Editorial to Re-worlding: Pluriversal Politics in the Anthropocene

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“The first fact about the contemporary world is accelerated growth”.
Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016)

“Imagination also enables us to do things together politically: a new way of seeing the world can be a way of valuing it - a map of things worth saving, or of a future worth creating”.
Jedediah Purdy (2015)

In describing the world experiencing accelerating change and multifaceted overheating, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016) portrays contemporary times through powerful endings like the end of cheap nature, the end of traditional political thought and of overarching generalizations. The exhaustion brought about by neoliberalism, and the double bind that emerges from a relentless pursuit of economic growth and sustainability is leading to increasingly tangible forms of social and environmental unsustainability (Eriksen 2021). Therefore, there is an impending urgency not only to move away from the traditional pursuits of economic growth as we know it, but for broader civilizational changes and transitions (Escobar 2015; Kallis \textit{et al}. 2020).

Such a transition has been expressed through multiple discourses, aiming to unsettle the model of Western capitalist modernity. Seen from this perspective, the Anthropocene not only disrupts the Nature/Culture divide and highlights the impossibility of maintaining these realms as apart (Chakrabarty 2009; Descola 2013; Purdy 2015), but it simultaneously is configured as an ahistorical narrative that celebrates the apotheotic rise of the \textit{Anthropos}, whose story of conquest and hubris is built on the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist forms of exploitation over the last 500 years.

Moving beyond modernity’s apotheotic and ever-expanding faith in forms of technological and market-based fixes (Harvey 2001; Temenos & McCann 2012), or “solutionisms” (Morozov 2013), reveals how the concept of the Anthropocene remains in its core a conceptualization prone to anthropogenic propositions that continue to reinstitute modernity’s separation of nature and culture, through the exploitation of class, race and gender as a form to obtain cheap labour and access to land (Wolfe

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Moreover, the Anthropocene signifies the emergence of geo-power: a series of technocratic environmental interventions accompanied by geo-knowledges rooted in the imperial ecologies of the nineteenth century, now expressed in Earth system sciences, and geoengineering (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2016: 87–90). These forms of power are rooted in a form of geo-constructivism that

exploits the capability of recycling the project of scientific modernity consisting of becoming ‘masters and possessors of nature’ (Descartes), while simultaneously solving the environmental disasters intrinsically associated with the same conquest (Neyrat 2018: 3).

As such, the Anthropocene celebrates promethean approaches in the form of managerial, technocratic, and market-based solutions to respond to civilizational crisis shifting from traditional bio-power to a broader form of control over biological and non-biological processes (Luisetti 2019).

The concept of the Anthropocene has – perhaps like no other – captured contemporary thought on contemporary planetary unsustainability in several forms. On the one hand, the Anthropocene opens a scientific and geologic debate over the primacy of humanity as a species and the impact humans have had on the biosphere and the lithosphere. This, as Lorimer (2017) argues, entails simultaneously a scientific question, an ideological provocation across the political spectrum to understand how humanity arrived at the Anthropocene, and the emergence of new ontologies of environmentalism enabling a politically differentiated model of geological subjects. On the other hand, the popular Anthropocene, the one that Jason W. Moore (2016: 4) refers to as the result of “Green Arithmetic” where “Human Action” plus “Nature” equals “Planetary Crisis”, has given rise to a popular term that has captured the imaginations of humans after “the end of nature” (see, McKibben 1989). This position has sparked a profitable industry in science fiction dealing with the collapse of societies and the imaginaries of possible futures (see, Tornel & Lunden 2020) which tends to dominate the discussion from academic writings to the pages of the New York Times. This conception of the Anthropocene normalizes a particular view of society and nature. In a very similar way to Hobbes, who led to a normalization of anarchy as the default characteristics of human societies, the Anthropocene normalizes neoliberal capitalism. It roughly tells the story of a humanity, transgressing planetary boundaries and the proposal to rapidly accelerate technological innovation to mitigate the excess done by humanity. In the process, productivist societies remain afloat, increasing economic growth and mitigating social inequalities (Dryzek & Pickering 2018; for a critique see Moore, this issue; Luisetti, this issue).

