

Decolonizing the Anthropocene

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The concept of the Anthropocene has gained prominence in many contemporary debates in both scientific and humanistic disciplines, most of which are related to the environmental emergency and its symptoms and effects. This field of research is rapidly evolving and highly contested. Many authors who have engaged with the Anthropocene as a generative concept have stressed the planetary scale of anthropogenic disturbances, basing their analyses on scientific research that is producing increasingly abundant volumes of data.

This entry focuses on how decolonial perspectives about the Anthropocene take us beyond the apocalyptic trope. The concept of the Anthropocene both suggests a common collective future and points to the limitations of our understanding of human history (Chakrabarty 2008). It has stirred contemporary academic debates and promoted a reorganization of the boundaries of disciplines as well as a renewed dialogue between the natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, and the arts. However, this generative moment lacks situated perspectives that reveal other ways of conceiving the scale, nature, history, and effects of human interference in the biosphere and the alliances and intersections that sustain alternative worlds.

The first part of this entry addresses the polysemic nature of the Anthropocene debate. The second discusses the concept of the *Anthropos*, pointing to alternative and critical ways of conceiving this epoch. Finally, the focus will be on the contemporary anthropological debate regarding the idea of *domestication* and use this notion as a heuristic to understand both the colonial legacies that inspire contemporary ecological and philosophical thought and different ways of inhabiting the world, according to “a more adequate cosmopolitical standpoint” (Viveiros de Castro and Hui 2021, 393).

The core argument of this entry is that a provocative and productive decolonial perspective on the Anthropocene operates as a reverse or counteranthropology of the contemporary condition. It is a perspective in which not only the present but also the scientific attempts at making sense of it, through concepts such as the Anthropocene, are seen and evaluated from the fringes of the hierarchies of knowledge that structure modern science (de la Cadena 2019; we are using *modern* in the Latourian sense—see Latour 1993). In this, the debate on *domestication* provides us with some relevant analytical tools. Arguably, domestication, understood as the attempt to tame a menacing “nature/other” and order an otherwise uncertain and overwhelming complex and external reality, was already an element of the cosmotechnical imagination of Europe before the birth of the sciences. We can find an association between science and domestication in the accounts of historians of science (e.g., Evans 1984; Gooday 1991) and in the works of authors in science and technology studies (e.g., Callon 1986; Latour

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1987; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Pickering 1995). Additionally, it is well documented that the work of domestication was part and parcel of how the development of science came to be intertwined with politics in Europe (Schapin and Schaffer 1985), for example, in the constitution of states and the publics of state policies, and the centrality of colonial enterprises that shaped Europe and its modernity (Cañizares-Esguerra 2006; Hage 2017; Seth 2009).

In this context, the decolonial critique of domestication allows us to frame the Anthropocene as a performative concept that works, among other things, to tame and order the uncanny aspects of the present. In so doing, the Anthropocene carries a conservative force that contrasts with the general perception of the valence of the term in the Earth sciences, in which it tends to be seen as a paradigm-shifting concept (Maslin and Lewis 2015). Thus, a decolonial critique of the Anthropocene inevitably presents itself as a critique of some of the ontological frameworks that inform mainstream modern scientific attitudes, which are marked by what the *quilombola* philosopher Antônio Bispo dos Santos called *cosmophobia* (Santos 2015; on *quilombos* and *quilombolas*, see Fagundes 2020): a fear of otherness resulting from radical deterritorialization.

In the following discussion, the context and examples will inevitably reflect the present authors' positionalities as Brazilian academics dedicated to understanding diverse aspects of socioenvironmental politics in Latin America and the Caribbean from nonhegemonic anthropological perspectives.

