

# History and Utopian Thinking in the Era of the Anthropocene



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**Abstract** The text analyzes the different ways in which historical narratives can contribute to changing human sensitivity and social practices in relation to climate threats. The term “utopian thinking” is problematized here as a combination of relativization of the existing reality with the desire to develop alternatives to it. Three types of historical discourses devoted to the Anthropocene will be analyzed and juxtaposed in the paper: post-naturalism (represented by Dipesh Chakrabarty), eco-Marxism (analyzed on the example of Jason W. Moore’s theory of the Capitalocene) and eco-catastrophism (illustrated in relation to the works of Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway).

**Keywords** The Anthropocene · Historical narratives · Utopian thinking · Post-naturalism · Eco-Marxism · Eco-catastrophism

I had always thought that the purpose of More’s *Utopia*  
was not to provide a blueprint for some future.  
but to hold for inspection the ridiculous waste and foolishness of his times,  
to insist that things could and must be better.  
David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (2000: 281).

## Introduction

Twenty-two years have now passed since Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer introduced the term “the Anthropocene” into scientific discourse. In a short text published in the *Global Change Newsletter* (Crutzen 2000: 17–18) they discussed the substantial and still growing impact of human activities on the natural processes taking place on Earth and in the atmosphere. As far as they were concerned, the second

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half of the eighteenth century marked the end of the Holocene and the beginning of the Anthropocene, as humankind then acquired the role of a geological force. Crutzen and Stoermer did not stop at this proclamation but stated that the current situation required mankind to take appropriate steps. They wrote: “To develop a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of ecosystems against human induced stresses will be one of the great future tasks of mankind, requiring intensive research efforts and wise application of the knowledge thus acquired in the noösphere, better known as knowledge or information society. An exciting, but also difficult and daunting task lies ahead of the global research and engineering community to guide mankind towards global, sustainable, environmental management” (Ibidem, p. 18). This statement was reflected in the nature of the discourse on the Anthropocene that has been dynamically developing in the twenty-first century (Bińczyk 2019: 3–18). On the one hand, it analyses the scale of destructive human activity in relation to the natural environment; on the other, it is characterised by a reflection on how a harmonious coexistence between human and nature could be achieved.

Although this discourse was originally developed mainly by natural scientists, over the years more and more representatives of social sciences and humanities have joined it (Trischler 2016: 309–335; Zalasiewicz et al. 2010: 2228–2231). This also applies to historians (see e.g.: Coen 2018; Moore 2016; Levene et al. 2010). The article examines this tendency and aims to show the different ways in which historical narratives can contribute to changing human sensitivity and social practices in relation to the natural environment. Thus, the paper examines the dialectic interplay between history and utopian thinking, the latter concept being understood as a combination of criticism of the existing social reality with an incentive to look for alternatives. In this context, I follow the contemporary approaches to utopia developed, *inter alia*, by Levitas (2013), Sargent (2010) and Jameson (2005). The two above-mentioned components of utopian thinking correspond to the two parts of the paper. The first part presents chosen historical narratives devoted to the criticism of the relationship between humans and the environment in the modern era, whereas the second part explores the same texts but focuses on their utopian potential with regard to counteracting the Anthropocene. Selection of the particular theories for analysis in this paper was related partly to their significance among historians and other intellectuals. This choice also results from a comparative dimension of the article. The paper juxtaposes three narratives of the Anthropocene that indicate the need to apply significant changes to historical discourse: post-naturalism (represented here by Dipesh Chakrabarty), eco-Marxism (analysed in the example of Jason W. Moore’s theory of the Capitalocene) and eco-catastrophism (illustrated in relation to the works of Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway). In the concluding part, I summarize my analyses and refer to the title question of the book: What sort of past does the future need?

## History and Criticism in the Era of the Anthropocene

Criticism of the *status quo* is considered a constitutive feature of utopian thinking (Jacobsen 2012; Sargent 2010; Levitas 1990), because a process of relativisation of the current state of affairs paves the way for the need to shape the alternative paths of development. Bauman (1976: 11) wrote in this context: “[...] the capacity to think in a utopian way does involve the ability to break habitual associations, to emancipate oneself from the apparently overwhelming mental and physical dominance of the routine, the ordinary, the ‘normal’”. Relating these observations to the issue discussed in this article, it should be noted that historians who conduct research on the Anthropocene strongly criticize the way nature has so far been conceptualized. They emphasize the need to reformulate the general assumptions as far as analyses of the human–environment relationship are concerned, so that they fully reveal the destructive scale of human activity. In this part of the paper I will highlight that their criticism is aimed at revolutionizing the nature of historical discourse.

