

Visualizing the Anthropocene

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A*nthropocene* is the name given by scientists to the new era in geology caused by human intervention, primarily the burning of fossil fuels. It is only 250 years old, a mote in the eye of geological time, which can barely register the ephemeral 10,000 years of the preceding Holocene, whose unusually stable climatic conditions made human agriculture and civilization possible. No more can humans see the Anthropocene, extending across centuries, through dimensions and across time. It can only be visualized. This task is further complicated because it affects everything from the lithosphere to the upper atmosphere and all the biota in between. Further, while visualization is normally carried out by the agent of an action, such as the general visualizing a battlefield, the Anthropocene is a human-created machine that is now unconsciously bent on its own destruction, a purposiveness without purpose, to repurpose Immanuel Kant's famous definition of the aesthetic. As I have argued elsewhere (Mirzoeff 2011), a complex of visualization usually comprises three steps: classification, separation, and aestheticization. In this case, however, the first two steps are essentially redundant: the Anthropocene defines the entire planet, whether we like it or not. The last moment of human agency comes in the rendering of this phenomenon into an aesthetic, comprising both the ancient concept of bodily perception and the modern sense of the beautiful. Perhaps surprisingly, to visualize the Anthropocene is to invoke the aesthetic. There are many aesthetics that are not those of the Anthropocene, of course, but that is not my concern here. In the brief compass available here, the first step is to recognize how deeply embedded in our very sensorium and modern ways of seeing the Anthropocene-aesthetic-capitalist complex of modern visibility has become. Next, we need to recognize that this interface is neither singular nor self-contained: it moves in nonlinear and networked form. Such patterns of material, social, human, and nonhuman interaction cannot be simply resisted or countered. There is, finally, a possible complex

of the antiaesthetic in the Anthropocene, nonetheless, that turns out to have been there all along.

This antiaesthetics is not a classificatory scheme of the beautiful, or a style of formal art practice, but what Jacques Rancière (2004: 13) calls “an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics . . . as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.” The body can no longer make sense of what is presented to it. We cannot articulate what we perceive, namely, that the climate is wrong—too hot, too dry, too wet, or all of the above. Any suggestion to this effect is at once challenged. There is no effective climate change politics at the national or international level. Since the intensification and expansion of the global social movements in 2011, in which the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement built on the foundations laid since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, we as commoners have nonetheless placed our bodies where they are not supposed to be seen, in part as a claim to that perception. This claim is what I call the “right to look” (Mirzoeff 2011). It is not a right in the sense of human rights, for declarations and charters. It is not a gaze but a look mutually exchanged between people in a consensual “invention of the other” (Derrida 1998: n.p.).¹ In the language of the social movements, it is not a demand. It is the process of consensus, producing the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity. This invention is common, and it creates a commons when it comes into being. For there is an exchange but no creation of a surplus. It is therefore sustainable. You, or your group, allow another to find you, and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself. It means requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right. It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange and rearrange the relations of the visible and the sayable. The right to look confronts the police who say to us “Move on, there’s nothing to see here” (Rancière 2001). Only there is, and we know it and so do they. The claim to occupy public space and the repeated eviction of the common from that space by the police from Buenos Aires to Cairo, Madrid, New York, São Paulo, and Istanbul is the dramatization of that claim and the visualization of the crisis in the current complex of visibility. The right to look is aesthetically *a priori*, philosophically foundational, and historically prior.

I talk of complexes, not complexity, because many issues are interwoven here. We have been told that the modern no longer has a single outcome. It turns out that maybe it does, ending with neither a bang nor a whimper but a gently rhyth-

1. I have modified the translation used by Wills, “right of inspection,” because it attempts to bridge the gap between right and law that I feel should be kept open.

mic rising of the sea in some places and the end of the rain in others. Nature, so often used by humans to define perversity as unnatural, has itself become perverse (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010: 1–47), undoing all theologies, deisms, Spinozisms, and other forms of the transcendent. We now find ourselves confronting an autoimmune capitalism that seems determined to extract the last moment of circulation for itself, even at the expense of its host lifeworld. Like AIDS and other autoimmune diseases, in which the body turns on itself, this capitalism has a long etiology and multiple symptoms and is resistant to cure: we might call it autoimmune climate-changing capitalism syndrome, or AICS for short. I want to acknowledge that it was Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) who first called for humanists to use the Anthropocene as a means of analysis in what has become a classic essay. His crucial point was to emphasize that the periodizing and dividing so beloved of academia no longer holds good. In the Anthropocene, all past human history in the industrial era is the contemporary. No location is outside the Anthropocene, although some are affected far more than others. The modern research university has grafted the capitalist division of labor onto the medieval vision of the individual scholar in his cell. Learning to think anthropocentrically, to coin a term, will mean letting go of both the divisions of time and space that define research and the myth of the solitary intellectual. Crowd-sourced collective and horizontal practice is not just desirable but necessary, as evidenced by the Superstorm Research Lab (superstormresearchlab.org) created in New York after Hurricane Sandy.

