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Introduction to Special Issue: Adorno and the Anthropocene

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Perhaps it was Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer who coined the term *Anthropocene* in 2000. Or maybe they were just repeating what Russian geologists had stated decades earlier. In any case, the concept came in vogue in a wider context – including the humanities – after Crutzen’s and Stoermer’s article.¹ The reason is rather obvious: the detrimental impact of human activities on the global environment seems to call for a new concept to grasp the desperate situation; the situation warrants the idea of a new epoch.

If these are depressing times, they are nonetheless also interesting, not least from the perspective of Critical Theory. Notwithstanding all the disagreements on “the Anthropocene” – about when the epoch actually began, what it implies for the concept of history, what it means for the human as a species, et cetera – the disagreements as such demonstrate the extent to which the concept raises concerns that are also central to Critical Theory: how to grasp the relationship between history and nature, between theory and activism, between subject and object, between human beings and non-human beings.

However, Critical Theory is not about finding interesting correspondences with other discourses or even with reality. It is about discovering breaks and contradictions in what appears to be “natural,” closed and identical; it is about changing reality, not just interpreting it. Accordingly, the aim of this thematic issue is not to point out certain similarities between the Anthropocene discourse and Adorno’s thinking, but to demonstrate that Adorno may bring something new to this discourse; that engaging with his thinking could enable a more critical perspective on the situation labelled the

¹ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene’,” *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.

ii | Introduction

Anthropocene. That ambition or notion was the initial reason behind the work with this issue,² and now that this work has come to its conclusion, the notion has turned into a more grounded conviction.

For anthropomorphism contains a measure of truth in that natural history did not reckon with the happy throw of the dice it accomplished in engendering the human being. The human capacity for destruction promises to become so great that – once this species has exhausted itself – a *tabula rasa* will have been created. Either the human species will tear itself to pieces or it will take all the earth's fauna and flora down with it, and if the earth is still young enough, the whole procedure – to vary a famous dictum – will have to start again on a much lower level.³

The quote is taken from the fragment “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written by Adorno and Horkheimer during their exile in the United States in the 1940s. In other words, it is from an era long before environmental destruction and climate change became common knowledge and the Anthropocene turned into a catch phrase. What Adorno and Horkheimer point to in this passage is that the human capacity for destruction is itself part of natural history. We are stuck in an anthropomorphism that blinds us to other perspectives and treats the rest of nature as an exploitable resource. This anthropomorphism is true however, in that the whole of nature has been shaped by human being, and to that extent *is* anthropomorphic. What is

² The issue is the printed manifestation of a symposium on “Adorno and the Anthropocene” that took place at Mid Sweden University in Sundsvall, in October 2017.

³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 186.

this, if not an insightful description of the Anthropocene *avant la lettre*?

In any case, there is no doubt that Adorno and Horkheimer were quite early in their emphasis on the problems attached to human being's domination of nature (*Naturbeherrschung*). This is after all what the dialectic of enlightenment turns on: nature-dominating reason liberates us from the grip of nature, at the same time as it ensnares us all the more tightly in a second nature of our own making; a second nature – late capitalist society with its systematic mastery over nature – threatening to destroy the very conditions for life on the planet.

Nature is hence a central concept in Adorno's thinking, and from the early lecture “The Idea of Natural History” (1932) onwards, he is constantly preoccupied with the dialectic between history and nature, and between domination of nature and freedom. Against that background, it is a bit strange that Adorno is not a current reference in the discourse on the Anthropocene. His name occasionally turns up, that is true, but normally somewhat dutifully, mostly in the shape of routine references to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or to his ideas on natural history, but generally without being given any serious consideration. This is not only odd but, we believe, also unfortunate.

