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CATASTROPHIC TIMES. AGAINST EQUIVALENCIES OF HISTORY AND VULNERABILITY IN THE «ANTHROPOCENE»

Abstract

With catastrophic events of «nature» like global warming, arguments emerge that insinuate an equivalence of vulnerability, responsibility or being affected by these catastrophes. Such an alleged equivalence when facing climate catastrophe is already visible, for example, in the notion of the «Anthropocene» itself, which obscures both causes and various vulnerabilities in a homogenized as well as universalized concept of humanity (*anthropos*). Taking such narratives as a starting point, the paper explores questions about the connection between catastrophe, temporality, and history, following mainly Walter Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Jean-Luc Nancy with the goal to provide (1) a critique of the concept «Anthropocene» on the basis of nonequivalence while retaining its key features to still grasp the catastrophic present, (2) an analysis of anthropocenic time and the chronical structure of catastrophe, (3) philosophical considerations on the intersection of catastrophe and history.

Keywords: Catastrophe, Anthropocene, Climate Catastrophe, Philosophy of History, Walter Benjamin.

Tempos Catastróficos. Contra as equivalências da História e da Vulnerabilidade no «Antropoceno»

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Resumo

A par dos acontecimentos catastróficos «naturais» tal como o aquecimento global, surgem argumentos que sugerem haver uma equivalência da vulnerabilidade, responsabilidade ou da susceptibilidade face às catástrofes. Esta alegada equivalência é desde já observável, por exemplo, no confronto com a catástrofe climática através da própria noção do «Antropoceno» e que confunde as respectivas causas e as várias vulnerabilidades num conceito homogeneizado, bem como universalizado, de humanidade (*anthropos*). Tomando como ponto de partida tais narrativas, o artigo explora questões acerca da ligação entre catástrofe, temporalidade e história, tendo principalmente em conta as obras de Walter Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty e Jean-Luc Nancy e com o objectivo de prover: (1) uma crítica do conceito de «Antropoceno» com base na não equivalência que conserva ainda os seus aspectos-chave para a compreensão do presente catastrófico; (2) uma análise do tempo antropocénico e da estrutura cronológica da catástrofe; (3) considerações filosóficas a respeito da intersecção entre a história e a catástrofe.

Palavras-chave: Catástrofe, Antropoceno, Catástrofe Climática, Filosofia da História, Walter Benjamin.

Introduction

In his study of the «risk society» sociologist Ulrich Beck sums up his thesis of the disappearance of class society in favor of a more equal distribution of «risks» in the concise formula: «Poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic»². In a similar manner, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in «Climate of History» in respect to the new geological epoch of the so-called «Anthropocene»: unlike in crises of capitalism, there are no «lifeboats for the rich and privileged» in crises induced by global warming³.

Thus, we encounter a similar structure of argumentation, which assumes a more general, even fairer distribution of being affected or vulnerable when facing natural catastrophes (in comparison to catastrophes caused by humans or technology – although especially in the two cited examples said distinction becomes blurred and natural catastrophes prove to be at least in part «anthropogenic»). Indeed, Beck and Chakrabarty are initially correct: imminent ecological crises/catastrophes threaten to permanently destroy the livelihoods of humanity, and moreover, impacts of the climate crisis and its accelerating effects («tipping points») may be so severe that the earth itself, although still existent, will be profoundly and irreversibly altered for all life forms and living beings. Therein lies the real significance of the Anthropocene as a geological force.

Especially in relation to catastrophic events of «nature» such as the climate crisis and other ecological devastations (but also in the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic), rhetorical

² U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, Sage Publications, London 1992, p. 36.

³ D. Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History: Four Theses», *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009) 197-222, p. 221.

figures emerged that insinuate an equivalence of vulnerability, responsibility or being affected by these catastrophes («We're in this together»). Such an ostensible equality (facing climate catastrophe, the virus etc.) is already visible, for example, in the notion of the «Anthropocene» itself, which obscures both causes and various vulnerabilities in a homogenized as well as universalized concept of humanity (*anthropos*). The normative content of this kind of equivalence will be addressed later in the text. In a first step, the postulated catastrophic equivalence as such, a concept of Jean-Luc Nancy, will be discussed.

In my paper, taking such narratives as a starting point, I will proceed then to explore the connection between catastrophe, temporality, and history with the help of Walter Benjamin, specifically to what extent logics of (natural) catastrophe hold traces of a turned messianism or catharsis, which (as with Beck, for instance) manifest themselves in fictions of an all-encompassing and indiscriminate equivalence. What I will therefore undertake is a juxtaposition of two paradigmatic understandings of history related to the catastrophe, namely those of Chakrabarty and Benjamin.

