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Hamilton, Clive - *Defiant Earth: The fate of humans in the Anthropocene*, , Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2017. (200pp). ISBN 1925576817, 9781925576818

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In *Defiant Earth*, Clive Hamilton attempts to establish a stepping-off point for a move beyond the lingering influence of the modern belief in a division between human and nature. The influence of Bruno Latour – a close reader of the book through its drafting – is clear from the opening pages as Hamilton stalks the dyads of modernity that haunt our attempts to grapple with rapid changes generated by human activity. The legacy of this division, he argues, can be observed in systems-based thinking that sees us divide our habitat into ecosystems for independent analysis and inspection when in fact we live as part of a total Earth System whose constituents are complexly interdependent.

Hamilton begins by arguing that the fundamental misconception that human and natural worlds have somehow been maintained as separate (yet integrated), is made clear by the reductive manner in which we continue to approach and understand the now commonly employed geological phrase, the Anthropocene. The phrase is, he posits, already 'encrusted with misreadings, misconceptions and ideological co-optations' – adumbrated through popular use to describe the continuing history of human effects on the landscape and ecosystems (10). The Anthropocene, under this definition, is for Hamilton a banal catchall for, and extension of, existing thinking wherein synthetic components such as 'ecosystems' are splintered away from the single Earth System, and where the violence of the changes at hand are not fully considered. The Anthropocene, he writes, is a '*rupture* in the functioning of the Earth System' so profound that it has 'entered a new geological epoch' (10).

The book finds its focus when Hamilton takes on proponents of the recent move toward a process of 'deanthropocentrism', arguing convincingly that such a move will not absolve us from the responsibilities of human ascendancy. Simply put, 'whether one keeps them in incommensurable categories or believes that animals can be elevated to human status – none of it changes the fact of the Anthropocene' (40-1). Hamilton argues on behalf a 'new anthropocentrism', one that places the human at the centre of our consideration of the Earth System. The Anthropocene, he contends, announces the presence of humans as protean in a manner that rivals the 'great forces of nature' (41). This is a fundamental shift, since under the conditions of the new epoch, the future of the planet and the life it supports will be inexorably shaped by, and reliant on, a 'conscious force, even if the signs of it acting in concert are only embryonic (and may be still-born)' (41). The issue of 'acting in concert' is one Hamilton does not tackle here, focusing instead on the politic that surrounds the various critiques offered of anthropocentrism. These cannot hope to countermand the collective moral and practical imperative delivered by the changes we now face: 'the Anthropocene arrives to blow them all away and instantiate humankind once and for all as the being at the centre of the earth' (41).

The (apparently) paradoxical structure of this imperative is derived from a division Hamilton insists on, between the scientific fact of anthropocentrism, and the normative claim to human ascendancy. Humans are at the centre of the Earth System, as we are the dominant creature whether we like it or not. Thus, we must take responsibility the disruptions generated by our actions whilst being conscious of the complexity inherent in attempting to understand the consequence of our actions. As Hamilton places it, the problem with the contemporaneous 'growth-driven techno-industrial' paradigm is its '*monstrous anthropocentrism*', which is '*not anthropocentric enough*' (his italics, 43). Not enough, and therefore monstrous, since we exercise the power that accompanies our dominance to act, but in adolescent fashion, do not take responsibility for the results. He warns we are having our cake, and eating it too, with monstrous results – immersed in the paradoxical situation of a moral failure that is unprecedented in scale. Scientists, he states, both assure us that we both 'rival the great forces of nature', and warn that these forces have been 'roused from their Holocene slumber so that we enter a long era in which they are more dangerous to us and more uncontrollable' than they have been for at least 10,000 years (45).

If Hamilton achieved nothing else, this book is important for its careful navigation of the territory he lights out for. At each point, the arguments are well wrought, and his focus and challenging claims are qualified with diligence. In a discussion that weighs the implication of changes of this magnitude, Hamilton avoids reductions that would lead us to divest the Anthropocene of its full weight, both in the immediacy of the discourse, and in the larger reality it addresses.