My sole point of divergence is with Chakrabarty's (2009: 214–22) musing that the Anthropocene might redirect our attention to the universal, because it affects everyone. Given that we are dealing with geology, we should be careful—the universe is not going to be affected by AICS. Our planet will continue, regardless of the future of the carbon-based life that currently inhabits it. Climate is the volatile context for that life, knowable only as a set of abstracted data, but revealing to us that all knowledge rests on such models (Edwards 2010). Further, its effects across the planet are very uneven, requiring a decolonization of the atmosphere. But let's use *universal* in the sense of “universal health care,” implied by my use of *autoimmune*. It's easy to say that I am medicalizing the climate situation: of course I am. If a threat to life is not a medical issue, what is? But I am most certainly not proposing a solution in what disability studies scholars and activists call “the medical model,” of diagnosis, experts, and compliance. I am suggesting that, in the manner of “nothing about us without us,” only the affected community can decide how to deal with the situation. Using the most dangerous of all supplements, democracy, it's the G6 billion who will solve this, not the G8. Syndromes

and supplements are notoriously tricky as well as dangerous things. Will it be possible to render AICS, the interactive crisis of climate change and capitalism, into a “real abstraction,” with similar force to Karl Marx’s analysis of the commodity, or Western Marxism’s interpretation of culture? To do so requires a planetary countervisualization to global financialization. It happened at Gezi Park in Istanbul. A choice was made to defend a green space against consumer capitalism. Thousands risked injury to defend the space and to invent democracy. At the time of writing, keeping the park had won support in the Turkish courts. It has happened at repeated protests in China against biospheric industrial projects. In July 2013, a proposed multibillion-dollar nuclear processing plant in Jiangmen, Guangdong Province, was canceled after an effective and coordinated protest campaign, linking Hong Kong and Macao media to direct action in Jiangmen. As so often in the history of countervisuality, the resistance has begun in the global South.

Visualizing

Visualizing is a task first defined by eighteenth-century military theorists (Mirzoeff 2011). Once the battlefield became too extensive and complex for any one person to physically see, the general’s task was to visualize it by means of his imagination, supplied with ideas, images, and intuition from his staff and troops. The tactic was transposed by the historian Thomas Carlyle to the processes of history in his 1840 lectures *On Heroes*. The mark of the “great man,” or hero, was precisely that he (always) could visualize history as it happened, unlike all other men (women being considered irrelevant by the archreactionary Carlyle). While we may have forgotten Carlyle, the concept of the great man of history underpins everything from the cult of biography to presidential debates. Visualizing was and is a hierarchical, indeed autocratic, means of imagining the social as permanent conflict (Mirzoeff 2011: 123–54). Its goal is to maintain the authority of the visualizer, above and beyond the visualizer’s material power. So when a government collapses, as happened in Eastern Europe in 1989 or in the Arab Spring of 2011, it is its authority that has disappeared, not its power. Visuality is a supplement, but it is the one that completes the ability to rule.

After Carlyle’s rather mystical concept of the heroic visualizer, the concept was transferred to the great abstract bureaucracies of modernity: first, the Empire of nineteenth-century imaginations, then the West of the Cold War, and now the Market. These visualizings were, of course, Western. They implicated and involved those regions of the world, the majority, that were affected by Western imperialism and plantation slavery. The technologies of visibility are, then, only

understood from the place of the “South” where they are practiced, looking back, as it were, at the global North from whence they came. In this context, I understand the South to be what Enrique Dussell calls “a metaphor for human suffering under global capitalism” (quoted in Mirzoeff 2011: 46). If Empire described by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* was above all “the idea only,” in the service of the Company, so too was the Cold War a clash of ideologies administered by the “military-industrial complex,” named by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The neoliberalism that has dominated governance since the 1970s has insisted that there are things such as “market forces” and that they must at all costs be obeyed. So we should now add to this list of visualities an Anthropocene visuality, albeit one that operates in a distinctive fashion. For if the Anthropocene cannot visualize itself, no more can the market or empire, and yet the “authority” of both can be felt across the world. Imperial authority allowed thousands to rule millions. Market authority is what is known as “confidence,” in whose name entire populations are subjugated by austerity. Anthropocene visuality allows us to move on, to see nothing and keep circulating commodities, despite the destruction of the biosphere. We do so less out of venal convenience, as some might suggest, than out of a modernist conviction that “the authorities” will restore everything to order in the end. What is ultimately far more disturbing to modern thought is the potential realization that no one (or nothing) in fact has authority—the market and the state, twin avatars of modern progress, can only combine to advance the progress of the Anthropocene. In this light, the choice to believe that a divinity is watching over us so that no climate disaster could ever happen is not so much irrational as it is a following of Carlyle’s preference for order over chaos at all costs. In short, Anthropocene visuality keeps us believing that somehow the war against nature that Western society has been waging for centuries is not only right; it is beautiful and it can be won. If this is certainly a Western imperial project, the shame and the crisis is that it has affected every living thing whatsoever. But, as we shall see, it does not do so evenly and equitably.

