Field of study

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Consuming Anthropocene: Environmental Risk and Everyday Life in Sociocultural and Multidisciplinary Perspective

Main area of research Business and Social Sciences
Sub area of research Anthropology
Secondary sub area (if any) Sociology
Desired start date 1 February 2021
Project duration 3 years

5 key words
Anthropocene, Consumption, Food, Pollution, Risk

Abstract
“Anthropocene” is the name given to the consuming environmental disruption that humans are currently causing on Earth, modifying the planet to such an extent that their imprint will remain visible far into the future. This project investigates the Anthropocene through a series of publications and talks that aim to foster both cutting-edge scholarship and public understanding of science. The project consists of two strands.

Strand 1 explores the effects of anthropogenic pollution on consumption through a sociocultural study of organic food. Pollution is now so ubiquitous that it threatens nine measures of planetary “health.” In this scenario, the food system is both a culprit and a victim. Affluent societies have therefore seen food contamination become a major influence on all sorts of behaviours and discourses. Drawing on fieldwork with Italian households, farmers, shop owners, and activists, I show that eating organics is not just about avoiding food believed to be contaminated; it is also about offsetting pollution supposedly absorbed from one’s immediate surroundings, in the hope of reducing the body’s overall toxic burden. This behaviour relies only in part on the instrumental and cognitive aspects of eating; embodied and culturally situated ones are also key. Bringing together theories of risk, nature, technology, and the senses, I thus suggest that eating organics is more than a mere act of consumerism. It is a practice that reveals how the Anthropocene has led to a fundamental shift in the relationship between food, body, and environment – what I call “polluted everyday life.” Strand 1 will

produce a monograph and two articles.

Strand 2 consists of a series of fourteen multidisciplinary public talks that seek to go beyond a standard scholarly project based on a single discipline. Recognising the multidimensional and collective nature of the Anthropocene challenge, the talks will host key figures from across science, art, and civil society, who will discuss a selected topic with the public. Strand 2 will result in a coedited volume aimed at a general audience.

Project description

SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Anthropological studies of the Anthropocene exhibit three tendencies: 1) they focus mostly on the livelihoods of “place-based peoples,” i.e. communities in the global South who depend directly on their natural environment; 2) they study regions where the effects of global environmental change (GEC) are clearly visible, rather than those where the effects are less apparent but the causes of GEC tend to concentrate; and 3) they deal primarily with climate change and biodiversity loss, the two measures of planetary health most relevant to place-based peoples (Chua and Fair 2019). Though important, this work leaves open many questions regarding the shape of the Anthropocene in the North (Hornborg 2011; Wilk 2016). In strand 1, the project asks what this new epoch looks like through the lens of food consumption in an affluent society, where artificial infrastructures are dominant and most of the causes of GEC originate from.

Production, distribution, and consumption of food have all changed dramatically since 1945, tracking the Anthropocene’s “great acceleration” and resulting in major pollution, biodiversity loss, and non-communicable diseases (Willett et al. 2019). At the same time, eating now takes place in a world where artificial substances of varying toxicity are virtually ubiquitous, showing up in mundane loci such as neighbourhoods, homes, people’s food, blood, and urine (Landrigan et al. 2017; Lock 2019). Though seemingly inevitable, the effect of this toxicity on human health is still poorly understood, a condition of uncertainty that reinforces individualistic, often commodified, attempts at risk reduction (Jackson 2015; Rosenberger 2016; Wilk 2006). Organic food is an excellent example of these phenomena. Empirically, strand 1 focuses on organics in Italy.

Contrary to common stereotype, Italy suffers from widespread pollution (Corona 2017) and

from a deep ambivalence toward its diet (Eurobarometer 2019; Grasseni 2013). Italian attitudes toward food are rooted in the appreciation for regional cuisines and seasonal ingredients, yet ideas about the alleged higher quality of Italian food have also been crafted by powerful political and economic forces. Food scares are nothing new in the country, breaking out on a regular basis. Historically, Italy's transition to modernity in the 1950s entailed a process of industrialization that affected all aspects of the food system. Though in 1971 supermarkets accounted for just 4% of sales, in 2009 the figure was 70%. Currently, the country has one of the highest rates of organic food production and consumption in Europe.

Ethnographic data I have collected over almost a decade shows that many Italians consume organics to cope not just with the anxiety of eating what they believe is polluted food, but also of living in a toxic environment — a composite situation I name "polluted everyday life." As edible material, food is the principal and apparently most easily accessible medium between a person's outside — the environment — and their inside — the body. For some people, eating organics becomes a way (or a hope) of reducing and offsetting their overall embodied toxicity, making life in the Anthropocene more manageable.

