

The Anthropocene Myth

Blaming all of humanity for climate change lets capitalism off the hook.

by **Andreas Malm, Jacobin** 3/30/15

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>

Last year was the hottest year ever recorded. And yet, the latest figures show that in 2013 the source that provided the most new energy to the world economy wasn't solar, wind power, or even natural gas or oil, but coal.

The growth in global emissions — from 1 percent a year in the 1990s to 3 percent so far this millennium — is striking. It's an increase that's paralleled our growing knowledge of the terrible consequences of fossil fuel usage.

Who's driving us toward disaster? A radical answer would be the reliance of capitalists on the extraction and use of fossil energy. Some, however, would rather identify other culprits.

The earth has now, we are told, entered “the Anthropocene”: the epoch of humanity. Enormously popular — and accepted even by many Marxist scholars — the Anthropocene concept suggests that humankind is the new geological force transforming the planet beyond recognition, chiefly by burning prodigious amounts of coal, oil, and natural gas.

According to these scholars, such degradation is the result of humans acting out their innate predispositions, the inescapable fate for a planet subjected to humanity's “business-as-usual.” Indeed, the proponents cannot argue otherwise, for if the dynamics were of a more contingent character, the narrative of an entire species ascending to biospheric supremacy would be difficult to defend.

Their story centers on a classic element: fire. The human species alone can manipulate fire, and therefore it is the one that destroys the climate; when our ancestors learned how to set things ablaze, they lit the fuse of business-as-usual. Here, write prominent climate scientists Michael Raupach and Josep Canadell, was “the essential evolutionary trigger for the Anthropocene,” taking humanity straight to “the discovery that energy could be derived not only from detrital biotic carbon but also from detrital fossil carbon, at first from coal.”

The “primary reason” for current combustion of fossil fuels is that “long before the industrial era, a particular primate species learned how to tap the energy reserves stored in detrital carbon.” My learning to walk at the age of one is the reason for me dancing salsa today; when humanity ignited its first dead tree, it could only lead, one million years later, to burning a barrel of oil.

Or, in the words of Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill: “The mastery of fire by our ancestors provided humankind with a powerful monopolistic tool unavailable to other species, that put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene.” In this narrative, the fossil economy is the creation precisely of humankind, or “the fire-ape, *Homo pyrophilus*,” as in Mark Lynas’s popularization of Anthropocene thinking, aptly titled *The God Species*.

Now, the ability to manipulate fire was surely a necessary condition for the commencement of large-scale fossil fuel combustion in Britain in the early nineteenth century. Was it also the cause of it?

The important thing to note here is the logical structure of the Anthropocene narrative: some universal trait of the species must be driving the geological epoch that is its own, or else it would be a matter of some subset of the species. But the story of human nature can come in many forms, both in the Anthropocene genre and in other parts of climate change discourse.

In an essay in the anthology *Engaging with Climate Change*, psychoanalyst John Keene offers an original explanation for why humans pollute the planet and refuse to stop. In infancy, the human being discharges waste matter without limits and learns that the caring mother will take away the poo and the wee and clean up the crotch.

As a result, human beings are accustomed to the practice of spoiling their surroundings: “I believe that these repeated encounters contribute to the complementary belief that the planet is an unlimited ‘toilet-mother’, capable of absorbing our toxic products to infinity.”

But where is the evidence for any sort of causal connection between fossil fuel combustion and infant defecation? What about all those generations of people who, up to the nineteenth century, mastered both arts but never voided the carbon deposits of the earth and dumped them into the atmosphere: were they shitters and burners just waiting to realize their full potentials?

It’s easy to poke fun at certain forms of psychoanalysis, but attempts to attribute business-as-usual to the properties of the human species are doomed to vacuity. That which exists always and everywhere cannot explain why a society diverges from all others and develop something new – such as the fossil economy that only emerged some two centuries ago but now has become so entrenched that we recognize it as the only ways human can produce.

As it happens, however, mainstream climate discourse is positively drenched in references to humanity as such, human nature, the human enterprise, humankind as one big villain driving the train. In *The God Species*, we read: “God’s power is now increasingly being exercised by us. We are the creators of life, but we are also its destroyers.” This is one of the most common tropes in the discourse: we, all of us, you and I, have created this mess together and make it worse each day.

Enter Naomi Klein, who in *This Changes Everything* expertly lays bare the myriad ways in which capital accumulation, in general, and its neoliberal variant, in particular, pour fuel on the fire now consuming the earth system. Giving short shrift to all the talk of a universal human evildoer, she writes, “We are stuck because the actions that would give us the best chance of averting catastrophe — and would benefit the vast majority — are extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our major media outlets.”

So how do the critics respond? “Klein describes the climate crisis as a confrontation between capitalism and the planet,” philosopher John Gray counters in the *Guardian*. “It would be more accurate to describe the crisis as a clash between the expanding demands of humankind and a finite world.”

Gray isn’t alone. This schism is emerging as the great ideological divide in the climate debate, and proponents of the mainstream consensus are fighting back.

In the *London Review of Books*, Paul Kingsnorth, a British writer who has long argued that the environmental movement should disband and accept total collapse as our destiny, retorts: “Climate change isn’t something that a small group of baddies has foisted on us”; “in the end, we are all implicated.” This, Kingsnorth argues, “is a less palatable message than one which sees a brutal 1 per cent screwing the planet and a noble 99 per cent opposing them, but it is closer to reality.”

Is it closer to reality? Six simple facts demonstrate the opposite.

First, the steam engine is widely, and correctly, seen as the original locomotive of business-as-usual, by which the combustion of coal was first linked to the ever-expanding spiral of capitalist commodity production.