As Jason W. Moore writes, “the abstraction Nature/Society historically conforms to a seemingly endless series of human exclusion – never mind the rationalizing disciplines and extremist policies imposed upon extra-human natures. These exclusions correspond to a long history of subordinating women, colonial populations, and peoples of colour” (Moore 2016: 2, emphasis added). Moore (2011) articulates the notion of cheapness as the strategy that has shaped capitalism since 1450. A process that follows the Marxian logic of primitive accumulation is the enclosure of the commons, of taking advantage of people (cheap labour) and nature (cheap nature) to produce, in means such as accumulation by dispossession, that to this day engulfs modern capitalist thought. As Moore (2016: 5) argues, the Anthropocene sounds the alarm, but it cannot answer how these alarming changes came about. If we accept the Anthropocene as a way of understanding our current epoch, then we are legitimating by default the idea that history
has come to an end and thus, that we cannot and should not expect the emergence of any resistance to the modern-human project (Barca 2020). In other words, the world is what Eurocentric modernity has made it to be. Here, the common “we”, is an Anthropos that is to be understood as

*an abstraction based on a white, male, and heterosexual historical subject in possession of reason (qua science, technology, and the law) and the means of production, by which tools it is entitled to extract labour and value from what it defines as Other (Barca 2020: 5).*

Unsettling the Anthropocene and its one-dimensional Anthropos, forces us to, on the one hand, understand the Anthropocene as a form of “ideology by default” (Malm & Hornborg 2014), where natural scientists extend their worldviews to society and attribute to Homo sapiens the responsibility for these changes. From this perspective, Humanity then becomes the doom-bringer, but also the saviour: it is through the newly formed hope of creating a planetary stewardship in modern technology and science that humanity can overcome these huge challenges (Neyrat 2018: 59–67). On the other hand, this forces us to look at those whose alterity is actively denied by this project, and whose very existence has been historically oppressed and actively made invisible by a particular ontology.

New political subjectivities are thus emerging in the resistance of this master narrative, that is, the hegemonic discourse or the ruling ideas that present humans and nature as separate, whose only purpose is to be put to work for capital to constitute the Anthropocene. Through what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) called the sociology of absences, a process that brings forth those forms of existence that have been rendered as non-existence, as non-credible alternatives to what exists (Santos 2014: 15), it then becomes possible to articulate the multiple forms of resistance that are unsettling this narrative. Form the interaction of feminist workers and strikes (Gago 2021) to the emergence of a pluriversal politics (see, Escobar 2018; Kothari et al. 2018), the Anthropocene must then be seen as more than an event or an epoch-defining characteristic of humanity, but as the ultimate form (or the apotheosis) of racist, colonial, patriarchal Western-modernity. In other words, the Anthropocene has been adopted as the hegemonic or ruling idea or common sense, that cannot be reduced to a simple epoch-defining characteristic (Barca 2020).

While we see the debate associated with the multiple names given to the current epoch (e.g., Capitalocene, Plantatiocene, Chthulucene) as relevant, this issue is interested in their contributions as methods, that is, how these notions can help us formulate and construct a political subjectivity of the ongoing civilizatory/planetary crisis. We echo the notions that present the Anthropocene, both theoretically and ontologically, as ‘patchy’ (Tsing et al. 2019), or in other words, we see no such thing as totalizing the Anthropocene, instead we see possibility at the margins of this discourse. We see class, gender and racial struggles taking shape as capitalism struggles to maintain the forces of reproduction at its disposal, as more and more alliances between those that have been historically oppressed become more evident (see, Arboleda 2020).

