

Workshop
Schuld im Anthropozän / Guilt in the Anthropocene
VDA Theory and Methodology in the Humanities
University of Vienna

24 January 2020
Büro Horn 1ZG, Stieg 9
In English and German

Program

10.00-10.30 **Welcome and Introductions**

10.30-12.30

Von Klimasündern, Flugscham und moralischen Streckübungen: Ökologisches Bewusstsein im Anthropozän

Ana Honnacker, Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover

For Want of a Respondent: Forgiveness and Climate Guilt

Juliane Prade-Weiss, University of Vienna

12.30-14.00 Lunch

14.00-16.00

Countable, Critically Endangered, and Charismatic: Debt, Responsibility, and the Financialization of Wildlife Conservation

Kári Driscoll, Utrecht University

Climate Justice: Guilt, History, and the Anthropocene

Benjamin Lewis Robinson, University of Vienna

16.30-17.00 Coffee Break

17.00-19.00

Aggression and Guilt, Repression and Return: Intergenerational Transfer in the Climate Debate

Jenny Willner, LMU München

Guilt and Finitude

Luca Di Blasi, University of Bern

Organization: Juliane Prade-Weiss & Benjamin Lewis Robinson

With the support of Stadt Wien Kultur and the Philologisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät der Universität Wien

Guilt in the Anthropocene

Much contemporary debate concerning the Anthropocene revolves, implicitly if not explicitly, around the question of guilt. The term Anthropocene implies that humanity, humans in general, are responsible for bringing about the new geological age. It has rightly been criticized for failing to specify the particular humans, cultural practices, and social structures that have overwhelmingly contributed to (and profited from) the anthropogenic transformation of the planet. Accordingly, an array of alternative terms has been proposed that provide a differentiated account for the emergence of the current epoch most notably, Capitalocene, but also Anglocene, Eurocene, Plantationocene, White Manthropocene, etc. However important and necessary these polemics may be, they operate with established conceptions of agency and responsibility that are premised on a model of indebtedness and guilt. Yet these are precisely categories that the Anthropocene throws into question and that urgently need to be rethought. Rather than seeking to attribute guilt for the Anthropocene, as if we know what “guilt” means, this symposium sets out instead to consider the ways in which the Anthropocene solicits a critical engagement with the concept of guilt and the economic, juridical, and theological histories in which it is entangled.

Schuld im Anthropozän

Ein Großteil der zeitgenössischen Debatten über das Anthropozän kreist implizit oder ausdrücklich um die „Schuldfrage“. Die diesem Begriff zugrundeliegende Annahme, dass die Menschheit, der Mensch im Allgemeinen, für das Herbeiführen des neuen geologischen Zeitalters verantwortlich ist, wurde zu Recht dafür kritisiert, nicht zu präzisieren, welche Menschen, kulturellen Praktiken und sozialen Strukturen die anthropogene Veränderung des Planeten maßgebend herbeigeführt (und davon profitiert) haben. Daher wurde eine Reihe von alternativen Begriffen vorgeschlagen, die eine differenziertere Darstellung der Entstehung der gegenwärtigen Epoche ermöglichen. Zu nennen wäre insbesondere das Kapitalozän, aber auch das Anglozän, das Eurozän, das Plantationozän, das „White Manthropocene“ usw. So richtig und wichtig diese Polemiken sind, so sehr implizieren sie alle ein durchaus konventionelles Verständnis von Handlungsfähigkeit und Verantwortung, geformt nach dem Modell von Schuld und Verschuldung. Gerade diese Kategorien jedoch werden mit der Ankunft des Anthropozäns in Frage gestellt und müssen dringend neu gedacht werden. Statt die Schuld für das Anthropozän zuzuschreiben, als ob feststünde, was „Schuld“ in diesem Zusammenhang bedeuteten kann, untersucht dieses Symposium vielmehr, auf welche Weise das Anthropozän eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Schuldbegriff und den wirtschaftlichen, juristischen, rechtlichen und theologischen Geschichten anfordert, in die er verstrickt ist.

Abstracts

Guilt and Finitude

Luca Di Blasi, University of Bern

Pessimist interpretations of the Anthropocene and the climate change confront us with the very possibility that we might have already crossed the point of no return and that the end of (large parts of) humanity can no longer be halted. This possible human finitude resembles the individual anticipation of death in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* at the level of human species. The pessimists of the Anthropocene were correspondingly potential activists, representatives of a resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*] of the species in which human being is finally perceived in its finitude.

By changing the scale from the individual to the species, however, we become aware of a fundamental difference regarding the notion of guilt: at the level of the species, finitude is not only the condition of possibility of becoming guilty, as this is the case for the individual according to Heidegger, but also vice versa: Human's guilt is the ground of a (possible) finitude, the possible nullity of the own species (and at the same time of countless other species or possibilities of life as well). The Adamic connection between guilt and finitude becomes here surprisingly plausible.

