

# Decolonising the Anthropocene: The Mytho-Politics of Human Mastery

Written by Karsten A. Schulz

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## Decolonising the Anthropocene: The Mytho-Politics of Human Mastery

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Discussing the fluid boundaries between humanity and nature in light of destructive human interactions with the biosphere raises controversial issues. There is now growing consensus among many scholars that a dualistic understanding of humanity and nature as separate and monolithic entities is insufficient to describe the richness of relations 'beyond the human' and the embeddedness of humans in the interdependent web of life (Kohn 2013). Furthermore, assuming that there is no mode of social relationality that is entirely free from power differentials, it seems no longer viable to speak of a single humanity or nature in the context of the current ecological crisis. Instead, it seems more sensible to conceive of abstract concepts such as humanity or nature in terms of multiple 'biosocial becomings' (Ingold and Palsson 2013).<sup>[1]</sup>

Yet as long as the modernist paradigms of technological utopianism and economic growth are taken to represent the 'natural order of things' under global capitalism, it is necessary to place the concept of biosocial becomings in a wider context. To begin with, it seems plausible to suggest that today's biosocial relations are markedly structured by a 'capitalist world-ecology, joining power, capital, and nature as an entwined whole' (Moore 2015: 70). Moreover, a considerable body of critical scholarship has pointed out that the capitalist world-ecological system is inextricably linked to *coloniality*, defined not only as an unjust economic model, but also as a racialised, androcentric, and class-based hierarchy of knowing and being which still marginalises non-western cultures and histories (Escobar 2004; Quijano 2007). Imagining collective becomings otherwise, in the sense of a transformation towards less destructive and more just forms of conviviality, thus means to avoid the superficial agglomeration — or a mere reshuffling — of what is presently deemed 'natural' or 'social' *within* the commodifying logic of the modern capitalist world-ecology.

At this point it is certainly interesting to note that more holistic and spiritually inclined forms of knowing and being-in-the-world are gaining renewed prominence in contemporary ecopolitical debates. In particular, there is growing awareness among scholars from various disciplines that storytelling and mythical thought have long prefigured philosophies on human-nature relations and left their traces in our collective social imaginaries (Williams et al. 2012; Vetlesen 2015). Hence, I intend to bring into sharper relief the role of myth and mythical narratives in shaping today's ecological crisis. At a time when new mystifications of human-nature relations are rapidly emerging, most notably through the increased humanisation of *geological time*, it is crucial to bear in mind that mythical narratives often come with their own (colonial) politics.

So how exactly can we imagine the scientific mystification of geological time? After all, geological epochs normally do not generate much excitement outside a narrow circle of scholars. Unlike historical epochs, commonly associated with characteristic representations of the world's meaning and the human position therein, geological epochs usually appear as the silent backdrop to the struggles of the human species. While being confronted with rapid technological change and pressing concerns such as poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation, it seems almost reassuring that humans have now been living in the Holocene for approximately 11,700 years.

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Today, however, a number of leading earth scientists propose that humanity has already entered a new geological epoch, the so-called *Anthropocene*, in which humankind is seen as a geological force transforming the planet. As currently used, the term Anthropocene was introduced by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen in 2000. Together with the ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, Crutzen suggested that a new epoch should be added to the geological timescale, arguing that such a far-reaching decision may be warranted based on mounting evidence for a profound anthropogenic influence on the biological, chemical, and geological processes on earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). In other words, it is now assumed that unprecedented human influence has led to a situation in which the earth system as a whole is 'operating in a *no-analogue state*' (Crutzen and Steffen 2003: 253, emphasis in the original).

In view of such unsettling changes, a lively discussion has emerged among scholars from different fields regarding the historical origins of the Anthropocene. Does the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century and the invention of the steam engine mark the beginning of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011)? Is it the invention of agriculture around 8,000 BC that has ushered in a new epoch (Ruddiman 2013)? Or did the Anthropocene begin with the explosion of the first atomic bomb in July 1945, when techno-scientific progress paved the way for the atomic age and sparked the 'Great Acceleration' in human communication and resource use that has shaped our societies since the post-war boom period (Steffen et al. 2015)?

