Vocations of Political Theory in the Anthropocene (new title)

by

John M. Meyer, Professor
Department of Politics;
Programs in Environmental Studies and Environment & Community
Humboldt State University
Arcata, CA 95521
john.meyer@humboldt.edu

Introduction

This is an exploration of roles that political theorists might play in broadly interdisciplinary research about planetary futures. As such, it is not an attempt to critically interrogate the discourse of the Anthropocene itself, nor to evaluate whether or how the Anthropocene might reshape our political theories. These tasks have been advanced by many others. Instead, I reflect upon the character of political theory as a vocation and in what ways participation in broadly interdisciplinary collaborations might reconfigure our implicit understandings of this vocation.

These collaborations have emerged from the conviction among some Earth system scientists that concepts such as the Anthropocene can foster interdisciplinary insight and public awareness on pressing planetary challenges; the most prominent is Future Earth (futurearth.org). In the past few years, several groups of scholars in the environmental social sciences and humanities have issued calls for greater participation in these projects, while noting that the conception of interdisciplinarity that they currently embody is far from inclusive. In one sense, (environmental) political theorists can be appropriately folded into these calls for engagement and inclusion, along with historians, cultural geographers, communication scholars, ethicists, literary critics, and others. Yet in the final section of this paper, I seek a more fine-grained analysis, exploring some of the distinctive questions, roles, and insights political theorists in particular might contribute in these contexts.

Vocations of Political Theory

The question of what political theory is and hence what political theorists do – or ought to do – is a well-established source of introspection among scholars in the field (e.g., Wolin 1969; Isaac 1995; Frank and Tambornino 2000; Stears 2005). If the question emerges more frequently among political theorists than among scholars in other fields, this may be the result of the liminal space political theorists occupy: 'in' (most commonly) the discipline of political science but not 'of' it, while oscillating between historicist and presentist approaches, between empirical and normative emphases, between the humanities and

1

social sciences. Michael Walzer has argued persuasively that – at its most promising – the ambiguities of this position have allowed political theorists an unusual degree of freedom to transgress disciplinary boundaries and schools of thought, something he characterizes as a political theory "license" (2013).

There is such a wide variety of work done by self-identified political theorists today that a case coule be made that fundamental disagreement about the goals or even the nature of the vocation itself is characteristic of the field. Moreover, those of us who identify our work as *environmental* political theory – no doubt like other "adjectival" political theorists – can appear to be in a liminal space in an additional sense, with one foot in the ambiguous, contested space known as "political theory" and another in something like "environmental studies" or even "environmental concerns."

Without either dismissing or exploring the many divergences that could be found here, I wish to take a step back in order to notice some shared practices and implicit understandings of the vocation of political theory – including environmental political theory – as it is commonly practiced today. I do so in the form of two models, which I term the dominant scholarship model and the public intellectual model. In drawing out characteristics of these, my aim is neither to condemn these understandings of the vocation nor to promote an alternative as preferable. It is at once more modest and more ambitious: to delineate the contours of a third model for the vocation of political theory, and particularly environmental political theory. This model, too, comes with its strengths and weaknesses; dangers and opportunities. In that sense, I envision it as *another* model for the vocation of political theory, rather than an *alternative* model. Yet in the end, I do argue that it is a model of a way to do political theory, rather than doing something else – say, a form of service to the broader community or a form of interdisciplinary scholarship rather than a form of political theorizing.

Three dimensions of the vocation of political theory can provide us with some sense of both the two extant models and of this additional one. The first dimension addresses questions of audience, the second raises questions of the style, form, and venue of communication, the third considers the goal of

good political theoretical work. My aim, here, is only to sketch very general contours of these models – enough that we are sensitized to their differences, but surely not enough to make an iron-clad case for the details.

Dominant Scholarship Model

Despite all the other differences, there is a dominant model for the vocation of political theory today. It is typically practiced by a solitary theorist. It assumes that the primary audience for political theoretical work is fellow practitioners of this enterprise – academic political theorists and students of political theory – and (sometimes to a lesser extent) practitioners of closely-related academic enterprises. This audience is reflected in conferences (such as this one) at which we present our work and learn from others in our field and in academic journals in which we present our findings and follow the work of our colleagues. Of course, just how tightly the boundaries of audience are drawn varies; a highly specialized conference or publication is different than, say, the political science "public sphere" cultivated by the journal *Perspectives on Politics* (Isaac 2015) or what might be labeled as an environmental studies "public sphere" in the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences.* Even within the latter journals, the style of acceptable communication falls within a fairly narrow range; while one school of political theory might disparage another for an opaque writing style, for instance, relatively few would seek to publish a list of aphorisms, an essay without any citations, a dialogue, or a eulogy as a work of political theory today, though we recognize these as important forms of political thinking in the past. Academic spaces such as *PoP* and *JESS* can be seen as counterweights to the contemporary pressures toward hyper-specialization, but they don't seem to challenge the contours of the vocation as I have sketched them here. All of this is integral to our understanding of the goals of political theoretical work as well. A central goal is to formulate perspectives or arguments that might influence our colleagues with similar interests to think differently or to influence other colleagues to share our concerns or perspectives about the matter being addressed. In doing so, we are often pressing the limits

of our own understanding, seeking to develop insights at the "cutting edge" of ongoing discussions in the field. Understood in this manner, political theory is clearly a "metapractice" in John Gunnell's terms – a "second-order," and sometimes "third-order" way of engaging with political phenomena (1998, 20–27). And just to be clear, there is no question in my mind that this paper fits neatly within this dominant model.