Chakrabarty assumes a kind of becoming-conscious of humanity in and through catastrophe – a «shared sense of a catastrophe»⁴ – through which he evokes a modicum of hope when facing climate catastrophe. Although the presumed equivalence of Chakrabarty's dictum «there are no lifeboats for the rich» can have a mobilizing function, it pales in reality due to two facts: 1. there are indeed such escapist lifeboats, be it gated communities or space shuttles and 2. with the image of the «lifeboats for the rich», the catastrophe is framed as an apocalyptic event, instead of understanding the catastrophe as a process of a «now-time» (*Jetztzeit*) as Benjamin would say⁵. If the catastrophe is shifted into the future, as a (singular) event yet to come, it comprises an eschatological and apocalyptic structure, which carries the connotation of catharsis.

My thesis is that references to seemingly equal or equivalent distribution in the face of global catastrophes reveal themselves as an ideological function of a discourse of oppression that should be contrasted with a critique of «catastrophic equivalence»⁶, as Nancy summarizes his perspective on contemporary catastrophes. I will conclude with references to Benjamin, a surprisingly topical thinker of catastrophic fate, especially when relating it to history. In contrast to the questions raised by Chakrabarty about the temporality and intelligibility of climate change and the extent to which the Anthropocene is an adequate description of the present catastrophic situation, Benjamin allows us to think of catastrophe as «now-time» as well as providing us with tools for a critique of equivalencies in catastrophic times. For him, the catastrophe presents itself as a continuum of history. This is the important shift of Benjamin's messianism (and a connection to dialectical materialism) that starts in now-time and not in a postponed future.

⁴ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., p. 222.

⁵ W. Benjamin., *Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2006, pp. 395-397.

⁶ J.-L. Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, Fordham University Press, New York 2015, p.41.

1. Nancy's Catastrophic Equivalence? The End(s) of Nature

Jean-Luc Nancy develops the concept of «catastrophic equivalence» after the earthquake/tsunami and the ensuing nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima in order to point out the inevitable entanglements of nature and technology (as well as politics and economy), which become indistinguishable through globalization and especially through catastrophic events⁷. Without suggesting the direct comparability of different catastrophes, Nancy criticizes a general tendency toward equivalence (grounded in exchangeability as well as commodification in late capitalism) that, because of its indistinguishability, does not aim at equality at all⁸. Hence for Nancy, the problem of equivalence is twofold: First, the equivalencies of catastrophes as such, and secondly, general equivalence presents itself *as* catastrophe.

Following Nancy's indication of a deeply rooted connection between catastrophe and equivalence, I present three different (but intertwined) branches that follow up on his line of reasoning and will guide the further structure of this text: 1. The collapse of the distinction between nature and its purported «opposites» like technology, humans, culture. 2. Questions of catastrophic times: A possible equivalence of past, present, future under catastrophic conditions? 3. A political critique of equivalence: Nonequivalence against, for instance, the concept of the Anthropocene.

One crucial point in Nancy's argumentation is that in and through catastrophe (its equivalence) the distinction between nature and its supposedly counterparts (for example technology, but also culture, human, society) doesn't hold up⁹. Similarly, Chakrabarty argues that in the catastrophic Anthropocene one cannot distinguish anymore between natural and human history¹⁰.

What even is a natural catastrophe? Nancy states that «natural catastrophes are no longer separable from their technological, economic, and political implications or repercussions»¹¹. This goes back to his earlier formulated thesis that, especially in the modern world, technology is never external to nature (if nature has an outside at all): it is always within it, or technology is a specific unfolding of nature¹². For

⁷ Ibid., pp. 53-54.

⁸ Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, op. cit., p. 40.

⁹ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁰ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 201. Chakrabarty's diagnosis is not so new when thinking about possible predecessors like Hegel, Marx/Engels, Adorno, Lukács or Benjamin, even though the prevalent distinction at play there is mostly first and second nature. An example for the dialectical interplay of natural and human history is given by Marx/Engels in *The German Ideology*: «We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist». K. Marx – F. Engels, *Collected Works. Volume 5. Marx and Engels 1845-1847*, International Publishers, New York 1976, pp. 28-29.

