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The Anthropocene as a challenge for sociological thinking in planetary dimensions¹

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Abstract

In this article, I argue for the relevance of integrating the planetary dimension, which is at the heart of the Anthropocene debate, into sociological thinking. The argumentation takes place in two steps: first, by sounding out the Anthropocene debate in search of the few sociological considerations that explicitly treat the significance of the Anthropocene for the architecture of sociological theory and theory formation, highlighting the associated desideratum within sociology which concerns the planetary dimension of the Anthropocene and the question of integrating it in sociological thinking; second, by following Dipesh Chakrabarty in outlining initial thoughts on why the planetary dimension should be integrated into sociology as a constitutive of the social and thus as a fundamental category of social theory. For this, I will also refer to Gesa Lindemann's conceptualization of social theory, which clarifies the systematic function of social theory in the architecture of sociological thinking. The aim of the article is also to sensitize for the possibility of interdisciplinary collaborations of knowledge creation in light of the awareness for the planetary dimension of social life.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel argumentiere ich für die Relevanz der planetaren Dimension, die im Mittelpunkt der Anthropozän-Debatte steht, für das soziologische Denken. Die Argumentation erfolgt in zwei Schritten: Erstens, indem die Anthropozän-Debatte sondiert und nach den wenigen soziologischen Überlegungen gesucht wird, die sich explizit mit der Bedeutung des Anthropozäns für die Architektur soziologischer Theorie und Theoriebildung auseinandersetzen. Auf diese Weise wird das damit verbundene Desiderat innerhalb der Soziologie sichtbar, welches die planetare Dimension des Anthropozäns und die Frage ihrer Integration in das soziologische Denken betrifft; zweitens, indem ich im Anschluss an *Dipesh Chakrabarty* erste Überlegungen skizziere, warum das Planetare als konstitutiv für das Soziale und damit als grundlegende Kategorie der Sozialtheorie in die Soziologie integriert werden sollte. Dabei beziehe ich mich auch auf *Gesa Lindemanns* Konzeptualisierung von Sozialtheorie, die die systematische Funktion der Sozialtheorie in der Architektur des soziologischen Denkens verdeutlicht. Ziel des Artikels ist es zudem, für die Möglichkeit interdisziplinärer Kooperationen der Wissensbildung im Lichte des Bewusstseins für die planetare Dimension des sozialen Lebens zu sensibilisieren.

Keywords social sciences, sociology, Anthropocene, planetary dimension, social theory

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Are humans now a “God Species”?
Should humans make kin with other nonhuman beings?
Should human societies aim to become a part of the natural systems of the planet?
Will the Earth become an “intelligent” planet, thanks to the integration of the technosphere and the biosphere?
Such questions [...] mark out how the category planet enters humanist thought, as a matter of human-existential concern, even as we come to realize that the planet does not address us in quite the same way as our older categories of earth, world, and globe.
Dipesh Chakrabarty 2019: 31

1. Introduction: The field of the Anthropocene debate and the role of social sciences in it

The idea of the Anthropocene has been making waves in the humanities and social sciences for a while now. At its heart, the idea of the Anthropocene, which originated in the natural sciences (*Crutzen* 2002), is the diagnosis that humanity, or the *anthropos*, has become the greatest geological force with an influence on the earth at a planetary level. This force has initiated irreversible geochronological developments the magnitude of which is unparalleled and the effects of which are still completely unforeseeable. If this diagnosis is accurate, it has a variety of consequences for social sciences. For one, social scientists would need to describe the situation referred to as the Anthropocene and analyze it in anticipation of future social processes: for example the structural, institutional, normative, and individual consequences of human-caused climate change, rapid loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, land degradation, and so forth. Second, this would provide the opportunity to formulate solution-oriented ideas and address questions of responsibility: What kind of society do we need in order to contain ecological dangers? Should we continue to follow the path of modern rationality, which got us into this situation in the first place, or leave it behind? Geoengineering, eco-socialism, or degrowth? Without a doubt, answering these and other questions is highly relevant if we want to practically manage the Anthropocene.

