

12 Housekeeping: *Oikos* and the Anthropocene

It is man's earth now. One wonders what obligations may accompany this infinite possession.

Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., 1948¹

This chapter discusses the notion of the Anthropocene and its implications for anthropology and environmental discourse, exploring the usefulness of notions of the *Oikos* and “house economies,” documented in many historical and ethnographic accounts, for the challenges of the Anthropocene. Famously, anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1967), one of the pioneers of “ecological” anthropology, carefully explored relations among humans and pig populations in New Guinea, their representations in local discourse, and their ritual regulation. Collectively, he and his colleagues drew attention to issues of housekeeping that had long been more or less ignored in the social sciences and the humanities – energy transfer, adaptation, resilience, metabolism, and cybernetic regulation, to mention some of the buzzwords. This scholarship was a great leap forward, paving the road for important ethnographies focusing on environmental relations and concerns, providing a “thick” description of subsistence. Rappaport’s work, however, had significant limits. While he was familiar with housekeeping tasks at several scales, having run a chain of hotels and restaurants before turning to anthropology, his approach was fairly narrow, focusing on a few households. Given this baggage, what could be the role of environmental anthropology and related fields in the current age, with its planetary connections and escalating, anthropogenic environmental change?

For many people, the massive scale of environmental change during the Anthropocene, the complex and poorly understood dynamics involved, and the distributive agency of the human and the more-than-human no doubt evokes a familiar idea of human paralysis when confronting alien Earth – a “cosmic terror” in Bakhtinian terms, “the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful . . . the terror that pervades ancient mythologies” (Bakhtin, cited in Last 2013: 66–67). Is it the fate of humans, and the study of humans, to lose

¹ Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr., *Our Plundered Planet*, 1948, Little Brown.

perspective when faced with the unprecedented heat and terror of the Anthropocene? How close can we get without getting paralyzed? Paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, I suggest that a broader notion of the Anthropocene captures what might be called the “new human condition,” posing unprecedented challenges for governance and housekeeping. The current collapsing of body, society, and environment, in both biosocial theory and the “real” world, necessarily invites applying the governmental gaze throughout, from the cellular to the global level, embedding humans and other beings in ever-larger contexts across the different scales of the Anthropocene.

12.1 Concerns with housekeeping: “from the doors inward”

The English term “housekeeping,” it seems, was developed in the sixteenth century. Usually it has denoted activities for maintaining a domestic household, but recently it has also been applied to computing (maintaining systems) and biology (housekeeping genes). Many historical and ethnographic accounts testify to more or less identical concepts and concerns related to the vitality of the house economy. For ancient Norse, for instance, humans and the land in which they were embedded represented an integrated universe of its own, an *óðal* (hence the German *edel*) requiring collective attention, maintenance, and care (Gurevich 1992: 178).

Another example is that of the “house model” or economy of livelihood of rural Colombia and Panama (Gudeman and Rivera 1990, Gudeman 2012). For Colombian peasants, the notion of the house (*la casa*) refers to a rural economic group and the manner in which it cares for its base or foundation (its wealth or capital in a broad sense). Caring for the base involves two projects, maintaining the “force” or “strength” (*fuera*) of the base and “augmenting” or “increasing” it. Through both projects, rural Colombians seek to hold (*guardar*) household products “inside the doors” – in order to ensure sustainability, to use modern environmental jargon; “they practice ‘householding’ and ‘housekeeping’” (Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 40). The house metaphor, here as in many other contexts, is pervasive and compelling:

Within a culture ... some figures seem to hold a persistent central place, and the “polity-as-house” example suggests something of the persuasive power the “economy-as-house” metaphor still has in rural Colombia. (Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 41)

In the South American model, the house economy is a sustainable closed unit with a vital force of its own. In local terms, when the house is self-provisioning it acts “from the doors inward”; if, on the other hand, the base is not replaced through work it becomes depleted and the house falls into “ruins” (Gudeman 2012: 63–64). For Gudeman (2012: 64), this is “debasement,” “a collapse more total than is suggested by our word ‘bankruptcy,’ for a

house in ruins has no outside social supports or communal welfare.” The threat of debasement is one of the characteristics of the global household; there is no outside support to draw upon to make ends meet. South American peasants speak of unique celebratory moments, perhaps once in a lifetime, as “throwing the house out of the window” (Gudeman 2012: 71). The Anthropocene doesn’t allow for such luxury. An outside solution, from the doors *outward*, to the problems at hand would probably require a good deal of the Milky Way.