¹¹ Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹² J.-L. Nancy – A. Barrau, *What's These Worlds Coming To?*, Fordham University Press, New York 2015, p. 46.

example, Nancy criticizes a confrontation between nature and technology that is based on an ecological «protection» of nature from technological access or one which subordinates technology to the purposes of a mythical nature: «An ecology properly understood can be nothing other than a technology»¹³.

The relation of nature and technology is connected to the second point regarding equivalence and catastrophe, that is of time and history or what could be described as chronological structures of the catastrophe (to come). This I will discuss later in the paper in regard to Chakrabarty and Benjamin. For Nancy, technology does not suffice to be understood anymore as an «assembly of functioning means» (nor an opposition to nature) but as our «mode of existence»¹⁴. This mode of existence exposes us to a condition of finality in a sense that everything becomes the means and ends of everything so that nothing has means or ends anymore – what Nancy calls general equivalence¹⁵. To escape such a general equivalence, he suggests refraining from an orientation towards the future (in terms of means and ends) and pleads for a (infinite) present, where finitude and finality merge. Nancy puts the present before the construction of an ultimate future: The possibility of a future contracts in an already existing future-present that avoids a «scheme of succession, of before and after»¹⁶ which still leans on teleology, finalism, and causality.

When confronted with catastrophes there is in fact a tendency of either idealization of the past/ passed present or projections into the future as a euphemized past. For example, in the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic as well as in the climate catastrophe at hand, there emerged the wish for a so-called return to «normality», where the conditions or exclusions of such «normality» are seldom reflected upon and what therefore appears predominantly as an embellished petit bourgeois desire (mainly in the global north).

The third point in terms of equivalence regarding (natural) catastrophes in the Anthropocene are (normative) questions about vulnerability; but also causation of or being affected by anthropogenic catastrophes. Phrases of equivalencies as cited in the beginning, or even concepts like «Anthropocene» hold some ideological content that can obscure existing power formations and (global) systems of domination and oppression as well as underlying political-economic structures. Therefore, in the next part I will try to analyze and critique the notion «Anthropocene» on the basis of nonequivalence. «Nonequivalence does not overturn equivalence; it makes it explicit. It says: All are equal in that no one is identical or commensurable with others»¹⁷.

¹³ J.-L. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2008, p. 42.

¹⁴ Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 60.

2. The Anthropocene as Catastrophic Equivalence?

Especially in relation to severe natural disruptions, the terms «catastrophe» and «crisis» are sometimes used interchangeably. The main difference lies in the temporal dimension, which, however, is used variably in the discourse on climate (with normative reasoning): While «catastrophe» is commonly considered a singular event, «crisis» extends over a longer period of time (indicating, for example, a state of emergency). Etymologically, crisis derives from the Greek κρίναι/krínein (to distinguish, to separate), catastrophe literally means turning around or downwards (κατά/kata: down; στρέφειν/stréphein: turn) as a decline, but more in the sense of a profound change instead of mere destruction¹⁸.

The fact that concrete material catastrophic (natural) events shape philosophical consciousness and discourses or significantly influence the philosophical concepts of their time can be illustrated not only by the occasion of Fukushima for Nancy, but classically by the devastating earthquake in Lisbon in the year 1755. Besides Kant or Lessing, Voltaire in particular took up the topic in his satirical novella *Candide*, which is directed against a (theological) world optimism à la Leibniz or Alexander Pope. As Adorno put it in his *Negative Dialectics*: «The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz»¹⁹.

The coining of the term «Anthropocene» does not respond to such a serious singular catastrophe, but it reacts to a crisis-like process on a geological time scale. Although used analytically to capture the far-reaching human impacts on the geological era, the Anthropocene already carries at its core the catastrophic potential of drastic anthropogenic climate change. Since the introduction of the term «Anthropocene» by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer²⁰ in 2000²¹, it has become a popular concept across disciplines to refer to the extensive repercussions of the human species on the earth- and eco-system(s), even though its descriptive and normative implications remain highly controversial. To speak of the Anthropocene as a new geological or geochronological epoch defined by the emergence, proliferation, and spread of humans and their influence on the ecosystem («Great Acceleration»)

¹⁸ Both scientists and activists have objected to using terms such as crisis or catastrophe instead of the more neutral «climate change» or «global warming» to express the drastic situation. Although often used synonymously, crisis and catastrophe differ temporally, but also in intensity.

¹⁹ T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Continuum Publishing, New York 1983, p. 361. For Adorno, of course, the greatest catastrophe is the Shoah, after which basically any philosophy or art becomes impossible. The natural catastrophe (first nature) pales in comparison to that of second nature (social) and shapes metaphysics and philosophy because it «defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil» (ibid.).

