

# Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene - a personal view of what is to be studied

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Distinguished lecture  
American Association of Anthropologists  
Washington December 2014  
(draft for comments)

What does it take to “produce anthropology” - the theme of this year’s meeting? Many things that you are much better able to envision than me. But maybe you need some help and you could do well with a gift and a little nudge forward. The gift is not mine, only the nudge is.

What an amazing gift! Sure it might be poisonous. But how silly it would be not to try to peek through the wrapping to take a glimpse of what is in store. Consider the situation: here is a battered scholarly discipline, always uncertain of its scientific status, constantly plagued by successive and violent “turns” (the “ontological turn” being only the more recent), a field which always finds itself dragged into the middle of harsh political conflicts, a discipline that runs the constant risk of being absorbed by neighboring specialties and voted out of existence by deans and administrators impatient of its methods and ideologies, a discipline that accepts being crushed under the weight of all the violence and domination suffered by the many populations it has decided to champion—a lost cause among all the lost causes; okay, you see the picture, and it is to this same discipline, which a few years ago, an amazing present was offered: pushed from behind by the vast extent of ecological mutations and dragged ahead by philosophers, historians, artists and activists, a sizeable group of natural scientists are describing the quandary of our time in terms that exactly match the standards, vices and virtues of that very discipline. Yes, what a gift! It is really embarrassing, especially if it is not deserved!

I am of course referring here to the strange undertaking by the “subcommittee of Quaternary stratigraphy” headed by my new friend, Jan Zolaciewicz, to name the geological period that might terminate the 13.000 year old Holocene, through the amazing label of Anthropocene. I know the label is still disputed. I am well aware that it is highly contentious (the dates vary wildly from 1945 to 3000 BCA; the proofs from sediments are still unsettled; the politics of it are utterly fuzzy). And yet I really think Dipesh Chakrabarty was right to seize upon this tiny terminological innovation as something that could trigger an entirely different conversation among historians. What is true of post colonial or Marxian historians, should even be truer of anthropologists, and many sessions at this meeting make the point already. In an earlier time, any anthropologists who would have claimed that even geology was made out of human activity would have been considered, and rightly so, as megalomaniacal. Or else what they might have meant was that such a connection between human and non human, mountains and spirits, had been painted upon the frail fabric of myths because only myths were supposed to link sediments and sentiments. But here we are talking about a connection that is literal. Not symbolic. What a surprise.

I want to share with you tonight some of the reasons why I am so interested (some would say infatuated) by the effects of the geologist’s Anthropocene label upon this discipline for which I am an outsider but toward which I feel the most loyalty.

If the idea of naming the period - or epoch, some say even era - “Anthropocene” resonates so deeply for the better and maybe for the worse (you will have to decide at the end of my lecture) with the name of your discipline, it is because it builds upon several of the same fault lines as those upon which anthropology had established its fragile tenements for many decades.

First, the very idea of the Anthropocene places the “human agency” (still undifferentiated, taken en bloc and generically) smack in the center of attention. For you to be “anthropocentric” does not come as a great surprise, but it is certainly a complete shock to stratigraphers used to studying million-year-old pebbles and to digging up sediments deposited long before humans ever appeared as a distinct species.

Second, this new concept defines the human agency by drawing on a bewildering range of entities, some clearly related to the “natural” sciences - biochemistry, DNA, evolutionary trends, rock formation, ecosystem - while others clearly relate to what ethnographers have learned to register throughout their field work - patterns of land use, migrations of plants, animal and people, city life, trajectory of epidemics, demography, inequalities, classes and state policies. In other words, to designate the present period as that of the Anthropocene is to tell all the other disciplines that the task of joining “physical” and “cultural anthropology” (I purposely use labels pertaining to the past of your discipline) is no longer your own undertaking, but what suddenly, without you having even asked for help, hundreds of subfields are also busy doing. Everybody it seems is now converging on the same problem, ready to make the same mistakes and to live through the same traumatic experience as what the discipline of anthropology as a whole had lived through since the beginning of the 19th century: namely, how to get bones and divinities fit together.