A similar house model, the ancient Greek notion of *Oikos*, the household of life, provided the root for the modern notion of “economies” and “ecosystems” and the names of their respective disciplines. In *The Politics* Aristotle argued that the products of agriculture, fishing, and hunting were “given by nature to all living beings”; “it is the business of nature to furnish subsistence for each being brought into the world . . . Plants exist to give substance to animals, and animals to give it to men” (cited in Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 145). In modern terms, this would be “ecological economics,” a house model of the house at whatever scale.

The definition, boundaries, and modern implications of house economies have, however, been the subject of some debate. In fact, an “*Oikos* controversy,” launched by the German economist Karl Johan Rodbertus in the 1860s, has its respectable place in the house of economic history. The center of the debate was the question of whether or not the economies of antiquity – Greece in particular – were highly developed models of the modern market economy. Was the “stage” of the *Oikos* economy characteristic for antiquity overall or only certain primitive social formations, and what, if anything, might be learned from it? Weber, one of the influential contributors to the debate, doubted that *Oikos* had any relevance for modern society, arguing that it narrowly applied to the household of a prince or manorial lord.

Polanyi revolutionized the tired controversy, revitalizing the primitivist case in looking for “a mechanism for recreating in the complex societies of modernity the sort of overview that had existed in the household (*oikos*) economies of the past” (Dale 2010: 28). “The household,” Polanyi argued, “is the smallest, the polis is the largest unit of consumption: in either case that which is ‘necessary’ is set by the standards of the community” (Polanyi 1967: 78). Rehabilitating Aristotle’s sociological approach to the “embedded” economy and human affairs, Polanyi emphasized, much like modern South American peasants, community and autarchy:

The group as a going concern forms a community (*koinonia*) the members of which are linked by the bond of good will (*philia*). Whether *oikos* or *polis*, or else, there is a kind of *philia*, specific to that *koinonia*, apart from which the group could not remain. *Philia* expresses itself in a behaviour of reciprocity . . . , readiness to take on burdens in turn and share mutually. Anything that is needed to continue and maintain a

community, including self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) is “natural” and intrinsically right. Autarchy may be said to be the capacity to subsist without dependence on resources from outside. (Polanyi 1967: 79)

Polanyi could not have imagined the relevance of these words half a century later for the global discourse of the Anthropocene. Again, the house model seems pertinent, with its focus on good will and material limits. Perhaps it is time for another *Oikos* controversy, on a radically different spatial and political scale.

Recent debates on the *Oikos* have centered on production, gender, and agency. While economic theory originally defined economic space in terms of the broad spectrum of activities in the domestic household, it later tended to restrict its definition of “productive labor,” a central economic term, to activities taking place *outside* the domestic sphere. Arguably, the notion of the household is flawed on two scores. For one thing, the house model was the invention of agrarian discourse. Given the mobility of humans – both prior to agriculture when families and communities regularly moved from one camp to another and nowadays in times of excessive travel and migration across the planet – the stable house erected on a foundation may be somewhat misleading. Also, and more importantly, the house is rarely, if ever, completely egalitarian. While there may be reasonable equity in the Colombian household (Gudeman 2012: 65), ancient Greece was the opposite with its radical separation of free persons and slaves and of men and women. Inequality in the global household, particularly between North and South, is a major barrier to joint pragmatic solutions to environmental problems. One of the contradictions of the Anthropocene is the fact that despite the frequent reference to the unqualified “us,” the human collective charged with correcting its devastating footprint on the planet, much of humanity is denied citizenship and subjecthood, the homeless migrants and refugees of the age of globalization; in the terms of postcolonial theory, this is the new subaltern (Chakrabarty 2012: 4).

Despite the flaws of the *Oikos* concept, the family hearth has to be sustained – irrespective of the frequency of movement, in the course of struggles for justice, democracy, and equity – to avoid total “debasement” in the South American sense, to secure decent living conditions and the necessary flow of vital energy for the generations to come. It seems safe to assume a family resemblance of processual *housekeeping* concepts – references to the act of maintenance – more or less across languages and throughout human history (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). In Marxian theory (Godelier 1986: 6–7), the conceptual pair of *Überbau* and *Grundlage* seems to capture the essence and unity of the Colombian house, the Scandinavian *óðal*, and the Greek *Oikos*, of both their base and the life form they represent and sustain.

One of the pressing tasks on the environmental agenda is to identify the nature and novelty of the current condition for humanity as a species.