Situating the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is the name suggested in 2000 by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer for the current geological epoch of the planet. The designation derives from the scientific evidence that there are traces of human interference in large-scale geophysical processes and all ecosystems and organisms on Earth. In 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy recommended that the new geological epoch be formally ratified but (as of 2022) the concept has still not been incorporated into the geological canon. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene has occupied an important share of debates in the environmental sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

The Anthropocene was picked up as an analytical concept by diverse social sciences and humanities communities. Its polysemic nature generated an extensive array of uses, understandings, and definitions. The use of the term very quickly departed from the geosciences, and its exact meaning remains elusive and subject to debate and controversy (Maslin and Lewis 2015; Zalasiewicz et al. 2021). Pointing out the symptoms of the environmental crisis is distinct from trying to circumscribe its causes or define its historical origins, and none of this is equivalent to the attempt to cope with its effects or assign responsibility. Yet, the Anthropocene has been associated with all these things (Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne 2015). In addition, besides the use of the concept to refer to a configuration of material conditions (like the so-called *big acceleration* of the second half of the twentieth century, the *sixth mass extinction*, or the parameters that

define the *planetary boundaries* of the Earth system), certain metaphysical elements have been systematically associated to the Anthropocene, such as the often-repeated notion of the *geological power of humankind* (Crutzen 2002, 23). This gave new fuel to the decades-old discussion of the place of the *Anthropos* in anthropology (since at least the reflexive turn of the 1970s and 1980s) but this time in a novel academic and political environment marked by decades of feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial critique.

The Anthropocene debate is undoubtedly enriched and empowered by the multiple semiotic layers of the concept. It has the form of a complex, dynamic tapestry of relations with porous and imprecise borders. In 2021, Jan Zalasiewicz, one of the chairs of the Anthropocene Working Group, and colleagues published a review article in which they compared the meaning of the concept of the Anthropocene in geology with other disciplines. They remarked that the concept “began to be used by a much wider range of academic communities [beyond geology and the Earth system sciences], notably within the humanities and social and environmental sciences” with remarkable semantic variations (Zalasiewicz et al. 2021, 8–9).

As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) argues, categorical equivocation can often prove productive. In this, the Anthropocene provides an interesting example for how it takes part in the debate on the ethical dimensions of geoengineering, the most ambitious technofix proposed to address the negative impacts of global warming. At the core of geoengineering is *solar radiation management*, a plan to manipulate the chemical composition of the planet’s stratosphere so that it reflects more solar radiation back into space than would happen without intervention. Negative reactions from environmentalists, ecologists, philosophers, and social scientists appeared soon after the idea was propounded, and many criticized geoengineering of this sort on technical, ecological, political, and ethical grounds (Hulme 2014). The unusual employment of a common keyword, Anthropocene, by authors in the geosciences, social sciences, and humanities meant that climate scientists and engineers encountered their critics from the social sciences when using academic search engines. In the face of such critiques of geoengineering, geoscientists found themselves pressed to address the ethical problems of the technical scheme in unparalleled ways (see Grieger et al. 2019; Oppenheimer 2005).

The *Anthropos* of the Anthropocene

If there is one agreement among critics of the term, it is the fact that the prefix *Anthropos* implies humanity in a general and universal way, without proper consideration of the differences in how various human collectivities engage with different forms of life and the environment. It is also blind to the amount of historical environmental injustice and environmental racism embedded in the present condition. In this context, arguments arise for the use of the terms Capitalocene (Moore 2016) or Plantationocene (Haraway et al. 2016), among others, as more appropriate alternatives. Émilie Hache (2015) called attention to how the consensus the Anthropocene concept seems to imply neutralizes alternative frames and creates a perceived inevitability to the place of male-centric technoscientific approaches in the environmental debate. The term’s wide diffusion and relative success make invisible the questions of which alliances it encourages and what

are the productive ways to mobilize them; in this picture, intersectional issues such as gender, race, class, and ontological difference are notably disregarded. Concepts, however, are not politically neutral and may appeal to colonial grammars. In returning the *Anthropos* to the position of central subject of the new geological age, the Anthropocene depicts an apolitical humanity stripped of its violence and historical inequalities.