Debates about the origins of the Anthropocene remain inconclusive, and a decision on whether the Anthropocene should be officially recognised as a period, epoch, or age in the geological timescale has yet to be made by the International Commission on Stratigraphy. However, despite ongoing discussions on whether the Anthropocene should be considered an additional chronostratigraphic unit above or within the current Holocene epoch — and, if so, how this proposed new unit should be formally defined — the idea of a 'New Human Epoch'<sup>[2]</sup> has seemingly struck a critical chord with many scholars in the broader humanities and environmental social sciences.[3] The recent mushrooming of Anthropocene-themed journals, books, and conferences as well as the prominent use of the concept by major earth system science initiatives such as Future Earth (2013) has even prompted a number of scholars to speak of an emerging 'Anthropo-scene' dominated by the epistemic and ontological tenets of complexity science and managerial systems thinking (Castree 2015; Rickards 2015). Especially the notion of earth system science as a new 'integrative super-discipline' that is arguably best equipped to take the lead in addressing the complex entanglements between biophysical, social, and technological 'systems' has sparked a heated debate about the Anthropocene's far-reaching implications (Pitman 2005: 137).

In sum, two fundamental questions are at the heart of these ongoing discussions. The first question concerns the multifaceted relations between humans, nature, and technology in the twenty-first century. What does it mean for our understanding of these relations if we accept the scientific proposal that humanity has become a 'geological force' similar to glacial and tectonic processes (Dalby 2015: 3)? And secondly, what are the political, ontological, and epistemic implications of the Anthropocene concept?

If the notion of the New Human Epoch ultimately implies that 'in a very real sense, the world is in our hands' (Vitousek et al. 1997: 499), it is evident that the same idea has been formulated long before the Anthropocene became a topic of interest for both natural and social scientists. In 1873, the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani already introduced the notion of an *Anthropozoic era*, while a number of other scientists such as G. P. Marsh, Vladimir Vernadsky, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Edouard Le Roy further developed the idea of a human age. However, in spite of the fact that it now seems to be a commonly accepted view that the precedents of the Anthropocene can be traced back at least a century, this intellectual genealogy does not seem to be very precise. As Hamilton and Grinevald (2015: 59) remind us, earlier conceptions of the human age mainly focused on the human impact on the earth's surface, and not on the *earth system* as a whole, while relying on 'a progressive and linear evolutionary understanding of the spread of humankind's geographical and ecological influence, whereas the Anthropocene represents a radical rupture with all evolutionary ideas in human and Earth history, including the breakdown of any idea of advance to a higher stage.'

Explaining the lively debate about the Anthropocene among scholars from various disciplines is then not so much about the immediate relevance of the Anthropocene as a geological or natural scientific concept. Perceiving the Anthropocene as a new epoch, which suggests at least some kind of stability, may even be misleading given the fast

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rate of current anthropogenic change. It is rather the ambiguous notion of the *Anthropos* itself, the idea of an undifferentiated humanity that is at the heart of the concept, which might help to illuminate the success of the Anthropocene as a discursive rallying point. The notion of an undifferentiated humanity is precisely ambiguous because it raises a number of critical questions regarding the political, historical, epistemological, and ontological assumptions that undergird contemporary discussions about the human condition. What does it mean to be 'human' in the Anthropocene—and who decides? Who (and what) is included and excluded as soon as notions of a single 'humanity' are invoked?

Considering the unequal distribution of dangerous anthropogenic changes to the earth's ecosystems, as well as different degrees of responsibility for the emergence of such threats, it has become clear that the undifferentiated notion of 'humankind as the new geological agent' is inadequate to describe the politics and injustices of capitalist development (Malm and Hornborg 2014: 64). Modernity and its western global expression are still marked by historically situated lines of inequality that are drawn according to categories such as species, gender, race, class, ability, or sexual orientation. Taken together, these material-semiotic practices of *b/ordering* and *othering* also define how biosocial relations are projected, performed, and policed in everyday life.

