**The “Human” and Climate Change**

Author: Samiur Khan of The Bronx High School of Science, NY

**Introduction**

Global climate change represents an uncertain time period in human history. Though climatic changes towards colder temperatures or warmer temperatures have occurred before throughout Earth’s history, this climatic epoch is the first event that the human species is exposed to. The effects of climate change, which includes rising sea level changes, shifting global agricultural patterns, increasing number of dangerous storm systems, all hold the potential to destroy the institutions, infrastructure, and everything that makes the human human. The root cause of climate change has not yet been entirely established. Different factors like “air and soil temperatures, water systems, aerosols, currents, clouds, plant respirations, farm-animal flatulence, volcanic eruptions, human influences, solar impacts,”⁠1 are all factors that play a role in global climate change.

Though the human species has identified the problem, we haven’t found a stable solution. In modern environmental politics, the subject-object duality that constructs much of western thought implicates environmental thought. These categories can be analyzed through the lens of ontology, where the subject and object have distinct “beings.” The subject is seen as the only actor that can execute an action towards an object. The categories take the form of the human and non-human duality, where the non-human is defined as the “other” that threatens the coherence of the unified “self.” In a similar fashion, because climate change and the environment is externalized from human ontology into a general category of “nature”, the modern response to climate change has devolved into another technical policy issue to be resolved by an abstract technological innovations. This devolution occurs because modern society constructs the human as the rational, technical manager of the environment. This “modern” or “rational” human response to climate change will fail because the human response interacts with systems that only act as band-aids to larger structural causalities, like capitalism,⁠2 that cause climate change.

**The “Human”**

Before we can answer the anthropogenic epoch impacts what it means to be human, we must first ask what does it mean to be human and how it has changed through time in context of politics. The question of what it means to be human is a question that has an answer in flux. The diversity within the environment and on the planet in general has had incredible impacts on the development of human ontology. Though on a biological level all humans are the 99% same, the 1% difference amongst humans have helped in the construction of hierarchies for certain people and against the majority.⁠3 Furthermore, lack of larger social interactions between different groups gave rise to the development of individual social and cultural practices. Each group of humans, developing according to what the environment contains, adapted their respective cultures and hence, different cultures accept different ontological statuses. For example, many Native Americans in North America defined the human as another part of a larger universe composed of spirits, animals, plants.⁠4 This checked against the massive extraction of resources that the Western culture of Europe tends to practice. Many western cultures practiced these extractive policies because of the cultural development driven by Judeo-Christian beliefs such as God creating the world for man to reap its benefits.⁠5

Time has played a huge role in what it means to be human as well. The politics of temporality is a defining feature in cultures, much like the human relation to the world and environment. Different cultures practice different temporalities. Many cultures, like but not limited to the Mayas in Central America or the Egyptian calendars, constructed calendars independent of the Gregorian calendar to help better manage and predict weather or climatic shifts. This was especially important for these cultures because the respective cultures were primarily agricultural (Egyptians needed to predict the flooding of the Nile in order to construct and maintain irrigation systems for example).

There are multiple definitions of what it means to be human, but the definition of the human that has shaped modern politics the most is the western definition. In the post-enlightenment era, the human is defined as the white, Christian, heterosexual, and rich man that externalizes the world for his control. This western definition of what it means to be human is the dominant structuring force in modern politics because technologies of violence like capitalism and colonialism have created a permanent epistemic shift in favor of the western culture, at the cost of others. The European subject, the colonizer, has eradicated the epistemology and culture of a multitude of human cultures and, therefore, eradicated the flux of human ontology. The construction of the Western human as the only human and the normalization of linear temporality and the externalization of the natural world is what subsequently led to the labeling of other cultures that deviated from the norms of the west as subhumans or nonhumans.⁠6

**What is “Nature”?**

While it is important to ask who is human, it is equally but slightly troubling to ask who (or what) is nature? What constitutes nature? The very conflict between who or what in asking about nature can help reveal a lot about relations and representations in language and, therefore, in a culture at large. If the human is defined as an agent that controls the world, then defining “nature” has its limits. Can human grammar capture the true essence of nature? Can human expression and language, which are both facets of human agency, escape the limits. Derrida was correct to argue that “the concept of subjectivity is irreducibly metaphysical and linked to presence and [self-identification].”⁠7 In other words, language has its limits and it is doing injustice to define nature in a static definition. Therefore, nature remains irreducible to simplistic interpretations because it functions in methods that cannot be described. Therefore, the only definition that we can possibly attach to nature is what is outside of the human. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a single “nature.” The assumption of “nature” being a single entity is based off of a romanticization of pre-modern cultural practices.⁠8 This romanticization can often be seen in the advertisement industry in capitalist societies like the United States, where products can be “natural” and the color green has become a symbol of what nature is. In truth, nature and the biosphere that we associate with it is incredibly complex, with interconnecting factors such as weather, climate, topography, etc., all impacting how “nature” functions. While the color green may be accurate in some instance, the ocean, air, soil, desert are all equally a part of nature as well.

