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## Introduction

Can Henrik Steffens (1773–1845) be understood as a thinker of the Anthropocene? The title of this volume indicates such a connection, but to answer this question, we must first clarify what is meant by the term “Anthropocene”.

Since 2000, there has been an interdisciplinary and sometimes heated debate about whether we are now in a new geological epoch, namely The Age of Humans.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in the history of the Earth, we may observe how rocks and sediments, the atmosphere, minerals, ecosystems, oceans and glaciers are being fundamentally altered by a single species, and these changes are still accelerating. At the turn of the millennium, atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen shouted out a wake-up call and suggested that we are now at a new stage in natural history in which we must take humans seriously as a geological force and fundamentally change the way humanity behaves. The warning is concerned with a looming climate and nature crisis, but also with the survival of humanity itself in a new phase of the Earth's (internal and external) history.

By raising the question of the Earth's internal and external history, the last sentence illustrates why Henrik Steffens' thinking is proving surprisingly relevant in the Anthropocene, and in an unprecedented way.<sup>2</sup> Under the influence of the climate and nature crisis, attempts

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1 See Renn, Jürgen & Bernd Scherer (eds.) 2017: *Das Anthropozän*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, Zalasiewicz, Jan, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams and Colin P. Summerhayes 2019: *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Mjaaland, Marius Timmann, Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Dag O. Hessen (eds.) 2024: *Antropocen. Menneskets Tidsalder*. Oslo: Res Publica.

2 See Steffens, Henrik 1801: *Beiträge zur innern Naturgeschichte der Erde*. Freyberg: Verlag der Crazischen Buchhandlung.

have been made in philosophy, literary studies and cultural studies, for example, to reinterpret earlier texts through so-called ecocriticism.<sup>3</sup> In historical studies, anthropology, psychology and theology, too, established research findings are being viewed in a new light and the relationship between humans and nature is being reinterpreted. The natural sciences, including biology, chemistry, geology, meteorology and the life sciences, are of course directly challenged by the climate and nature crises, and natural scientists have recently been engaged in radically interdisciplinary approaches. In this sense, it is obvious that Henrik Steffens can also be understood as an Anthropocene scientist who ventured to establish a similar interdisciplinarity at the core of his thinking, as a geologist and natural philosopher, as a poet and theologian, and as a polyglot and cultural mediator in Romantic Europe.

One could argue that Steffens does not belong to the Anthropocene, that he never reflected on the climate or nature crisis, that his theories on *geognosis* are outdated and no longer relevant to today's situation. All this is true in a way, and there are of course justified reservations about the new interpretations. However, it is also part of the approach associated with the concept of the Anthropocene that the history of humanity and nature is explored far back into civilisation in order to understand the causes of today's crisis. The period in which Steffens worked was a decisive era in the history of science, because it was the time when the differentiation between the natural and human sciences took place. One of the basic premises of the Anthropocene is the attempt to reconceive these sciences in order to gain a new understanding of causes and consequences, connections and theories, and in this context, Henrik Steffens' thinking is a treasure trove. Thanks to his original theories, his scientific career, his philosophical and scientific curiosity, and his extremely wide and diverse network, his ideas have regained their relevance.

Steffens' historically and holistically oriented philosophy of nature is strongly influenced by Schelling and Spinoza. Spinoza, in turn, is

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3 See Garrard, Greg 2012: *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge and for Nordic literature: Iversen, Kristina Leganger, Marius Timmann Mjaaland and Elisabeth Oxfeldt (eds.) 2023. *Naturen som gave? Tvisyn på naturen i nordisk litteratur*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. See also Furuset, Sissel and Reinhard Hennig 2023. *Økokritisk håndbok. Natur og miljø i litteraturen*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

a key source of inspiration for Arne Næss's deep ecology, which was developed as a response to the climate and nature crisis. Contemporary natural philosophers such as Arne Johan Vetlesen also propose understanding nature historically, processually and relationally in order to overcome modern alienation and the associated destruction of nature. This important line of thought in the modern history of Norwegian philosophy, which originated with Steffens, has generally been overlooked, but his thinking can regain significance for reflecting on the climate crisis and the search for a different understanding of humanity and nature. Today, we can take a fresh look at his work and be challenged by his axioms to understand our present age in a new and better way. Henrik Steffens may not be a thinker of the Anthropocene in the strict sense of the word, but he is at least a *forethinker of the Anthropocene*, and this is how he is reinterpreted in some of the contributions to this volume.