In view of the far-reaching political implications of this state of affairs, it is indeed problematic that mainstream debates about ecology and sustainability continue to be dominated by a troubling separation between the realm of science and the realm of the political — a separation that is increasingly difficult to uphold. The Anthropocene narrative offered by earth system scientists, for example, has been heavily critiqued for its primary focus on environmental symptoms and its relative neglect of the social, political, and economic processes that are arguably at the heart of the Anthropocene 'crisis.' Whether such criticisms are entirely justified, assuming that natural science investigations have drawn political attention to environmental problems in the first place, is another question.

In any case, the framing of humanity as a geological force implies that the living environment is now shaped by (and entangled with) a complex political economy whose origins and inequalities cannot be sufficiently understood unless one realises that western-centric narratives of a single modernity are characterised by wilful abstractions, silences, and the 'wound inflicted by the colonial difference' (Mignolo 2011: 63). Yet, while particularistic and western-centric narratives of modernity are increasingly being questioned, few scholars have explored the concept of the Anthropocene from the perspective of *decoloniality*.

Decoloniality — as a perspective, conceptual lens, and political project — engages with a critical reading of modernity that is inseparably bound to the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 1992: 437). According to Walter D. Mignolo (2009: 39), 'de-colonial thinking and doing emerged, from the sixteenth century on, as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideals projected to, and enacted in, the non-European world.' Based on the assumption that the coloniality of power can be characterised as a hierarchical system of control and oppression, coloniality is defined as a constitutive element of modernity. There is no western modernity without coloniality and its exploitative relations. Modernity and coloniality are essentially two sides of the same coin.

In this sense, decolonial scholarship differs considerably from historical studies of decolonisation, since it does not assume that colonialism has ended and can thus be historicised. Decolonial theorists would rather argue that contemporary forms of coloniality are perpetuated on a global scale through discursive-material processes of imperialism, appropriation, and unequal economic exchange. This includes ethnocentric forms of education as well as the selective application of human rights. In other words, coloniality constructs human *subjects* and less-than-human *objects* at the same time. It produces schisms within humanity by inscribing itself onto bodies, minds, and histories, while simultaneously promulgating a logic of objectification. In the words of Aimé Césaire (2000: 42), this colonial logic of objectification is based on the 'thing-ification' of so-called subaltern people and the nonhuman world. Just as the logic of coloniality denies subaltern people their full subject status as human beings and establishes a colonial difference based on an alleged *lack* (of knowledge, history, development, and so on), it also negates the subject status of the nonhuman world. The living environment and other species are not seen as subjects in their own right, but as objects that can be mastered and exploited.

Intent on counteracting the coloniality of power, being, and knowledge, decolonial scholarship also distinguishes

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itself from the field of postcolonial studies through, for instance, its strong emphasis on *epistemic disobedience*. By refusing to adopt the theoretical outlook of poststructuralism and postmodernism to which postcolonial theory arguably takes recourse, decolonial scholarship seeks to *delink* itself from western-centric worldviews. This process of delinking does not simply refer to a critical project within western academia, a mere deconstruction of terminologies. It describes a delinking from an epistemological frame that silences and subalternises non-western voices, knowledges, and languages within the totalising hierarchy of a single modernity (Mignolo 2007; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010). To this end, decolonial scholarship relies on concepts and theories that have been developed by scholars, artists and activists such as Waman Puma de Ayala, Enrique Dussel, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Aníbal Quijano, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others.