**The Failed Response**

Though there may not be a single root cause to climate change, it can be agreed that a wide range of these causalities originate from human practices. These human practices, including widespread consumption of goods and the uninterrupted dumping of toxic waste into the environment has disrupted the natural systems needed to maintain a biological equilibrium in the biosphere.⁠9 The accumulation of human waste following the industrial era has assisted in the increased temperature fluctuations being recorded around the world. Because modern politics is dominated by the western models, philosophies, and metaphysics, modern politics and the ontology of the modern human is what structures the modern human response to the environment. Following the post-Enlightenment era and following the engraining of Judeo-Christian traditions, the human was seen as an agent that transforms the world. The modern rational human is constructed as the ontologically superior being, where the nonhuman, e.g. nature, becomes a standing reserve, a challenge, to complete and compete against human interests because of its inherent irrationality.⁠10 The human morphs the environment, bending it to conform to a set of rational laws.⁠11

The metaphysics of the human implicates the human response to climate change. Many politicians, economists, and students advocate for new policies and new technologies to manage climate change. It is common to see advertisements for natural gas presenting gas as a cleaner alternative. Many advocate for the use of renewable energy sources like wind turbines, solar panels, geothermal energy convertors, etc. However, these responses will all fail because these green capitalist solutions rely on the production of commodities and the recirculation of commodities. This circulation will only set the stage for the contradictions of capitalism to take hold of the issue.

Let’s take for example solar panels. Solar panels may be seen as ingenious for they simply stand facing the sun and supply energy by letting the subatomic particles of the sun conduct work to produce and be converted into energy. However, where do solar panel creators attain supplies? Often, many rare earth metals need to be extracted, which require a corrosive process than can cause irreversible damage not only to the environment but also to local communities situated near these extraction sites.⁠12 Furthermore, what will happen when all the rare earth metal supply run out. Besides just the issue of supplies, green capitalist efforts become tokens for corporations to justify corporate efforts to overlook environmental concerns.⁠13 This tactic was used by BP after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, where the corporation continued drilling for oil after claiming they have fixed the problem. In truth, the extent of the impact of the spill reached to depths beyond human assistance.⁠14 These problems all demonstrate the limits of capitalist solutions to issues of climate change. Capitalist solutions only focus on technical quick-fixes, as band-aids to larger problems.

Another example of the modern response to climate change is the Kyoto Protocol. The summit was a multilateral attempt to address the issue of climate change. Many nations have attempted to create “green” policies that attempt to protect the environment and/or reduce emissions or waste. The Kyoto Protocol, which attempted to create a global standard for emission discharge, was a significant attempt and stands as both a success and a failure. It was a success because it helped unite the states of the world around a problem that threatens the future of humans on Earth but it was also a failure because the principle emitter of the time, the United States, rejected the treaty. Because the US has attained such a dominant presence in the international sphere, not only would no sovereign government condemn the U.S., but the lack of an American signature subsequently led to a decline in the popularity of the treaty. This phenomenon helps to reveal a larger issue within the capacity to solve problems on the level of the government: power and authority. Because the US is a global power, no one would be able to repress or coerce the US into signing an effort towards a more sustainable future. Ideologies bombard and implicate political processes, and the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol is no less of an example that demonstrates as such. Whoever is constructed as the primary source of power within a given space, has the ultimate authority over action and politics at large. The sovereign is seen as the only legitimate actor that can change the world. Because of the limits of agency within western metaphysical thought, collaborative responses are eradicated.

**Hope**

Climate change is a problem not for the planet but for humanity at large. Changing conditions throughout the climate will cause widespread shifts in global biodiversity. The principle of natural selection first theorized by Darwin will take hold; animals that are better suited for the new environment will survive and the probability of widespread destruction if not extinction of unadaptive species will increase. Humans are a part of that second category. The existence of homo sapiens only represents a fraction of the total time compared to the length of time life has existed on Earth. But if the normal response that uses technology and innovation to generate change fails, what will work?

The answer to the climate crisis is simple: we are asking the wrong questions. We shouldn’t ask what the next big innovation is. We shouldn’t ask what policy do we need. We should ask simpler but more fundamental questions that criticize and identify the human practices that have caused a tumult in the climate. Why do we need to consume so much? Why do we need to keep drilling? The answer and truth is simple: we don’t. For 99% of the existence of the human species, the prospect of growth and mass consumption never occurred⁠15. Furthermore, more sustainable alternatives already exist. For example, many Latin American cultures have embraced Buen Vivir, a new movement focus on establishing “harmony between human beings, and…between human beings and nature⁠16.” Though capitalism has established humans as the owners of the land, the alternative paradigm of Buen Vivir eliminates the concept of owning the planet. Instead, all actors of the world are stewards of the world. Buen Vivir is an example of alternatives that have arose out of the questioning of the system. The shifting of the question away from manipulating the ontological other (like nature) towards changing ourselves can go a long way towards creating alternative paradigms to the current unsustainable paradigm and, therefore, can go a long way in generating genuinely sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

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5 Book of Genesis 1:26

6 Sylvia Wynter. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." CR: The New Centennial Review 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed March 29, 2015).

7 Calarco, Matthew. Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

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9 Refer to footnote #2

10 Heidegger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology. New York: Garland Publishing, 1977.

11 Peat, David. Gentle Action. Italy: Pari Publishing, 2008

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13 I have to thank Arjun Reddy for helping me here. I give credit to him for bringing that point.

14 Charles R. Fisher, Pen-Yuan Hsing, Carl L. Kaiser, Dana R. Yoerger, Harry H. Roberts, William W. Shedd, Erik E. Cordes, Timothy M. Shank, Samantha P. Berlet, Miles G. Saunders, Elizabeth A. Larcom, and James M. Brooks, “Footprint of Deepwater Horizon blowout impact to deep-water coral communities,” PNAS 111 (2014) 11744-11749. doi:10.1073/pnas.1403492111

15 Rees, William. “What’s blocking sustainability? Human nature, cognition, and denial.” Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy 6 (2010): 17.

16 Balch, Olivar. “Buen vivir: the social philosophy inspiring movements in South America.” The Guardian. Last Modified: February 4rd, 2013. http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/buen-vivir-philosophy-south-america-eduardo-gudynas