Marisol de la Cadena (2019) calls the Anthropo-not-seen a neologism which signals

*the world-making process through which heterogenous worlds that do not make themselves through the division between humans and non-humans—nor do they necessarily conceive the different entities in their assemblages through such a division—are both obliged into that distinction and exceed it.*
Others, like Arturo Escobar (2020; this issue), refer to this condition as *radical relationality* which is meant to show this radical form of interdependence between what is often separated by modern thought as nature and culture. Collapsing this separation has become the go-to tool of both post-modern and post-colonial thinkers. For most, the collapse signals a need to look beyond the traditional ways of framing politics and focusing instead on those other forms of understanding of the world that have been traditionally left out, obscured and or suppressed by modern thought. The bottom line is that modernity has reached a conundrum from which it cannot escape: the civilization crisis is in its essence a crisis of energy, food, institutions, democracy, and perhaps most relevant of all, meaning (Escobar 2015, 2020). The search for alternatives or revolutionary subjects in the face of these multiple crises has academics scrambling to find answers.

The inspiration for this theme issue originated in the search for a scalar conceptualization of global- and local-level interactions, specifically trying to address how it is that those local solutions can lead towards global transformations? Are the efforts (mainly coming from the academy) to name our epoch any good for actual revolutionary strategies? If we are facing a civilizatory crisis, then what tools for emancipation that we are familiar with are still useful or effective in our current epoch? While we do not presume to answer these questions in full, the Theme Issue offers a series of propositions and debates that can, in our view, begin to lay the groundwork to answer these questions.

For the issue, we drew inspiration for the work from the theme of pluriversal politics (Escobar 2015). In brief, pluriversal politics means engaging with multiple dialogic methods to

*enhance appreciation of multiple ways of knowing and being in the world (...) that decentres models of science and development that have been portrayed as universally true and good (Paulson 2018: 85).*

Concepts like conviviality, *Buen Vivir* and *Comunalidad* in Latin America, *Ubuntu* in Africa, Degrowth in Europe and North America and a struggle for the commons elsewhere have highlighted these modes of transition beyond the Anthropocene towards a cosmopolitan or pluriversal process of re-worlding (Salleh 2020). As remarked by Karin Amimoto Ingersoll (2018: 301):

*[Too] much of the world proceeds without memory, as if the spaces we inhabit are blank geographies, and thus available for consumption and development.*

In this light, the problems of our time are not based on a lack of development, progress, or economic growth,

*but in the conception of development itself as a linear, unidirectional, material, and financial growth, driven by commoditization and capitalist markets (Kothari et al. 2018: xxii).*

Drawing on indigenous placed-based examples including notions such as ‘grounded normativity’ (Coulthard & Simpson 2016), these alternatives to development point towards a need to recognize the differences and specificities of socio-environmental struggles. These forms of ethical frameworks are provided by the thought and praxis of those that have historically experienced modernity as an imposition, effectively
becoming the victims of modernity (Dussel 2015). Their experiences of distress due to loss of livelihoods, identities and ecological functions from environmental changes points towards an agenda with multiple paths towards transformation, emancipation and definitions of justice.

**Theme issue contents**

This theme issue brings together scholars working in different fields highlighting the historical conversations and growing number of convergences between critiques to capitalism and critiques to modernity and Eurocentrism, emerging from the Global North and South (with a particular emphasis on Latin America). The main goal of the issue is not only to highlight the importance of a continued dialogue between these positions, but to address the apparent theoretical contradictions that are often formulated against one another. The issue presents four original contributions seeking to address: a) political ontology, b) methodological contributions to engage with those subaltern or repressed knowledges (Foucault 2003), c) a systematic account of the grassroots struggles and political innovations in Latin America and d) the understanding of ecological conflicts seen as cultural misunderstandings (Viveiros de Castro 2006). These contributions enable us to identify the emergence of what Escobar (this issue) along with Marisol de la Cadena calls *Pluriversal Contact Zones* (PCZ).

