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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 20th 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 22nd 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 ‘6th 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 15th and 20th 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

future. Many activists, government policies, and even legal frameworks focus on the needs of ‘future generations’ for ‘justice’. For example, Lussem (this volume), working among anti-coal activists in the Rhineland area of Germany, highlights how activists and legal rulings consider the needs and well-being of distant and future humans. These ‘absent others’ become subjects of justice, with local civil-society actors, and the state alike, having responsibility for their well-being. These ideas are also highlighted by the movement ‘Friday for Future’, with strikes from school being mobilised as a tool for highlighting the need for ‘justice’ for future selves (Biswas and Mattheis, 2024).

Scales of Justice in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene not only necessitates cutting across temporal frames when considering ideas of justice, but also across tensions between individual and local fights for justice and the global legal, economic, and political frameworks which often dominate Anthropocene crises. This is clearly evident in Piart’s (this volume) discussion of trade union politics and labour law in the shipping industry. Piart explores how the state of the flag flown by a vessel dictates the laws and regulations to which seafarers on that vessel are subject. This has been mis-used by some owners exploiting neo-liberal approaches, that have defined economics in the Anthropocene since the 1970s, who have used flags from nations with more lax labour regulations. Piart explores how agencies such as the International Transport Workers’ Federation have mobilized international networks (e.g. by mobilizing dock workers in a port in a nation with stronger protections) to transcend the ‘national’ regulations of these flags and internationalize collective bargaining agreements.

A similar interaction between local and global concerns is visible in Krämer’s (this volume) discussion of nature conservation views and opposition to wind power among communities in the low-mountain regions of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany. Here, members of a citizen’s action group (*Bürgerinitiative*) of self-identified nature conservationists highlight how they oppose the expansion of wind turbines for renewable energy production as a result of the impacts they have on species protection, on the aesthetic values of landscape, and on stimulating further extractive and expansive approaches to energy. Of particular interest here are the tensions between national and global perspectives on the need to reduce emissions, versus more local, ‘rural’ concerns focused on landscape and biodiversity conservation and which see the expansion of renewable energy as a further form of ‘energy colonialism’ driven by distant urban expansion.

These examples point to the ways in which different spatial scales of justice intersect and come into tension with one another in the Anthropocene. Global discussions of emissions reductions through carbon capture and carbon credits might seem logical in a bid to curb planetary effects of climate change, but they can have feedbacks that enhance local, regional, and international injustices leading to accusations of green-

washing (Lyons and Westoby, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014; Osbourne et al., 2024) or ‘green colonialism’ (Bringel and Svampa, 2024). Similarly, national or international designations of ‘conservation’ have often been used to protect key environments or species (e.g. tigers, gorillas) for the benefit of the planet or ‘nature’. However, such approaches can have their roots in colonialism (Cronon, 1996; Agrawal, 2008; Choudry, 2013), and have been used as a basis to evict and disadvantage Indigenous communities or local stakeholders who rely on certain habitats for their cultural and economic wellbeing (Barume, 2000).

Without understanding these various scales of justice, inadvertent structural injustices and ‘structural violence’ (Galtung, 1969) can emerge and be perpetuated (Zenker and Wolf, this volume). Indeed, the growing distance between local and global concerns is arguably one of the greatest challenges of the Anthropocene. The majority of individuals demonstrate an environmental appreciation within their local contexts, yet global supply chains mean that unthinking purchasing in one nation can have consequences for communities and environments in another (Kastner et al., 2011). Meanwhile, national political decisions might be made in an attempt to reduce the consequences of climate change for all inhabitants of a region or nation. However, local communities may be more focused on their immediate situation and concerns. Navigating the different spatial scales of justice and evoking local and global senses of justice and being will be a fraught area in the decades to come.

Perspectives of Justice in the Anthropocene

The efficacy of Zenker and Wolf’s (this volume, p. 26) definition of justice is that it enables comparison of diverse empirical cases ‘past and present’ and can describe a wide range of ‘justice regimes’ (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 26). The definition involves a flexible approach to ‘subjects’ of justice (to whom justice is due), ‘objects’ of justice (what is due), responsible agents of justice (those who implement justice) and concerned agents of justice (those for whom justice is a matter of concern) as well as values (according to which justice is to be realized). It is therefore well-equipped to explore the temporal and spatial scalar variabilities of justice mentioned above, as well as the appreciation of very different perspectives as to what justice might mean in different contexts. It is also a critical basis through which to explore the ‘contestations around justice’ (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 27) in the Anthropocene.