The occasion for this renewed interest in Henrik Steffens' work was, as so often before, an anniversary. The 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2023 marked the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Steffens' birth in Stavanger in south-western Norway. His homeland and his connection to Norway were important to him throughout his life, even though he spent most of his life in Denmark and various German-speaking countries (Saxony, Thuringia, Prussia, etc.). To mark this anniversary, two major symposia were held in 2023, one at the University of Oslo and the other at the University of Stavanger. Both were interdisciplinary and multilingual in nature: They focused on science and culture, theology and philosophy, geology and anthropology, history and literary studies. While Steffens was a famous philosopher and cultural mediator between the German-speaking countries and Scandinavia during his lifetime, he is known today only to a few specialists. The two conferences sought to counteract this, and selected contributions from these events are now presented in this anthology.

While the first section of the volume deals with the aforementioned topics related to the Anthropocene, the second section broadens the perspective and highlights the diversity and contradictions of Steffens as a thinker. In addition to theological questions, his literary work is critically evaluated and his thinking on human "races" is illuminated by Steffens' reflections on the Sami people.

The first section takes the question of Henrik Steffens in the Anthropocene as an opportunity to reinterpret his thinking. The

early work of the natural philosopher and mineralogist plays a major role here. Marie-Theres Federhofer's contribution, "er machte den Schnee und die Steine und Berge lebendig". Henrik Steffens' *Naturverständnis* examines the temporalisation of nature in the essay *Ueber die Bedingung der Möglichkeit einer innern Naturgeschichte der Erde* (1810) and in *Anthropologie* (1822). Federhofer finds the decisive new approach in his thinking in the historicization of nature and in a processual understanding of the Earth. This is a break with earlier *historia naturalis* thinking, she argues, especially when Steffens attempts to connect human time with the deep time of geology. This corresponds to the proposal by science historian Jürgen Renn to develop an interdisciplinary *geoanthropology* in order to better understand our time, the Anthropocene. Steffens' anthropology can also be read as geoanthropology, providing an understanding of human existence grounded in geology. Federhofer also sees connections to the thinking of American geologist Marcia Bjornerud, who seeks to understand humans and culture from the perspective of deep time. Steffens' literary romantic style can be read as nostalgic and anthropocentric, says Federhofer, but the narrative structures could also be understood as resonance (H. Rosa) between humans and nature.

In his essay 'Thinking with Rocks: Henrik Steffens and the Anthropocene,' Helge Jordheim turns to Steffens' early treatise *Über die Mineralogie und das mineralogische Studium* (1797), as well as *Beyträge zur innern Naturgeschichte der Erde* (1801) and *Vollständiges Handbuch der Oryktognosie* (1811–24). The focus is therefore on stones and minerals, and how one can think about, or rather *with*, inorganic nature. For Jordheim, this raises a question that should concern us even more today than it did then, namely: how can we understand anthropogenic climate change if it cannot be grasped by Newtonian time? Should we think more phenomenologically about the past, present and future of nature and objects? Can we possibly join Steffens in rethinking human time and natural history in a new and different way? Jordheim's questions are related to those of Federhofer, but he also sees potential for new approaches in the *mineralogical* texts. Through his scientific expertise, Steffens remains connected to the earth and stones but also takes them as an opportunity to reflect on death and the future of humanity. Compared to Spinoza and Schelling, for example, Jordheim claims that Steffens

is a distinctly *historical* thinker. Influenced by Abraham Gottlob Werner, among others, he thinks teleologically about nature and thus becomes a thinker of the future of the Earth. For Jordheim, this holds the potential for a radical rethinking of natural history in the Anthropocene.

