

## **Humanity as a political subject in the Anthropocene: from planetary subjectivity to global sovereignty.**

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*Abstract:* In the Anthropocene, the unprecedented disruption of planetary systems caused by an ongoing social activity seems to demand from human beings an equally unprecedented effort to avert catastrophe -in the form of a «hothouse Earth» scenario that would render the Earth uninhabitable. But is humanity up to the task? In other words: Does even «humanity» as a functioning political category exist? If not, can it be brought into existence? This paper will explore this question. It will begin by pointing out the need for a massive and concerted effort on the part of living generations of humans, since otherwise it will not be possible to counteract the accumulated effect of the species' footprint. Hints of this global sovereign can be found in the climate agreements and other forms of governance, but the rise of climate populism -as witnessed in the yellow vests movement in France- suggests that an unified action against planetary deterioration has not yet been achieved. The question, then, is how to create such a global political subject. Which form should this demogenesis adopt to be effective? The goal of making the Anthropocene sustainable can, in fact, be the unifying motif that increasingly fragmented and pluralistic human societies have been lacking for sometime now.

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## 1. The need for human action in the Anthropocene.

There is increasing evidence that human beings have reshaped the Earth in significant ways. The idea that human activity, accumulated over time across the globe, has transformed the planet is newly expressed in the notion of the Anthropocene -a scientific concept that has rapidly spread across the social sciences and the humanities (see Ellis 2018). Mostly, it has been promoted by a number of geologists and environmental historians who believe that the anthropogenic impact is such that we have abandoned the Holocene and entered into the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch that also marks a state of the Earth for which there is no analogy (see Crutzen & Steffen 2003). Properly speaking, however, the coupling of social and natural systems does not need geological confirmation: Earth System science has been signalled by some commentators as the real science of the Anthropocene (Hamilton 2017). In any case, the need for human action seems undisputed: an anthropogenically disrupted planet must be consciously governed by human beings if the necessary conditions for civilized life are to be preserved.

In their chronology of the Anthropocene, Steffen et al. (2011) argue that we are now living in a stage in which humans become aware of their role as global geological forces. New responsibilities emerge as a result of this realisation -humans should act, according to an old green metaphor, as stewards of the Earth System. Obviously, this is not something that can be deduced from scientific observation, but rather a moral mandate that relates to the moral dimension of the Anthropocene. It makes sense: if humans have truly transformed the planet, they cannot avert the consequences. If we are forced to live *in* the Anthropocene, the collective decisions we adopt in the next decades will largely determine *which* is the Anthropocene we will inhabit (Ellis & Trachtenberg 2013). Declaring that we are living in the Anthropocene has then performative effects:

«We are the first generation with the knowledge of how our activities influence the Earth System, and thus the first generation with the power and the responsibility to change our relationship with the planet» (Steffen et al. 2011: 749).

The rationale goes like this: scientific findings, combined with the power of the Internet as a system of global information and the diffusion of democratic practices would pave the way for humanity to become «un agente activo y autoconsciente en el manejo de su propio sistema de soporte vital» (Steffen et al. 2007: 44). Humans would thus turned into diligent stewards of the planet, managing socionatural interactions so as to make sure that the latter are sustainable into the future (Steffen et al. 2011: 749). A global politics of the Earth is therefore the natural outcome of rising planetary awareness.

A number of solutions that have been proposed for dealing with planetary risks, from climate change to the loss of biodiversity, seem to presuppose the existence of such socionatural stewardship. That is the case with the «planetary boundaries» approach, namely those natural limits that should not be trespassed if a «safe space for humanity» is to be preserved (Rockström et al. 2009). More boldly, geo-engineering intends to manipulate the planet's climate through technological means in order to prevent it from going awry -a vast enterprise that is hardly imaginable without some kind of global agreement (see Humphreys 2011). No less colossal is the proposal made by Edward O. Wilson and endorsed by a number of ecomodernist thinkers, namely liberating half of the Earth from human intervention to allow nature to restore itself (Wilson 2016). No single national government can possibly implement such policies, which in themselves simbolize the concerted effort of living generations of humans.

In this sense, the grandeur of such approaches may be seen as simply befitting the magnitude of the problems posed by the Anthropocene. Yet their ambition is nonetheless surprising in the disenchanting arena of a post-utopian world. Back in 1957, political theorist Judith Shklar claimed that due to the gradual decline of rational political optimism since the Enlightenment

«the urge to construct grand designs for the political future of mankind is gone. The last vestiges of utopian faith required for such an enterprise have vanished» (Shklar 1969: vii).

Without any faith in the human ability to act, she cautioned, political theory becomes impossible and is replaced by cultural fatalism. Remarkably, political faith is not lacking in those who defend a geopolitics for the Anthropocene -or, in other words, the need to focus on a «Gaia-politics» (Hamilton et al. 2015: 9). But perhaps they are being too optimistic. Where is the collective will to make structural changes to address planetary risks? Is there anything that resembles a global government able to pass laws and implement policies? Is it not true that liberal democracies are themselves threatened by the rise of nationalism and populism as well as by its own mutation into «vetocracies» incapable of effectively governing their societies?

Therefore, a major obstacle presents itself from the beginning: the absence of the collective subject that is meant to deal with the Anthropocene. The indeterminacy of the global *demos* is thus a problem for any democratic attempt to build up a global environmental polity. And yet the psychological operation through which humanity constitutes itself as a reflective agent able to respond to planetary risks *comes before* the launch of global democratic procedures -it is the necessary precondition of the latter. As Peter Sloterdijk playfully puts it,

«Thus the concept of the "Anthropocene" includes nothing less than the task of testing whether the agency of "humanity" is capable of transforming something ejected into a project, or of transforming an emission into a mission» (Sloterdijk 2017: 13).