In addition, however, to these sociopractical problems arising for social sciences with the diagnosis of the Anthropocene, we must also ask whether the social

sciences possesses a sufficient theoretical apparatus to approach them productively or whether the diagnosed novelty of the situation referred to as the Anthropocene requires a theoretical renewal of social sciences if it is to be able to conceptualize future order-forming processes that take into account the planetary dimension of social life. Is social science’s established analytical apparatus able to grasp the situation referred to as the Anthropocene without overlooking significant changes? Does the idea of the Anthropocene as a geochronological planetary epoch have systematic consequences for the architecture of theory in social sciences? Should the debate surrounding it motivate social sciences thinking to incorporate the “planetary moment” (*Hanusch et al.* 2021: 7) which is at stake here? Or should they in general keep a reflexive distance from the “Anthropo-scene” (*Lorimer* 2017: 117) in order to retain their conception of themselves as the sciences of the social? These questions illustrate: the challenges that arise with the Anthropocene do not only concern the socio-practical dimensions mentioned above, but also the production of knowledge in the social sciences itself, which is equally world-building and bears responsibility for what counts as the social and what counts as the extra-social. Since the events associated with the Anthropocene erode this separation more and more these science-theoretical questions can hardly be answered from a singular perspective, but rather pose the challenge of interdisciplinary engagement. In particular, the temporal/spatial aspects of the planetary and their entanglement with the conditions of emergence of (social) life opens the possibility for us to bring together parallel strands in the Anthropocene debate – for example, the geographical, sociological and biological strands – in order to unfold collaborative potentials for theorizing the social-planetary entanglements.

In this paper, as a sociologist I explore what significance the idea of the Anthropocene could have for sociological thinking and why sociology should integrate the planetary dimension in its theory-building architecture. This is also to put forward a suggestion for how to push the sociological imagination over its established boundaries in which it is well defined what the social is. In the following, I hone in on this integration in two steps: first, by sounding out the Anthropocene debate in search of the few *sociological* considerations that explicitly treat the significance of the Anthropocene for the architecture of sociological theory and theory formation, highlighting the associated desideratum within sociology which concerns

the planetary dimension of the Anthropocene and the question of why to integrate it in sociological thinking; second, by following *Dipesh Chakrabarty* (2009, 2019) in outlining initial thoughts on why the planetary should be integrated into sociology as a constitutive of the social and thus as a fundamental category of social theory. For the latter, I will also refer to *Gesa Lindemann's* (2009, 2021) conceptualization of social theory, which clarifies the systematic function of social theory in the architecture of sociological thinking. Against this background it becomes clear why it is necessary to include the planetary dimension in the architecture of social theories. I will barely be able to master all the challenges which come with the Anthropocene for sociology, but demonstrating the theoretical significance of the planetary moment and subsequently an interdisciplinary practice of "thinking-with" (*Haraway* 2016: 39) for sociology is at least the goal here.

2. Sociology's understanding of itself in view of the Anthropocene

Since it came onto the stage outside of the natural sciences, the Anthropocene as a cultural idea has provided a discursive arena where what is fundamentally at stake is humanity's conception of itself and the question how "we" want to live in the future (*Jahn et al.* 2015). The debate seems to pivot on the *anthropos*, or rather that which is affirmatively, critically, or even with decided repudiation understood in reference to this *anthropos* as the human. The "Anthropo-scene" (*Lorimer* 2017: 117) in the humanities encompasses two antipodes, as it were, with one of them hyperfocused on the human, appearing to be convinced of its return as promethean savior of the earth. Here we find technicist notions of global geo-engineering (*Crutzen* 2006), the idea of the earth as a spaceship that merely needs a rational, autodidactically accomplished helmsman (*Sloterdijk* 2010, 2015), as well as the faith in progress embodied by notions of a "green revolution 2.0" or an "environmental movement 2.0" that look at the Anthropocene in terms of a "good Anthropocene" (on these positions, see *Dürbeck* 2018). The antipode to this position decidedly aims to decenter the human in order to make the Earth (*Latour* 2018) visible as a force in its own right and to understand the human in relationship to it (see, among others, *Latour* 2017, 2018; *Stengers* 2015; *Tsing* 2015; *Tsing et al.* 2017; *Haraway* 2016; *Haraway et al.* 2015).

