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Introduction

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Notes

This handbook comprises a series of interventions, in which scholars with different backgrounds and disciplinary affiliations take Venice as a prism through which to observe the historical unfolding of the human-nature relationship from multiple comparative perspectives. Such a multi-vision is here brought together under the auspices of the UNESCO Chair on Water Heritage and Sustainable Development, which I direct at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE), in close collaboration with the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology in Jena. The many vistas here presented show the complexity of the Anthropocene, as well as the possibilities to gain relevant knowledge by means of collaborative and integrated approaches. This volume also offers insight into the many challenges of the Anthropocene both as a concept and as a reality, starting from Venice.

The Broader Picture

The water city of Venice has become a symbol of climate change and the global environmental crisis. We have become used to looking at the varying heights of the flickering mirror that surrounds Venice with growing concern. Memories of the *Acqua Alta* floodings of 1966 and 2019 occupy the collective imagery regarding the future of Venice, in spite of the construction of new technological defences such as the movable dams at the lagoon inlets. Water has never been a purely aesthetic element for Venice. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the lagoon was the fluid wall protecting the 'serenity' of the Republic and a gateway for exchange with the Mediterranean and Eastern world. Today, water has turned into a threat; global sea-level rise threatens to submerge Venice's unique world heritage. Its future, as it seems, does not depend on decisions at a local level as much as on the capacity to coordinate international measures to counterbalance the human impact on the planet. The future of Venice and that of the Earth are indissolubly linked.

But this site, with its 1,600 years of history, is also a paradigm of resilience and sustainability, the capacity of human societies to adapt to mutable environmental conditions and co-evolve together with their ecosystems. Not only have the local habits, lifestyles, and mentalities been forged by geography, the environmental conditions are the result of past decisions, interventions, and anthropogenic path-dependencies. Human activity is deeply inscribed in the geomorphology. Labour, land-architecture, and canalizations have transformed the coastal lines as well as the rivers that descend from the Alps to the Adriatic Sea. The waterscape has been constantly engineered and redirected to better serve transportation and agriculture, provide energy (from ancient hydraulics to the electric age) and, above all, preserve the harbours of Venice from the infilling of sediment. The conservation of the lagoon is basically due to river diversion beginning in the sixteenth century. Moreover, the development of sophisticated knowledge about water, technology, and institutions made it possible for Venetians to adapt to the specificity of their territory and, in turn, transform it. This can be seen as an entwined natural-artificial process. Indeed, Venice is a complex ecosocial space that connects fishing

communities (present since its mythical origins) to the mercantile classes of medieval proto-capitalism, that draws together artistic-cultural elites of the Renaissance and the Gutenberg era, industrial workers of the twentieth century, and tourist pilgrims of the current consumerist age.

Venice with its cultural strata is a paradigm of the Anthropocene condition, which the Earth system and humanity have more-or-less officially entered since the mid-twentieth century. Human geological agency has become the main driver of the planet. Via an accelerating process of deep technological transformation, industrial societies have bid farewell to the Holocene by subverting the parameters of its existence. This transformation has almost certainly left durable traces in the layers of the terrestrial crust. A team of stratigraphers has long been seeking such evidence, the Anthropocene Working Group, a subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, and a part of the International Union of Geological Sciences. This pool of scholars has striven to identify global traces at a microscopic level that could serve as markers of the profound geological impact of humans on the Earth System. Independent of the rejection of the Anthropocene hypothesis by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and the International Commission on Stratigraphy in March 2024 (for purely technical reasons), the question of the geo-anthropological nexus still haunts us. Far from an abstract Promethean relation between a mythical Man and a deified Nature, this interrelation is one of dialectical interplay. Indeed, the driving factor of the Anthropocene is technology which, in turn, has deep socio-economic roots; it is linked to human practices, political conditions, and forms of knowledge. As the historian of science Jürgen Renn has argued in *The Evolution of Knowledge* (2020), we ought to reconceive the history of science as a fundamental factor of world transformation in light of controversies over the Anthropocene. Therefore, the social conditions of science, its validity, applications, and goals, cannot be thought of in separation from the planet, as if humanity were an autonomous empire within a larger empire (*imperium in imperio*, according to philosopher Baruch Spinoza's expression). Given the existential threat of the ecological crisis, and given the widespread sense of urgency to transition to sustainable economies, the question of 'how' has become especially pressing. Critical thinkers such as Naomi Klein have pointed out that the main challenge is at once political and cultural, as much as it is scientific and technological, because regulations and new forms of inhabiting the planet ought to be devised. In particular, ecosocial thinkers such as John Bellamy Foster and Kohei Saito have argued that the gulf that increasingly separates urban consumption from the regenerative capacity of nature has to be bridged, at the cost of rethinking the fundamental structures of our societies. This also implies that we critically assess their origin and imagine alternative futures.

