

GEOG 310

Environment and Sustainability

Professor: Jessica Dempsey

Final Paper

The Euro-pocene

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Option 4: Watch the following three-minute overview of “The Anthropocene” Critically engage with the imaginary of the Anthropocene presented in the video: do you agree with the imaginary on offer? Why or why not?

Gaffney, Owen, director. Welcome to the Anthropocene. planetunderpressure2012.Net, Planet Under Pressure Conference, 4 Apr. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvgG-pxlobk.

“*This is the story of how one species changes the planet*”¹ – Welcome to the Anthropocene presents the Anthropocene as a geological epoch dominated by humanity, placing relentless pressure on our planet with the risk of unrepresented de-stabilization. It further recognizes how The Great Acceleration has helped humanity evolve, while also acknowledging the environmental harms it has caused. It concludes by placing the hope of humanity’s existence in technological innovation. Although the imaginary on offer holds true with respect to mankind’s impact on the Earth, its approach to the solution is quite *Eurocentric*². Hence, this essay will scrutinize this approach by discussing the impacts of the dualisms Eurocentrism creates within mankind, and between mankind and nature.

The Anthropocene is like a *Colonialist*³ movement, and like any other process of colonization, it will leave the colonized in despair. As all species that have ever existed, humans

¹ Gaffney, Owen, director. Welcome to the Anthropocene. planetunderpressure2012.Net, Planet Under Pressure Conference, 4 Apr. 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvgG-pxlobk.

² Eurocentric: An adjective that describes the characteristic of believing that the western European experience is the only correct way to progress. (Dempsey, Jessica. Lecture 6)

³ Colonialism: An enduring relationship of domination and mode of dispossession, usually between an indigenous majority and a minority of interlopers (colonizers), who are convinced of their own superiority, pursue their own interests, and exercise power through a mixture of coercion, persuasion, conflict and collaboration. (Dempsey, Jessica. Lecture 5)

were meant to colonize the earth as well. However, instead of adapting to nature like all other species have, we have exploited it for our comfort and benefit. We have tried to shape nature around us - to cater to our endless needs, taking more than the earth has to give.

The video reinforces the Eurocentric divide between Mankind and Nature⁴ when the speaker says, “*We have shaped our past, we are shaping our present, we can shape our future.*” I believe that this the wrong way of dealing with this issue. Mankind has existed on this planet for merely a fraction of time and has already caused so much destruction. We consider ourselves as being superior to nature. Therefore, the imaginary that this video presents, still fails to accept that we have no power over nature. It offers mankind’s ‘*Creativity, Energy, and Industry*’ as rays of hope. However, what it fails to recognize is that the heedless and improper use of this very ‘*Creativity, Energy, and Industry*’ drove us into this chaos.

Naomi Klein articulates it perfectly - “*We have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism*”⁵ Hence, the video impeccably reflects the problem in society – we are aware of the harm we cause to our environment, but still discount meaningful actions to mitigate this damage by placing faith in the fact that someday, someone will be able solve it.

⁴ (Dempsey, Jessica. Lecture 6)

⁵ Klein, Naomi. “One Way Or Another, Everything Changes.” *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*, CNIB, 2015.

The imaginary presented also fails to recognize the Eurocentric divide within mankind - between the ‘superiors’ (Europeans/North) and the ‘inferiors’ (Rest of the World/South). It ignores this relationship of power that Europeans had forcefully established between them and the rest of the world, dispossessing the ‘inferiors’ of their land and natural resources.⁶

So when the speaker says, “*We move more sediment and rock than all natural processes*”, the question arises - who does the ‘we’ refer to? In today’s world, the trend is that governments and companies from the *Global North* threaten the land, resources, and livelihoods of people in the *Global South*⁷. Hence, Environmental Movements of the South pertain more to fighting the ‘colonizers’ off; They have not had the time to worry about the degradation of their environments yet –

*“The Environmentalism of the Poor manifests itself through conflicts with an ecological element, including social justice claims, and involving impoverished populations struggling against the state or private companies that threaten their livelihood, health, culture, autonomy.”*⁸

In terms of dealing with climate-induced disasters, “*Millions of people around the world are suffering from the effects of a problem they did not contribute to*”⁹. The Global North is

⁶ Hartsock, Nancy. “Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7, 1987, pp. 187–206. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1354155.

⁷ *The North–South divide is a socio-economic and political divide where the North is defined as the richer, more developed region and the South as the poorer, less developed region.* – Therien, Jean-Philippe. “Beyond the North-South Divide: The Two Tales of World Poverty.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1999, pp. 723–742., doi:10.1080/01436599913523.

⁸ Alier, J, and R Guha. “Chapter 1.” *The Environmentalism Of The Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁹ Klein, Naomi. “One Way Or Another, Everything Changes.” *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate*, CNIB, 2015.

relatively better off as they have the infrastructure, capital, and capacity to do so. However, the impacts of climate change are strongest felt in the Global South which lacks all of that, and faces the highest degree of environmental degradation owing to the *Extractivism*¹⁰ by the Global North. Most Latin American countries (South) experienced major debt crisis in the 1980's. Major structural adjustment policies were enforced by the World Bank (North), which greatly focused on increasing their exports of natural resources such as minerals and petroleum. Extractivism implies over-exploitation of resources of one country while the benefits flow to another.¹¹

Hence, it is quite ironic when the obviously European-made video starts off with, “*This is the story of how one species changes the planet.*” It fails to recognize the source of the problem - the colonial tendencies of one race.¹²

Therefore, I find it difficult to agree with the imaginary this video presents as its approach is still Eurocentric – It fails to recognize the fundamental causes of the situation we are in. However, what I respect is its *Collective*¹³ call to action, “*You and I are a part of this story, we are the first generation to realize this new responsibility.*” It is imperative for humanity to

¹⁰ Extractivism: the process of extraction or removal of natural resources that are considered valuable for exportation worldwide. (Dempsey, Jessica. Lecture 6)

¹¹ Robert, Devlin, and French Ricardo. *The Great Latin American Debt Crisis: A Decade of Asymmetric Adjustment*. Revista De Economía Política , 1995.

¹² Jessica Stoller-Conrad, Jessica. “Why Did Western Europe Dominate the Globe? .” *The California Institute of Technology*, CalTech, 9 Jan. 2015, www.caltech.edu/news/why-did-western-europe-dominate-globe-47696.

¹³ Collective Action: Forging alliances, building bridges across difference - different people, communities, across borders even, in order to produce political power capable of changing institutions, economies, to alter power relations. (Dempsey, Jessica. Lecture 13)

recognize ‘Individual’ shortcomings, and work together. To realize the dream of a sustainable planet, we need a blend of both Science and Indigenous Knowledge. It also has to be a Collective of Culture and Science, not just people.

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External –

(6) Hartsock, Nancy. “Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 7, 1987, pp. 187–206. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1354155.

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