

Representing the Anthropocene

John Crowley

Chief of Section for Research, Policy and Foresight in the UNESCO Sector for
Social and Human Science

The constitutive ambiguities of “representation” are familiar and have been the subject of an extensive literature in political theory. Something is represented when something else stands in its place, but there are many tricky questions about what makes such an operation possible, legitimate or effective, and for which purposes, and what its consequences might be for the entities involved and for the system of which they are part. The issues are complex enough in the case of concrete entities that have the empirical capacity to speak for themselves but choose, or are required, to stand aside while their representative speaks or acts in their name. Things get considerably more tangled when considering abstract entities that must be constituted through representation to acquire personhood or concrete entities that, for whatever reason, cannot literally speak for themselves.

At the same time, the legal and political issues of representation are intimately tied up with the equally venerable and familiar question of artistic representation, which induces a certain relation between an entity – again, concrete or abstract – and its image in a very broad sense. One immediate feature of this relation, which sheds light on the underlying complexities or legal/political representation, is that representation involves not just two entities – the second standing for the first – but four. The artist creates the terms on which one thing may stand for another – possibly in radically new and unexpected ways – but succeeds only to the extent that an audience of some description buys into and gives credence to the representation. Hence the view that representation is a form of magic, something dishonest and potentially dangerous, a view that runs in various forms from Plato to Bourdieu.

The question of the Anthropocene raises in stark and fascinating form these very familiar general questions about representation, with an additional important twist, since the notion of the Anthropocene depends on the ability, through science, to reveal features of the planetary system that are not accessible to straightforward observation or common sense and, indeed, are inherently counterfactual. To this extent, the abstraction to be represented is itself the outcome of representation.

Politically, the hypothesis that human activity is the primary force shaping the planetary system calls into question the forms enshrined in the UN Charter – not uniquely, but more radically than other challenges stemming from e.g. the

globalization of the economy. The current international system is premised, for well-known historical reasons, on territoriality as a meaningful basis on which to attribute sovereignty to states, sovereignty being, in turn, the distinctive mode of legal capacity through which states achieve their objectives, limited only by relations with other states. As the term “planetary boundaries” implies, neither territoriality nor the mutuality of sovereignty can necessarily survive the confrontation with the Anthropocene. Furthermore, this new era raises the question how non-human interests can be reflected within political deliberation and perhaps, more profoundly, what the very nature and composition of an Anthropocenic political community might be. Ethically, these questions point to the intimate connection between representation and responsibility.

Imaginatively, the Anthropocene invites reflection on what it might mean for humanity to think of itself as the reflexive component of a self-conscious planetary system, and what it might mean for any particular human to think and act as a member of such a largely unrepresented humanity. And artistically, it is a challenge to find forms of representation, whether visual or not, or perhaps artistic forms that renounce the ambition to “represent”, that can give an account or an image of the Anthropocenic planetary system and thus – as in previous generations for the crown, the state, the nation, the people or the proletariat – provide an imaginative basis for its political constitution. Science is an indispensable component of such a new framework of representation, but cannot exhaust in, even if the distinctive contributions of the social and human sciences, focusing on the meaning of the Anthropocene and not just on its structural features, are effectively mobilized in a truly integrated science of and for sustainable development.

On this basis, the lecture will offer a brief overview of some current contributions to these debates, emphasizing the role of environmental humanities, in order to open a space of discussion on how the various dimensions and limitations of representation can help to grasp the connections between the political, ethical, scientific, imaginative and artistic dynamics of the Anthropocene. Particular emphasis will be put on how local solutions to particular aspects of sustainable development, through their sensitivity both to specific cultural practices and traditions and to the global context, can help open up a space of exchange and reflection in which necessarily diverse and pluralistic approaches can interact and support the gradual emergence of what, as it unfolds, might deserve to be called “planetary consciousness”.