²⁰ P. Crutzen – E. Stoermer, «The Anthropocene», *IGBP Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000) 17-18.

²¹ However, there are precursors such as the Italian geoscientist Antonio Stoppani, who already in the late 19th century spoke of the «Anthropozoic» or the «Anthropozoic Era». A. Stoppani, *Corso di Geologica. Vol. II. Geologia Stratigrafica*, Bernadoni & Brigola, Milano 1873, p. 732.

seems to presuppose a universalized or generalized abstraction of «humanity». Most critical accounts of the Anthropocene point to this problematic status of «anthropos» (ἄνθρωπος; human), arguing that it proves insufficient to explain the diverse and multifaceted causes of such a new geological era, or even that it masks the asymmetric responsibilities and vulnerabilities to the challenges it poses²². In such a view, the category anthropos (of the Anthropocene) is essentially flawed because it assumes a universal humanity that does not exist as such or exists only as an ideal abstraction. Such critiques aim mainly at the insufficient descriptive power of anthropos, while they strive to find more appropriate terms for a new geological age within or after the Holocene, thus trying to define causality and historicity or even responsibility and accountability for the present ecological crises more precisely²³. At the same time, it is a difficult task to demand differences regarding causation or vulnerability without individualizing the problem: for example, the infamous carbon emission footprint that – while a useful tool for information – suggests the possibility of reducing said personal footprint solely by own choices and seemingly ethical consumerism, what can't be achieved for instance with infrastructure or whole energy systems based on fossil fuels. Thus, it is no coincidence that the carbon footprint has been heavily marketed and popularized by BP²⁴.

3. Specters in the Anthropocene (Subjects of Catastrophe)

Interestingly enough, both Beck and Chakrabarty contrast their theses on equivalence in the face of anthropogenic natural catastrophe to class society (Beck) or to the other crises of capitalism (Chakrabarty) in order to indicate a specificity of such (supposedly natural) phenomena. As Jason Moore and Donna Haraway have each noted in their critique of the Anthropocene, ecological crises cannot be understood simply as crises of humanity, the earth, the planet, or ecosystems. Rather, the irreducible connection with the capitalist mode of production, therefore the spheres of production, circulation, and consumption must be considered, which is why Moore refers to it as the «Capitalocene»²⁵. The Capitalocene is a complementary concept to the already widely used and well-known concept of the Anthropocene.

²² C. Bonneuil – J.-B. Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, Verso, London/New York 2016, pp. 65-88; A. Hornborg, A. – A. Malm, «The geology of mankind? A critique of the Anthropocene narrative», *The Anthropocene Review*, 1.1 (2014) 62-69.

²³ The pluralization of terms seems to know hardly any limits: Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Technocene, Kinocene, Econocene, Plantationocene, Thermocene, Thanatocene, Phagocene, Phronocene, Agnotocene, Polemocene...

²⁴ J.M. Turner, «Counting Carbon: The Politics of Carbon Footprints and Climate Governance from the Individual to the Global», *Global Environmental Politics*, 14.1 (2014) 59-78, p. 64.

²⁵ J. Moore, «The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis», *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44.3 (2016) 594-630.

It is concerned with (1) historical issues, i.e., when and by what means the drastic changes on a planetary scale begin, and (2) conceptual considerations of philosophical and political relevance. This means that «humanity», presupposed in the anthropos of the Anthropocene as a generalized universal category, seems to disregard for example inequality, class, or imperialism. Therefore, the term conflates and obscures irreducible human differences in responsibility, vulnerability, power, etc. as well as systemic and structural causes of the Anthropocene and its ecological impacts. Moore argues for placing humans in the «web of life» (without abandoning their particularity), i.e., not reproducing a human/nature dichotomy while examining the political and economic causes of the devastating «capitalogenic» (not just anthropogenic) geological force²⁶. In addition to the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, there are also proposals (mentioned here only by way of example) such as Chthulucene²⁷, Technocene²⁸, Naturalism²⁹, or even the negation of the need for a new geological age/epoch and the retention of the Holocene.

What comes to light here is a critique of ideology and a politics of concepts. This is by no means a mere philosophical gimmick, rather it is an analysis of the causes, responsibilities as well as possible solutions (humanity, technology, capitalism, industrialization...) for a catastrophic change of the climate and thereby of the human and non-human living conditions of the ecosystems that is already present. However, the various designations for the age we are living in («-cene») are not necessarily to be understood as mutually exclusive or even contradictory, but a matter of (also political) emphasis³⁰.

