

Environment and History

A photograph of an industrial site, possibly a power plant or refinery, with a tall, cylindrical smokestack on the left and a large, rusted metal structure in the center. The background is a large, forested hill. The foreground is filled with tall, green and yellow grasses. The title "Environment and History" is overlaid in a large, yellow, serif font at the top.

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Reviews

Carolyn Merchant

The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020

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Few terms have gained more currency in recent discussions of the environment than the *Anthropocene*, a proposed new geologic epoch marked off from the preceding Holocene by humanity's immense impact on the planet. First coined by Earth scientist Eugene F. Stoermer in the 1980s and popularised by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen at the start of the new millennium, the Anthropocene originated as a scientific idea. But scholars in the humanities have been quick to study, apply and interrogate the term. In this short but ambitious book, prominent environmental historian Carolyn Merchant presents the key debates within humanistic approaches to the Anthropocene, identifies various avenues for humanities scholars to further explore and publicise this theme, and lays out her own vision for how we can survive – and ultimately move beyond – this period. This topic has value, she argues, because 'the concept of the Anthropocene goes beyond earlier concepts and periodizations ... by presenting a clear and forceful characterisation of the future crisis humankind faces' (p. xi). While maintaining that all fields can contribute to this conversation, she specifically examines and organises her book around, six subjects: history, art, literature, religion, philosophy and ethics/justice.

Merchant begins her book with a concise overview of the development, popularisation and criticism of the notion of the Anthropocene, grounding her analysis in what many consider this epoch's defining characteristic, climate change. She therefore favours Stoermer and Crutzen's proposed date for the start of the Anthropocene at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the broad uptake of coal-powered steam engines in Western Europe. But she acknowledges that scholars in the humanities and other fields have made numerous compelling arguments for alternative means of dating and conceptualising this era. Among the most influential rival periodisations are the *Capitalocene*, commencing in the sixteenth century with the global spread of this economic order; the *Plantationocene*, with a similar starting point but focusing on the expansion of plantation monoculture; and the *Chthulucene*, an era of human–nature interconnectivity with an indeterminate origin. Although Merchant maintains the conventional terminology and periodisation for this era, she recognises a key insight from these alternative frameworks: that human beings have not contributed equally to climate change or other features of the Anthropocene. Rather, certain societies and economies – especially those in wealthy nations – have disproportionately propelled these transformations.

In the first five main chapters, addressing history, art, literature, religion and philosophy, Merchant pithily lays out how each field can enhance our understanding, and communicate the importance, of the Anthropocene. Historians can help us better comprehend how we got into this situation, so that we can escape it. As an example, she traces the historical development of internal combustion power, with a particular focus on the second law of thermodynamics and its implications for engineering and human history alike. Artists and photographers can publicise the ramifications of climate change and other anthropogenic disruptions. As Merchant demonstrates in her discussion of recent environmental art, they can also help break down the problematic natural–artificial divide, and present hopeful visions for the future of the planet. Writers and poets, and those who study them, can help us comprehend the profound ambivalence humans have felt towards industrialisation’s impact on the environment, dating back to the coal-powered emergence of the Anthropocene. Religious movements and personal spiritualism can promote ethical models that heed ecological and natural patterns. Merchant suggests that Christianity initially encouraged a domineering attitude towards nature, but since the late twentieth century various churches have taken up a conservation message. Philosophers can guide us out of the Anthropocene by bridging the tensions between a jumbled, unstable planet and the numbers and figures through which we attempt to make it legible. As examples, Merchant highlights the thinking of Heraclitus, who taught us everything is in flux, and Parmenides, who provided us with foundations for logical thinking.

The final chapter, discussing ethics and justice, warrants special attention, as here Merchant lays out more of her own thinking regarding the Anthropocene, and how we might move past it. Merchant divides prevailing ethical frameworks concerning the environment into ecocentric (ecological), egocentric (liberal), and homocentric (anthropocentric) approaches. After assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each, she proposes a new tactic, dubbed a ‘partnership ethic’. Inspired by Aldo Leopold’s land ethic (and bearing some resemblance to Donna Haraway’s writings on the Chthulucene), Merchant writes that ‘*a partnership ethic holds that the greatest good for the human and non-human communities is in their mutual living interdependence*’ (p. 131, italics in original). Additionally, Merchant contends that to address climate change’s impact on marginalised peoples, ‘new theories of justice are needed’ in which ‘low-income communities, indigenous peoples, women, and peoples of color’ are directly involved ‘in all aspects of decision-making’ (p. 127). She points to the environmental justice movement as an example of this necessary rethinking of our relationship to the planet and each other. Merchant elaborates on these ideas in a stirring epilogue in which she calls for humanities scholars to come together to ‘create a new story of sustainability’, so that ‘we can exit the Age of the Anthropocene’ (p. 144).

REVIEWS

This book has few flaws. Given the project's grandiose scope and limited page count, though, Merchant does make some sweeping claims that appear overly simplistic. Her broad assertions concerning gender and indigeneity sometimes lack precision and nuance. Noting that some have taken to calling the Anthropocene the 'Androcene, the Patriarchalocene, or the Phallocene', Merchant contends 'we should be entering the Gynocene, an age in which women can contribute policies and power to help resolve climate change' (p. 87). Merchant pioneered the use of gender analysis in environmental history, and greater female participation in policymaking, environmental or otherwise, is undoubtedly desirable. But in our era of complex, non-binary gender identities, the suggestion that there is an inherently female means of relating to the environment seems problematically essentialist. Similarly, Merchant summarises the environmental perspective of 'native peoples' as a belief that 'People should not be exploiters of the natural world; they should be one with it' (p. 20). Given the enormous diversity of indigenous populations, and their varied subsistence strategies, some of which involve market participation, this claim seems rather romantic.

These minor issues hardly detract from what is, on balance, a very impressive book. Merchant's keen synthesis and original thinking will appeal to field experts. Her clear, straightforward case studies render this volume well suited for course assignment, even in first-year classes. Although Merchant acknowledges that this project – which focuses overwhelmingly on Europe and North America – is hardly exhaustive, throughout her work she has highlighted potential areas for future research. This book will no doubt inspire many to fill in the gaps.

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