Suddenly many hard science colleagues seems to sit uneasily on the same fault line that has been the bane and the glory of our discipline: namely, surviving through an uneasy relation with evolutionary biologists, paleontologists, archeologists, as well as cultural and social ethnographers. (Everyone in this room, I am fairly certain, has a lot of stories to tell about how difficult it has been to collect the two sides of anthropology - the scars are visible everywhere even in the ways museums and departments and collections have been carved out. The French, being well known for their love of politicking, having even gone to the point of pitting two museums against one another: one for the Human bones -the Musée de l'homme- on the Right Bank and another one for art, gods and cultures -the Quai Branly- on the Left Bank...). But the big novelty today is that those fights, those connections, those victories and defeats, now occupy many other people with new instruments, new agendas and coming from many different countries and trades.

At this point you could object that there is no reason to be excited by the replay of the old boring game of “physical” versus “social” dimensions in the definition of human evolution and habitation. To

alternate once again between the twin dangers of “naturalization” on the one hand and “social construction” on the other, seems rather depressing. I agree. But the concept of Anthropocene introduces us to a *third feature* that has the potential to subvert the whole game: to claim that human agency has become the main geological force shaping the face of the earth, is to immediately raise the question of “responsibility”, or as Donna Haraway is fond of saying, “response ability”.

The “anthropos” that is pushed center stage by geologists is not the same passive entity that used to populate the older narrative full of “natural” causal agents. It is a being that is inevitably endowed with a moral and political history. To the great surprise of those who had tried to paint the human agent as a bag of proteins, computerized neurons and selfish calculations, it is as a *moral character* that human agency is entering the geostory of the Anthropocene. Its entry on the scene staged by geologists is also its exit from the scene of “natural history”.

Try to tell my neighbors the farmers of Auvergne, as if it was just a straight “scientific fact”, that their soil is now sterile because of their imprudent land use and that the mouth of their river is now a “dead zone” because of the way they use nitrates. Or try to utter without making it sound as an alarm, as an accusation, the sentence: “Anthropic origin of climate transformation”. Try. And be prepared for tar and feathers! To state the fact and to ring the bell is one and the same thing. No amount of naturalization will clean this little statement from being read as an attribution of responsibility that requires action and probably a fight.

Such is the great paradox of the Anthropocene. There is nothing natural in the telltale signs left by this human agent in the sediments recorded by stratigraphers. Actually, this is exactly the reason why members of the subcommittee in charge of nomenclature assemble to compare their “unnatural” findings in the sedimentary sections they have unearthed. It is because those sediments are so different that today geologists can say that any stratigrapher, a million years from now, will have no more difficulty detecting the neat mark of that geological period in the strata than the K/T transition that marks the demise of dinosaurs. (The topic of Zalaciewicz book’s whose title is fairly typical “The Earth

after us. What legacy will humans leave in the rocks”). In the rocks! This is Elizabeth Povinelli's terrain.

The human agent has grown to the dimension of a *natural* phenomenon (comparable, if you count in terawatts, to plate tectonics) but it has not become more *natural* for all of that. It has a history—a very short one compared to geological periods; it is burdened by responsibility, it depends on some moral economy; it is made to play an active role in this geohistory.

(A funny thing about this subcommittee of the Geological association I have to share with you, is that it is so badly funded that they had to rely on the “Haus der Kultur der Welt” in Berlin to pay for their meeting... Artists financing geologists to decide upon the name of the *Zeitgeist*! You have to recognize that the Anthropocene is a strange animal).