Public Intellectual Model

Not everything does, of course. A less commonplace, but nonetheless familiar, model for the vocation is one in which the theorist aspires to act as a social critic or public intellectual. The norm of the solitary theorist remains dominant, yet the audience, the style of communication, and the goal are all constituted differently than above. The audience might be construed – at least aspirationally – as "the educated public," or as activists, policymakers, journalists, and (non-political theory) students with an interest in the subject matter. Ideas may be conveyed through semi-popular magazines or blogs, trade books written for a broader audience, public talks, or even curated as museum exhibitions (e.g., "Making Things Public | 2005-03-20 | ZKM" 2016). The goal, here, might also be understood differently. While influencing others to think differently or to share our concerns or perspectives may be central here as well, a more explicit appeal for social action or social change may also be the aim (I discuss models of social criticism at greater length in Meyer 2015, 1–21; see also Wissenburg 2013). This is consistent with Sheldon Wolin's heroic conception of the vocation of political theory: "by an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world." (Wolin 1969, 1078). While the "act of thought" is one that might be shared narrowly with one's fellow theorists, the goal of "reassembl[ing] the whole political world" is one that demands "first order" participation in the political discourse of the wider community.

Alternately, a political theorist might act as a public intellectual strictly with the aim of enriching the quality of public discourse by transmitting their insights about political thinking in general. Michael

Sandel's book and massive online course on "Justice" seem to reflect this latter goal (Sandel 2010; "Justice with Michael Sandel - Online Harvard Course Exploring Justice, Equality, Democracy, and Citizenship" 2016).

It is relevant to acknowledge that many works by political theorists seeking to cultivate this sort of social criticism or public intellectualism nonetheless fit within the dominant scholarship model. For example, although a major work like James Tully's two-volume, 700+page *Public Philosophy in a New Key* is a clearly-written call for a more publicly-engaged form of theorizing and forms of citizenship, and although it addresses a number of pressing contemporary political concerns, it is hard to imagine many outside of political theory and its cognate disciplines taking up the volumes in the serious or sustained manner that they warrant.[1]

Broad Interdisciplinary Engagement Model

The models of the vocation sketched above are no doubt familiar to political theorists with a wide range of interests, including those in environmental political theory. An additional model, which I develop here, may be of particular relevance to the latter. In this model, knowledge if generated in (often large) teams. The audience is interdisciplinary, but not just in the relatively limited sense of communicating with cognate disciplines. In the context of environmental political theory, cognate fields could include those in the (already interdisciplinary) environmental humanities, science and technology studies, environmental sociology and communication, etc. But in this model, the interdisciplinary audience is *broad* in the sense that it crosses what C.P. Snow long-ago described as the "two cultures" divide and also includes those in the natural sciences: in this case, Earth system scientists, climatologists, ecologists, epidemiologists, etc. (Snow 2008). Similarly, it crosses a powerful divide within social science disciplines – between so-called "hard" social sciences that rely heavily upon quantitative analysis and formal models, including those of economists, behavioral psychologists, and others, and "soft" critical or

---

[1] For what it's worth, the latter point could be said of my own recent book too (Meyer 2015).

interpretive social sciences (which often seem to bleed over into the humanities), including not just political theory, but cultural anthropology, history, and many others (c.f., Kagan 2009) . The style and forms of communication appropriate to these broadly interdisciplinary academic collaborations and audiences must also be different than either those of the individual scholar writing for colleagues in their field or the public intellectual writing for a more general public. What counts as appropriate evidence and persuasive argument is not identical with the other vocational models. Finally, the goals of working as a political theorist in such venues must also be distinct.

While the nature of such goals will be explored below, let me anticipate and address one such possibility here: A familiar, yet very constraining and ultimately insufficient justification for such work is to act as a "translator." This translational role can be characterized in two distinct senses: first, as political theorists we might be asked to "translate" complex ideas from our field into easily digestible principles or guidelines for understanding by others. For example, natural scientists might find it valuable for a theorist to distill some of the key claims about justice that are at play in international climate negotiations. The translational role can also be imagined in reverse, where those of us in "social" or "people" disciplines are called upon to translate (or, transmit) scientific findings to a lay public in a comprehensible or persuasive manner. This reflects what science studies scholars have critiqued as a "linear model" of decision-making based on scientific findings (Pielke 2011; Brown 2016). I argue that the service implied by the former represents a very limited vision of interdisciplinarity, while the communication function prescribed in the latter represents a misunderstanding of the contribution that political theorists and others are in a position to make.

