

## **Towards Planetary Thinking** **By Prof. Claus Leggewie and Dr. Frederic Hanusch**

Defining the *conditio humana* was the unique job of the humanities and social sciences in modernity. Humankind took center stage. When climate change announced itself, this began to change, with sociologists like Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour as well as leading political ecologists calling for a change of course. “What the New Climatic Regime calls into question is not the central place of the human; it is its composition, its presence, its figuration [...]”—thus Latour writes in his latest book *Down to Earth*, challenging illusions of sovereignty on the part of individual and collective actors and turning upside down deliberations on contracts between so-called principals and agents. Humans have massively interfered with the planet; they have become a destructive geological force. And now they seem incapable of finding a way out of the mess they have created. Humans have thus utterly failed as “principals”; nature is taking over: that is the basic assumption of the Anthropocene.

The contribution the social sciences and cultural studies can make to this primarily geologically informed debate is to ‘socialize’ it. As the chemist and originator of the Anthropocene concept, Paul Crutzen, was well aware, generalizations like “planet” or “humanity” hardly apply when in fact those responsible for the overexploitation of resources amount to only about one fourth of the global population. Little wonder, then, that from an indigenous or postcolonial perspective, the consequences of climate change—which supposedly affects “us all” in equal measure—are being assessed very differently. Also, functional systems such as the economy, politics, or culture each have their own way of reacting to the “Great Acceleration.” Which is why calls for changing “our” way of life require some thorough micro-social reflection.

### The geologization of the social

Suggestions that supposedly objective, empirically derived “guardrails” are but socially constructed symbolic markers have not always been well-received among natural scientists. It should be apparent, however, that mandates for society, politics, and the economy cannot be deduced directly from statistical projections. If we want to prevent (ostensibly benevolent) eco-dictatorships, we must keep relying on democratic processes, which—though they have their own logic and need lots of time—demonstrably work better.

As Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski point out in their forthcoming book on *Planetary Social Thought*, a look at the potentials and achievements of socio-ecological theory and practice reveals that we need to “geologise the social,” i.e., transfer social thought into planetary thinking. This new kind of thinking—as outlined in works by, among others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (a scholar of literature and postcolonialism) and Donna Haraway (a biologist and ecofeminist)—has little to do with traditional sociobiological approaches. It radically questions the established dualism of active human subjectivity and passive materiality, regarding animals and inorganic matter as more than just that. Matter is capable of “acting,” too, at least if we conceive of such agency as effectiveness, and not just as deliberate action. A case in point is the great earthquake of 1755, which shook not only Lisbon

but large parts of the globe. Another is the steadily rising temperature of our oceans, which is a direct result of anthropogenic climate change and has been proven to trigger seaquakes.

Sociology has always been familiar with interdependencies and processes of differentiation, but instead of only accounting for cultural diversity it now has to confront bio- and geodiversity as well. Thus, colonialism, because it has so deeply affected the textures of whole continents, is now understood as an important chapter in natural history. What is more, spiritual and “situated” indigenous knowledges are no longer seen as subordinate to the rational insights of secular modernity. As Clark and Szerszynski put it: “[I]t is not only a matter of asking who speaks *for* the Earth, but of asking who speaks *with* and *through* the Earth—or even how the Earth speaks *through us*.”

Such poetical metaphors are jarring to ‘proper’ social scientists and mainstream natural scientists alike. The same is no doubt true of James Lovelock’s recent “Novacene” extension of the Gaia hypothesis, in which he predicts a posthuman future under the aegis of artificial intelligence. However, planetary thinking has found its way into many disciplines, often with reference to (neo-)stoic holistic approaches that acknowledged the relativity of humanity’s supremacy on Earth and in the universe. Indeed, as attested by emerging disciplines such as astrobiology or “Big History,” planetary thinking is not confined to the globe. “The harder we ‘work’ the earth [...], the more we encounter the planet,” writes the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. Seen from this perspective, nature has always been an agent.

Sociology’s role, which would also raise its visibility, could be that of a mediator, a translator, much like geography has been in the past. Once we really recognize the Earth as a planet—materially, epistemologically, ethically—and firmly situate human life in that planetary context, we will begin to think differently about society as well. Future decisions about the survival and flourishing of humanity are dependent on our knowledge of the functioning of the universe as a whole, on observations made in space missions like Solar Orbiter, which was launched earlier this year.

Global democracy?

Our proliferating sustainability efforts deserve applause—even though the universe could care less about the actions or non-actions of humans. Alternative, planet-centric ideas focus on the Earth’s habitability or on human hospitality, with guest and host not conceived of as opposite, but as symmetrically connected. Kant’s conception of visitor rights in *Perpetual Peace* conceded “to all mankind” the “right to present themselves to society,” “in virtue of our common right of possession of the surface of the earth.” In view of planetary boundaries, political scientist Anne Fremaux and legal scholar Louis F. Kotzé have elaborated this into theories of “green republicanism” and “global environmental constitutionalism.” Both these concepts transcend the borders of nation states and even capitalism, but as normative theories they still need further operationalization.

Which brings us back to the question of how compatible planetary thinking is with liberal democracy, seeing that the latter remains closely tied to the nation state. In 1966, Martin Heidegger poked fun at the “planetary flatness of opining and talking and writing” as a form of “*Seynsvergessenheit*” (“forgetfulness of being”); at the time, his targets were both

communism and “Americanism,” and more generally, modern technology and liberal democracy. Some current approaches of planetary thinking share this skepticism, almost as if the era of post-democracy had already begun. It remains to be seen whether or not “the people,” or more precisely: whether political movements still possess the capability for instigating new beginnings.