

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Anthropocene rupture in international relations: Future politics and international life

Tom Lundborg* 

Department of Political Science and Law, Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, Sweden

*Corresponding author. Email: tom.lundborg@fhs.se

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Abstract

The Anthropocene rupture refers to the beginning of our current geological epoch in which humans constitute a collective geological force that alters the trajectory of the Earth system. An increased engagement with this notion of a rupture has prompted a lively debate on the inherent anthropocentrism of International Relations (IR), and whether it is possible to transform it into something new that embraces diverse forms of existence, human as well as non-human. This article challenges that possibility. It shows how much of the current debate rests on the idea fulfilling future desirable ideals, which are pushed perpetually beyond a horizon of human thought, making them unreachable. As an alternative, the article turns to Jacques Derrida's understanding of the future to come (*l'avenir*), highlighting the significance of unpredictability and unexpected events. This understanding of the future shows how life within and of the international rests on encounters with the future as something radically other. On this basis, it is argued that responding to our current predicament should proceed not by seeking to fulfil future ideals but by encountering the future as incalculable and other, whose arrival represents an opportunity as much as a threat to established forms of international life.

Keywords: The Anthropocene; International Life; Future Politics; Derrida; Climate Crisis; Time

Introduction

The notion of an Anthropocene rupture, referring to the birth of our current geological epoch in which humans constitute a collective geological force, has come to pose a severe challenge to the modern discipline of International Relations (IR).¹ While a growing awareness of this rupture has prompted a reconsideration of the modern split between human culture and nature, IR is, just like

¹The concept of an Anthropocene rupture is developed by Clive Hamilton in *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), ch. 1. The notion of the Anthropocene as a distinct geological epoch was first discussed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene"', *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme Newsletter* (2000). Since then many other significant contributions to the concept of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch that has succeeded the previous epoch of the Holocene (which started over 11,000 years ago) have been published, including Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen, 'The new world of the Anthropocene', *Environmental Science and Technology Viewpoint*, 44:7 (2010), pp. 2228–31. While agreeing that a rupture has indeed taken place there is disagreement in this literature on when it occurred. Prominent suggestions include the beginning (around 1750) or halfway point (around 1800) of the Industrial Revolution, and, in particular, the post-1945 'Great Acceleration' of global environmental change, see Zalasiewicz et al., 'The new world of the Anthropocene', p. 2230; Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, 'The Anthropocene: Conceptual and historical perspectives', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, 369 (2011), pp. 842–67 (p. 849); Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig, 'The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The great acceleration', *The Anthropocene Review*, 2:1 (2015), pp. 81–98 (p. 93). For the purposes of this article, the importance of the rupture relates

other social sciences, based on that very distinction. By placing the human subject in the foreground and nature passively in the background, IR is inherently anthropocentric. In response, a rapidly expanding literature has started to address the crucial question of whether it is possible to transform IR into something less anthropocentric and closer to an alternative vision of the world, linked, for example, to concepts of ecology, Gaia, and post-humanism.²

This article challenges the idea of revitalising IR through new ontologies of a (post-) Anthropocene world. Such attempts, it is noted, commonly rest on assumptions of a future ideal. Irrespective of how radical the ideal is said to be, efforts to reach it cannot escape the logic whereby all thinking and action must begin from within a human horizon, while the future itself is pushed beyond the horizon. Trying to overcome a human-centred IR thus becomes an impossible task as it involves transcending a horizon of thought whose end point moves perpetually further away the closer one gets.³

Instead of trying to revitalise IR on the basis of alternative ontologies and future ideals, this article turns to Jacques Derrida's understanding of *l'avenir*, the future to come. Crucially, this is not a future that can be purposefully worked towards in the hope of one day reaching it. Rather, it points to the arrival of something unexpected that cannot be known, desired, or predicted in advance. The future, in this sense, must be encountered as something radically *other*, or else it no longer has any value as a distinct temporality and merely becomes a reaffirmation of established ideas and traditions.

Derrida's understanding of the future to come, it is argued, has important implications for IR. Rather than seeking to overcome an inherent anthropocentrism of IR by aspiring towards an alternative vision of the future, a more productive response entails conceptualising the international *vis-à-vis* a future other. The international, in this sense, can be grasped as a structure that both enables life and itself has a life. While this international life is unavoidably human-centric, it is also conditioned by encounters with a future that is neither human nor non-human, hence a future predicated on no particular ontology. It is in relation to these encounters, the article concludes, that the future of international life has to be grasped.

The article begins by giving an account of the Anthropocene rupture and the challenges the idea of such a rupture poses to our understanding of human history as inextricably interlinked with the history of the Earth. The next two sections consider different attempts to respond to this rupture by exploring its relevance as a reference point for a reinvigorated IR. While these attempts seek to affirm more inclusive ontologies, it is noted that they all depend on the future ideal as a naturalised basis of critique. In this way, they also seek to transcend the Anthropocene horizon while remaining within it. To disrupt this horizon, the fourth section turns to Derrida's *l'avenir* as an alternative understanding of the future. The final section of the article explores some of the main implications of this understanding of the future for IR, focusing in particular on how it can be used in order to analyse the temporal finitude of international life and the encounters between this life and its future other.

The rupture

The questions raised in the ongoing debate on the Anthropocene are enormous and the stakes equally high. In brief, they centre on the task of trying to rethink the human subject's place in the cosmos and, in so doing, remedy even if not fully reverse the disastrous impact this subject has had on the global environment. It is a task with potentially huge ramifications as it directly

not to *when* it occurred but rather to how it signals a paradigm shift for thinking about the relationship between humans and the Earth.

²For a good overview of the literature on the Anthropocene in IR, see Dahlia Simangan, 'Literature review: Where is the Anthropocene? IR in a new geological epoch', *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 211–24.

³My inspiration when using the metaphor of the horizon in this way is largely taken from Didier Maleuvre, *The Horizon: A History of Our Infinite Longing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

challenges prevailing notions of ‘man’, rather than ‘nature’, as the primary subject of modern politics.⁴ Whether the modern political order has sought to reaffirm the place of the human subject within a state/state system or championed her rights *as* human beyond that system, it is nevertheless the human subject that has been its primary concern.

What makes the idea of an Anthropocene epoch unique compared to previous geological epochs is that it highlights a rupture in *both* human *and* Earth history.⁵ According to one key definition, ‘the Anthropocene represents a new phase in the history of both humankind and of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces became intertwined, so that the fate of one determines the fate of the other.’⁶ The arrival of the Anthropocene signals in this way a rupture brought about by humans while affecting the Earth system as a whole.⁷ Due to the increase of carbon dioxide emissions dating back to the onset of the industrial revolution but having a decisive impact post-1945, the changes made to the Earth system directly caused by humans are palpable. The acidification of the oceans and the melting of glaciers and ice sheets are just some of the devastating consequences of human action on the environment, consequences that will be impossible to simply reverse. The human impact on the global environment and the Earth system as a whole is everlasting.

