of linear succession, which increasingly contracts as catastrophe approaches.

4. *A Whig View of History*

This view of historical time goes hand in hand with a Whig view of history as one endless story of human progress and enlightenment. Two passages clearly exemplify this tendency:

- 1) “Migration to cities usually brings with it rising expectations and eventually rising incomes, which in turn brings an increase in consumption”; and
- 2) “The onset of the Great Acceleration may well have been *delayed* by a half-century or so, *interrupted* by two world wars and the Great Depression.” (Steffen et al. 2011, 850; emphases added)

The first sentence seems almost willfully blind to the history of mass urban poverty, gentrification and accumulation by dispossession. The second seems to claim that the bloodiest century in human history—including Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Dresden bombing, the Gulags, and the Holocaust—is a mere blip on the rising line of progress.

5. *Apolitical Technical and Managerial Solutions*

Finally, the Anthropocene discourse is extraordinarily technocratic. The majority of the solutions proposed by scientists are technical (e.g., mass climate and geoengineering projects) and managerial in nature—often couched in the language of “governance systems”—rather than political. The scientists arrive at such apolitical solutions precisely because they never pose the Anthropocene as a political problem in the first place. Kim Stanley Robinson’s claim that “Justice has become a survival technology” is practically unthinkable within the presuppositions of the scientific representations of the Anthropocene (Robinson 2010, 213). Just as Anthropocene scientists cannot see *technology* as a *political* force, so they cannot see *politics* as a *material* force. Indeed, they have a problematic conception of materiality as such.

From this sketch, we can see quite clearly how the Anthropocene’s diagnosis of planetary crisis powerfully shapes the range and quality of the possible

solutions. An alternative sketch, drawing on Marxism and the world-ecology argument, suggests a very different range and quality of possibilities. Particularly useful is Moore's suggestion that we replace Anthropocene with Capitalocene, the "Age of Capital." Where many would see capitalism as an economic and social system, Moore's argument for world-ecology calls for thinking capitalism as producer *and* product of the web of life. Capitalism's economic and social relations are thus "bundled"—in Moore's language—with (and within) nature as a whole. Such a formulation points toward a synthesis of humanist and post-human thought. For one of the many paradoxes of the current conjuncture is that at the very moment in which scientists are using the term Anthropocene—forcing us to focus on our natural existence as a human species and collective human agent—the speculative realists and object-oriented ontologists are trying to problematize and move beyond the "human" as such (Harman 2011). The two appear to be flip sides of one another and, arguably, equally politically toothless.

Capitalocene as World-Ecology

World-ecology is a "framework of historical interpretation that dialectically unifies capital, power and nature" (Moore 2014a, 2). This is an argument for a conception of capitalism that extends beyond the purely economic, and sees capitalism as a civilization "co-produced by humans and the rest of nature" (ibid., 1). As such, world-ecology seeks to transcend accounts of human history—capitalism included—premised on a "Cartesian divide" between Humanity and Nature (2014b, 3).

For Moore, the world-ecology framework allows for a reconceptualization of Marx's theory of value: "While Marxist political economy has taken value to be an *economic* phenomenon with systemic implications, I argue that value-relations are a *systemic* phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment" (ibid.). For classical Marxism, "value" has been understood as "abstract social labor." Its dynamics center on socially necessary labor time, or the average labor time in the average commodity. (With the caveat, as we shall see, that only *some* work is counted as labor time.) This occurs within the "zone of exploitation" (Moore 2015a, 73)—Marx's "hidden abode" of commodity production, ruled by the capital-labor relation. What Moore does is simultaneously to affirm Marx's insight on this question, whilst highlighting how the zone of exploitation depends on a tight relation with *another* zone: the "zone of appropriation." This refers to all those realms of human and extra-human "unpaid work/energy,"

including not only so-called “women’s work” but also the work of forests, soils, and rivers. In this perspective, capitalism cannot be reduced to the realm of paid work alone. Without the constant (and rising) appropriation of unpaid work—performed by human and extra-human natures—capitalism could not expand and develop:

If we take the nexus paid/unpaid work as our premise—implicitly suggested by ecological and feminist scholars—the implications are significant. Capitalism and value relations cannot be reduced to a relation between the owners of capital and the possessors of labor-power. . . . The historical condition of socially necessary labor-time is socially necessary unpaid work. This observation opens a vista on capitalism as a contradictory unity of production and reproduction that crosses the Cartesian boundary [Nature/Society]. The crucial divide is between the zone of paid work (the exploitation of commodified labor-power) and the zone of unpaid work (the reproduction of life). (2014b, 9)