***

My brief summary of these models will prove useful if it clarifies some relevant characteristics of different sorts of work as well as the aspirations that lie behind such works. To be clear, I am not arguing that the dominant model of scholarship can only influence colleagues in our own field, but that this is its

characteristic aim. I am also not offering an analysis of the professional pressures and incentives that influence the vocation of political theory, though it seems clear that – at least up to the present – these weight the scales heavily toward the dominant model. Further, I make no claim that this typology is exhaustive nor that these categories are mutually exclusive. Finally, I am also emphatically not intending to trivialize one or more of these models, to suggest that one is always preferable, nor that one is sufficient. My survey could appropriately be utilized to argue for cultivating a plurality of models of the vocation, as well as for greater self-awareness about one's own work. In the table below, I offer a preliminary summary of these models.

Table 1: Models of the Vocation of Political Theory

Model of Political Theory Vocation	Audience	Communication Style and Venue	Goal
Dominant Scholarship (single author)	Colleagues: fellow political theorists and graduate students; critical scholars in cognate disciplines	Books and journal articles with arguments closely grounded in and engaged with established literature in the field; disciplinary and sub-disciplinary academic journals; disciplinary and other specialized conferences	Influence colleagues to think differently and/or share concerns and perspectives; develop "cutting edge" insights into political phenomena; "metapractice"
Public Intellectual; Social Critic (single author)	"educated public"; activists; policymakers; journalists; undergraduate students?	Articles and commentary in semi-popular blogs, magazines, and related publications; trade books; public talks; perhaps curating museum exhibitions	Appeal for social action or social change on contemporary concerns; enrich public understanding; participate in "first-order" political discourse
Broad Interdisciplinary Engagement (collaborative authorship)	natural scientists; "hard" social scientists; policymakers; activists; etc.	Collaboration with academics with fundamentally different assumptions about what counts as knowledge production; broadly interdisciplinary reports and conferences and ???	Appeal for action and change – both in society and in academic scholarship; foster new forms of knowledge; challenge "linear model" of decision-making; participate in "first order" knowledge production

The "Two Cultures" in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene, the controversial but trending name for our present geological epoch, was popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, who described it in an International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (a precursor of Future Earth) newsletter essay in 2000 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). At its core, consideration of the Anthropocene is Janus-faced in its central

proposition and insight. On the one hand, it highlights the impact of human *power* so great that it transforms not just landscapes or ecosystems but the Earth system itself – from Holocene conditions to the Anthropocene – while on the other hand it draws equal attention to the *limits* of intentional human action, given our inescapable embeddedness in planetary processes that are far beyond human control.[2]

Although the concept of the Anthropocene has garnered much attention and debate among geoscientists including stratigraphers, it has generated as much or more interest in the past 6-7 years among environmental (and other) scholars writing in the humanities and social sciences.[3] At the same time, the Anthropocene has generated a notable degree of attention in the media and has been the subject of at least one major museum exhibition (Deutsches Museum 2016). Geographer Noel Castree has argued that from the start "clearly, this was more than a 'pure' science concept—unlike, say, 'black holes' or 'quarks;' just as clearly, it significantly amplified the socio-economic, cultural and political implications of the climate change idea" (2014, 239). Thus, the Anthropocene has been an always-unconventional scientific concept, one whose emergence reflected a desire of (some) natural scientists to foster interdisciplinarity and public awareness. In this sense, it represents an opening that might allow for the cultivation of interdisciplinary insight and new formations of knowledge and of knowledge production, even as the concept of the Anthropocene itself remains contested as both a geophysical hypothesis and as a normative claim.

Writing in the journal *Environmental Humanities*, Castree has gone to considerable lengths to explore the characteristics of humanist writings on the Anthropocene, characterizing most of them as playing at least one of two time-honored roles, that of

> 'inventor-discloser' or 'deconstructor-critic'…The former entails scholars using their
> academic freedom and the time a university career affords to conjure-up new (or

---

[2] On the centrality of an understanding of the Earth system, and so the "radical novelty" of the concept of the Anthropocene, see (Hamilton and Grinevald 2015, 61 and passim).
[3] One of the first non-scientists to explore the Anthropocene idea in depth was post-colonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay 2009 essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (Chakrabarty 2009). For a recent engagement with his theses and their influence, see: (Emmett and Lekan 2016).

revisit old and neglected) concepts, ideas and arguments intended to enrich humanity's understanding of its place in the world. The latter entails scholars challenging existing (or *new*) patterns of thought in the academy or the world at large. In practice, the roles often bleed into each other and, typically, no environmental humanist performs one exclusively for any length of time (Castree 2014, 243).