But who or what is the anthropos of the Anthropocene, its subject? Chakrabarty claims that humanity as a universal «we» cannot be experienced as such, although humanity has arguably become a global actor as a species³¹. It is astonishing that for the marxist (and postcolonial) historian Chakrabarty in particular, the threat of climate catastrophe in the Anthropocene constitutes humanity as a universal actor, although this must remain an idealistic abstraction that obscures differences in matters of class, imperialism, colonialism, racism, or gender.

In contrast, Carl Schmitt in his 1932 paper *The Concept of the Political* hits

²⁶ J. Moore, «The Capitalocene...», art. cit., p. 597.

²⁷ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham/London 2016.

²⁸ A. Hornborg, «The political ecology of the Technocene», in C. Hamilton – C. Bonneuil – F. Gemenne (ed.) *The Anthropocene and the Global Environment Crisis*, Routledge, London/New York 2015, pp. 57-69.

²⁹ P. Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 2013.

³⁰ Even though scientists of the Anthropocene Working Group argue that the specific name Anthropocene would be without «particular significance or symbolic character», this simply doesn't hold up when analyzing the public and scientific discourses as well as their underlying ideological functions. J. Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit. A Guide to the Scientific Evidence and Current Debate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, p. 15.

³¹ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 221.

on an ideological function of the concept of «humanity» that may also prove true for the Anthropocene: «The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism. [...]Whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat»³². Schmitt focuses primarily on a normative content of Anthropos; but the critique of the Anthropocene is first concerned with a descriptive question, namely, whether it is appropriate to the phenomenon as an analytical concept – and only in a second step with its lack of political viability.

As I argued in the previous section, the category «we» is problematic because it presupposes a universal «we» that remains analytically questionable as well as imprecise due to the homogenization and totalization of the universal figure «humanity». For the Anthropocene, there are varying degrees of responsibility, vulnerability, accountability, utility, or causation. In the same line of reasoning as Chakrabarty (namely that the «we» of mankind is not tangible but emerging as this globally impactful actor through anthropogenic climate change) other unspecific universal categories could be constructed as well: for example, such as the sum of all (also non-human) living beings – biocene –, which cause the same or even more far-reaching geological effects than the anthropos but would still explain similarly little.

Moreover, the «we» raises the question of who is affected by ecological crisis (or who is affected first), which is reflected both in Beck's quote «poverty is hierarchical, smog is democratic»³³ and in Chakrabarty's thesis that «[u]nlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here [with climate change] for the rich and privileged», and in this aspect for him resembles the dangers of nuclear war³⁴. To be sure, this postulated equivalence has an important mobilizing function to take an impending catastrophe seriously. However, first, not only is for instance vulnerability extremely unevenly distributed globally (e.g. coastal cities/islands or the virulence of heat waves), even said lifeboats are actually being built, as witnessed for example by Douglas Rushkoff in *Survival of the Richest*. Escapist safe spaces on Earth or colonies on Mars, where billionaires could be protected or survive the harshest consequences of a climate catastrophe³⁵, are only an aggravation of already real existing «gated communities» (for the rich and privileged).

Second, the image of «no lifeboats for the rich» reiterates the catastrophe as an apocalyptic event, rather than understanding the catastrophe as a process of (speaking with Benjamin) now-time (*Jetztzeit*). In relation to the climate crisis,

³² C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2007, p. 54. Schmitt's anti-humanism is perfectly compatible with his political support of Nazism and his involvement in the juridical legitimation of the totalitarian regime, as well as his open antisemitism and racism.

³³ U. Beck, *Risk Society*, op. cit. p. 36.

³⁴ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 221.

³⁵ D. Rushkoff, «Survival of the Richest», *OneZero Medium* (2018), <https://onezero.medium.com/survival-of-the-richest-9ef6cddd0cc1> (July 1st, 2022).

this leads to shifting the catastrophe into the future, i.e., as a coming (singular) event, thus structurally resembling eschatological and apocalyptic thinking, which holds still cathartic elements³⁶. We encounter such tendencies, for example, in (pop-cultural or defeatist) narratives of world-without-humans theories – what Neyrat calls «anathropies»³⁷ – that imagine a situation «after the catastrophe» without humans. However, in the case of the catastrophic Anthropocene, there is no simple «vanishing» of humanity. The «world without us» just skips over the disastrous process currently at work.

