

Annual theme 2025 Forum Basiliense: Life in the Anthropocene

The topic of “Living in the Anthropocene” is at the center of the forthcoming period of our forum and will be the intellectual focus for our groups of international fellows and guests in 2025. In the last two decades, the concept of *Anthropocene* was discussed intensively in the Sciences and the Humanities. It was established to address the challenges caused by human, societal and industrial interventions and transformations on planet Earth. For the first time, humanity is facing a recent geological period that is essentially determined by the traces and costs of human activities. Concerning issues of sustainability, of climate change, of balancing economical and ecological demands, the skills and potentials of academia are addressed from the broadest interdisciplinary perspective.

Since the 2010s, the term Anthropocene has experienced a remarkable increase in awareness and importance in the natural and environmental sciences, as well as in political and cultural discourses (Ellis 2018; Horn/Bergthaller 2022). The concept was coined as a critical term following the example of the terms for layers of deep geological time such as the Pleistocene (a period of extensive glaciation lasting up to eleven thousand years ago) or the Holocene (the 'uppermost' layer and most recent period on Earth) to express the alarming fact that, since the advent of the industrial age and the increasing consumption of fossil fuels, humans have become a dominant factor in the history of the Earth, causing irreversible interventions and transformations (Crutzen 2002; Chakrabarty 2023). Taken literally, these geological designations for the Earth's layers express the extent of the planetary changes taking place in each of them; thus, in the age of glaciation, 'most things were new' (pleistos; kainos), whereas in the Holocene, everything was actually new (holos), especially humans, who developed and began to populate the Earth in this geological epoch.

When the Swiss writer Max Frisch gave his last work of prose the title “Man appears in the Holocene” in 1979, in order to dystopically explore a model of human control over nature that has become crisis-ridden (permanent rainfall outside, dissociative disturbances of consciousness inside make the narrated story unstable), this already hinted at the new positioning of a dynamic and interdependent relationship between man and the environment. Nature no longer faces human individuals and societies as a mere performance stage or work object; it is itself essentially man-made, just as, conversely, human activity on the planet has long since assumed the dimensions of a geo-elemental force comparable to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis. The periodic macro disturbance of the meteorological balance known as El niño is a prominent example of this,

as are other global indicators such as the warming of the oceans and atmosphere, the decline in biodiversity, or the consequential burdens of nuclear radiation and final disposal.

The phenomenon of the half-life of radioactive material in particular, in which the follow-up periods and periods of responsibility extend into the tens of thousands of years, illustrates a fundamental feature of the cultural and political challenges outlined by the term Anthropocene: the problem of scale. There is a considerable, unbridgeable difference in size and scale between individual human lifetimes on the one hand and the societal consequences that result from the standard of living in Western industrialized nations on the other. The same applies to the gap between perceived self-responsibility and cumulative social effects. Or for the divergence between everyday life and statistically measurable planetary macro-effects, which manifest themselves in the topic of “global warming”, for example. The warnings articulated since the early 1970s (Club of Rome) represent large-scale, abstract scenarios that can only be related to individual experiences and options for action in a very mediated way.

The annual theme chosen by Forum Basiliense for 2025, *Life in the Anthropocene*, thus outlines a problem area of eminent urgency that is more dependent on trans- and interdisciplinary exchange and opportunities for collaboration than almost any other in the current scientific landscape. While the agenda was initially set primarily by international working groups in the earth system sciences (stratigraphy, biology, ocean and atmospheric research, etc.), the range of disciplines required and involved has also expanded to include the social sciences (including politics, economics, law, sustainability research), the humanities and cultural sciences (such as ethics, cultural memory and environmental history, aesthetics 'after nature', cf. Böhme 2002) and aspects of the life and health sciences. This focus topic is therefore addressed to interested representatives of the above-mentioned and other related disciplines.

Literature:

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