Furthermore, common forms of usage of the concept tacitly imply that the ecological crisis is to be understood in similar ways everywhere, reproducing the disconnection between scientific facts and everyday experiences of reality. It is not a surprise that the environmental agenda—greatly inspired by normative positions of modern technoscientific thought—produces vacillating engagement and mistrust among those oriented by anticolonial and antiracist struggles. Environmentalism, already heavily criticized for its historical erasure of ethnic and racial minorities and for its role in supporting dispossessions through conservation rhetoric and politics (DeLuca and Demo 2001), appears once again as a “white utopia” in the face of a “white Anthropocene,” to use Kathryn Yusoff’s terms (2018; see also Todd, 2016). According to Yusoff, the Anthropocene is a political geology constructed over the historical proximity of Black and Brown bodies to harm, an inhuman proximity deeply entangled with the “historical geographies of extraction, grammars of geology, imperial global geographies” (2018, 11) and the environmental racism that were made invisible by, and at the same time grounded, the historical development of scientific sensibilities and (deformed) modern subjectivities. In such a panorama, the Anthropocene, like the concept of *wilderness*, “perpetuates the fantasy that the West can produce a discourse on the historical destruction of the planet’s ecosystems without addressing the historical imperialism and colonialism that drove such destruction” (Ferdinand 2022, 194). The ecological crisis and the Anthropocene are perceived as a new “White man’s burden” in an attempt to “save ‘Humanity’ from itself” (Ferdinand 2019, 26).

A diverse and complementary line of critique comes from Indigenous thinkers. Regardless of the perceived effects of the environmental crisis, it makes little sense to address the situation through the prefix *Anthropos* in a context of the rejection of human exceptionalism, a common feature of Indigenous relational ontologies. Working with “ideas to postpone the end of the world,” Ailton Krenak (2019) highlights the excluding limits of an *Anthropos* based on the distinction between humans and nonhumans that has historically demoted non-Western peoples to a subhuman level. In addition, personhood and agency are seen in Indigenous ontologies as qualities present in all entities that affect reality, regardless of whether they are inanimate or share a human condition. Indigenous cosmologies tend to recognize all beings that participate in the constitution of the world as potential subjects. The environmental crisis is the unavoidable result of how the naturalistic objectivism of European thought alienated other entities from the condition of subjects with which relations are regulated by ethical and moral codes. It is no accident then that ecosystems are turned into “residues of industrial and extractive activity” (Krenak 2019, 50). Echoing this criticism of Western humanism, Davi Kopenawa denounces the anthropocentrism and self-referentiality of colonial modes of existence (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). In not being able to detach from their ordinary realm in dreams, like Indigenous shamans, Westerners cannot perceive the spiritual dimension of existence (see also Bubandt 2018 and Szerszynski

2017 for a critique of the normative secularism of academia and its implications for the Anthropocene). Whites then become the “people of the merchandise” who destroy the *urihi*, the forest-world (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 327). Both Krenak and Kopenawa propose a counteranthropology of the White world and its unsustainable relationship with the Earth. Their philosophies, as shamanic critiques of the political economy of nature (Albert 1995), attack head-on the modern conceptions of nature and human nature, the proclaimed self-sufficiency of the knowledge systems that sustain them, and the resulting (inefficacious) voluntarism of the forms of care they engender (Puig della Bellacasa 2017; Taddei 2022a).

The domestication debate

A key element in the ecofeminist, Black, and Indigenous critiques discussed earlier is a rejection of the apocalyptic dimension of the Anthropocene. As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2016) have pointed out, the eschatological fears associated with the environmental crisis that became the dominant mythology of the global North are a product of understanding history as the epic apotheosis of humanity. The negative side effect of having made the subjectivity of the Enlightenment the model for what it is to be human is that, for moderns, what does not reflect the self is perceived as chaos (Taddei 2022b).