The Conquest of Nature

Since the seventeenth century, the West has in some ways been defined as the modernizing call for the “conquest of nature,” a visualization of the planet as an enemy to be subdued. For Francis Bacon, who seems to have originated the phrase, nature was provided “for the relief of man’s estate.” The gendered implication is important. Nature did not give up her secrets willingly, but was treated like a supposed witch requiring brutal interrogation (Merchant 1989 [1980]: 166–68).

In turn, this rendered indigenous nations into *terra nullius* (nothing land), meaning that any European was free to “ransack” them, and opened the sea to international navigation without limits as *res nullius* (nothing thing) (Mirzoeff 2009). In short, the nonhuman/non-European world became a space in which there was “nothing to see here.” Of course, there was a certain equivalence between the nonhuman and the non-European in these imperial practices that was extended to the nonelite subjects in the imperial metropole. During the English Revolution (1642–49), a range of radical sects envisaged the end of Charles I’s monarchy as the beginning of a new era and the end of slavery. Consider Gerrard Winstanley (1609–76), a sometime Baptist and itinerant preacher, who was working as a cowhand when he felt himself called upon: “As I was in a trance not long since, divers matters were present to my sight, which must not here be related. Likewise I heard these words, *Worke together. Eat bread together*; declare all this abroad” (1941 [1649]: 190). Winstanley’s vision of collectivity came at a time of social, economic, and political crisis, following the execution of the king. He insisted on following through first principles, all of which can be derived from the first sentence of his first pamphlet, written as his small group known as the Diggers were beginning to reclaim the commons and wasteland on St. George’s Hill, Surrey: “In the beginning of time, the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury for all” (Winstanley 1973 [1649]: 77). It’s worth looking closely at this sentence. The divine was expressed as rationality, present in each individual, whose agency of “vision, voice and revelation” (Winstanley 1973 [1649]: 84) produced the direct action of cultivating the land. “Earth,” or land, is assumed to be the common property of all, the treasury of a land without a state. His vision was a relay of divine inspiration, internal rights, and righteousness to be grounded in a common sense of equality. By cultivating land on an equal basis and denying the possibility of exclusive ownership of the land, Winstanley envisaged sustainable small-scale cultivation as the basis of social life. His nonviolent form of resistance was to advocate that workers refuse to labor for others, the refusal of the wage system at its beginnings. Historian Christopher Hill called this action the first general strike. Indeed, in a manner familiar to present-day social movements, Winstanley declared: “Action is the life of all and if thou dost not act thou dost nothing” (quoted in Hill 1996).

In response to such theories of radical direct democracy, Thomas Hobbes in 1651 defined the state as Leviathan. The Leviathan was the figure of the commonwealth, the social contract by which individuals arrogate their right of governance to the sovereign. They do so because the alternative is a condition of permanent war, the “nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1904 [1651]: 84) life that Hobbes

visualized as a consequence of social movements like the Diggers. Of the three possible modes of commonwealth—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—Hobbes was convinced that monarchy was by far the most effective. So the figure seen in the famous frontispiece represents the monarchy as a living form of the social contract. The body of the king is composed of hundreds of other bodies, his subjects, combined to make the whole known as Leviathan. As Horst Bredekamp (2007: 33) reminds us, Hobbes imagined the Leviathan as a “mortal god,” a figure equivalent to Hercules and other creatures of legend. Hobbes was interested in the question of such “compound creatures,” as he called them, as a special instance of the power of imagination, or Fancy. Fancy was not simply an artistic or creative attribute: “Whatsoever distinguisheth the civility of *Europe*, from the Barbarity of the *American* savages, is the workmanship of *Fancy*” (quoted in Tralau 2007: 65). Fancy created images, meaning “any representation of one thing by another” (ibid.: 66). Leviathan thus colonized the land by means of the imagination, rendering it into an aesthetic form composed of sovereignty and colonial authority in and as the power to represent. These are not just words: in 1660 the British monarchy was restored, and the first law code for the enslaved was published in the British settler colony of Barbados in 1661. Winstanley had called the revolution the “world turned upside down” (quoted in Hill 1996). Plantation monarchy restored it.