Yet the idea of decoloniality is *not* to celebrate a proudly defiant counter-stance that ultimately remains dependent on the totalising views and beliefs that it reacts against. Instead, the decolonial option is to develop a consciousness of *border thinking* that is able to inhabit different worlds at once, while creating new cultural and political imaginaries from a position of being-in-between (Anzaldúa 1987). In doing so, decolonial scholarship attempts to move beyond First World and Third World fundamentalisms to direct attention toward the epistemic *locus of enunciation*, the ideological, geopolitical, and body-political location of the subject that speaks. The motivation behind this approach is to avoid the fallacy of a totalising *zero-point* epistemology that 'hides its local and particular perspective under an abstract universalism' (Grosfóguel 2011: 5). Simply put, this means to change not only the epistemic rules of the geopolitical conversation, but also the asymmetric power relations which govern these very rules. What decoloniality certainly does not mean, however, is to reject the best of western science and modernity *tout court*. Decolonial scholarship is not anti-scientific. Instead, it seeks to show how particular knowledges and epistemologies are devalued, decentred and reduced as being 'traditional, barbarian, primitive, mystic' (Mignolo 2011: 46). While each of these value-laden ascriptions would certainly be worthy of investigation, I shall nevertheless limit myself to focusing on the latter aspect of *myth* and its relevance for a decolonial politics of the Anthropocene.

What exactly is a myth? On the one hand, there is an observable tendency in everyday speech and various scholarly writings to disparage content as 'myth' that appears to be false, misleading, or simply different from one's own valued convictions. On the other hand, the notion of myth is frequently invoked to designate some kind of primordial truth, sacred narrative, or imaginative way of knowing that fulfils particular adaptive, sense-making, and identity-generating functions.

Yet, to avoid getting bogged down in endless theoretical debates about the truth-value of myth, I will begin my discussion with a structuralist definition provided by the French linguist and philosopher Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, a myth is neither a concept nor an idea that is related to certain contents, but rather a *form of speech* that needs to be interpreted in a concrete social and material context. Mythology, or the study of myth, is thus described by Barthes as being partly scientific (semiotic) and partly ideological, since myth must be understood historically, in its context, which is always a subjective and ideologically charged process (Barthes 1991).

This Barthesian separation between science (semiotics) and ideology (history) leaves us with a paradoxical situation. Studying particular myths through the eyes of a scientific discipline such as semiotics normally implies that science itself can be separated from myth due to its rational and empirical approach. In other words, framing a particular worldview as mythical — which is usually done from the universalising zero-point perspective of western science and philosophy — means precisely to juxtapose the mythical with the rational, non-ideological, and factual.

Contrary to Barthes, I nevertheless maintain that science at large, and not only history, is characterised by the presence of myth and the existence of an ideological dimension that arises from the embeddedness and application of science in concrete conditions of sociality. The main question that follows from this assumption, however, is how exactly the relationship between myth and ideology may be defined vis-à-vis a western-centric politics of knowledge generation.<sup>[4]</sup>

Generally, literature on this specific topic is rather sparse. While there are large bodies of literature devoted to either the theory of myth or the conceptualisation of ideology, there has been surprisingly little exchange between the two fields of research (Flood 2002). The notional use of the term mythology as an apparent synonym for ideology, for

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example in the writings of Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes, illustrates this conceptual lacuna (Von Hendy 2001). It is certainly questionable whether such a vague conceptualisation of the relationship between myth and ideology is sufficient to inform a decolonial politics of delinking.

In line with a critical deconstructionist conjecture, it would of course be intuitive to assume that the ideological element of myth can be easily identified and demystified by those who know how to decipher and contextualise mythical forms of expression. However, defining the relationship between myth and ideology is not quite as easy. Barthes (1991: 143) reminds us that myth does not simply conceal or deny ideologies, but *naturalises* them: 'it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.'

After all, categories such as truth or falsity and even concepts like false consciousness do not apply well to myth, since myth can hardly be assessed according to principles of justified belief. Most people today would probably agree that there is no evidence for the existence of a 'real' person named Prometheus, let alone for the existence of Zeus. Nevertheless, acknowledging the powerful message of progress and mastery that is conveyed by the Promethean myth, to take just one example, shows that myth has a very distinct way of entering the sphere of the political, notably by presenting ideology as a natural condition of the world at large.

