

The course aims to introduce students to the concept of the Anthropocene, both in general terms and as it relates specifically to the discipline of anthropology and to ethnographic practice. Readings combine a selection of theoretical and methodological approaches, ethnographic examples and critiques. The course is not lecture-based, but built around seminar participation. During the day, students will be divided into groups to discuss the set texts, and each group will present their set text to other students during the evening class. Participation in class, through group presentations and discussion, forms an element of the final assessment.

Overall, the course is intensive and heavily text-oriented, with assessment based on several written submissions: two short summaries of texts discussed in class (approximately 250 words each), and a written assignment in two parts, including an essay on the significance of the Anthropocene for anthropology and/or ethnography (1000-1500 words) and a short proposal for an imagined ethnographic project relating to the Anthropocene (500 words).

NOTE: As I've outlined it here, the course is structured around a certain number of participants. Changes may occur, depending on how many people actually turn up. Also, if any of you have a favorite text on the Anthropocene that you'd like to bring to class, do let me know: nothing here is written (entirely) in stone.

## OVERVIEW

The emergent literature on the Anthropocene is complex, dense and expanding rapidly across a number of venues, disciplines and discourses: a short course such as this can only scrape the surface. Given that, however, our aim here is to examine some key recent texts on the concept, assess some of its potential implications and consider some lines of possible critique. The principal objective of the course is to equip you with a basic orientation and a few critical framings, so as to help you think through the concept for yourself and decide whether and how it fits in with your understanding of anthropology as a discipline and a practice.

Simply put, the discourse on the Anthropocene concerns the emergence of human activity as a planetary or geological force. How should anthropology, as a discipline invested in the exploration of *anthropos*, respond to this notion? Where and when and how does it enter into our practices of research and thinking? Does this idea represent a new peak of anthropocentrism, a new iteration of exceptionalism that elevates the human to the role of (bumbling) planetary mastery? Or, conversely, does it somehow relativise or diminish the human, dislodging its exteriority from the world and placing it on an evened playing field, relative to other, commensurable agencies? Who or what *is* this new planetary subject, this "human" that reshapes the face of the planet, and who will step up to fill its shoes? Already, we see discourses emerge, such as geo-engineering, by which the urgency and speed of planetary change empowers certain groups to act — at least in theory — in highly undemocratic and unaccountable ways. What then are the politics of the Anthropocene, and how do they differ from earlier formations that functioned on a similar scale — metanarratives such as "globalization", or "modernity"?

The field of potential inquiry here is enormous, and wide open: there are new objects, new discourses, new framings, new scales and forms of action, new ethics, new economies, new interconnections, new

models of the human... How, then, should a discipline that is committed to the face-to-face, to the everyday concreteness of ethnographic fieldwork, engage with a phenomenon that takes place on a planetary scale?

### **Session 1 (Monday) Introduction**

Aims, course outline, how this will work, assign groups (A, B and C), briefly outline the texts for subsequent sessions, discuss written assignment and marking requirements. Questions.

Discuss the preliminary readings.

#### *Readings*

0. Weisman, *The World Without Us* (Optional; included as “fun” background reading)
1. Steffen et al, “The Anthropocene—Conceptual and Historical Perspectives”

### **Session 2 (Tuesday) Background**

Examine some general background, precursors and conditions for the rise of the Anthropocene as an object of global concern, as well as anthropological responses to climate change (as a key aspect of the Anthropocene phenomenon).

#### *Readings*

- 2a. Lazier, “Earthrise—Or the globalization of the World Picture”
- 2b. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”
- 2c. Sayre, “The Politics of the Anthropogenic”

### **Session 3 (Wednesday) Approaches**

Discuss some disciplinary and methodological responses to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

#### *Readings*

- 3a. Palsson et al, “Reconceptualizing the Anthropos”
- 3b. Lorimer, “Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene”
- 3c. Kirksey & Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography”

### **Session 4 (Thursday) Objects**

Discuss some examples of ethnographic approaches that relate—either overtly or implicitly—to the Anthropocene.