4. Anthropogenic Timing

Beside the subject of the Anthropocene (that is who or what is the anthropos) and questions of who is affected/responsible or what the «-cene» we live in should be called, the time and timing of the Anthropocene is a topic of debate as well. Mainly a matter of geochronology, the process of defining geological time scales (that is, to determine and classify different eons, eras, periods, epochs, ages) works mostly through chronostratigraphic analysis of rock strata.

Geological history of the earth is a transformative and highly contested field, due to new methods and data that allow but also necessitate state-of-the-art and more nuanced geochronologic/chronostratigraphic differentiations³⁸. This is not only true for «deep history» (before humans existed) but also for the «time» we live in, what – on a geological level – can mean a stretch from present to several hundred million years ago («eon») to only thousands of years ago («age»)³⁹. Since the late 19th-century the term «Holocene» has been established as the present series/epoch we live in⁴⁰. Holocene means «entirely recent» in a literal sense and stems from the Greek ὅλος/hólos (entirely, total) and καινός/kainós, (recent, new), therefore signifying the time dimension of «-cene». It describes the time after the last glacial period and has been recently (2018) divided into three stages/ages namely Greenlandian, Northgrippian, Meghalayan. Especially with the most recent Meghalayan (still our present geological age) comes the first real convergence of natural and human history in geochronology.

³⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁷ F. Neyrat, «Planetary Antigones. The Environmental Situation and the Wandering Condition», *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 25.1-2 (2016) 35-64.

³⁸ Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, op. cit., pp. 11-17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁰ The «newest» geological stratum on a system/period level is the Quaternary with its subdivisions (series/epoch) Pleistocene and Holocene. With the name Quaternary we can see an example for the ever-occurring shifts in terminology: the former Tertiary (as well as Primary, Secondary) is not used anymore in favor of Neogene and Paleogene, so the term Quaternary has been stripped from its original meaning. Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, op. cit., pp. 12; 15; 26.

The Meghalayan began around 4200 years ago with the climatic event of a 200-year drought that led to the collapse of civilizations worldwide. Therefore, it has been the only geochronological age that is, among other things, defined by a catastrophic period with impacts on human cultures on a global scale⁴¹.

This convergence of natural and human history proves to be even more important in the case of the Anthropocene with the programmatic inversion that human beings irreversibly alter the earth and geological history themselves. The Anthropocene has not yet been officially declared and defined by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) although their Anthropocene Working Group after a preliminary vote in 2019 suggested to treat it as a new chrono-stratigraphic series/epoch⁴². Interestingly, the formalization of the Working Group is not geared primarily towards climatic changes but to nuclear fallout after thermonuclear bomb tests from the early 1950s⁴³ – thus they identify the worldwide spread of artificial radionuclides as the primary (geological) marker for the Anthropocene⁴⁴.

Even though it is evident that the Anthropocene would be by comparison a very different kind of series/epoch, it remains still highly debated if the geochronological criteria of a new geological epoch are even met or if it should for example not be better characterized as an (ongoing) «event»⁴⁵.

From a philosophical point of view that would suit, on the one hand, Walter Benjamin's juxtaposition of history and catastrophe and still acknowledges, on the other hand, the deeply catastrophic implications and consequences caused by global warming and the concomitant disasters for nature-human-(eco)systems. Although it has some merits to think of the Anthropocene as an event instead of an epoch, the crucial point regarding time and history should be nevertheless to grasp the catastrophe as «now-time», a truly «-cene», *kainós*, that merges past, present and future in the now and necessitates an imminent as well as immediate catastrophic *kairós/καιρός* (a proper, critical moment).

⁴¹ M. Walker et al., «Formal ratification of the subdivision of the Holocene Series/Epoch (Quaternary System/Period): two new Global Boundary Stratotype Sections and Points (GSSPs) and three new stages/subseries», *Episodes*, 41.4 (2018) 1-11.

⁴² Anthropocene Working Group, *Newsletter of the Anthropocene Working Group* 9 (2019), p. 4.

⁴³ Another very good example of why to imply an all-encompassing and homogenous humanity when talking about the Anthropocene is misguided.

⁴⁴ Zalasiewicz et al., *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, op. cit., pp. 10; 282; Anthropocene Working Group, *Newsletter*, art. cit., p. 4.

⁴⁵ P. Gibbard et al., «The Anthropocene as an Event, not an Epoch», *Journal of Quaternary Science* (2022) 1-5.

