

Democracy and / in the Anthropocene



**Funded interdisciplinary workshop at the Point Alpha Research Institute (PARI)
in Geisa, Germany**

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The concept of the Anthropocene, coined once in the field of geology and earth system science, has been taken up by the social sciences and humanities in the last years. The concept is used in different understandings, some are more theoretical and others quite material – but they all refer to a changing global, human and natural condition that challenges modern conceptions of knowledge and agency. Namely, the modern separation of “humans” and “nature” no longer holds, since visibly humans have by now impacted so much on nature that they are decisively affected by it in return. Backfire effects such as climate change underline humans are part of nature themselves. In terms of ontology the Anthropocene challenges the idea of a separation between humans/culture and nature that has marked modern thinking for centuries, as well as the ideas of linearity and simple causality. In material terms the Anthropocene entails the end of the stable geological epoch of the Holocene that has made the illusion of a stable stage for human history possible. The planetary ecological and geological system is becoming increasingly unstable and vulnerable and this directly affects humans and their lives.

The Anthropocene thus marks an end, or at least an inevitable turning point, for modernist thinking and modern modes of governance. Modernity seemed to have succeeded in making the world readable and thus governable based on linearity, causality, and progress. Like the socialist version of modernity more than thirty years ago, now the western/liberal worldviews are challenged in many ways. Governance is no longer simply a matter of rational control and regulation, established modes of liberal democracy do not work as “they used to”, and future no longer appears as a promise of progress. It seems like the modern “order of things” is unravelling in front of our eyes in a very material and non-linear way. Instead we face imaginaries of decay, loss of control and apocalypse that no longer concern only the peripheries, but also the centres of global capitalism and liberal democracy. This triggers feelings of vulnerability, precariousness and uncertainty as well as a series of “crises” and their symptoms such as populism and technocracy.

Outside the Anthropocene debate, the latter crisis symptoms are generally discussed as part of a general “crisis of democracy”. When seen in relation to the anthropocene condition, the picture becomes much broader: A setting of entangled fields of changes of the human and the planetary condition and their collisions opens up. The various, contradicting, but also entangled relations between democracy, modernity and the Anthropocene therefore are the overarching theme of the workshop. They will be taken up in the following clusters of topics:

A first cluster concerns **the state of crisis diagnoses and reactions** both in academia and politics. To what extent are the current crisis symptoms related to the Anthropocene condition? And what are the reactions to them – both in academia and politics? How are climate change, security, new technologies or artificial intelligence discussed and tackled (or not)? So far, modes of reaction are frequently linked to claims for resilience, relationality and (strategic) autonomy, and to the goal to cope with complexity. They often recur to two seemingly opposing strategies, namely either citizen participation via democratic innovations such as roundtables or citizen budgets, or expertise and an inclusion of scientists. Many of the respective strategies and policies, however, are still based on a rationalist modern ideal of governing in which either citizens or experts are expected to become a simple remedy for complex problems. Moreover,

this can be at odds with established mechanisms of legitimization. Especially expert governance is frequently criticised as technocracy that bypasses democratic decision making and control.

A second cluster of questions concerns **the ontologies and concepts that enable to (re)think, act and govern in the anthropocene**. Academic debate as well as political strategies in the last decade have increasingly turned towards concepts such as complexity, resilience, quantum theories, adaptation, entanglements, materialisms, and relationality, and there is a visible turn towards relational and entangled ontologies. What are the potentials and limitations of these approaches, and what are alternative concepts, ontologies and traditions of thought that can possibly contribute, such as contingency?

A third cluster of topics concerns the question of **how to conceptualise democracy in the Anthropocene**. Given the challenges described, democracy and democratic modes of governance in the Anthropocene require to take into account various entanglements, rely on a more systemic approach, thinking in networks, and taking into account that there is no effect of a policy or action that does not also have a side-effect. This thinking is at odds with a policy field tradition that is used to separating fields, with e.g. healthcare, nature protection and economics being separated portfolios. What are conceptions, possibilities and practices of democracy and democratic governance in the Anthropocene, that is, of governing complexity in the face of the crisis of the modern episteme? This discussion then involves conceptions, possibilities and practices that hold the potential to translate democracy to an entangled world – but it also requires to discuss new modes of domination, exclusions and hierarchies within the terrain of complexity.

We invite papers that discuss questions such as

- To what extent are the current crisis symptoms related to the Anthropocene condition? How is this debated in academia?
- What are the ongoing policy reactions to these crisis symptoms? How are policy fields such as climate change, artificial intelligence or security currently governed? Which strategies are deployed? Which patterns of reaction can we detect, and how do they refer (or not) to governing complexity, networks and systems?
- What are conceptions, possibilities and practices of democracy in the Anthropocene? Is governing the Anthropocene at odds with democracy?
- What new modes of power and governance are created within the terrain of complexity and what kind of exclusions and hierarchies do the new approaches enhance?
- What is the relation of governing and ungoverning, knowledge, and not knowing, directedness and entanglements? Does it make sense to speak of “governing (in) the anthropocene”?
- What kinds of “new weapons” are needed for (critical) theories and political analysis?
- Which (new) concepts and sets of ideas and theories are useful in thinking the Anthropocene condition and its governance?
- What are the potentials, pitfalls and limits of newly conceptualised “anthropocenic”, i.e. entangled, relational or participatory ontologies, thinking and practice? Are they more or less democratic than others?

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Deadline: August 20th, 2023

The workshop is fully funded for accepted papergivers, including travel and accommodation.