

Democracy and / in the Anthropocene



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

October 9-11, 2023

Workshop theme and guiding questions

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 will 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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Programme



Venue: Schloss Hotel Geisa, Schloßplatz 4, 36419 Geisa

Monday, October 9th

14.00 – 18.00 Arrival and Visit of the memorial

18.00 - 19.30: Diagnosing the “Crisis”

Claudia Wiesner (HS Fulda): Opening remarks - Why democracy and/in the anthropocene?

Veith Selk (TU Darmstadt): Twilight of Democracy

Opening discussion

Tuesday, October 10th

9.00 – 10.00: What is Politics (in times of the Anthropocene)?

Kari Palonen (University of Jyväskylä): Politics as playing with contingency

Caroline von Taysen (Westminster): Compossibility of Politics? The Possibility of Transformative Governance in the 21st Century

10.00 – 10.30 Break

10.30 – 12.00 The “crisis” of democracy and the Anthropocene

David Chandler (Westminster): Addicted to Democracy? The Strange Death of Liberalism

Basil Bornemann & Julian Purrmann (University of Basel): Exploring the Democratic Implications of Governance Challenges in the Anthropocene

Aysem Mert (Stockholm University): Democratic Theory for the Anthropocene: Convivial Tools for Future Democracies (Hybrid)

12.00 – 13.30 Lunch Break

13.30 – 15.00 Democratic Innovations: a cure for the Anthropocene?

Ana Matan (University of Zagreb): Democratic Innovation in the Anthropocene

Julian Purmann (University of Basel): More-than-Human Democratic Innovation in the Anthropocene

Päivi Timonen (University of Helsinki): Coping strategies for applying artificial intelligence in participatory processes

15.00 – 15.30 break

15.30 – 17.00 Forests at the end of the world

Juliane Schumacher (Leibniz-Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (ZMO), Berlin): Forest Experiments. Ecological Governance in the Anthropocene

Tom Scheunemann (HS Fulda): “Disruption and Resurgence in an Entangled World – Anthropogenic Governance of the Forests in the Rhön”

Kayla M. Gabehart & Christoph H. Stefes, Ph.D. (University of Colorado Denver): From Washington to Wesel: Democratic Governance of the Environment in the Anthropocene (Hybrid)

17.00 – 17.30 break

17.30 – 19.00 Roundtable: Democracy after the end of the world?

Short resumes of what has been discussed so far by David Chandler, Ana Matan, Tom Scheunemann, Claudia Wiesner

Wednesday, Oct 11th

9.00 – 10.00: Political Practice in the Anthropocene (in German)

Manuela Henkel (Mayor of the City of Geisa) Forstpolitik an der Schnittstelle von Klimakrise und Demokratie

Matthias Schorr (District Forester in Geisa) – Auswirkungen der Klimakrise auf den Kommunalwald der Stadt Geisa

10.00 – 10.30 break

10.30 – 12.00 Political Practice in the Anthropocene (continued)

Nathaniel Umukoro (Western Delta University, Nigeria): Democracy, Land Laws and Anthropocene Inequality: Lessons from Nigeria's Niger Delta

Abdallah Zouhairi (University Hassan II, Casablanca): Surviving on the ruins of the Anthropocene: Repair and Recycling Practices of E-Waste (Hybrid)

Rafael Palazi (State University of Campinas / FU Berlin): Maristela Svampa's Anthropocene Notion: Democracy and Neo-Extractivism

12.00 – 13.30 Lunch Break

13.30 – 14.30 Democratic renewal in the face of emergency?

Hagen Schölzel (University of Vienna): Ecological emergency in the Anthropocene? Concepts of State of Exception and Emergency Politics between nature and society

Olga Nosova (European University Viadrina Frankfurt, Oder) The Anthropocene and democratic values: Challenges and Perspectives

14.30 - 15.00 Break

15.00 – 16.00 Outlook: conceptualizing the future of democracy in the anthropocene

Jan-Peter Voß (RWTH Aachen): A practice turn in democracy studies

Jan-Philipp Kruse (University of Hamburg): Democracy and the Challenge of the Anthropocene: Sketches of a "New Republic"