The first of the three narratives analysed in this paper, “post-naturalism”, is in fact a very diverse set of theories focused on the reconsideration of the relationship between the human world and the natural world. Christophe Bonneuil, to whose typology I refer in this article, modifying it to some extent,<sup>1</sup> wrote about this narrative as follows: “While modernity had promised to emancipate society from nature’s determinism, the Anthropocene proclaims the inescapable immersion of human destiny in the great natural cycles of the Earth, and the meeting of the temporalities of short-term human history and long-term Earth history that had been viewed as separated for the last two centuries” (Bonneuil 2015: 24). This assumption is reflected in the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose article “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009: 197–222) introduced reflection on the Anthropocene to historical research. This paper, as well as the later works of this historian (e.g. 2021; 2019: 1–31; 2017: 39–43; 2016: 103–113; 2015: 137–188), are, to this day, points of reference—often critical, as will be shown later in the text—in the development of this discourse in history and beyond.

“The Climate of History” starts with a reference to Alan Weisman’s book *The World Without Us* (2007), which presents what would happen if humans suddenly ceased to exist. Chakrabarty points out that this thought experiment is useful not only in terms of awakening ecological awareness but also in the context of reformulation of some assumptions taken for granted in historical research. Imagining a future without human beings breaks the common-sense view of the relationships among past, present and future. It also contributes to asking questions about the place of humans in the history of the planet. As far as Chakrabarty is concerned, in the era of the Anthropocene, the centuries-old division into natural history and

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<sup>1</sup> Bonneuil distinguished four main narratives of the Anthropocene: “naturalism”, “post-naturalism”, “eco-catastrophism” and “eco-Marxism”. I decided to focus on the last three ones in this article because they are most concerned with changes in historical narratives. What is more, as the example of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s theory shows, it is difficult to clearly separate the “naturalist” and “post-naturalist” narrative of the Anthropocene. His utopian vision of “planetary perspective” is, however, definitely closer to the “post-naturalistic” narrative.

human history has to be fully transcended. He considered previous attempts to extend this distinction—made, for example, by environmental historians—insufficient, as humans are perceived in their context as a “biological agent”, not as a “geological agent”, which does not allow an adequate illustration of humans’ impact on the natural processes taking place on Earth and in the atmosphere. Chakrabarty claims (2009: 206) that “Humans are biological agents, both collectively and as individuals. They have always been so. [...] To call ourselves geological agents is to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species. We seem to be currently going through that kind of a period”. As a consequence, Chakrabarty postulates that the advent of the Anthropocene requires history researchers to think of human beings from the perspective of “geological time” and “planetary space” (Chakrabarty 2019: 1–31; 2017: 39–43). It does not imply the need to abandon customary historical research but to supplement them with this new, widely extended approach. This perspective will make it possible to analyse the consequences of human activity in relation to other organisms, both living and non-living. It will also serve as a basis of historical research into how this transformed natural environment affects humans as a species. Both levels of analysis are also related to the utopian dimension of Chakrabarty’s thought, which will be analysed in the next part of this paper.

Among historians who reflect on the destructive activity of humans toward nature, there is no agreement that the epoch following the Holocene should be called the “Anthropocene”. The opponents of this term argue that it assigns the responsibility for degradation of the Earth to all humankind, which does not reflect reality. Not only were not all humans to blame for this crisis, but also most were its victims, they claim. This issue is discussed within the “eco-Marxism” narrative and characterized by Bonneuil as follows: (2015: 27–28): “While Marx theorised on the first contradiction of capitalism, its inability to reproduce the labour force, the eco-Marxist narrative sees the Anthropocene as a result of a second contradiction of capitalism: its inability to maintain nature”. One of the most renowned representatives of this narrative is Jason W. Moore, who calls the present epoch the “Capitalocene”. Moore published many papers on this issue (e. g. 2018: 237–279; 2017a: 594–630; 2017b: 175–202) and edited a book, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016).

Unlike Chakrabarty and the vast majority of the Anthropocene researchers, Jason W. Moore states that the beginning of human destructive activity in relation to nature took place long before the industrial revolution. In this context, he focuses on the “long” sixteenth century,<sup>2</sup> when the constitutive features of capitalism were developed. Taking into account, *inter alia*, such phenomena as agriculture expansion, rapid deforestation and a several-percent increase in coal production, Moore stated that it was that time when the natural environment began to be exploited on an unprecedented scale. In this context he introduced the concept of “Cheap Nature”.

