

Assignment Description: The purpose of the assignment was to “write and present a research paper on a topic that might help policy makers to understand and address the threat of global climate change and the threat of the global pandemic.” The pandemic aspect was optional, with the focus being on how climate change presents novel challenges to policy makers. This assignment wanted students to engage in nuanced research and paper crafting to analyze a topic of their choosing.

# **Climate Change in the Anthropocene**

## **Defense of Democracy and a Path Forward**

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## **Abstract**

The liberal ideal of democracy has fallen under increased scrutiny in the face of failures in tackling the ecological crisis of climate change. The lack of meaningful action regarding saving our planet has left many scholars questioning the efficacy of democratic regimes in the Anthropocene, the most recent geologic time period in which human activity has had massive impacts on the planet's climate and ecosystems. In the face of impending crisis, some have proposed widescale systematic upheaval to avert disaster. Some have called for a temporary technocratic management system known as "green authoritarianism" while others desire a total reconstruction of political structures, noting the moderate successes of China relative to the Western world. This paper rejects the belief that democracies are irredeemable in the Anthropocene and it argues that consequential reforms to liberal democracies and their political institutions will yield worthwhile results. The Anthropocene simultaneously undermines the present order of democracies while affording them the opportunity to grapple with the challenges that it lays before them. In engaging in contestation with knowledge, time, boundaries, and humanism, democracy can rework itself and successfully guide us through the Anthropocene.

## **Into the Anthropocene**

The Anthropocene defines Earth's most recent geological time period as being anthropogenic based on the immense global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, biospheric, and other earth systems and processes are now increasingly altered by humans. The scholarly consensus is that the Anthropocene is a new period either after or within the Holocene, the current geological epoch which began around 10,000 years ago with the end of the last ice age. The Anthropocene begins to ask fundamental questions for how world politics is now to be understood in an age of globalization of ecological upheaval. From the scientific to the political,

the Anthropocene provides an opportunity for rethinking many aspects of life (Dalby 2018). One of the most pressing matters in the Anthropocene is our relationship to the natural world and how we can remedy our exploitation so we can avoid the worst consequences of climate change. The Anthropocene pushes us to debate whether democracy is the path forward, or if we are to be better suited under a different political framework due to the recent history of categorical failures. This paper argues that democracy is not without its detractors; however, it is ill-advised to abandon the system at a crucial time in human history and attempt to reconstruct global society at a whim. Democracy is the way forward in the Anthropocene, and reform to the system of governance will yield the best results in the existential fight against climate change.

### **Doubts for Democracy**

It is not that long ago that it was a common belief that democracies were weak and fleeting, and stronger, more authoritative government would rise to replace them. Therefore, it should not be surprising that we see calls for revolutionary changes to the status quo. Distaste with democracy breeds where it falters, and it has done so in the face of several challenges, notably climate change. The failure to anticipate and address the challenge of the Anthropocene can be viewed as “nothing less than a failure of democracy” (Mert 2019). Democratic failures are often failure to impose self-restraint, and self-restraint is exactly what environmental politics necessitates (Purdy 2018). Without self-restraint, climate change and ecological exploitation go unchecked and the validity of democracy in the Anthropocene falls even further as it displays a lack of control over its surroundings.

There is presently a disconnect between environmental and ecological democracy. Environmental democracy calls for reforming institutions, rather than radically transforming or dismantling them. This is in opposition to ecological democracy that is more critical of liberal

democracies and their systems, seeking to revolutionize them. Thus, there is a desire to seek to reconcile the two normative ideals; ensuring environmental sustainability while safeguarding democracy (Pickering et al. 2020). As time goes on, there is less faith in democracy achieving this.