In other words: is humanity capable of acting as a humanity, giving shape to some universal *We* that can be translated into an ecological *volonté générale*? There is even the possibility that the Anthropocene provides pluralistic societies with the unifying motive that they have been lacking. The very transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene might help to instill that collective feeling, shared by those generations of humans that are trapped in the abysmal fissures opened between different geological epochs (Davies 2016: 148). Finally, it could be argued that the Anthropocene signals the return of the grand universalist narratives that seemed discarded after the horrors of the twentieth century:

«Yet the failure of modernity's story of a universal humanity joined in a common project does not mean there can never be a story that draws all humans together. Does not the arrival of the Anthropocene justify new grounds for an emerging narrative of humanity as a whole?» (Hamilton 2017: 77).

If that is the case, the *We* of humanity must be explored. As Scott Hamilton has recently asked: «Whom or what exactly is this ubiquitous global "We" of humanity that is now supposedly planetary in scope and scale?» (Hamilton 2019: 3). Does it include all human beings? Should they be asked whether they feel themselves represented by that figuration? Is it perhaps the same as the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene? Hamilton believes that this new *We* encapsulates a shift in the way that a human self represents itself today, both ontologically and epistemologically. This is plausible, but also premature -revolts like that of the *gilets jaunes* in France point to a solid resistance to climate policies that in turn attests to the persistence of the Holocene worldview. Admittedly, there is a tendency, a gradual move towards a new self-recognition. But there are also disagreements about the conceptual and affective foundations of this humanity, which in turn create doubts about its feasibility. Is it the same humanity upon which the discourse of human rights is based? Is it the humanity of humanism? Or is it something else?

I will suggest that the only way to generate a successful *We* for the Anthropocene rests upon the biological-cum-geological dimension of human existence. This is the novelty, a novelty in degree rather than substance, that geologists and Earth System scientists are bringing up. The *anthropos* understood as a distinctive species whose accumulated actions change natural systems at a planetary scale and inflicts harm on the nonhuman world -that is the foundation for a new self-understanding of humanity. A different question is whether this humanity can act as a *people* or at

least turn itself into a *demos* that legitimizes a global environmental politics that addresses the Anthropocene challenges. In turn, this leads to the question of sovereignty -would this global subject be sovereign? If so, how can the perils for pluralism and democracy be avoided?

These are the questions addressed in this paper, which is divided into five sections. Firstly, I will offer an account of the criticisms levelled against the notion of humanity that is implicit in the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene. Secondly, I will however defend the suitability of the species as a foundation for turning humanity into a viable political subject *for* the Anthropocene. Thirdly, the new state of Earth will be presented as a spatial revolution that demands collective action, some of the problems for which will be sketched. Finally, I will outline the figure of a global sovereign devoted to guarantee the Earth's habitability with the help of the old wisdom provided by Kant and Hobbes.

## 2. The trouble with the anthropos.

The term Anthropocene entails an invocation of the *anthropos*, i.e. the Greek word for «human». And it has actually been suggested that the new era -which is characterized by measurable global human impact- involves a radical change in perspective and action in terms of human awareness, almost a new human condition that presents a challenge for the humanities and the social sciences: «does our conception of the human have to change?» (Palsson et al. 2012: 9). That is quite an interrogation and it demands new answers and not just the recourse to old humanist cliches.

It should be noted that the idea that we are all now living in a «human epoch» is originated at a particular level of the human existence, namely that of our biological life. As biological beings, we are embedded in physical environments that exerts adaptive pressures on us. And yet human behaviors in response to that pressure are themselves transformatives of those environments -as niche-construction theory has rightly emphasized in the field of evolutionary biology (see Odling-Smee, Laland & Feldman 2003). In time, as human populations expand and human societies interact with each other, the impact of the *anthropos* becomes global and affects natural systems that are planetary rather than local or regional: from climate to the ocean conveyor belt or global biodiversity. What the *anthropos* hides, then, is a psychobiological species like no other: one that is evolutionary endowed with a number of traits -ultrasociality, cultural accumulation, technological prowess- that increases its disruptive powers (see Ellis 2015). This increase is exponential, as culture can be stored and passed between societies and generations.

Arguably, it was historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) who first outlined the epistemological consequences involved in this focus on the species level -derived itself from a scientific way of seeing natural systems and fossil records. As he pointed out, environmental historians had already understood the human as a biological agent, so much so that this idea can be taken as the whole foundation of their discipline. What scientists are saying now is that humans wield a geological force *because* their collective actions have accumulated over time: as a whole they have become something that they could possibly not be as single biological agents in the past. And many of those scientists talk of the human life-form as an species, a concept that is alien to traditional social sciences but otherwise connected with the enterprise of deep history (see Smal 2008). The view of the *anthropos* as species should thus be incorporated into social thinking.

Needless to say, the category of the species poses a number of problems. Some are unrelated to the rise of the Anthropocene, but can resurface with it -the dubious political uses of biology in the past or the deterministic connotations of the concept. Others, however, are directly associated to the Anthropocene proposition and reinforce the criticism levelled against it by a number of social scientists and humanists who reject the universalist, seemingly undifferentiated *anthropos* that is predicated as its main character. In the rest of this section, I will present an account of this counterargument; on the next one, the species perspective will be defended.