Zooming in Through a Series of Classes

This handbook builds on earlier work, in particular on the Anthropocene Campus that took place in Venice in October 2021, focused on the past, present, and future of water politics.¹ As much as this international forum deepened the topics of earlier campuses, which had been organized in various locations under the guidance of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, it also marked the beginning of a novel engagement with the controversies of the Anthropocene from the perspective of the environmental humanities, historical epistemology, and political ecology.

In 2022, we published *Venice and the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Guide*, which was a snapshot of the collective sharing of experiences and ideas at the

¹ <https://anthropocenevenice.org/campus-2021/>.

Anthropocene Campus Venice 2021. Since then, new collaborations and research lines have been established. Among them, an alliance with the newly created Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology in Jena, through the Max Planck Partner Group in Venice, *The Water City: The Political Epistemology of Hydrogeological Praxis*, and with the Anthropocene Commons network, which experiments with new forms of active pedagogy and research.

A research unit on Waterscapes has been working on the themes of this handbook for several years now, based at the NICHE Centre for Environmental Humanities Venice in connection with the UNESCO Chair on Water Heritage and Sustainable Development. The series of classes presented in this handbook mirrors the unfolding of our research. The handbook constitutes one step forward in our reflection on the constellation of problems linked to the Anthropocene controversies.

The classes of the MOOC are gathered into four units. In the first one, “Plunging into the Waters of Anthropocene Venice”, four scholars working on political mythology, classical studies, the environmental history of science, architecture and urban politics offer a general introduction into the *longue-durée* history of the interaction between humans and the elements from antiquity to the hydroelectric and industrial age in Venice and its waters. Unit two, “Anthropocene Vistas”, presents epistemological, philosophical and aesthetic considerations on the Anthropocene, linking the exemplary case of Venice to broader theoretical debates. Unit three, “Water Cities”, offers a comparative reading of the cultural-geographical, anthropological and historical-scientific dimensions of Venice in relation to other water cultures, from Mesoamerica to Southeast Asia. The last unit, “Cultural Politics and Ecosocial Troubles”, expands on the cultural-political challenges of the Anthropocene, in particular the consumerism evidenced by touristic extractivism in Venice, environmental activism (including its eco-artistic expressions), the impact of science politics on nature and society, and legal means to protect ecosystems, including debates on the rights of nature.

These classes are offered in a multi-media manner. They comprise the texts of this handbook as well as audiovisual materials on display on the teaching platform of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. In the videos, all the lecturers involved in this project introduce themselves, their approach (depending on the methodologies and disciplines that they mobilize), the topic of their classes, and the pertinent locations in the region of Venice. These self-presentations have an immersive character. They are sometimes noisy (wind, waves or traffic can be heard and seen in the background) or crowded. This is consonant with the aim to give a sense of the human-natural environment of Venice. The various lectures connect a textual part – which can be listened to or read in this handbook – and visual explorations. The images have been gathered during collective excursions to significant geoanthropological sites. Pietro Consolandi and Joe Sartorius artistically assembled them. The link between texts and images is not obvious, because we aim to trigger active and creative engagement on the part of the spectator. While listening and looking at the audiovisual classes, the student is stimulated to construct bridges and engage, both rationally and emotionally, with the topics, while maintaining critical distance and nurturing curiosity. I see this as an important pedagogic point: to develop a MOOC format that forces one not to passively absorb notions but rather to reflect and even question the framework and creatively move beyond it. One way to approach these classes is to first watch and listen to the video, then read the corresponding text in the handbook, engage with the mandatory reading of the class, and watch the video for a second time. The handbook also includes an essential glossary of key terms and concepts. At the end of each section – groups of three or four classes – students will have to pass a test of multiple-choice questions relative to the classes and the mandatory readings.

Bibliography

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