Between these two positions there is a gray area, which includes among others ideas informed by *Po-lanyi's* Great Transformation, questions of responsibility and guilt (see *Dürbeck* 2018). These narratives following the Great Transformation and of the question of responsibility or guilt have for all intents and purposes already been addressed with the concepts preceding the Anthropocene, i.e., "the environment" and "sustainability". Sociology also helped shape these debates. Environmental sociology and the sociology of sustainability, in particular, have, in addition to environmental questions – those of society's relationship to nature, and the associated fundamental questioning of the nature/culture divide (see among others *Dunlap and Catton* 1994; *Newby* 1997; *Foster* 1999) – treated and continue to treat questions of social justice, economic distribution, and reflexive responsabilization (see, among others, *Beck* 1992; *Vara* 2015; *Clark and Bettini* 2017).² The success that these approaches have had in environmental sociology and the sociology of sustainability can be attributed to the fact that they have made no attempt to come to terms in any fundamental way with the question of the *anthropos* or of the human as a planetary category. While they did reintroduce the topic of "nature" or of society and culture's relationship to nature (and vice versa) to sociology, environmental sociology and the sociology of sustainability are largely characterized by a relatively unshaken anthropocentric perspective, whether strong or weak, implicit or explicit. In this perspective ecological problematic phenomena like climate change appear in the context of the global, by which is meant the worldwide material and immaterial infrastructures that connect and produce the global society economically, politically, juridically, etc. The global is a category of human history (*Chakrabarty* 2019) that reveals the globality of the social but excludes the planetary as an extra-social dimension (see also *Latour* 2018). Thus, it is no surprise that recent sociological publications rather mobilize already established sociological thinking for researches on topics like climate change and ask for their manifestations in the social (*Köhrensen et al.* 2020) than take into account that the planetary dimension of the Anthropocene may challenge sociological thinking and therefore may require more reflections on the relevance of the planetary for social order formation processes and accordingly for sociological thinking.

Since there are few original sociological contributions in the Anthropocene debate it is necessary to broaden the view on social theory as a cross-disci-

pline research area to get a better overview on how the Anthropocene is thematized in the non-natural sciences part of the debate. On the one hand, the Anthropocene functions thematically here as normative framework serving, for instance, to remind us of humanity's ethical responsibility to realize a "sustainable Anthropocene future for all" (Skillington 2015: 234) or to discuss compatible forms of religiosity in "our" Anthropocene future (Turner 2016). On the other hand, the Anthropocene as an object of the sociology of knowledge becomes the focus here in order to either unmask it as a political concept that points to a "Cosmopolocene" rather than to a geologization of the social (Delanty and Mota 2017) or, on the contrary, to characterize it as the culmination of specific socio-historical developments (Hann 2016) arising from the synthesis of human and geological history with corresponding significance for our thinking (Szerszynski 2017). One of the most recently published sociological contributions to the Anthropocene debate focusses on the political implications of the Anthropocene as an imperial nomos (Folkers 2020) but still not on the consequences of its planetary dimension for social theory. Where these are addressed, we either find scholars making a case for continuing to develop "geo-social" thought (Clark and Gunaratnam 2016) or calling for a deciphering of the sociotheoretical overinterpretation of natural phenomena (Luke 2016). Finally, however, the concept of the Anthropocene also serves as an occasion to reflect upon anthropology, ranging from a sociotheoretical consideration of cognitive premises underlying the ways in which opportunities for action and decision-making in the Anthropocene future are grasped (Strydom 2016) to proposals in the philosophy of science for deciphering the anthropological presuppositions inherent in the idea of the Anthropocene in view of how fundamental they are to normative premises in society (Chernilo 2016). The basic question of whether the idea of the Anthropocene as a geochronological epoch at planetary level has significance for a self-reflexive engagement with the sociological or social theoretical imagination is not addressed in any of the papers.

The historian Zoltán Simon (2018) asks, however, what significance the Anthropocene as historical narrative has for the form of scientific thinking. The challenge, he argues, is to figure out how to relate to the radical novelty of the Anthropocene about which no stories can yet be told. Stories, he argues, can only be told *in*, but not *about*, the Anthropocene (Simon 2018: 1). Simon thus raises a question that is also important for sociology:

what form of thought do we need in order to grasp, analyze, and reflect upon the "novelty" framed by the idea of the Anthropocene? The greatest challenge, he writes, is: "making sense of that which appears to defy our familiar ways of sense-making" (Simon 2018: 11). This is quite inspiring for the sociological perspective because the "novelty" of the Anthropocene, which challenges our established ways of thinking, is the planetary dimension of the depth of human intervention which requires geo-chronological relations of time and space to describe and understand it. Taking this into account means for sociological theory the need to overcome disciplinary boundaries, which is a challenge as such for sociology since it took a long way for the discipline to generate genuine sociological objects of investigation and a terminology to describe and explain these objects (Block 2016). Nevertheless, a few positions can be found in sociology that insist, at least in a programmatic way, that the Anthropocene, as a geo-chronological epoch, challenges the established sociological thought structures and (possibly) requires their extension or even their renewal.