5. Catastrophic Times? Philosophy of History in the Anthropocene between Chakrabarty and Benjamin

What is thus present are questions of history (where/when/why is the beginning of the Anthropocene), of now-time, and of a future to come in the face of catastrophe. As one of the most radical thinkers of the catastrophe (as history and vice versa), Walter Benjamin links the two into one «theological-political motif»⁴⁶.

According to Chakrabarty, the science of history as such becomes precarious under the conditions of the Anthropocene: the classic distinction in history between human history and natural history is challenged by the Anthropocene and thus undermines the foundations of the science of history. Chakrabarty is concerned with whether and how humanity (in the Anthropocene) can appear as a species and to what extent a categorization as species (*anthropos*) makes sense or is desirable for a historiography. Furthermore, he emphasizes that humanity as a species is not tangible (even in the sense of a phenomenology), but always an intellectual-idealist derivative or abstraction:

The discussion about the crisis of climate change can thus produce affect and knowledge about collective human pasts and futures that work at the limits of historical understanding. We experience specific effects of the crisis but not the whole phenomenon⁴⁷.

For Chakrabarty, the very experience of catastrophe serves as the potential to produce a «we». The sense of impending catastrophe, he argues, enables a kind of becoming-aware of humanity (for-itself)⁴⁸ through which he invokes hope in the face of the climate crisis. One of Chakrabarty's premises concerning the philosophy of history is the continuity of human experience, which considers past, present, and future as coherent and thus comprehends retro- as well as prospectively from the present point of view which he points out as the basic condition of the historical sciences⁴⁹. The diffusion of human and natural history in the Anthropocene now requires a recalibration of human capacities in regard to temporality. The catastrophe

⁴⁶ A. Greiert, «Geschichte als Katastrophe. Zu einem theologisch-politischen Motiv bei Walter Benjamin», *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 64.4 (2012) 359-376.

⁴⁷ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 221.

⁴⁸ Analogous to Marxian class consciousness: from humanity in-itself to humanity for-itself.

⁴⁹ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 197.

to come, already begun as well as present⁵⁰, as an «unintended consequence»⁵¹ of the historical era of the «Anthropocene» makes Walter Benjamin's convergence of philosophy of history (which is always the «subject of a construction»⁵²) and catastrophic thought seem all the more timely⁵³.

For Benjamin, the notion of (messianic) time takes shape from the present; in the preparatory work for *On the Concept of History* he notes: «Definition of the present as catastrophe; definition from messianic time»⁵⁴. In said theses on history, written shortly before his death in 1940, Benjamin opposes a hegemonic optimism of progress as promise of salvation, which he attributes to both the bourgeois positivist as well as the materialist Marxist conceptions of history⁵⁵. In this context, Benjamin rejects teleological as well as continuous progression of the historical. Specifically, he defies such a notion of a «historical norm» of progress in his VIII. thesis on the concept of history, which also and above all had to prove itself in the struggle against fascism:

The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are «still» possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable⁵⁶.

A critical philosophy (of history) undermines the understanding of history implied in the «still», which, for example, relies too optimistically on the development of technology or productive forces (but also morality), and yet remains faithful to a (historical) materialism. Said non-philosophical amazement still applies equally in the 21st century and beyond.

Benjamin follows up to the quote above with arguably his most famous thesis on the concept of history, a description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* as the «angel of history». The angel of history gazes with open mouth and widened eyes – no longer

⁵⁰ An example for such an entanglement of time dimensions regarding climate change could be the rise of the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere that operates at this intersection of past (currently irreversible), present as well as future emissions. Thus, «committed global warming» means a rise in temperatures in the future because of emissions that have already occurred in the past. T. Wigley, «The Climate Change Commitment», *Science*, 307 (2005) 1766-1769.

⁵¹ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 221.

⁵² Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, op. cit., p. 395.

⁵³ My intention here is not to suggest simply «applying» Benjamin's texts - which emerged from a very specific historical situation, particularly marked by Nazism and fascism - to the climate crisis. It is about an impulse of a thinking together, without falling into an equivalence of catastrophes here, too.

⁵⁴ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 1243, translation RG.

⁵⁵ S. Gorgone, «Kritik der Geschichte und Katastrophe der Zeit», *Studia philosophica*, 74 (2015) 205-219, p. 207.

⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, op. cit., p. 392.

(philosophically) amazed, but rather horrified – at the wreckage of the past. Unable to close his spread wings, he is carried away by the storm of progress in the direction of the future. With the future (and even paradise) behind him, the catastrophe grows before his eyes as the aforementioned pile of wreckage of the past⁵⁷. Benjamin's image reverses natural history and human history by symbolizing man-made progress as a natural event: the storm that seizes the angel's wings, holds them open, and drives him backwards toward the future, whereby the angel of history can only keep the past (as catastrophe) in sight.