Human history and Earth history can thus no longer be separated. They have converged and become part of the same historical reality.⁸ Yet the primary agent of this story is often said to remain the human subject, not only as a biological creature but also as a collective force that has altered the trajectory of the Earth system. Clive Hamilton thus asks: ‘Does not the arrival of the Anthropocene justify new grounds for an emerging narrative of humanity as a whole?’⁹ In his view, the arrival of the Anthropocene is precisely that decisive rupture in history that enables, indeed *requires* conceiving of humanity as a whole. ‘The Anthropocene arrives’, he writes, ‘as the totalizing event *par excellence*’.¹⁰

To think of humanity as a universal whole can of course be seen as problematic. This is partly because it is highly unclear what humanity ‘as such’ actually refers to, partly because any representations of its meaning are inevitably based on particular points of view.¹¹ As Dipesh Chakrabarty explains:

Who is the We? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like *mankind*, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.¹²

This observation is crucial because it highlights the limits of the ‘Anthropocene’ as a historical concept. While abstract, however, the universal figure of the human subject also seems necessary if the aim is to think of a dramatic rupture when humans, collectively, *became* a geological agent. Moreover, this notion of a collective subject seems vital for envisioning a possible transition from

⁴R. B. J. Walker, ‘On the protection of nature and the nature of protection’, in Jef Huysmans, Andrew Dobson, and Raia Prokhovnik (eds), *The Politics of Protection: Sites of Insecurity and Political Agency* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), pp. 189–202.

⁵Steffen et al., ‘The trajectory of the Anthropocene’, p. 94.

⁶Zalasiewicz et al., ‘The new world of the Anthropocene’, p. 2231.

⁷Hamilton, *Defiant Earth*, p. 48.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 77.

¹¹See Scott Hamilton, ‘I am uncertain, but We are not: A new subjectivity of the Anthropocene’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 607–26.

¹²Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The climate of history: Four theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 197–222 (p. 220), emphasis in original.

the current state of the Anthropocene, plagued by a global climate crisis, to some sort of post-Anthropocene future no longer premised on the idea of man's superiority over nature.¹³ Such a transition, however, is far from straightforward.

What does it even mean to imagine a future in which the human subject is no longer placed at the centre of our political imagination? Even more challenging, how is it possible to envision a future in which the nature/culture binary has been dissolved and given way to a new reality, and a new (international) politics? While difficult to answer, recently there have been some prominent attempts in IR to address these questions. The next two sections consider two main ways of doing so. At the heart of these attempts are different ways of thinking the relationship between past, present, and future. They respond in this way to what can be seen as one of the main challenges of the Anthropocene concept, namely that while it 'reflects the nature, scale and magnitude of human impacts on the Earth, its societal significance lies in how it can be used to explore and guide attitudes, choices, decisions and actions that will reverberate far into the future.'¹⁴ In other words, what makes the Anthropocene concept both interesting and challenging relates to how a new way of thinking our collective past is directly linked to ideas about alternative futures.

A more desirable future

Critical IR was for a long time dedicated to the Kantian regulative ideal, according to which 'man' should be seen as an end in itself. For Immanuel Kant, the highest purpose of man's freedom is to act in accordance with the moral law whereby every man is treated as an end rather than as a means.¹⁵ This crucial part of Kant's moral philosophy has influenced several efforts to articulate an international politics based on the desire to harmonise relations between human subjects, beyond the segregating borders that separate them on the basis of their citizenship.¹⁶

In the context of the Anthropocene, aspiring towards increased human freedoms appears to have become an insufficient purpose of critique.¹⁷ The human subject needs to become more harmonised with earthly life, beyond the forms of political community that continue to place man at the centre.¹⁸ There is, according to this view, a need to challenge the anthropocentrism that pervades IR, and to think beyond the human subject as the primary agent of history and change. For Cameron Harrington, this means that 'we must force IR into an uncomfortable place, and consider the enmeshing of natural and social processes.'¹⁹ Moreover, 'for IR to contribute to contemporary debates about the global environmental change, it needs to shift its ontological and ethical boundaries and incorporate the diverse entanglements of humans, non-humans, things, and natures.'²⁰ For this to happen, it no longer suffices to think of nature and the environment as mere 'issues', separated from a presupposed core of IR.²¹

¹³Ibid., p. 203.

¹⁴Xuemei Bai et al., 'Plausible and desirable futures in the Anthropocene: A new research agenda', *Global Environmental Change*, 39 (2016), pp. 351–62 (p. 352).

¹⁵Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 45.

¹⁶Two prominent examples of theorising IR in this spirit are Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1982), and Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁷See Olaf Corry, 'Nature and the international: Towards a materialist understanding of societal multiplicity', *Globalizations*, 17:3 (2020), pp. 419–35 (p. 420).

¹⁸Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel J. Levine, 'Planet politics: A manifesto from the end of IR', *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523 (p. 520).

¹⁹Cameron Harrington, 'The ends of the world: International Relations and the Anthropocene', *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 478–98 (p. 480).

²⁰Ibid., p. 481.

²¹See Olaf Corry and Hayley Stevenson, 'IR and the Earth: Societal multiplicity and planetary singularity', in Olaf Corry and Hayley Stevenson (eds), *Traditions and Trends in Global Environmental Politics: International Relations and the Earth* (London, UK: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–25.

What was previously viewed as the primary telos of critique, to realise human freedom, is now suddenly seen as part of the problem: a notion of IR ‘dominated by a profound anthropocentrism that renders Western secular images of humanity the focal point of cosmology, the sole source of agency and the referent of all ethical action’.²² To think of what ethical action might entail in the Anthropocene, IR must broaden its vision and encompass other life forms than modern international life. Since the dangers we currently face threaten not just states, or even human subjects within states, but entire ecosystems, IR’s traditional focus on ‘survival’ must also be reconsidered. According to Audra Mitchell, it is only by adapting to this new reality, in which the overwhelming sense of threat is *mass* extinction rather than extinction of individual states that IR has the chance of playing a meaningful role in the future.²³

Coming to terms with the Anthropocene rupture thus entails adapting to a changed reality, characterised by the ways in which human life depends on and interacts with non-human forces. This realisation, in Mitchell’s view, means that a traditional cosmopolitanism needs to be replaced with an expanded *cosmopolitics*, which is ‘attuned to the nonhuman and inhuman forces and conditions of the universe’.²⁴ Instead of the Kantian-inspired cosmopolitanism centred on the telos of man, this new cosmopolitics looks beyond the horizon of human life. What lies beyond the horizon is a desirable future no longer anchored in a modern political imagination that violently excludes some forms of life in favour of only particular life forms. On the other side there is, as it were, the chance of ‘future life forms that bear resemblances to, but are not restricted by, existing norms of “humanity”’.²⁵

The logic of Mitchell’s argument, while turning against the modern anthropocentric telos of critique, is in a similar way to that form of critique distinctly modern in the way it conceptualises the future in relation to the present and the past. The future is an ideal that regulates aspirations in the present, inviting a linear historical trajectory going from the past via the present and into the future. Hence, hers is a ‘future-oriented politics based not on the *continuity* of the present, but rather on the creative possibilities of *discontinuity* and unpredictable difference’.²⁶ While unpredictable, the future remains something to be aspired towards.