I stress this history for several reasons. It shows that the widely circulated idea that we cannot imagine the end of capitalism is better understood as part of capitalism’s self-constitution, rather than as a failure of present-day radicalism. For there is a longer modern tradition of landed communism, direct action, and direct democracy than there is of industrial nation-state capitalism. It further suggests that the power to imagine has itself been colonized and dominated so that we understand the fundamental human impulse to be one of conflict rather than communal action. The theory and practice of the conquest of nature has become integrated into Western aesthetics throughout the Anthropocene. The modern concept of the aesthetic is itself a transformation of a long-standing discourse of *aesthesis*, meaning the full range of the body’s sensorium, into a specific discourse about art (Buck-Morss 1992). This transformation was enabled by a new configuration of the modern, imperial subject as being constituted by his (gender intended) “superiority over nature,” as Kant (1987: 120–21) put it. This dominance was rendered geographically, so that in his *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*, Kant situated the beginnings of inequality at the very earliest stages of human history, which he drew from the book of Genesis. He disposed of the fantasy of “a complete equality of human beings,” which he defined as a

life of lazy hedonism, by pointing to the evidence of “voyages to the south sea islands” (Kant 2007 [1786]: 174). Kant does not deny the possibility of a certain equality but renders it as a passive, effeminate, and even boring way of life. There is, then, a slippage from biblical to imperial history in his essay. Where the Bible postulates the necessity of inequality following the Fall, the colonized islands of the South demonstrated it in the then-present. As Susan Buck-Morss (1992: 9) has stressed, the masculine superiority required to create civilization was epitomized for Kant by the practice of the military general, who was also the archetype of visualization in the same period. So, a generation later, we find G. W. F. Hegel (1998: 1:163–64) synthesizing as follows: “Anything and everything art wrests from momentary existence, and in this respect too conquers nature. . . . Our imaginative mentality has in itself the character of universality. . . . Now the work of art is of course not just a universal idea, but its specific materialization. . . . It is the task of the work of art to grasp the object in its universality.” Art conquers nature by revealing the universal in a specific material object, leaving no remainder. From Thomas De Quincey’s opium eating to *The Matrix*, we have been aware that we perceive a phantasmagoria that passes for reality but is a qualitatively altered world. As we learn how to look at the (Western, imperial) artwork via aesthetics a paradox results: the conquest of nature, having been aestheticized, leads to a loss of perception (*aesthesis*), which is to say, it becomes an anaesthetics.

Anthropocene (An)Aesthetics

The aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution. The examples here from the three major Western global cities of imperial capital—Paris, London, and New York—are deliberately mainstream choices to reinforce my claim that this aesthetics is a central modern experience. I have also selected works from the three dominant Western, modern, imperial powers, which were centrally responsible for the change in climate. Britain launched the Industrial Revolution. Together with France, it was the world’s leading imperial power until the era of decolonization. And the United States continues to lead the world in per capita carbon emissions (other than low-population oil-producing nations). The Euro-American centrism is designed to indicate the degree of responsibility, not primacy.

By the same token, I also want to show that the transformation of the biosphere was never unknown and is indeed central to what we have come to call the canon. After all, it would not be striking if some little-known artists and writers



had made some observations that we retrospectively decided to be important. Instead, it's there at the very heart of what colleges and universities in the United States like to call "Western Civilization." And that is no coincidence. There is no modern Western painting more widely reproduced and taught than Claude Monet's 1873 *Impression: Sun Rising* (see fig. 1). In supplementary addition to the standard appreciation of Monet's handling of color and light, I want to stress here that this is a painting that at once reveals and aestheticizes anthropogenic environmental destruction. Coming late to the Industrial Revolution, France was just experiencing the smog produced by industrial coal use. The smokiness of the port of Le Havre in Normandy, seen in Monet's picture, was a feature of French visual culture from popular photographs and paintings from the middle of the nineteenth century to Maurice de Vlaminck's 1907 painting *Le Havre, les bassins*. Monet grew up in Le Havre, which had become the main French port for

Figure 1 Claude Monet, *Impression: Sun Rising*, 1873. Musée Marmottan. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

transatlantic passenger shipping, predominantly steamship traffic. While traditional rowing boats can be seen in the foreground, the background is dominated by industrial machinery, such as the cranes to the right, and its by-products. Coal smoke pours forth from the smokestacks of the steamers clearly depicted at the left middle ground of the painting. It generates the set of sense impressions that gave first this painting, and then an entire movement, its name. Coal smoke is yellow, the yellow that predominates at the top of the painting. In the early morning, it encounters the blue morning light and the red of the rising sun, producing the array of refracted color that makes Monet's painting so stunning.

