

Day 2 closing lecture: Anthropocene's archive?

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My lecture will draw from Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's concept of the Anthropocene – proposed in 2000 as a designation for the present geological moment. In just less than 15 years, the term itself has spawned a veritable growth industry in the hard sciences, the social sciences, humanities, and increasingly, the fine arts. Although the term has yet to be “officially” adopted, it has installed itself as a theoretical touchstone in a broad swath of academic domains.

From literary theory to cultural anthropology, biology to evolutionary psychology, the Anthropocene, as concept – as condition, or sentence – is seeping into the cultural imaginary with strange legitimacy. And it is – or should be – I will argue, of considerable theoretical, practical, and rhetorical interest within the broad set of concerns that brought participants to Verdun for the Constructing Memory conference. Specifically, within the geological, social, and human sciences the question of the Anthropocene circles in part around issues of what the relevant human signature is that marks the intersection of humans as agents within biospherical systems – that is, where and when does the Anthropocene's archive begin. There are various competing ideas about all of this, from early human settlements and the acquisition of fire, to the Industrial Revolution, to the great acceleration of the mid-20th century.

To this we might add other potential signatures including techno stratigraphic features (terrestrial and orbiting), nuclear testing, accidents, and of course the lingering problem of historical, present, and future nuclear wastes. Figuring “neither purely ‘natural’ nor purely ‘human’ history” (Chakrabarty, 2012: 10), but rather the collapse of the two, the Anthropocene asks of us – demands, perhaps – to seriously and comprehensively come to consider timescales outside of an anthropocentric register. I want to suggest that the Anthropocene, as a kind of evolving cultural and scientific meme, offers us a “moment” in which cultural awareness around questions of the nuclear and its peculiar temporalities may be broadened and enhanced.

Reference

Chakrabarty, D. (2012), “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change”, *New Literary History*, 43:1, pp. 1-18.