From a sociocultural perspective, then, food in the Anthropocene seems to entail the same condition of risk, uncertainty, and ambivalence that has long been identified as constitutive of late modernity. Strand 1 draws on this link to ground its argument about the effects of the environmental question on food culture. However, it also recognises that both the Anthropocene and the late modernity rubrics tend to overgeneralise social change and privilege abstract views of agency and reflexivity (Boholm 2015; Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne 2015; Reno 2011). My data highlights the inadequacy of this tendency by showing that Italians are not constantly thinking about anthropogenic contamination, nor do they trust solely cognitive knowledge and technoscientific notions of food quality. Their engagement with organics is intermittent and reliant also on embodied and cultural-historical notions of edible value. The latter aspect is evident in their views about pollution.

Pollution is usually defined either objectively, as materials that are scientifically proven to be toxic above certain thresholds, or subjectively, as materials that go against religious precepts. Italians who engage with organics often see pollution differently — as a combination of the objective and the subjective. They believe food to be contaminated 1) when it contains toxic substances regardless of thresholds (or substances whose safety is still being debated); 2) when it gives them bodily discomfort on a regular basis; or 3) when it is produced in ways that

contradict deep-seated cultural preferences of a non-religious nature.

To make sense of this data, I draw on theories of practice, everyday life, and ordinary consumption to reveal how food helps accommodate (or reject) distant structural forces in our intimate, cultural, and historical worlds (Shove, Trentmann, and Wilk 2009). Because nature is fully part of these structural forces, the environmental question posed by the Anthropocene now shapes consumer society in profound ways, even though popular awareness of this remains discontinuous (Halkier 2010; Vine 2018). Overall, by looking at organics, I suggest that food consumption is becoming a “risk practice”: a combination of conscious acts and routines based on personal constructs of pollution that blend scientific, cognized information and lay, tacit knowledge of bodies and lived environments.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most anthropological studies of the Anthropocene focus on rural livelihoods, climate change, and biodiversity loss in the global South. This project breaks new ground with one of the first ethnographic accounts of the ways that people experience pollution through food in a high-energy, high-consumption society of the North. The project will help advance scholarship by developing the concepts of polluted everyday life and risk practice, and by placing consumer society at the heart of analyses of the Anthropocene.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In strand 1, the project uses data from fieldwork in two Italian regions, Sicily (since 2007) and Piedmont (since 2016), gathered through recurrent spells of participant observation. These took the form of work in organic food stores and farms, visits of people’s homes, participation in their meal preparation and shopping trips, and attendance of civil society networks and public events. These activities generated qualitative data of an observational and verbal nature, which was recorded in written form in a field diary. 57 semi-structured interviews were also carried out, mostly with women aged between 20 and 70, often married and with children. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was collected through snowball sampling and is thus not statistically representative. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate to capture the ordinary nature of consumer engagement with the Anthropocene. Data analysis will rely on grounded theory, i.e. the inductive coding of diary entries and interview transcripts to identify and connect thematic clusters in an iterative

process.

SCHEDULE

The project will produce four publications: a monograph, two articles, and an edited volume. The former consists of eight chapters, of which I have currently written four initial drafts. I envisage that by the start of the Fellowship I will have written drafts of the remaining four. I will therefore use:
- 16 months to revise the whole manuscript (write eight final drafts);
- 6 months to write two articles;
- 4 months, divided in two 2-months periods, to visit international institutions;
- 10 months to work on the coedited volume resulting from strand 2 of the project (review chapters and write introduction).

Time will also be spent responding to reviewers and organising the fourteen talks of strand 2, to be held in March, April, May, October, November, January, and February of years 1 and 2.

See Figure 1 for timetable.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY POTENTIAL

The project builds on the considerable multidisciplinary potential that the natural and social sciences exhibit toward the Anthropocene.

Social scientists have welcomed the view that nature and society are mutually constitutive and thus no longer separable, which lies at the heart of the Anthropocene concept. This view can avoid the empirical pitfalls that an exclusively social epistemology has historically incurred, such as disregarding the environmental question (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019). The project speaks to this dialogue in strand 1 by putting pollution — as a more-than-human issue – centre stage. However, social scientists have also shown that underlying some uses of the new concept is a “naturalist narrative” that depicts humanity as a generic force, paying scant attention to issues of inequality, difference, and place (Hann 2017). In this vein, the Anthropocene concept risks replacing a dualism — nature vs. society — with a new absolute category — generic nature-society — which may itself lead to empirical blind spots (Palsson et al. 2013). The project draws on this criticism by recognizing the analytical significance of

gender relations (see Publishing Plan below), and that of situated emic constructs of the "natural" and the "cultural" as separate domains of life.