In Marius Timmann Mjaaland's article, 'Why Spirit Matters: Towards an Anthropocene Ecology of the Earth with Steffens, Næss and Vetlesen,' the question of humanity and nature is pursued further in the direction of cosmology. According to the author, the modern dichotomy of spirit and matter, soul and body is being questioned in the Anthropocene, above all by the so-called New Materialism (including Latour, Braidotti, Haraway and others). In *Beiträge zur innern Naturgeschichte der Erde* (1801), Mjaaland sees a similarly grounded materialism in Steffens' chemical and mineralogical interpretation of the evolutionary history of the Earth. Unlike Hegel or Schelling, for example, his theory is grounded in matter, but it also presupposes an "inner nature". This inner nature of the process is to be understood as spirit, which reaches a higher level of reflection in humans and can be understood ethically as "love". Mjaaland sees a connection here to Spinoza, who, like Steffens, interprets the relationship between matter and spirit holistically and thinks in terms of processes. Furthermore, Spinoza, like Steffens later, understands love as an expression of the immanent presence of God. Mjaaland points out that Spinoza became important not only for Steffens, but later also for Arne Næss, the founder of deep ecology and perhaps the most important Norwegian philosopher of the 20th century. In Spinoza's dictum *Deus sive natura*, Næss sees a potential for liberation within a modern culture that is alienated from nature and therefore destroys it. Although Næss hardly mentions Steffens, there are conceptual and structural similarities in their philosophy of nature. The line from Spinoza and Steffens via Næss can also be extended further into the Anthropocene era to the cosmology of Arne Johan Vetlesen. In *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene* (2019), Vetlesen defends process-oriented panpsychism, although he criticises posthuman "new" materialism. Mjaaland's study shows how a central motif of Norwegian philosophical history is regaining prominence in the Anthropocene, not only ontologically and cosmologically, but also theologically and morally.

Morten Tønnessen also turns to Steffens' early work. In his essay 'Steffens' early outlook reconsidered: Nature conceptions of the industrial-age Anthropocene,' he reads the Copenhagen *Lectures on the Introduction to Philosophy* (1802–04) in context, namely as an expression of a new industrial age. He interprets Steffens' holistic approach as a response to the division of science into technical natural sciences and historically oriented humanities. According to Tønnessen, Steffens takes an original position here, one that is gaining importance again today, even though it is criticised by both the natural sciences and the humanities. Tønnessen also sees Steffens' natural philosophical approach as a novelty because it refers so much to mineralogy and geology, even when it comes to his interpretation of human beings. However, Tønnessen is quite critical of this approach because Steffens never transcends the anthropocentric limits of science and philosophy. From this perspective, he remains rooted in the basic tendencies of the Christian, but also the Western, tradition and is therefore unable to provide any decisive impetus in the current crisis. In Tønnessen's view, it is essential to move away from anthropocentrism, and in this sense, the new Anthropocene era does not represent a solution but merely draws attention to the pressing problems of the present.

Paul Ziche also examines the relationship between Steffens' philosophy of nature and the Anthropocene but draws a much more positive conclusion than Tønnessen, albeit an ambiguous one. In his essay 'The passivity of our actions: Steffens, the fragility of Romanticist unity, and the anthropocene's predicament,' he focuses primarily on Steffens' text *Grundzüge der philosophischen Naturwissenschaft* (1806). Romanticism, he argues, seeks unity, as does Henrik Steffens in his literary texts and the texts on *Naturphilosophie*. However, his examples show that the unity must be regarded as fragile, that it repeatedly disintegrates and can therefore only be maintained in parts. This seems to bother Steffens less, writes Ziche, who finds Steffens' ambition to hold on to and harmonise opposites thoroughly inspiring. The interplay between passivity and activity plays an important role in Steffens' work: because our actions cannot be absolutely free, neither from material conditions nor from God's continuous act of creation, we must learn to understand our actions *relationally*, as responses to other actors – be it human, animal or organic – but also inorganic actors. This network of relations is reminiscent of Bruno