He concludes that "despite their importance and their differences, as currently performed these roles hold environmental humanists at a distance from those geoscientists currently trying to popularise the Anthropocene proposition and a set of related grand ideas (like 'planetary boundaries')" (Castree 2014, 233). Castree's account of the most familiar roles played by environmental humanists writing about the Anthropocene can also be seen among political theorists writing on the subject. This reflects the dominant model of scholarship that I have sketched above and is manifest in panels and conferences like the one to which this paper is a contribution. Castree's "inventor-disclosers" and "deconstructor-critics" might also aspire to a public intellectual model, but as he argues this still does not provide the basis for collaboration with the geoscientific community.

That *might* be a good thing, as the dual meaning of collaboration -- both working together on a shared endeavor and cooperating with an enemy -- make clear. There are insights about the Anthropocene that require an independence of thought and the mutual intelligibility that comes from conversation with colleagues who share intellectual referents, which are therefore best situated as scholarship in the dominant mode. But before dismissing broad interdisciplinary collaboration based on its pitfalls, the promise and possibilities for such work deserve consideration. In fact, Castree, along with other scholars in both the environmental humanities and social sciences (including political theorists John Barry, Luigi Pellizzoni, and David Schlosberg) issued a call for just such a collaboration in the pages of the journal *Nature Climate Change* (Castree et al. 2014; see also Palsson et al. 2013). The venue of this call – a premier journal read by natural scientists and seeking to foster interdisciplinarity – is highly significant, as is the inclusiveness of the fields in the environmental social sciences and humanities (they label these "ESSH") that are represented. As they argue, interdisciplinarity is evident in work that

9

addresses climate change and the Anthropocene, but it is of limited scope, dominated by the natural

sciences and those "social science approaches to human dimensions that share an elective affinity" –

the so-called hard social sciences described above (Castree et al. 2014, 764).

While our contemporary tendency is to think in terms of three academic realms or "three cultures"

– natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities – the tendencies in interdisciplinary collaboration and

communication suggest that these three often collapse back into two (cf., Castree 2015). On the one

hand, we find scholars in the humanities and critical/interpretive social sciences often collaborating on

problem-driven research across discipline and sub-disciplinary boundaries. Political theorists take part in

this sort of interdisciplinarity with some frequency. Despite many differences, the commonality can be

seen as what Joshua Dienstag has recently described as a "discipline of questioning," which places

political theory at the very core of this enterprise (2015). On the other hand, we find what Castree et al.

describe as the "elective affinity" between physical scientists, economists, behavioral psychologists,

certain political scientists, and scholars of business and management. The social scientists in this

configuration are among those typically identified with research on the "human dimensions" of

environmental change (a revealing label). As they also note, it is this configuration that has developed

the increasingly prominent field of "sustainability science," and is often assumed as the core disciplines

for "interdisciplinary" journals such as *Nature Climate Change* itself and for large-scale and generously

funded research collaborations -- especially Future Earth -- that are positioned to drive the research

agenda on global sustainability for years to come. (2014, 764; "Future Earth" 2016).

For broad interdisciplinary work to have a chance of success, it seems that a degree of openness,

introspection, and change will be necessary on both sides of the "two cultures" divide. Arguing for "a

seat at the table" will founder in its absence. On the "science" side, bringing critical social scientists and

humanists to the table will likely lead to disappointment if the expectation – reflecting the "linear

model" of science advice noted above and a managerialist (or "administratively rationalist") notions of

policy implementation – is that these scholars will act as junior partners assigned the task of translating

scientific knowledge to a lay audience. This sort of role fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the

insights offered even by those scholars (such as those involved in "climate change communication") who

most closely resemble it. More to the point, a hierarchy in which physical scientists are explicitly or

implicitly placed at the top, with their forms of knowledge regarded as primary while the others are

derivative, will have to be toppled in order to truly grapple with the social dynamics and normative

implications of global environmental change. But on the other side of this divide, a reconceived role is

also required. The very nature of collaborative work alters the professional identity of many in these

fields, at least in a North American context.[4] Moreover, Castree argues that an "engaged analyst" role is

needed, requiring a different way of thinking about our vocation than the "inventor-discloser" and

"deconstructor-critics" role that he finds dominant within the environmental humanities. These roles

are shaped in part by comfortable or habitual assumptions about what publications we choose to read,

conferences we attend, and intellectual conversations we engage (Castree 2014, 251–255).

(Environmental) Political Theory in the Anthropocene

In the previous section, I drew heavily upon three essays authored or co-authored by geographer Noel

Castree. These were a source of inspiration for this paper and I am convinced that a great deal of his

analysis of the environmental humanities and social sciences (ESSH) resonates with the practices and

experiences of environmental political theorists, a point reinforced by the prominent theorists who co-

authored one of these pieces. And yet, in reading all three, I can't help but notice a lacuna: despite

frequent references to disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, there isn't a single explicit

mention in any of the three essays of political theory itself (including the one with 3 political theorists

among its 22 co-authors).[5] This oversight is not distinctive to Castree; it can be seen in other calls for

---

[4] Humanities scholars in Europe seem much more accustomed to engaging in large-scale collaborations.
[5] The only relevant mention is the inclusion in one essay of a quotation from "English political philosopher Michael Oakeshott" in the context of an appeal for a new "conversation of humankind" (Castree 2014, 256).

interdisciplinary Anthropocene scholarship as well. It suggests that as political theorists considering

participation in broadly interdisciplinary venues, our relative invisibility may be twofold: first, and most

importantly, that of the environmental humanities and social sciences writ large (as discussed in the

previous section) but second, that of political theory itself within this academic configuration.