Of course, such a structuralist reading of myth and ideology has its own difficulties. Understanding myth and ideology as being largely equivalent in their meaning and omnipresence in both the structures of society as well as the unconscious structures of the human psyche makes it very challenging for many theoreticians of ideology to legitimise their own epistemic privilege, especially while advocating for social change. A possible solution to this predicament may be found in decolonial scholarship. Here, the push for 'neutral' or non-mythical forms of expression that drive the western-centric structuralist approach appears to be much less salient. Instead of promulgating a primarily negative view of myth-as-ideology, decolonial theorists would rather see myth as a fully legitimate way of knowing and being in the world. The creative use and re-envisioning of western as well as non-western mythical material through the lens of *border thinking* plays an important role, for example, in the writing of decolonial scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, where myth is described as a symbolic, poetic, and spiritual language that is in constant flux and allows for the transformation and reconstruction of seemingly monolithic realities and identities (Keating 1993).

*Mytho-politics*, at least as I define the concept here, then refers to a critical approach which understands the ontological and epistemological neutrality claims of western modernity/coloniality as the product of a naturalising function that the concept of 'myth' allows us to decode. Such a view emphasises the openness and integrative function of mythic cosmologies, which may be used to either naturalise or transcend particular ideologies. In other words, myths are not merely political because they narrow the scope of a societal discourse by, for instance, presenting us with binary choices ('either/or'). It is often precisely their openness and suggestiveness in the sense of an ideological 'both/and' which marks them as sites for political contestation.

To further elucidate this mytho-political perspective, I now turn to one of the most prevalent ideologies of western modernity, the idea of human mastery, the anthropocentric notion of being *above* the nonhuman world. By using this example, I will attempt to illustrate that the symbolic and conceptual structures with which 'we' are trying to make sense of the current Anthropocene condition remain firmly rooted in the European mythological tradition. I am aware that an exhaustive treatment of this topic would require a book-length study, particularly if the goal is to include a nuanced inquiry about the complex origins of 'western' or European thought. Similarly, there are various western and non-western mythologies which, at least to some extent, connote a more holistic view of the interdependent web of life. These enchanting mythologies should neither be idealised nor discarded, for they are certainly influential in their propensity to shape the outcomes of societal processes — even if they are often marginalised in today's globalised cultural fabric. For the purposes of this inquiry, I will nonetheless focus on the mythical legacy of the western-centric and anthropocentric worldview that is now commonly referred to as the *human mastery of nature*.

This being said, wide consensus exists among historians that the radical elevation of the human species over the nonhuman world by means of reflexive reason and scientific self-improvement is an idea of European origin (Leiss

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1994). Moreover, there seems to be fair agreement that the idea of human mastery over nature has been progressively shaped by three influential cultural currents, the first of which is arguably the intellectual and artistic tradition of ancient Greece. In his broad historical account entitled *The Beginnings of Western Science*, David C. Lindberg (2007) illustrates that the emergence of pre-Socratic natural philosophy during the sixth century BC was marked by a distinct turn from a mythical worldview toward independent inquiry and generalised scepticism. Nature came to be understood as an autonomous object which had to be comprehended through logical reasoning.

However, the gradual change that took place in Greece from the beginning of the sixth century BC was not simply a miraculous turn from *mythos* to *logos* that signalled the end of Greek mythology. Mythical thought can be found in every period of ancient Greece for which evidence exists — to the end of antiquity and into the Middle Ages (Lloyd 1979). These influential mythical tropes certainly played their part in naturalising the ideology of human mastery within western cultural imaginaries. Aristotelian, Platonic, and Stoic philosophy as well as the works of the Greek playwright Sophocles explicitly emphasised the divinity of the world, while simultaneously asserting ‘the godlike rationality and hence superiority of human beings, and the rightfulness of ruling over land, vegetable and animal life’ (Wybrow 1991: 129).