We, who? The pronoun seems so indeterminate that many commentators have asked who exactly comprises the *We* of the Anthropocene. If an American consumes as much as 32 times the resources of a Kenyan, can both be members of the same *anthropos*? Dissolving the greater responsibility of *some* humans speaking of a global *humanity* is to ignore the glaring differences that separate particular groups of humans (Malm & Hornborg 2014). More specifically, it is a way of naturalizing the gap between those who have accumulated political and economic power in the last two centuries in the context of an «imperialistic capitalism» characterized by inequality and violence: we should rather talk of a «Capitalocene» or an «Oligoanthropocene» (Moore 2014, Bonneuil & Fressoz 2013: 71). Humans are not equal members of humanity as far as environmental risks are concerned: the burden of the latter are mediated by class, race, gender, ethnicity (Barnes 2016). If the Anthropocene is understood as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, perhaps those who initiated and fostered it should be singled out:

«The collective that is characterized these days by expressions such as "humanity" mainly consists of agents who within less than a century have acquired technologies developed in Europe. (...) In fact, talk of a "Eurocene" or a technocene initiated by Europeans would be more fitting» (Sloterdijk 2017: 10).

In a similar vein, Taylor (2018) has suggested that «to describe the Anthropocene is to deploy a Victorian lexicon» insofar as those times also saw an incensed debate about the origin of humans and the age of the planet, thus grappling «with the implications of rethinking the human in species terms». The allusion to Darwinism is not gratuitous: the quantitative observations that give impulse to the Anthropocene hypothesis have been accused of flattening the agency of different social groups and thus their responsibilities (Luke 2009). When all living and dead humans are absorbed into a single body, specific humans and states and corporations are deemed unaccountable for their particular contributions to climate change and other perilous manifestations of the Anthropocene (Lepori 2015). Therefore, an abstract conception of «humanity» cannot be identified as the cause of a socio-natural phenomenon that most critics see as intimately linked to the spread of global capitalism. Differences *between* humans disappear *inside* the species: a collective imputation leads to a general exculpation.

The role of geological criteria in the creation of an «hyperbolic narrative of totalized humanity» (Wakefield 2014: 12) has not escaped the attention of critics either. Yusoff (2019) has argued that «geological origin stories» operate in fact as a particular kind of identity politics that cohere around a reductive notion of humanity -one that is made up of white powerful people. On her part, Zylinska (2018) claims that the Anthropocene actually conflates humanity and the male half of it, presenting the crisis of the latter as the crisis of the former:

«even though the "end of man" may indeed signal the possible withering of a particular form of white Christian masculine subjectivity as the dominant orientation of our cultural and political discourses, it is meant to read as a diagnosis of the extinction of a particular species» (Zylinska 2018: 46).

Contrariwise, a gendering of the Anthropocene that stresses relationality instead of dominion would offer a way out of the apocalypse that is implicit in the Anthropocene narrative. But if the Anthropocene fails to capture the diverse array of relations between different assemblages of humans and non-humans that lie behind its supposedly universal *We*, is it not just a «convenient meme» that perpetuates environmental and social injustices? (Di Chiro 2016). Others have emphasized how the lineal temporality of the Anthropocene reproduces exclusionary accounts of the human, obscuring plural pasts and rendering plural presents anachronistic (Fagan 2019).

Thus the need to «socialize the geological» (Moore 2015) in order to reveal the inner diversity of the *anthropos*. There is no humanity, which according to this viewpoint is a useless category for the social sciences -only human beings assembled in different forms. Species-talk surrenders to essentialist ways of thinking, as Sideris argues in her response to Chakrabarty:

«I am not convinced that Chakrabarty fully appreciates the way in which scaling-up our imagination of the human has engendered—and perhaps is bound to engender—essentialist, reductionist, or homogenizing portraits of the human, not to mention inadequate forms of interdisciplinarity» (Sideris 2016: 93).

Again, there is the reproach that the Anthropocene entails a radical loss of plurality as it forces an homogenization that «does violence» to the autonomy and richness of different spheres and scales of reality. No single framework can interrogate the Anthropocene, which certainly is itself the framework wherein various disciplines can do their work. More to the point: «no single discipline can define for us what it means to be human in the Age of the Human» (Sideris 2016: 95). In other words, the Anthropocene is criticized as a *simplification* of the human as well as of its relation with nature -a simplification that is dangerously reproduced in the cultural and political *We* it is supposed to engender.

Finally, there is what might be called the identity question. The promotion of a singular identity, that of the *anthropos* as species, may endanger the multiple identities that a self is able to possess today: the *I* as member of a nation, a gender, a class, a culture, and so forth (Hamilton 2019: 18). Conversely, that very multiplicity complicates the identification of the self with a human totality: rather than a single *people* there are *peoples* that by forming different political alignments refuse to be represented by any self-appointed spokesperson of the universal Human (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2016: 90). Associated to the dangers of essentialism, there is the fear that an uniform view of humanity might lead to an equally uniform way of governing the planet, i.e. some kind of «planetary governmentality» led by experts and closed to popular participation (Uhrqvist and Löfbrand 2014: 342). Once a global subject can be conceived and represented, technocracy will trump democracy.

In sum, there should be no talk of an abstract humanity. Different societies and groups, each with its own causal history, are instead to be the unit of analysis. Likewise, universalist narratives should not be resurrected lest the heterogeneous character of really existing human realities is suffocated. Paraphrasing Aristotle, we could then say: «Oh humans, there is no humanity!». And yet there is.

