ROUTLEDGE

Anthropocene Psychology

Being Human in a More-Than-Human World

Matthew Adams

CONCEPTS FOR CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY | DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES RE-THOUGHT

ANTHROPOCENE PSYCHOLOGY

This ground-breaking book critically extends the psychological project, seeking to investigate the relations between human and more-than-human worlds against the backdrop of the Anthropocene by emphasising the significance of encounter, interaction and relationships.

Interdisciplinary environmental theorist Matthew Adams draws inspiration from a wealth of ideas emerging in human–animal studies, anthrozoology, multi-species ethnography and posthumanism, offering a framing of collective anthropogenic ecological crises to provocatively argue that the Anthropocene is also an invitation – to become conscious of the ways in which human and nonhuman are inextricably connected. Through a series of strange encounters between human and nonhuman worlds, Adams argues for the importance of cultivating attentiveness to the specific and situated ways in which the fates of multiple species are bound together in the Anthropocene. Throughout the book, this argument is put into practice, incorporating everything from Pavlov's dogs, broiler chickens, urban trees, grazing sheep and beached whales, to argue that the Anthropocene can be good to think with, conducive to seeing ourselves and our place in the world with a renewed sense of connection, responsibility and love.

Building on developments in feminist and social theory, anthropology, ecopsychology, environmental psychology, (post)humanities, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, this is fascinating reading for academics and students in the field of critical psychology, environmental psychology and human–animal studies.

Matthew Adams is based in the School of Applied Social Science at the University of Brighton, UK. His previous books include *Ecological Crisis, Sustainability & the Psychosocial Subject* (2016) and *Self & Social Change* (2007).

Concepts for Critical Psychology: Disciplinary Boundaries Re-thought
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Humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside a sticky web of connections or an ecology of matter
—Sarah Whatmore

Beware o wanderer, the road is walking too
—Rainer Maria Rilke

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In memory of my friend Martin Jordan (1967–2017)

For Clare, Dylan, Amelie & Leila

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FOREWORD

We humans cut up the world, cut out animals to make us what we are, and then cut ourselves up. This book shows how we do this at a material, ideological and psychological level, taking us to a novel, necessary and urgent analysis of what geologists have recently agreed is the 'Anthropocene'. In their specification of our times, our relatively short time on earth as sentient beings, the geologists have, of course, made an ethical-political choice, and critical psychologists now need to follow suit, taking up the challenge that has now been posed to us. We could quibble, of course, with this naming of these times – times which look like end times and which the global climate strikes have been responding to – and demand a little more precision, but this would risk skewing the analysis we need to something too partial.

We could say, for example, that the climate crisis is the product of the peculiarly exploitative political-economic system that turns human creativity and the natural world into commodities, and so a more accurate name for the geological age we find ourselves in now is 'Capitalocene', rather than Anthropocene. Or we could specify this condition in terms of a feminist analysis which attends to the stereotypically masculine patriarchal concern with 'prediction and control' so beloved of mainstream psychology, and so settle instead on the name 'Androcene' to insist on that. In both cases here, there is a focus on the organised nature of the cutting out and cutting up that is taking us all to the edge of destruction. However, we surely need to

take responsibility for this state of things, and look deep, deep into ourselves and into the history that has made us who we are. However, this book does actually give us analysis that is critical of commodification and profoundly feminist.

Matthew Adams points, in this conceptually rich and passionately argued book, to something that goes beyond a partial view of the world – a partial view that we humans have been guilty of for so many years, and a view that psychology as a discipline has itself been symptomatic of – something that we might call 'intersectional'. Instead of separating out the different kinds of identity that psychology so often trades in, we need to weave them together, and we can do that by simultaneously stepping back and embedding ourselves in the problem at hand. We step back by treating 'human' as a property of those beings who have, with the aid of the discipline of psychology, pretended that those who are other are lesser; other beings in the world that we have cut out of our own worldview are, this book shows, not lesser at all, they are 'more-than-human'. We embed ourselves in the problem by always considering what we are doing when we turn the rats and dogs and other experimental subjects into objects, and how, in that process, we turn ourselves into instruments of destruction, of others, of other beings, of the world itself. Nature in the Anthropocene is indeed organised, and this book, *Anthropocene Psychology: Being Human in a More-Than-Human World*, gives us a critique and an alternative. By simultaneously stepping back and embedding ourselves, it operates 'outwith' the Anthropocene, with humility and steadfastness. Whatever else we do with psychology, we have at least to do this; this path-breaking book takes us beyond ourselves so that we can remake ourselves, and in the process, eventually leave self-destructive human-centred psychology behind.

Ian Parker
University of Manchester

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WELCOME TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

A parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity

Human nature is an interspecies relationship.