One source of insight is Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), a treatise of political philosophy on the various forms of human activity that relate people to one another and to the material world. Arendt suggested that humans' being-in-the-world had been disrupted in the modern age, resulting in alienation from the common, artefactual human world and from nature. Arendt, it is true, made a critical distinction, in a classical fashion, between the space of politics, the *Polis*, and the household, the *Oikos*: "It was only upon entering the *polis* and leaving behind the cares of the *oikos*, upon freeing oneself from the cares of sheer life, that the citizen could pursue good life" (Collier and Lakoff 2005: 26). Nevertheless, she argued that times had changed: "In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself" (Arendt 1958: 33). In a sense, the "rise" of the household into the domain of politics – for Arendt "an essentially modern phenomenon" – has now been completed, with the "biopolitics" of both the Anthropocene and life itself.

In his discussion of the relevance of Arendt's politics of place for discussions of the household of life, Macauley suggests that Arendt rarely focused directly on the environment and at times she was too committed to the ancient Greek tradition to adequately deal with the ethnographic realities of the contemporary; nevertheless, she was deeply concerned with dwelling and rootlessness, issues that have direct relevance for current discussions of accelerating human impact on the earth:

In a day when much of humanity is more concerned with exploring "outer space" than recovering our own sense of earthly place, this kind of thinking can help us to reconceive our relationship with nature and the world . . . In the end, it may be said that Arendt did not so much initiate a dialogue with the earth itself as she suggests . . . but rather kindled a valuable inquiry into *the origins and meaning of our changing relation to and transformation of our given home*. (Macauley 1996: 126; emphasis added)

Modern biological and economic theory has tended to reduce the rich and integrated world of the ancient household of life to the "natural" domain, stripping it of the "social." As Schabas (2005: 12) points out in her analysis of the conceptual roots of economic thought, social as well as natural scientists "have implicitly agreed to divide the world into two parts. When physicists today think of the world they investigate, it is one with all the social institutions stripped away . . . Economists, in parallel fashion, have come to adopt a domain of discourse that is similarly segregated." Such fragmenting, which has characterized anthropology with its segregation of the social and natural aspects of *Homo sapiens*, no longer sounds theoretically defensible; the application of concepts such as nature/culture (Haraway 2008) and biosociality (Ingold and Palsson 2013) increasingly seems unavoidable for rendering the refashioning of the human being, its house, and life itself.

Before Adam Smith placed markets at the center of economics, James Steuart (1713–1780), one of the pioneers of modern economics, used the image of the house as a metaphor for the national political economy, and long before him the mercantilists drew upon a similar model (Gudeman 2012). Given the collapsing of the natural and social in the modern age and the immediate concerns of environmental change, it seems pertinent to draw upon the ancient notion of the *Oikos* and to vastly expand the meaning of housekeeping, to humanize the discourse of the “earth system” and to avoid the nature/culture dualism inherent in the notion of planetary boundaries (Rockström *et al.*, 2009). As Nelson (1993: 33) remarks, keeping in mind the notion of the house in both the words “economics” and “ecology”: “Economics could be about how we live in our house, the earth.”

12.2 Anthropogenic change

Concerns with large-scale housekeeping necessarily escalate with growing evidence of human impact, as our footprint on Earth begins to match those of geological forces. It is patently clear by now that the “natural” climate of the globe has a lot to do with “artificial” tangible and intangible human services and goods. Some Arctic volcanic eruptions and earthquakes are even attributed to human activities; a recent study on Iceland’s Vatnajökull ice cap suggests that melting glaciers can increase volcanic activity over timeframes that are relevant to humans (Pagli and Sigmundsson 2008). As a result, it is being argued (Steffen *et al.* 2011), planetary history has entered a new, emerging epoch, the Anthropocene – a successor to the last interglacial epoch, the Holocene. Similar concepts range from anthropozoic era, the Homogenocene, and the catastrophozoic era to the Great Acceleration. While the insight that humans have become one of the dominant factors in shaping the globe is not new, the Anthropocene concept is one of the most influential concepts attempting to capture this insight.

The discourse on the Anthropocene, highlighting as it does growing evidence of the exceptional role of humans in the refashioning of life on Earth, is not free from critique and debate. One issue is that of definition and identification. The idea of allocating the Anthropocene a respectable place in the global standard of geological periods has not remained uncontested. Geologists have actively debated the exact onset of Anthropocenic change, the stratigraphic legalities of the Anthropocene, whether the term would meet their strict protocols, how to detect the relevant signatures in the geological record, and so on (Showstack 2013). While other geological epochs have been defined in terms of the “golden spikes” of rock formation, geologically speaking the “rocks” of the Anthropocene do not exist yet. As a result, the relevant spikes for marking Anthropocenic time should not, and cannot, be looked for in fossil sequences (Kolbert 2013).

