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# Justice in the Anthropocene: An Anthropological Approach

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# Foreword

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Living in the Anthropocene has heightened focus on issues of ‘justice’ in philosophical, legal, economic, and anthropological debates (Chakrabarty, 2009, 2021; Zenker and Wolf, this volume). The observed effects of human-induced climate change and a ‘Great Acceleration’ of human impacts on various markers of planetary health since the 20<sup>th</sup> century have highlighted the increasingly global ramifications of the actions of our species (Steffen et al., 2015; Hornborg, 2020). Humans have even constructed a new portion of the Earth System, the ‘technosphere’, which now weighs as much as 30 trillion tonnes (Steffen et al., 2015; Renn, 2020; Zalasewicz et al., 2020). With this growing planetary presence has come a growing sense of responsibility for the other organisms with which we share our planet, future generations of humans, and the Earth as a whole, requiring urgent action to ensure a more sustainable future.

‘Justice’ has become a key part of these visions of sustainability, even being explicitly mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (Zenker and Wolf, this volume). But what does justice actually mean in the Anthropocene? The term ‘Anthropocene’ itself has come under heavy criticism in the social sciences and humanities due to its tendency to define humans ‘as a single global entity affecting the planet at large’ (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 28). Such a perspective neglects the historically unequal roles that different societies, and segments of societies, have played in current planetary crises (e.g. differences in emission responsibilities – Antweiler, 2022). Nor does this term express the inequality in the experience of contemporary risks. Those least responsible for climate change are the most exposed to its ongoing and future impacts (Davis et al., 2019; Antweiler, 2022). Small island states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, for example, are already experiencing rising sea levels, and some may become uninhabitable before the 22<sup>nd</sup> century (Duvat et al., 2021).

The Anthropocene thus introduces a complex interplay of different, often-intersecting, temporal and spatial relationships to justice. Present crises are shaped by the past while just futures are evoked in contemporary debates. Justice is simultaneously fought for by individuals (e.g. seeking out recompense for property loss or health-related issues due to the impacts of climate change), institutions (e.g. ensuring just treatment across sectors of society), and the international community (e.g. discussions of climate reparations) (Chapman and Ahmed, 2021; Perry, 2021). Even within a given time and

place, different agents and subjects hold varied perspectives on justice. Policy makers may seek to build infrastructure or enact regulations to meet climate targets and economic development goals, while local stakeholders seek ‘justice’ in terms of having their concerns heard, having access to basic resources and economic well-being, or avoiding environmental degradation (Lussem, this volume).

Ideas of justice also extend beyond the human realm in the Anthropocene. As we are living through a ‘6<sup>th</sup> mass extinction’ event (Ceballos and Ehrlich, 2023) and anthropogenic environmental impacts continue apace, justice is also sought for the wider complex of different species that are impacted by contemporary challenges (Haraway, 2016; Tsing et al., 2019). A closer ontological relationship (or even complete lack of distinction) with the non-human world has long been expressed in various Indigenous ontologies which frame a ‘kinship’ of humans with other species, and highlight the agency of other organisms and even landscapes (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Kopenawa and Bruce, 2013; Banerjee and Wouters, 2022). Such perspectives encourage us not only to break down western Cartesian dichotomies of nature and culture to feel a closer intimacy with the world around us, but also to acknowledge the agency of non-human beings who can both adapt to and shape Anthropocene crises on an ecological, social, and, now, even a legal (BBC News/Armstrong, 2025) basis.

These complex discussions of justice both stimulate, and benefit from, Zenker and Wolf’s volume on ‘Justice in the Anthropocene’. Focusing on the emergence of an anthropology of justice, they seek to find the intersection between lofty ideals of justice and the ‘more messy, ambiguous and uncertain realities’ and ‘everyday, mundane’ fights for justice that unfold in the Anthropocene (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 23 see also Brunnegger, 2019). Their definition of justice – ‘*matters of concern about what is due to different (kinds of) subjects according to relatively stable and impartial values and norms to be enacted by specifiable and thus responsible agents*’ (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 26) – provides a comparative framework to explore ‘justice’ in the complex and ambiguous contexts that the Anthropocene presents.

This volume’s five contributions use this definition to form a dialogue on justice in the Anthropocene: how it is imagined, debated, fought for, and utilized by different agents in diverse contexts. In what follows I want to highlight particularly how the framing and examples contribute to explorations of the different temporal and spatial scales of justice, and the different perspectives on justice held by various subjects and agents. On this latter point I seek to explore what Zenker and Wolf (this volume, p. 27) refer to as an ‘anthropological (re)turn’ which, while acknowledging the multiple agencies and more-than-human nature of the Anthropocene (Haraway, 2016), highlights that ‘people matter, still’ when framing discussions of justice (Tsing et al., 2019:188). Ultimately, I would argue, these discussions have bearing on our understanding of what the Anthropocene is, as well as its potential consequences.

## Temporalities of Justice in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene brings into sharp focus the varied temporal dimensions of justice. One of the main critiques of the Anthropocene as a term has been the difficulty of defining it as a specific date or period, as well as its de-historicizing of human-Earth system interactions (Edgeworth et al., 2024). As Zenker and Wolf discuss, the recent rejection of the Anthropocene as a formal geological epoch by the International Union of Geological Sciences encourages a ‘more transdisciplinary and inclusive approach’ (p. 28) (see also Ellis, 2024; Edgeworth et al., 2024). Here, our Institute, the Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology, seeks to explore the complex interplay (and feedbacks) between social, legal, political, economic, and cultural systems (and the ‘technosphere’ – Renn, 2020) and different facets of the Earth system, from the deep past to the future (Roberts et al., 2024). Justice is one element that is brought into focus in this regard.

To take one example, from a historical perspective, the expansion of European (and later North American) colonialism into the latitudinal tropics between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be seen as a transformative threshold where extractive approaches to land, environments, species, and people and increasing global flows of capital paved the way for contemporary regional and global inequalities, neo-extractivism and raw material exportation, sustainability and biodiversity crises, and complex Earth system feedbacks (Svampa, 2019; Roberts et al., 2021a; 2023). The significance of these processes is encapsulated in proposals to explore a ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2010) or ‘Plantationocene’ (Haraway, 2016; Davis et al., 2019) rather than an Anthropocene. These processes are also intimately tied to the racialized exploitation of forced enslaved labour that funded urban growth, individual, institutional and national wealth, and the construction of monuments in the Global North (Yusoff, 2018).

These discussions, as well as the unequal emissions resulting from the Industrial revolution (the capital for which may also have emerged from the colonial processes mentioned above – Hersh and Voth, 2009; Hall, 2020), frame contemporary considerations of climate ‘reparations’ and the fact that the current predicaments of the Anthropocene are not the product of a homogenised ‘humanity’. For example, initiatives such as REDD+ have sought to provide funding for nations in the so-called Global South to develop in a sustainable manner with reduced carbon emissions, although they can place serious burdens on Indigenous communities in the form of evictions and expulsions (Osborne et al., 2024; Dehm, 2021). Similarly, reparations for slavery and its legacies remain important topics for African nations and Afro-descendant communities in the Americas, while ongoing battles for racial equality and justice by individuals, institutions, and nations continue around the globe (Yusoff, 2018; Davis et al., 2019). It is arguably impossible to understand battles for both every day and institutional justice in the Anthropocene without taking into account these historical processes.

It is perhaps equally impossible to understand justice in the Anthropocene without acknowledging the way discussions of justice in the present necessarily also invoke the