In the first original article, Tim May addresses the ontological nature of an ecological disagreement over a wastewater collector in Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. His analysis presents the contradictory nature of ontological disagreements, furthering the case for establishing differences through ontological politics. May shows how the perceived environmentality that guides the Friends of the Lake organization presents the collector as a benefit for the local population. However, May’s work shows how such arguments are mixed with historical references to colonial politics and a manner that disregards local inhabitants’ meanings and relation to the lake. The article highlights the importance of looking at environmental conflicts beyond the traditional gaze of political economy and political ecology. Instead, May approaches the different meanings and stakes in the conflict from the perspective of Political Ontology. Seeing these as ontological disagreements shows how the environmental conflict in the case of Lake Atitlán transcends the taken-for-granted framings of nature, either as resources or conservation units. Ultimately, his article shows how

*a more nuanced approach, inclusive of ontological ambiguities is necessary to better understand extractivist conflicts and to move abstract discussions closer to the dynamic and entangled realities of Indigenous lives (May, this issue).*

In *Listening with the subaltern: Anthropocene, Pluriverse and more-than-human agency*, António Carvalho and Mariana Riquito present a novel and provocative methodological approach to navigate the Anthropocene and its entanglements. For the authors, the Anthropocene presents more than a geological timescale or a geopolitical event reflecting the dominant ontological model – the modern “one-world world” perspective (Law 2011). Their analysis draws on several methodological practices that, while speculative at this stage, point towards directions that are needed to listen-to or learn-from those that have been oppressed or silenced by the Master’s discourse, the subaltern. This specifically refers
to those that have been historically oppressed by this ontological understanding of the world based on development and capitalist imaginaries. Drawing from a rich theoretical background, the authors show how the debate of the Anthropocene cannot be reduced to a modernist framework of development, progress and economic growth. Instead, the article signals an exhaustion of modernist solutions, and the need to turn focus to those who have been historically silenced in conceptualizations of the Anthropocene. Carvalho and Riquito propose a way forward by presenting a series of methodological proposals towards politicization as we continue to navigate the modernity-spawned civilizational crisis.

Following this article, Marina Wertheimer presents a case study of La Ribera de Bernal, a neighbourhood in Buenos Aires. Here, the development of an urban settlement in Nueva Costa del Plata is presented as a form of urban extractivism. Wertheimer argues that the controversies between locals, environmentalists and developers is based on a form of ‘cultural misunderstanding and ontological disagreement’. Drawing on the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2006), Wertheimer sees the environmental conflict over the new settlement to be based on cultural – often insurmountable – misunderstandings. As pointed out by Escobar (in this issue), common interests may be shared among multiple actors, but they are not the same interest due to different ontological understandings of the place, resources, and nature-culture relations. Wertheimer’s case study shows precisely how pluriversal politics appear in a context in which other forms of being in the world are uncovered or revealed by highlighting common but different understandings of the conflict and its stakes between environmentalists, developers, and local inhabitants. She argues that attempts to bring environmental concerns to local inhabitants are often considered as exported epistemologies, even as a form of violence, where scientific knowledge, “ingrained and naturalized as a habitus, ends up imposing a superior epistemological position” (Wertheimer, this issue). Ultimately, Wertheimer’s article shows how the use of conservationist’s discourses served to legitimize environmentalist groups in public debates.

In the fourth article, Erandi Maldonado-Villalpando and Jaime Paneque-Gálvez present a review of the multiple forms of thought and territorial struggle emerging in Latin America. Reviewing both academic and grey literature on grassroots innovation, post-development, alternatives to development and Zapatismo, the authors seek to map the alternatives to development emerging from several communities’ defence of their territory and ways of living. A process that, as they argue, often incurs in the design and the construction of alternatives to the hegemonic and imposed form of development by states or markets. The authors show how grassroots organizations and community organizing are not only seeking alternative forms of development in the Global South but are generating innovative processes and practices to create other possible worlds.

The theme issue then presents two special contributions. First, we present an interview with Arturo Escobar to reflect on how his work on the pluriverse and its relation to the contemporary civilizational crisis. We focus on his theorization of pluriversal politics based on the idea of thinking and designing politics in a world where many worlds fit. This includes notions like terricide, pluriversal contact zones, community entanglements, entanglements of concepts and neologisms that have given birth to a new language and the possibility of imagining something beyond the apotheosis of modernity in the Anthropocene. These are viewed through what Escobar calls the axes for civilizational transitions, presented as possible alternative approaches to the Anthropocene and the ontology of separation that constitutes it. We also discuss his more recent work on radical relationality and the impact of Sylvia Wynter and transhumanity on his thought,
before finally touching on his long-lasting work on development, post-development, and its relation to the current development agenda of Sustainable Development Goals.