There is a good deal of artfulness in Monet's apparently spontaneous effort to seize the moment. In the words of Paul Hayes Tucker (1995: 74), doyen of Monet scholars, the mix of light and smoke combines to "create a kind of beauty that is both surprising and seductive." Indeed, the steamers can barely be distinguished in the smog, giving them the appearance of factory smokestacks, somehow emerging from the water like a latter-day Leviathan. The painting is constructed from an unusually high viewpoint. If we are seeking to give a literal account, perhaps Monet was looking out of a high window or from the rigging of a ship. Whether he physically positioned himself at such a place is perhaps beside the point. Monet visualized the "seductiveness" mentioned by Tucker as the conquest of nature, blending the once-threatening seascape into a domesticated and human-dominated object of contemplation. Here the human agents of the Anthropocene look at their creation from its own viewpoint, as it were, and see that it was good. While some of Monet's contemporaries at first experienced his depiction as a modernist shock, it soon became comfortably familiar, as it remains today. The painting makes the circulation of capital and the modern visible and sayable as Anthropocene (an)aesthetics. Whereas the material smog was a dangerous by-product, this modern aesthetic countered it by transforming the very perception of its difference into a sign of human superiority and the continuing conquest of nature.

Two years later, Monet fully visualized this cosmology in his small but dense painting *Unloading Coal* (see fig. 2). A fleet of coal barges from the mines in the north invade the picture space from the bottom left to the right middle ground. The product of this primary extraction is carried off the barges by workers who cannot be distinguished individually, precisely because as individuals they do not matter. What counts is the unloading of the coal. From here, the coal is transported by means we cannot see to factories like the one in the background, once again pouring smoke. In those factories are produced the modern iron bridge and the commodities being transported by the carts across it. A gaslight, the literal visible sign of human dominance over nature, can just be made out on the

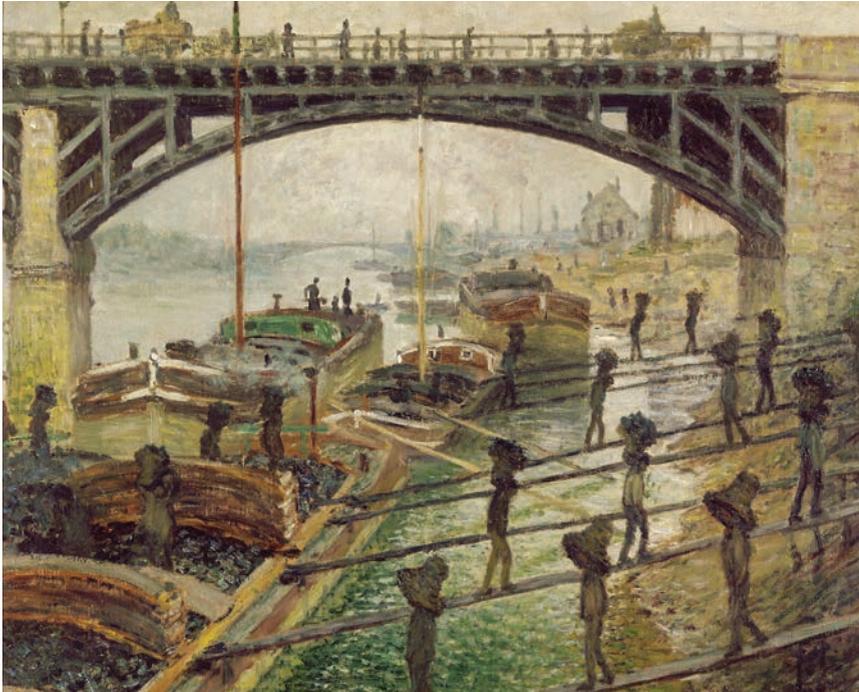


Figure 2 Claude Monet, *Unloading Coal*, c. 1875. Musée d'Orsay.
© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

bridge. The bridge is visibly a “higher” level of existence, one dominated by commodities and artificially lit. The figures are no more distinct or individualized up there, even though some are at rest or watching the underlings carry coal, so you would rather be one of them. The two spaces of phantasmagoria—production and consumption—are linked into one visualized system here. It is given coherence by the overall warm tone of the painting, that subdued yellow hue, which is the product of coal smoke. The degradation of the air is seen as natural, right, and hence aesthetic, a key step in any visibility: it produces an anaesthetic to the actual physical conditions. The Anthropocene is so built in to our senses that it determines our perceptions, hence it is aesthetic. Just as with *Impression* a few years earlier, *Unloading Coal* is constructed from an unusual midair viewpoint, interpreted by Richard Thomson (2010: 123) as being the view from the window of a train as it crossed over the river Seine between Argenteuil and Paris. If we take this literally mapped view, Monet turned the moving image seen from his train, often taken to be the precursor of cinema, into a still. This freeze-frame