But the book does something more important still, because Hamilton's arguments shine a light on a deeper problem that besets the discourse surrounding the issue of anthropocentrism: the absence of a clear definition for the 'human'. What, after all, is Hamilton addressing when he writes of the categories 'human', 'humankind', 'being', and the collective, or fragmented and potentially divisive 'conscious force' of humans? His categories bracket, variously, the biologically determined creature homo-sapiens, the material and immaterial achievements of this creature, and the ephemeral mess of consciousness – juggling the whole philosophical mess against the admission of a false division between this human's 'culture', 'society' and the 'nature' with which it is so thoroughly entangled.

Hamilton does an admirable job of reflexively organising these categories around an argument for the moral certitude of his position: that this mix can be sharpened to an existential form coalescent at the centre of our struggle to understand the predicament of the Anthropocene, and how best to collectively proceed. In order to take responsibility for this predicament, we must admit a moral universal, and all this entails. Here Hamilton is right, and from this admirably unstable position, he proceeds. Indeed, that we are not anthropocentric enough is 'the essential claim of this book' (43). But this is not, he is at pains to make very clear (a project that defines the first third of the book), a defence of the 'singular moral standing of humans against other creatures', but instead a recognition of 'the unique responsibility of humans to protect the Earth and, above all, avoid dangerous disruption of the Earth System' (55).

And here is the nub of his argument: grasping the full weight of the fundamental, monistic insight of Earth System science that we are entangled in, rather than ascendant from, the singular Earth with all other creatures cannot be achieved without an accompanying philosophy. This philosophical anthropocentrism 'diverges from anthropo-supremacism', but also moves away from post-humanism and environmentalism by maintaining the human 'as the central agent on a new kind of earth' (49). The emergence of the condition of the human in the Anthropocene is qualified by tragedy, since we are more powerful than ever, but this power has awakened a sleeping beast. In the metaphoricity of Earth System science, the beast is 'ornery', and 'fighting back' via 'angry summers' and 'death spirals' (47). The humans of the Anthropocene exercise agency, 'enjoying autonomy and power but increasingly up against an opponent that resists our autonomy and tightens our constraints' (52).

Hamilton's response to radical philosophical anthropocentrism is positioned 'against all ethics from Kant onwards', since an imperative replaces autonomy, where 'morality is not to be found in the realm of freedom but is rooted in the realm of necessity because our duty of care for the Earth must precede all others' (52-3). This is an 'anti-humanist anthropocentrism because the destiny of humans now lies as much in the hands of 'Gaia' as our own' (54). His criticism of the anthropocentrism that has led us away from adopting responsibility for our collective role in the Earth System, and suggested move toward a new anthropocentrism that would permit us to act as an intentional collective, is convincing. The Kantian, and modern, division of nature and human collapses, as 'freedom and necessity' too become telescoped on a *Defiant Earth* where Hamilton's anthropomorphism communicates a refusal to yield (139-40). The imprecise language of Earth System science is sharpened in this regard, from fighting angrily toward the singular, resentful intention that underpins defiance. The implied coherence is sound, however, since the violence the Anthropocene greets us with will remain as a reminder of our collective fate.

Like his earlier, more accessible and equally morbid *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change* (2010), *Defiant Earth* assumes the end, and sorts through what remains. In this sense, any (likely still-born) attempts at 'acting in concert' will be conducted in the face of deepening punishment, and tightening constraints. The frightening thing is Hamilton is utterly convincing, and as a result, that his book can never be a stepping-off point. How are we to act in concert without hope as the fulcrum? How is this singularity of purpose and moral certitude to be garnered as an organising force? But there is no answer, for even the only possibility – politics – is no answer to the inevitable. If we should abandon all hope, he asserts, this would add 'moral cowardice' to our list of crimes (160). The book gives shape to the opaque questions made unavoidable by the new epoch, such as '[w]hat kind of creature interfered with the Earth's functioning and would not desist when the facts became known?' (149). Such a question, again, cannot be answered. And as to how to end such a book, Hamilton concedes under the heading 'Living without Utopia': 'I don't know, it's too hard' (157). Some indication of how to move is presented, but there is little solace in the cagey possibility Hamilton muses over, of the distant rise of a 'second civilisation' from the 'planetary ashes of the old one' (162). The tone of the title, and the book as a whole, gives one the sense that it is less intended as stable platform and more as talus or tower from which to leap.

About the reviewer

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