But there is something even more interesting in this concept: as soon as you give that pride of place to human agent, the exact nature of this assemblage is immediately thrown into doubt. This is the feature I find so fascinating in the short period during which scholars absorbed the geologists' innovation. As soon as historians, philosophers, anthropologists and activists stumbled on the name “Anthropocene”, they immediately realized that there was no sense whatsoever in lumping into one undifferentiated “anthropos” all the human agents responsible for shaping the planet. Amazonian Indians, Alaskan seal hunters, Shanghai tycoons, Enron executives, and slum dwellers of Valparaiso could not be ascribed the same responsibility in this newly defined “geological force”. You just have to pronounce the sentence “Anthropic origin of climate transformation” to get the immediate retort: “But *who* is at the origin of that mutation? Certainly not *me*. Not *them*. Maybe *you* are!” So, as soon as the “anthropos” became the centre of the collective attention of geochemists, economists, political scientists and many others, the idea of One Human in charge of that geostory exploded into pieces.

I hope you now recognize how familiar the question is. Anthropologists had been there all along! This is the defining question of our discipline, but not raised, this time, by ethnographers keen on solving the problem of the universality of human cultures, but by hundreds of

new disciplines keen on attributing, eschewing or accepting responsibilities for thousands of different human situations. The old conundrum of what unites the human race is raised all over again from new quarters about issues such as deforestation, CO2 credit swaps, urban dwelling, soot belching kitchen fire, steel mills, coal mines, fisheries, intestine flora and soil degradation. It is in that sense that the very idea of defining our present period as that of the Anthropocene fits so readily within the older pattern of anthropology, as if all the older fights had to be fought all over again, but at a much bigger scale and with lots of new recruits. What is common to all humans and what is specific, that most essential of questions, is opened once again but on a new terrain, even literally, on a new soil.

Except that this old question takes another unexpected twist. Let me explain. In September, I was lucky enough to participate in the Climate March in downtown Manhattan (and with no less a cirerone than Timothy Mitchell, the great historian of the Middle East, of economization and the author of this most important book, *Carbon Democracy*!). I don't know if this has been commented upon or not, but this Climate March had been cleverly sectioned into various slogans. So that, depending through which streets of New York you decided to join the march, you were enrolled behind a different banner. A great idea to transform the long snake of the demonstration into a sort of telegram easily decipherable by the media. At first, Tim and I had chosen the slogan prepared for scientists and (I am not inventing this), “interfaith” followers. Their banner read, not surprisingly: “The debate is over”. Which is true enough. But after a while, realizing that there weren't that many white coats walking behind that one, we decided to move ahead and give our support to another argument. We found ourselves chanting behind what I took to be the best banner of all: “We know who is responsible”.

The “anthropos” of the Anthropocene is not exactly any body, it is made of highly localised networks of some individual bodies whose responsibility is staggering. As Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski write: “We have your names and your telephone number” (this is from a remarkable book, edited by Emilie Hache, on what the Anthropocene does to anthropology). Such an attribution of

responsibility and this dispersion of the “anthropos” into specific historical and local networks, actually gives a lot of weight to the other candidate for naming the same period of geohistory, that of “*capitalocene*”, a swift way to ascribe this responsibility to whom and to where it belongs.

So, as you may see, choosing the name Anthropocene brings together three features fairly familiar to anthropologists: the concentration on human agency; the necessity to tackle again the connection between what used to be called “physical” and “cultural” anthropology; and the reopening of the key question of what is common and what is specific in the various ways of inhabiting the earth. Is this enough of a gift? Or are you still worried that it might be a poison in disguise?

Well there is a *fourth* element that is brought in with the idea of the Anthropocene and this one is not so familiar. Quite the contrary, it runs against what anthropology has most lamented about. Suddenly, with the question of the Anthropocene everywhere on the table, anthropologists are confronted head on with the question of urgency and political relevance. Of course, this has always been the case, but the political relevance of the ethnographer’s field work has never been easily reconciled with the epistemological goal of establishing a science of the human. Relevance was an after effect, not a central point. Most often it had to be resisted so as to save the sanctity of the quest. But to the bewilderment of many, it is all the disciplines that are now seized by the same feeling of urgency and the heated necessity of “doing something” and influencing policy on hundreds of issues for which academics are suddenly pushed to the forefront. No need to be an “*anthropologue engagé*”: the engagement comes to you as soon as you open your mouth.