The meditation of a collective human guilt, including the possibility of a self-inflicted finitude of the human species can lead to an acknowledgement of an "existential human guilt", that allows for wrenching from programs or protocols of self-preservation. And this, exactly, might renew a completely faded notion of "Human's dignity," without which any attempt at self-preservation would appear empty. At least when this goes together with a new sense of responsibility for other forms of life with whom we are so closely and inseparably related.

Luca Di Blasi is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Theological Faculty of the University of Bern in Switzerland and Associate Member of the ICI Berlin. He is currently leading the project "Disagreement Between Religions. Epistemology of Religious Conflicts". His main theoretical interests include philosophy of religion, modern continental philosophy, political theology, and cultural theory. Main publications: *Dezentrierungen. Beiträge zur Religion der Philosophie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2018); *Der weiße Mann. Ein Anti-Manifest* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013); *Der Geist in der Revolte. Der Gnostizismus und seine Wiederkehr in der Postmoderne* (Munich: Fink, 2002).

**Countable, Critically Endangered, and Charismatic:
Debt, Responsibility, and the Financialization of Wildlife Conservation**
Kári Driscoll, Utrecht University

In the summer of 2019, a new strategy in wildlife conservation was announced: so-called “rhino impact bonds,” which support efforts to conserve African black rhinos, promising a return on investment only if rhino numbers increase. The hope is to create “a conservation debt market” that can be applied to other species. In this paper, I take this latest example of the financialisation of wildlife conservation as an object lesson in the mutual imbrication of guilt, debt, and the human in the age of the Anthropocene. To this end, I will trace a theoretical genealogy that explicitly frames “Man” in terms of debt/guilt, starting with Nietzsche’s famous proposition that “the real problem *of* Man” consists in his self-production as an animal “allowed to make promises.” The figure of the promise seeks to impose order on the future, to make it predictable (*berechenbar*), which in turn renders the human calculable and indebted to his past and future actions. From here, I turn to Walter Benjamin’s 1921 fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,” in which he describes capitalism as “a cult that creates guilt, not atonement” and whose ultimate aim is thus not universal salvation but universal debt/guilt. Third, I link these two to Sylvia Wynter’s account of the emergence of *homo oeconomicus* as the paradigm of the human, whereby capital accumulation is “projected as the indispensable, empirical, and metaphysical source of all human life.” Against this backdrop, the strived-for accumulation of rhinos through finance can be seen as an extension of the principle of universal debt to the entire natural world. As the impact bonds’ creator explains, black rhinos were chosen as a flagship species because they are “countable, critically endangered and charismatic” (Anthony Sguazzin). In other words, they are *berechenbar* in much the same way as Nietzsche’s guilt-ridden sovereign individual. Thus, the financialization of wildlife conservation can be seen as an attempt to breed yet another animal that is able to make promises.

Kári Driscoll is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He holds a PhD in German from Columbia University. His primary research interests lie within the field of literary animal studies. He is the editor, with Eva Hoffmann, of *What Is Zoopoetics? – Texts, Bodies, Entanglement* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018) and, with Susanne C. Knittel, of “Memory after Humanism,” a special issue of *Parallax* (2017). His current research project, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), is entitled “Reading Zoos in the Age of the Anthropocene.”

Von Klimasündern, Flugscham und moralischen Streckübungen: Ökologisches Bewusstsein im Anthropozän

Ana Honnacker, Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover

Die Idee des Anthropozäns ist längst mehr als eine geowissenschaftliche Hypothese – sie hat sich als diagnostisches Konzept in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften etabliert. Mit Blick auf den umweltphilosophischen Diskurs stellt diese Aneignung ein deutliches Gegenarrativ zu den seit Mitte der 1970er Jahre eingeforderten Versuchen der De-Zentrierung des Menschen dar, wie sie etwa in tiefenökologischen und anderen biozentristischen Ansätzen unternommen wurden. Denn die normative Pointe des Anthropozäns ist es, den Herrschafts- und Gestaltungsanspruch des Menschen über die Natur nicht etwa zu überwinden, sondern gerade auszuführen. Damit gerät auch die Frage nach Verantwortung und Schuld wieder verstärkt in den Fokus, die in der Umweltethik bislang eine seltsam untergeordnete Rolle spielte. Zum einen ist die Zuschreibung von Verantwortung in Bezug auf kollektive Handlungen, wie sie etwa CO₂-Emissionen oder die Überfischung der Weltmeere darstellen, schwierig, zumal wenn sie zusätzlich erst kommende Generationen betreffen werden. Zum anderen wird vor einer vermeintlichen Moralisierung gewarnt: Dem Klimawandel sei nicht durch Schuldzuweisungen und „shaming“ beizukommen, da dies eher Abwehrreaktionen auslöse.

