

# 'The climate to come depends on the present time'

Bruno Latour

Le Monde 14th November 2014

Last week, in Berlin, an event took place that was as modest as it was decisive: for the first time, the Working Group of the Sub-Commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy met under the chairmanship of an English geologist, Dr Jan Zalasiewicz. Hardly headline news, is it? That's where you're wrong. To begin with, these geologists were meeting in connection with, and at the invitation of, a cultural institution (the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, located a stone's throw from the Reichstag).<sup>1</sup> Already that's something of an oddity. But, more than that, they were meeting for our benefit, by which I mean they were meeting to decide the geological epoch we ought to consider ourselves to be inhabiting from now on. Now that's certainly surprising.

It turns out that, behind the climate negotiation, another negotiation, even more critical, has been concealed from view. The question it sets out to answer is whether we still live in the Holocene, just as we were all taught at school (broadly, this is the more or less stable period of these last 13,000 years which separate us from the previous Ice Age), or whether we have entered into a different epoch of the Earth, one that is considerably more agitated.

Well, I hear you say, why should we care what geologists decide to name periods of the Earth's history? Ultimately, what interests us are the names of periods in *human* history – the Postmodern, the Hypermodern, the Later Capitalist, the Neoliberal, and so on. It's not up to the natural sciences to define our *Zeitgeist*.

The problem is that the periods of the Earth's history and those of human history seem to have converged of late. Hence the name that the experts have been proposing over the last six or seven years: the Anthropocene. The most important geological phenomenon to have taken place since the last Ice Age, as they see it, has nothing to do with volcanoes,

---

<sup>1</sup> As part of the Anthropocene Project, 'Human Impacts and their Consequences', 17 October 2014.

meteors, solar activity or tectonic plates, but rather with this strange biped that is called (from the Greek) *anthropos*.

Stratigraphers are earnest sorts: this is not a matter of sentiment, but of sediment. If in, let's say, one million years' time future geologists were able to exhibit the deposits of rock that had been laid down in our own epoch, they would reveal a transition every bit as abrupt as any their predecessors had charted these last two centuries in reconstructing the billions of years of our planet's history. The rupture inscribed in the rock by our activity would be as easy for them to decipher as the famous 'K-T' transition marking the boundary between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary, the one that indicates the impact of a meteor and the disappearance of the dinosaurs.

Moreover, just as this honourable society of geologists marks each of these transitions by means of a 'golden spike', often accompanied by a little monument or a plaque, we'll have to begin to ask ourselves where to mark the boundary separating the Holocene from the Anthropocene. In 1790? Or perhaps in 1945? This is one of the issues up for debate. Another one, no doubt, being the form of the monument or the wording on the plaque that ought to be erected to mark the transition (which is, by the way, the subject of an exhibition at the *musée des Abattoirs* in Toulouse, simply called 'Anthropocene Monument').<sup>2</sup>

If our geological friends manage to reach an agreement, we will find ourselves in a new epoch, no less! No longer will we be humans, peacefully installed in the Holocene, profiting from an environment that is as indifferent to our adventures as we are to its own. We shall be hybrids, the former humans, having become a geological force capable of having so modified the planet that it hurries to react to our history, obliging us in turn to react just as quickly to hers. Just as in *The Life of Pi*, we'll find there's a tiger in the boat with us!

As a result, we, too, would have to change our name: although the word 'human' derives from the same *humus* that constitutes the earth itself, it would be better to call us, let's say, the *Earthbound* – with a strong whiff of compost added in.

---

<sup>2</sup> Running from 03 October, 2014 to 04 January, 2015; cf. [www.lesabattoirs.org/en/expositions/anthropocene-monument](http://www.lesabattoirs.org/en/expositions/anthropocene-monument).

Now you can appreciate the importance of the *Sub-Commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy*: either we are Humans living at the time of the Holocene, or we are the Earthbound struggling with the tragedies of the Anthropocene. Never before has an issue pertaining to our very civilisation depended on so minor a Sub-Commission...

Evidently, if they're prepared to put themselves to such trouble, it's because they sense that they are not the only ones who feel that way. What the sediment deposits of the ground attest, our own souls are also registering. The awful redundancy of contemporary politics has no other explanation. All of us feel, by means of our own detectors, tracers and seismographs, that we are inhabiting a different earth; that the old model of public life has come to an end; just as has the possibility of the limitless modernization of an inexhaustible Earth.

What shall we call the projection of an ideal into an abstraction decoupled from the earth? A utopia. So here's what's happening: we are leaving utopia and returning to Earth. But upon our return, we notice that this Earth doesn't look the same. Like the astronauts in a science-fiction story who return to their planet after a long separation spent daydreaming in the stars, we are discovering an Earth which, in the meantime, has changed its form and its movement.<sup>3</sup> The surprise is as great as was the discovery of the New World at the time of Columbus. Except this time we haven't discovered a new continent, but the same continents as before, albeit warped by the action of humans in the midst of things.

Our surprise only grows when we see that everything is going on just as if nothing had changed – our ways of thinking, the response of the elites, the naïve faith of the general public. It's as if the benchmarks of yesteryear for what is 'reactionary' and what is 'progressive' still held good, for a time when we sought to live *off shore*. We have to return to the Earth, but there is no landing-strip on which to do so. Everything has changed, including the composition of the ground itself, from the bedrock to the atmosphere just above it – what geochemists rightly call 'critical zones'.

Hence the huge disquiet accompanying the work of these researchers. There is indeed a 'coming insurrection'. But not only of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hache, Emilie, ed., (2014), *De l'univers clos au monde infini: textes réunis et présents* (Paris: Editions Dehors).

human multitudes – it will also be an insurrection, every bit as heterogeneous, every bit as violent, every bit as radical, of the residents of a forgotten earth, earthworms included! In becoming geological, human history will not become more peaceful; on the contrary, there is no evidence that Humans and the Earthbound will be able to co-exist in peace. Hence the reason why our negotiations concerning the climate to come [*le temps qu'il fera*] depend on this other negotiation concerning the present time [*le temps où nous sommes*].

*Translated by Tim Howles, University of Oxford, UK*