This is the particular twist of Benjamin's messianism (and a nexus to dialectical materialism), which begins in now-time instead of a postponed future and brings together both the different time dimensions as well as natural and human history in the concept of «Eingedenken», translated as remembrance. *Eingedenken* means a remembrance that contracts the past into the present⁵⁸ without closure, but also, in line with Jewish theological tradition, doesn't project into the future⁵⁹. Catastrophe of now-time not only means locating the catastrophe in the «now» as already present (*in actu*), but furthermore, grasping the «now» as catastrophe rather than placing it in a distant future. Such an intrusion of now-time (as an event) is nevertheless not to be understood as already having taken place and thus again entering into the past, i.e., as already having taken place, hence as inevitable doom⁶⁰. Also, with regard to anthropogenic/capitalogenic climate change, it is necessary to develop a perspective to understand the catastrophe as happening in now-time without falling into fatalistic-apathetic apocalypticism. For Benjamin, this task should also concern (philosophical) history in terms of establishing a «conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time»⁶¹.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 392.

⁵⁸ How to understand time in terms of contraction (of past and future) in the present, Gilles Deleuze sheds light on in his first of three syntheses of time in *Difference and Repetition*. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, pp. 70-81.

⁵⁹ «This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter». Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, op. cit., p. 397.

⁶⁰ «Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race [Menschengeschlecht] – to activate the emergency brake». Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, op. cit., p. 402. The brake symbolizes a moment of discontinuity («tiny fissure») in the continuum of permanent catastrophe. This is one of the rare places where Benjamin brings up humanity [Menschengeschlecht] and it can be linked to Chakrabarty's shared sense of catastrophe.

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, op. cit., p. 397.

Conclusion

But how can this philosophy of history be embedded in the catastrophic Anthropocene? In his text «Central Park», Benjamin compares the course of history (in terms of the concept of catastrophe) to a kaleidoscope in children's hands, which presents a new order at each turn. The analogy wants to point out that «[t]he concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of «order» to prevail. – The kaleidoscope must be smashed»⁶².

As laid out in previous sections, such an ideological function as «concepts of the ruling class» is present in catastrophic equivalence, for example when referring to an abstract or homogeneous humanity/anthropos. To evoke alleged equality in the face of catastrophe reveals itself as a discourse of oppression, if responsibility, vulnerability, or affectedness are presented as equivalently distributed. Hence, it is possible to follow up on what Benjamin states in *On the Concept of History* – under the condition that the catastrophe is to be considered «as the continuum of history»⁶³, he notes in the preliminary annotations: «The subject of history: the oppressed, not humanity (*Menschheit*). The continuum is that of the oppressors. To blast the present out of the continuum of historical time: task of the historian»⁶⁴. Here, Benjamin's apposition «not humanity» that did not make it into the final version of the text is of vital significance in the context of this paper and a critique of the Anthropocene that could argue with an inversion of Benjamin: The subject of the Anthropocene: not humanity.

Additionally, from the perspective of Benjamin's «oppressed» as the main historical subject, a (still to be established) universalism can be saved, which does not turn into a relativism à la Schmitt. The formulated critique of the descriptive universal figure «anthropos» is to be countered by a normative claim of a «negative universal history»⁶⁵ (Chakrabarty), in which the equivalence of vulnerability, causation, responsibility of and for the catastrophe is not just presupposed, but still has yet to be constructed in favor of the oppressed in the sense of «Eingedenken». Such a horizon is expressed also by Nancy at the end of his writing on the equivalence of catastrophes (After Fukushima): «To demand equality for tomorrow is first of all to assert it today, and by the same gesture to reject catastrophic equivalence. It is to assert common equality, common incommensurability: a communism of nonequivalence»⁶⁶.

What we can draw from the intersection of Chakrabarty, Nancy and Benjamin

⁶² Ibid., p. 164.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 395-396.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, op. cit., p. 1244, translation RG.

⁶⁵ Chakrabarty, «The Climate of History...», art. cit., 222.

⁶⁶ Nancy, *After Fukushima. The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, op. cit., p. 41.

as a focal point could be precisely a task of philosophy: not to presume ideal universals or subjects of history like the «anthropos» or a «we» that can obscure crucial differences. And furthermore, situate a philosophy (of history) in and for the Anthropocene, in its pasts, futures and presents – that is: catastrophic (now-)times.

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