The well-cited ‘Planet politics’ manifesto, of which Mitchell is a co-author, follows a similar teleological line of reasoning, arguing for a reimagined relationship between humans and the Earth. The Earth, they write, ‘is not “our” world, as the grand theories of IR, and some accounts of the Anthropocene have it – an object and possession to be appropriated, circumnavigated, instrumentalised and englobed’; rather, there is ‘a complex of worlds that we share, co-constitute, create, destroy and inhabit with countless other life forms and beings’.²⁷ While IR depicts *one* world it is not *the* world, and, increasingly, it is a world ‘that is not of this Earth’.²⁸

The main message of the manifesto, it seems, is to encourage scholars of IR to leave an outdated reality behind and embrace a new reality. Doing so requires ‘an ontological shift: human activity and nature are so bound together that they are existentially indistinguishable, into a complex but singular “social nature”’.²⁹ Again, it is clear that this complex is not something that has already been accepted and adjusted to, or else there would be no need for the manifesto. Even if the reality ‘itself’ is already present, behind the veil of modern IR, it must be aspired towards as something to be actualised in the future.

²²Audra Mitchell, ‘Is IR going extinct?’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017), pp. 3–25 (p. 12); see also David Chandler, ‘The death of hope? Affirmation in the Anthropocene’, *Globalizations*, 16:5 (2019), pp. 695–706 (p. 702).

²³Mitchell, ‘Is IR going extinct?’, p. 4.

²⁴Ibid., p. 4.

²⁵Ibid., p. 21.

²⁶Ibid., p. 21, emphasis in original.

²⁷Burke et al., ‘Planet politics’, p. 518.

²⁸Ibid., p. 504.

²⁹Ibid., p. 510.

Envisioning a post-Anthropocene future does not mean that the limits of a modern understanding of History (written here with a capital H to denote a form of knowledge that is used in order to make sense of time as linear and based on clear distinctions between the past, the present, and the future) have been transcended. In accordance with History, transitioning into a future that differs from the past rests on a boundary producing activity that inscribes a border between the present and the past. While the past is declared dead, the present is the ground on which we can shape the future in accordance with our current desires.³⁰ For this to be possible, the human subject is needed as the author of History. It is uniquely this subject who has the capacity and authority to inscribe the borders of History. Hence, it is also this subject's sovereignty and freedom that are reaffirmed in the process.³¹ Irrespective of the ideal placed beyond the Anthropocene horizon, it cannot be reached without at the same time reaffirming the primacy of the human subject as the author of History.³² The promise of a future in which the problem of man has been finally resolved is therefore impossible to fulfil since the envisioning itself is based on a movement that cancels out such a future.

The focus on a more desirable future risks obscuring the ways in which attempts to fulfil it reaffirm the sovereignty and freedom of man. Moreover, when operating so clearly on the basis of History, the two histories of humans and the Earth remain separated.³³ This is problematic, at least if the uniqueness and radical potential of the Anthropocene rupture is said to lie in the convergence of these two histories. Exploring this uniqueness and potential through the language of *one* history, the history of man, which is supposed to incorporate the history of *both* humans *and* the Earth is therefore an inadequate form of response.

An alternative present

Instead of exploring the potential of the Anthropocene rupture through a modern (Historical) lens, attempts have also been made to take a step further, by calling for 'an epistemological and ontological break with modernist assumptions'.³⁴ Analysing this break along more radical lines, the hope is to avoid falling into the trap of reaffirming the primacy of the human subject within a modern politics while claiming to overcome it. If the Anthropocene concept highlights the fallacy of human mastery over the Earth, another way of thinking the relationship between humans and the Earth is needed. In particular, there appears to be a need to reconsider sovereign agency and the way that sovereignty always seems to be linked to the human subject rather than other possible agents.³⁵ Before addressing the question of what this might mean for IR it is useful to begin by considering one of the main sources of inspiration behind attempts to think beyond the modern sovereign subject, namely Bruno Latour and his take on an Anthropocene rupture.

³⁰This notion of History as a boundary drawing activity that is key to understanding the creation of the modern sovereign subject and the modern state is developed by Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Other important contributions along similar lines are found in Michael Allen Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger, and the Ground of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). In relation to the Anthropocene, Fagan (Madeleine Fagan, 'On the dangers of an Anthropocene epoch: Geological time, political time and post-human politics', *Political Geography*, 70 (2019), pp. 55–63) draws on Fasolt and Davis, among others, to develop a critique of the politics of dating and periodisation in the Anthropocene literature. Whereas Fagan's engagement with this politics leads to an alternative take on the past (as plural and incorporating the human as well as non-human), my primary focus in this article is on the future. In a similar way to her article, however, I also seek to destabilise linear notions of time.

³¹Fasolt, *Limits of History*, p. 7.

³²See Mustapha Pasha, 'After the deluge: New universalism and postcolonial difference', *International Relations*, 34:3 (2020), pp. 354–73.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 362.

³⁴David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, 'Anthropocene, capitalocene and liberal cosmopolitan IR: A response to Burke et al.'s "planet politics"', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2017), pp. 190–208 (p. 193).

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 203.

For Latour, the point of referring to a *rupture* in relation to the Anthropocene is to think beyond History. The rupture, in his view, should not be grasped as a historical moment that allows for a linear historical trajectory going from the past via the present into the future. Such thinking, Latour warns, risks leading to apathy as it suggests that ‘we have definitively burned our bridges behind us.’³⁶ For the Moderns, he writes, history ‘is always over. Without any way to regain the present, there will be no exit, since they will hear every call to come back to Earth as a return to the archaic or the barbarous.’³⁷

Latour’s alternative view of the rupture is to think along more apocalyptic lines. Often, such thinking is associated with the Judeo-Christian theme of the end time, or *eschatology*. Furthermore, eschatology is commonly linked to efforts to prevent or delay the end time (*katechon*).³⁸ For Latour, secular-theological discourses on the end are as problematic as discourses of History since they perpetually push the apocalypse further into the future. The worst is thus always yet to come, meaning there is always more time to act before it is too late. Inspired by the title of Francis Ford Coppola’s film classic, Latour suggests that we must think more in terms of an *Apocalypse Now!*. We have to live, he writes, ‘as though we were at the End of Time’.³⁹ And if the choice is between placing ourselves before, after or during the apocalypse, it has to be during, ‘for then you know that you will not escape from the time that is passing. Remaining in the end time: this is all that matters.’⁴⁰

Focus on the here and now, and on the Earth below.⁴¹ Embrace religious thinking on the apocalypse, but avoid translating it into a secularised modern ethics that pushes the end time further into the future, which only serves to perpetuate the illusion that there is more time to act. We have to make sure that the apocalypse, or ‘the radical rupture of eschatology’⁴² is not used, once again, to leap into eternity and aspire towards utopia. The modern Historical understanding of the past from which we have descended and that provides the ground for advancing into the future no longer works. That understanding of History has become inoperative and can, furthermore, be seen as a direct reason for our current predicament, a disastrous consequence of placing man at the centre and as maker of History.