Seeing the challenges that arise for sociology from understanding the Anthropocene as a geo-chronological epoch Leslie Sklair (2017: 776) asks: "What then, can Anthropocene studies bring to sociology and what can sociology bring to the Anthropocene?". For Sklair the challenge for sociologists is not to conduct sociological analyses of the human impact on the various components of the earth system, but to show what sociological assumptions are necessary in order to be able to interrogate this impact in the first place and to explore the possibilities of social life (human and non-human) on the planet. Sklair leaves open, however, to what extent identifying these assumptions requires a planetary moment in the sociological way of thinking.

Ulrich Beck has an even more radical take on the situation. In view of the environmental challenges no one seems to know how to address, he tries to grasp the novelty of the situation, particularly in light of climate change, with the concept of metamorphosis. He sees this metamorphosis as having a global reach, without, however, containing operationalizable characteristics of risk (Beck 2015). According to Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Beck 2016), is not societal change or social transformation let alone a crisis, but a much more radical phenomenon giving rise to something completely new that cannot be grasped with modern certainties. What is called for, he argues, is nothing less than a "scientific revolution" (Beck 2016: 20). Al-

though Beck calls for a revolutionary scientific paradigm change, in the end he does no more than shift the focus from the category of risk, which fails to grasp what is happening now, to the category of side effects. Given that said category is a classical one in sociology, this approach comes closer to an expansion of established ways of thinking than a scientific revolution.

Henning Laux and *Anna Henkel* ask about the novelty value of the Anthropocene hypothesis and the watershed in the relationship between society and nature it suggests, and whether it implies a change in the research practices of social scientists (*Laux and Henkel* 2018: 8f.). *Laux* identifies a “foundational inventory of historical concepts and methods” (*Laux* 2018: 22) as one task the Anthropocene imposes upon sociology, such as *Latour* (1993, 2005) undertook in the context of his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) by suspending the nature/culture dichotomy. *Laux* also points to *Latour’s* observation that the amalgamation of human beings and nature is by now established in the natural sciences as well, evidence of “the necessity of a socio-theoretical renewal” (*Laux* 2018: 22). *Laux* and *Henkel* see the situation referred to as the Anthropocene as posing new challenges and as raising the question of a renewal of the sociological apparatus. They do not, however, have anything systematically precise to say about what this renewal might look like.

In order for sociology to do justice to the mentioned amalgamation, *Markus Schroer*, finally, argues for a synthesis of sociology and geography in the form of a geosociology (*Schroer* 2018). *Schroer* suggests expanding sociology’s horizon of thought in order to be able to face the new challenges emerging in the Anthropocene by, on the one hand, connecting with an already existing geosocial tradition within sociology (represented by, among others, *Gabriel Tarde*, *Robert E. Park* or *Marcel Mauss*) and, on the other, by mobilizing *Deleuze* and *Guattari’s* concept of territory from a geosocial perspective (ibid.: 126f.). For *Schroer*, this “expansion of the sociological zone of thought” (ibid.: 147, emphasis in original) is one of the “most urgent tasks of a sociology that wishes to be relevant today” (ibid.: 147), with the goal of geosociology providing a “comprehensive description and a systematic assessment of the nature/culture hybrid” (ibid.: 147).³

