

A Comment on:

Andrew M. Bauer and Erle C. Ellis. 2018. "The Anthropocene Divide: Obscuring Understanding of Social-Environmental Change" *Current Anthropology*, 59(2).

Pre-copy edit version. For final version, please click on:

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/697198>. Then scroll down to this piece.

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Ontologies of Occlusion in the Anthropocene

In this superb article, Bauer and Ellis explain how the 'species' framing of 'Anthropocene' occludes socially stratified causes and effects of climate change. So, it is logical that this framing also hides differentiated responsibilities both for cause and care. However, they later merge nature and culture in a manner that can also erase the very possibility of moral judgment and thus responsibility and response. They argue "Anthropocene narratives...risk downplaying the many nonhuman materials, things and organisms that people are entangled with and that also contribute to climate and other global environmental changes through a variety of relationships." Indeed, climate-oriented explanations of weather-related damages are known to occlude the multiple causes of the vulnerabilities that place people at risk (Ribot 2014). Hazards (climate or otherwise) without vulnerability do not cause damage – they work together. With any given hazard, some people are damaged while others are not; that difference is vulnerability, not climate.

But the authors also evoke a different, Latourian-style occlusion – although their nature-culture discussions belie a more-nuanced stance. Like Latour, they emphasize the need to attend to (ostensibly ignored) non-human things that shape outcomes, despite that attention to these things is already present in any rigorous analysis of causality. Indeed, who ever said that the material world and material objects do not have effects? Was this ever in question? So, this object-oriented 'turn' (ironically labeled 'new materialism') occludes the long history of analyses of social and material causes of climate crises. All thorough analysts – from Sen (1981) to Watts (1983) onward – bring in human and non-human factors.

Unfortunately, Latour goes further. He calls these non-human things 'agents' – attributing to them a most-human quality. This introduces another occlusion. An occlusion of the role of agency in responsibility; by equating humans with objects, equating agency to any mere force, and thus flattening the relation between human and non-human influence – a flat ontology merging subject and object.

Objects can, of course, contain human agency. But they have no agency of their own. Humans contribute to making the world. They influence it. They shape it. They are shaped by it. That relationship still does not give agency – a uniquely human attribute – to things. Things have force. Forces have effects. Effects have consequences. Consequences can, when humans are involved, have meaning. Human agency, like dead labor, is in things and shapes outcomes. This does not (without distinctly human fetishism) give things agency. Nevertheless, the forces that drive and shape things take on particular meaning when we can trace their origin back to humans. It is not agency of the objects that carry it. It is human agency that articulates through them. It is human agency that establishes blame, liability and responsibility (see Harte and Honoré 1959; Calabresi 1975).

To attribute responsibility, a major reason that imagining an ‘Anthropocene’ (of socially differentiated cause and effect) is worthwhile, we need to maintain the distinction between object and subject, nature and culture. For effective response (my goal), we need to know three things: 1) the human actions and non-human forces damaging the environment we depend on (whether or not we generate that environment or influence its non-human forces), 2) how we can reduce effects (regardless of their human or non-human origins) that undermine our environment, and 3) where to locate responsibility – what society judges can and should be done and who should do it. This responsibility – like blame or liability – cannot be located in the non-human forces. The force-agency distinction matters if response is to follow.

Since ‘should’ shapes human action and thus outcomes, it must be within the scientific study of causality within any social system. Yet Latour (2005) tells us there is no history or theory (his irreducibility principle) nor therefore morality (due to his flat non-hierarchical ontology), this framing will miss those things that depend on ‘should’ – social judgment that creates a *hierarchy* of value. Latour’s radical empiricism blinds us to all of the acts that did not happen (and are thus not visible), but that society judges as necessary or moral. These must be historicized and theorized to discern. In short, the normative is central to any scientific/rigorous analysis of the multiple causes of disasters – such as the causes of vulnerabilities that turn climate events into crises (Ribot 2014).

‘Shoulds’ are necessary for the framing of any research that involves humans and that asks ‘why’ something happened. This is because human (in)action is based on judgment. The inaction is only visible through knowledge of judgment – whereas action is manifest. Within a social world there is no asking *why* without asking about what is socially expected. Hierarchy (of human values), not flatness, guides action. We cannot know what was ‘not’ done unless we know what could and ‘should’ have been done.

This brings us full circle. ‘Should’ is morality. It is located in the unique human characteristic called agency. It is in the will; predicated on the ability to think (a la Arendt 2003). If we view agency as everywhere, including objects, then everything, and therefore no one, is responsible. Tracing cause to an object’s force is fine. Yet, we must continue the search for agency, which is human, to establish the relations of responsibility and the possibility of response.

The earth moves, but is not moved. The earth is a force without agency. Along with non-human forces, it carries in its movement the forces introduced by the agency of humans. That agency is part of causality. It leads us back to responsibility and basis for action – although responsibility can also come from mere knowledge of potential damages (knowledge, the apple, a good starting point for the Anthropocene?). The agency in the earth is not of or from the earth. It is ours, purely ours – no matter how it manifests and whether or not we can control it. True, “the traces of our action are visible everywhere” (Latour 2014:9). But, it remains *our* agency since it is the antecedent that establishes responsibility for the movement that troubles us. We should be moved. *We* should consider what we do and how it affects others – the golden rule applies (see Arendt 2003).

Further, our being ‘subjected’ to earth’s vagaries does not give earth subjectivity (*a la* Latour 2014:9). The earth remains object, shaped by our agency, but as much object as a table or chair. Placing it on the same plane with me, a subject, is tantamount to war – it is the objectification of humans. This flat ontological object-subject conflation is a frame of war that enables those of us who are subjects and have subjectivity to be reduced to the non-grievable equivalent of an object (Butler 2009). It is the equivalence, the erasure of difference, that reduces us. It is distinctly unethical. Humans are not equivalents of objects. Being is hierarchical – I, indeed we, live in a round world.

Once we distinguish humans from objects and recognize them as the locus of agency. Then responsibility can be attributed and response can begin. I see no utility in asking whether humans are nature, since human nature, the ability to think and judge, is nature and is what distinguishes us from the remainder of the nature of which we are a part.

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