This key principle of self-restraint is key to the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene challenges us to rethink our interactions with the environment and question our ethical responsibilities to our world. Democracy is failing in this. Although there have been notable successes like anti-pollution laws, resource use and environmental impact continue to accelerate. Supra-national organizations have taken economic governance out of the hands of popular majorities and placed it with technocrats, perpetuating the ideal that democracies cannot be trusted with their own affairs (Purdy 2018). This lends into “green authoritarianism” that posits only experts know the right way to organize economic life in the Anthropocene, and that we must accept it. Eco-authoritarianism argues that a hierarchical, technocratic, and centralized response featuring a strong state entity and a corresponding global authority is paramount to averting environmental disaster (Pickering et al. 2020).

This is particularly concerning, as real environmental reform is a matter of political economy; it requires engaging the foundations of economic life and asking questions of the value and qualities of the wealth it produces (Purdy 2018). If democracies are not trusted with the political economy, then it is impossible for them to effectively tackle climate change. Their legitimacy and validity in the Anthropocene are under significant duress. This is a key component of Klein’s exposé of the existential clash between capitalism and climate change. Klein pushes socialism, a throwback to the 1970s in which environmentalists took democratic failures as reason to believe nondemocratic governments would be the path to saving the natural

world. This is based in the hope that state socialism can avoid the demand for economic growth and exploitation of the natural world (Purdy 2018). The Soviet bloc's environmental record of pressure for economic growth and industrial disasters like Chernobyl and the death of the Aral Sea discredited this idea for a while, however, there has been resurgent fantasies of "green authoritarianism" like that of China and its state-led investment in solar cells (Purdy 2018). Comparatively, democracy has been a disappointment in the Anthropocene.

### **Defense of Democracy**

In the bleak backdrop of smog and gloom, there is hope. The Anthropocene simultaneously threatens and jettisons the practice of democratic governance at the same time. Mert reminds us that "there is nothing so unique about the issues of environmental governance that puts them out of the reach of democratic deliberation." Democracies are not rigid unless we make them so. The result of an undemocratic Anthropocene is an inhumane world built on unfair terms, as it excludes the narratives of those whose voices were silenced. The protection of minority voices is essential to the Anthropocene and in defining what kind of world we are making. Democracy is thus seemingly pivotal in this process of reflection in the Anthropocene. Democracy may be imperfect, but it is young. We can adopt attitudes to bend democracy to our aims (Purdy 2018).

Further, it is harmful to ignore the big picture when criticizing democracy's shortcomings. While China has had a successful state-led investment in solar cells, its overall environmental and human rights record is hardly better than the Soviet Union's, and its economic growth has led to massive increases in human impact on the planet. The reality is that no political system has risen to the challenge because humanity itself is the challenge. Authoritarianism, socialism, nor democracy have succeeded by contradicting the demand for

more and more (Purdy 2018). Thus, the emphasis is on changing our culture and consciousness. Our mores have put us where we are, and so it is imperative we deconstruct how we got here and how we can redefine our relationships with the human and natural worlds in order to thrive in the Anthropocene. We must not blindly trudge our way into the future with a baseless commitment to democracy in a failing system. Our commitment to democracy must be one to propose reforms that meet the Anthropocene question of what kind of world to make for a better future.

Detractors are right when they say democracy has failed in the Anthropocene. This is because we do not have a democracy presently capable of self-restraint. Detractors posit their visions of green authoritarianism on the idea that democracy is irredeemable and incapable of developing institutions that foster self-restraint. However, democracy can, and will, if it develops the necessary approach to tackle the challenges of the Anthropocene.