This is illustrated already by the diverse examples included in this volume. From digital start-up justice entrepreneurs in Kenya seeking to democratize justice by creating tools for reporting corruption, accessing online dispute resolution, and providing legal expert knowledge (Ahoya, this volume) to the new international labour law horizons of sea-farers working with the International Transport Workers’ Federation mentioned above (Piart, this volume). From the perspectives of a self-organised network of

coal-critical civil-society actors on the injustices of vast open-pit mining (Lussem, this volume) to rural nature conservationists opposing wind power expansion in western Germany (Krämer, this volume) and resistance to mining projects in Ecuador (Affolter, this volume). The ways in which these different authors and contributions engage with Zenker and Wolf's definition emphasize its ability to act as a tool for exploring how the anthropology of justice is an important lens for studying debates surrounding the Anthropocene.

Indeed, the volume already shows the applicability of this approach to justice to various pressing themes involving politics, biodiversity protection, labour regulations, economics, and legal disputes. The real test will be whether this approach is adopted by further, more diverse voices moving forward. This volume is primarily the product of writers from European institutions (and primarily Germany). Yet, the concepts and definitions provide a strong basis for explorations of justice by academics and stakeholders from traditionally less-privileged contexts. It will also be interesting to see how Indigenous ontologies and ideas of justice engage with these new anthropologies of justice.

Of further interest here are the ways in which the different contributors describe their ethnographic methods. Participant observation has long been a key methodology in social anthropology, enabling specialists to gain more active, closer appreciations of informants' perspectives. In the case of justice in the Anthropocene, this participation takes on interesting forms. Ahoya (this volume), for example, prepares funding applications for justice start-ups with her informants alongside semi-structured interviews. Lussem (this volume) meanwhile reflects on his own memories of injustice as a child while working as a researcher in the same region and his position in the 'middle of the transformation process' (as per Herberg et al., 2021). Finally, Krämer (this volume) uses an educational approach through 'collaborative walking'. Together, these examples highlight the emergence of a 'committed anthropology in the Anthropocene' (Lussem, this volume, p. 90), whereby justice is simultaneously an ever-present subject of study and agent in the process of research.

Agents and Subjects of Justice in the Anthropocene

The anthropology of the Anthropocene not only lends itself to wider views on participation in the anthropological process, but also in terms of the agents and subjects of 'justice' in various cases. As Zenker and Wolf put it, subjects may include 'individuals and collectives – humans, non-human animals, other creatures, spirits and gods' (p. 25), while agents include 'any agents deemed capable, in principle, of deliberating about opinions before acting' (p. 26). Such an approach highlights the various entities which come together in 'Anthropocene Patches' (Tsing et al., 2019; Lussem, this volume). This term refers to the complex contexts of anthropological research in the

Anthropocene where particular sites of study are constantly entangled with, in tension with, and in contradiction to the overall ‘geostory’ of the Anthropocene (Lussem, this volume, p. 91).

These subjects and agents may also ‘emerge’ through study, rather than necessarily being a given. For example, Ahoya, in the first contribution to this volume, looks at situated justice among justice entrepreneurs or ‘justlers’ in Kenya. These individuals seek to explore and promote alternative avenues to justice beyond those formalised by the Kenyan state, including through a variety of digital tools. These entrepreneurs aim to offer market-based options to ensure ‘people-centred’ and democratized justice. Ahoya highlights how these entrepreneurs become ‘responsibilized’ as agents while they ‘oscillate ambivalently between idealistically fighting for a more sincere system of people-centred justice and cynically living off an ultimately still donor-driven discourse’ (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 37). This example highlights the fluid ways in which agents and subjects of justice can change or emerge through their engagement with justice.

Discourse relating to the Anthropocene also necessitates that anthropologies of justice consider agents and subjects beyond the human realm. In a recent prominent case, Mount Taranaki in New Zealand was granted the same legal rights as a person (BBC News/Armstrong, 2025). Similarly, Affolter (this volume) explores how the ‘rights of nature’ have been incorporated into the Ecuadorian Constitution and trees, mountains, and species become ‘subjects’ of justice. These cases speak to posthumanist or multi-species trends in critiques of the Anthropocene concept, and anthropology more broadly, which encourage a de-centring of humans as the only powerful agents and highlight the connectedness of human and non-human beings. Indeed, when we talk of planetary health or sustainability in the Anthropocene, we really mean from the perspective of ourselves. The Earth, having survived multiple geological and extra-terrestrial crises, will continue with or without us.