Creating new connections between already established approaches and using a concept of territory derived from the sociology of space to address the nature/culture nexus may succeed in expanding socio-

logical thought in the way envisaged by *Schroer* – but it is doubtful that his set of tools will leave behind the nature/culture thinking and bring about a *renewal* of sociological thought. This is because the assertion of hybridization must first assume two separate components that are intermingled. The nature/culture divide thus remains *ex negativo*. The qualitative difference between expansion and renewal is that renewal not only involves shifting boundaries but also transgressing them, that is, penetrating into the previously unknown, which is in this case the planetary dimension. This planetary unknown is primarily addressed within the Anthropocene debate as an existential challenge that can hardly be met with established solutions. Thus, *Thomas Scheffer* and *Robert Schmidt* recently made the interesting claim that the confrontation with “existential trials” – as they call the current situation following *Boltanski* – means that sociology as a discipline must renew its multiparadigmaticity: “Sociology, along with its various fields of study, has to reinvent itself as it engages with the urgent problems at hand” (*Scheffer and Schmidt* 2019: 170). They thus clearly advocate a renewal of the sociological imagination here, a demand that has been familiar to sociologists for thirty years in its articulation by *Latour* (1993, 2005) as co-founder of the ANT school. What was at the time *Latour’s* innovative recognition of the hybridity of the world is today one of the well established paradigms within multiparadigmatic social theory.

And yet the first person that comes to a sociologist’s mind when thinking about sociology’s contribution to the Anthropocene discussion is *Latour*. That being said, it is less his works developing ANT (*Latour* 1993, 2007) that have shaped his contributions to the Anthropocene discourse, which rather follow a politically radical line of argument (*Latour* 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018). Still, ANT supplies the sociotheoretical foundation of these writings – once a theory up for debate, it is now simply put to use. Unlike *Schroer*, *Latour’s* focus is no longer on describing the hybridity of nature and culture itself but on its consequences, which currently are subsumed under the heading of the Anthropocene. Finding fitting concepts to describe this state of affairs, *Latour* writes, is so hard because it “is new for everyone, since [...] there is quite simply no precedent for the current situation” (*Latour* 2018: 44). It is this new situation that finally leads him to think of the whole functional complex – which, following *James Lovelock*, he refers to as *Gaia* – as the “extended consequence” (*Latour* 2017: 105) of events brought

about by waves of action rather than as a framework called “nature” that has always existed. *Latour’s* reformulation of the Gaia theory in context of the ANT does not simply make the Earth an actor or actant, which has to be considered equally as human actors. But a warrior, who is looking for revenge for all the interferences in her own sovereignty. *Latour* aims to politicize an engaged Earth involved in modern affairs, which is not indifferent to the developments on its terrain, but on the contrary fights as a cosmopolitan for an earthbound collective of shared survival. This highly politicized and normative approach to the ecological urgencies and necessities of our time creates, on the foundations of an expansive ANT, an affirming and disturbing tension at the same time. This is legitimate, yet *Latour* does not thereby capture the specificity of the planetary dimension, which, as we will see below, lies precisely in the indifference of the planet to evolutionary or even human processes. In this planetary indifference lies the genuinely new aspect of the situation called Anthropocene, which makes it a watershed for us late-moderns and a challenge to handle it – even in sociotheoretical thinking.

In conclusion, we can identify as a consensus within the sociological Anthropocene debate presented in the second half of this section the programmatic insight that the idea of the Anthropocene expresses a watershed. The Anthropocene is seen as constituting something radically new, bringing with it new challenges for doing theory in sociology. This radical newness is the crashing of the “planetary moment” (*Hanusch et al. 2021: 7*) into the modern world. A world that until now has been able to invisibilize the conditions of its possibility and now that it is confronted with them, cannot manage them in the way of modern rationality. Assuming that this watershed hypothesis is correct, we must ask in what way this *novelty* can be made accessible for sociological study and whether, in terms of social theory, a mere expansion or extension of the sociological zone of thought is enough – or whether sociology must go further and undertake a renewal of its imagination to integrate this new planetary dimension of the social. In no way is this meant to suggest that established apparatuses are now entirely obsolete. It is rather to formulate a task for sociology that can indeed be understood as a challenge. While the consensus about the novelty of the situation called the Anthropocene implies the necessity of taking on this task, this has to date remained a desideratum.

