

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anthropocene disorder and the transcultural search for common-ness

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In this article I seek a new way to understand the Anthropocene and its ecological crisis. I argue that we must first deconstruct the mainstream Herderian concept of culture, as it seems inadequate to capture how we deal with our life circumstances and choices, especially on the level of global events like the Anthropocene. I also suggest that the concept of transculturality may serve the purpose of understanding this situation better and may even offer a prospect of a process that might induce the common-ness that we are lacking as a species. After discussing the Anthropocene concept, I examine the idea of the search for a common-ness of humanity as a remedy for Anthropocene disorder. Finally, I present an overview of new universalist approaches to the Anthropocene and propose that the concept of transculturality as advanced by Wolfgang Welsch may provide a better basis for understanding the Anthropocene as a human predicament.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Anthropocene disorder, Common-ness, Culture, Transcultural commonalities, Transculturality

Introduction

*It's the terror of knowing
what this world is about
Watching some good friends
scream "let me out"*

"Under Pressure," Queen/Bowie (1981)

As I was cycling down the road in busy downtown Taichung, Taiwan, I was overtaken by a noisy city bus, spewing its diesel exhaust into my face. This in itself is not an uncommon event in such a postmodern ghost of a city, and so it would have remained yet another incident of urgently feeling the need for electric buses, were it not for the fact that the advertisement on the side of the bus caught my eye. I rarely pay attention to the things that are being thrown at the general public from any vehicle, but in my mind this ad immediately fell into its rightful place: the introduction of this article about the Anthropocene and the critique of culture that gave rise to it. The advertisement was for a Taiwanese life insurance company called "Taiwan Insurance Guarantee Fund." The name is relevant here, because of its "guarantee" part. Apart from some slogans in Chinese characters which I could not read, but assume the meaning of, the ad showed a cartoon representation of a 4-member penguin family. There were papa and mama penguin, standing behind their son and daughter penguins—a composition very much in line with

the current Taiwanese ideal family picture. This kind of cartoon style pictography is very popular in Taiwan and relates to the general feeling of "cuteness" that strongly prevails in Taiwanese cultural tastes. It struck me as totally paradoxical to feature a romantic "cute" ideal picture of a happy penguin family in an advertisement that sells life insurance as a guarantee, while at the same time these "cute" penguins are sliding into the seas around Antarctica from melting ice slabs and dying from over-exhaustion in trying to locate disappearing fish stocks many hundreds of kilometers from their original hunting grounds. Several layers of irony are at work here. The representation of an image of happy penguins while they are currently being driven into extinction by climate change; the association of this image with *life* insurance, and more awkwardly even with the concept of "guarantee"; and all this on a carrier that puts diesel exhaust and carbon emissions right in your face.

So what is the advertisement really saying? Buy our policy and we will guarantee you will be as happy as the starving penguins, or in other words is this just another invitation to go "straight back into the wall," as Isabelle Stengers puts it (Stengers, 2015)? We all love (the cuteness of) penguins and in our minds, we have long established imagery of happy penguins shuffling around on ice sheets. But the real situation is much direr for the penguins, as global warming has drastically changed their living conditions. Is such an advertisement, then, a clear illustration of the immense gap that yawns between the perils of the Anthropocene and the general awareness of the public? Or is it merely a sign that our worn-out concept of culture as the catch-all term for our set of values and ways we

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think the world works, for how we thus live our lives, simply can no longer offer explanations for seemingly ungraspable phenomena like the Anthropocene and the fallout aspects that this term has become synonymous with? In this article I argue that the answer to the last question is affirmative; the concept of culture, as it is currently generally understood at least by the largest part of the world community, and further discussed below, seems inadequate to capture how we deal with our life circumstances and choices, especially on the level of global events like the ecological crisis that goes with the Anthropocene. Merely from the current climate change debate on the issue of phasing out of fossil fuels that is highlighted at COP28, it can be easily observed that we lack a sense of common-ness among ourselves that could give all of humankind a shared direction which might be a preliminary condition to remedying this situation. I also suggest that the concept of transculturality can serve the purpose of understanding this situation better and may even offer the prospect of a process that might induce such common-ness.

As a caveat beforehand, I should qualify the use of the term “we” as I discuss the issues of culture and the sense of common-ness in this article. Unlike in the presently inaccessible dimension of *Star Trek*, “we” as the collected humankind do not live in a Unified Earth-like world community. When discussing the Anthropocene, it needs to be acknowledged that as a term where it refers to “mankind,” it is somewhat of a misnomer as it inappropriately hides the fact that there are great divides among nations and peoples within nations, in the power, wealth, and even carbon, which are considered to be at the basis of the capacity to structurally influence Earth’s ecosphere. It is commonly agreed that divisions exist between for example the Global North and the Global South or between so-called developed countries and developing countries, which render it virtually impossible to consider humankind as an Anthropogenic collective that is equally responsible for creating the climate crisis and as such should be held equally responsible to solve it. As per date of writing, most recent Oxfam report of November 20, 2023, indicates that the richest 10% of people on Earth are responsible for 50% of all carbon emissions, while the richest 1% emits as much carbon as the poorest 66% (Khalfan et al., 2023). Pacific Island nations that are facing inundation because of the general rise in temperatures predominantly caused by the rich’ carbon emissions, or Indigenous peoples whose lands have been confiscated for the purposes of industrial agriculture or mining operations, are certainly part of the Anthropocene, but then basically only on the receiving end of it, which state of affairs is of course neither just nor equitable. And when referring to the role of culture in this debate, different peoples around the world will have varied perceptions of cultural meaning relating to the Anthropocene and what it stands for. Yet, having recognized such disparity when considering the “we” that stands for humankind in the context of the Anthropocene (which in itself deserves further debate in more detail elsewhere), it needs also to be clarified that when I critique the predominant concept of modern

culture in this article, I target mainly the separatist nature thereof that is one of its core elements. I explain this further in the section on transculturality. It is important to note that irrespective of how various peoples culturally define themselves as members of tribe, community, and/or nation, as soon as one group of people considers themselves culturally different or excluded from another group of people, the element of separatism is present. And it is this sense of being part of separate cultural spheres however much they may partially overlap in place or time that I argue, constitutes a principal cause of the observed lack of sense of common-ness. Thus the “we” used in this article has a normative, or at best, an aspirational, quality.