Western ideas of human mastery, in other words, never developed in a historical and scientific vacuum that was entirely free from mythical thought, particularly if we turn our attention toward the second mythical tradition that played a decisive role in legitimising the human dominion over nature, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Decreed by divine providence, ‘Man’ was given *dominium terrae*, the cultural mandate to rule over God’s creation. Occasionally this mandate was interpreted in the sense of a paternalistic stewardship, while in other cases it was taken quite literally as a divine decree to subdue the earth and all living things.<sup>[5]</sup>

As a dominant cultural force and frame of reference for the interpretation of what I would call ‘second degree’ mythical thought (mythical thought that openly disavowed any intention to make a claim of absolute truth), Christianity exerted a continuous influence throughout the entire early modern period — a period that witnessed the scientific revolution, the colonisation of the Americas, and the emergence of capitalism and the modern nation-state. Reinforced by technological and scientific progress taking place at a hitherto unprecedented pace, mythical themes of mastery — that ‘man’ and spirit stand apart from nature and that human beings rightfully exercise authority over nature — slowly blended with the modern scientific and capitalist worldview. In the seventeenth century, iconic thinkers such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes set out to conquer nature by means of philosophy, science, and technology, driven by the desire to reconcile and transmute mythical, alchemical, and Christian influences under the aegis of a naturalistic and rationalistic worldview (Leiss 1994).

Particularly the Cartesian dualism between the extended physical world and the nonphysical world of thought was seen as the definitive completion of the pre-Socratic turn from *mythos* to *logos*, when myth finally became synonymous with the subjective and the irrational (Scarborough 1994). From this point onward, myths could neither serve as cosmological narratives of the universe, nor as valid allegories of nature, for they were now fully associated with the inner realm of subjective experience and not with the outer realm of the objective physical world. In the same vein, myths had to be sharply distinguished from history as well, since history could from then on only refer to objective events.

This Cartesian schism was further exacerbated by the spread of Enlightenment thought during the eighteenth century, which celebrated the power of reason and embraced a triumphalist scientism. Even though the Enlightenment was not a unified cultural expression with a single doctrine, it nevertheless gave rise to new forms of secular modernism which gradually reduced the influence of mythical and religious thinking as a dominant cultural frame of reference. Simultaneously, the Enlightenment created its own utopian paradigm of the rational and autonomous individual who imposed upon nature as well as on herself or himself the orderly totality of a universal reason. Nevertheless, the persistence of various mythical or spiritual imaginaries in our contemporary societies certainly illustrates that such a lasting demystification of life turned out to be a rather short-lived illusion.

If we consider contemporary discussions about the Anthropocene, we can easily see that the sediments of powerful mythical narratives advancing the idea of human mastery and distinguishing mind from matter, subject from object,

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and nature from culture can still be found in today's political debates. A number of scientists recently suggested that the Anthropocene should be seen as an opportunity and, ultimately, as a 'good' epoch in which human ingenuity and technology will provide the means to solve the critical environmental problems of our time (see, for example, Ellis 2011).

These Promethean myths of ecomodernism, synthetic biology, and geoengineering are not only fallacies of control in the light of unprecedented changes which are currently occurring in the earth's ecosystems. They are also about to be woven into a new geopolitical master narrative that is on the verge of replacing the abstract totality of a single humanity with the abstract plurality of more-than-human entanglements. Put differently, it is important to realise that *more-than-human* or *posthuman* accounts of the Anthropocene provide the discursive background for the mytho-politics of the newly proclaimed human epoch. From the contested metaphor of *Gaia*, popularised by James Lovelock as a synonym for earth system science (and recently reworked by the French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour), to animistic and pantheistic currents in western environmental philosophy and non-western thought, there currently exists an intriguing interest in imagining other possible ways of relating to the world at large.<sup>[6]</sup>

Decolonial scholars nevertheless argue that such attempts at conceptualising the relations between humans and more-than-human nature(s) must pay attention to the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, while becoming more sensitive to the vital role that myth and mythology play in articulating alternatives to hegemonic western knowledge practices. The idea of border thinking, in particular, alerts us to the limiting modes of relationality and representation that are inherent to the anthropocentric worldview, a worldview which perceives more-than-human nature primarily as an *object* (socially produced, biophysically constituted, or both).