### **3. Humanity as a biological species: a defence.**

Despite its persuasive strength, the criticism levelled against the species viewpoint remains unconvincing. In this section, I would like to present a defence of the category of the species as the best possible foundation for reclaiming humanity as a political subject in the Anthropocene. As we have seen, talking about the species or about its particular way of being constitutes an epistemic affront: it is essentialist, non-historical, depoliticizing. And yet it makes sense in the particular context of the Anthropocene. As Michel Serres, writing thirty years ago, puts it:

«the decisive actions are now, massively, those of enormous and dense tectonic plates of humanity (...) This plate of humanity has long disturbed the albedo, the circulation of water, the median temperature, and the formation of clouds or wind -in short, the elements- as well as the number and evolution of living species in, on, and under its territory» (Serres 1995: 16).

It remains a fact that the aggregated actions of all humans over time have produced the effects on planetary systems that scientists are observing. The etymology of the term «Anthropocene», it should be noted, is entirely casual: an improvised remark on the part of chemist Paul Crutzen and not an obscure hegemonic manoeuvre. Still, the term is consistent with that which it tries to describe, namely the anthropogenic transformation of Earth. Moreover, neither Earth System scientists nor geologists are «in the business of blame» (Thomas 2018: 77). They are quantifying and assessing planetary changes produced by the human *species* -thus adopting a point of view from the derided «species-talk» makes perfect sense. Likewise, naming an epoch with a term that refers to humans is not tantamount to glorifying humanity or the human domination of nature, whose criticism is still possible (Jamieson 2017: 14). In other words, nothing prevents social scientists and humanists from problematizing, on a different plane, such causal assignation. They are not incompatible -why should they be? Is there only room for one narrative, one identity, one explanation? Could it not be the case

that natural scientists, on the one hand, and social scientists and humanists, on the other, are talking about different things? As Simon suggests:

«Whereas scientific Anthropocene narratives demand pre-emptive action in facing an existential risk, the narratives of the humanities and social sciences typically demand social justice and entail proactive social engagement» (Simon 2018: 4).

That is the reason why Chakrabarty (2016) himself has suggested that we should be able to tell the story of ecological overshoot not simply as the story of an unequal modernization, but also as the story of a particular species: whereas the details of intra-human injustice are not enough in order to understand the Anthropocene, we can keep an eye on them without cancelling the species perspective. The individual is at the same time irrelevant and indispensable in the formation of this collective power that, once it is unleashed, creates planetary risks. In fact, every individual act is at once episodic *and* systemic -episodic in the life of the individual and systemic after it is connected to millions of identical actions at a global level: driving a car, having a baby, eating meat (see Di Paola and Jamieson 2016). Which is the most relevant level of explanation? Arguably both, and yet without the aggregation over time and across space of individual actions there would be no Anthropocene.

Humanity must then be seen simultaneously as a biological species and as a social collectivity -this double act of representation is a challenge to be met if an adequate explanation for the Anthropocene is pursued (Heise 2010: 161-162). At the same time, though, humanity has also become a community of risk in the face of an Earth that also presents itself to us as a whole: despite the uneven distribution of environmental burdens among different social groups, gradual uninhabitability affects everyone and it affects them greatly. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992: 36) once quipped that whereas poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic -and he had a point. The agents of change are also, unwillingly, passive subjects of it.

In this sense, the Anthropocene represents a new twist in the itinerary of that old metaphor which presents us a shipwreck witnessed from safe ground by an observer. Hans Blumenberg (1997) documented the history of this trope, noting that the original reference to nature was lost by the mid-nineteenth century and replaced by the tide of History. He quotes historian Jakob Burckhardt, who at that time noted that we would like to know the wave upon which we go adrift in the ocean, but that we ourselves are the wave. If we bring this metaphor back and apply it to the Anthropocene, some parallels are startling: it can be said that *we ourselves are the wave* in the sense that humans have produced a massive change in the planet and have done so as a particular species endowed with disruptive powers that are greater than others. They are still close to nothing in comparison with the vast scales of the Earth seen from a geological or deep-time perspective, as Mark Sagoff (2018) has pointed out when criticizing the Anthropocene notion as «narcissistic». Yet this is also the Anthropocene's point: it puts mankind in center stage as the driver of planetary changes, yet it de-centers it at the same time insofar as the invocation of the geological past of the planet reveals its insignificance in the long run. This is a creative ambiguity captured by the species viewpoint. Once the planet has been anthropogenically disturbed, there is no other safe ground than the ship itself - a ship which, following some versions of the trope collected by Blumenberg, we must repair while at sea. We: the humans that comprise humanity.

It could be argued that, as the Anthropocene itself cannot be understood without the epistemic role played by natural scientists, mostly those coming from Earth System science and geology, the species viewpoint remains inescapably «scientific». There is no way to separate the Anthropocene from recent scientific developments, as it is through «knowledge infrastructures» built in the twentieth-century that we come to know what we know about anthropogenic environmental change at a planetary scale (see Edwards 2017). As the *We* of the Anthropocene is a reduction of pluralities, the Earth System of scientists is also the result of an assimilation that is opposed to the analytical habits of traditional earth and life sciences (Hamilton 2018: 10). If we turn our attention towards the other scientific discipline that is playing a role in the recognition of the Anthropocene, namely geology, the role of humanity is *contingent* in the sense that the geological impact produced by mankind would

have been equally registered had it been caused by a different agent. As Zalasiewicz and his colleagues, all members of the Anthropocene Working Group, argue:

«It so happens that the bulk of this change is currently human-driven, but if exactly the same changes had been produced not by human action, but for example by actions of some other species, by the effect of extraordinary volcanic eruptions or bolide strikes, or by some other means, then the geological justification would remain unchanged» (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017: 220).