In the first part of this article then, I examine what is indicated when speaking of the Anthropocene and offer a brief overview of (the confusion featured in) ecocritical discussion on the Anthropocene. The most interesting part of this discussion for me is where ecocritical writers try to come to grips with the question how we can end up (and stay) in a situation where we seem to prefer to continue our self-destructive consumerist habits over saving the planet and humankind. This is a condition Timothy Clark has designated as “Anthropocene disorder” (Clark, 2015) and that is prone to be exacerbated into what Clark has called “Anthropocene horror” (Clark, 2020). The term “disorder” seems apt, in that we as humankind are knowingly engineering a future that seems destructive to our species or at least, our civilization and the livable nature of the planet, while we do not seem to want to change anything in our ways. This is not a condition of collective sanity and therefore it can be called a state of sickness. In search of insights into this sickness, I look at several theories and suggestions put forward to better understand the Anthropocene and its disorder (or horror), its impact on human behaviour, and its consequences for human survival.

In the second part, I inquire into the possibility of a common-ness of being part of humanity that may address the Anthropocene disorder and its follow-up stage of horror. I start with a brief review of some theory about culture, beginning with the monist ideas of Johann Herder in relation to culture. His idea of monist culture as an identifier for the concept of nation-state was the foundation for the homogeneous and separatist prejudice toward cultural movement that has come to dominate global thinking about culture over the last 200 years and still prevails even now. Next, I seek to understand how it seems that culture in the above sense does not play much of a role in the extent to which people are overwhelmingly under the influence of the Anthropocene and its originating factors, as Hannes Bergthaller has argued. This is followed by an overview of some thinking on a new universalist approach to the Anthropocene, as expounded for example by Dipesh Chakrabarty. I then introduce the new concept of transculturality as proposed by Wolfgang Welsch and examine whether this concept can provide a better basis for understanding what the Anthropocene is about or how it got to the point where it is now. Here, I discuss the arguments of Erich Fromm who has

suggested that societies can be insane in their drive for progress. In conclusion, I argue that the concept of trans-culturality can help us grapple with the question how people should reorganize their lives in the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene

Anthropocene disorder

The Anthropocene first emerged as the brainchild of Paul Crutzen, a Dutch atmospheric chemist, and Eugene Stoermer, in the year of the new millennium (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). They proposed that since the invention of the steam engine, humankind's power to structurally influence the Earth system has increased so much that this geological era deserved its own nomenclature. With this gesture, Crutzen and Stoermer wished "to emphasize the central role of mankind," underscoring the human power over nature had reached a critical mass, a tipping point of no-return to innocence. And with that term, an umbrella was offered to all the phenomena that went with the exercise by humankind of this supreme power. The list is well-known: nuclear fallout, excess release of greenhouse gases, rising global temperatures, extreme weather patterns, acid rain, acidification of the oceans, holes in the ozone layer, mass extinction of species, glacial melting, sea level risings, and so on. When I speak of the Anthropocene, I am also referring to these phenomena.

Once the genie was out of the bottle, naturally the question arose how humankind could have gotten itself into so much trouble, pushing the Earth's geo-boundaries beyond their limits. In his book *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh sees the Anthropocene as a crisis of narrative (Ghosh, 2016). Ghosh comes to this conclusion as he tries to understand why the modern novel, as the most highly valorized form of literature, simply remains silent about the Anthropocene and its climate phenomena. He notes that any literature that tries to deal with natural disasters is banished to genre fiction, to the "outhouses" of modern literature, as he calls it (Ghosh, 2016, p. 24). Ghosh blames the rise of the modern realist novel for this fate. The modern novel is centered on the probable by depicting its lifeworlds through everyday details. By banishing the improbable, the modern novel appealed to the tastes of the new capitalist bourgeois middle class, who built their way of life on the need for daily security and 9 AM to 5 PM rhythms. Extreme weather events triggered by global warming have simply not been considered part of the probability expectations, so nobody would want to read about them, even if they actually occurred. Ghosh notes that this is a strange phenomenon, because extreme weather events and natural disasters have been part of the circumstances bearing on people's lives across history. It seems that people just collectively preferred to forget about this and banished these from life expectations and consequently, from written narrative. Ghosh deduces from this that if the Anthropocene seems resistant to understanding through the written word (meaning the novel), maybe we should turn to visual language to break this resistance. Ghosh calls this "thinking in images" and he refers to film and the Internet as media that seem to have been doing a much better job at raising awareness of the

Anthropocene (Ghosh, 2016, p. 83). Although it rings true that in this 21st century, many people seem to be more visually oriented in their ways of understanding the world, Ghosh does not make clear *how* this "thinking in images" could help solve the problems associated with the Anthropocene. Of course, raising awareness is good, but the step to action based on greater knowledge is then still not made, as Timothy Clark also points out (Clark, 2015).

Where Ghosh refers to the capitalist habituation to probability as a root cause for the public inertia in the face of Anthropocene crises, he is of course not alone. There is a host of writers who engage in bashing modern capitalism, which in itself may be justified. Anne Tsing paints a picture of "industrial ruin" following the advent of modern capitalism (Tsing, 2015, p. 18). Isabelle Stengers refers to it as "a war of all against all" and calls on her readers to "resist the coming barbarism" (Stengers, 2015). Yet as Bruno Latour correctly argues (Latour, 2011, p. 22):

Set in contrast to the modernist narrative, this idea of political ecology [ed.: being against industry] could not possibly succeed. There is beauty and strength in the modernist story of emancipation. Its picture of the future is so attractive, especially when put against such a repellent past, that it makes one wish to run forward to break all the shackles of ancient existence.

