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Bringing the Nature Back in: Situating International Relations in The Anthropocene

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Summary

The Anthropocene era brings evolving challenges to international relations. The impact of human activities on the earth system makes it impossible for us not to put IR within the Anthropocene context. IR should include the Anthropocene context in theoretical and practical debates to stay relevant to current conditions. When IR recognizes the Anthropocene in a limited context, the debates will round at resulting partial and incomplete responses in facing this era's complex and urgent challenges.

Keywords: *Anthropocene, human activities, ecological challenges, international politics, environmental crises*

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Clocking in Anthropocene

We are living in the Anthropocene and recognizing it should change our ways of seeing the world and our relationships within it. Crutzen & Stoermer (2000) introduced the Anthropocene term to highlight the distinct characteristic of the geological epoch or era we live in. It is the era where humans (Anthropos) are the dominant force shaping the geology and ecology of Planet Earth (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Technological progress and industrialization in the last few hundred years have changed the Earth's climate faster than hundreds of years before. While there are debates on when the Anthropocene era started, there is a strong consensus among the scientific community that climate change is human induced (Cook et al., 2016).

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report shows that human activities, primarily greenhouse gas emissions, have caused global warming, with global surface temperatures reaching 1.1°C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020 (IPCC, 2023). Global warming brings tremendous consequences, both in the future and today, as we witness a continuous increase in the quantity and intensity of climate-related disasters. Without significant changes in managing our relationships with nature, we are collectively heading toward a climate catastrophe.

The term "Anthropocene" is also useful to highlight the entanglement between the systems that govern our intra-human relationships at different scales (global, national, local) and dimensions (security, political, economic, etc.) and the ecological system. Patterns of intra-human relationships affect the ecological system and vice versa. Exploitative human activities, driven by pursuing economic growth or competition for scarce resources to ensure political primacy in the international system, lead to climate change, environmental degradation, ecosystem destruction, and resource scarcity. These conditions, in turn, lead to increasing competition over resources, leading to instability in international politics (Evans, 2011) and the fragility of the economic system. This is why we believe students of International Relations (IR) should begin to situate their studies in the context of the Anthropocene.

Evolving Challenges in International Relations

Our usual IR conversations and debates are often based on assumptions that are not taking the embeddedness of the patterns of intra-human relationships within the ecological system into serious consideration. Concepts such as "anarchical international structure," "liberal international order," or "global capitalist system" often miss the fact that these patterns are manifesting in, conditioned by, and mutually constitutive to, specific ecological context. In short, despite the increasing awareness of the human impact on the ecosystem and how ecosystem changes affect us, there is still limited recognition of the Anthropocene context in the discussions of IR.

Increasing Great Power competition, for example, is often seen as independent and disconnected from the issue of climate change while they are deeply entangled. Furthermore, ecosystem damage affects the entire population of planet Earth regardless of the geographical boundaries of countries. Such a condition poses challenges to IR, especially regarding the emergence of social and political conflicts. From the international security study perspective, new non-traditional threats are emerging. For example, unsustainable agricultural practices and drought give rise to social conflicts in Sudan (Eklund, 2022) or dam construction in Ethiopia that causes human security threats in Egypt

(Ezzamouri, 2022). These examples show that excessive human activity can threaten and change the international security landscape.

The landscape of the international political economy is also changing due to human activities. Excessive exploitation of natural resources for industrialization that is not environmentally friendly causes many ecosystems to change. The global economic system based on neoliberalism prioritizes economic growth by ignoring social and environmental impacts. However, the impact of exploitative human activity is distributed unequally among countries and societies. Developing countries experienced much more significant effects than developed countries, even though developed countries were responsible for past emissions from their economic activities. When viewed based on the income groups, the wealthiest 1% income group (63 million people) is responsible for 15% of emissions cumulatively. The poorest half of the world's population (3.1 billion people) is responsible for only 7% of cumulative emissions (Tim Gore et al., 2020). It requires a transformation of the global economic system that is more supportive of sustainability but still fair to less developed and impoverished countries.

In addition to the challenges in international political economy, the Anthropocene era witnessed how certain societies experienced a more significant impact of exploitative human activities on the planet. Many indigenous people still firmly hold their low-carbon way of life in their natural environment. However, they are exposed to greater impacts from global ecosystem change. For example, some African indigenous people are under pressure to survive because climate change causes frequent floods, crop failures, and community displacements (Filho et al., 2021). Paradoxically, indigenous peoples' contributions to climate change are minimal, yet their survival is at greater risk. In addition to indigenous peoples' issues, changes in global ecosystems also affect the migration of more vulnerable groups. For example, a prolonged drought in the Sahel prompted families to send members to Europe for better income after harvest (Oli Brown, 2008).

Bringing the Nature Back In - How Recognizing the Anthropocene Context Could Help IR to be More Relevant?

While the Anthropocene challenges are becoming more visible, IR discussions and debates do not adequately consider this new reality. Without situating IR discussions in the Anthropocene context, we cannot understand how different issues are deeply entangled, leading to mutual ignorance between separate "compartments" of the IR scholarly community. Those who are focusing on Great Power rivalry, for example, are often unaware that the behaviors of these Great Powers are embedded within a context of a coming climate catastrophe. On the other hand, those who focus on environmental issues often forget the global political-economic structure and balance of power. These disconnections are a mismatch for understanding IR in the era of the Anthropocene.

It also has policy consequences. Over time, these partial approaches to understanding IR leads policymakers to develop policies that only address global challenges in a non-comprehensive manner, leading to a deteriorating sustainability of global ecosystems, including the well-being of humanity.

We have a success story of dealing with the challenge of environmental catastrophe. The international community collaborates to protect the ozone layer by banning the production and use of damaging CFCs through the Montreal Protocol. This protocol's success is marked by signs of restoring the ozone

layer, shrinking the ozone hole, and saving 2 million people from skin cancer each year (UNEP, 2019). However, this success is not seen in other international environmental cooperation.

Why the Montreal Protocol remains the sole anomaly? We believe that it has to do with how we attempt to understand and address the challenge without understanding the entanglements between patterns that govern intra-human relations (including inter-state and intra-state political and economic systems and the global economic system) and patterns of human-nature relations. Our "sectoral" and "compartmentalized" approaches, in contrast to embracing the reality of entanglements demanded by the era of Anthropocene, lead to partial and incomplete responses, which would never work.

The Paris Agreement and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are examples of this reality. Although the agreement began in 2015, exploitative human activities and their environmental impacts are getting worse. The main reason behind this is the current policy context, which undermines the significance of the Anthropocene context and reflects a broader issue within IR that also does not recognize the concept of the Anthropocene. While some states show an active commitment to reducing emissions and protecting the planet, others prioritize economic growth and national interests, resulting in a competitive and uncooperative environment when dealing with the challenges of the Anthropocene era. The prevailing perspective of an anarchic world system centered around state power further hampers effective environmental cooperation. Consequently, these agreements struggle to effectively respond to the pressing issues posed by the Anthropocene era. A paradigm shift is needed in IR and policymaking to effectively address this era's complex and urgent challenges.

The challenges posed by the Anthropocene era have become increasingly evident. It is crucial for IR to adjust its focus and recognize the Earth as a complex interconnected system, integrating the Anthropocene context into its theory and practice. This involves acknowledging that human activities, regardless of location, profoundly impact global ecosystems. With this, IR can be better prepared to understand and address the incoming, or even ongoing, multiple crises that threaten all of us.

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