accounts for the strong sense of movement and circulation in the painting. At a metaphorical level, it once again represents the Anthropocene's visualization of itself and its aesthetic anaesthesia of the senses.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this anaesthesia comes from New York. If we look at George Wesley Bellows's classic painting *Forty-Two Kids* of 1906, the scene is dominated by the naked children getting ready to swim in the East River on a hot day (see fig. 3). The water is black, which has rarely been mentioned in the literature. It was not a metaphor. At that time, all the bodily waste of the 6 million people living around New York Harbor was piped straight into the water, along with many dead animals and industrial waste (Reeve 1922). The oyster beds that were so extensive in the nineteenth century as to be one of the key food sources for the city had died. Officials charged with dealing with the disposal of sewage could not understand why there was no public outcry or even perception of the waste. In 1903 the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission was established; it spent eight years compiling an interim report. Nonetheless, in 1912, six years after Bellows made his painting, the British scientist Dr. Samuel Rideal commented after a tour of the harbor: "I am surprised that a city claiming to be one of the first in the world should allow such a disgraceful condition of affairs to exist" (quoted in Phelps, Soper, and Gould 1934: 1006). The sewage officials noted in amazement:

The people of New York seem strangely indifferent to the polluted condition of the harbor. They have recently built some of the finest and most expensive hospitals and apartment houses on the shores of the most polluted large part of the inner harbor, namely, the Upper East River, where that fetid stream is joined by the black and malodorous Harlem. Two extensive and expensive marine parks have been laid out and other waterside recreation grounds are contemplated in other parts of the city. Here bathing, boating and fishing will be dangerous, if not repugnant to the senses. (Ibid.)

The point here was that, while the "great unwashed" working classes might have been expected to be willing to live with dirt and smells, so too were New York's elites. It appears that the desire to live in the modern city was so great that it literally anaesthetized the senses, or at least allowed people to disregard what they saw and smelled in the water.

Such selective perception was by no means unique to New York. For over a century, London was afflicted with dense smogs produced by burning coal. Known as "pea-soupers," and often referred to incorrectly as fog, this persistent smog became a feature of London life. Tourists expected the fog, Londoners

missed it when away, and it became a character in nineteenth-century fiction from Charles Dickens to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. From then on, it was simply accepted as part of London life. In the “Great Fog” of December 1952 twilight came at noon. A later study estimated that it killed twelve thousand people by lung disease and other breathing difficulties, more than four times the casualties of 9/11 (Bell and Davis 2001). But if you look in newspapers, diaries, and other sources like the Mass Observation Archive for those days, it’s hardly mentioned. The *Times* (1952a, 1952b) noted that fog held up traffic and mentioned respiratory difficulties only for cattle at Earl’s Court. Indeed, Mass Observation hardly notices the fogs, except for the occasional one-word entry in a diary (Mass Observation). Fog just came with London, in the way that smog was later associated with Los Angeles. Smog is not always anaesthetically invisible. When the Olympics were held in Beijing in 2008, there was tremendous concern in Western media and sports circles about the effects of air pollution. Google “smog” even today and many of the top images depict Beijing in 2008. Certainly, the conditions there were and

Figure 3 George Wesley Bellows, *Forty-Two Kids* (1907). Oil on canvas. 42 x 60 1/4 inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Museum purchase, William A. Clark Fund

are poor to say the least. But when the first day of the 2012 London Olympics coincided with an air quality alert, no one mentioned it. Imperial smoke is a positive sign of the energy and vitality of the modern metropole, whereas the smogs of developing world capitals are miasmas, threatening to health and vitality.

Countervisuality

To understand the present dynamics of this colonization, we need only look at the diagram produced by the *Lancet* in 2009 (see fig. 4) (Costello et al. 2009). The top half of the diagram represents nation-states by size according to the quantity of carbon emissions. The bottom half shows the likely consequences of climate change for each nation-state. Where the European Union and the United States are clearly the greatest emitters, it is equally clear that Africa and India will suffer the greatest consequences. So if it is true that climate change is the polite name for the robbing of the commons, the overdeveloped world as a whole is the thief in relation to the dominated world. This is usually the place for lamentations about the difficulty of doing anything against the modern Leviathans of multinational corporations, consumerism, and the fossil fuel industry. I do not underestimate these forces. However, I do not wish to participate in their visualization of the planet as a battlefield and hence presume that to mitigate the effects of climate change, they must somehow be defeated. Rather, I think that the reclaiming of the imagination entails an undoing of their authority, which they themselves literally cannot conceive. The theory of society as permanent war cannot envisage an alternative. Nonetheless, a countervisuality to the Anthropocene already exists and has long been active.