It is such an appealing picture: through our technology we will right our past wrongs, enjoy never-ending progress, and be prosperous and happy. This modernist ideal has also given birth to a new thinking that promotes even deeper and further-reaching control by humankind of the geological systems, so to shape Earth perfectly, finally, and once and for all. Erle Ellis offers a very good example of such thinking when he writes about human resilience on an "artificial earth" (Ellis, 2012). Ellis even goes so far to say that "the older ways," that is, the ways in which our ancestors made their livelihood in conjunction with a bio-diverse environment, will become "hobbies for the elite" (Ellis, 2012, p. 4). Wild forests, fish, and game will disappear, but Ellis does not think much of it, because humankind will adapt and thrive. This notion of all-powerful technological control and modernist progress is so attractive that it blinds people to the "ruins" it leaves behind. Even Latour got caught up in this. In the aforementioned essay "Love your Monsters," Latour proposes not "to stop innovating, inventing, creating, and intervening," in other words, to exercise full control. We should just have more patience with our technological Frankensteins. But in his Holberg Prize lecture of 2014, Latour uses Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to illustrate the inherent powerlessness of people who think they are in control by analyzing how General Kutuzov is essentially being controlled by outside factors when he thinks he is taking decisive action. Latour even cries out: "Given that those who believe they will be in command [...] will never control things better than Kutuzov, if we give them the Earth, what mess they'll make of it!" (Latour, 2014, p. 9). It is of course true that the promise of salvation through technology is extremely

attractive, especially where it contains an implicit release from the unpleasant prospect of having to (partially) forego on our technology-based comforts. And yet, we should remain aware that this promise is so attractive that it blinds us to the fact that science constantly presents us with half-products that are then applied on a global scale, as E.F. Schumacher (1911–1977) pointed out already in 1973 in his book *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1973). This way of shaping progress through half-way applications has led to all too familiar disastrous consequences. For examples of this, we do not need to think far: nuclear meltdowns, poisonous agricultural pesticides, and leaded gasoline are just a few obvious ones. In a way, this reminds me of Zeno's paradox on the dichotomy of motion as presented by Plato, in which a destination can never really be reached, because an infinite number of half-way distances need to be first covered. We are constantly trying to cover the half-distances in technological progress and will thus never get to the promised point of solving the world's problems.

This schizophrenic paradigm only results in people receiving “openly contradictory messages” as Stengers calls it; people are called upon to continue to consume as this is good for progress, but on the other hand, to change their lifestyles and to create less of a “carbon footprint” (Stengers, 2015, p. 32). She very correctly calls this “being suspended between two histories” (Stengers, 2015, p. 17). No wonder we suffer from this Anthropocene disorder; we want to see the promise of endless progress fulfilled, but we can also tell things are not going as planned and we do not know what to do about it. We are constantly thrown back and forth between two political or socioeconomic realities that are contradictory or at least, exclusive of each other. We are in positions that are separatist in nature, as they are based on difference and preferences. Wolfgang Welsch sees these individual positions as political stances based on a variety of forms of rationality, which he then juxtaposes with his idea of reason, which I will explain further below (Welsch, 2000). Even though capitalism and its modernist premise of progress seem to be of crucial importance, the above also shows that defining the Anthropocenic trouble in terms of capitalism and its consequences alone cannot offer a full explanation of the question. As Hannes Bergthaller correctly points out, communist countries like the Soviet Union and China have done a great job of environmental destruction without or at least, prior to, adopting the capitalist system (Bergthaller, 2014).

The Anthropocene is just too complex

Other theorists have argued that the Anthropocene is a phenomenon that is simply too complex to be understood and therefore cannot be grasped in its make-up or consequences. Timothy Morton for example argues that the Anthropocene is of such omni-presence and complexity, that it signals the end of our world-understanding concepts, including those of “World” and “Nature” (Morton, 2014). Morton uses this hypothesis as starting point for a new ontology: the ontology of Hyperobjects. Hyperobjects in his terminology are things that “we live in,” that

are real and not real at the same time, that are so complex that they cannot be grasped, and that are “futural” in the sense that they extend beyond a time frame that we can comprehend. Examples of these Hyperobjects that Morton offers are Earth, global warming, and evolution. He depicts a reality in which we cannot fully understand our lifeworld anymore, but yet are constantly confronted by it. Among the many ideas he offers up in this respect, he refers to Buddhism to extract a new morality that may help humankind to survive; he also calls upon Art to help us foster understanding and coping strategies. Another author who points toward the structural inability to understand the Anthropocene is Timothy Clark. He refers to a theory of 3 levels of complexity offered by Allenby and Sarewitz (Clark, 2015, p. 6). In their system, level I complex things are real objects, like airplanes. Level II complex are the socio-technological network that these objects function in, in this case, international air travel. And level III complex things are those that go beyond the traditional concepts of scale and intricacy, like the effects of air travel on the atmosphere. Clark compares the latter ones to Morton's Hyperobjects and argues that complex things of this kind can simply not be modeled or predicted. The Anthropocene is such a level III complex entity.

Unlike Morton or Ghosh, however, who look toward culture and its representations in the form of written or visual narrative, music, and art, to help our understanding, Clark sees the Anthropocene merely as a “threshold concept.” He argues that ecocriticism has not brought much to bear on understanding the Anthropocene so far, but he himself does not try to offer the hope of a better way to understand or even solve the problems of the Anthropocene, either. If there is one thing that seems clear about the Anthropocene, it is that it has a greatly paradoxical nature and as such, the Anthropocene defies logic, however much attempts have been made to get to grips with this phenomenon by using terms as “polycrisis” or concepts like “evolutionary traps” (Søgaard Jørgensen et al., 2023). Here we are as an all-powerful geological force, but we cannot seem to stop or change what the dominant majority of humankind has started. We know more or less what has been done to start this process of geoclimatological change, but we do not know the extent or timeframe of its consequences. And most spookily (in the words of Morton) of all, maybe, we *know* we are running toward self-destruction, but we on a collective basis do not seem to *want* to do something substantial about it. As Morton says, putting his finger on the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon: we live in it, but we cannot grasp or see it.