In strand 2, the project will harness this multidisciplinary potential by organising fourteen monthly talks where natural and social science scholars, civil society actors, and artists will be invited to reflect on the Anthropocene. The series, called The Anthropocene Talks, will be aimed at an audience of non-specialists. The series will result in a coedited volume entitled The Anthropocene Dictionary. The talks will thus contribute to a multidisciplinary dialogue on one of the most vital topics of the 21st century.

WORK ABROAD

To further enhance the project's disciplinary collaborations, I plan to visit two international research institutions: Helsinki University, where a group of scholars do research closely connected to the project at the Centre for Consumer Society Research, and Nottingham University, where scholars work on the politics of toxicity at the Institute for Science and Society. These visits are integral to the project, as they will offer the chance to network and share my work with other researchers, thus creating added value for the Fellowship. I have scheduled the visits outside the academic year to avoid being absent from AIAS during term time.

PUBLISHING PLAN

The monograph, entitled "Consuming Anthropocene: Organic Food and Polluted Everyday Life in Late Modern Italy," consists of an introduction, six substantive chapters, and a conclusion.

The Introduction starts with the book's topic and theoretical approach. It then discusses the development of Italy's modern food system, its organic food sector, and the country's environmental problems since 1945, the conventional start date of the "great acceleration."

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 explore local views of food pollution.

Ch. 1 draws on research participants' discussions of mediatised food "scandals" over the course of a decade to examine technoscientific notions of food quality, focusing in particular on four anthropogenic agents of "pollution": recombinant DNA, glyphosate, dioxins, and

radionuclides.

Ch. 2 analyses embodied notions of food quality using three kinds of data: participants' experiences of illness and the lay aetiologies used to explain them; their sensorial appraisal of organic and conventional foods; and the senses' link to memories of Italy's post-war food transition.

Ch. 3 uses data about conventional food purchases done in rural settings thought to be less contaminated to explore cultural notions of food quality linked to Italy's recent peasant past and the potential clash they entail with technoscientific notions.

Ch. 4 draws on participants' views of their lived environment, especially its air, water, and mediatised locales, to show how eating organic food is also seen as a way of offsetting contaminants thought to be absorbed by living in a polluted area.

Ch. 5 examines the gendered nature of food fears of environmental contamination, together with the context of household reproduction through which these fears have to be negotiated, especially the demands placed on women to accommodate their family members' wider wishes.

Ch. 6 looks at evidence that organic food consumption represents also a strategy to protect the environment from us — rather than protect us from the environment — linking this evidence to debates about political consumerism.

The Conclusion summarises the book's argument and reflects on the role of the social sciences in understanding, and possibly changing, the Anthropocene epoch.

The planned articles will explore two important topics in relation to the Anthropocene: the role of class in alternative forms of consumption, and the moral economy of ethical food trade. I will submit these articles to Journal of Consumer Culture and American Ethnologist.

Finally, the second volume, The Anthropocene Dictionary, will include papers from the seminar series The Anthropocene Talks.

I will approach Bloomsbury and University of California Press as potential publishers.

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Why AIAS?

My reason for applying to AIAS is three-fold.

First, an IAS is the ideal host for my project, which includes both innovative research in one discipline (strand 1) and multidisciplinary activities for the public understanding of science (strand 2). Second, an IAS allows conducting "blue-sky" research, or what Jan Willem Duyvendak recently described as "slow science" in his inaugural address to the Netherlands IAS (https://nias.knaw.nl/stories/on-slow-science/). I was lucky enough to experience this condition during a Marie Curie Fellowship at the University of Turin and I am keen to do so again. While my focus in Turin was empirical, to mature as a scholar in Aarhus it will be

analytical. Third, the Fellowship will allow me to complete a substantial piece of writing.

An IAS is characterised by a multidisciplinary environment and an informal community of scholars. At AIAS, the whole scientific spectrum is represented, allowing for a truly open dialogue. My project — a social science attempt to understand an Earth-system problem — will thus greatly benefit from working at the Institute. I see this added value accruing both at a general and an individual level.