Authors from different academic traditions of the global South have been calling our attention to other forms of inhabiting the world that have engaged in regenerative practices and techniques directly connected with other-than-human entities. In this sense, the critique of the concept of domestication is a heuristic path from which to highlight the historical vicissitudes of the “colonial inhabitation” (Ferdinand 2019) and its legacies. Such critique makes visible nonhegemonic ways of relating to human or non-human otherness not equated to exploitation, property, control, and domination. From a particular conceptual matrix, namely Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous Amazonian, ideas associated with domestication evoke distinct forms of relations between humans, animals, plants, and spirits, providing us with a complementary analytical path to the critique of human hegemony.

Domestication is a powerful generative concept with which to think about the linkages between knowledge and power, on the one hand, and technical and ontological schemes, on the other, across forms of life, race, gender, and class difference. During European colonial expansion, domestication became a way of inhabiting the world, tying forms of conceiving of nature as property and commodity to the exploitation of human and nonhuman labor (Ferdinand 2019; Ghosh 2021; Tsing 2018). Domination of other beings and the environment as a whole is the form of coloniality that Ghassan Hage calls “generalized domestication” (2017, 94–95). Domestication structured forms of biopolitics and governmentality (Foucault 2004), always in intimate relation with science and colonialism.

Not by chance did the central infrastructure in the European colonial expansion into the New World, the *plantation*, push the notion of domestication, including the domestication of plants and animals, human beings, and entire landscapes, to the limit. As

agro-industrial enterprises, plantations became the main form of resource extraction in the Caribbean and the Americas from the late sixteenth century onward. Despite various compositions between plantation and provision regions (see Giusti-Cordero 2009), plantations have left a significant mark in Western modernity and have assumed a wide prominence in other colonized territories around the globe (Haraway et al. 2016). Plantations were not only part of a moment of primitive accumulation; they were also forms of sociotechnical transition that shaped empire and capitalism through controlling time and disciplining labor, and supporting the financialization of capital that directly underpinned the Industrial Revolution in European contexts (James 1989; Mintz 1996; Williams 1994).

In the space of the plantation, animals, plants, and humans were subject to forms of domination that commodified their existences. As a “race-making situation,” to use E. T. Thompson’s (1975) classical definition, the plantation naturalized labor hierarchies, turning human differences into a cognitive system that sustained racialized ontologies (see also Bastos 2020). As recent scholarship has pointed out, plantation contexts produced race at the same time as they defined *animality* (Boisseron 2018; Jackson 2020; Johnson 2012).

Nevertheless, even in the organized and policed world of the plantations, spaces of resistance were constituted, in the “untamable margins” (Tsing 1993), where other ways of existing and of nurturing alliances and networks of care and regeneration flourished (Wynter 1971). Practices of the struggle for land guided by African and Creole agricultural traditions persevered in organizing “counterplantation systems” that were oriented “towards the protection and regeneration of the community” (Casimir 2018, 101). These spaces included gardens and animal pens called “provision grounds” that were sites of resistance and biodiversity composed of European animals and cultivars brought by Africans and crops of indigenous origin, notably corn and cassava. Through plant and animal alliances made beyond colonial domestication forms, this autonomy experience allowed for arrangements that were the expression of new agrarian futures and whose legacy continues to resonate in Afro-America today (Bulamah, forthcoming; Castellano 2021; DeLoughrey 2011; Moore et al. 2019).

The concept of domestication has acquired new usages from authors of multispecies ethnography and those working on the redistribution of agency between humans and nonhumans (Carneiro da Cunha 2020; Norton 2015; Sautchuk 2018; Van Dooren 2012; Velden 2018). These new dialogues shed light on practices marked by unexpected intimacies, ontological uncertainties, and corporeal co-constitution between beings. Domestication can take multiple forms, especially if viewed from the margins and from a decentered point of view (Swanson, Lien, and Ween 2018). Historical ecology undertook a similar review to dissociate plant domestication from dependence on intensive agricultural cultivation forms (Clement et al. 2020), expanding the understanding of the concept to all varieties of plant modification arising from the relationship between humans and plants without prioritizing the existence of a fixed endpoint. Domestication, in this sense, is taken as a continuous process of mutual transformation.