The apparent fact that we cannot see what we live in, but then in the sense that we have no direct perception of the earth as finite planet, is also the factor that Timothy Clark proposes to be at the root of the common Derridian feeling of entrapment “within the repetition of conceptual, ethical, social, and political assumptions and structures which seem both unavoidable but also known to be environmentally destructive and intellectually anachronistic” (Clark, 2020, p. 68). And it is this feeling of entrapment that is at the core of what he then coins as the

“Anthropocene horror,” a second stage of the Anthropocene disorder, or something like Anthropocene disorder squared, which is a stage where the disorder has entered a state of a pervasive daily affect that expresses itself in a general feeling of powerlessness (Clark, 2020, p. 61). Clark argues that this affect can occur in people in a variety of ways, going from denial all the way to panic, with panic being the most obvious response of those who are sensitive to “green issues” (Clark, 2020, p. 69). For the people sensing the panic, the horror is mostly felt as “one of mocking disjunctions, of the lack of felt connections between, for instance, individual actions and collective effects,” meaning the Anthropocene horror cannot be captured in one simple narrative (Clark, 2020, p. 71). It is also a state that leads to the experience of a crisis of legitimacy of “established values, expectations, and aspirations” as well as of government, which in turn feeds the general feeling of dissatisfaction with so-called “green policies” that seem effect-less (Clark, 2020, p. 76).

As a result of all this, Clark argues that people affected by Anthropocene horror feel powerless to make a difference individually (Clark, 2020, p. 77). Clark diagnosed the Anthropocene disorder in 2015 as a sense of disjunction between problems and the measures that are proposed to address these, leaving people suspended between on the one hand, an individual feeling of rage or despair about this, and on the other hand, some sort of majority perception that such individual response is disproportionate (Clark, 2015, p. 140). He argued in 2020 that this disorder has progressed into the feeling of powerlessness as the marker of the stage of horror. It is commonly known that experienced powerlessness (or helplessness) leads people to inertia and perceived inability to change.

As the above overview of ideas brought forward in ecocriticism on the Anthropocene shows there is something ungraspable about the Anthropocene and its disorder. Yet Clark brings to the foreground an essential question in this respect: to which extent can *culture* or its representations, like art, account for any insight in the Anthropocene? Is there anything that culture can mean for finding solutions or insights here? It is indeed my argument that our dominant concept of culture and especially its separatist nature forms a root cause for our apparent difficulty in understanding the Anthropocene and for the Anthropocene disorder as such. And I argue that by looking differently at how we form our ways of life, we may actually have a better view on the same. I will first take a quick look at the history of (Western originated) thinking about culture.

Culture

The trouble with Hobbes and Herder

To start our journey back in time searching for the important beginnings of our current dominant ideas about culture as the conglomerate of ways of organizing human societies and lives, we need to travel to Europe in the 17th century. Halfway through that century, a new idea of popular sovereignty was born with the publication by Thomas Hobbes of *Leviathan*, a crucial work on political philosophy and the theory of the social contract

(Hobbes, 1651). Hobbes spoke against the state of barbarism, or the war of all humans against each other. The only way to prevent this state was for a populace to subject their autonomy to the rule of a sovereign on the basis of free will, which then constituted the social contract. With this proposition, the concept of the nation state was born. The idea of a social contract allowing a sovereign to exercise absolute power as a representative of “the people” was, however, not really something naturally present in the minds of people at that time. In the end, the concept of separation of peoples along the lines of modern nation states came only to be established through long term directed efforts through education and institutionalization by governments that had obvious interest in making sure that the people they governed had a clear sense of belonging to the nation.

A related construct used for the control of people after the general decline of Catholic religious indoctrination was the concept of “national culture.” A key figure in the development of this concept is Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). He championed the organizational form of the nation state based on the culture of a people, arguing in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* that nations “differ in everything, in poetry, in appearance, in tastes, in usages, customs and languages” (Herder, 1784–1791). The concept that nations are defined by the culture of their people has become predominant in thinking about national culture and how people interact with each other as groups and among individuals. Even though it must be recognized that this concept may bear no or less relevance to some (indigenous) peoples in this world, it did help give rise to a division of the world into more than 190 nations, each with their own feelings of nationalism.

It is here, with this divide among nations and between groups of people that the concept of national culture links up with the Anthropocene disorder. To establish this link, I want to highlight some of the critiques of national culture, or simply “culture,” that were formulated by Wolfgang Welsch as a basis for his concept of transculturality (Welsch, 2001). Welsch recognizes 3 main characteristics of national culture: firstly, it is unifying for the people of a nation, as it is supposed to shape the ways of life of the whole population; secondly, it is ethnically oriented; and thirdly, and most importantly, it is separatist as it intends to create a distinct unity that is clearly separated from other peoples or nations. These 3 elements together were the basis for the creation of a new ideology that justified the separation of people into nations not only language or geographical elements that were used in the past to mark tribal borders. This ideology in turn became the basis for the model of the world that we have inhabited ever since; a model of segregation of peoples into nations—a segregation that has fostered inequality and lack of brotherhood among nations, and that also has become a big hurdle for international agreements on how to handle the Anthropocene, an example of which is the breakdown of the Paris Agreement. Yet, before all that, there also were separate territories ruled by kings and chieftains, so what is so different about this notion of the nation state?

Anonymous authority

The novelty came about as a result of the rise of the nation state and its social and economic models, in the form of the anonymity of authority. In his landmark study *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm (1900–1980) wondered about the origin of Anthropocene disorder, even though he described it in different terms (Fromm, 1955). He came to the conclusion that societies, just like individuals, can actually be insane, in the sense that they do not provide people with the essential elements to be happy and healthy. In the workings of capitalism, feudal models of direct recognizable authoritative relationships were replaced by models of alienation between individuals and the collective powerbase, like economy and bureaucracy. Organization no longer serves humans; humans serve systems. In the capitalist economic system, for example, free humans give up their time and effort to work for others. This seems an act of free will under the concept of contract, but in reality the system offers no choice. The social character in feudal societies, such as dominated Europe before the industrial revolution, was very different from the social character of a society based on the workings of capitalism, where mass production and consumption are the driving forces.