In other words, for Moore there are *two* fundamental contradictions—unified through an expanded conception of value—which structure capitalism as a civilization. One is between capital and labor, another between the zone of exploitation (commodity production) and the zone of appropriation (unpaid work/energy). Because this appropriation of unpaid work/energy cannot be conceptualized purely in terms of the capital/labor relation, Moore proposes a new concept: “abstract social nature” (2015, chapter 8). Abstract social nature comprises “the family of processes through which capitalists and state-machineries map, identify, quantify, measure, and code human and extra-human natures in service to capital accumulation” (2014b, 12). These activities and methods seek out and make legible to capital realms of unpaid work/energy—what Mies calls the work of “women, nature and colonies” (1986, 77). One might think, for instance, of those nineteenth-century American land surveyors who measured, mapped, rationalized and parceled out the land in order to sell it to investors (Johnson 2013, 34ff; see also Parenti’s essay “Environment-Making in the Capitalocene,” in this volume).

World-Ecology and Culture

Moore distinguishes abstract social nature from Stephen Shapiro’s conception of the “cultural fix.” For Shapiro, the cultural fix comprises those

“social and cultural matters involving the reproduction of class identities and relations over time-lengths greater than a single turnover cycle” of capital. These identities and relations “*are intrinsic, not superficial, to the [accumulation] of capital*” (Shapiro 2013 quoted in Moore 2015a, 198). The cultural fix thus seems to refer to all those hegemonic and ideological processes that legitimate the long-term reproduction of the social relations of production. “If cultural fixes naturalize capitalism’s punctuated transitions in the relations of power, capital, and nature,” writes Moore, “abstract social natures make those transitions possible” (Moore 2015a, 16).

The distinction between abstract social nature and the cultural fix works only so long as it is provisional. Moore’s account of the history of capitalism turns on the idea that capitalism reinvents itself—and the web of life—in successive eras. There are *transitions* from one phase of capitalism to the next, and consolidations of these accumulation regimes during which specific orders of culture, food, social reproduction, etc., stabilize. By equating those cyclical periods of transition with abstract social nature, and stabilization with the cultural fix, Moore risks overlooking just how important each moment is to the other. *Both* processes—abstract social nature and cultural fix—are constituted through the other, albeit in shifting relations of dominance. Culture is a constitutive moment of abstract social nature and vice versa. This dialectical relation of abstract social nature and culture is a constitutive moment of value in a Marxist sense.

Let me give me two brief illustrations, so as better to draw out the implications of this mutual constitution of culture and abstract social nature. The examples show the mutual imbrication of abstract social nature and the cultural fix within any period of historical capitalism. But they do not account for the shifting configurations between abstract social nature and culture in any historically *singular* period of transition or consolidation. A far lengthier engagement awaits.

In *River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson describes the way in which slaves’ bodies were standardized for the market: “The reports [filed by slaving firms] formalized a system of grading slaves—‘Extra Men, No. 1 Men, Second Rate or Ordinary Men, Extra Girls, No. 1 Girls, Second Rate or Ordinary Girls,’ and so on—which allowed them to abstract the physical differences between all kinds of human bodies into a single scale of comparison based on the price they thought a given person would bring in the market” (2013, 41). Here, we see abstract social nature in practice. Slave bodies are being standardized and made measurable for the market.

Could we not also say, however, that such standardization was possible only through a racist culture capable of legitimizing this practice and—here’s the rub—producing the callousness of the human gaze? Here we see a cultural fix that was instrumental in effecting this standardization and in consolidating its social and material payoff. Indeed, Johnson himself writes with remarkable insight into the co-implication of abstract social nature and cultural fix:

The agricultural order of the landscape, the standing order of slavery, the natural order of the races, and the divine order of earthly dominion were not separable for a man like Harper [a slaveholder]; they were fractal aspects of one another. His eschatology was rooted in his ecology. . . . Slaveholders were fully cognizant of slaves’ humanity—indeed, they were completely dependent on it. But they continually attempted to conscript—signify, channel, limit, and control—the forms that humanity could take in slavery. The racial ideology of Harper and Cartwright [another slaveholder] was the intellectual conjugation of the daily practice of the plantations they were defending: human beings, animals and plants forcibly reduced to limited aspects of themselves, and then deployed in concert to further slaveholding dominion. (Johnson 2013, 206–8)