Dagegen werde ich in meinem Paper dafür argumentieren, dass die ökologische Krise auch auf eine unterentwickelte moralische Imagination zurückzuführen ist und der Rede von Schuld eine wichtige Funktion in Bezug auf deren Ausweitung zukommt. Nur wenn das Individuum sich als verantwortungsvoller Akteur wahrnimmt, ist die Grundlage für die Transformation hin zu einer nachhaltigen Lebensweise geschaffen. Im Anthropozän zu leben bedeutet daher auch, mit der Schuld leben zu lernen.

Ana Honnacker ist wissenschaftliche Assistentin des Direktors am Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover. Sie studierte Philosophie, kath. Theologie und allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft an der Universität Münster. Von 2009 bis 2013 war sie wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Institut für Theologie und Sozialethik der TU Darmstadt und Stipendiatin am DFG-Graduiertenkolleg „Theologie als Wissenschaft“ an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, wo sie 2014 ihre Promotion mit einer Arbeit zu William James abschloss. Sie ist Gründungsmitglied des German Pragmatism Network und Mitglied der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Religionsphilosophie. Sie forscht u.a. im Bereich der Religionsphilosophie (Religion und Moderne, Religionskritik), der politischen Philosophie (Demokratie als Lebensform) und der Umweltphilosophie (Klimawandel und gesellschaftliche Transformation), ihr Schwerpunkt liegt dabei auf dem Pragmatismus.

For Want of a Respondent: Forgiveness and Climate Guilt

Juliane Prade-Weiss, University of Vienna

Arendt describes “the human condition” as “conditionality”: Humans “are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence.” In this contingent relationship with the earth (Macready), the concept of guilt is a key regulator, articulated as economical, juridical, and theological indebtedness. Relationality implies an exchange, the character of which is profoundly re-negotiated in view of the climate crisis: Ecological debt and climate guilt are discussed as new juridical and economical categories for identifying and punishing agents of the destruction of ecosystems. Much like the popular catchphrase of flight shame, the models of ecological debt, climate guilt, footprints etc. carry strong moral connotations and can, as such, be conceptualized in accordance to Elias’ understanding of shame and guilt as psychic figurations for the regulation of societal interdependencies. Their status in a complex interdependency with non-human agents and phenomena such as climate, however, is unclear. The concern of ecological discourses transcends the realm of societal interdependence and gestures toward a relationality in which the position of the respondent is acutely vacant: While certain animals give responses that can be understood as such, and ecosystems certainly respond to intervention, the particularities of causation and owing action – the two aspects of the concept guilt – are everything but clear in the latter, global case but subject to examination, doubt, polemics, and a reduction to a feedback-loop of sovereign human agency. Until the 17th century, the “economy of the natural world” referred to its usability as much as to its divine order (Bühler). The religious understanding has been cut off since, but the position it marks has been filled, not least, with the capitalist deomorphism of “the market.” Ecological discourses renegotiate the position that would respond to evocations of guilt and grant forgiveness, absolution, or commands, as if in solastalgia for a punishing god. Žižek thus calls ecology the “new opium for the people.” And yet, discourses on guilt such as pleas to change, self-accusations, and confessions hinge on a metaphysical instance to take ecological discourses beyond a feedback-loop of sovereign human agency.

Juliane Prade-Weiss is a fellow in the Department of German at Vienna University, sponsored by a European Union Marie-Skłodowska-Curie-Grant for the project *Complicity: A Crisis of Participation in Testimonies of Totalitarianism in Contemporary Literatures*. 2007-2017 she was an Assistant Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature at Goethe-University Frankfurt, where she earned her Dr. phil. in Comparative Literature with a thesis on the Infantile within the human-animal distinction in philosophical and literary texts from Antiquity to Modernity. 2017-2019 she was a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of German at Yale University, sponsored by a Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft research grant to finish her habilitation thesis on the language of lamenting and complaining. She received a *venia legendi* in Comparative Literature from Frankfurt University in July 2019, *Language of Ruin and Consumption: On Lamenting and Complaining* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury Publishing in 2020.

Climate Justice: Guilt, History, and the Anthropocene

Benjamin Lewis Robinson, University of Vienna

This paper will draw on a tradition of thinking about guilt from Kierkegaard to Benjamin in order to consider the way in which debates around the Anthropocene recapitulate an attitude to history as *Schuldgeschichte* – as a history of the attribution of guilt and debt.