Fromm argued that a capitalist society “needs men who feel free and independent, not subject to any authority, or principle, or conscience—yet willing to be commanded, to do what is expected, to fit into the social machine without friction” (Fromm, 1955, p. 110). Such people participate in the flow of production, which requires their labor, and in consumption, which requires their spending of the money that they have worked so hard for. They think they are free, but this is only true to the extent that one considers working and spending as exercising freedoms. The system is in control; authority has become anonymous. Everything is done to promote the growth of GDP, but nobody seems to be responsible for the functioning of the system as a whole or for its long-term outcomes; nobody is responsible anymore for the fact the system has not delivered the goods. As there is no clear and specific authority that can be held responsible for things that go wrong (like climate change phenomena related to the Anthropocene), people feel powerless and believe that they as individuals cannot make a change. People have not received true well-being from this new order and they have nowhere to turn, nothing to blame. Since Fromm’s analysis, the situation has only gotten worse: today, the world’s 8 richest men own the same wealth as the poorer half of the world’s population (Hardoon, 2017), while as of 2020, the world’s 2,000 plus billionaires had more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60% of the planet’s population (Coffey et al., 2020). The number of billionaires has only gone up during the COVID pandemic to a total of 3,194 for 2022, according to data-company Statista (Statista, 2023). While according to the Oxfam media briefing *Profiting From Pain*: “for every new billionaire created during the pandemic—one every 30 hours—nearly a million people could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2022 at nearly the same rate” (Oxfam, 2022). This state of experienced powerlessness then is the one that Clark has

defined as Anthropocene horror. Thus we find ourselves caught in the Anthropocene.

In search of common-ness; transculturality Culture and reason

Considering the homogeneous, ethnically defined and separatory nature of Herderian culture, maybe it is not very surprising that Clark is critical about the power of culture in the face of the Anthropocene. Bergthaller has argued that taking refuge in Eastern philosophy or culture in order to find solutions to the Anthropocene disorder, as Morton tries to do, does not seem to make much sense insofar as Asian peoples have had no less of a detrimental impact on their environment (Bergthaller, 2014). So if culture as it is perceived currently does not seem to offer much insight into the paradox of the Anthropocene or the nature of the Anthropocene disorder, let alone its second stage, the horror, maybe this is because by its constitutive elements, the concept cannot serve to do this work. Or maybe the concept of culture as introduced by Herder and adopted into the modern worldview does not correctly describe (any longer) what people are doing to form their ways of life. Culture is not a definitive concept anymore. And to the extent that culture promotes separation between peoples from “different” cultures, it also works against any possible shared sense of common-ness that might help to address the issues of the Anthropocene. I define the term common-ness here in the sense of what can make us humankind and act as a species in awareness of our shared need to face the problems associated with the Anthropocene in order to sustain our survival on this planet and its livability for all species.

It is here, on this sore spot of culture, and this search for common-ness, that Dipesh Chakrabarty puts his finger. In the essay *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, he effectively argues that all roads in the Anthropocene lead back to the same old Rome, Enlightenment reason: “[...] it is also clear that for humans any thought of the way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life” (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 210). He draws attention to the increased role that the idea of humanity as a species has begun to play in scientific discourse on the Anthropocene. We have here an impulse from Marxist theory about the global unity of humans through “collective self-recognition as a species,” which is put back into the spotlight by Edward Wilson, whom Chakrabarty quotes as saying that “We will be wise to look on ourselves as a species” (quoted in Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 15). The thinking of ourselves as a “species” comes into view when the Anthropocene is considered as the result of all our actions on the level of our global presence, while we as individuals experience the consequences of our added total of actions without being able to specifically pinpoint the tipping point where collective action turns into an individually experienced crisis. In this way we cannot experience the Anthropocene as a whole on an individual basis and we can only grasp the total picture of the Anthropocene by elevating our thinking to the level of ourselves as a species (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 221).

From this analysis it follows that the main symptom of Anthropocene disorder finds its root in the way that we have organized our cultural patterns. Ever since the introduction of culture as a guiding concept, we have settled into a structure of social interaction based on certain defined and very often opposing positions. These are positions that we have made political in the sense that we first created differences among ourselves along the lines of groups, nations and national cultures, which we then tried to bridge by looking for similarities and shared interests between nations, an effort that has culminated globally in institutions like the United Nations. Such efforts have improved aspects of the Anthropocene, but they have not resulted in any major shift toward a true solution. This makes clear that whatever solutions may be brought to bear on the crisis of the Anthropocene, they cannot come from the proposing of further positions that are characterized by difference, or by its dialectic twin, similarity. Yet Chakrabarty still feels the need to put a brake on the elevation of reason given that global life is not ruled by reason only; we have organized our freedom through politics, and politics is not a business of reason, but of trying to balance different positions. So he ends his essay on the note that any form of universal reason that may be needed here cannot refer to “the myth of global identity,” as that would deny the reality of politics. He calls this a “negative universal” (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 222). However, postulating a form of universal reason that needs to take into account political realities leaves a wide gap in the argument, raising the question how such a universal reason could be reconciled with the reality of political divisions.

Much of Chakrabarty's subsequent work has been devoted to arriving at a clearer understanding of what he calls the “common,” another name for the kind of universal reason he gestured at in the conclusion of *The Climate of History*. In his 2015 Tanner Lectures, he reached back to the thinking of Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883–1969). Jaspers was a German-Swiss philosopher who introduced the concept of “epochal consciousness,” which Chakrabarty describes as “a space of thinking” that is “prepolitical: a form of consciousness that does not deny, decry or denounce the divisions of political life while seeking to position itself as something that comes before politics or thinking politically, as a pre-position as it were to the political” (Chakrabarty, 2015, p. 142). Chakrabarty therefore looks for a “space of thinking,” a common position based on reason, from which we can derive motives for acting when confronted with our divergent positions. In Jaspers's theory of epochal consciousness, Chakrabarty sees a starting point to reach such a position. He mentions that there are 2 major characteristics of that theory: firstly, the theory presupposes a thinking from a wholeness that precedes thinking in “departments,” a thinking that is based on the fiction of an objective, “complete” listener, a man who “listens to experts explaining their view of global problems [...] while [he ... ed.] is supposed to understand them all, to check their statements understandingly as best as he can, to gain an over-all insight and to judge them, in his turn, on an over-all basis”; secondly, the theory is negatively oriented, meaning it cannot offer

solutions or conclusions, and is “calling for endurance in the tensions of insolubility” (Chakrabarty citing Jaspers, Chakrabarty, 2015, p. 145). Chakrabarty then takes this last characteristic of “inhabiting tension” and extrapolates it in the direction of his own issue with the Anthropocene which, he argues with reference to his discussion of Deep History, is characterized by a “tension” between what he calls “homocentric” and “zoocentric” views of the world. The first of these terms refers to the habitability of the planet for human beings, while the latter focuses on the question of (best conditions for) life on the planet in general. When confronted with this tension, Chakrabarty again concedes that the grounding of any theory (including that of Jaspers' epochal consciousness) in reason is insufficient to resolve it (Chakrabarty, 2015, p. 182). So we are still left with the same cliffhanger.

