

BOOK REVIEWS

BARCA, STEFANIA 2020. *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 75 p. ISBN: 9781108813952 (paperback); ISBN: 9781108880428 (E-book)

As a tiring sense of planetary crisis casts its shadow on social research, one response has been to reinterpret the history of capitalism in creative ways. Often the debate pivots around the contested but nonetheless widely used (and useful) concept of the Anthropocene, and much of the debate emerges from the environmental humanities. This field, significant for environmental anthropology these days, is characterised on the back cover of *Forces of Reproduction* as ‘a new transdisciplinary complex of approaches to the embeddedness of human life and culture in all the dynamics that characterize the life of the planet’. The series, *Cambridge Elements in Environmental Humanities*, currently numbers seven published volumes including Barca’s text, furthering debate that connects critical and creative work.

Readers with an anthropological or ethnographic sensibility are likely to find the rapidly growing literature speculating on the future of the planet at its most convincing when it is socially and materially grounded. Stefania Barca’s short text does indeed include ample empirical illustrations to support her argument. It is also provocative, building on a tradition of Marxist and eco-feminist work over several decades, and acknowledging the influence of political ecology networks and activist collectives. It also reflects its author’s background as an environmental historian. Though thin, the book is a welcome addition to

the Anthropocene literature and should appeal to novice and veteran alike.

To set the scene, she analyses a 3-minute video titled *Welcome to the Anthropocene* that was presented at the 2012 Rio+20 Earth Summit. The film was designed to offer a scientific reading of earth-systems crises whilst inviting an undifferentiated humanity, a problematic *We*, to now take responsibility for fixing the crises and shaping a better future by nurturing the creativity, energy, and industry that humans are capable of (p. 9). Most major arenas where global environmental governance is debated and shaped now do accept and act on something like this version of the narrative. Though her tone is polemical, Barca usefully provides details of the institutions and discourses, among scholars, activists, policy makers, and business leaders alike, that contribute to this.

The core argument echoes other efforts to undo the Anthropocene narrative by showing up imperialist omissions and gendered biases in the way crisis is conceptualised. Like for many others (Andreas Malm and Kathryn Yusoff, for example), for Barca the hegemonic understanding of the Anthropocene as ‘our’ shared crisis and challenge is crying out loud for counter-hegemonic narratives that are earth-aware and careful in many ways. In a lucid summary, early on in the introductory chapter, she synthesises how the master narrative of European, modern, industrially based economic

growth persistently obliterates the social and ecological costs associated with fossil capital. She goes on to lay out how the Anthropocene narrative is more about perpetuating the violence of fossil capitalism than about any ecologically productive revolution of thought. In fact, it is a master-narrative that covers over the agency and even the existence of other-than-master subjects of history. In her analysis it is here, among the colonised and excluded, that the true forces of reproduction can be found. The work and the knowledge that keeps the world alive is precisely not that of the masters, the Anthropos of the official narrative. Rather, it is the racialised and feminised non-masters, who are usually even framed as not properly human—not part of the Anthropos responsible for capitalist/industrial modernity—whose contributions actually matter. The masters generate violence, while their Anthropocene narrative only perpetuates ignorance and reduces sustainability to ecological modernization and to the overwhelmingly technocratic projects that stem from such an understanding, and that end up commodifying and financializing nature (p. 10).

Contributing to the important work of decolonising dominant narratives, Barca employs a historical—even an environmental historian's—lens to unpack modernity and Euro-American domination. This recognises the human and not just the geological forces that have shaped the modern mess (to borrow a phrase from Kim Fortun 2014). Underpinning her approach is a long and well-acknowledged heritage of feminist work on ecological and labour relations, but also an ecologically informed appreciation of the plantation (with its significant human as well as nonhuman actors) as formative of European modernity and its conceits, alongside the factory. The relationship between economic and ecological is thus shown

to be far more complex but also manipulable, than suggested or allowed by the intellectual and political conventions that pit them against each other. The argument is made through illustrating how society, market included, depends on life-giving work, and working out from this how global proletarianization and global environmental degradation go together.

Countering the neoliberal assumption that welfare depends on economic growth, the analysis that Barca develops recognises value across the range of ways of satisfying human needs, not just in 'the market' or in labour otherwise deemed productive by the narrow definitions of European economic thought. If Marxist feminism put unwaged labour carried out by women at the heart of the historical rise of capitalism, the ecofeminist approaches also deployed by Barca have both deepened and questioned the relegation of women and the feminine to non-market domains that modern thought aligned with nature and naturalness. These long-standing debates are briefly synthesised in the book, grounding the argument for a relational, historically informed, analysis of the contradictions of the Anthropocene and its political stories.

Forces of Reproduction builds on this feminist ground, echoing arguments about why women are at the forefront of so much environmental activism and defence of, quite simply, life. Its analysis recovers a multiplicity of powers that sustain life but are systematically forgotten, ignored or dismissed by polite society and political systems. Specifically, Barca works on four areas in which the forces of reproduction are denied or ignored in the hegemonic Anthropocene-talk: colonial, class, and gender but also species relations. Across these domains, drawing generously on illustrations from the (mostly) English-language sources, Barca articulates a confident,

angry, and often nuanced version of a critical counter-narrative, elements of which will be familiar to many anthropologists. As elsewhere in Anthropocene writing, there are repeated references to feminist materialism, as well as to unconventional registers for making sense of the damages of industrial capitalism, such as poetry. Her invocations of working-class communities and labour stands out as novel as well as politically potent, drawn as they are from the experiences of workers, trade unions, and labour organizations.

Readers can make their own connections to the myriad extractivist forces shaping modes of misery around the world, and yet which are deemed necessary not just to make profit but to be green, as in dominant visions of sustainability (electrification, digitalisation, and other platforms of so-called green growth). This contributes to politically crucial descriptions and to the analytical work that many activist-scholars hope will overturn the idea that sustainability-as-usual—including the Anthropocene narrative—is a good thing. After all, the damages discussed in this text as environmental injustices suffered by the weakest in the world are no longer limited to the sacrifice zones in parts of the Global South

but now generate conflicts closer to home, even here in the Nordics.

Barca's contribution furthers important political projects of developing and refining the vocabulary required to understand and ideally reverse the violence embedded in business as usual, and even sustainability-as-usual. The historical record we are working with, and the material legacies people are living with, indeed do invite serious attention to all the four dimensions of wilful ignorance Barca works against: gendered, colonial, species, and class relations. And here, as an environmental historian, with an eye for what already *is* as opposed to the speculations of so much Anthropocene-analysis, Barca does a great job.

REFERENCES

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