Latour’s critique of the Modern is at the same time a calling for an ethics of Gaia, the name of James Lovelock’s theory of our planet as a complex system of which humans are merely a part.⁴³ If the human impact on the Earth has been severe, Lovelock’s theory states that the Earth will self-adjust, and that the process of readjustment will make life even more difficult for humans. At one point he predicted a likely reduction of the world’s population before the end of this century to less than a billion, which, in his view, is roughly what Gaia can take ‘living the way we do’.⁴⁴

While Lovelock expresses a deeply pessimistic view of the human species and its chances of saving itself from apocalypse, for Latour there seems to be more hope in facing Gaia and the reality it entails. The value of the concept of Gaia, according to Latour, is precisely that it points to a complex reality of agents and actants, a reality that exists independently of modern politics and

³⁶Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), p. 212.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Mick Dillon, ‘Specters of biopolitics: Finitude, eschaton, and katechon’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 110:3 (2011), pp. 780–92; Delf Rothe, ‘Governing the end times? Planet politics and the secular eschatology of the Anthropocene’, *Millennium*, 48:2 (2020), pp. 143–64.

³⁹Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 213, emphasis in original.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 217.

⁴¹See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

⁴²Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 286.

⁴³James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning* (London, UK: Penguin, 2010).

⁴⁴BBC HARDtalk, interview with James Lovelock (2009), available at: {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLA-Sn6bi-U>} accessed 30 September 2022.

science. It is a reality that controls ‘us’ more than we control ‘it’. Gaia should therefore not be confused with ‘nature’, which in its modern sense is commonly depicted as a ‘stable background’ or ‘inert object’ that humans can bend according to their will.⁴⁵ Blinded by the illusion of nature as a stable background, the moderns have been given free rein to wreak havoc. The force of Gaia’s response will depend on how soon and how well humans can learn to adapt to the reality that is Gaia.

With Latour’s use of Lovelock’s theory of Gaia, there is another attempt to grasp a *new* and more *real* reality. This one goes further than that discussed in the previous section as it expresses a more radical disavowal of modern politics. In this respect, Latour also notes how severely outdated the borders of nation-states have become.⁴⁶ Not least the Weberian understanding of the state as the human community that successfully claims monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a given territory has become obsolete in the face of the violence inflicted on the Earth.⁴⁷ Against this backdrop, Latour argues: ‘It is by making themselves capable of response, by endowing themselves with a new sensitivity, that Humans in Nature become Earthbound with and against Gaia.’⁴⁸

The politics and ethics of adjusting to Gaia is simultaneously a plea to stop any more vain attempts to impose anything related to the Modern on the Earth.⁴⁹ More precisely, the aim is to avoid drawing on modern coordinates such as the dichotomy of human culture and nature, which can only serve to reproduce the problems we seek to escape. This is no easy task. As pointed out by Madeleine Fagan in her critical engagement with the Anthropocene debate: ‘To think interconnectedness without starting points of human or nature, of plurality or singularity, is a very difficult task indeed.’⁵⁰ Somehow, it would require a completely new thinking, beyond the human subject as the naturalised centre of Western metaphysics. As Scott Hamilton points out in his critique of various attempts to find solutions along these lines, ‘the goal of such a non-subjectivist metaphysics is to disclose new aspects of politics and Nature through human interaction and open dialogue, rather than assimilating and systematising them into any objective or overarching framework.’⁵¹

Resisting the conceptual frameworks of modern politics means that we cannot ‘begin’ with the standard reference points for theorising IR, since doing so inevitably places nature passively in the background of the human subject. According to David Chandler, ‘if humanity is to survive in any recognizable form, new forms of political imagination need to be much more humble, “reflexive” and “adaptive”.’⁵² For this to be possible, he argues, there need to be new forms of critique that are incompatible with modern understandings of critique that continue to inform much of critical IR.⁵³ Debates on new materialisms and post-humanism are seen as key in this respect.⁵⁴

In the face of ongoing apocalypse there is, then, the possibility of embracing a reality beyond the modern focus on man, the state, and the international for thinking the place and meaning of political life on this Earth. For Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, drawing on Latour, the ‘world of politics, national and international, is an artifice’ that ‘cannot capture

⁴⁵Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 280.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 279; see also Bruno Latour, ‘Onus Orbis Terrarum: About a possible shift in the definition of sovereignty’, *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 305–20.

⁴⁷Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 279.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁴⁹See also Claes Tångh Wrangel and Amar Causevic, ‘Critiquing Latour’s explanation of climate change denial: Moving beyond the modernity/Anthropocene binary’, *Millennium*, 50:1 (2021), pp. 199–223.

⁵⁰Madeleine Fagan, ‘Security in the Anthropocene: Environment, ecology, escape’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 292–314 (p. 308).

⁵¹Hamilton, ‘I am uncertain, but We are not’, p. 625.

⁵²David Chandler, ‘The transvaluation of critique in the Anthropocene’, *Global Society*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 26–44 (p. 32).

⁵³*Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, fn. 61.

the cosmological reality of life on this planet'.⁵⁵ The answer to IR's growing irrelevance must therefore be to explain 'international politics in terms of systems, preferably complex ones', in order to 'better grasp the politics of the world in which we live'.⁵⁶

Instead of relying on a future desirable ideal, this form of critique seems to offer an alternative reading of the 'present'.⁵⁷ For Cudworth and Hobden, the move towards posthumanism has, in this respect, the potential to open up new space for thinking both about 'the politics of global life' and a 'posthuman international relations'.⁵⁸ This is based on their assertion that international politics has always been about more than the relations between states that the discipline of IR has reduced it to.⁵⁹

Adjusting to a new reality points to the need for open dialogue and forms of negotiation that recognise the existence of both human and non-human life forms. Such negotiation highlights the potential of another politics beyond the modern spatial and temporal coordinates traditionally used for determining the place and meaning of political life.⁶⁰ While promising, this idea of negotiation retains elements of the future ideal that underpins the Kantian telos of critique. Even if the object of the telos is different, no longer man but a complex reality of agents and actants, human and non-human forces, the point of the critique is still to strive towards its full realisation. There is, thus, still a significant progressive aspiration when responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene along these lines. Even if the response no longer follows a historical trajectory but rather plays out in the present, it still emphasises negotiation and adjustment on the basis of a progressive teleology.⁶¹

Assumptions of eschatology and teleology continue to have an impact on this process of negotiation and adjustment. While teleology informs the aspiration towards an ideal, eschatology provides the primary reason for renegotiating the terms of our political existence, which for Latour means bringing the subject down to Earth. While extremely vague, the idea of bringing the subject down to Earth expresses a goal to be aspired towards. Hence, it also encounters similar problems as the previous more explicit modern form of critique. Both critiques aspire to fulfil an ideal that waits on the other side of a horizon. A more radical ontology has not made the horizon itself and the logic it entails obsolete.⁶² If negotiation expresses the need to respond to a growing awareness of the entanglement of human and non-human life, it is still the horizon that conditions and regulates this negotiation. What makes the latter possible is also what makes its successful completion (i.e., arriving at a point when there no longer is a human horizon) impossible. Caught within the limits of the horizon while seeking to transcend it, attempts to think of a more desirable future on the basis of an alternative present hit a dead end.