Yet, maybe the problem of insoluble tension which Chakrabarty cannot seem to overcome is already built into his argument insofar as he frames the issue in terms of a basic dualistic structure. Even where Jaspers' epochal consciousness seeks to position itself on the level of the whole from which proceeds departmentalization, it still suggests that there exists a preposition, a space before politics, which is a meta-position and therefore presupposes a vertical hierarchy or already inclusive tension. In his article *Reason and Transition: On the Concept of Transversal Reason*, Wolfgang Welsch has argued that a lot of the critique of traditional reason stems from this hierarchical nature of reason and has even led to theories that prefer to replace reason altogether by rationality, leading to the presence of positions based on preferences (Welsch, 2000). Welsch then proceeds by exploring a new approach to reason that does not position itself in a moral or ethical higher position in respect of those positions, but that is centered on the process of object-related reflection and self-reflection itself. He calls this form of reason “Transversal Reason,” as the main characteristic of it is that it transcends one-sidedness through logical thinking and as such breaks down “positional rigidity,” leading one to suppose that “proper thinking altogether has its place *between* rather than *within* positions” (Welsch, 2000). Welsch argues that reason should be a “faculty of transition”: “Instead of contemplating from a lofty viewpoint [...], it passes between the forms of rationality and its own procedures.” He does concede in the end that even this Transversal Reason may not offer solutions in itself, as by nature it is not ethical, but it will “clarify the situation of insurmountable dissent” and will thus allow us to “understand and accept, to think and live with” our differences (Welsch, 2000).

When we bring the discussion back to the Anthropocene and the phenomenon of culture, how we form our ways of life, it can be argued that the issue that Chakrabarty raises of how we can build “common-ness” from the perspective of a species, may not necessarily be one of tension. As Ursula Heise argues, how we see ourselves as humankind is mainly the result of our own organization and in effect our education and our building of institutions (Heise, 2014). Just as the powers that be have made us accept culture and form our identification with nations

and ethnicity through education since the 18th century, so we as human beings can also chose to build a new image of ourselves as species through the same mechanisms: “there is no principal reason why the concept of common-ness cannot be translated into the realm of perception, experience, and collective self-identification by means of its own set of rhetorical, symbolic, legal and institutional structures” (Heise, 2014, p. 24). Granted of course, this is not a small venture and so far, governments and industry have not given much indication that they really wish to change the institutions that dominate this forming process of “self-identification” as Heise calls it. And still, there seems more to this when we look closely again at the process of how culture comes into being.

Transculturality: A brief introduction

If we start thinking of culture and our own image as a species not from the vertical perspective of culture and traditional reason as explained above, but from the horizontal, transitional perspective as introduced by Welsch, a whole new space of thinking is opened up. In a paper from 2001, Welsch argued that the 3 basic parts of Herder’s concept of culture do not reflect social reality. First of all, societies are not homogeneous. They are so much differentiated within themselves that they cannot be called uniform. Vertical and horizontal divisions of various kinds make for great internal complexity. Secondly, societies are not ethnically congruent; no tribe lives on an island by itself. And thirdly, the delimitation between the proper and the foreign is artificial. Lifestyles and ways of life mix and mingle. People of many cultural backgrounds intermingle. Welsch therefore suggests abandoning Herder’s monist concept of culture and to replace it with a concept that recognizes the fact that the ways of life labeled as culture are the result of a continuous process of mixing of cultural elements, a concept that would thus enable us “to think of cultures beyond the contraposition of own-ness and foreignness.” To this end, he advances the concept of transculturality. Similar to transversal reason, the space of common-ness opened up by transculturality is not prior to or above anything, but rather lies in between.

According to Welsch, a transcultural view on society recognizes that people are very much interconnected and that their ways of life are intermingled. The resulting cultural mix is different for each individual person, and it is based on a process of hybridization. Information and products from anywhere in the world have become instantly available everywhere in the world. Cultural mixing happens on both levels of culture: high culture and daily culture. Also, people appropriate foreign cultural elements and come to consider them their own, allowing for the disappearance of the selectivity between own or foreign cultural input. Welsch argues that transculturality happens both on the level of societies as a whole, and on individual level. Where we can let go of our thinking in polarity between own-ness and foreignness, we can be open to transition. As expressed by Hans Jörg Sandkühler and Lim Hong-Bin in their preface to the edited volume *Transculturality—Epistemology, Ethics and Politics*, “this

process leads to the end of the illusion that regional borders and cultural identity are congruent” (Sandkühler and Lim, 2007, p. 7). Central to this concept of transculturality is the acceptance of the fact that people find their own way of life, their own mix of cultural elements, based upon and selected from the total cultural input they receive and their life experiences. According to Welsch, this can account for the fact that people are turning increasingly global in their worldview (the process of globalization) while at the same time, they seek sameness in personal networks of their own, that they build on the basis of shared cultural likings not necessarily found in their neighborhoods.

We network and hybridize not only as a result of the process of globalization, but according to Welsch, we have been doing this throughout human history. For example, there is a rising awareness that the Euro-centric image of the development of civilization is simply false. In a new elaborate study on the rise of civilization, *The Silk Roads: a New History of the World*, Peter Frankopan argues that the true birth place of civilization lies in Central Asia, the core region which connected Europe and East Asia by way of the trade routes later called the Silk Road. As Frankopan writes: “There was good reason why the cultures, cities and peoples who lived along the Silk Roads developed and advanced: as they traded and exchanged ideas, they learned and borrowed from each other, stimulating further advances in philosophy, the sciences, language and religion” (Frankopan, 2017, p. xvii). Maybe what is currently considered to be a “new” trend of simultaneous globalization and localization through individualized networking is not such a new thing after all; maybe it has always been the way in which people form their ways of life and this process, but it has just not been well-perceived in the last 2 centuries through the intentional forging of nation-state identity. Historically and as a species, we have always looked for progress in the spaces that lie in between.