This second sort of invisibility will be the subject of this section. The aim is not to lament, nor to

ignore those places where the voices or insights of individual political theorists have been heard and

recognized. It is, instead, to begin to identify and sketch some ways in which environmental political

theory as a dynamic body of work and scholars might be positioned to add valuable insights to broadly

interdisciplinary conversations. Greater recognition of these insights and opportunities – both among

political theorists and among other scholars fostering broad interdisciplinarity – is my goal. In doing so,

my aim is to enrich the conversation; not to reify or reinforce the boundaries of the "non-discipline" of

(environmental) political theory but to suggest some ways in which this non-discipline itself can be of

value.[6] My suggestions are necessarily preliminary and meant to invite dialogue. They are largely my

own, though strongly influenced by my reading of fellow environmental political theorists in general and

---

[6] The phrase "non-discipline" allows me to acknowledge the author from whom I borrowed it, Harlan Wilson, who in a wonderful footnote of his own (to a conference paper I've long since lost) wrote: "My own positioning is as a political theorist with interests in green theory, even though those interests are marginal within my own non-discipline. I find myself on the boundary between positivism and social constructionism, materialism and idealism, agency and contextualism, modernism and postmodernism. I think that the way concepts are constructed filters and mediates our observations and perceptions, often decisively, but I want to resist the view that all language is self-referential such that we can't be demonstrably wrong about aspects of the world. I know of no clear foundations for political theory; certainly they would not come from either 'nature' or moral philosophy; yet I want to avoid an extreme relativism that one can't live with, or can't teach students with, or can't evaluate environmental dangers with. Reading of texts is a critical political activity, but should not save one from the responsibility of taking one's own stand. In short, I am a reluctant modernist who worries about the problem of authority and the crisis of previously authorized discourses, practices, politics. I feel the obligation to argue for all these positions, but I won't do so here; the litany will have to suffice…"

by the wide-ranging insights of the many terrific contributions to the new *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* in particular (Gabrielson et al. 2016).

Bridging-Building and the (so-called) "hard"/"soft" divide in academic cultures

The context and location for one's academic training and professional life matters. In the US, at least, we often see evidence of this, for instance, in differences between political theorists – trained and usually situated in political science departments – and political philosophers – trained and usually situated in philosophy departments. While we may read and engage the same literatures, the way questions are formulated and evidence is provided are not identical. Surely there are many reasons for this, but one seems to be that those in political science often filled out their graduate training (and count among our professional colleagues those who...) study of constitutional law, or comparative political systems, for instance, while those in philosophy likely did so with logic, epistemology, or ethics. These differences make a difference.

Castree and others make clear that one challenge to the meaningful inclusion of ESSH scholars in Anthropocene research is the "cultural" divide within the academy. Those on each side ask different sorts of questions and look for different sorts of evidence. While ESSH may – like the "hard" science side of the divide – generate "findings," what counts as a finding differs (Holm 2014, 59). Fostering mutual intelligibility across such divides can be especially challenging if neither side has a context for making sense of the other in good faith. Similarly, while some in the humanities (perhaps especially historians) have extensive experience in bringing their findings to broader publics via documentary film, museum exhibitions, etc., they are less familiar with the politics of policy-making than political theorists might be.

In this context, one potential strength that many political theorists can bring to the table is an ability to serve a bridge-building role that is necessary to facilitate meaningful conversation. I noted above – building on Dienstag's notion of a "discipline of questioning" – that the work of political theorists can be understood at the very center of the ESSH configuration of interpretive/critical social

13

sciences and humanities. This is no small thing. But here I wish to suggest that we might also have an ability to communicate across the gulf that so often separates the so-called "soft" from the "hard" side of the academic culture divide. I'll offer one anecdote here, which occurred during a set of conversations on the nature of "interdisciplinarity" itself.