3. The challenge of planetary thinking in sociology

The original question of sociology – How is social order possible? – has been answered in many ways throughout the history of sociology. This is evidenced by its eventful history of social theoretical turns. One motivation (among others) for these turns has always been the attempt to overcome the gap between culture and nature (*Block 2018*). For the inclusion of bodies, materialities, space and time, for example, expresses the insight that order-forming processes cannot be adequately grasped in their multi-dimensional complexity if they are understood merely as linguistically-symbolically or rationally-cognitively mediated meanings. However, the various order-relevant constituents of the social have been conceptualized within the framework of what *Chakrabarty (2009)* calls the history of humans. By this he means the period of human life that can be traced through records (*ibid.: 213*). Such records are central to social theoretical turns and provide justifications for why bodies or space, for example, must be included as order-relevant factors in the social. This is also true for the concept of nature. For the sociologically conceived “nature” is already a historically conditioned and thus a culturally appropriated one, which is always already interpreted within modern dualism in terms of order formation (*Block 2018*).

This insight of socio-historical conditionality of the concept of nature confronts us with a specific problem within the context of theoretical-sociological considerations to answer the question: how is social order possible? The problem is the following: In the systematic architecture of sociological theorizing – and here I follow *Gesa Lindemann’s* suggestion of a distinction between social theory and theory of society (*Lindemann 2009, 2021*) –, the question of the possibility of social order is answered within the framework of social theories, which are accordingly the core of basic sociological research and on whose level the aforementioned turns are also located. The question itself is so fundamental that its answer cannot only apply to modern societies but must formally claim to apply to all possible forms of social order. This is what *Lindemann (2021: 312)* calls the “formal universal a priori” of social theories. Such a priori are thus ontological assumptions that have to be made theory-systematically in order to be able to say something about the conditions of the possibility of social forms of order. Accordingly, formal universal a priori

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can only be dimensions that are found in all forms of social order. Following *Lindemann*, these are, for example, time and space. But also the so-called social dimension, in which is defined who or what counts as a social actor in a social order (*Lindemann* 2021). This means in all known or explored forms of social order, time and space are structure-forming dimensions and in all social orders there are practices that realize and stabilize who or what is considered a social person. Dimensions of order formation thus represent conditions of possibility for social order in social theoretical architecture.

Against this background it then becomes clear: “Nature” in nature/culture dualism, according to its socio-historical status of being a modern category, is not a good candidate to be considered a formal-universal dimension of existential conditions of social order. *Latour’s* Gaia is also not to be used in the sense of a formal-universal dimension, since it cannot be assumed that its bellicose impetus is a condition for all forms of social order. The planetary, however, which is now at stake in the Anthropocene, seems to be such a fundamental dimension of social order formation that is of existential importance for all possible forms of social order. Seemingly similar concepts such as earth, globe, or world are, in turn, not such fundamental concepts, since they all refer to humans in specific ways (*Chakrabarty* 2019: 3), and only in modern societies are humans considered the only legitimate actors (*Lindemann* 2021).

Chakrabarty sums up the difference of the planetary to the mentioned three: “We cannot place it in a communicative relationship to humans. It does not as such address itself to humans [...]. To encounter the planet is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet profoundly indifferent to that existence.” (*Chakrabarty* 2019: 3). The planetary is not to be limited to being part of the conditions of human existence. Such a perspective merely reiterates modern anthropocentrism. Rather, the planetary is a condition of the possibility of living existence in general. This was true before the existence of the human species and will be true after it (at least as long as planetary conditions are preserved in such a way that they can give rise to living things). It can therefore be said that the planetary dimension represents a “human version of nonanthropocentrism” (ibid.: 14) that is now coming to consciousness in the face of the Anthropocene. What at first sounds contradictory about *Chakrabarty’s* statement is, however, epistemologi-

cally important: it is impossible to leave the human perspective behind, so that even in the conceptualization of the planetary a residue of anthropocentrism remains. This is not simply to deny, but to reflect. I call this position a reflexive anthropocentrism (*Block* 2020). From this position, the concept of the planetary becomes understandable as a socio-historically specific attempt to distance the human perspective as far as possible and thus also normative settings that go hand in hand with the anthropocentric view – without ever being able to completely lower it. Nevertheless, a formal universalism is generated in the planetary, which could be operationalized in social theory.