<sup>2</sup> This term – introduced by Ferdinand Braudel (1972) – refers to a period in history from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century when the expansion of the European world-economy took place (Moore 2003: 431–458).

“For capitalism, Nature is ‘cheap’”, wrote Moore (2016: 2–3), “in a double sense: to make Nature’s elements ‘cheap’ in price; and also *to cheapen*, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price. These two moments are entwined at every moment, and in every major capitalist transformation of the past five centuries”. Moore claims that the emergence of “Cheap Nature” was accompanied by the appearance of a similar attitude toward humans. The most significant manifestation of this phenomena was the development of slavery, but there were also many other examples of this tendency. That is why Moore claims that history must be reconsidered to analyse how humanity and nature are bound together within the web of life. This conviction is reflected in his concept of the “Capitalocene”, which he defines as “a multispecies assemblage”, or “a world-ecology of capital, power, and nature” (Moore 2016: xi). Thus, Moore shares Chakrabarty’s conviction in the fallacy of creating binary divisions between nature and society, and, therefore, also natural history and human history. He does so, however, from a different, Marxist perspective. This is also reflected in the distinct approaches to utopian thinking between the two.

The third narrative discussed in this paper is eco-catastrophism. According to Bonneuil (2015: 26), it: “[...] views the Anthropocene as an age in which modernity’s project of indefinite growth and progress hits the wall of the planet’s finitude” (see also: Rothe 2020: 148–151). A very good example of such an approach to the Anthropocene is a book, *The Collapse of Western Civilisation: A View from the Future*, which was authored in 2014 by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. Similar to Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us*, their work presents the consequences of a future global ecological catastrophe. They do not, however, depict the world after the extinction of humans but the reality in which the Western model of civilization fails to cope with the climate catastrophe.

Oreskes and Conway juxtapose science fiction writing with historical analyses to indicate how the current challenges of the Anthropocene could be perceived from the point of view of the distant future. Their vision is presented as a narration of a historian living in the ‘Second People’s Republic of China’ in 2393. He reflects on the twenty-first century processes that led to “the Great Collapse” of Western civilization. He analyses both the destructive impact of humans on the environment and the inability to make bold decisions within the West (in contrast to Chinese civilisation) that would enable adaptation to the changes taking place. What puzzles this future historian the most is the fact that these tragic events were fully predictable, and yet no measures were put in place to prevent them. He wrote: “Indeed, the most startling aspect of this story is just how much these people knew and how unable they were to act upon what they knew. Knowledge did not translate into power” (Oreskes and Conway 2014: 2). Oreskes and Conway point out in the commentary to this book that their aim was to highlight the fallacy of the aforementioned way of thinking. It is worth emphasising that they focus mainly on the normative and institutional spheres of social life and indicate that the lack of significant changes in these areas will inevitably lead to disaster.

The post-naturalist, as well as the eco-Marxist and the eco-catastrophic narrative, share the desire to relativize both the current ways of writing history and, at the

same time, the perception of history. Regardless of all the differences between them, they focus on the destructive dimensions of the processes that have shaped modern civilization and thus open the way for the development of alternative thinking. In the book by Zygmunt Bauman cited at the beginning of this part of the article, he also wrote: “One cannot be critical about something that is believed to be an absolute. By exposing the partiality of current reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot, utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man” (Bauman 1976: 13). In the next part of the article I will continue my analysis, presenting and comparing the visions of the post-Anthropocene future within these three narratives.

## History and the Future in the Era of the Anthropocene

With reference to Jacoby’s (2005) thought, the various visions of the future could be placed on the continuum between “blueprint” and “iconoclastic” utopianism.<sup>3</sup> The former is characterized by a very detailed and holistic presentation of the future. What is more, this approach assumes that there is one perfect, universal model of life, and that it is legitimate to strive by all means to realise it. At the other end of the continuum Jacoby placed “iconoclastic” utopianism, which, as its name suggests, does not involve mapping out the future. Instead, it is open to various alternative opportunities, none of which is considered final. Iconoclastic utopianism is characterised by the process of outlining directional guidelines with regard to the future without drawing the ultimate result of these efforts. The evolution of utopian thinking in recent decades consists of moving from blueprint visions towards iconoclastic ones that many intellectuals consider relevant to the reality of the twenty-first century (Levitas 2007: 289–306; Sargent 2005: 1–14). In this part of the paper I will emphasise that this statement also applies to utopian thinking in the era of the Anthropocene in all of the three narratives discussed here.