Countervisuality has had three constituent aspects: a claim to move out of the “place” allocated to one by birth, a claim to democracy on behalf of the part that has no part, and a means of sustaining these claims beyond the spontaneous moment of uprising. While these categories do not appear “visual,” that is not the field of visibility or countervisuality. Rather, the project is to create a mental space for action that can link the visible and the sayable. In relation to Anthropocene visibility, a move out of one’s place would be the end of the de facto hierarchy of humanity that continues to affect global populations long after anthropologists and other scientists abandoned the formal attempt to classify the human. At present, the majority of people on the planet remain what Micronesian activist Julian Aguon (2008) calls “disposable humanity.” In short, the most radical possible gesture would be if all living people were considered fully human, as the civil rights movement in the United States has insisted. For if we did genuinely hold all

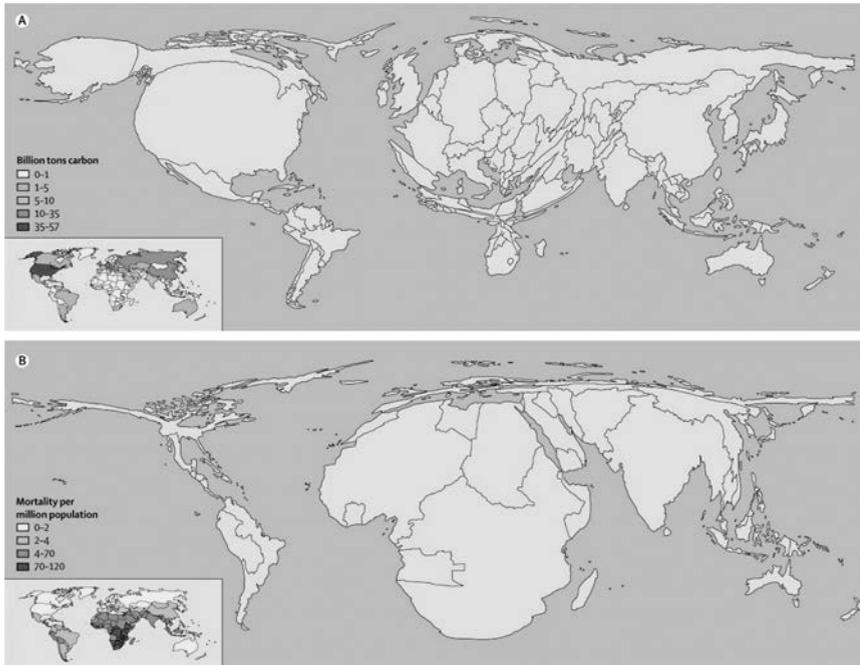


Figure 4 Reprinted from Anthony Costello et al., “Managing the Health Effects of Climate Change: *Lancet* and University College London Institute for Global Health Commission,” *Lancet* 373, no. 9676 (2009): 1693–1733, with permission from Elsevier. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140673609609351

human life to be self-evidently equal, there would already be dramatic action to protect those whose way of life is radically under threat, such as Pacific islanders and other residents of low-lying nations like Bangladesh threatened by rising sea levels. One-third of all currently spoken languages are found in Oceania, meaning that great swathes of human culture should be placed on the endangered list.

This renewed equality should be taken further to include all nonhuman actors. Extinction of nonhuman species has already reached unprecedented levels. Scientists have suggested that we need to classify the moment as the sixth mass extinction in earth’s history (Novacek 2007). For example, no less than a third of amphibian species are currently threatened with extinction (Wake and Vredenburg 2008). This threat should not be considered wholly external. It has been estimated that 90 percent of the DNA in our bodies is not “ours” but microbial (Human Microbiome Project). “Our” DNA is itself the result of a long sharing between generations. We also now know that certain “switches” in the genome

are turned on by experiences—diet, toxicity, age, and so on—that lead to changes in the body. Taking this for the metaphor that it clearly already is, we might say that there is a cultural “switch” for the common that can, at certain moments, resonate with us and lead to a restoration of the commons. The imperial state has in part been devoted to imagining ways to turn such a switch off or even make it invisible. The long obsession with surveillance that has reached new heights in the digital era has been motivated by the anxiety that imperial subjects might start to think and act in common. In the brief time since Mohammed Bou’azizi shocked Tunisia into taking action by his self-immolation, that switch has proved interestingly easy to find from Egypt to Brazil by way of Madrid, Athens, New York, London, Istanbul, Montreal, and so on. We have always already known how to do this. Because prior to all law, there is a relation between people. We move from the social to the individual. This thesis is currently supported by one variant of neuroscience, which claims to have identified a set of “mirror neurons” in the brain (Gallese 2003). More importantly, that relation is known to us every day as the way two people look into each other’s eyes, whether in friendship, solidarity, trust, or love. That relationship cannot be represented because it exists only in common as it passes between people. Authority has invested enormous amounts of energy, time, and money to convince us otherwise. There is a planetary claim to a participatory democracy under way that would entail more than a choice between narrowly differentiated representatives every four or five years.