The second example is Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), which explicates the systematic violence perpetrated against women in the transition to capitalism. She highlights the highly gendered—and unequal—character of enclosure and the spread of wage-work in early modern Europe. With the enclosure of the commons, women lost a vital source of sociality and relative power. This was compounded by two further phenomena. One was the Price Revolution, in which the costs of food increased so steeply that many were condemned to chronic hunger. The other was the European demographic crisis of the seventeenth century. Federici sees this crisis as the root cause of a new “biopower” regime, in which “the question of the relation between labor, population, and the accumulation of wealth came to the foreground of political debate and strategy” (2004, 86). This was the crucible in which the witch-hunt emerged: “the enslavement of women to procreation” that “literally demonized any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality, while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil” (ibid. 89, 88). The witch-hunt involved a series of socio-cultural measures: the limiting of women’s legal rights;

the surveillance and curtailing of women's spatial freedom; the criminalization of prostitution; the introduction of publicly humiliating punishments; the construction of new cultural canons to maximize perceived differences between the sexes and about women's innate inferiority; and an entire literary and theatrical discourse dedicated to the vilification of the "scold," the "witch," the "whore," and the "shrew," with Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* being "the manifesto of the age" (ibid., 101). If women's unpaid work has been historically vital to capitalism, then we must conclude from Federici's history that culture is more than a force of ideological *legitimation*; it is itself a materially *constitutive* and *productive* moment in capitalist value relations. The ideological attacks on women were precisely about controlling them, confining them, and making their unpaid work appropriable by capital. Thus, whilst "abstract social nature" and the "cultural fix" can be *analytically* separated, in practice they always go together.

Let us now consider the ingenious notion of the cultural fix more closely. Shapiro (2014) connects the cultural fix to what he claims is a missing, but logically inferable, category in Marx's *Capital*: "fixed labor-power"—the dialectical complement of "fluid" or "circulating" labor-power and the counterpart to fixed capital. He further distinguishes between "absolute fixed labor-power" and "relative fixed labor-power." The former denotes "the materials that labor needs, but which capitalists do not provide, to ensure their human survival [. . .]: food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and educational training." The latter "include[s] everything that shapes class subjectivity, such as the social infrastructures responsible for durability of class solidarity and subordination. This is the realm of Gramscian hegemony" (Shapiro 2014, 1261–62). The ingeniousness of the term "fixed labor-power" is undeniable: it effectively combines social reproduction theory (Marxist-feminism) with theories of ideology and hegemony, and it transcends simplistic theories of culture as a non-constitutive "reflection" of the economic "base." Consequently, Shapiro claims to have discovered the "'object' for which the 'domain' of cultural materialism has been searching" (ibid., 1252).

As with any pioneering work, however, local blind spots are the condition of its insights. Shapiro focuses on the recurrent or cyclical features of capitalism—"periodicity" (2014, 1250)—as opposed to conjuncture-specific "periodizations." His categories are therefore transhistorical to the extent that they name structural features of *more than one* capital

accumulation cycle. This abstraction is a necessary first step in the production of new theoretical knowledge. However, in naming “cultural fix” the operation of reproducing class identities over the *longue durée*, he has also rendered transhistorical the term “culture.” As we have seen, the contemporary meaning of culture is deeply historical and has been reinvented as a “keyword” in successive eras of capitalism (Williams 1976). If one looks at “culture” across these successive eras—abstracting the cyclical reinvention of culture as a keyword—Shapiro’s conception works ably to encompass social reproduction, hegemony, ideology, and so forth. If one looks at culture *within* these successive eras, however, this abstraction underestimates the extent to which these words are immanent, constitutive elements of the very problems they are used to discuss. (The same holds for “nature” and any number of other keywords.) The question must then arise: Is the abstraction of “culture” in Shapiro’s work the reflection of a real, historical abstraction—as the abstraction of ‘labor’ for Marx presupposed the “developed totality of real kinds of labor” (Marx 1973, 104)—or is it a purely conceptual abstraction?

