

Call for Papers

Social Contracts and Democracy in Times of the Anthropocene

Thinking Beyond Crisis

International Conference

Dates: December 16th – 18th 2025

Location: Hochschulzentrum Fulda Transfer, Heinrich-von-Bibra-Platz 1a, 36037 Fulda

Host Institution: University of Applied Sciences Fulda, Fulda, Germany

This conference aims to link two current debates in the Social Sciences and the Humanities: the one on the crisis of liberal democracy and social contracts, and the one on the Anthropocene. This means to connect two fields and strands of debate that have been rather disconnected so far. The objective is to explore the (future) common ground and to turn the discussion of different, or maybe seemingly opposed, approaches into a resource for innovative debates.

Today, liberal democracies are understood to be in crisis. This crisis is often portrayed as a multiple one or “polycrisis”: No singular event seems to abolish democracy; nevertheless, established democracies, so the concern, are eroding. Crises, it seems, have become the defining feature of our times, from the breakdown of global financial markets to climate change and the meltdown of the earth’s polar caps. Populists openly defy liberal norms, social media shitstorms seem to have replaced public debate, swarms of jellyfish clog the cooling systems of nuclear power plants. Established forms of governance fail to tackle these complex challenges. We constantly seem to cross another line, edge ever closer to a global tipping point, while solutions and collective action seem to be in short supply.

Social contract theories have long served as a cornerstone of political philosophy, exploring the implicit agreements that form the basis of society’s moral and political structures. Pioneers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceptualized the social contract as an agreement among autonomous individuals to form a society and abide by common rules to ensure mutual protection and benefit. In social contract theories, a prior state of nature served as a key heuristic for thinking about legitimate forms of governance.

Modern conceptions of liberal-representative democracy are thus rooted in a world in which politics is about agreements between human subjects and states, formal and rational considerations of legitimacy, institution building, democratic principles, and governmental strategies. Debates abound on how political and legal institutions can evolve to respond to current crises, without questioning democratic ideals. However, the increasing gap between crisis diagnoses and proposed solutions within this ‘world of modern politics’ fuels anxieties of failure of Political Theory/Political Science.

Anthropocene thinking attempts a conceptual and theoretical shift, in which both crises and their possible remedies are related to the crisis of modernity and modern thinking itself. This has been emphasised among others by Bruno Latour who underlined that the current crisis symptoms of liberal democracy are strongly related to the Anthropocene. This point is the outset of the present conference.

The concept of the Anthropocene was introduced to capture the growing human imprint on the planet Earth (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017). However, it quickly linked the proposition of a new geological epoch to a fundamental challenge to modern thinking and governance. It is paradoxically the idea of human power over nature, a key element of liberal modern thinking, that has led to the present predicament of apparent powerlessness. The moment we discovered humanity as a geological force, it seems, we have lost the human (Chakrabarty 2021).

One reaction in contemporary political thinking has been to claim postliberal ways of governing and organising communities. As we navigate the challenges presented by the Anthropocene, scholars are increasingly compelled to reassess the philosophical and political underpinnings of our societies. Philosophies of the Anthropocene challenge traditional dualisms, proposing a more interconnected view of humans and non-humans. The Anthropocene invites us to rethink human agency, knowledge, authority, and responsibility as well as the ontological boundaries between nature and culture. By now, Anthropocene thinking has left its initial optimism behind (e.g. Earth System Stewardship) and is increasingly exploring a postapocalyptic stance towards the unavoidability of catastrophes and crises (e.g. Tsing, Haraway). Short-circuiting the prospect of extinction with an existential crisis of western/modern metaphysics, the world as we know it has already ended, is about to end, or will have to end as a precondition for a new kind of political “life in capitalist ruins” (Tsing, see also Colebrook)

The Anthropocene and (liberal) modernity are accordingly often discussed as irreconcilable. Yet, the real world consequences of the Anthropocene and a crisis ridden liberal world pile up. How do we deal with them, if we are stuck with our modern ways of thinking? Does the Anthropocene really mark an irreconcilable divide that we cannot bridge? And perhaps more general: What is the purpose of political theory and critical Social Sciences within the current condition? How do we rethink modernity while we criticize it? If we want to take a critical approach to modernity and go beyond ontological certainties and established concepts, what is the basis (that is left) for our thinking and how do we deal with the fact that we are researchers living in modernity? And can we at the same time criticize the real world and conceptualise a hopeful, alternative future?

Against this backdrop, the conference aims to discuss the manifold and complex theoretical, conceptual, and empirical questions raised above. The various, contradicting relations between democracy, social contracts, modernity, and the Anthropocene form the overarching theme. We invite debates across disciplinary and political divides on both empirics, practices, and concrete challenges of (democratic) politics and governance and social contracts in the Anthropocene as well as theoretical-conceptual approaches to the issues outlined above. Participants should reflect upon the challenges but also opportunities for our conceptual understandings and practices of social contracts, democracy, and democratic governance in the Anthropocene. We invite contributions from and critical engagement with both

contemporary Anthropocene thinking and theories of social contracts, democracy, and democratic governance as well as empirical explorations of these issues. Collectively we wish to explore what kinds of ideas arise if we aim to think beyond crisis.

We aim at contributions tackling questions such as, but not limited to, the following:

- How can we understand the crisis of democracy in the context of the Anthropocene?
- What can approaches to the Anthropocene tell us about crisis? Is the Anthropocene the same as the crisis of modernity, or is the crisis of modernity the end of crisis (thinking)?
- How does social contract thinking relate to the Anthropocene, and how can social contracts be rethought in the Anthropocene?
- How can we understand the rise of populism and polarisation from an Anthropocene's posthuman and postanthropocentric angle?
- (How) can we think about social contracts in the posthumanistic paradigm of the Anthropocene? Is an ecosocial contract possible?
- What are conceptions, possibilities and practices of governing democratically in the Anthropocene? Are newly conceptualised "anthropocenic", i.e. entangled, relational, or participatory forms of governance, more or less democratic than others?
- 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 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 their potentials, pitfalls and limits?

Submission Guidelines:

We welcome submissions from Philosophy, Political Science, History, Environmental Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Legal Studies, and related disciplines.

Abstracts should be 300-500 words and include the paper's title, the author's name(s), affiliation(s), and contact information.

Submission deadline is October 26th, 2025.

Please submit abstracts to muriel.wenzel@sk.hs-fulda.de