If you doubt that this plight has become common, ask the climate scientists who are part of the IPCC to tell you how it feels to be messengers of alerts that are not being heard by those who are most directly impacted. And then compare this politicization of “natural” science with the problems encountered by ethnographers forced to “politicize” their own involvement with their “own people” (as the saying went) while keeping within the standards of objectivity. You will realize that the question of political relevance and urgency has spread

from scholarly fields to hard sciences. It is all the disciplines that are now fighting with the urgent mission of assembling humans on newly defined territories - exactly the problems raised by anthropologists long ago.

In that sense the concept of the Anthropocene pushes anthropology to the centre stage and requests from it to be worthy of its original mission - a mission that anthropologists probably never really wanted to have! Or that many thought the discipline had definitely abandoned in favour of a glorified version of story telling to which were added some radical pronouncements against power, injustice and domination. Remember the old concept of “posthuman”? Posthuman! Just at the time when the Anthropocene brings the human back with a vengeance! You might be unprepared for a situation where too many people take your discipline too seriously... It is in that sense that you might consider the gift of the Anthropocene handed to you by geologists too much of a good thing. [HALF]

Your decision, it seems to me, depends on whether or not I am right in thinking that both sides of the former division between physical and cultural anthropology are being reconfigured by the unexpected entry of the Anthropocene as the defining name of our period.

If I am wrong then we will simply be back where we were in the 20th century. Natural scientists (aided by economists and cognitivists) will happily drown the results of ethnography with a few sets of “natural forces” in the service of an even harsher round of “modernization”. It was reductionism. It will be reductionism. Against this trend there will be no other game to play than the usual one we are so good at: we will be left insisting on the specificity, openness, rich situated and historical dimension of human agents. In this case, the very agency granted to the “anthropos” by geologists will come split in two, just as before. And just as in an earlier time, what we take as the hallmark of our field—attention to the fragility, specificity and multiplicity of human attachments—will be considered as simply irrelevant. In other words, the fad of the Anthropocene will have been just another name for the attempts of neoliberalism to define the globe. The global will have gobbled up everything else.



Can the conversation really change? Imagine the cocktail conversation: - What is your field? - I am an anthropologist. - Meaning? - Meaning I am studying people who live in the Anthropocene. - Do you mean *me*? - Yes, you, in addition to many others... See? This is a very different definition from the idea that anthropologists study *specific* people or *specific aspects* of being human.

To clarify this change in definition, I am afraid I have nothing more to offer than a few scraps of my recent experience. If I called this lecture “a personal view of what is to be studied” this is because there is no other way but for everyone to decide how he or she might accept or not the gift of living during a period of history named after the main topics of one’s own discipline.

Let me start with the “physical” side of things (even though I know the adjective “physical” has become largely obsolete). The key thing here is this question of agency or more precisely of *animation*. All the scientific disciplines that are converging around the Anthropocene (in Paris, I lead a consortium of 22 laboratories of geochemistry, geology, geography, political sciences, law and media studies) have a specific style: they define the many entities that are proliferating in their models or field stations as being “animated”. No, I exaggerate, they would not say “animated” but they would say “not dead” or “surprising” or “being dependent on other entities just as surprising”. For instance, I was struck when a renowned chemist from our consortium complained that there were so many types of carbone dioxides, that he needed a geopolitical map of CO<sub>2</sub>s in the plural... “Geopolitics” is his adjective. Too many different CO<sub>2</sub>s? Even for an ethnographer of science like me who is used to the surprises of field work, this came as a shock. We immediately started a collaboration to bring scientometrics to try to map out this odd type of geopolitics.