The cost of abstracting the historical meaning of culture is the excision of shifting constellations of keywords. The title of Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958), for example, implies the gradually emergent opposition of culture (as a repository of ideal values) to society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, the terms “political” and “hegemony” invite a historical analysis of the changing role of the state throughout capitalist modernity. Gramsci himself argued that in bourgeois society the “political” is “a real abstraction or hypostatization that subordinates and organizes civil society,” this latter providing the “subaltern ‘raw material’” (Thomas 2009, 31). “The political” in bourgeois society quite simply *is* the form of bourgeois hegemony: “As a distinctively modern political practice aiming to compose atomized, juridically free individuals into larger collective social bodies, bourgeois hegemony has traversed the boundaries between civil society and political society, simultaneously a form of both ‘civil’ and ‘political’ organization and leadership” (ibid.) We must therefore take care to situate the historically specific struggles to shape and reshape culture within successive eras, as well as across the *longue durée* of capitalist history. Cultural history must incorporate the profound *interrelation* of historically and geographically specific struggles with their fundamental symbolic components and the long-run arc of “fixed labor-power” in capitalist history as a whole.

Historical capitalism produces a total social formation whose material constitution is such that the topographical relation of its elements—“culture,” “nature,” “politics,” “society,” and “the state”—is constantly shifting, and continually altering the internal compositions of that which the terms denote. The relations of nature to culture, of culture to politics, or of politics to the “economy” are remade through successive eras of capitalism. Each rearticulation transforms the very meaning of the terms themselves. This is certainly not to deny the presence of recurrent or cyclical features of capitalism, but we have yet to hit upon a sufficient terminology for thinking periodicity and periodization together. “Fixed labor-power” and the “cultural fix”—like abstract social nature—must be taken provisionally, as points of departure rather than “fixed” concepts. Otherwise, they risk sacrificing historical specificity. Our conceptual vocabulary—and historical method—for articulating the historical specificity within the *longue durée* of the Capitalocene is only now beginning to be elaborated.

Conclusion

How, then, should world-ecology proceed? Firstly, we should attempt to respect the complex historical trajectories and shifting relations of the words and phenomena that fall under the broad term “cultural fix”: culture, society, ideology, hegemony, identity, generation, etc. That is, world-ecology should integrate and build on the historical semantics of Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*, resisting the temptation to narrow itself only to those terms directly connected to the “Cartesian dualism” it wishes to sublimate (Humanity/Nature, Culture/Economy, etc.) Such terms are themselves articulated with other keywords: politics, the state, work, etc. Secondly, extending the insights of Johnson and Federici, we should continue the world-ecological project of overcoming the Two Cultures by rethinking the precise relations between abstract social nature and ideology or hegemony—and by understanding how these specific relations change and evolve in successive cycles of capitalism, and over the *longue durée* of the Capitalocene.

Moreover, we must insist on the importance of culture in justifying the theoretical and political superiority of the term Capitalocene. Strictly speaking, the Anthropocene is cultureless: it is the result of “man” and technology, or “man” insofar as he develops and wields technology. Politics proper (as opposed to “governance”) does not enter the Anthropocene discourse since social relations are presumed to possess

no effective materiality. Yet the history of the word “culture” belies this disavowal, for it contains within itself the violent separation—and inseparability—of the spirit from the soil in historical capitalism. Conceived in Williams’s terms as “a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life,” culture demonstrates the inadequacy of static notions like “man,” “technology,” and “environment,” whose relation to each other is one of pure externality. “Culture” names the shifting constellations of mutually articulated elements in the social formation and, at the same time, is one of those elements itself. Each constellation constitutes a “way of life,” the broadest definition of culture—and one very much akin to Moore’s own term *oikeios*, “a co-production of specifically bundled human and extra-human natures” (Moore 2014a, 11). Thus, culture is a crucial element of the Capitalocene, both in Shapiro’s broad cyclical sense (ideology, hegemony) and in my own conjunctural one. It is also that the Capitalocene is the only term capable of reasonably accounting for the historical trajectory of the keyword “culture” itself. For the great irony of the Anthropocene discourse is that it was developed to explain the merger of “man” and “nature,” yet at the conceptual level has split them further apart than ever.

What *culture*, *world-ecology*, and the *Capitalocene* show is that the battle against the capitalist production of climate change must be waged at several levels simultaneously. Of course, we must attack self-evidently “ecological” phenomena such as new oil pipelines, deforestation, fracking, etc. But—and this is crucial—we must also attack those elements of capitalist civilization *which appear to have no immediate relation to ecology, but which are in fact internal conditions of its possibility*: violence against women both literal and symbolic, the structural obscurity of domestic labor, institutional racism, and so on. At its outer limit, ecological struggle is nothing but the struggle for universal emancipation: world-ecology unifies these struggles at the level of theory.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was published under the title “Against the Anthropocene” in the inaugural issue of *Salvage* magazine (2015). I thank the editors for their kind permission to reproduce parts of it here.