One may argue, if a problematic and separatist concept like national culture originated from Western thinking, why would another Western philosophical idea like transculturality be any more suitable to address the issues of a diverse cultural world? To that I would say that the origin of a theory does not automatically work to disqualify its importance. Through the transcending nature of its purpose, the theory of transculturality claims validity for the 21st century discussion on how culture forms when the world community needs to find ways of overcoming the inheritance of predominance of Herder’s monist cultural thinking while moving beyond the paralyzing effect of the continuous oppositional nature of nation-thinking and its historicity, as well as (the logic of) duality as a mode of thought itself. As I have argued in an earlier instance, the idea of transculturality is concerned only with how culture is formed on societal and individual levels, how people form their ways of life through hybridization, and very importantly, how they think about that. It is completely irrelevant whether or not a cultural element that is brought into the intermixing at any given point in time for example stems from colonial

legacy or not (Richard, 2022). In transcultural discourse it suffices for a cultural element concerned to be made part of the mix and that one does not attach any feeling of own-ness or foreignness to it as to its origin for determining value. The theory of transculturality offers a perspective that goes beyond 19th and 20th century concepts and will allow us to drop the baggage of ethnocentrism that so easily clouds the perspective on global formation of culture.

The common-ness of the intermediate space; the search for transcultural commonalities

The idea of looking for the space in between as a place for meaning forming is however not exactly new. As Maya Nadig points out in her contribution to the abovementioned edited volume, this idea has been pioneered in psychoanalysis (Nadig, 2004). Searching for a methodological approach to the dynamism of transculturality, this “being beyond own-ness and foreignness,” Nadig brings up the theory of intermediate space formulated by Donald Woods Winnicott in his collection of essays *Playing and Reality* which appeared just before his death (Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott proposed that babies, from the experience of being separated from their mother, develop the sense of an intermediate space between the outer object in the environment and the inner life of an individual. According to Winnicott, it is initially in this “space” that play takes place, and later also those activities which we refer to as cultural. This space is the result of the accumulated experiences of the individual and therefore varies in extent between individuals. Nadig suggests that this “intermediate space” is very much like the transcultural experience, where the reality of culture lies beyond the contraposition of own-ness and foreignness.

By proposing the intermediate space as the sphere where cultural experience takes place, Winnicott rejects the classical duality between outer and inner, one that was still taken by Freud as his basic premise. The contrapositioning of outer and inner creates the most fundamental paradox that exists: if outer cannot be inner, and vice versa, then *where* do we create meaning? It is in the tension between the opposites of a paradox where meaning lies—or, as Stengers puts it, “suspended between histories” (Stengers, 2015, p. 17). Like in the intermediate space, where the object is not the individual and the individual is not the object, yet the individual experiences the object in its in-betweenness, cultural reality is experienced in the tension between own-ness and foreignness, between global and local, between world and home, between doing and feeling, between driving a car and thinking about climate change, between being a geological force and experiencing the threat of extinction.

As mentioned earlier, according to Clark, the experience of being suspended between the personal narrative of despair and the collective narrative of denial that is characteristic for the Anthropocene disorder has progressed into a feeling of powerlessness that marks the Anthropocene horror (Clark, 2020; cp. above). Clark diagnoses this as a generally felt affect rather than a singular emotion of grief related to a specific ecological event or situation

(Clark, 2020, p. 61). According to his analysis, this affect is intrinsically related to the lack of sense of the earth as a finite home (Clark, 2020, pp. 62–63), resulting in a “dangerous mismatch between the dynamics of individual personhood and the contemporary context” (Clark, 2020, p. 63). Even though it is argued (e.g., by Chakrabarty) that development of a sense of common-ness based on our identification as a species may help to solve this situation. Clark rightfully observes that “the identity that needs to be constructed and argued for is clearly one that already barely exists” (Clark, 2020, p. 63). It is also observed by Bergthaller that the sense of affect that Clark mentions does not exist equally in the various parts of this world, and that “Anthropocene talk remains largely a Western phenomenon”; especially in the (South East) Asian region, the media do not reflect upon this debate a lot (Horn and Bergthaller, 2020, p. 170). Bergthaller goes on to observe that this may result from a difference between the West and Asia in historical horizons of expectations. For the West, the Anthropocene comes as a shock because of the broken promises of universal progress and well-being under modernity, but people in Asia do not share this history nor experience, so there it does not come as such a shock (Horn and Bergthaller, 2020, p. 171). Clark argues that the phenomenon of Anthropocene horror is in essence a feeling of inadequacy, of “being the target of ethical demands that exceed anything one could do in combating global environmental wrongs, and, more worryingly, a realization of the incongruously anachronistic nature of given ethical discourse” (Clark, 2020, p. 68). If it is understood that the crisis of the Anthropocene disorder (and horror) is framed in the context of disparity between ethical value systems between people and groups of people, whether defined horizontally or vertically in terms of (political) parties, social classes, tribes, nations, and so on, then it is clear that this debate what the Anthropocene entails for each of us and how its problems can be solved is troubled by its inherent dialectic nature. What may be considered ethical by someone or a group of people is very much decided by the cultural narratives of those people on what they think is ethical. So when solutions are sought which are to be based on some sense of common-ness or ethical value system change, the above review shows that dead ends are run into. And this is the case, because the concept of culture that is used to structure those ethical narratives is a dualistic concept. For this reason, I argue that we need to embrace a concept of culture that goes beyond this, which is transculturality.

When speaking of embracement of this new concept of culture, it must be reiterated that an essential difference between the idea of transculturality and the Herderian concept of national culture lies within their viewpoints. Transculturality calls upon us to focus upon the cultural aspects that we share transcending boundaries, while national (and tribal) culture pivots on what separates us and sets up delimitations along the lines of our differences. If we accept with Chakrabarty that finding common-ness among humankind is the way to achieve durable solutions to the dilemmas of the Anthropocene, surely we will have to investigate what we share, not how

we differ. Erle Ellis in his recent evolutionary meta-study of the Anthropocene condition argues that in order to “effectively bring people together to shape a better future,” it is needed to “harness the social superpowers of human aspirations,” for which purpose “the long-term successes of extended kinship relations should be seen as foundational” (Ellis, 2023, p. 8). He urges us to explore the “aspirational narratives that deeply connect people with each other and the rest of life” and Ellis concludes his argument as follows: “The time has come to put the focus where it belongs—on our shared aspirations for a better future and making sure that those in power are accountable to meet these aspirational demands” (Ellis, 2023).