This is what I mean by “animated”: surprising agencies where we expected no surprise, because we were supposed to deal with “material entities”. For instance, Ian Zalaciewicz’s book *The planet in a pebble* is entirely animated, in the sense that it is freed from the “cause reduces consequences to nothing” narrative that is paralyzing so much scientific writing, and which is at the origin of what is called, strangely enough, the “scientific world view”. His whole book is the history of one Welsh

pebble, from the Big Bang to now. In his account, everything moves. Consequences *add* to their causes, a pragmatist tenet which is pretty hard to keep up with. It is not “How forests think”, but rather “how rocks register the transformations of history”. I take it as a very important sign that Zalaciewicz, the head of the now famous sub-committee on Quaternary nomenclature, is also able to write such an amazing book about a non-human, a mere pebble, a stone freed from the silly role given to “mere objects” by scientific writers and their enemies (in epistemology, usually, rocks and stones are used only for stoning relativists to silence). Is this not a good omen when totally unusual scientists meet totally unusual anthropologists to share some of their narrative strategies?

The great philosophical contribution of the Anthropocene is that *narrativity*, what I call *geostory*, is not a layer added to the brutal “physical reality” but what the world itself is made of. Something on which novelists such as Richard Powers, anthropologists like Eduardo Kohn or Anna Tsing feed on. And it is also, as I have shown elsewhere, the great contribution of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. When they say the “planet is alive” it does not mean there is one big organism that is to be called Earth, but that its many ingredients are all building their own world. “Connected” does not mean “holistic”, any more than “animated” means “having a soul”. The range of animation entertained by scientists is much wider than what philosophers and even bio-semioticians are prepared to register. Why is it that, in our field, we take infinite precautions when Bororos “say they are Araras” and that we jump to the conclusion that scientists are “naturalists” when they say that “Coal is made from sedimented life forms”? No, scientists are just as innovative; they too try to get out from under all sorts of metaphysical assumptions handed to them by philosophers that would result in them speaking of a dead planet. And not the one they live on with the rest of us.

My impression is that those scientists I meet around the “Politics of the Earth at the time of the Anthropocene” (it's the modest name of our consortium!) are not so ready to present their objects of study as *de-animated*. They are so conscious of the multiplicity of factors they have to take into account and of the specificity of their field sites (many of those I follow are boots in the muds types) that they don't buy the reductionist

style of their colleagues. Especially when many of the cycles or loops they study include human actions distributed throughout.

This is where the Mobius strip quality of the Anthropocene has such an educating effect on all disciplines. Adding geochemistry on top of land tenure or agricultural subsidies on top of methane emissions (I say on top on purpose to break down the notion of levels), has a sobering effect on every one of the partners. Especially when every paper and study they write is drawn into this other Mobius strip of restitution, reflexivity, media publicity and then back to science policy. And all the more so when you work under the urgent pressure of having to take a decision. Not respecting the sacrosanct distinction of fact and value has, in the end, a civilizing effect: be more careful of what you say about what the others do, and be prepared to react quickly to the consequences of what has been agreed upon.

Remember this idea that social sciences could never be really scientific because the researchers were too much involved with their subject matter? Well, the great thing about living in the Anthropocene is that this is common to pretty much everybody. No View from Nowhere to be obtained here; nor any Great Unification to be expected. The consortium I had proposed to assemble is simply based on the project of learning to navigate in common a landscape of controversial data. Nothing to feed the rash impulse of reductionist predictions. But a great way to have data sets converge on, for instance, the questions of environmental inequalities if you can get soil scientists, chemists, lawyers, public health officials, to share their uncertainties.

The people with whom I study name their network “critical zones”. They define them as so many fully instrumented water catchments where they study everything from the top of the canopy to the mother rocks deep down. “Critical zones”? Is this not an excellent name for collaboration with those who are so fond of critique - and so worried of its deferral? And is this not a term as excellent as those other concepts natural scientists keep inventing? Such as “tipping points”, “planetary boundaries”, “great acceleration”, a zoo of concepts to absorb what it is to run inside such a roundabout - and I am not even talking of the institutional innovations proliferating all around the world to handle those new anthroposcenes (a term used by artists where “scenes” is now

used as in scenography) the most famous of those innovations being the very protocol of the IPCC.