It is the impact what counts, as seen from the viewpoint of the fossil record itself -a viewpoint from which it is the human species that is registered and not the causal subdivisions that can be found within it. Zalasiewicz himself explains elsewhere that geological boundaries are not there to include or exclude this or that event:

«Although the Anthropocene is characterised by human forcing of key Earth processes, there is no implication that 'all humanity' has an equal share in the ongoing planetary perturbation, any more than 'volcanism in general' precipitated the Permo-Triassic mass extinctions» (Zalasiewicz & Lewis 2016: 513).

Such conclusion simply does not apply, as both levels of explanation are perfectly compatible and in fact may supplement each other. As it happens, the species viewpoint emphasizes the aggressive adaptation to the environment that is *universally* recognizable in human beings. Again, this emphasis does not preclude the inquiry into *local* processes where that universal drive is shaped by culture and history. If thinking in the human being as a species does exclude the analysis and critique of economic systems and social injustices, as Alaimo (2017a: 101) concedes, then the reverse is surely true as well: this latter critique does not hinder the identification of the species as a causal unity. Focusing our attention exclusively on the trees of modern capitalism can prevent us from seeing the forest of a transhistorical humanity.

To put it differently: there is truly no *We*? Beyond the differences that can be found in different locations and times, something universal in the human relation to the environment can be identified, namely the need to adapt to it in order to survive. Unlike other species, humans adapt to their environments in a way that entails the latter's transformation -first modestly, then hugely. In this context, local and regional variations reflect different biophysical conditions, the degree of material wealth and technological prowess, the measure in which a society is connected to others, as well as the cultural norms that regulate socionatural relations. Below the universal impulse towards a transformative adaptation, there is thus a particularist dimension: not all ages, cultures or societies have approached their relation with the natural world in the same way. Socionatural relations vary *relatively* from one context to another (see Fischer-Kowalski & Haberl 2007). Anthropologists, ethnologists and historians have given enough proof of the mediated character of such relation. In turn, these differences tend to wane over time, as societies gradually converge in the wake of a globalization process driven the capitalist organization of the world economy, the global diffusion of technologies, the generalization of urban life, and the influence of the Western conception of nature.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere (see Arias-Maldonado 2015), the lack of ontological separatedness between human beings and the rest of nature did not prevent a *historical* and *ideational* dualism to emerge in the course of socionatural history. This process, by which human beings colonized nature while feeling increasingly detached from it, can also be explained in evolutionary terms dwelling on niche-construction theory. On his part, Giorgio Agamben (2004) has convincingly argued that the «anthropological machine» of humanism served as a way to reinforce a human identity marked by a delusional separation from nature. Humans saw themselves as *subjects* but never as *objects* of the material world -they are now forced to accept that the Anthropocene makes them both things at a time. Yet talking of «the Great Ontological Collapse» (LeCain 2016: 16) is both misguided and revealing, since the ontology has never changed: humans must now come to terms with something that was always there, albeit in a non-dangerous form. Not that this remained unnoticed, as the words of Ukrainian geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky attest:

«Mankind taken as a whole is becoming a mighty geological force. There arises the problem of the reconstruction of the biosphere in the interests of freely linking humanity as a single totality. This new state of the biosphere, which we approach without our noticing, is the *noösphere*» (Vernadsky 1945).

What is radically new, then, is the dangerousness of the situation. Hence the ambivalence of the Anthropocene, which expresses at the same time the human power and the human helplessness (Clark 2014: 25). Again, the human at this point must be contemplated *first* as a species and *then* as a differentiated set of social groups and assemblages. It has been argued that the two levels of analysis are non-exclusive and can -must- be combined. In the next section, I will argue that the ensuing identities are mutually compatible, a feature that opens up new possibilities for addressing the Anthropocene challenges in the name of the *anthropos*.

#### 4. The Anthropocene as a spatial revolution

Does the Anthropocene require a global sovereign that is able to represent the whole of humanity in the quest for preserving the habitability of the Earth? On the face of it, this would be one of the political possibilities contained in the recognition of humanity as a political subject. Yet the notion of a global sovereign, a befits a rhetoric of totality, sits uneasily with the demands of a pluralistic democracy. So far, the latter has been the preserve of sovereign nations, which in turn cooperate among each other and with non-democratic states in the international arena. New planetary risks seem to demand a step further, though. How to take it without curtailing liberal democracy?

In his late reflections on international law, Carl Schmitt (1997, 2003) outlined a global history that puts at its centre the changes in how human beings have conceptualized space. He emphasizes that the human is an earthly creature but also creature that does not let herself be absorbed by her surroundings -humans have also conquered the seas. Schmitt sees universal history as a clash between Leviathan (sea powers) and Behemoth (land powers). But his most insightful view concerns the idea of a «spatial revolution» that takes place whenever the image of space is fundamentally changed due to a particular event or technological innovation -let us think of Alexander the Great, Copernicus and Columbus, airplanes and airwaves. A spatial revolution is more than a discovery or a conquest, as it entails a change in the spaces where the existence of human beings take place. More particularly, changes in the image of the globe are associated to new distributions of the globe. For Schmitt, that is precisely the function of the *ius publicum europaeum*, i.e. the often unwritten laws that organize such distributions and the rules by which it can be lawfully altered. In this regard, the fundamental legal titles of modern sovereign states are the «discovery» and «occupation» of new lands and seas, the land-taking being at the center of the *nomos*. Therefore, the *nomos* is related to a historically constitutive event that creates its own legitimacy, from which a legal order can in turn be derived. New *nomos* are not frequent, but, as Schmitt writes:

«As long as world history remains open and fluid, as long as conditions are not fixed and ossified; in other words, as long as human beings and peoples have not only a past but also a future, a new *nomos* will arise in the perpetually new manifestations of world-historical events» (Schmitt 2003: 78).