At a general level, strand 1 of the project aims to understand how people, as social beings, react in the face of impending risks that are part objective phenomena and part cultural constructions. Strand 2, on the other hand, seeks to gain a wider understanding of the Anthropocene through informed yet accessible public conversations. Sharing space with scholars from across the sciences will be incredibly beneficial in achieving both aims. I have always been interested in multidisciplinarity – it led me to study anthropology and ecology at UCL.

At an individual level, I envisage learning a considerable amount from the fellows I will meet in 2021.

Dr Janicka, for example, is exploring how ecological and technological changes linked to the Anthropocene have influenced the philosophies of Latour, Sloterdijk, and Stengers, authors who have significantly influenced the anthropological and sociological literature that my project builds on.

Professor van Kersbergen’s research on the mismatch between accelerating problems and society’s problem-solving capacities links to noted anthropological approaches to the Anthropocene, such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s “overheating” framework, and to my own project, which questions individual consumption strategies as solutions to environmental problems.

The broad topic of consumption is also a bridge between my project and that of Dr Eckert, who is studying consumer perceptions of European Single Market policies and how these affect everyday life. Controversies about food regulation (e.g. of genetically modified organisms) are an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Another important aspect of the project that will benefit from joining AIAS is the focus on embodiment as a key component of any theory of agency. Both Dr Allen and Dr Angelino are currently working on related issues, respectively the nature of the embodied mind in psychiatry and the bodily roots of group agency in the arts.

Finally, Dr Kerby's and Dr Christiansen's research on wildlife will also offer the chance to learn more about the consequences of the Anthropocene.

The Fellowship will also contribute to my career development by giving me the chance to complete a monograph, the lack of which represents a weakness. Soon after receiving the PhD, I was forced to take a career break to care for my father. The negative impact this had on my early postdoc years means that my career stage does not reflect my "academic age." Since returning to academia, however, I have proven myself with a mobile path built on positions of growing prestige. In 2015 I won a postdoc for talented young researchers and in 2016 I was awarded a Marie Curie Fellowship. The reason I do not have a book contract yet is that I wish to complete a first draft of the manuscript before contacting publishers.

Through strand 2 of the project I will also add value to AIAS, not just receive it. This strand includes fourteen events called The Anthropocene Talks, which will be sponsored by AIAS for the benefit of scholars and the wider community. The talks will explore fourteen keywords. Depending on the keyword, a prominent member of the natural and social sciences, the humanities, the arts, or civil society will be invited as guest speaker. Whenever relevant, AIAS fellows will be invited to join the talks.

The Anthropocene has drawn considerable public attention since it was first posited. Documentaries such as Edward Burtynsky's "Anthropocene: the human epoch," the Fridays For Future protests, and the disputes over glyphosate and plastic show that the Anthropocene is an idea whose time has come. It should also be noted, however, that the idea risks becoming a new theory of everything due to its appeal as a post-natural, post-social, and post-political concept. Experts, activists, and artists thus have a critical role to play in ensuring the idea retains the clarity needed to illuminate the most pressing issues of the 21st century. Strand 2 will place AIAS at the centre of this endeavour both as a research centre and a public institution.

Already established connections or collaborations at Aarhus University

To organise the activities of strand 2, I will enlist the help of members of Aarhus University's Centre for Environmental Humanities (CEH). The Centre is the perfect local partner for the project as it follows in the footsteps of the Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene (AURA) project, which ended only a year ago. AURA applied insights and methods from anthropology, philosophy, and biology to investigate in a truly multidisciplinary manner the kinds of lives and possible futures that are created in the unintended landscapes of the Anthropocene. My project's focus on everyday pollution and toxicity as examples of research on more-than-human worlds fits closely with current CEH interests, while an ethnographic focus on Italy will expand the Centre's geographical scope to cover the Mediterranean region, which most scholarship on the Anthropocene has thus far neglected. Collaboration with CEH will assure the quality of strand 2 by informing the choice of speakers for The Anthropocene Talks. This will be especially useful to embed the series in the local community by including representatives from the sciences, the arts, and civil society in Aarhus, and by engaging the local student body. The resulting volume, The Anthropocene Dictionary, will be coedited with members of the Centre. I have discussed the details of this collaboration with CEH Director Professor Heather Swanson, who has agreed to support the project (please see letter of agreement attached).

Declaration of no conflict of interest with the Quality Assurance group I declare NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST
Declaration of no conflict of interest with the Selection Committee I declare NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Outline of conflict of interest (if any)