We always forget how recent the scientific enterprise is and how much leeway there is—there should be—for those many disciplines to evolve and change their tone and standing because of the change in the conflicts surrounding them. Having to deal with “animated” agencies is just as difficult for soil scientists of Paris as for the Runa of Ecuador. And both are trying to invent how to resist the crisis destroying their own land. I have been studying scientists for forty years and I really think that the pressure of the Anthropocene is making them willing to engage with our sorts of disciplines in a way that is really novel. (And the good news is that it has nothing to do with “inter-disciplinarity”...).

Since the topic of this meeting is “Producing anthropology”, it might be worth betting that when former “cultural” or “social” anthropologists meet all those fields and sites, they will be surprised to see how little they resemble the “natural sciences” they had learned to eschew in the name of the fight against “naturalization” and biopower. How could you “naturalize” anything anyway when the very ingredients of what used to play the role of “natural forces” have been so transmogrified that they includes humans in pieces and morsels at every junction?

I insist, once again: such intricate links between humans and non humans in complex cosmograms have been described in every single ethnographic monograph but always with the risk of being seen as only “symbolic”. Now it is literal. And that transforms everything, because it means that all field studies are studying devastated sites in crisis. To be on planet Earth at the time of the Anthropocene is not the same thing as being “in nature” at the time of its modernization. *Cosmopolitics* is now the common situation for all collectives. There is no common world, and yet it has to be composed, nonetheless.

How does the situation sound when we turn to the other side—even though the whole point of my argument is that there are no longer two sides? Do we register the same amount of innovation, the same excitement, the same urge to collaborate, the same surprise at meeting in every juncture former non human entities suddenly present with full

blown agency? Is my beloved principle of symmetry applicable here so that, in the Anthropocene, “cultural” anthropologists are just as ready to shed their habit of using society and culture, as “physical” anthropologists are to redistribute what count as “natural forces”?

No, I don't feel so; at least if I follow recent disputes around the “ontological turn”. (Nothing wrong by the way with taking many turns even it makes you dizzy; it is possible that turning in ever-enlarging circles might be a necessity at the time of the Anthropocene to absorb the various loops that define the situation).

It seems to me that many anthropologists wish to keep the human in the center, without always realizing that the center has shifted, and that the human agent has been put in the center also by geologists, climatologists, soil scientists and epidemiologists — before being redistributed again.

There is a tricky problem of design here: concentrating around the human could mean either maintaining this character apart from other entities—the former beings of “nature” defining by contrast what could be called the “humanistic” position—, or it could mean accepting that, as soon as you take the human into consideration, it is suddenly redistributed (not *disintegrated*, that's the whole point, but *redistributed*) in many other roles and connections that make its earlier figurations unrecognisable. And with the great danger of losing its humanity in the process. This is the great risk of the Anthropocene, I agree. And that's what humanistic anthropologists warn against and rightly so.

Except if it is the case that “producing anthropology” remains what it has always been, namely producing the effect that every monograph always has had on its reader: first I don't recognize the usual face of humanity, and yet, on second thought, I do recognize it.

Such is the drama into which Chakrabarty has plunged all of us: What does it mean to redistribute human agency without being humanist, or post-human, or anti-humanist? Where is the politics of assembling a character which is pushed to the center but which simultaneously loses its boundary, consistence and definition because it is tied—morally tied—to all of what in earlier times would have been, to use a now famous subtitle, “beyond the human”? That's what I mean by

the tasks of *composition* (very much linked to that of *composting* as Donna always emphasizes).

Those questions are at once central to anthropology—the human figure is a Western conceit, a naturalistic conception, everyone seems to agree—but they are also the questions that most anthropologists wish not to tackle head on since it would mean searching for alternative metaphysics. I use “metaphysics” here just to avoid the O word. In reality, this is where, sorry to mention it, *ontological* questions are back. Attached to the Western conception of nature you also find the various conceptions of what sort of stuff society is, what role politics is supposed to play, how religion is to be located, what it is to have a mind, how law is bound to act, what can you expect from fiction, what is the standing of technical artifacts, and so on and so forth. Modernism comes within a package. How strange it is to want to get rid of the Western definition of nature but to take as totally intangible, in the name of humanism, all the other notions, especially those of power, social order, critique and political struggle. It is as if you claimed to meet otherness but only on the condition that it fits exactly inside the same eternal and universal patterns of “social life”.