The history of what I have called countervisuality has always been a drive for sustainability, or a politics of eating. *Sustaining* means here both the need to survive physically and psychologically and the means by which a participatory form of democracy might be sustained. In *The Right to Look* (Mirzoeff 2011), I have traced this history from the consistent demands by the formerly enslaved to own small pieces of agricultural land to the food justice claims that motivated the Arab Spring. One familiar means to understand this for readers in the United States is incarnated in the slogan Forty Acres and a Mule coined by the formerly enslaved at the end of the Civil War. The gain of land and animal support would have enabled the “freed” to move out of their allotted place, away from the plantation, to becoming landowners and participants in the democracy promoted by Reconstruction (1865–77). Despite the implementation of a new racialized system of domination that reinforced segregation with the penitentiary, some freed people did manage to achieve this new balance and even established new townships, such as Scanlonville and Lincolnville, both in South Carolina. These movements have what the Invisible Committee (2009: 12) called a “resonance” with the recent social movements. Countervisuality, like other forms of resistance to capitalism,

does not move in a linear, tactile fashion. Rather, in moments of rupture, resonance with similar moments in the past suddenly becomes perceptible. We learn in such moments what it is to learn and what history might mean for those who are not the traditional victors. In Egypt, for example, the 2011 uprising that culminated in the Tahrir Square revolution began with a chant around Cairo: “They are eating pigeon and chicken, we eat beans all the time.” The demand for food justice resulted from a threefold crisis in global food prices, caused by climate-change-enhanced drought, the diversion of corn to biofuels, and the expansion of the Goldman Sachs Commodity Futures Index. Drought reduced food supplies in North Africa that could not be made up with imports because so much corn was going to make ethanol, ironically motivated by the desire to reduce carbon emissions. Speculation in commodity prices brought over \$300 billion into the commodity futures index after the financial crash of 2008, resulting in a rise in food prices of over 80 percent in the dominated world since 2003, generating a crisis for urban subaltern populations (Kaufman 2011). With another poor harvest in 2012, food prices rose rapidly in 2013, even as the government pursued neoliberal austerity (Ahmed 2013). In the first draft of this essay, I suggested that further upheavals were likely. Since then, the peculiar democratic coup of June 2013 overthrew the Morsi regime. While the involvement of the army led some to label this a coup, the revolutionaries of 2011 uniformly supported the action. Like the seventeenth-century radicals, they presume that democracy means that the government represents them, not that representatives have the freedom to govern as they will once elected. How these events all turn out remains unclear at the time of writing, but let us stay on point: the interactive climate and food crisis is producing a different understanding of democracy, in messy practice rather than cleanly defined theory.

Sustaining is, then, properly a participatory democracy. Such a democracy would be based on a philosophy like that known as *vivir bien* (living well) now being discussed in Bolivia. Following the “Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth” made in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2008, legislation has now been proposed that would give the planet legal standing and rights, defined as an “indivisible community of all living systems and living organisms, interrelated, interdependent and complementary, which share a common destiny.” This legal project is also an ethical commitment to *vivir bien*, defined as “adopting forms of consumption, behavior and conduct that are not degrading to nature. It requires an ethical and spiritual relationship with life. Living Well proposes the complete fulfillment of life and collective happiness” (WorldTruth.TV 2012). The law was drafted by the Unity Pact, representing all of the country’s thirty-six indigenous groups and

a total of 3 million people. I do not suggest that all nations should pass this law. It is not even clear whether Bolivia will do so. The politics it embodies nonetheless offer a possibility of moving beyond the Anthropocene visuality that has produced the interactive crises of democracy, food supply, and climate change. It relies on rejecting the twinned dynamic represented by the proper names Hobbes and Kant: namely, that human nature is nasty, that there must therefore be a permanent state of social warfare, and that this warfare is also the contest of the global North against the global South. Like all forms of countervisuality, contesting Anthropocene visuality is a decolonial politics that claims the right to see what there is to be seen and name it as such: a planetary destabilization of the conditions supportive of life, requiring a decolonization of the biosphere itself in order to create a new sustainable and democratic way of life that has been prepared for by centuries of resistance.

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