Anna Tsing

Introduction

The title of this book brings together two words rarely considered together – Anthropocene and psychology, so to begin, perhaps some explanation of that title is in order. For a number of years, I have been interested in how we respond to knowing about human-induced climate change and related environmental problems and how that knowledge gets translated into action – what we do, or do not do, individually and collectively, about 'environmental issues', depending on where and who we are. Fairly recently, the Anthropocene has come to the fore as a powerful way of framing our current era as one in which, for the first time in its history, the Earth is being deeply transformed by one species – the human (*Anthropos* is Greek for human; the *-cene* suffix refers to a substantial geological time period within the current 65 million year old *Ceno*zoic era). Although originally proposed by atmospheric scientists and then geologists advancing the idea that future proof of our planet-dominating existence will be evident in rock strata and biosphere, it has rapidly become shorthand for the 'overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes are now altered by humans'

(Ellis, 2013). As discussed below, the idea of the Anthropocene has rapidly become influential in shaping discussion of ecological crisis across academic disciplines and in wider public debate. It offers a great deal of material in making sense of our predicament, whilst even as it emerges and takes shape, is subject to criticism on many fronts. The Anthropocene has been effectively utilised as a point of coalescence for mounting evidence of anthropogenic ecological degradation. This book is not an attempt to add to that body of work. Introduced below, and explored in detail in the chapters to follow, the intention in this book is to take up the Anthropocene as an invitation.

Why psychology? Chakrabarty makes the point that as an idea, the Anthropocene represents 'the makers of geology inscribing themselves into their own rock record' (2009, p. 207). In this sense, the Anthropocene is also something intimately disconcerting, a reflexive turn, troubling in a 'deeply existential way… the environment is in us, and we humans are in the environment' (Åsberg, 2018, p. 186); the contemplation of human activity as now the single most decisive force shaping the planet 'a profound realisation' (Garavan, 2015). Descriptions such as this challenge or invite us to recognise the deep material, emotional and existential resonance of the Anthropocene. Whilst it might seem to consolidate the notion of human influence *on* ecological systems, the Anthropocene also amplifies the interrelationship that defines the co-constitution of human *with* other forms of life; and 'the multiple, interdependent relations within nature, within different forms of materiality, within technologies and within social systems' (Lidskog and Waterton, 2018, p. 39). Psychology, especially social psychology, has always been interested in the part encounters, interactions and relationships play in shaping our personal and social realities, though for the most part, this has been exclusively in human terms. The Anthropocene imaginary invites a radical extension of meaningful relationality, understanding and attending to human–animal and multispecies encounters as worthy of theoretical, methodological, ethical and political attention.

Accordingly, this book is about critically extending the psychological project to being human in a more-than-human world. The term 'human and more-than-human worlds' was coined by US philosopher David Abram to refer to all forms of earthly life – animals, plants, landforms – and to make salient the fact that the world exceeds the human in ways we are nonetheless a part of, the human *and* more-than-human world (Abram, 1997). So the book is titled *Anthropocene Psychology*

and subtitled *Being Human in a More-Than-Human World*, to make explicit that the book is an attempt, however modest, to contextualise the human in the life forces and liveliness of what is other than human. It does so largely by attending to specific and situated places. Before summarising the chapters that follow, however, some reflections on time offer a further contextualisation of the way in which the Anthropocene is approached in this book.

Deep time

Deep time is the concept of geological time used 'to describe the timing and relationships between events that have occurred throughout Earth's history' (Warmold, 2017, p. 3) – an approximate 4.54 billion year history. We struggle to grasp the huge scale of a sense of time that is so, well, deep, especially in comparison to the shallow time of our everyday experience, our lifespan, the history of our nation, culture, even of human history in general.[1] Geologists work with stories of deep time, 'the immense arc of *non-human* history that shaped the world as we perceive it' (Farrier, 2016; emphasis added). Theirs is a story which takes in unimaginable stretches of life on Earth and its transformation, told through cycles of sedimentation and erosion. Geology divides deep time into segments, which makes it easier for us to digest, but these are also meaningful divisions, distinctions in rock strata that reflect shifts in global climate and biology. Earth's time is divided into large segments called eons, within which are eras, periods and epochs. We live in the Phanerozoic Eon, a 451-million-year history which marked the beginning of abundant plant and animal life on Earth. It incorporates numerous eras, the current being the Cenozoic, a mere 66 million years old. The Cenozoic is notable for the rise of mammals as dominant life forms, making the most of a sudden 'mass-extinction event' that wiped out almost all larger life forms. The Cenozoic is subdivided into shorter epochs, the six previous averaging 10 m years each. We are now into the seventh – the Holocene, which follows the end of a glacial period and at 11,700 years old is barely into its stride. Although in existence for perhaps as long as 300,000 years (Hublin et al., 2017), the Holocene marks the global spread of *homo sapiens* as the ice retreated and the climate warmed. So we have raced through deep time to the almost-present. However, something else of significance has been happening in the blink of an eye, and it concerns the impact of a single species, for, as far as we know, the first time in Earth's history – *homo sapiens*.