Zenker and Wolf’s proposed approach, however, argues that the multi-species approach can be taken too far in removing humans, as well as the injustices, consciousness, reflexivity, and responsibilities at the core of human being in the Anthropocene, from focus. They emphasize the need to ‘return to and rediscover the human as an indispensable category of analysis and action’ (p. 34), while simultaneously disassembling the ‘global human subject’ (p. 35). For example, Affolter explores how, although given legal protection, the ‘subjects’ of nature (e.g. the mountains, trees, different plants and animals) are still described as being ‘unable to act as concerned and responsible agents’ and therefore must be protected by humans. This also, however, means that they can be mobilized by humans in different ways, to the benefit of nature, or to its detriment.

As mentioned above, the conservation of ‘nature’ can be, and has been, used against subaltern groups to contest their claims to land and to remove them from different spaces (Barume, 2000; Zenker and Wolf, this volume), something with a long colonial history (Roberts et al., 2021b). Meanwhile, in the case of Mount Taranaki, the basis for the decision to grant this geological landmark legal rights, was to ‘acknowledge the

hurt that has been caused by past wrongs' of colonialism, emphasizing the relevance of human considerations and contestations even as the mountain was made a 'subject' in its own right. Even if the Earth is perceived of as an agent of justice, responding to human mal-treatment of the climate cycle and biodiversity (Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019, Odeku, 2022), this 'justice' will ultimately be felt through human institutions, inequalities, and cultural diversity.

Looking Forward

Through the analyses of justice in the Anthropocene by the authors in this volume we can bring into focus the Anthropocene concept, and its inherent tensions, more generally. Whether the Anthropocene is an epoch defined by a clear geochemical stratum or not, it is clear that its roots lie deep in the past (Roberts et al., 2021, 2023; Ellis, 2024) and complex, historical inequalities shape human-Earth system relationships in the present. By the same token it is clear that these historical processes, while leading to an ever-greater global entanglement of our species with different parts of the Earth system, have also played out differently in different local and social contexts (Biermann et al., 2016). Two defining features and central challenges of the Anthropocene are i) to reconcile historical injustices with present-day concerns and future planning and ii) to reconcile local concerns and fights for justice with global crises in 'humanity's' relationship with the planet.

Exploration of these temporal and spatial scalar tensions also highlights the varied perspectives of the Anthropocene, as, at once, local communities, policy makers, NGOs, and companies are thrust together, with their variety of often-competing interests, in discussions as to what a 'sustainable' future might and should look like. The Anthropocene forces us to study and explore multiple levels and 'regimes' of justice, bringing together the 'everyday' fights for justice with more elusive, wider-reaching ideas of justice, as well as their interaction with politics, environment, and culture. Here, participatory concepts, such as the Decision Theatre (Wolf et al., 2023), developed at the University of Arizona, offer a digital means to explore pressing themes, including justice, emphasizing the importance of the active participation of different interest groups, initiating dialogue at the same time as exploring the varied contexts of decision making.

Finally, exploring justice in the Anthropocene also forces us to look beyond ourselves and to the ways in which other species, landscapes, and even the planet itself are due, and apply, 'justice'. The 'Anthropocene' has sometimes portrayed a certain arrogance in our perception of our pre-eminent position in the Earth's future, while also homogenising a non-existent, equally-responsible, and equally-powerful humanity. Yet, at its core, the term the Anthropocene, and the discourse surrounding it, reflect a desire to understand the *feedbacks* between ourselves at the world around us, something

driving novel co-evolutionary human-Earth system modelling approaches (Donges et al., 2018).

It is through humans that the legal rights of nature are created, manipulated, and enacted. It is through human social, economic, political, and cultural constellations that inequalities emerge that shape our relationship to the planet and, indeed, how changes in the planet are experienced by different individuals and communities (Davis et al., 2019). It is also through humans that such processes can be studied, interpreted, and engaged with. Zenker and Wolf's closing sentence in the introduction of this volume sums it up beautifully. By exploring the human as an indispensable category of analysis and action we may not only start to fully 'apprehend and interpret the world of (in)justice in the Anthropocene productively, but also intervene in it and change it' (Zenker and Wolf, this volume, p. 42). Words just as fitting to frame this volume, as discourse on the Anthropocene more generally.

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