It is now expected, nevertheless, that the so-called International Commission on Stratigraphy will accept the Anthropocene as a new geological age at a meeting in 2016. While the debates and arguments of the Commission are not trivial, the narrow confinement of anthropocenic discourse to the community of “science” and the notion of the geological record fails to illuminate the various signatures of human concerns and activities on the global scale. Geological time itself, in the conventional sense, seems out of time, fatefully informed by the ancient European semiotics of the book of nature. Geological fundamentalism – the equivalent of the Periodic Table of the Elements in chemistry – doesn’t seem to resonate with the fleeting, humanized Anthropocene. What is missing is genuine integration of social and environmental theory appropriate for the times.

Anthropologists, philosophers, and social historians are unlikely to bother with legalizing and standardizing their lists of ages and periods. For those familiar with “chronic” debates on the relativity of timing and chronotypes (see, for instance, Bender and Wellbery 1991) and the definition and demarcation of periods – Antiquity, the Long Eighteenth Century, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and so on – concerns with the making of epochs need not be surprising. The term Middle Ages was only invented in 1469 to emphasize the inferiority of the Dark Age, the period prior to the Renaissance; it is high time, Le Goff (1988: 10) argued, “that we let the air out of the inflated concept of the Renaissance.” While the “Anthropocene” has only been around for roughly a decade, it is probably already more inflated than any other term in the entire history of the timing of epochs and chronotypes.

What matters, however, is the pragmatic usefulness of marking time, its implications for our understanding of the human in the current age. There may be good reason, I think, to speak of *four* Anthropocenes, not just one. The longest one, the *very long* Anthropocene, would be the one marked by the early use of fire. It seems possible that in prehistoric times more than one species of primates had significant environmental impact. Neanderthals, we now know, extensively used fire (Daniau, d’Errico, and Sánchez Goñi 2010) and their role has probably been underestimated. Given such a time-scale, at the risk of trivializing the issue, perhaps one should speak of a “Primatocene” rather than an Anthropocene. The *long* Anthropocene, in contrast, would be the era signified by the beginning of agriculture, with its large-scale transformation of landscapes and political systems. So far, most of the writings related to the Anthropocene, however, assume a *short* era, suggesting that it started in the late eighteenth century in the wake of colonial expansion and capitalism, with rapidly growing combustion of fossil fuels (Tickell 2011) and “ecological imperialism” (Crosby 1986). Finally, the *immediate* Anthropocene is that characterized by human awareness of anthropogenic change. Indeed, the era of the Anthropocene does not just imply conflation of the natural and the

social, also it suggests radical change in perspective and action in terms of human awareness and responsibility.

The Anthropocene, it may be argued, could be seen as an anthropocentric construct. There are good grounds, after all, for speaking of *distributive* agency to emphasize that the Anthropocene is not the result of *Homo sapiens* (or primates) acting in isolation; it is only made possible through a diverse network of organic, technological, cultural, and geological entities (Connolly 2011). As Latour (2013) points out, the somewhat surprising *comeback* of *Anthropos* in the postmodern, post-human era represents a major conceptual feat, returning humans to the driver's seat from which they were recently expelled at a time when social theorists are busily granting agency to everything living. However, the most striking feature of the Anthropocene is that apparently it is the first geological epoch in which a defining geological force is *conscious of its geological role* (Pálsson *et al.* 2013). "So maybe," Szerszynski (2012: 171) argues, "the Anthropocene in all its geohistorical specificity really starts when humans become aware of their role in shaping climate, and this awareness shapes their active relationship with the environment." This awareness has profound implications for politics and human responsibility. The immediate Anthropocene which began by the middle of the last century is obviously of greatest relevance for any discussion of environmental concerns and planetary housekeeping. In the language of Osborn in 1948, "it is man's earth now." Leaving aside the gendering in Osborn's language, how should the figure of "man" and human agency be understood?

The circulation and use of the term Anthropocene has escalated exponentially, much like many of the curves describing the rate of anthropogenic change, including global warming and melting glaciers. Googling it in late 2013 yielded one million results. Should we let the air out of it, much like Le Goff did for the "Renaissance"? Not necessarily, in my view, and, in any case, who are "we"? Drawing upon Thoreau's critique of the egocentric naming of "Flint's Pond," Crist (2013: 142) suggests the label of the "Anthropocene" reflects a similar "poverty of nomenclature" and that accepting it would be "to bow once more before the tedious showcasing of Man," a managerial mindset and a Promethean self-portrait. While the geology of the Anthropocene is only prospective, a reasonable hunch about where things are going, the ontological problems and the tensions of the universal and the particular remain, I suggest the anthropocentric notion of the Anthropocene may turn out to be a powerful *pre-emptive speech-act*, fueling responsible attempts to avoid disaster, what *might* and *is likely to* become. Admitting the flaws and biases of the label of the Anthropocene, Clark emphasizes its positive aspects; while current environmental problems represent a mega-disaster, undermining our opportunities for making sense of what is going on, "the Anthropocene is as much about the

decentering of humankind as it is about our rising geological significance” (2014: 25; emphasis in the original).