While it is admittedly banal to point out, steam engines were not adopted by some natural-born deputies of the human species. The choice of a prime mover in commodity production could not possibly have been the prerogative of that species, since it presupposed, for a start, the institution of wage labor. It was the owners of the means of production who installed the novel prime mover. A tiny minority even in Britain — all-male, all-white — this class of people comprised an infinitesimal fraction of humanity in the early nineteenth century.

Second, when British imperialists penetrated into northern India around the same time, they stumbled on coal seams that were, to their great amazement, already known to the natives — indeed, the Indians had the basic knowledge of how to dig, burn, and generate heat from coal. And yet they cared nothing for the fuel.

The British, on the other hand, desperately wanted the coal out of the ground — to propel the steamboats by which they transported the treasure and raw materials extracted from the Indian peasants towards the metropolis, and their own surplus of cotton goods towards the inland markets. The problem was, no workers volunteered to step into the mines. Hence the British had to organize a system of indentured labor, forcing farmers into the pits so as to acquire the fuel for the exploitation of India.

Third, most of the twenty-first century emissions explosion originates from the People's Republic of China. The driver of that explosion is apparent: it is not the growth of the Chinese population, nor its household consumption, nor its public expenditures, but the tremendous expansion of manufacturing industry, implanted in China by foreign capital to extract surplus value out of local labor, perceived around the turn of the millennium as extraordinarily cheap and disciplined.

That shift was part of a global assault on wages and working conditions — workers all over the world being weighed down by the threat of capital's relocation to their Chinese substitutes, who could only be exploited by means of fossil energy as a

necessary material substratum. The ensuing emissions explosion is the atmospheric legacy of class warfare.

Fourth, there is probably no other industry that encounters so much popular opposition wherever it wants to set up shop as the oil and gas industry. As Klein chronicles so well, local communities are in revolt against fracking and pipelines and exploration from Alaska to the Niger Delta, from Greece to Ecuador. But against them stands an interest recently expressed with exemplary clarity by Rex Tillerson, president and CEO of ExxonMobil: “My philosophy is to make money. If I can drill and make money, then that’s what I want to do.” This is the spirit of fossil capital incarnate.

Fifth, advanced capitalist states continue relentlessly to enlarge and deepen their fossil infrastructures — building new highways, new airports, new coal-fired power-plants — always attuned to the interests of capital, hardly ever consulting their people on these matters. Only the truly blind intellectual, of the Paul Kingsnorth-type, can believe that “we are all implicated” in such policies.

How many Americans are involved in the decisions to give coal a larger share in the electric power sector, so that the carbon intensity of the US economy rose in 2013? How many Swedes should be blamed for the ramming through of a new highway around Stockholm — the greatest infrastructure project in modern Swedish history — or their government’s assistance to coal power plants in South Africa?

The most extreme illusions about the perfect democracy of the market are required to maintain the notion of “us all” driving the train.

Sixth, and perhaps most obvious: few resources are so unequally consumed as energy. The 19 million inhabitants of New York State alone consume more energy than the 900 million inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa. The difference in energy consumption between a subsistence pastoralist in the Sahel and an average

Canadian may easily be larger than 1,000-fold — and that is an *average* Canadian, not the owner of five houses, three SUVs, and a private airplane.

A single average US citizen emits more than 500 citizens of Ethiopia, Chad, Afghanistan, Mali, or Burundi; how much an average US millionaire emits — and how much more than an average US or Cambodian worker — remains to be counted. But a person's imprint on the atmosphere varies tremendously depending on where she is born. Humanity, as a result, is far too slender an abstraction to carry the burden of culpability.

Ours is the geological epoch not of humanity, but of capital. Of course, a fossil economy does not necessarily have to be capitalist: the Soviet Union and its satellite states had their own growth mechanisms connected to coal, oil, and gas. They were no less dirty, sooty, or emissions-intensive — perhaps rather more — than their Cold War adversaries. So why focus on capital? What reason is there to delve into the destructiveness of capital, when the Communist states performed at least as abysmally?

In medicine, a similar question would perhaps be, why concentrate research efforts on cancer rather than smallpox? Both can be fatal! But only one still exists. History has closed the parenthesis around the Soviet system, and so we are back at the beginning, where the fossil economy is coextensive with the capitalist mode of production — only now on a global scale.

The Stalinist version deserves its own investigations, and on its own terms (the mechanisms of growth being of their own kind). But we do not live in the Vorkuta coal-mining gulag of the 1930s. Our ecological reality, encompassing us all, is the world founded by steam-powered capital, and there are alternative courses that an environmentally responsible socialism could take. Hence capital, not humanity as such.

Naomi Klein's success and recent street mobilizations notwithstanding, this remains a fringe view. Climate science, politics, and discourse are constantly couched in the Anthropocene narrative: species-thinking, humanity-bashing, undifferentiated collective self-flagellation, appeal to the general population of consumers to mend their ways and other ideological pirouettes that only serve to conceal the driver.

To portray certain social relations as the natural properties of the species is nothing new. Dehistoricizing, universalizing, eternalizing, and naturalizing a mode of production specific to a certain time and place — these are the classic strategies of ideological legitimization.

They block off any prospect for change. If business-as-usual is the outcome of human nature, how can we even imagine something different? It is perfectly logical that advocates of the Anthropocene and associated ways of thinking either champion false solutions that steer clear of challenging fossil capital — such as geoengineering in the case of Mark Lynas and Paul Crutzen, the inventor of the Anthropocene concept — or preach defeat and despair, as in the case of Kingsnorth.

According to the latter, “it is now clear that stopping climate change is impossible” — and, by the way, building a wind farm is just as bad as opening another coal mine, for both desecrate the landscape.

Without antagonism, there can never be any change in human societies. Species-thinking on climate change only induces paralysis. If everyone is to blame, then no one is.