The gradual delinking from such a limiting perspective, and the simultaneous consideration of cosmologies which see nature as an active and 'ensouled' *subject* in its own right, so it seems, must therefore appear as one of the most radical projects imaginable vis-à-vis the epistemic hierarchy of western-centric technoscience. Quite possibly, many scholars would fervently revolt against such a proposed bridging of established science/myth, rational/primitive or fact/value divides — particularly if such an attempt is performed without a certain ironic or subjective gesture — for it conjures up vivid images of seemingly regressive elements that have been expelled from today's dominant scholarly discourses: essence, spirit, esotericism, non-modernism, non-rationalism, romanticism, totalitarianism, and so on.

And yet it is evident that the predicaments of the Anthropocene, whether they are taken to be economic, spiritual, or sociopolitical in nature, will require a cultural-cognitive and affective shift in how (many) humans relate to the world they inhabit. While imagining the possibilities for new biosocial becomings, it is crucial to realise that contemporary societies are still influenced by older mythological substrata that carry with them the sediments of the 'grand narratives' of human mastery. Such deep-seated sociocultural patterns must be taken very seriously in their capacity to shape the future outcomes of Anthropocene politics. After all, the ideology of human mastery might well survive without the much-critiqued nature/culture binary and become enshrouded in new Anthropocene myths. Advanced algorithmic or biopolitical control mechanisms and the capitalist-materialistic ethos of desire, production, and consumption are certainly well attuned to the Anthropocene rhetoric of biosocial complexity, indeterminacy, interconnectedness, and plurality (Pellizzoni 2015).

By contrast, decolonial scholarship reminds us of the liberating potential and integrative function of myth and myth-making. The concept of *mytho-politics*, which I have outlined here, thus draws attention to the complex openness and suggestiveness of myth in the sense of an ideological 'both/and.' This means that, even if the role of mytho-politics in transforming imaginaries of biosocial relations is fully recognised, it is difficult to predict how the Anthropocene debate might develop in the near future. Will the discussion become more open to different views of knowing and being? Will it include marginalised perspectives which reject the objectification of nature and point toward the need for a decolonial politics of 'delinking' and 're-learning'? Or will the debate remain entrenched in western-centric and anthropocentric ideas of planetary stewardship, managerial control, and (bio-)technological fixes? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the discussion about the Anthropocene has already moved beyond questions of mere geological evidence. It has become a lively debate about the principles of thought, speech, and action which provide the seemingly 'natural' foundations for the idea of unlimited human mastery over the earth.

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# Decolonising the Anthropocene: The Mytho-Politics of Human Mastery

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## Notes

[1] Humans are, according to Ingold and Palsson (2013: 39), ‘fluid beings, with flexible, porous boundaries; they are necessarily embedded in relations, neither purely biological nor purely social, which may be called “biosocial”; and their essence is best rendered as something constantly in the making and not as a fixed, context-independent species-being.’

[2] ‘Anthropocene’ from Greek: ἄνθρωπος = human being/man, καινός = new/current.

[3] For an overview, see Lövbrand et al. (2015).

[4] Such a definition does not imply a desire for conceptual closure. My intention is to illustrate how western-centric (in this case, structuralist) and decolonial expositions of the relation between myth and ideology differ from each other. There are also a number of conceptual approaches to both ideology and mythology that must remain unexplored at this point, including those by Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Karl Mannheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Enrique Dussel, and Theodor W. Adorno.

[5] Notably, the mandate of *dominium terrae* has also been misused to categorise particular groups of people as less-than-human and less-than-civilised (i.e., as *primitive* and ready to be dominated).

[6] For a decolonial critique of the Latourian concept of ‘Gaia,’ see Luisetti (2015). For a panpsychist interpretation of western environmental philosophy, see Vetlesen (2015).

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## About the author:

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