> Many of us – from history, political science, anthropology, gender studies, sociology – found that despite differences in disciplinary conventions and substantive interests, we were able to share work in a way that was mutually comprehensible and constructive. Yet there were also economists – formal modelers – in the group (some were originally trained in mathematics). The chasm between their work, methods, and framing of a research question and ours often proved insurmountable. We all tried. One memorable exchange took place at the end of a lengthy roundtable discussion. The non-economists had been arguing – one after another and at length – for the necessity of rich contextual knowledge as an alternative to (or at least a pre-requisite for) the sort of social and political decision-making models that the economists were pursuing. Finally, one of the economists erupted – visibly shaking with anger, he held his hands to his ears and cried, "words, words, words, it's just a blizzard of words!" From his perspective, parsimonious models were vital to our ability to gain insight into real-world problems, while our many words posed obstacles to such efficacy.[7]

For many colleagues from history, gender studies, anthropology, etc., the evident frustration of our colleagues in economics seemed literally incomprehensible. They had little professional exposure or training upon which to draw that would allow them to make any sense of the emphatic positivism of the economic modelers and so they couldn't do anything other than simply dismiss them. And the latter lacked resources that allowed them to do anything more than express their exasperation. It seemed to fall upon the political theorists and some others from sociology and political science (where game-theoretic and other positivist approaches were familiar even if we contested them deeply) to initiate mutually intelligible conversations. There were no grand successes here. But it was enough to offer me reason to believe that our academic positionality might at times allow political theorists to make a distinctive contribution in this regard.

---

[7] I offer further reflections on this experience in: (Meyer 2014)

Offer Broad(er) Insight into "Post-Politics"

Eva Lövbrand and her colleagues offer a valuable investigation of the possibilities for what they label the "critical social sciences" in Anthropocene research, and in Future Earth in particular. Their conclusions extend and reinforce themes identified by Castree, while shifting the emphasis within "ESSH" toward relevant social science fields. Perhaps most importantly, Lövbrand and her colleagues urge that scholars in these fields not compromise on the urgent necessity of offering critical insights in order to play well with others. They argue that a short-term "quest for solutions" fosters a means-ends rationality that marginalizes vital "questions of meaning, value, responsibility and purpose in a time of rapid and escalating change" (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212). Dienstag's notion of a "discipline of questioning" again suggests that political theory's contribution here is central.

Lövbrand et al. organize their insights around three claims that they attribute to the onology of the Anthropocene as described by its proponents: that it is "post-natural," "post-social," and "post-political." The claim that the Anthropocene promotes "post-naturalism" is rooted in the in the fundamentals of the Anthropocene idea itself. If human power is now not merely transforming landscapes but the Earth system itself, then a nature/culture dualism cannot cohere. Environmental political theorists, as well as ESSH scholars in many other fields, now have more than two decades of work exploring the implications of challenging and re-thinking these boundaries to build upon (Gabrielson et al. 2016, see especially Part III: Rethinking Nature and Political Subjects). Yet as Lövbrand et al. observe, the scientists promoting this point often fail to account for its full implications, or carry it through to its logical conclusion. Scientific knowledge of the "natural" world cannot be uniquely privileged in Anthropocene research agendas if this is the case.

The "post-social" premise of the Anthropocene idea is one that they argue leads to the Anthropocene misleadingly being discussed in universalizing species terms. Here, the problem is that "Anthropos" is regarded as a universal agent, with the potential to foreclose a differentiated discourse

in which the individuals, classes, or systems of power and privilege that have generated the Anthropocene (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 217). Again, environmental political theorists have been consistent in highlighting this critique, as have a great many other ESSH scholars (For EPT contributions see Luke 2015). Quite a few have used this point to argue "against" the Anthropocene idea itself, calling for recognition, instead, of the "capitalocene" or some other formulation that draws attention to a social analysis of the source of "human" power (see Di Chiro 2016). Yet the starting point for this paper was a consideration of the opportunities for a certain type of broad interdisciplinary conversation that seems to be emerging under the sign of the Anthropocene, rather than an evaluation of the value of the concept itself. In this context, a key point to be made about the deeply unequal distribution of agency is that there cannot be any fixed or determined social and political order that emerges from a consideration of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene will – as always – be refracted through diverse human experiences, positions, affects, cultures, and views of justice and injustice (Meyer 2016, 50).

This recognition of inescapable pluralism, interpretation, and power brings us to the final point in Lövbrand et al.'s formulation: the "post-political" presumption embedded in much Anthropocene talk. The premise here, echoing widely-cited work by geographer Erik Swyngedouw, is that there are prevailing depoliticizing forces at work in society today – including the conceptualization of global crises like climate change – that serve to suppress evidence of plurality and power rather than making them visible (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 535). As a result, Lövbrand et al. argue that "environmental scholars need to demonstrate that the Anthropocene is not the end of politics" and thereby to "challenge the managerial impulse" (2015, 216; see also: Swyngedouw 2010; Neimanis, Asberg, and Hedren 2015; Macgregor 2014).

Two observations relevant to the role and contribution of political theory are pertinent here. The first is that the tension between political and managerial or otherwise depoliticized approaches to the Anthropocene is a real and vital subject for concerted attention. The second is that while

Swyngedouw's work is – unsurprisingly – rooted in (a particular strand of) political theory (especially works by Mouffe and Rancière), this explicit political-theoretical influence is often less visible or at least less developed in works that take up Swyngedouw's ideas. This is a missed opportunity. For surely one topic on which a wide array of political theorists have ability to foster insights is on the rich array of meanings and challenges surrounding our notions of politics and the political.