### **Agonism as a Pathway**

Democracy must reform so it can survive in the Anthropocene. On the grand scale, the democratic experiment will fail if the institutions in which liberal democracies govern are not reworked. The question is then, how will democracies reform in the face of the scrutiny that has arisen against it within the Anthropocene? If democracies choose to view the Anthropocene as an opportunity to correct the failure of existing failures, then they can begin to reconstruct the systems they utilize. In order to reconstruct these systems, democracies around the world need to take on an agonistic relationship with the challenges of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene no doubt encompasses a myriad of serious and interconnected issues. Mass biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, pollution, biohazards, climate change, and side effects of technology. Human interaction with the environment defines the Anthropocene. However, just as the Anthropocene indicates environmental strife, it also unsettles base approval

of prevailing social norms and political institutions. Modern democratic institutions of all forms across the world seem unable to produce swift and decisive action required to cope with climate change and environmental consequence. The Anthropocene has exposed these flaws in modern democratic systems and has led to a rise in calls to scrap current systems or put democracy “on hold” in order to avert impending ecological disaster. To claim democracy can work in the Anthropocene is to claim that there are ways for it to improve and that there is a path forward. Machin suggests that in contrast to the claim that democratic institutions are incapable of adequately responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene, that democratic institutions might rather be strengthened through a meaningful engagement with them. Machin suggests the instrumental challenges that the Anthropocene poses to the democratic system of governance are challenges of knowledge, time, and boundary. I believe there is a fourth challenge, that of humanism. Contestation brought on by the challenges of the Anthropocene is key to democratic revival and renewal. If democracies ignore these challenges, the status quo will be preserved, and the opportunity will be lost. Therefore, democracy in the Anthropocene can be enhanced through an agonistic approach, insofar as they engage with the challenges and strive to overcome them in argument rather than aggressively suppress them.

Detractors will argue that existing democracies seem incapable of effective policy in tackling the Anthropocene, but this may suggest its imminent reinvention and large potential for reform along agonistic lines. Agonists argue that radical change is possible within the existing democratic institutions, and that reform is preferable to revolution in combatting the challenges of the Anthropocene. This is because of the belief that any sort of measures to combat the challenges of the Anthropocene should be subject to a deliberative process, as the disagreement between differences is actually constitutive of robust democratic politics. Under this logic, the

challenges of the Anthropocene are not surmountable by technocracy but rather a robust democratic response that is humane in all respect. Of course, if democracy operates only within narrowly defined and static sets of institutions, then it will be unsustainable. However, if we understand democracy more broadly and as open to redesign and adaptation, we can see renewed reflections on democratic institutions. The Anthropocene, in generating opportunities for renewed and creative democratic disagreement, ends up providing the path towards democracy's survival.

The first challenge for democracy posed by Machin in the Anthropocene is the crucial role science plays in grasping the implications of climate change. Knowledge is an essential resource that transforms society and creates new politics. While never certain, scientific predictions regarding climate change are nonetheless a valuable resource in legitimizing socio-economic and environmental policies and their drastic effects. Thus, there is a debate in how to make the knowledge accessible to non-experts. The danger is in portraying scientific claims as indisputable and scientists are the sole arbiters of knowledge. What is crucial for democracies in the Anthropocene is to design political institutions that can support and enhance the capacity of citizens to not only grasp the science but to determine its consequences. In grappling with knowledge, democracies will critically assess and utilize it. The Anthropocene both highlights the importance of contestation between different knowledges and bring about said competition. To grant authority to any particular group or way of knowing would subvert democracy, as it would lend more credence to the aforementioned technocratic reality. Although the science is paramount in the Anthropocene, to assert that scientists are the sole authorities of it hinders democracy. In combating the challenge of knowledge in the Anthropocene, democracies will not



only restructure their institutions in a way that facilitates dialogue, but in doing so will empower citizens.

The second challenge posed in the Anthropocene by Machin is the challenge of time. The rapid political response that is necessary becomes difficult to obtain against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. The distinction between calendars of human history and geological time has crumbled, and democracies must weigh the consequences of tomorrow against those in 100 years, the next millennium, and even further. The difficulty of implementing policies for environmental issues that unfold over a long period of time in unforeseen ways is an area of concern. Liberal democracies often dismiss uncertain future outcomes of various ecological problems as non-salient issues. There is a tendency to discount future problems in favor of short-term concerns, with climate change being the prime example in the Anthropocene of long-term policy issues being shunned in short-term electoral cycles. As democracies move from short-term economic rationality towards rational disagreement along an economic-ecological spectrum, juxtaposition is key. For every measure that promotes rapid development in impoverished nation, we must balance it with a concern for the creeping rise of sea levels that threatens the security of the very region that is undergoing these measures. Democracies can utilize the challenge of time to comprehend alternate ways of being and the consequences of our relationship with our planet. Neoliberal capitalism may presently be saturated by concern for the short term, but we may see a reformed economic system that predicates the importance of the long-term health of our environment.

