

Rethinking the Anthropocene as Carnivalocene

Written by David Chandler

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/11/rethinking-the-anthropocene-as-carnivalocene/>

DAVID CHANDLER, APR 11 2019

Writing in the mid-1960s, Russian literary theorist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin famously understood medieval carnival to reveal the truth of life's rebelliousness against the authoritarian rule of official culture. Carnival was important to Bakhtin as it expressed an immanent liveliness that exceeded the regulatory controls of church and state and disrupted the binary hierarchies of power, distinguishing the governing and the governed, high culture from the low, and those with power from those without. Carnival was a world of freedom from external constraint: a world of immanent becoming, rather than transcendental laws: 'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it... While carnival lasts there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its own laws, that is the laws of its own freedom.' (Bakhtin, 2009: 7)

In most treatments in the discipline of International Relations, the Anthropocene and the ethos of carnival could not be further apart. The Anthropocene, formally a concept derived from geological debate over the level of human impact upon the earth's geomorphology, is often treated merely in terms of the potential security implications of climate change and global warming. Nothing to probe here, just another set of problems which require the assembling of expertise, resolving some organisation issues, perhaps some lobbying and resource redistribution, and then we can be on our way. There seems to be something a little soulless about this rationalist problem-solving approach, whether it's cast in terms of addressing a planetary crisis, a global problem or even a plain old-fashioned international one (see Burke *et al*, 2016). It often seems that we are missing out on the disruptive commotions occurring across other disciplines and, even more so, on their expressive eruptions of joy and celebration. It is these more affective aspects of the contemporary condition that we often fail to grapple with and that I wish to foreground in this short piece.

Because we are so used to seeing problems as governmental opportunities – enabling the advocacy of new legislative, economic or military regimes, new modalities of international cooperation or empowering global activist networks – it can be difficult to take the Anthropocene seriously. When contemporary theorists talk about living after 'the end of the world' (Morton, 2013) we assume they are making dire predictions about the future or perhaps speaking metaphorically. Everything looks very much as it did before: states; governments; international summits; the whole works. Those able to remember the 1990s went through a similar experience, when people talked about globalisation and how the compression of time and space 'changes everything' (see, Rosenberg, 2000). Pretty much everything looked the same but at the same time it wasn't. Our easy distinctions and separations – modernist binaries – were called into question – not all of them, just the more obvious state-like ones, sovereignty/anarchy, war/peace, combatant/non-combatant, protectorate/democracy.

In the Anthropocene everything still pretty much looks the same, there are still states, global hierarchies, inequalities and exclusions, poverty, wars, conflicts, exploitations and oppressions; everything one would need to keep IR theory in business. But the changes that happened beneath the surface – the less-visible ones, that were first spotted lurking in discourses of globalisation – have quickened their pace. Hardly any binaries or distinctions are now left standing. First they came for the state-based binaries and now they have come for the rest: culture/nature, subject/object, human/non-human, living/non-living, figure/ground, thought/matter. These are the binaries held to be at the heart of modern or Enlightenment thought, said to have separated the human as subject from the world as object. As long as modernity seemed to be achieving its promises of progress, its epistemological and ontological assumptions went largely unchallenged. Today, the liberal world of the imagined 'social contract' and escape from

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'the state of nature' seems dangerously elitist and stupidly hubristic (Serres, 1995; Latour, 2018). If only the Anthropocene could be put back in the box of problems to be solved, like climate change and global warming. Unfortunately it cannot be. The Anthropocene, like globalisation before it, is not a problem we are facing: it is a condition we are in.

To understand that condition perhaps it would be better to think of the Anthropocene more in terms of the Carnivalocene. The Anthropocene is a time of high emotional intensity, an affective release of the energies and frustrations pent up during the slow implosion of modernity. In the Anthropocene, the world is turned upside down, as all traditional authorities and hierarchies are challenged: the Anthropocene as carnival. Just as with carnival, the Anthropocene is a deeply intense, material experience: a wild romp of the grotesque and the transgressive, emphasising our shared character of Earthly being. It is about the body not the mind. Life is at the centre of the Carnivalocene: not the regulated, ritualised life of separated entities, fixed essences and linear causal chains, but the free-flowing, unregulated and ungovernable life of flux, change and unpredictability. The Carnivalocene cannot be governed, transgression is the norm; life is lively and here to party and to disrupt.

In the Carnivalocene, life comes to the fore in ways, which, we are regularly told, displace figure and ground. The environment/nature/the geological forces of the Earth, become the central actors, no longer the background or stage for a merely human drama (Serres, 1995; Latour, 2018; Clark and Yusoff, 2017). Ghosts and monsters become our grotesque guides in the *Arts of Living on a Dying Planet* (Tsing *et al*, 2017). Ghosts and monsters both point us towards life's entanglements: enmeshed in disruptive processes of becoming, they are the return of our uncared for side effects and externalities. The Carnivalocene threatens each and every achievement of modernity with the return of the repressed and the excluded in the form of blowbacks and feedbacks impossible to predict or to control. In carnival, co-species contaminations, symbiogenetic interminglings and cross-species entanglements come to the forefront. Every attempt to regulate, control and order the world seems to make the problems worse as unintended consequences, unforeseen side-effects, unaccounted for externalities and extended networks of interaction and interdependence can make even small interventions catalyse tipping points towards catastrophic new phase transitions. New antibiotic medications breed new drug-resistant bacteria, new and higher sea walls lead to higher levels of flood devastation, new technologies and data processing capacities bring new levels of error and infringements of privacy, new ways of securing reveal new threats and create new insecurities.

In carnival, the lowly and forgotten are put on the same plane as the high and the mighty. We can read from Michael Marder how 'plants quietly subvert classical philosophical hierarchies and afford us a glimpse into a lived (and growing) destruction of Western metaphysics' (2013: 53). Anna Tsing tells us how fungal spores fill our stratosphere, challenge species boundaries and turn our ideas of sexual reproduction upside down (2015). María Puig de la Bellacasa investigates the lively power of soil webs of 'multilateral relational arrangement in which food, energy, and waste circulate in nonreciprocal exchanges' of care circulating through more than human relations (2017: 192). Natasha Myers explains how molecular life is lively in a perspective that is neither vitalist nor mechanical and how cells and molecules are 'active participants in the *agencements* that shape their growth, development, and reproduction' (2015: 235). Stefanie Fishel writes biopolitics in reverse in the understanding that microbial life can help us rethink the political 'by affirming life as vital and relational rather than as a purely mechanical reaction against that which is Other' (2017: 108). The list goes on.

Understanding the Anthropocene in terms of the Carnivalocene might enable IR to think the contemporary condition in more affective and experimental ways. However, it is important to bear in mind that while the Carnivalocene may, like Bakhtin's carnival, turn the world 'inside out' (2009: 11), the old order, which was merely suspended, does not look set to return, and certainly not in a rejuvenated manner. If carnival does become a condition of stasis rather than one of release, rupture and return (as in the classical adaptive cycle of resilience theory, Wakefield, 2018) then the Carnivalocene may yet turn out to be a dark time for those looking for resources for disciplinary renewal. The carnival of the Carnivalocene is far from the family-friendly, corporate-sponsored, community-policed fun day out type of carnival, where everyone goes happily back to work the day after.

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