12.3 Icarus in the heat: the plowman and the splash

In the Anthropocene, humans are the driving force of major environmental accelerations that seriously threaten life as we know it. At the same time, what life itself is understood to mean has been increasingly destabilized in the wake of massive intellectual and practical changes involving a complex array of theoretical, technical, and empirical innovations, including those of epigenetics, systems biology, and microbiomes. The task of housekeeping, as a result, involves both caring for our bodies, our families and communities, and everything that surrounds us. No wonder that life itself has become the center of debates on governance and the relative merits of public trust, markets, and states. Despite these developments, the routine critique of the ontology of the dualism of nature and society (Descola and Palsson 1996, Hastrup 2013), and increasing emphasis in both social and biological theory on mutualism and a variety of relational concerns (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopina 2011), the interdisciplinary literature on governance often presents “resources” and people as clearly separate domains, with the latter defining and appropriating the former, through ever-more innovative avenues.

Human awareness and responsibility, as already mentioned, often engenders terror and paralysis. Perhaps the cosmic terror of the Anthropocene is reminiscent of the predicament of Icarus in Greek mythology. Presented with wings of feathers given to him by his father, Daedalus, a talented craftsman, Icarus decides to explore the sky, normally the privileged domain of birds and gods. Despite his father’s warnings, he eventually flies towards the glowing sun. As he gets close, the wax that has secured the feathers begins to melt, and Icarus falls helplessly into the ocean. This is a theme explored in Bruegel’s representation of the myth of Icarus in his famous painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Here, Icarus’s legs can be seen in the water, with the sun half-set on the horizon and peasants calmly continuing to work in the field despite the fall. A poem by W.H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux-Arts,” nicely describes the spectacular fall and the indifference of those who were bound to witness it:

In Bruegel’s Icarus . . . : how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

(Auden 1940)

Perhaps the melting of the wings and the splashing of Icarus's body can be seen as a reminder of the entanglement of organisms, their epigenetic regulation, and their dependence on the house and its vital circulation of energy. Also, it draws attention to our ability, or inability, to act quickly and responsibly to the terror of the Anthropocene. Will the wax on our wings melt as our flight continues, sending us into the sea with a splash without any historical record? Alternatively, we might ask, in a more optimistic mood: How can we theorize our flight, managing and redirecting our course? For that historic task, a thoroughly transdisciplinary effort is essential. It seems vitally important to come to terms with both the terror and the heat involved and the scale of the human footprint.

Perhaps the most pressing task on the theoretical and political agenda involves navigating the transition to a full-blown "Anthropocene society." The Anthropocene is not just a new geological epoch; it redefines the very nature of the geological by marking it as a domain that includes intentionality and meaning. It seems time to address the issues involved with consistent, transdisciplinary effort, assuming human responsibility, social justice, and public trust. Significantly, the inclusive term "environmental humanities" has been gaining ground in several contexts. The great challenge now for anthropology and related disciplines is to ethnographically document the unfolding of the Anthropocene in the broad sense and to theorize its significance. This involves exploring the extent to which the human condition, as analyzed by Arendt, has changed in the Anthropocene era and the nature of this change (Chakrabarty 2012; Palsson *et al.* 2013; Clark 2014). Virtually all social sciences and humanities disciplines have at some point taken an interest in human–environmental interactions. Indeed, they are critical for thinking the Anthropocene and the environment. While the notion of the "environment," a key term in Anthropocenic discourse, is often taken for granted, it has a history that tends to elude us. The two terms of environmental "expertise" and "environment," Sörlin (2013: 15) points out, have been "co-produced as a kind of double helix so that the modern usage of the 'environment' is essentially constructed by those that claimed expertise on it and also provided the advice." Gibson and Graham suggest that what is needed is a new ethics of care, relating to the global world as one does to a family; can we extend our solidarity, they ask, to the more-than-human, to other life forms and life in general? "If we can," they conclude, "that would certainly usher in a new mode of humanity and a new form of belonging" (Gibson-Graham 2011). This will mean reorganizing our own house in a radical sense – a central element of the housekeeping of the Anthropocene. Because what currently counts as environmental is also social (or, in some accounts, biosocial or natural/cultural), humanity's knowledge enterprise needs to return its attention to social theory and the humanities for reframing *Anthropos* for the modern context.