The third challenge Machin submits democracy to engage with is that of boundaries. As the environmental concerns of the Anthropocene do not conform to political borders, it brings a novel challenge to the forefront. Issues like acid rain, biodiversity loss, and climate change are

all transnational in nature. These problems call for robust policymaking, of which no multilateral action is forthcoming. State-centered approaches seem inadequate to cope with the dynamic nature of conditions in the Anthropocene, and political boundaries serve to exclude those most affected by environmental concerns from decisions. While a world government would have the scope to enforce a coordinated multilateral response, there is no way for it to obtain the legitimacy to carry it out. Thus, scholars have argued democracy cannot work at the global level. In this, the Anthropocene poses the challenge to democracies of boundaries that become both necessary yet futile. If such creatures (both human and non-human) share mutual interests and an ecological reality, then the questions of wherein lies the boundaries that divide us, and who decides them, become compelling. However, this is in which the paradox of boundaries lies, and thus its challenge. To eliminate boundaries is to suppress politics, as you suffocate the emergence of alternatives by eliminating the antagonistic inclusion-exclusion distinction that politics hinges upon. In such a world, political ecology cannot exist, and thus we fall into the stifling of views different from the accepted consensus. The challenge of boundaries posed to democracies by the Anthropocene is thus not how to eliminate boundaries, but rather how to reconstruct in a way that promotes pluralism rather than endangering it in its current status quo. The Anthropocene in a sense calls for a global approach to politics without creating a myth of a global identity. The call for planetary cooperation and multilateral measures must be balanced with a respect for the role of political identities with boundaries. Democracies will be strengthened not by eradicating walls between us, but rather by reconstructing them to be bridges that enable us to facilitate pluralism while maintaining the us-them distinction of opposing viewpoints.

In the American democratic system, the “us-them” distinction is a dichotomy that hinders pluralism, and thus we slow to a standstill. Republicans and Democrats do not exist within democratic structures that facilitate the pluralism needed to rise to the challenges of climate change in the Anthropocene. Thus, it is not surprising to see the United States and other democracies and regimes work unproductively together across history, across different summits and proposals. The Anthropocene simultaneously provides the challenges and the opportunities for reform to strength democracy.

The fourth challenge I propose to add onto Machin’s challenges is that of humanism in the Anthropocene. As the Anthropocene challenges us to reflect upon our relationship with the natural world, human and post-humanism battle on the ethical battlefield. Humanism dictates our realities as being human-centered, while post-humanism turns to ways of thinking and acting in the world that would give actant status to the non-human entities of the world. The challenge democracies must grapple with is the idea of how human-centered democracy should be in the Anthropocene. There is a need for a democracy less beholden to money than the current American one, as the role of money gives louder voices and more votes to those who benefit from the present economy and its exploitative practices while silencing those who seek to change it. Post-humanism is conceived as the way to overcome imperialism, racism, and subjugation that all came from the arrogance that led to the humanist exploitation of the living world in the first place. The hope is that a post-humanist attitude will open space for experiences that cross into the nonhuman and value the perceptions of place.