But is that the case? Does the Anthropocene represent a spatial revolution, can it be the foundation of a new *nomos*? The answer is that it *should* be both. It is a spatial revolution in the sense that a new conception of space emerges from the scientific observation that natural and social systems are now coupled and human influence can be found almost everywhere on Earth. Yet it is debatable whether *this* spatial revolution entails an *ampliation* of the human sphere of action or contrariwise a *compression* of space, a limitation of human possibility. As in the case of the Copernican Revolution, the Anthropocene is a *humbling* revolution that demands some type of restraint or, at the very least, a self-conscious deployment of human ingenuity. To put it bluntly: there is no land to take because the Earth is already occupied. As for the *nomos*, if a new one can arise from the Anthropocene it will not be caused by any land-taking nor by a geographical discovery -it will rather be the negative culmination of previous spatial revolutions. As Jünger (2013: 156) noted, the geological insertion of

life and the meaning of Earth has remained so far almost unnoticed. The Anthropocene is a violent awakening to that reality.

This negativity, in turn, does not limit itself to the masses of land where most humans live their lives, but also to the seas towards which Schmitt turned his attention when thinking of the major spatial revolutions of modernity. As Alaimo (2017b) points out, whereas geological time is expansive, marine science suggests a huge temporal compression by which the seas will move rapidly backwards to a time where soft and gelatinous creatures will proliferate. Schmitt's anthropocentric epic, which however contains a moving eulogy of the whale, is thus replaced by a «Cthulucenic» unfolding (see Haraway 2016). As it happens, the Anthropocene coincides with another spatial revolution, namely that of digital communications. In fact, the technologies that have made possible the development of Earth System science and hence the very own idea of an organically interconnected planet facilitates now a «polylogue» among distant humans from which a «global subject» is to emerge (Schellnhuber 1999). It remains to be seen whether it will emerge on time.

How can the human subject, the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene, be politically articulated? Some critics have lamented that «the current grand narrative of the Anthropocene» promoted by the Earth sciences is shaping intergovernmental policies and many responses from the social sciences and the humanities (Luisetti 2019). Others fear the biopolitical consequences that the state of urgency associated to Anthropocene geopolitics may entail due to the clash between national and green sovereignty (Lynch & Veland 2018: 136). But even a theorist engaged with sovereignty as such can declare that it is «tempting to fantasize about a benevolent monarch with absolute power to impose earth-friendly rules of behavior on the entire human race» (Cocks 2013: 139). The language of sovereignty, let alone a global one, is charged with worrying implications.

It is thus only natural that a first reaction towards that prospect is to recall the eco-authoritarian scheme defended in the 70s by William Ophuls, among other writers concerned by the then newly perceived ecological crisis. Ophuls (1977) advocated a world government endowed with coercive power over nation states and directed by a body of ecological mandarins capable of applying expert knowledge in order to prevent environmental collapse. The idea resonates in our present: it has been predicted that a capitalist or communist «climate Leviathan» will reaffirm political sovereignty over the global environment as the only way out of the ongoing planetary disruption (Mann and Wainwright 2017: 49). The possibility of a new Leviathan has been explored in length by Bruno Latour (2017), which conceives the Anthropocene so far as some kind of natural state to be replaced by a new legal equilibrium through a civilizational gesture. The planetary dimension of the Anthropocene means that we are all citizens of a single body politic, but one torn apart by the kind of division that worried Hobbes himself:

«The *Anthropos* of the Anthropocene is nothing but the dangerous fiction of a universalized agent capable of acting like a single humanity. For such a Humanity to be viable, there would have to be a worldwide State already in place behind it. The Human (with a capital letter) as agent of history has been demobilized and disbanded» (Latour 2017: 246).

In order to have a political ecology, the division among humans must be recognized. There might be a war against Gaia, the terrifying earthly goddess, but first and foremost there is a war between the humans of the Holocene and the earthbounds of the Anthropocene. Of course, there is an echo of the religious wars waged during the Reformation, the solution to which lied for the great part in the constitution of the new modern state that concentrated hitherto dispersed powers and exerted political sovereignty. Only by pacifying the social domain can humans concentrate their efforts on the planetary front. In her comments to Chakrabarty, McAfee (2016) claims that humanity as a whole cannot act politically:

«Today's reality calls for a politics that identifies and forges links between the multiple fractions of humanity who comprise the majority of us and who are impoverished, materially and otherwise, by the effects of global warming and other, ongoing consequences of capitalism and colonialism» (McAfee 2016: 71).

A similar conclusion is reached by Connolly (2017) when he envisions a «politics of swarming» that would lead to a «general strike» at a global level -one that is enacted by fragmented constituencies across the planet which, as the situation worsens, coalesce around the demand for radical policies in the face of impending ecological disaster. This may or may not happen, but these thinkers are pointing out that there is no unified humanity ready to operate politically in the Anthropocene. Moreover, there are also reasons to question that a sudden rise in global planetary awareness will automatically lead to an agreement about *how* to govern an anthropogenically disrupted planet -not to mention how to define a «good Anthropocene» (see Arias-Maldonado 2019). If the *anthropos* is plural in its values and preferences, as any other «people» is, then there is no exercise in «*demogenesis*» that can produce that political consensus. Tellingly, no process has yet been identified that can produce a borderless social movement capable of binding together humans from the whole world and turns ecological solidarity into a political force (Kunkel 2017). There might be hints of it now, but success is far from guaranteed.