#### *Readings*

- 4a. Strauss et al, *Cultures of Energy* [Read Introduction]
- 4b. Falzon et al, *Multi-sited Ethnography* [Read Chapter 8]
- 4c. van Dooren & Bird-Rose, *Unlove Others* [Read “Flying Fox...”]

## Session 5 (Friday)

## Responses

Discuss critical perspectives on the Anthropocene concept. Watch a film.

### *Readings*

5. Crist, "The Poverty of Our Nomenclature"

## Further Readings

The Anthropocene is a "hot" topic at the moment, and you will have no problems finding discussions, lectures, roundtables, forums, art projects, newspaper coverage, blogs dedicated to the subject. I have included a folder with some further academic readings, links to public lectures etc. in the dropbox, including copies of a number of books and articles that I considered—at some point—whether to include in the curriculum.

## ASSESSMENT

The class is heavily text-oriented—both in terms of engaging critically with texts, and in terms of producing texts. Assessment is based mostly on written submissions (80%), with an element of class participation (20%).

All written assignments are to be sent directly to me by the submission deadline, which will be **Monday January 13, 2014**. I will email reminders of the submission deadline to all participants.

I encourage you to start the writing process early, as the assignments are not designed to be finished in one sitting or at the last minute.

Once the grading process is completed, I will also return your submissions to you with short comments—though this will take a little longer than the grading itself, so be patient.

### **ASSESSMENT 1. Class participation (3 presentations per group, plus a discussion on Friday)**

At the first session, each of you will be assigned to one of three groups. Each day, your group will convene, before the class, and discuss the set text for that day. During the evening class your group will then give the rest of us a short presentation of the text (approximately 15-20 mins). It is up to you how you organize these presentations — consider this an exercise in team-based work — but it is preferable if you break up the presentations into short sections, to let as many group members speak as possible. I will expect each member of the group to present part of at least two presentations.

You are entirely free with regard to how you organize your presentations and how you divide aspects of the text among yourselves: you may also cover any aspect of the text that you find relevant, in any way you see fit — from Socratic dialogues to slam poetry (if you really have to...). Keep in mind, however, that you are conducting the presentation partly for the benefit of other participants in the class, who have not had the time to read the text themselves and who therefore gain access to it through your presentation. Each of you will have to write about at least one text presented by one of the other groups — so try to be clear, helpful, and concise.

If you are unsure what or how to present, the following are some suggestions for aspects that your group might want to cover:

**a. Argument.** Outline the central argument of the text. If the argument is long or complex, I suggest you break it into parts and divide these out among members of the group. What are the key points, how are they argued, what do you think of them? Is the argument persuasive? Why was the text written, what is it trying to achieve and how? Who is the intended audience, what are its intended effects?

**b. Author.** Who is the author? What are their disciplinary background, institutional affiliations? What kind of “allies” do they draw in, through references and by placing their argument in relation to others? How do their background and agendas shape the way they approach the notion of the Anthropocene, and how they make use of it?

**c. Anthropocene.** How does the text relate to or involve the concept of the Anthropocene? Does the author invoke it directly? If so, what sort of work does the term do here? What are the implications and consequences of the way it is presented? How does the framing force us to take notice — or fail to do so?

**d. Disagreements.** Does the text open for multiple interpretations? Conflicting readings are usually interesting, and may open for a richer understanding of text and issue alike. Was there any aspect of the text — agenda, argument, politics, conclusions— that you disagreed on within your group? What did you disagree on and why?

**e. Critique.** What are the weak points of the argument? How might you go about critiquing, improving on or disproving what they say? Are there any obvious flaws, drawbacks, invalid assumptions or problematic implications of what they argue? Or, conversely, were you entirely persuaded?

**f. Questions.** What sort of questions are you left with, having read through and discussed the text? Was there any aspect of the text that you didn’t understand, or that you would like further clarification on? What sort of questions would you like to pose the rest of the class, based on your reading of the text?