The future to come

The general idea of an Anthropocene rupture, as explained in the first section of the article, relates to the convergence of the histories of humans and the Earth. Yet many attempts at making

⁵⁵Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics', *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 643–64 (p. 663).

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 664.

⁵⁷Chandler, 'The transvaluation of critique', p. 39; Chandler, 'The death of hope?', p. 702.

⁵⁸Cudworth and Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics', p. 646.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 651; see also Rafi Youatt, 'Interspecies relations, international relations: Rethinking anthropocentric politics', *Millennium*, 43:1 (2014), pp. 207–23 (p. 222).

⁶⁰Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 32.

⁶¹This is also presumably why the concept of 'resilience' has been combined with the concept of the Anthropocene, with the former used in order to call for a way of 'renaturalising politics' by learning to adapt to a rapidly changing reality far removed from the modern. See Kevin Grove and David Chandler, 'Introduction: Resilience and the Anthropocene: The stakes of "renaturalising" politics', *Resilience*, 5:2 (2017), pp. 79–91 (p. 85).

⁶²See also Elisa Randazzo and Hannah Richter, 'The politics of the Anthropocene: Temporality, ecology, and indigeneity', *International Political Sociology*, 15:3 (2021), pp. 293–312 (p. 304).

sense of this convergence can be seen less as a reflection of an independent and objective account of history than as a modern desire to control the passage of time from the past and present towards a future deemed worthy of aspiring towards (History). The focus on future ideals, whether linked to the desired outcome of an updated cosmopolitics or the end point of adjusting to Gaia, reaffirms this modern desire of controlling the passage of time.

Much of the literature on the Anthropocene in IR similarly reflects a desire to control the passage of time, in search of a future present in which the problems we currently face have finally been resolved. The *telos* of critique is linked in this way to a time and place beyond the horizon that currently limits the possibility of realising a more desirable future. Even if this ideal is detached from a Kantian ethics in which man is the primary *telos* of critique, it is nevertheless tied to the Kantian logic of aspiring towards the ideal's full realisation. The horizon of the modern present thus continues to structure the aspiration to reach beyond the horizon.

How, then, is it possible to think of the future without the horizon of the human present? In this section I try to show how another way of thinking the future, which Derrida refers to as *l'avenir*, the future to come, offers one possible way of addressing this question. Derrida clarifies the difference between his understanding of the future and a more traditional understanding as follows:

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and '*l'avenir*'. The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There is a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it is *l'avenir* in that it is the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.⁶³

This understanding of the future runs contrary both to attempts to declare definitive end points (eschatology), and to forward progressive movements seeking to fulfil future ideals (teleology). The future to come is irreducible to such ends and therefore cannot be grasped on the basis of linear historical timelines going from the past, via the present and into the future.

Rather than being tied to History, the future to come speaks directly to the arrival of unexpected singular events.⁶⁴ The force of these events relates to their capacity to *strike*, unexpectedly, and in so doing disrupt notions of historical chains of events. 'The event', as Derrida writes, 'has nothing to do with history, if by history one means a teleological process. The event must interrupt in a certain manner this kind of history.'⁶⁵ Referring to this notion of the event, the future to come is not something that can be purposefully worked towards as this *particular* future, or as a future present. There is no clear way of connecting the future to come with desires held in the present, thus making a traditional normative ethics based on teleological reasoning obsolete. The future, instead of referring to a possible outcome of current desires, appears rather as something radically other, which is disjointed in relation to the present.⁶⁶

The notion of a future that is disjointed and other in relation to the present can itself be seen as a response to Derrida's life-long engagement with philosophy as a history of Western metaphysics. Ever since the times of the ancient Greeks, this history has revolved around the question of ontology, or 'what is'. A wide range of answers has been provided, all of which are based on

⁶³Derrida, in *Derrida*, documentary directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, produced by Jane Doe Films (2002).

⁶⁴Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), p. 112.

⁶⁵Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 362.

⁶⁶Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 32.

assumptions grounded in metaphysics.⁶⁷ There is, accordingly, a seemingly inescapable assumption at the heart of Western philosophy, which relates to the necessity of anchoring lived experience in something beyond experience. Beyond that which happens, something is thus assumed to be already present. Crucially, it is also in this assumption of metaphysical presence, or the being-present of time, that the idea of 'man' has traditionally been anchored, according to Derrida.⁶⁸

Some of the main thinkers of modernity, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, and Foucault, have all sought to challenge the notion of 'man' as the presupposed ground of being. While commonly portrayed as anthropocentric thinkers, an important intellectual challenge they tried to address, albeit in different ways, was to think the 'end of man'.⁶⁹ When man is analysed as a subject whose being-presence is called into question, he can no longer function as a stable metaphysical ground of existence. Questioning the presence of this ground was, according to Derrida, the 'first tremor of philosophical security'.⁷⁰

Much of Derrida's work addresses the inherent difficulties and tensions of trying to overcome the idea of a metaphysical ground of being. Yet, even if Derrida's multiple deconstructions show how such attempts are ultimately unsuccessful, that is, how they are unable to simply escape the notion of a metaphysical ground without at the same time reinscribing it, he also notes how incredibly important such efforts have been in terms of showing how 'man' constitutes a *question* and a *problem* rather than a pre-existing ground.⁷¹ There can be no essential content and meaning of 'man', only an exploration of how this subject is constituted in relation to what is other, in 'an apparently inhuman or else a-human fashion'.⁷²

Following this deconstructive approach to the question of man, the radical potential of an Anthropocene rupture can be thought of in relation to a future other, which lies beyond the horizon in which man's presence has traditionally been conceived. Compared to the ideas discussed in the previous sections, the horizon changes meaning here as the main metaphor for thinking the passage from the present to the future. With teleological reasoning, the horizon mediates our relation to what lies beyond and conditions every response to that beyond, by linking it to a future desirable ideal. Crucially, a precondition for being desirable 'as such' is that the ideal remains on the other side of the horizon, since any attempt to bring it inside and actually fulfil it would immediately expose it to the flow and messiness of life. When trying to actualise a future ideal it loses its purity, which means that the object of desire always has to remain in some sense unreachable.

In contrast, by refusing to subscribe to a future ideal, or indeed to any *particular* future at all, but only to the arrival *of* the future, as unexpected and other, the future to come calls for a response that does not aspire to reach beyond the horizon in the first place. Inherent in the response there is, rather, the recognition of a form of inescapable asymmetry and violence in the very act of responding. Since the response is conditioned, not by the purity of ideals, referring for example to a relational ontology, the response also breaks, violently, with such ideals.⁷³ Responding to the future is violent, then, because it entails encountering a future other whose arrival is 'possible' only on the condition that it does not conform to the ideals and desires held in the present.⁷⁴

⁶⁷Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and metaphysics: An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas', trans. Alan Bass, in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 97–192.

⁶⁸Jacques Derrida, 'Ends of man', trans. Alan Bass, in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 111–36.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Derrida, 'Violence and metaphysics', p. 167.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 188.

⁷²Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 93.

⁷³Derrida, 'Violence and metaphysics', p. 160.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 187.

