



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
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Climate(s) of Change: Towards a “Radical” Concept of History Education in the Anthropocene?

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Cite as: Andreas Hübner, "Climate(s) of Change: Towards a “Radical” Concept of History Education in the Anthropocene?," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 13/12/2022, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9976>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/9976>

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Climate(s) of Change: Towards a “Radical” Concept of History Education in the Anthropocene?

The planet we live on “is a world of our making, but not of our choice.”¹ This proposition, put forward by Georges Monbiot, illustrates the challenges the world faces today just as it illustrates the challenges that historical thinking and historical learning are called to face. Yet, in history didactics, responses to current (climate) crises are mostly normative; and, to recall Christian Heuer’s reference to dealing with ‘uncertainty’ in teaching history, they are often rooted in “the modern idea and euphoric hope of being able to shape a better future by ‘looking back’.”² Taking this observation as a starting point, I argue that the lack and limits of present-day responses to the (climate) crises call into question our understanding of history education as such.

More than two decades ago, atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and diatom researcher Eugene Stoermer heralded a new geological epoch in a two-page article for the *Global Change Newsletter*. In light of the ever-increasing impact of human activities on Earth, the two scientists proposed that the current epoch should be referred to as the Anthropocene.³ Two years later, the Nobel laureate Crutzen took up the matter again and spoke of an epoch of the “Geology of Mankind.”⁴ Ever since, the Anthropocene has created an uproar and academics of all disciplines, both from the sciences and the humanities, have discussed whether a new epoch should be added to the geological time scale and what consequences this would have for their own disciplines. In history, climate and environmental historians took upon the task, while at the same time the writings of Dipesh Chakrabarty stimulated a boom in research on the Anthropocene. Acknowledging that today “humans exist as a geological force,”⁵ (climate and environmental) historians now rise to the challenge to “reconsider their habits with respect to periodization, evidence, units of analysis, and subject matter.”⁶

In history didactics, responses have been rare so far. Still, two types of reactions can be found: (1) those that rely on conventional didactic tools to meet current challenges, and (2) those that rethink history education per se as they approach the crises. (1) In the context of the climate crisis, many researchers have recognized the need for conceptual change, and in the process have revisited the framework of history education. Kenneth Nordgren, for example, has identified the “Need for a Crisis in Teaching” and argued that “crisis awareness must go beyond the present and take root in our historical consciousness; crisis is temporary, but learning to live

with the consequences will be long term.”⁷ While challenging anthropocentrism, hegemonic discourses and methodological nationalism and while calling for new ways of historical thinking and learning, Nordgren does not seem to bring into question the heart of history didactics: A history education based on (western) universal values. In other words: scholars like Nordgren envision a type of didactics that moves beyond the limits of human dignity; however, rather than dismantling history education and giving rise to posthumanism, these scholars mean to rethink the notion of knowledge and knowledge production in the Anthropocene: “We need to explore what can be powerful historical knowledge to orient in this new normality.”⁸

(2) In contrast, some scholars, for instance Canadian historians Heather McGregor, Sara Karn and Jackson Pind, have taken a ‘radical’ approach “in seeking to attune history education to a relational, ecological and ethical future orientation.”⁹ McGregor, Karn and Pind propose consideration of four ‘radical’ theoretical touchstones: radical truth, radical hope, radical imagining and radical teaching. These four ‘radical’ theoretical touchstones are to lead educators, students, and pupils alike to adopt more-than-human perspectives, to respect and value Indigenous knowledge(s), to diagnose symptoms of eco-anxiety, and to construct personal narratives that identify “the conditions for a meaningful human and more-than-human life in the context of unprecedented environmental change.”¹⁰ McGregor, Karn and Pind challenge history education as such, a concept that originated on the premises that history constituted “the study of human beings.”¹¹ Thus, their writings can be read in terms of a radical intervention that embraces posthumanist and indigenous perspectives and calls for a fundamental rethinking of educational theories. From this point of view, ‘remedy’ could be provided by praxeological approaches that would enable history didactics to overcome human/nature dichotomies of the past and to reconsider such substantial categories as narrativity, agency and materiality as well as space and time. The need for such reconsideration has long been articulated¹² – and it has long been clear that such reconsideration needs to “turn its back on the future.”¹³ Indeed, history education needs to acknowledge that “the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility.”¹⁴ Inasmuch as history education “turns its back on the future”, it needs to reassess its dependence on concepts of human experience. In a way, history education might have to move beyond an interest in functional thinking, towards a “history teaching for idleness”¹⁵

– albeit such movement might sooner or later challenge history education's most sacred place, that is the idea of the historical consciousness.¹⁶

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Tags: Anthropocene / historical learning / history education

¹ George Monbiot, as cited in: Jürgen Renn and Bernd Scherer (eds), *Das Anthropozän: Zum Stand der Dinge*. Berlin: Matthes und Seitz, 2015, 5.

² Cf. Christian Heuer, "'Everyman his own historian': Historical Thinking and Life History Narration," *Rethinking History* 24, no. 1 (2020), 56–68, here 56.

³ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change Newsletter* 41, (2000), 17–18.

⁴ Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 23 (2002), 23.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History. Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 1, (2009), 197–222, here 207.

⁶ John McNeill, "Historians and the Anthropocene. A Discipline and an Interdisciplinary Concept," *Anthropocene Lecture* (17.09.2017), URL: <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/anthropocene-lecture-john-mcneill> (04.12.2022).

⁷ Kenneth Nordgren, "The Anthropocene and the Need for a Crisis in Teaching," *Public History Weekly* 8, no. 9 (2021), DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2021-17397](https://doi.org/10.1515/phw-2021-17397) (04.12.2022).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Heather E. McGregor, Sara Karn and Jackson Pind, "History Education in the Anthropocene," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS)* 18, no. 1 (2020), 169–170, here 169.

¹⁰ Heather E. McGregor, Jackson Pind and Sara Karn, "A 'wicked problem': Rethinking History Education in the Anthropocene," *Rethinking History* 25, no. 4 (2021), 483–507, here 498–499.

¹¹ Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, "Why the Anthropocene Has No History: Facing the Unprecedented," *Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 3 (2017), 239–245, here 239.

¹² Reinhold Leinfelder, "Assuming Responsibility for the Anthropocene: Challenges and Opportunities in Education," *RCC Perspectives* 3, (Anthropocene: Envisioning the Future of the Age of Humans) (2013), 9–28.

¹³ Lisa Regazzoni, "And If History Were to Turn Its Back on the Future? A Thought-provoking Interjection," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, (28.06.2022), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/6870> (04.12.2022).

¹⁴ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 197.

¹⁵ Thomas Hellmuth, "National Integration and the Idea of 'Zweckrationalität'. 'Public History' and History Teaching in the second Republic of Austria," in *Public History and School. International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2018, 152–161, here 159.

¹⁶ Cf. for instance Jörn Rüsen, *Historisches Lernen. Grundlage und Paradigmen*. Schwalbach/Ts.: Wochenschau 2014, 25–32. Also see Heuer, “Everyman his own historian”.