The aim of this exercise is to stimulate horizontal interaction and critical engagement with the text, as well as give you some practice with team-based work within your peer-group. With its relentless focus on the individual, the neoliberal academy can be a harsh and isolating place.

## **ASSESSMENT 2. Short written summaries (500 words)**

As part of your assessment, you will also produce two short written summaries (250 words each) of two texts that have been discussed in class. One of these summaries can be a text you discussed in your own group, but the other has to be a text presented by one of the other groups. This is to ensure that you all read a little bit beyond the minimum required for the presentations — and also, to make the point that you’re all presenting for each other here. The summaries should briefly outline what you consider the key points and argument of the text, as well as any critical observations you may have to add for yourself. If it helps, you can think of these summaries as capsule reviews.

**The aim here** is to give you some practice writing in a short, review-style format, as well as ensuring that you engage closely with at least some of the texts on the curriculum.

### ASSESSMENT 3. Written assignment (two parts)

#### a. Written essay: “What is the Anthropocene, and what does it mean for anthropology?” (1000 / 1500 words)

The written essay should be around 1000 (BA) or 1500 (MA) words, and include a critical discussion of the concept of the Anthropocene as it relates to anthropology and ethnographic practice. It should draw on at least two texts we have discussed in class, but you are welcome to use more.

Points to keep in mind are:

- clear argument.
- logical structure.
- presentation matters.
- think for yourself.

Essays in the highest-mark category will be clearly written, with a logical structure and a conclusion that builds on the argument presented in the essay. They will be largely free of typos, with a functioning scholarly apparatus (references, footnotes and so on), and will also show *some* evidence—as appropriate to the level of the student—of independent thinking and critical engagement with the set texts.

#### b. Imaginary Proposal (500 words)

The second part of the written assignment takes the form of a short proposal for an imaginary project in which you yourself engage, in some way, with the concept of the Anthropocene from an ethnographic perspective. The sky is your limit here, feel free to speculate, but the proposal should address at least the following elements:

- A research question, along with a clearly defined empirical field that the question addresses.
- A framework or background for the project. How do you intend to approach the subject? What are your theoretical reference points? How does your project fit into — or depart from — the existing literature, in what fields?
- An outline of the proposed work. How do you propose to go about doing this in practice? Who will you talk to? Where will you go? What are your methods? What are your sources?
- A justification. Why is this particular issue or subject interesting? What is it relevant for? Why does it matter?

**The aim of this exercise** is to get you thinking in concrete terms about how one might approach the concept of the Anthropocene ethnographically, as well as give you some space for imaginative writing and practice with the format of writing proposals — an aspect of anthropological practice that will become all too familiar to you, if you intend to continue doing research. This is intended as a relatively “light” exercise, so feel free to have some fun with it.

## THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN WRITING

**1. Don't plagiarize.** Seriously. Plagiarism is bad scholarly practice, it is extremely annoying to come across when you are marking and, if you are discovered, it can have very serious consequences. Attribute your sources, mark clearly the parts of your text where you are quoting others, and don't try to pass anything off as your own if you haven't written it. If you're not sure what constitutes plagiarism, there are a number of sources available online and I am happy to answer any questions you may have — either in class, or via email ([hugo@tlu.ee](mailto:hugo@tlu.ee)).

**2. Presentation matters.** An important aspect of your training is to master the codes and conventions of scholarly writing. When submitting academic writing, pick a referencing system and stick to it, ensure the bibliography is complete, double-check your typing and grammar. Don't do everything at the last minute: give yourself time to read over your text before you submit it, check the writing, spelling and presentation, maybe get someone else to proof-read it. Avoid unnecessary mistakes and errors. It is a lot easier for an examiner to give the top mark if your text is clear, well-presented, easy to follow, without obvious errors or mistakes.

(PS. If you are in doubt, I personally like to read things in the Cochin typeface, font size 11 or 12, line spacing 1.2, justified margins.)

**3. Oh, and also.** Don't plagiarize. Pretty please.