Responsibility is articulated, in this sense, not *vis-à-vis* a future ideal, a future present, or a future generation.⁷⁵ It is directed, rather, towards ‘an unforeseeable coming of the other’.⁷⁶ Lacking a future ideal that waits indefinitely on being actualised, there is a strong sense of urgency linked to the response. Responding happens ‘*here and now*’.⁷⁷ Consequently, the future to come is not a hurdle to act but underlines the urgency and immediacy of the response, avoiding delay and acting *now*.⁷⁸ This ‘now’ is not the now of being-present, belonging to a particular onto-logy on the basis of what either currently exists or should exist in the future. It relates, rather, to the singularity of what *happens*, to the event.⁷⁹

In the face of radical uncertainty and unpredictability, the event’s potential relates not to how it marks a date in history, as an actualised moment whose significance is determined by its position in a linear timeline of events. Nor can it be translated into a point of origin from which to work out a particular *reason* or *logos* of what is to come, a *teleo-logy*. In the context of both History and teleology, the event remains within the realm of the ‘possible’, a possibility whose meaning and significance can be negotiated in relation to a modern politics of time. As singular, however, the event springs not from the realm of the possible but can only come from the *impossible*. ‘It arrives *as* the coming of the impossible, where a “perhaps” deprives us of all assurance and leaves the future to the future.’⁸⁰

To encounter the singular event is to encounter the opening of a horizon of expectation and possibility. This encounter does not call for ‘a rule to be applied’, since any such rule would have to be articulated within the horizon of what is already ‘possible’ and ‘known’. It calls rather for an exposure to ‘something irreducible to ourselves and what we already know how to do’.⁸¹ According to Derrida, ‘a horizon is both the opening and the limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting.’⁸² Yet decisions cannot wait but require immediacy. Irrespective of how long the period of waiting, or the amount of knowledge and calculations, even if unlimited, ‘the decision would be structurally finite, however late it came, a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule.’⁸³ For the decision to be possible, full knowledge and guarantees of its outcome must therefore be impossible, or else it would not be a decision but merely an application of a rule.⁸⁴ This is why the decision speaks directly to the future to come, which is its condition of possibility.

The encounter between self and other must thus be predicated on a temporality that makes the decision and the response ‘possible’, without turning into an aspiration for completeness. With the latter aspiration, in which the self seeks to affirm who or what the other truly *is*, the encounter would have to conform to the purity of an idealised relation, without alterity.⁸⁵ As the next

⁷⁵Simon Dalby, ‘Rethinking geopolitics: Climate security in the Anthropocene’, *Global Policy*, 5:1 (2014), pp. 1–9 (p. 8); Matt McDonald, ‘Climate change and security: Towards ecological security?’, *International Theory*, 10:2 (2018), pp. 153–80 (p. 168).

⁷⁶Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 84.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 85, emphasis in original.

⁷⁸Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 37.

⁷⁹Derrida, *Negotiations*, p. 362.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 344, emphasis in original.

⁸¹Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 2.

⁸²Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of law: The “mystical foundation of authority”’, trans. Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (eds), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3–67 (p. 26).

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸⁴For a good account of this understanding of the decision, in particular as it pertains to the link between politics and ethics, see Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics After Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 88–9, 96.

⁸⁵Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 89.

section seeks to demonstrate, the international conceptualised as ‘life’ provides the necessary ‘ground’ for thinking about responsibility and decisions along these lines. My understanding of international life is predicated on the assumption that this life continually opens up space and time for the arrival of what is other in relation to the finite entities of the state and the state system in which the human subject resides. As such, while this international life conditions the possibility of decisions within a finite horizon, the meaning and urgency of such decisions have to be grasped in relation to what is other.

The future of international life

In IR, the most common way of responding to the challenges posed by the notion of an Anthropocene rupture and epoch is to try to bridge the gap between IR’s disciplinary boundaries and a rapidly changing reality.⁸⁶ IR, from this point of view, is a severely outdated discipline. Even more seriously, it contains ‘numerous pathologies’.⁸⁷ As such, it represents a failure directly linked to some of the most severe challenges currently facing human civilisation. These challenges relate not just to the climate crisis but also to other forms of discrimination and violence. For example, as argued by Anna Agathangelou:

IR now finds itself at a crossroads. It has failed to engage or challenge the dominant ways of governing, or to recognise the violence that guides governing mechanisms in deciding whether certain life formations ought to be allowed to participate in politics. We must ask how to avoid denying the existing, albeit extinguished, normativity, while at the same time extinguishing an IR that we do not want.⁸⁸

And for Harrington,

the Anthropocene is a problem of, and for, IR. It reflects the numerous failings of the contemporary interstate system and the ongoing denial of the deleterious effects of the carbon economy that emanate from it.⁸⁹

On one hand, it is obvious that IR is ill suited to speak to many of today’s problems, which is why so many scholars who nevertheless seem to identify with it struggle to make it relevant again. On the other hand, it is problematic when attempts to transform IR fail to properly engage with the ‘international’. Due to an almost exclusive focus on *security* in the recent literature on the Anthropocene in IR,⁹⁰ the failure to discuss the international at any depth, beyond superficial references to an interstate system, is palpable.⁹¹

⁸⁶For an insightful discussion of this way of referring to the arrival of the Anthropocene, as a ‘temporal marker’ for IR, see Delf Rothe, ‘Global security in a posthuman age? IR and the Anthropocene challenge’, in Clara Eroukhmanoff and Matt Harker (eds), *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology* (Bristol, UK: E-IR, 2017), pp. 87–101.

⁸⁷Matt McDonald and Audra Mitchell, ‘Introduction: Posthuman International Relations’, in Eroukhmanoff and Harker (eds), *Reflections on the Posthuman*, pp. 1–8 (p. 6).

⁸⁸Anna M. Agathangelou, ‘Bruno Latour and ecology politics: Poetics of failure and denial in IR’, *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 321–47 (p. 338).

⁸⁹Harrington, ‘The ends of the world’, p. 496.

⁹⁰See McDonald, ‘Climate change and security’; Harrington, ‘The ends of the world’; Simon Dalby, ‘Anthropocene formations: Environmental security, geopolitics and disaster’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 34:2–3 (2017), pp. 233–52; Fagan, ‘Security in the Anthropocene’; Rothe, ‘Global security in a posthuman age?’.

⁹¹One crucial exception is Corry, ‘Nature and the international’. Due to limits of space I have chosen not to provide a detailed engagement with Corry’s contribution here. In brief, he draws on Justin Rosenberg’s understanding of ‘multiplicity’ as the most important distinctive feature of IR as a discipline engaging with the international. Suffice it to say, I very much

When linked to a traditional understanding of the interstate system, the international is easily viewed upon as something archaic, and clinging on to it is seen as a way of denying how profoundly the world has changed since the birth and evolution of the modern international order.⁹² The current state of the Anthropocene, plagued by an escalating climate crisis, is simply too far removed from the theoretical efforts by Hans Morgenthau and others after the Second World War to theorise that order through the development of modern IR.