Latour, and Ziche again sees parallels to today's discussion. Because Steffens repeatedly uses literary examples, his text remains fragile and open to new interpretations. This is also how Ziche would like to see the Anthropocene era understood: as an epoch that seeks unity and overview but is overtaken by its internal contradictions.

The second section of the anthology reflects Steffens' versatility to a greater extent and takes up theological and literary perspectives. Texts from his late work come to the fore. The transition is formed by Steffens' university thesis from 1809, which is reinterpreted in Tollef Graff Hugo's contribution 'Der Göttliche Sinn. Philosophische Theologie in der Universitätsidee Henrik Steffens'. Graff Hugo focuses on the philosophical and theological thought patterns in Steffens' essay about the university and thus emphatically rejects a historical-political reading that has dominated the discussion of this text to date. In contrast, he reveals the Socratic and Christological influences on Steffens' idea of the university, which is oriented towards wisdom and divine meaning. For Steffens, the core of the university lies in the third birth, the insight that knowledge is not one-dimensional but rather an oscillating pulse between the incomprehensible and the comprehensible. This idea is closely linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which clearly distinguishes the text from other important university writings of the time by Humboldt, Schleiermacher and Schelling.

While Graff Hugo reveals the theological-philosophical subtext of the university text, Otfried Czaika continues the study of Steffens' religious development in his contribution 'Clash der Konfessionskulturen. Der dänische Lutheraner Henrik Steffens zwischen den konfessionskulturellen Stühlen.' In 1831, Steffens had outlined his relationship with the Silesian Old Lutherans, whom he had joined in the meantime, in his work *Wie ich wieder Lutheraner wurde und was mir das Lutherthum ist*. Czaika points to the different confessional cultures within Lutheranism, some of which differ significantly in terms of social conditions and core theological issues (e.g. the Eucharistic controversy). Coming from the Danish state church, which had a strong influence on Steffens, Lutheranism was uncontroversial from a denominational point of view and therefore differed significantly from the situation of the Silesian Lutherans. Historically, the latter had to defend themselves repeatedly against both attempts at re-catholisation and pressure from other Lutheran denominations.

According to Czaika, these divergent socialisations were bound to lead to a break.

Two texts in the anthology deal with a smaller, later work by Steffens, *Über die Lappen und Pastor N. J. C. V. Stockfleths Wirksamkeit unter diesen*. The text was written as an invitation to the twenty-eighth anniversary celebration of the Prussian Bible Society in October 1842. In addition to providing a theological framework for the text, which deals extensively with Stockfleth's missionary efforts, further contexts are activated, with Steffens' ideas about human "races" taking second place.

In her contribution 'Henrik Steffens on Race and Theology: A Reading of the Sámi in *Über die Lappen* (1842)', Simone Kotva focuses in particular on the intertwining of theological and racial-theoretical discourse. In his *Anthropologie* (1820–1822), Steffens had mainly dealt with Kant's axioms about the different human races but expanded them to include a theological dimension. In his view, the differentiation into different "races" is ultimately a consequence of the Fall. Kotva points out that Steffens spiritualises racial thinking, introducing a racial dimension into Christian spirituality, which in turn is linked to a racial hierarchy. This connection legitimises a missionary, educational project that further advanced the colonisation of the indigenous peoples of the North Calotte. Kotva reads Steffens' short treatise as a symptomatic text that pointedly highlights the connection between theological discourse and racist thinking, thus encouraging further research on this topic.