The turn from the blueprint to the iconoclastic form of utopianism is related, *inter alia*, to the association of the former with the tradition of Enlightenment, which has been strongly criticised by many representatives of the social sciences and humanities since the second half of the previous century. Such prominent intellectuals as Arendt (1951), Popper (1945) and Hayek (1944) argued that there is a close relationship between the projects of a perfect society created on the basis of rationalism, and the origins of violence and totalitarianism. Therefore, the iconoclastic model of utopian thinking is shaped in opposition to the assumptions attributed to the tradition of Enlightenment (Jacoby 2005). In this context it is worth stressing that Chakrabarty’s attitude towards this formation is ambivalent. On the one hand, he points out that the

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<sup>3</sup> Similar distinctions between the two opposing types of utopianism were made, *inter alia*, by: Jameson (2005), Alexander (2001: 579–591), Bauman (2003: 11–25) and Bloch (1986).

current climate crisis emerged as a result of the processes initiated in the Enlightenment. On the other hand, he states (2009: 210) that “[...] it is [...] clear that for humans any thought of the way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life”. Chakrabarty advocates the development of technology, as well as organisational solutions, aimed at counteracting climate change, but he does not advocate the blueprint of utopia.

As far as he is concerned, the above mentioned efforts should occur in parallel with the emergence of a “planetary perspective”. This concept reflects his view of the changes that, as he claims, needs to be made in historical narratives. Chakrabarty points to the necessity of transcending anthropocentrism and extending human responsibility to all organisms on the Earth. “Man will have to be placed in the larger context of the deeper history of life on this planet”, he wrote (2017: 42). “[...] anthropocentrism may be necessary but will increasingly seem inadequate if one looks at the impact of the human ecological footprint on other forms of life and on the planet itself. So, our inevitable anthropocentrism will need to be supplemented (not replaced) by ‘deep time’ perspectives that necessarily escape the human point of view”. It should be emphasised that Chakrabarty’s utopian thinking is entirely iconoclastic in this matter. He neither presents a plan for how to achieve the revolutionary change in social imaginary nor describes the details of the reforms that should be implemented in relation to the anticipated “planetary” perspective. Instead, Chakrabarty indicates the direction mankind should pursue and also highlights the sense of historical necessity.

The term “planetary justice” is also a constitutive element of Moore’s utopian thinking (Moore 2020: 161–182; 2019: 49–54), but he defined it in a different way to Chakrabarty. “In my view”, he stated (2020: 176), “a radical strategy of planetary justice proceeds through that connective critique of capitalism, such that we can make clear—and organize around—the conditions of capitalogenic climate change. In world-ecological perspective [...] the history of climate crisis, modern imperialism, the world colour line, and globalizing patriarchy open vistas through which to see today’s crisis politics in ways that reveal the constitutive lines between global domination and empire, and the endless accumulation of capital”. *Ergo*, Moore’s utopian thinking resembles his historical analyses of the emergence and development of the Capitalocene. In analogy to his thesis that the emergence of Cheap Nature was accompanied by the subordination of reality to the principle of endless accumulation, he claims that only through rejection of the logic of capitalism can the climate crisis be solved. Moore’s view on this matter reflects Marxist inclinations of his thought: he advocates the radical, holistic change, and considers all other solutions as definitely insufficient.

Moore’s vision of the future remains closer to the iconoclastic than to the blueprint model of utopianism. He does not strive to outline the details of the post-Capitalocene world he postulates and points out only its fundamental principles. Among them are such imperatives as, *inter alia*, decarbonisation, decommodification and democratisation, which are in fact the negatives of capitalist logic. Moore argues that the shape of the future order should be discussed in a wide forum among scholars, artists and

activists (Moore 2019: 54). The concept of the Capitalocene is in fact an invitation to take part in this debate on planetary justice.

In contrast to Jason W. Moore, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway do not postulate the need to establish an entirely new socio-economic order. Also, they do not share Dipesh Chakrabarty's belief that it is necessary to question anthropocentrism. Their utopian thinking is far less radical than that of those two intellectuals. They even claim that "Our story is a call to protect the American way of life before it's too late" (Oreskes and Conway 2014: 79). However, they also believe it is necessary to implement the normative and institutional changes in order to minimize the processes of climate destabilization. In this context, they indicate, *inter alia*, the need for more control mechanisms against political and economic neoliberalism. They also consider it indispensable to raise ecological awareness among the general public. A few years before *The Collapse of Western Civilisation* was published, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway published *Merchants of Doubt* (2011), which analyses the process of spreading doubt and confusion by some scientists wishing to discourage society from taking action aimed at changing given practices, attitudes or policies. One of the topics it discusses is the questioning of global warming. Oreskes and Conway returned to this issue in *The Collapse of Western Civilisation*, arguing that in order to counteract the Anthropocene it is necessary to restore the authority of science. Only then science will have a decisive influence on both political and individual choice.