There are, however, other ways of thinking about the international, which do not view it as a static system that is either present or absent, relevant or irrelevant. One such way, which I believe is especially valuable in the context of the climate crisis, is to think of the international as something that both conditions life and itself has a life. Crucially, analysing the international along these lines means temporalising a system otherwise commonly seen as time-less.⁹³ It also means viewing the international as something inherently finite, which, just like individual states is not immune to the unpredictability of the future.

International life is relevant for thinking both about interstate relations within a system, and of the ways in which those relations are predicated on forces that cannot be contained within that system. While preserving the lives of states may be its chief function, international life is open to its perpetual deconstruction. Underpinning this deconstruction are the temporal movements of past and future, which render impossible any static moments in time, and make undesirable any end states of being. Hence, the temporality of international life also makes the aspiration towards the full realisation of an idealised state of existence, beyond the vibrant relations among its entities self-refuting. This is because it is precisely these vibrant relations, and the fundamental lack of a prior ground that force them in a predetermined direction, towards a particular telos, that make this life ‘possible’ in the first place. As Martin Hägglund puts it in his discussion of life in general, what he refers to as *this life*:

There is no final goal or completion of life, since life can come to an end only in death. Even in its fullest actuality, a living being must continue to strive to be alive, since life is essentially a temporal activity. The relation to the negative cannot be eliminated, since a living being is subject to constant alteration and has to maintain itself as it changes across time. The relation to the negative is therefore internal to the living being itself and part of its positive constitution.⁹⁴

International life offers a way of thinking about the end of man, a structure that makes the- orising his finitude possible. As such it opens up space, and time, for all sorts of political struggles against the violence of reaffirming ‘man’ as some sort of essence. International life gives time and space for political contestation, and makes it possible to challenge established identities and exclusionary practices. Hence this conception of the international is not opposed to political struggles, including decolonial ones, seeking to question and disrupt dominant hierarchies, which both have helped enable and continue to be reinforced by anthropogenic climate change.⁹⁵ It rather provides the necessary ground upon which such questioning may proceed, yet without tying the latter to a particular teleology or desired end state of being. International life is a *groundless* ground, in this sense, freed from a totalising present and ethical ideals to which any attempt to respond to whatever the future throws at it must conform. The point of this

share Corry’s ambition of connecting the Anthropocene with a more novel take on the international, but I do so in a very different way than Rosenberg’s approach to ‘multiplicity’.

⁹²McDonald and Mitchell, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁹³On the privileging of time-less theory in IR, see Christopher McIntosh, ‘Theory across time: The privileging of time-less theory in international relations’, *International Theory*, 7:3 (2015), pp. 464–500.

⁹⁴Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2019), p. 186.

⁹⁵See, for example, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, ‘On the importance of a date, or decolonizing the Anthropocene’, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16:4 (2017), pp. 761–80.

'ground', then, is not to suppress but rather to accept the asymmetry between human agency within the limits of the state/state system and whatever exceeds it.

Crucially, the purpose of theorising international life along these lines is not to predict future events on the basis of how this life plays out in the present. Nor is it to rely on some irrefutable laws of behaviour, which can be used in order to calculate the future of interstate relations in the face of a global climate crisis. There is, indeed, a politics linked to the future of international life, but this politics relates to how the future, as unknown and unpredictable, conditions the possibility of responding *to* the future in the first place. What matters, in this sense, is encountering the future not on the basis of the past or the present, but along deconstructive lines, as something radically *other*. Doing so calls for a future politics that challenges 'established ways of acting and thinking', and highlights 'a commitment to the permanent possibility of movement beyond present limits to our individual and collective capacities'.⁹⁶

By encountering the future as other there is as noted earlier the risk of alteration and contamination. Without this risk, however, there could be no proper encounters at all, only a process whereby the other submits before the self, or vice versa, forcing self and other to conform to the same ideal. A proper encounter with the future other is possible only on the condition that self and other are finite and therefore open to alteration, and thus permanently exposed to contamination. In this way, the other, irrespective of what it refers to, always presents a chance as well as a threat. This is because one can never know in advance who or what the other *is*, since otherwise the other would not be 'other'. Consequently, it is 'impossible to decide whether the encounter with the other will bring about a chance or a threat, recognition or rejection, continued life or violent death'.⁹⁷

Trembling and the non-horizon

When something occurs on the margins of what is possible, and a future arrives that bears no resemblance to the present, there is the chance of a *trembling*.⁹⁸ 'A radical trembling', Derrida writes, 'can only come from the *outside*'.⁹⁹ As such, it can also be seen as useful for exploring the potential of the Anthropocene rupture. The power of the Anthropocene literature, in IR and beyond, has to do with how it takes on issues of seemingly gigantic proportions with the stakes at least as high. The sudden realisation of humanity's impact on the global climate and its role as a geological agent that has altered the history of the Earth can really make one tremble.

While trembling does not translate into a specific line of action it can still be seen as a necessary way of experiencing the discrepancy between what is possible in the context of contemporary international life, and what is impossible in the same context. Responding to the Anthropocene rupture rests precisely on this simultaneous possibility and impossibility of transcending the international as the primary structure conditioning the relationship between the human subject and what lies beyond the (imagined) grasp of that subject. Crucially, doing so is very different from trying to bring whatever exceeds an Anthropocene horizon under the control of the human subject. The point should rather be to, at least initially, experience the *loss* of control and thereby accepting that any notions of a desirable future can only rest on an illusion that keeps us firmly within the horizon. As Nigel Clark succinctly puts it:

⁹⁶Paul Patton, 'Future politics', in Paul Patton and John Protevi (eds), *Between Deleuze and Derrida* (London, UK: Continuum, 2003), pp. 15-29 (p. 27).

⁹⁷Häggglund, *Radical Atheism*, p. 91.

⁹⁸Trembling is a recurring theme in Derrida's work, from his early 1978 essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a philosophy that can 'make us tremble' (2001, p. 101) to his reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in *The Gift of Death*, trans David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995). For a brilliant analysis of the role of trembling in Derrida's thought, see Peter Salmon, *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* (London, UK: Verso, 2020), p. 274.

⁹⁹Derrida, 'Ends of man', p. 134.