I know it is foolish on my part to try to rescue my own project on describing the plurality of modes of existence from the preventive strike fired at the last AAA Chicago meeting and from which it is not supposed to recover. And yet I have the weakness to think that “producing anthropology” also means re-describing what those who have never been modern have been up to. The reason has nothing to do with maintaining the modern /non-modern distinction. It is just the opposite: since “we” have never been modern, there is no recognizable “we” and “they”. Modernization is a war cry that has to be resisted everywhere. Anthropocene could offer another occasion to find an alternative to modernization. Another occasion to renegotiate the shape, boundary, limit and extent of the “we” whose humanity is once again in question and that the Anthropocene is pressing upon everybody to answer, and fast.

Let me conclude. There is a huge difference between being “modern” and being “contemporary”. Actually knowing how to become a

contemporary, that is, of one's own time is the most difficult thing there is. This is probably the reason for my conversion to anthropology, forty two years ago, while I was supposed to be teaching philosophy in Ivory Coast, right on the frontier of a ruthless form of neo-colonialism. I converted not because I wanted to study the “human”. Not because I was interested in some types of people by distinction to others. But because I realized at once that using “modernization” as a shibboleth to understand the colonial situation would lead me nowhere—especially if I wanted also to study California scientists.

I felt that to stick to the concept of “modernity” would have distracted me from the time and from the space I inhabited, that it would have forced me to encounter the wrong type of agency. I realized at once, that “Modernity” could be a topic to study -I have done nothing else ever since- but never a *ressource* to describe any situation whatsoever. “Modernize” is a mot d'ordre. Not a concept. Not a thing. It destroys your ability to be the contemporary of what happens around you. It is a debilitating machine. It's made for that. While philosophy as a field was totally dependent on the concept of modernity, it appeared to me that anthropology could be an entry into the contemporary: precisely because it took ontology seriously at last. Not as symbolic representation. Not as those beliefs left on the wrong side of the modernizing frontier. But as life and death struggle to have the right to stand in one's own time and place.

In the same way as there is a shift from the modernizing frontier to the contemporary, there is a shift from the utopia of modernity to the relocalization of all the places and sites. By this I mean that everywhere the notion of territory is back, and even, that of the soil. And in the same way as becoming a contemporary is not a return to the past of modernity, this relocalization has nothing to do with attachment to the “terroir”. What is to be reoccupied is not the post Renaissance idea of a territory, that is, a bounded piece of land viewed and ruled from a centre, but very much a new definition of an unbounded network of attachments and connections. It means that the search for *where* we are in space is just as complicated as to find *when* we are in time. This is why I think it is fair to say that in the same way as the idea of “otherness” came in the 16th century from the “great discovery” (in effect a land grab) of a new

“empty” continent, allowing the modern world to live for a few centuries in its utopia of an infinite frontier, a completely new definition of “otherness” will come from this other “great discovery” not, to be sure, of a new continent to be grabbed, but of another way for every piece of land to reside under the feet of those who have, at last, never been modern.

And yet, until recently, I had not met any alternative concept that would redefine spatial and time coordinates as well as the right type of agency, to root me in back in my time and space (I toyed with “ecology” but it didn't work too well). This is what the definition of the Anthropocene could do: it gives another definition of time, it redescribes what it is to stand in space, and it reshuffles what it means to be entangled within animated agencies. At the time of the Anthropocene, anthropology is not a specialized discipline; it is the name of what it is to reoccupy the time and space taken out of all of us by the modernising frontier. See why it is a gift? But I agree an embarrassing one and, in spite of what I said, you might be wise not to accept it! As I said: too much of a good thing...