Oreskes and Conway's utopian thinking has, in a similar way to that of Chakrabarty's and Moore's, an iconoclastic character. This is clearly demonstrated by a metaphor they use at the end of the book discussed here. They wrote that "[...] you can't predict what your readers will take away. Books are like a message in a bottle. You hope someone will open it, read it, and get the message. Whatever that is" (Oreskes and Conway 2014: 79). Thus, *The Collapse of Western Civilisation* should be interpreted as an inspiration to reflect upon both the challenges of the Anthropocene and upon appropriate ways to deal with them. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that this book has been written with a wide range of readers in mind. Oreskes and Conway not only refrained from using the hermetic scientific language but also chose a science fiction formula to attract readers. They left "a message in a bottle"<sup>4</sup> in the hope that it would be found and read, thus contributing to the spread of utopian thinking.

All three historical narratives discussed above, although differing in their details, are excellent examples of the transformations that have been taking place in the field of utopian thinking for the last few decades (Rüsen, Fehr, Rieger 2005; Jacoby 2005). Firstly, they do not visualise the post-Anthropocene or the post-Capitalocene world but present general assumptions upon which it should be founded. Secondly, they focus on the critical revision of the norms, practices and institutions that led to the current climate crisis, and indicate that it is necessary to transcend them. Thirdly,

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<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Bauman commented on this metaphor in his *Liquid Life* in the context of critical theory. He wrote: "The message in a bottle is a testimony to the *transience of frustration* and the *duration of hope*, to the *indestructibility of possibilities* and the frailty of adversaries that bar them from implementation" (2005: 143).

they emphasise that mankind is at a critical point but at the same time inspire hope and desire for change. Last but not least, they are aimed at expanding the scope of human responsibility in terms of the “planetary” or “global” perspective.

## Conclusions

The construction of this paper reflects the way the classic work of Thomas More is structured (1965 [1516]). This book is divided into two parts, the first of which presents the social, economic and political problems that took place in Tudor England, and the second of which is a description of an idealised island community. Both parts of this work form an inseparable whole: the vision of the Utopian Republic is a reference point for critical assessment of the situation in More’s homeland, while the relativization of the *status quo* paves the way for the creation of alternative visions of the future (see e.g.: Cousin and Grace 1994). Following Moore, I analysed in this article how historical narratives entwine criticism of human’s attitude towards nature with visions of a better future. On the one hand, I emphasised that writing on the history of modernity, not from the point of view of progress but from the perspective of the deepening climate catastrophe, may affect ecological awareness and stimulate related activities in this regard. On the other hand, I analysed how a presentation of a more or less detailed vision of a post-Anthropocene future may contribute to the relativization of those norms or practices that are considered to be responsible for the ecological crisis. These interpenetrating functions of historical discourse were illustrated in one example of three competing narratives: post-naturalism, eco-Marxism and eco-catastrophism. It has been shown that, despite significant differences among them, they all represent an iconoclastic model of utopian thinking.

The above reflections contribute to the answer to the more general question of what sort of past the future needs. I pointed out in this paper that, faced by the challenges of the contemporary world—the Anthropocene is, of course, only one of them—the historical narratives may play a very important role. They may, *inter alia* stimulate criticism toward the *status quo*, awaken individual and social awareness, extend the scope of human’s responsibility, shape moral imperatives and inspire hope. The fulfilment of these functions will depend, however, on whether these narratives acquire a utopian dimension. My vision of the liaisons between history and utopian thinking is quite similar to the concept of the “rescue history” of the Polish historian Domańska (2014: 12–26). She wrote that “Rescue history as an existential history is a research perspective that via the inquiries of the past reflects on the meanders of the human condition. [...] It is a perspective that treats the problems undertaken by the researcher as a starting point for reflection (and self-reflection) on the human condition, the condition of the planet, the condition of the humanities, and history as a discipline” (Ibidem, p. 18). I agree with Domańska that future-oriented historical narratives should raise critical hope rather than indicate particular solutions. As far as I am concerned, the idea of the “iconoclastic utopia” may serve as an important

source of inspiration in this regard. It encourages involvement in the historical process while emphasizing its complexity and never-ending changeability.

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