Calls for “climate justice” arose as it became clear that the consequences of anthropogenic climate change have the most immediate and most devastating consequences for the poor, while it is overwhelmingly the rich who are responsible for bringing it about. More recently, it has been adapted to apply to the question of intergenerational justice. Advocates of climate justice tend to be suspicious of the use of the term Anthropocene because it implies an undifferentiated responsibility of humanity in general. They argue that the transformation of the earth system is in the first place sociogenic. It owes to the unequal development of “fossil capitalism” – for which there now needs to be a fair accounting.

In contrast, those who espouse the term Anthropocene argue that they are referring to the human species not in moral or political terms but as a causal geophysical force. But the attempt to distinguish a natural historical force from the history of political and economic power proves ambiguous. As a survey of the titles of Anthropocene literature confirms, the Anthropocene has brought to light an ancient confusion of the natural and the political, of freedom and necessity, that has an age-old name: fate. Life subject to fate is guilty, just as humans in the Anthropocene suffer the consequences of transgressions they did not know they were committing.

Insofar as they still operate within a framework of guilt/debt (*Schuld*), advocates of climate justice, however critical of capitalism, abide by a fundamental tenet of what Walter Benjamin called “capitalism as religion.” Meanwhile talk of the Anthropocene produces a discourse of fate that reduces human existence – and perhaps life itself – to a life of guilt. Both approaches thus remain captivated by a particular economic-theological way of thinking that may itself be at the root of our troubles. In short: guilt is guilty.

Benjamin Lewis Robinson is University Assistant in the Department of German at the University of Vienna. He is the author of *Bureaucratic Fanatics: Modern Literature and the Passions of Rationalization* (De Gruyter, 2019) and is currently engaged in a project entitled *States of Need / States of Emergency* tracing the roots of current biopolitical and ecological debates in the literature and thought of the nineteenth century. He is a member of the Vienna Anthropocene Network and has published on “political ecology” in the *Hannah Arendt Zeitschrift für politisches Denken* (2018). Ben is also preparing a book on the reservations about fiction in J. M. Coetzee’s fiction. “Passions for Justice: Kleist’s Michael Kohlhaas and Coetzee’s Michael K” appeared in *Comparative Literature* (2018) and “Fiction Cares: J. M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*” is forthcoming with *Novel*.

**Aggression and Guilt, Repression and Return:
Intergenerational Transfer in the Climate Debate**
Jenny Willner, LMU München

How can we analyze the modes in which the message of impending human-made disaster is being transferred between generations? As the call for papers points out, the debate concerning the Anthropocene implies an understanding of responsibility on the model of indebtedness and guilt. Approaching this complex from a psychoanalytic perspective, my paper draws upon Sándor Ferenczi's notion of introjected guilt as an intergenerational phenomenon.

From the present point of view, with movements such as *Fridays for Future* and *Extinction Rebellion* in mind, we will take a leap back to the childhood of today's middle aged generation which was socialized during the Cold War and in the aftermath of Chernobyl. During these years, children's literature in the tradition of social realism played a formative role. The paper will ask for the affective heritage of a distinct set of examples: In West-Germany, Gudrun Pausewang's novel *The Last Children of Schevenborn* (1982) robbed its young readers of their sleep: a group of friends ends up dying one after the other following a nuclear war. In *The Cloud* (1987) by the same author a fourteen-year-old girl experiences the breakdown of social order during her futile escape from a cloud of radiation. Meanwhile, perhaps even exceeding the effect of Pausewang's novels, 500 children were gathered in a sports arena in northern Finland to embody a similar spirit and lend it their sweetest voices: My paper will reconstruct a mass children's choir event with lyrics envisioning the extinction of all life on earth.

How do notions of political and environmental agency relate to the affective surplus obviously emanating from the signifiers involved in such cases? How can we wrap our minds around the paradoxical figure of the innocent child as a bearer of what seems to be modeled as hereditary guilt? What kind of an intergenerational transfer is at stake? In the works discussed, care for 'the planet' or 'humanity' is inextricably tangled with different forms of guilt and desire, the message at stake is affectively overcharged: it is never about 'climate', 'nature', or 'earth' alone.

Jenny Willner is an assistant professor of Comparative Literature at LMU Munich, currently working on her second book (Habilitation) *Neurosis and Evolution. Developmentary Narratives Between Psychoanalysis, Biology, and Critical Theory*. She holds a master's degree in German literature and philosophy and received her PhD in comparative literature at FU Berlin in 2012. Her first book, *Wortgewalt. Peter Weiss und die deutsche Sprache*, was published in 2014 at Konstanz University Press. Her last publication "Archaeopteryx und Angelus. Organisches Leben im Rückblick. Darwin, Freud, Benjamin – Weiss" appeared in *Peter Weiss Jahrbuch* 2019.