One problematic consequence of the language of "*post*-politics" itself has been to lead many to treat the concept as a temporal claim.[8] Those familiar with the longer and broader lineage of laments about the decline of the political will recognize that the claim that it is something new or distinctive in recent years is highly suspect (one partial starting point: Hauptmann 2004). Depoliticization (if we can even call it that) is not a new phenomenon but a recurring one; it is the eruption of spaces for politics in this sense that seems fleeting – "fugitive" in Wolin's later writing – rather than a long-standing norm (Wolin 1994). Political theorists are well-positioned to correct this nostalgic reading, which can contribute to a misdiagnosis of our contemporary condition. Rather than being the consequence of some distinctively post-political dynamic of our age, the phenomenon seems better described as a familiar consequence of the mainstreaming or cooptation of environmental concerns by elites and others who assume that they must be addressed with the economic, technocratic, and administrative tools presently at hand. To challenge such supposed "solutions," on the grounds that they are either insufficient or not an inexorable consequence of the problem, necessarily results in their politicization and can open up space for the consideration of other strategies.

The point here is not simply that political theorists have much to say about conceptions of politics – though they do. It was made clear to me years ago by a philosopher attending a political theory conference that one of the most commonplace and yet distinctive questions being posed there was

---

[8] Kenis and Lievens make this point (which they later criticize along similar lines to my argument here) by tying the emergent literature on "post-politics" to Ingolfur Blühdorn's explicitly historical claim that a "post-ecological condition" has emerged in recent decades (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 533; 542–44).

"*what are the politics of that?*" That is, political theorists seem particularly attuned to exploring the

practical implications of normative or critical claims, a seemingly vital element of Anthropocene

research, which promises more substantive insight than a nostalgic call for a return to "the political."

Open up conceptual space

Political theorists, unsurprisingly, have much to offer when the conversation turns to questions of

politics and the need to open up *political* space for challenges to dominant "solutions." Yet I would

argue that our most characteristic contribution – the real raison d'etre of political theory – in this

context is to open up *conceptual* space. Others often take concepts including justice, freedom,

democracy, or sustainability for granted, acting as though they possess a singular correct meaning (see

Gabrielson et al. 2016, Part IV). This is true even where they lament that this meaning has been lost – as

in much recent consternation about "sustainability." In such cases, we often see proposals for new

words or ideas (e.g., resilience, thrivability, even the Anthropocene). This reflects a conviction that

concepts ought to have a singular meaning and when they do not – or no longer seem to – they ought

somehow be replaced with others that will. Political theorists can be helpful here, allowing others to see

that essentially contested concepts don't reflect a failure of words, but an underlying struggle over

meaning and value. Those who fail to grasp the implications of this remain destined for recurring

disappointment. Politics in its broadest sense is a struggle over what constitutes a good life and how

political communities ought to be ordered. Politics in the Anthropocene will continue this struggle and

quite likely heighten it. Interdisciplinary initiatives to make sense of life on an Anthropocenic planet

ignore this at their – our – peril.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to explore some possibilities for political theory *qua* political theory

to meaningfully engage in the sort of broad interdisciplinary initiatives I've discussed here. As such,

considering what skills and insights political theorists might have to contribute and what roles we might

play becomes central. To the extent that I have sketched a model that can add value to these initiatives,

then I maintain that this is a plausible or an appropriate vocation for political theorists, rather than being

construed as something else – say, "service" when it is part of our academic identity, "citizenship" when

it is not. My attention has been focused on a particular sort of project and the contours of a particular

model. Yet it seems to me that the effort to envision and articulate new models of political theory as a

vocation is a valuable one that extends beyond the particulars addressed here.

Works Cited

Brown, Mark. 2016. "Environmental Science and Politics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, edited by Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, David Schlosberg, and John M. Meyer. Oxford University Press.

Castree, Noel. 2014. "The Anthropocene and the Environmental Humanities: Extending the Conversation." http://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1389/.

———. 2015. "The 'Three Cultures' Problem in Global Change Research." *#EnviroSociety*. March 9. http://www.envirosociety.org/2015/03/the-three-cultures-problem-in-global-change-research/.

Castree, Noel, William M. Adams, John Barry, Daniel Brockington, Bram Büscher, Esteve Corbera, David Demeritt, et al. 2014. "Changing the Intellectual Climate." *Nature Climate Change* 4 (9): 763–68. doi:10.1038/nclimate2339.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2): 197–222.

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

Deutsches Museum. 2016. "Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands." Accessed March 16. http://www.deutsches-museum.de/en/exhibitions/special-exhibitions/anthropocene/.

Di Chiro, Giovanna. 2016. "Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene Meme." In *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, edited by Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg, 362–81. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dienstag, Joshua Foa. 2015. "Political Theory and the Humanities: Remarks at the APT Plenary." APT Plenary, October. https://www.academia.edu/17534491/Political_Theory_and_the_Humanities_Remarks_at_the_APT_Plenary.