How to reverse this situation? Is the global sovereign a doomed idea that actually threatens democracy and pluralism? Should humanity be discarded as a political actor?

### **5. Recruiting old wisdom in the quest for a new sovereign.**

Something has clearly emerged from the previous discussion: insofar as sovereignty retains connotations of absolute power, it must be handled with care. And yet it all depends on the extent of power that is granted to the aforementioned global sovereign and on the goals that is allowed to pursue. Not even the apparently harmless metaphor of the gardener, often presented as an appropriate figure for the new socio-natural realities, is devoid of dangers: «Who is yet to say, what should grow and what should not, which are the weeds and which the crop?» (Manemann 2014: 89). Among those who are attempting to forge a new politics for the Anthropocene, however, the premise of a global human agreement is usually present -if only as a *desiderata*. In his vision of ecomodernism, for example, Symons (2019) argues that for universal human flourishing to be possible in the near future a «global social democracy» is needed: the global community of fate created by climate change generates obligations of justice that cannot be made without a global social agenda.

In fact, a more benign view of a global sovereign can be presented. By necessity, it must be rooted in some kind of moral cosmopolitanism that assumes that all human beings are *in some sense* part of the same community (see Ingram 2014). This shared community is double-faced: it is indeed a community of fate, since all living humans are experiencing the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Yet it is also a community of blame, because it is the human species itself what has created the new planetary state in the first place. Scott Hamilton has put it nicely:

«If the certainty of the 'I' was once derived from the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am", then certainty in the Anthropocene epoch might become: "We are, because of what We have done".» (Hamilton 2019: 20).

Until recently, we did not know what we were doing -despite some isolated insights about the anthropogenic impact on the planet (see Bonneuil & Fressoz 2013: xiii)- and this creates the possibility of redressing past antics. Granted: not all humans have contributed in the same measure. But that is an intrahuman problem to be attended to when global agreements are negotiated and the relative contributions of each one are legally settled -the planet does not care. Whereas the constitution of humanity as a global subject is to be based upon the shared belonging to the same biological species, there is room for nuances and provisos.

Now, a concerted human effort that invokes universal moral norms as a foundation for some kind of global polity feels very much like an inheritance from the Enlightenment. Yet the Anthropocene is in itself a reminder of modern reason's shortcomings. As a result, the toolbox of the Enlightenment is to be cautiously updated in a reflective way -taking from it what is valuable and amending what is

not. Let us take the idea of the classical social contract, which was formulated in strictly anthropocentric term and thus in exclusion of the natural world. Now, Serres (1995: 44) argues, the latter must be incorporated in a new contract of symbiosis and reciprocity that acknowledges the necessary balance between human and earthly powers. His sovereign has also a tinge of scientific expertise: «Thus the prince, formerly a shepherd of beasts, will have to turn to the physical sciences and become a helmsman or cybernetician» (Serres 1995: 18). The recourse to science is not hard to explain, as science has accompanied past attempts to build up a genuine internationalism due to the cultural neutrality of its methods and its status as a foundation of material progress (see Pemberton 2001: 93). How could sustainability in the Anthropocene be achieved *without* a massive help from the natural *and* social sciences?

Defenders of a socionatural contract are thus suggesting that adapting old instruments is enough: the Enlightened notion of moral progress would now be extended to the nonhuman world, while the cosmopolitan ideal is extended to the future generations of humans (Williston 2015: 22). A key part of this new global contract is the recognition of an ecological citizenship that establishes individual duties and obligations towards the planet and its nonhuman members. We are never *anywhere* and we are always *somewhere* -thus interacting materially with the Earth regardless of the state that recognizes us as citizens (see Dobson 2003). Needless to say, as Clive Hamilton (2015: 39) warns, there is no entity at the other side of the table that can sign any kind of contract with humanity, the idea of which is a projection of an early modern view onto the Earth of the Anthropocene. This is true, but also pointless: the idea of a socionatural contract is but a human way of acknowledging a dangerous reality and creating the obligation to address it. What it makes for us -that is what matters. It would be a human institution with planetary effects.

Arguably, humanism cannot be understood nor implemented in a classic manner anymore. Thus Connolly's proposal of an «entangled humanism» that is not «sociocentric», in the sense that it takes nonhuman phenomena and planetary forces into account, but remains humanistic insofar as it gives

«a recurrently problematized degree of priority to the human species in its interdependencies and imbrications with other beings and forces it neither masters nor owns» (Connolly 2017: 171).

Now, Connolly explains that entangled humanists do not pursue a pure «horizon of community» - perhaps because the latter seems unattainable. However, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this paper, human species-belonging offers a convenient foundation for an instrumental community whose expression is a limited global sovereignty assigned with the task of protecting the Earth's habitability. The task is not to protect the Earth, nor its other inhabitants -these are desirable additions to the main purpose of the new sovereign, namely making sure that the planet remains habitable for the human species. The form of that sovereign does not have to be decided in advance, nor it is compulsory that it is represented by a «prince». On the contrary, it would be unrealistic to expect the realization of a world government -an old chimera that may never happen (Murphy 1999: xxi). The prospects are not propitious: China is on the rise as a world power, populism and nationalism militate against the surrendering of national sovereignty, ideological enmities do exist. Additionally, there is no clear answer as to whether a centralized or a polyarchic system best serves the goal of achieving global sustainability (see Biermann & Dryzek 2016); nor do we know whether a constitutional moment that brings about a global environmental constitution is imminent or not (see Kotzé 2018). As the classic theoreticians of sovereignty already envisioned, the sovereign does not have to be a single person -it can be a body comprised of several members. The key lies in the powers that the sovereign holds -powers that are determined by the functions assigned to it. Is there any reason to believe that the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, if made more binding than it is now, could be the result of negotiations conducted in the name of humanity by a sovereign body whose goal is clearly delimited so as not to collide with national sovereignties? In its current form, international cooperation is too contingent and limited: the idea of a political institution that represents the human species might help to expand it. At this point, old wisdom -Kant and Hobbes- may be helpful.