In the second text – 'Die Samen von Berlin aus gesehen. Henrik Steffens Schrift *Über die Lappen*' – Benedikt Jäger examines less the theological core of the text than its textual practice. He also traces Steffens' ideas about the differentiation of human "races" with reference to Kant and Steffens' anthropology but places more emphasis on the sphere of aesthetics. Both Kant and Steffens denied indigenous peoples' access to civilising aesthetic judgement, which is reflected in the use of the adjective "läppisch" (*lappish*). According to Kant, the "lappish" African has no access to the categories of beauty and sublimity because of his racial predisposition. Jäger therefore asks rhetorically whether the Lapp is lappish and attempts to prove, in a detailed examination of the text, that Steffens repeatedly falls into contradictions that undermine his basic racist discourse.

Stefan Höppner focuses exclusively on literary production in his contribution ‘Steffens, Literature, and Revolution,’ which deals with Steffens' last novella, *Die Revolution* (1837). This novella, which is almost 1,000 pages long, is one of the few literary texts by Steffens that does not choose Norway as the main setting for the events. Höppner first discusses the conceptual history of the term “revolution” and shows that Steffens understands “revolution” in the sense of the restoration of an old order and harshly judges all proponents of a modern concept of revolution (revolution as upheaval). Analogously, Höppner discusses the various conceptions of literature that are presented in *Die Revolution*. While the protagonists, who are endowed with the author's sympathy, continue to adhere to the poetic, religious ideals of the Jena period (1798–1802), the aspiring contemporary author resorts to political prose. This contrast gives rise to a paradoxical punchline in the novella. Conceived as an attack on the political literature of his time, Steffens' text is itself political literature, lacking any poetic quality, argues Höppner.

While the previous contributions have dealt with Steffens' late work (*Lappen*, 1842; *Revolution*, 1837), does Marit Bergner's contribution ‘Bücher über Norwegen. Die Bestände zur norwegischen Geographie, Politik und Mineralogie in Henrik Steffens' Bibliothek’ study texts that were published even later, i.e., posthumously. Three months after Steffens' death, his library, which contained 3,559 books and 134 maps, was auctioned off. Using the auction catalogue, Bergner examines the focus of the collection on Steffens' country of birth: Norway. Steffens owned a total of 43 titles and 12 maps about Norway, with the selection clearly reflecting Steffens' research interests. In addition to travelogues, there are special studies on geology and mineralogy as well as political titles. Unfortunately, the library was not sold as a whole but scattered to the four winds. Therefore, one has only very limited access to annotations and underlinings that could provide insights into Steffens' working process.

The relationship between the two sections of the anthology highlights a gap for further research. How can we understand the relationship between the old Steffens, whom Heine sarcastically said had fallen into the hands of the Pietists, and his revolutionary early work? Can transitions and breaks be identified that correct or modify Steffens' own mythologising master narrative – his ten-volume autobiography, *Was ich erlebte* (1840–1843)? We hope that the Stef-

fens anniversary will not share the fate of many other anniversaries, where interest quickly fizzles out. Fortunately, the Henrik Steffens Professorship at the Humboldt University in Berlin, funded by the Norwegian government, offers the opportunity for further and more in-depth research into the “blown-away laurel leaf” of Norwegian culture – to quote the Norwegian Romantic Henrik Wergeland. To take some of the wind out of the sails of this criticism, the University of Stavanger has established the annual International Steffens Lecture, which takes place from 2023 onwards. Leading international researchers from all disciplines will be invited to follow in Steffens' footsteps, challenging the consensus and commenting on the burning issues of our time. Steffens was not an ironist, and one can only speculate whether he would have liked or disliked the fact that his birthplace, which has developed rapidly over the last 50 years as Norway's oil capital and must therefore be seen as a profiteer of the ecological crisis, is honouring his proto-ecological work with a series of lectures.

*Stavanger and Oslo in July 2025,  
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