If it is easy to dismiss “the Anthropocene” as an academic catch phrase, it is hard to deny its urgent relevance. Beyond that dilemma there are other disagreements of a more political nature within the discourse. According to some (reluctant) participants a problem with the discourse on the Anthropocene is that it risks maintaining the

iii | Introduction

anthropocentrism that is the reason we are in this mess in the first place. Others claim that when the boundaries between culture and nature, humans and non-humans, are blurred, the baby – the possibility of critique and action – is thrown out with the bathwater. Against that background one may certainly argue for the need of a more dialectical stance, like Adorno's. How this could take shape is demonstrated in various ways by the contributions to this volume. Through an engagement with Adorno's ideas on nature in relation to its dialectical counterparts – history, freedom, progress, art – the articles probe the possibility of continued criticism, that is to say, of maintaining a distinction between nature and culture, while simultaneously not hypostatizing this distinction.

In her article, Antonia Hofstätter reads the Anthropocene in the light of Adorno's interpretation of Beethoven's late style. Hofstätter argues that faith in the capability of science to avert the potential catastrophe on the one hand, and the direction of new materialism on the other, share the common assumption of the Anthropocene as implying a nature-culture continuum. Adorno's understanding of music is then highlighted as an important contrast allowing for a dialectical reconsideration of the relationship between nature and history. Hofstätter shows that Beethoven's late style enables us to grasp how what has been regarded as natural – the musical conventions of tonality – is in truth historically conditioned in a way that manages to sustain the idea of a nature beyond the existing order.

Perhaps then the current situation calls for a new understanding of nature altogether? Maybe the Anthropocene even means the end of nature? Alastair Morgan raises these questions in order to probe the relevance of Adorno's concept

of nature with regard to the contemporary environmental crisis. If there has been a significant change in the domination of nature, does Adorno's comprehension of nature still have critical force? Morgan argues that Adorno's dialectical understanding of the relationship between reason and nature, as well as the theme of "lifeless life" are still valid for thinking in catastrophic times.

But if nature is in crisis, the same goes for its dialectical counterpart, history. Focusing on the need to rethink the tradition of universal history in the light of the Anthropocene, Harriet Johnson argues that Adorno is helpful in this undertaking. Or maybe critical is a better word than helpful: pointing to the destructive domination of nature that makes "fragments of history cohere not in species advancement but in catastrophe," Johnson claims that Adorno's model of a negative universal history avoids resignation before the desperate situation. Through undermining the totalizing ambition of traditional universal history his model offers a change of perspective that enables attention to local points of resistance at the sidelines.

A common rhetorical figure, both in the Anthropocene discourse and in the more popular climate debate, is that "we are all in the same boat," "we have to do something." While this sense of community certainly may be necessary, it is nonetheless problematic. Anders E. Johansson reads the calls for a unifying story within the Anthropocene discourse through Adorno's critique of the jargon of authenticity. Following Adorno's questioning of meaning and communication, he argues that "the hermeneutics of belonging has become instrumental to an even larger degree today than when Adorno wrote his book." In a discussion involving Paul

iv | Introduction

Celan, Jacques Derrida and the question of poetry after Auschwitz, he argues for another conception of understanding beyond the current entanglement.

Camilla Flodin focuses on Adorno's conception of a possible reconciliation between human beings and nature, and especially how this possibility is formulated in Adorno's aesthetics. Flodin looks at recent criticism of the concept of the Anthropocene, and argues that Adorno's comprehension of nature constitutes an important correction since it leaves room for conceiving a nature beyond domination. The article also addresses misinterpretations of Adorno's concept of nature as well as the negligence of his contribution to the discussion of the human–nature dialectic in current literature on the environmental crisis.

Sven Anders Johansson asks why we should turn to art if we are facing ecological disaster and argues that Adorno, in contrast to much of contemporary ecocriticism, does have a substantial answer to this question. The concept of natural beauty is crucial here. To Adorno, natural beauty contains both a memory of something lost, and a promise of something yet to come. Natural beauty is a moment where the subject may approach something unknown – something which is not subject, not human – in a non-dominating way. In that sense art may be our best option to get out of the anthropocentrism that prevents us from even understanding the current situation.

Works cited

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