On the one hand, Kant employed often the category of the species when reflecting upon the essential features of human beings. In his *Anthropology* (2006a), the German philosopher offered a description of the human animal that does not differ much from the one that is currently common in evolutionary literature: human beings possess an outstanding technological ability and also the capacity to civilize themselves through culture. As rational animals, he argues, humans want to preserve their own persons and the integrity of their species. For that, they need binding laws that force them to be good, destined as they are *by nature* to form a progressive yet unstable coalition whose ultimate form is that of a «cosmopolitan society». Importantly, this is not a constitutive principle derived from experience, but a «regulative principle» that is to be pursued diligently «as the vocation of the human race» (Kant 2006a: 237). When Kant cautions about the difficulties associated to this project, he sounds like our contemporary:

«achievement is difficult because one cannot expect to reach the goal by the free agreement of individuals, but only by a progressive organization of *citizens of the earth* into and toward *the species as a system* that is *cosmopolitically united*» (Kant 2006a: 238; my emphasis).

It is hardly necessary to clarify that «nature» and «the concealed plan of nature» are in Kant nothing but heuristic concepts -an hypothesis for the philosopher and for the philosopher of history. As a matter of fact, human hopes are not to be realized at the level of the individual, but rather at that of the species (Kant 2006b: 3). Thus one can regard «the history of the human species at large» as the realization of a concealed plan of nature whose end is a cosmopolitan universal state (2006b: 13). Admittedly, Kant is not thinking of humans as biological agents, but that perspective can be easily introduced into his approach as a way of a supplement. In his reflections on perpetual peace, he presents the problem of establishing a state in well-known terms that are eerily relevant in the Anthropocene:

«To form a group of rational beings, which, as a group, require universal laws for their preservation, of which each member is, however, secretly inclined to make an exception of himself, and to organize them and arrange a constitution for them in such a way that, although they strive against each other in their private intentions, the latter check each other in such a way that the result in their public conduct is just as if they had no such evil intentions» (Kant 2006b: 90-91).

But given that the world republic is something that remains distant in the future and perhaps ultimately utopian, this positive idea can in the meantime be replaced by «the negative surrogate of a lasting and continually expanding federation that prevents war» (Kant 2006b: 81). The notion of a defensive agreement intended to prevent not war but ecological collapse makes perfect sense in a world where habitability constitutes a common interest -the ultimate interest of all.

On the other hand, there is Hobbes. But what interests me here in Hobbes is not the notion that a social contract is to be derived from a state of nature represented, as in Latour, by the current disruption of planetary systems. The usefulness of his contract theory for the political articulation of humanity in the Anthropocene lies in the operation by which the sovereign is put in place. Hobbes explains that the powerful state that he represents with the biblical Leviathan is created «by art» as «an artificial man» that is greater in size and strength than the natural man for whose protection the state is set up in the first place. Yet Hobbes singles out the fact that if an artificial person is that which represents the words and actions of another, a *person* is herself an «actor». And this explains the nature of representation, opening up a possibility that *one* represents *many*:

«A multitude of men, are made *one* person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented; (...) it is the *unity* of the representer, not the *unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *one*. (...) *unity* cannot otherwise be understood in multitude» (Hobbes 1996: 109).

In the case of a global Anthropocene politics, the representer is the sovereign that embodies humanity, while the represented is that very humanity in all its internal diversity -a diversity that is temporarily suspended for the sake of political action. The *anthropos* is not exactly a fiction, since all

humans belong to a biological species whose transformative powers have produced the Anthropocene. Its unity is performative: it creates the condition for taking the necessary measures to achieve sustainability. But we are sophisticated enough to remember that such unity is *at a different level of analysis* certainly non-existent. That is the reason why different responsibilities and duties are already recognized in environmental international treaties. Pluralism is thus preserved, all the more since individuals can hold different identities at the same time -they can feel as members of their biological species, as citizens of a nation, as parts of a social group. Furthermore, this inner diversity can help to spread the planetary subjectivity that constitutes the precondition of any geopolitics, as the phenomenological apprehension of human precariousness can be achieved through «ethnological comparativism and translative curiosity» (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2016: 82). Humanity is simultaneously *one* and *many*: the species is not a people but can be a *demos*.

Moreover, the sovereign body that represents the shared interest of all humans in a habitable planet will receive a limited power rather than an absolute power: the goal is to guarantee that certain thresholds are not trespassed, nor to decide upon the shape of national societies or about the way in which citizens must live their private lives (although they will unavoidably be affected). Whereas the «mortal God» conceived by Hobbes had to provide security to the members of the political community, the global sovereign that is to embody the emerging planetary subjectivity receives a similar mandate: to avoid the worst without aiming for the best. Perhaps, as in Kant's view of history, a world republic will take shape one day. In the meantime, though, we will have to settle for a lesser God.

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