Conversely, that which defines human beings is precisely what constructs the impassable barrier between use and the rest of the non-human world (Purdy 2018). Our capacities for reason and freedom are what make human beings morally important and is what makes the basis of our

dignity that only us humans hold. Therefore, slavery, imperialism, and 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides are failures in humanism rather than a part of it. The same can be argued for the avarice in capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In contrast, the progress of human equality comes from recognizing what we have in common. Democracy is beholden to valuing the morality of each participant, and by deconstructing humanity into mere cells, we stumble philosophically. Humanism is essential to our being, even as it shuns that which is not us.

Therefore, there is a need to combine the human and post-humanism properly in different aspects of democratic society. A democracy that is open to post-humanism philosophy would be much more likely to find ways to restrain its demands and be more cognizant. History shows people are best able to change their ways when they can find something to fear and another to love in nature (Purdy 2018). The fear can be the end-of-times and avoiding environmental crisis. The second can be the love of post-humanism and its relation to the non-human aspects of our world. Humanism and post-humanism need to coexist in democracy. Relegating the two attitudes into a dichotomy and argument over which should be the hegemon in ethical theory is itself undemocratic and unethical. Democracies must engage with humanism and its flaws in order to reform in a way that values the natural world. An emphasis on culture and consciousness is imperative, as that is in which humanity finds restraint and purpose. If consciousness does not change, nothing will (Scholsberg 2016).

### **Policy Implications**

The logic to be drawn from grappling with these challenges is that there is no need to assume that institutions must be totally overthrown, but rather we may be able to readjust them to live in the Anthropocene. The challenges of the Anthropocene demand and provoke the contestation that facilitates a revitalized democracy. Thus, democracy may not just survive in the

Anthropocene; it may rise to the challenge and reach many of its ideals. This deliberative and metacognitive approach in reform is seemingly supported best through democratic avenues of communication. Therefore, it would be short-sighted to risk the long-term health of our democracies and institute “green authoritarianism” due to present failures. We only have one planet; however, it is paramount that we do not “throw the baby out with the bathwater” in preserving our world. Democracies uphold humanitarian principles and aim to exact social justice around the world. It is not outrageous to believe that democracies can adapt to the Anthropocene in ways that empower itself and their citizens to effectively combat climate change. In redefining our democratic institutions, we will redefine our relationship with the natural world and each other. In abandoning the “democratic experiment” in leu of purported short-term technocracy, we forfeit the progress we can make as a global society. I contend that question that should be debated is “How will democracy change?” rather than “Is democracy the way forward?” in the Anthropocene.

## **Conclusion**

Democracy is faltering, but it is not damned. The Anthropocene presents novel challenges that challenge the fundamental legitimacy of our democratic way of life; and yet it simultaneously enables democracies to reform and restructure their institutions so that it may live on for millennia to come. By taking an agonistic approach, democracies may just yet thrive in the Anthropocene and bring in a new dawn of humanity. With the challenge of knowledge in the Anthropocene, democracies must reengineer their institutions in a way that facilitates dialogue, and in doing so, empowers citizens. With the challenge of time presented in the Anthropocene, democracies can turn the tides by rising to the challenge and utilizing it to comprehend alternate ways of being and our relationships with the environments around us. In redefining boundaries,

the Anthropocene can guide democracies into a more pluralistic global order that constructs productive dialogue. Then in the challenge of humanism, the Anthropocene will challenge democracies to grapple with the ethical problems of our society, and what we must reform in order to coexist; not only with each other but with the world we have exploited for so long. Democracy has stumbled, but it now has an opportunity to pick itself up, look inward upon itself, and fashion itself anew for a more sustainable and ethical future.

How democracies will look and shift as the Anthropocene continues will be a fascinating chapter in the story of humanity. The field is ripe for discussion on how the Anthropocene can, and should, alter democracies so that they may prove the detractors wrong. Reorganizing systems to promote civic engagement and civil discourse across boundaries is only a beginning. Metacognition and post-humanism ideals only play out in the mind. It will be essential for democracies to reconstruct their mores, and then utilize their new frameworks to produce institutions that are just and productive in this new epoch. It is the only truly democratic thing to do.

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