With regard to its social-theoretical relevance, it can be stated that for all possible forms of social order – that means more-than-modern forms that also know more-than-human social actors – the planetary dimension is of existential importance, its universal claim is thus also not a purely formal one, but a real one. What makes the planetary dimension relevant in social theory is the “habitability” (*Chakrabarty* 2019: 20) of the planet. We can assume with *Lindemann* (2021) – who founded the multi-dimensional turn in German sociology – that every social order has at least a social, a symbolic, a material-technical, a spatial, and a temporal dimension. In order to stabilize a form of social order, these different dimensions must enable matching generalizations (ibid.: 84). With *Lindemann*, these generalizations are realized through lived bodily executions (in German: “leibliche Vollzüge”). That means via lively executions. This presupposes that living entities must be involved in the realization of social order (which does not mean that *only* living entities must be involved, as we know, for instance, from ancestral cultures). From this insight it can be concluded that the habitability of the planet is a necessary condition of order-forming processes, which makes life and accordingly the creation of diverse forms of social order possible.

The integration of the planetary dimension into the architecture of social theories seems plausible against this background. It not only fulfills the formal claim of universality of social theories, it also enables reflection on which form of social order fits with the habitability of the planet and how, without having to make a moral judgment about it right away.

Due to the “radical otherness of the planet” (*Chakrabarty* 2019: 25), which shows itself in the fact that the planetary cannot be centered on the human being

(it is rather indifferent to it) it is, however, currently still a challenge for sociological thinking to connect with planetary thinking. The encounters with the planetary, which will accumulate in the future of the Anthropocene, will hardly be able to prevent this connection. Clarifying the “how” of this connection then seems to be the next challenge that sociological thinking must address. The sociological positions in the discourse presented above, while still few, show a willingness to take up this challenge. Ideas such as *Schroer’s* (2018) geosociology can offer interesting points of reference here. However, in order not to fall back into the gap between nature and culture it is necessary to look in view of a reflexive anthropocentrism for non-anthropocentric connections, for example, with geographical, biological or earth-system scientific thinking to master the “how”-question. The “why” of this connection has hopefully become somewhat clear in what has been said here.

4. Conclusion

The sciences are discovering the Earth as a planetary dimension of human life, and not only in the natural sciences, but equally in the social sciences. This discovery is embedded in the Anthropocene discourse, which, since the introduction of its titular term at the beginning of the 21st century, has gained momentum from the natural sciences and, in addition to its now acquired interdisciplinary reach, has also penetrated the public consciousness. The urgency of answering ecological questions, finds its strongest expression in the planetary dimension and demands a stock of knowledge that, from a sociological perspective, significantly addresses what was previously considered extra-social. Against the background of sociological theory-building logic, however, it became clear that the planetary dimension could find its way into sociology precisely in the sense of the formal universalism claimed by social theory. Thus, the idea of the Anthropocene as a geochronological planetary epoch unfolds systematic relevance for the architecture of theory in social sciences. Accordingly, we can say that the debate surrounding it should motivate social sciences thinking to incorporate the “planetary moment” (*Hanusch et al. 2021: 7*) by simultaneously keeping a reflexive distance from the “Anthropo-scene” (*Lorimer 2017: 117*) in order not to reiterate its modern anthropocentrism. The perspective of reflexive anthropocentrism also made it possible to make visible that the planetary is anything but an extra-social fact, it is

rather the attempt of the modern Prometheus to show humility – and that is a real challenge which requires interdisciplinary strength to master.

Notes

¹ Parts of this text have been published in *Block 2021*.

² It is especially questions of guilt or of responsibility for the current socioecological crisis that have led scholars to point to the problematic leveling tendencies associated with a collective human subject or a collective subject of humanity, to the interplay between sociohistorical developments of an economic, political, and technical nature, as well as to existing power relations. This line of argument ultimately results in suggestions for alternatives to the concept of the Anthropocene. Examples are the Capitalocene (*Moore 2016*), the Plantationocene (*Haraway 2015*), the Eurocene (*Sloterdijk 2015*), and the Technocene (*Hornborg 2015*).

³ In May 2022, *Schroer* published a nearly 600-page book on Geosociology (*Schroer 2022*). At that time, the present article was already in the final editorial phase, so that an examination of *Schroer’s* entire work was no longer possible. In the introduction, however, there is a slightly modified version of the cited quotation (cf. *ibid.*: 26). It can therefore be assumed that *Schroer’s* claim formulated in it has shifted little, and that the discussion of it presented here remains plausible. A detailed reading of Geosociology is thus still pending, which I am very much looking forward to.

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