Emmett, Robert, and Thomas Lekan, eds. 2016. *Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Four Theses."* Vol. 2. RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society. 2016. Accessed March 16. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2015_new_final.pdf.

Frank, Jason A., and John Tambornino, eds. 2000. *Vocations of Political Theory*. University of Minnesota Press.

"Future Earth." 2016. Accessed March 16. http://www.futureearth.org/.

Gabrielson, Teena, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg, eds. 2016. *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Gunnell, John G. 1998. *The Orders of Discourse: Philosophy, Social Science, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Hamilton, Clive, and Jacques Grinevald. 2015. "Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?" *The Anthropocene Review* 2 (1): 59–72. doi:10.1177/2053019614567155.

Hauptmann, Emily. 2004. "A Local History of 'The Political.'" *Political Theory* 32 (1): 34–60. doi:10.1177/0090591703256606.

Holm, Poul. 2014. "Can Environmental Humanities Help Make a Better World?" In *Mind the Gap: Working Across Disciplines in Environmental Studies*, edited by Rob Emmett and Thomas Lekan, 57–60. RCC Perspectives. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2014_i2_web.pdf.

Isaac, Jeffrey C. 1995. "The Strange Silence of Political Theory." *Political Theory* 23 (November): 636–52.

———. 2015. "For a More Public Political Science." *Perspectives on Politics* 13 (02): 269–83. doi:10.1017/S1537592715000031.

"Justice with Michael Sandel - Online Harvard Course Exploring Justice, Equality, Democracy, and Citizenship." 2016. Accessed March 14. http://www.justiceharvard.org/.

Kagan, Jerome. 2009. *The Three Cultures: Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities in the 21st Century*. Cambridge University Press.

Kenis, Anneleen, and Matthias Lievens. 2014. "Searching for 'the Political' in Environmental Politics." *Environmental Politics* 23 (4): 531–48. doi:10.1080/09644016.2013.870067.

Lövbrand, Eva, Silke Beck, Jason Chilvers, Tim Forsyth, Johan Hedrén, Mike Hulme, Rolf Lidskog, and Eleftheria Vasileiadou. 2015. "Who Speaks for the Future of Earth? How Critical Social Science Can Extend the Conversation on the Anthropocene." *Global Environmental Change* 32 (May): 211–18. doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.03.012.

Luke, Timothy W., ed. 2015. "Political Critiques of the Anthropocene." *Telos* 172 (Special Issue). http://www.telospress.com/telos-172-fall-2015-political-critiques-of-the-anthropocene/.

Macgregor, Sherilyn. 2014. "Only Resist: Feminist Ecological Citizenship and the Post-Politics of Climate Change." *Hypatia* 29 (3): 617–33. doi:10.1111/hypa.12065.

"Making Things Public | 2005-03-20 | ZKM." 2016. Accessed March 14. http://zkm.de/en/media/video/making-things-public.

Meyer, John M. 2014. "Less Is More." In *Minding the Gap: Working Across Disciplines in Environmental Studies*, edited by Rob Emmett and Frank Zelko, 2:15–18. RCC Perspectives.

———. 2015. *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

———. 2016. "Politics in -- but Not of -- the Anthropocene." In *Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Four Theses."* Vol. 2. RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society. http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2015_new_final.pdf.

Neimanis, Astrida, Cecilia Asberg, and Johan Hedren. 2015. "Four Problems, Four Directions For Environmental Humanities." *Ethics and the Environment* 20 (1): 67–97.

Palsson, Gisli, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Sverker Sörlin, John Marks, Bernard Avril, Carole Crumley, Heide Hackmann, et al. 2013. "Reconceptualizing the 'Anthropos' in the Anthropocene: Integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities in Global Environmental Change Research." *Environmental Science & Policy* 28 (April): 3–13. doi:10.1016/j.envsci.2012.11.004.

Pielke, Roger A. 2011. *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*. Cambridge [u.a.: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Sandel, Michael J. 2010. *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* Reprint edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Snow, C. P. 2008. *The Two Cultures*.

Stears, Marc. 2005. "The Vocation of Political Theory Principles, Empirical Inquiry and the Politics of Opportunity." *European Journal of Political Theory* 4 (4): 325–50. doi:10.1177/1474885105055981.

Swyngedouw, Erik. 2010. "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change." *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2-3): 213–32. doi:10.1177/0263276409358728.

Walzer, Michael. 2013. "The Political Theory License." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (1): 1–9. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-032211-214411.

Wissenburg, Marcel. 2013. "Political Appeasement and Academic Critique: The Case of Environmentalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39 (7): 675–91. doi:10.1177/0191453713491233.

Wolin, Sheldon S. 1969. "Political Theory as a Vocation." *The American Political Science Review* 63 (4): 1062. doi:10.2307/1955072.

———. 1994. ""Fugitive Democracy"." *Constellations* 1 (1): 11–25. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00002.x.