Following the interview, we introduce the discussion section with an intervention by Jason W. Moore. In it, Moore argues that the notion of the pluriverse is in reality “a flight from World-history”. For Moore, the idea of the pluriverse presents an ahistorical understanding of the current civilizational crisis. Instead, he argues that contrary to the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene acts simultaneously as a solution to ahistorical narratives, and as a method to disentangle how world-ecology resulted from capitalism’s interaction with climate change and civilization projects. The article claims that political ontology frameworks are limited, by highlighting the importance of returning to the mechanisms of class struggle and world history to interpret our current civilizatory crisis. Moore’s intervention sets the groundwork for a quite interesting and fruitful debate over the long-standing tensions between post-colonial and decolonial thinkers on the one hand and Marxist thought on the other. The juxtaposition of these two fields of study has in the past resulted in a series of critiques that often foreclose rather than expand on the possibilities for cross-fertilization.

In response, Federico Luisetti argues that indeed, the cross-fertilization of materialist and decolonial concepts is not yet over. Drawing on the point of origin of the birth of contemporary capitalism and colonial relations, Luisetti sees in the coalescence of both narratives the possibility of multiple ways of providing an alternative to the Anthropocene consensus that legitimates and normalizes neoliberalism and its conception of nature as a form of common sense. According to Luisetti (this issue),

*a pluriversal politics of nature can reverse the ecocidal imagination of the capitalist energy transition by promoting alliances of movements centred on “little-e’ energies” and liberation ecologies in urban centres and agricultural lands, indigenous territories and Western enclosures.*

Drawing on the possibility of a multiplicity of universalisms such as Wallerstein’s *A Thousand Marxisms*, it becomes possible to question “the way that incommensurability operates within struggles, values and practices of energy, life, and justice across extra-human natures”, and to identify some open gaps that Marxism and political ontologies can address.

Japhy Wilson presents a response to Jason Moore, arguing for a project that reformulates the abstract Eurocentric universalism, towards a multiplicity of insurgent universalities. Drawing on the examples of the Haitian Revolution at the end of the 19th Century and the contemporary Ecuadorian Amazon, Wilson makes a distinction between a homogenizing universalism in the abstract, to the actual struggles that constitute the possibility of emancipation. As he argues, by looking at the margins or the edges of the extractive frontiers, it becomes possible to see how universalism is not always a totalizing project exported from the outside, but it constitutes a form of lived reality, or an “insurgent universality”, which creates a space of struggle “in which the universal dimension emerges like a flash of lightning, simultaneously exposing false universals and transcending closed identities” (Wilson, this issue). Wilson argues that the colonial past is present in most of these places and is palpable in the struggles emerging in today’s conflicts. Therefore, the pluriverse itself reduces subalterns’ struggles to a form of universality that forecloses any emancipatory potential from the margins.

Finally, Carlos Tornel offers a possible space for dialogue between political ontology and Marxist thought. Drawing on the decolonial school from Latin America, emerging from several movements and thinkers, the commentary shows how the debate between traditional Marxism continues to discount Marx’s questions and contestations of his
own teleological assumptions by the end of his life and work. Tornel claims that while the debate has shifted from whether the subalterns can speak (which indeed they can!) to how can we learn from those Others that have been historically discounted or ‘cheapened’ by global capitalism and eurocentric-modernity over the last 500 years. Tornel argues that there are numerous possibilities for a dialogue to emerge between these two fields, but that the main aspect that we can learn is to follow how indigenous, peasant and other grounded communities are reinventing their struggle against capitalism, development, the traditional ways of organizing society and nature relations under colonialism and patriarchy.

These commentaries offer the beginnings of a dialogue that we see as fruitful and important in the field of both Marxist thought and Political Ontology and, more broadly, a discussion that needs to be sustained as we continue to understand pluriversal politics and revolutionary subjectivities in an age of generalized crises.

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References