We cannot simply excavate, render transparent, or recompose the messy, unstable, even violent play of material forces out of which we ourselves have emerged. And this means that alongside our capacity for action, the very condition of our active orientations in the world is a kind of primordial passivity, a susceptibility in the face of all that is not ours to make or even know.¹⁰⁰

Refusing the option of either staying within or moving beyond a particular horizon, the more important task relates to interrogating the relationship between the horizon and the 'non-horizon'.¹⁰¹ The latter, according to Derrida, refers to an unexpected opening of the horizon through which the future flows, as if backward in time, precipitating an encounter with the other without having any preconceptions of it. 'Everywhere there is a horizon and where we can see something coming from out of some teleology or ideal horizon', Derrida writes, the horizon 'will have neutralized in advance the event'.¹⁰² In order to avoid this neutralisation, or depoliticisation, the event must announce itself 'without any horizon of expectation, any telos, formation, form, or teleological pre-formation'.¹⁰³

Heat waves, floods, and storms offer a useful starting point for thinking about the event along these lines. Enabled by an international order in which the first priority has been state survival rather than the survival of the planet, extreme weather events also bring problems that this order was never meant to resolve. The repeated failures to take necessary measures to reduce carbon emissions demonstrate how the international system cannot simply be transformed in accordance with some sort of collective human will, as if to correct a past wrong by relying on a new set of ideals that the system should suddenly conform to. Even if the events spring from within international life they point to forces that exceed it, and thus affirm the radical asymmetry between this life and its other. To even begin to address the limits of the former, and what can be done to respond to the latter, this asymmetrical relation has to be acknowledged and made meaningful.¹⁰⁴

There is a life of as well as within the international that is proving highly resilient as it continues to prioritise citizenship and state borders over other forms of life, 'human' and 'non-human'. This resilience, however, has to be grasped in relation to the temporal finitude of international life. What makes this life resilient is also what makes it vulnerable to forces that exceed it. These forces, illustrated by extreme weather events, make it abundantly clear what is possible and, more significantly, impossible within the context of this life. Experiencing this impossibility is not the same as experiencing the feeling of hopelessness in the face of apocalypse. It implies, rather, an indeterminate experience, a trembling, that both welcomes and fears the coming of the other.

In responding to a future that is fundamentally other in relation to the present and the past, a variety of struggles against the injustices that anthropogenic climate change bring about become possible. For these struggles to be 'possible', the future encountered must remain incalculable, not translated into an ideal to be aspired towards. Absolute peace and global justice, while seemingly desirable, are in this sense not end states of a teleological process. Instead of such a process there can only be a passage, into what is other and essentially unknown. As noted by Thomas Keenan, 'there would be no passage, in any rigorous sense of the word, without the experience of the impasse, without the darkness of a certain undecidability'.¹⁰⁵ Everything of relevance when deciding on how to encounter the other, how to welcome a stranger, or how to adapt to a rapidly changing planet, happens at this 'darkened frontier'. And 'no matter how bright the light, the crossing

¹⁰⁰Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2011), p. 52.

¹⁰¹Derrida, 'Ends of man'.

¹⁰²Derrida, *Rogues*, p. 143.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁰⁴Clark, *Inhuman Nature*, pp. 50–3.

¹⁰⁵Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility*, p. 12.

occurs at night', as it is here: 'In the dark', that 'we guard, we cross, we decide, we reach out to the other.'¹⁰⁶

The darkened frontier separating international life from what lies beyond cannot be reduced to particular experiences that are somehow able to capture the purpose and meaning of this life, in its entirety. Emphasising particular experiences can certainly be seen as valuable, not least as a way of shedding light on the uneven effects of climate change. It becomes more problematic, however, when the experiences of a particular group or identity are seen as a possible solution to the tension between the finite and the infinite, the particular and the universal, since this suggests that the particular can be universalised, or the finite made infinite. These struggles, even if seen as vital parts of international life, do not provide an automatic passage from this life to another life, in which the struggles have been resolved. This is why the promise of something like global justice is always inseparable from the worst forms of violence. And if there is a promise of global justice, this is not because of what it promises to fulfil, but because of how the promise itself entails a perpetual deconstruction of established binaries and a passage to the unknown. The purpose of international life, if there is one, therefore cannot be to eradicate the particular in favour of the universal. Its only possible purpose, as it were, lies in maintaining the tensions between the particular and the universal, which is what conditions the possibility of response within this particular horizon.¹⁰⁷

Against a traditional understanding of History, the Anthropocene rupture can be seen as a continuous movement rather than a fixed point in the past. As such, it is continuously actualised in encounters with the future other, for example, in relation to extreme weather events, which offer a key passage to other worlds. These events speak of the 'worst' but also of a 'promise': the worst consequences of anthropocentric international life, but also the promise of political struggles as they expose this life to its perpetual deconstruction. The international, understood as life, is therefore not a problem to overcome but something to be lived through, not by aspiring to reach an ideal beyond the present, but by focusing all energy on the passage, the non-horizon of the horizon.

Conclusion

The idea of an Anthropocene rupture refers to the convergence of the two histories of the Earth and of humans. This rupture presents a unique opportunity to think beyond IR's modern anthropocentric imaginary, pointing to nothing less than the promise of a new beginning for a discipline in danger of becoming outdated. However, as demonstrated in this article, trying to fulfil this promise is far from straightforward. An alternative reading of the past does not automatically generate an alternative future. The transition from the former to the latter requires a politics, which ultimately depends on how the relationship between past, present, and future is understood. The growing literature on the Anthropocene in IR deals with this relationship in two main ways: either by relying on the notion of a future desirable ideal, or by referring to an alternative reading of the present, which nevertheless is also made into a future ideal. Together these two approaches illustrate the apparent necessity of a future that springs directly from understandings of the present as well as the past. It is this future ideal that most commonly gives the notion of an Anthropocene rupture its political purpose and meaning.

As argued in this article, the radical potential of an Anthropocene rupture is depoliticised when its relation to the future is reduced to a particular teleology, even if masquerading as something very different. As a form of knowledge that rests on a modern desire to control the passage of time, teleology depends on the sovereign practice of inscribing linear timelines and points of

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁷On the importance of these tensions, in relation to the state as well as the international, see R. B. J. Walker, 'Polis, cosmopolis, politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 28:2 (2003), pp. 267–86.

origin as well as of the end. One end of man, the purpose of his being, is thus negotiated in relation to another, the end point of his existence.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, attempts to renegotiate the relationship between these two ends can only reaffirm the necessity of a human horizon *within which* the relationship between past, present, and future is understood.

If the only future available springs from a modern capacity to draw borders between past, present, and future, to declare new beginnings and ends, then what is the value of this future? What transformative potential does it have? Derrida's emphasis on singular events and the future to come (*l'avenir*) points to another way of thinking the future that falls outside teleology and eschatology. The future to come, crucially, does not translate into a future ideal that can be aspired towards. Instead of emanating from perceptions of the future in the present, *l'avenir* belongs only to the future. As such, it points to the future as something radically other, the coming of the totally unexpected, and the irruption of singular events that have no given place in a linear timeline of events. Shifting focus to this understanding of the future, the task is no longer to aspire towards a particular future, but rather to encounter the arrival *of* the future and thus respond to a reverse flow of time emanating *from* the future.

While an increased engagement with the notion of an Anthropocene rupture has created an important opening of the horizon of modern international life, it is easy to fall back on teleology when responding to that opening. In doing so there is an attempt, even if unwittingly, to regain control over the passage of time that seems to be in danger of slipping away. Against such attempts, this article has argued for the importance of experiencing at least a temporary loss of control, and to tremble in the face of the impossible. There is then the chance of responding to the violence of the encounter between this international life and the forces that exceed it.

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Tom Lundborg is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Swedish Defence University. He draws on philosophy and history of ideas to study global and international political life. His publications include *Politics of the Event: Time, Movement, Becoming* (Routledge, 2012), as well as articles published in journals such as *International Political Sociology*, *Review of International Studies*, *Security Dialogue*, and *European Journal of International Relations*.

¹⁰⁸David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 86.