In turn, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha’s critique of the phenomenon of domestication within the Amazonian context addresses the problematic relationship between agriculture, labor, and property in political economy and points to a different relational

scenario, one in which multiple forms of cultivation do not occur at the expense of the forest and its beings but configure themselves as a “science *in or of* the forest” (2020, 172, emphasis original). Thus, the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their cultivars is not based on control and subordination, as plants have agency and volition (if they are not well taken care of, they leave in search of other gardens). At the same time, even “wild” plants are understood as being cultivated by animals, other plants, or spiritual beings. Therefore, Indigenous peoples reject the concept of domestication as the imposition of the human will as the “primary organizing principle” of life at the expense of the eco-multispecies networks that make up the forests. As Carneiro da Cunha uses the expression, “anti-domestication” refers to a nonproprietary model of relationship with the land, a noncolonial, non-subduing/domesticating mode of dwelling, echoing Clastres’s proposition that the political refusal of power concentration and stratification found among Amazonian peoples made them “societies against the state” (Sztutman and Shiratori, forthcoming). In standing in direct opposition to “generalized domestication” (Hage 2017), Amazonian socialities are cosmopolitically aligned with other global Southern forms of resistance against the *altericide* (Morizot 2017) that characterizes modes of existence that refuse to compose with otherness, eliminating it.

Rewilding the Anthropocene

If “conceptual structures are like precisely engineered valves, ... domesticating disciplinary agency,” as Pickering states (1995, 145), the concept of the Anthropocene is a form of semiotic regimentation of the world, an attempt to match the uncanny aspects of experience and our expectations about reality. All taxonomic names do that. In the case of the Anthropocene, or the environmental crisis and all its implications, it may well be that the technosciences and other registers of the Western world, despite their techno-optimism, are not well fitted to provide humans with a sufficient understanding of the nature of the current existential challenge, as pointed out by Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2016) and Morton (2013). In any case, the domesticating effect of the term derives from its performative dimension, due to how it objectifies a reality made of material objects or phenomena, connected in linear ways, generating the perception that because we have a word for the problem, we understand what it is or have an efficient connection to it.

In the spirit of anti-domestication, if we need a name for the current condition, it cannot be something that reduces our anxieties to manageable levels—and that is how Latour and Woolgar (1979) defined “truth” in the realm of scientific practices. If it is true that the Anthropocene is generating new forms of collaboration between the humanities, the arts, and the hard sciences (Mathews 2020), its apocalyptic, anthropocentric, White, and patriarchal tones take us away from the historical and practical alliances between humans and more-than-humans that created and still create alternative futures in the ruins of colonial infrastructures. So, if it is to be useful, the concept needs to be something that destabilizes mainstream conceptual schemes and induces transformations in established modes of existence—a form of *rewilding*, as proposed by Indigenous thinker Jera Guarani (2022). This is perhaps the paramount quality of ideas such as

Haraway's *Chthulucene* (2016) and Ferdinand's *Negrocene* (2019), which are defined by what they engender in terms of decolonial relations; that is, by their pragmatic power rather than by their semantic content.

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SEE ALSO: Agrarian Change and Agricultural Development; Anthropocene, The; Anthropocentrism and Post-humanism; Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Biopolitics; Biopower; Categories and Taxonomies; Climate Change; Coloniality of Power; Cosmologies; Ecological Anthropology; Environmental Anthropology; Environmental Justice; Environmental Sustainability; Environmentalism; Gender, Colonialism, and the Colonial Gaze; Global Environmental Change; Indigenous and Local Knowledge and Science: From Validation to Knowledge Coproduction; Multispecies Ethnography; Nature, Concepts of; Nature/Culture Distinction; Patriarchy and Male Dominance; Political Ecology; Postcolonial Theory and Feminism; Postcolonialism; Postcoloniality; Protected Areas; Race and Racisms; Risk and Uncertainty; Sacred Ecology; Science and Technology in Development; Scientific Expertise; Technology; Technology and Development; Transdisciplinary Multispecies Science in the Anthropocene

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