Remarkably, we are now talking about the impact of human activity as it has accumulated over the last 300 years, perhaps even the last 70, radically unsettling the Earth's biodiversity, carbon cycles, climate, ocean chemistry and so on, on a scale equivalent to deep-time processes – 'millions of years of slow evolution' (2016).[2] Welcome to the Anthropocene.

The cumulative effects of human activity are well known in relation to climate change – derived primarily from extracting and then burning or boiling fossil fuels such as coal and crude oil. Fossil fuels are essential to the manufacture of many materials such as plastic and many practises that require power – transportation, electricity and heat, manufacturing and construction and agriculture; whilst other activities like deforestation and waste systems also contribute. The impacts of such activities are also now familiar to many – air, water and land pollution; loss of biodiversity; desertification; mass extinctions; acidified oceans; extreme weather; drought; eroding coastlines. As a conceptual framework, the Anthropocene broadens this impact beyond climate. The proposed markers of the Anthropocene include carbon spheres emitted by power stations; radioactive elements from nuclear bomb tests; plastic pollution; nitrogen and phosphate in soils (from fertilisers) and domestic chicken bones; the growth of global cattle populations; species extinction rates; various types of habitat loss; the rise of industrial fisheries and, of course, greenhouse gas emissions (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill, 2007). Human practises are embedded in these processes on a scale staggering in its variety and banality. The briefest browse of accounts of human practises considered responsible in one form or another for ecological degradation includes colonialism, the plantation system, the steam engine, radioactive isotopes, the mining of tar sands, the redistribution of fresh water, the cruise ship industry, data cloud storage, avocado production and drinking coffee. Clearly, the world's economy is far from dematerialising, and the Anthropocene is as much about stratification, inequality, injustice, power and politics as it is about extraction, production, distribution and consumption practises. But it is also about time.

Deep time is profoundly uncanny – it is disorientating to consider a human life span, or even the life span of humanity, against a non-human history stretching back over eons, the immediate reality of being as an embodied and temporal experience within a timescale of imponderable proportions. The Anthropocene is a kind of double-uncanny – human beings entering into deep time's register by disrupting it. The deep time

of an ancient Earth and an indifferent universe is uncanny in its own right, that we humans might be disturbing this unknowable teleology, and how, more so. In other words, told straight, the Anthropocene is an outlandish tale of science fiction, but one that is really happening. The shock of the Anthropocene, then, is 'to reveal humans as planetary agents on a deep spatial and temporal scale. The corollary to that shock was of course to place humanity within long-running Earth processes' (Ginn et al., 2018, p. 214).

A parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity

It is remarkable how quickly the Anthropocene moniker has become culturally ubiquitous – the subject not just of academic texts and conferences but art, magazines, travelogues, poetry, even an opera. It has rapidly become what the anthropologist Elizabeth Reddy calls a 'sort of charismatic mega-category', establishing itself as the lens through which to make sense of our current predicament. There is already plenty of criticism of the idea of the Anthropocene. We have recently seen attempts to double down on the specifics of human history and aggregate activity responsible for environmental crises, rather than lumping all humans, and their responsibility, together as *Anthropos* – offering alternatives terms like Capitalocene and Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015; Moore, 2017). Whether rapid devastation or slow degradation, those who are the least responsible are already positioned to experience the brunt of ecological crises for now, and the least equipped to successfully mitigate against. Ignoring such enormous variation and positing a simplistic 'species-thinking' is a form of 'bourgeois mystification' (Malm and Hornborg, 2014: 67). It clouds a sense of specifics – of what is driving our predicament, of the power asymmetries involved, of where (in)action matters, who has access to the lifeboats and who is left to sink with the ship. In this book, I largely follow Haraway's lead, in accepting the usefulness of the Anthropocene ambivalently as a motif, as a story that matters, whilst committing to addressing its shortcomings and inconsistencies as we go along, in the working through of particulars (Haraway, 2016).

Other critics argue that the Anthropocene framing is inherently hubristic or triumphalist (e.g. Clarke, 2014; LeCain, 2015). Whilst particular framings can lend themselves to this kind of rhetoric, in the embraces of techno-salvation, or space colonisation, for example, I do not think it is inevitable. A more subtle problem is that if we accept that a