

PRELIMINARY DRAFT

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THE ENDS OF THE WORLD: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE
ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract:

The concept of the Anthropocene – the geological epoch defined by human action – has so far remained largely absent from international relations (IR) analyses. This is perplexing given the monumental stakes involved in dealing with planetary change and the discipline’s overriding focus on crisis. This silence may exist however because contemporary theories of international relations are troubled by the Anthropocene, which shifts basic assumptions about how humans live in the midst of perpetual danger, harm, and risk. It also presents us with the prospect of failure in existential terms, if indeed we are living in (and causing) “the sixth mass extinction.” The focus of this paper therefore is threefold. First, to consider the challenges to environmental IR that the Anthropocene concept presents; second, to probe what it means for IR to respond to the end of nature; and third, what is required of IR to deal with the prospect of mass extinction. It is argued that earth-system changes wrought by human action require the discipline to demystify its own ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches that are culpable in ushering in the Anthropocene. Doing so may allow IR to provide necessary insight into the contemporary and historical effects of the state system as an enabler of planetary change, and the future possibilities for global politics within the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene; IR theory; nature; humanness; security, extinction; risk; safety

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