Based on the ideas of transculturality and transversal reason as discussed earlier, Wolfgang Welsch has developed some insights in how these aspirational narratives that Ellis talks about could be formed. Welsch calls this the “Acquisition and Possession of Commonalities” and he divides this into 2 levels: the level of Transcultural Commonalities (the ones that can be “acquired” through cultural exchanges) and that of Deeper Level Commonalities (the ones that we already “possess” and predate culture) (Welsch, 2009). According to Welsch, the transcultural process of formation of culture through networking, hybridizing, and very importantly, losing the sense of distinction between own-ness and foreignness results in “a greater chance for communication, linking-up, and understanding than ever before” while the “common stock of overlapping elements—of commonalities that have arisen through the development of transcultural networks in the first place—provides a basis for further exchange and agreement” (Welsch, 2009, p. 12). Welsch argues that in this way, “transcultural orientations provide a first set of commonalities and on their basis, allow for the development of subsequent commonalities” and that “transcultural intersections lead to an *initial acquisition* of commonalities, and the *possession* of these consequently enables *further acquisition*” (Welsch, 2009, p. 12, emphasis in original).

The development of transcultural commonalities is in his vision further promoted by the recognition of the existence and relevance of precultural commonalities that stem from the protocultural-biological makeup and evolution of human beings, which include bodily form, elementary emotions and their facial expression, as well as neuronal structures (Welsch, 2009, p. 26). These deeper level commonalities that all humans share can find expression through the experience of fascination exerted on us when we encounter foreign cultural expressions, like works of literature, art or architecture (Welsch, 2009, p. 13). As Welsch describes it: “Long before the culture-specific commonalities and differences that one usually focuses on, we humans already possess universal commonalities owing to the origins common to all of us. Through these commonalities, people were already connected before they began to differentiate culturally” (Welsch, 2009, p. 33). It is thanks to these universal commonalities that we can “connect internally with the content of other cultures—from the initial fascination . . . [ed.] through to highly elaborate forms of understanding” (Welsch, 2009, p. 33). Based on this, it can be argued that

if we as collective humankind wish to find a pathway to harness our shared human aspirations for a better (or even just livable) world for ourselves and our fellow species while existing on this planet, or to common-ness, we are to recognize our universal commonalities and seek to overcome cultural differences by acquiring transcultural commonalities.

The task that the Anthropocene therefore sets for us is in essence an exercise in transculturality where we try to look for our common-ness as experienced in this tension between the two opposites of a paradox, opposites that logically cannot exist together. In the old concept of logic, only one of two contradictory statements can be true. This one-sided way of looking at truth is clearly challenged by a phenomenon like the Anthropocene. A logic that can tell the truth between two opposing realities is based on a simple (and dualistic) worldview, a worldview in which black and white are clearly separated. But the world of the Anthropocene transcends such a clear-cut view on reality. As such, the Anthropocene marks the end not of comprehension of our environment but of the old concepts of culture and logic that are being used to define the Anthropocene largely up to this moment.

Conclusion

*Chippin' around, kicking my brains around the floor
These are the days it never rains but it pours
“Under Pressure,” Queen/Bowie (1981)*

The terror of knowing what the world is about is a symptom of Anthropocene disorder. It is the shock of realizing that the world has become so complicated that old worldviews and concepts no longer fit. Morton argues that World and Nature have become dead concepts as result of the Anthropocene, but he still looks for solutions from another old concept, a concept which, as I have tried to show in the foregoing, is no less exhausted: culture. As we enter this new epoch, humankind must leave behind the boat it used to cross the river. And this is not the first time this has happened. Just imagine for example, what the impact must have been on people in Western Europe at the time of the introduction of the new worldview of the Earth as a sphere. Gradually the world turned 3-dimensional and the whole idea of a flat world supported by a giant turtle had to be thrown overboard. One would no longer fall off the Earth by sailing over its edges. Now we look back over time and we think this is not a big deal. But it is fair to assume that to large numbers of people then, this realization must have been a source of terror. With the arrival of the Anthropocene, we have just turned up the pressure a couple of notches. Within a period of only a few decades, we have usurped capacities formerly assumed to belong to God alone and, at the same time, chased ourselves out of what we only now come to recognize as our Eden. However unwittingly, the process of industrialization as it has been pushed forward by the Global North has destabilized our living environment beyond the point of no return, while people were actually chasing or at least hoping for, progress and well-being.

Our lifeworld has become so paradoxical in nature that we can only grasp our reality by realizing that there is no one single truth for one single humanity anymore and that the only way out is not by looking for other positions defined by rationality, but by moving into the space in between, in the space of balance between the two apparent opposites of climate breakdown and business as usual, and by leaving behind old concepts that separate us and rallying toward transitional networking and hybridizing.

This is the central theme of transculturality. In the Anthropocene, people will have to find their individual truths in the intermediate space between technological progress and a return to nature; between geo-power and survival; between I and the Other. In the intermediate space of the Anthropocene, penguins are painted on a bus to advertise life insurance policies while at the same time, glacial icesheets are melting away from under their little feet. To understand the Anthropocene is to look for the transcultural intermediate space where people are both creating a world and experiencing the consequences, a space where people are both terrified and “chippin’ around,” as David Bowie and Freddie Mercury sang. By thinking in the space in between and allowing transversal reason to articulate a notion of common-ness, we may not directly achieve a solution to the Anthropocene disorder or to the ecological difficulties associated with the Anthropocene. But at least, we can deconstruct the institutional character of culture and through the processes of individualized networking and hybridization, as well as finding transcultural commonalities, come closer to “understanding and living with” the Anthropocene. Which, not only in a Freudian sense may finally get us off the couch.

Data accessibility statement

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The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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The author declares that he has not used any AI-assisted techniques in creating this paper.

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