

BOOK REVIEW

Translated Version

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WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ANTHROPOCENE?

O ANTHROPOCENO E A CIÊNCIA DO SISTEMA TERRA

José Eli da Veiga. São Paulo, SP: Editora 34, 2019. 152 p.

After years of there being very few reactions to the implications of organizations on issues such as global warming, changes in atmospheric composition, and the acidification of the oceans, it seems that in 2019 the field of Organizational Studies (OS) finally began to reflect on the Anthropocene to a meaningful degree¹. The delay in joining the chorus of scientists who have been studying the impacts of human actions on planet Earth and denouncing its effects makes it seem that we have reached this moment perhaps more because of the availability of information than because of political commitment. After all, as environmental disasters that are increasingly being associated with human actions have become more frequently perceived and reported upon, it seems that we are becoming more attentive and more likely to adhere to the subject in our research agendas (perhaps without the awareness that we can be influenced by the readiness with which catastrophic events now come to mind and inform public opinion). Still, the sudden interest in the topic represents a flash of consciousness, and we cannot miss the moment². As *DeCock, Nyberg, and Wright (2019)* point out, the time has come to develop OS as a discipline that fits the Anthropocene. If we want OS to be part of the solution of the environmental crisis, rather than being one of its sources, we must not only engage quickly with scientific debates about the Anthropocene, but must also act promptly.



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¹ In the EGOS conference in Edinburgh, the Anthropocene was addressed explicitly in the title of a sub-theme (Critical Anthropocene studies), and was the central focus of the discussion of at least one other (Discursive and material struggles over the natural environment). It was also the central theme of a crowded subplenary (Grand challenges: Organizations and the Anthropocene). Before that, in 2018, the journal *Organization* published a special issue dedicated to the theme “Organizing in the Anthropocene.” The OS of Latin America and Brazil can boast of having arrived at the topic in a pioneering way (although not quicker than to other scientific fields). Spaces for discussion about the Anthropocene emerged in the 2018 and 2019 editions of CBE0 (in the sub-themes “Organizational Studies in the Anthropocene” and “Organization-nature relations in the Anthropocene: epistemic crisis of anthropocentrism and the emergence of new biosocialities,” respectively). The same occurred at the international conference of Red Pílares in Chile, in 2018 (in the round table “Cambio climático y otros riesgos del Antropoceno para América Latina”). Also, before the Europeans, the journal *Desacatos: Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, organized by the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Social Antropología (Ciesas) of Mexico, launched in 2017 the number 54 – “Cambio Climático y Antropoceno” - available at this link: <http://desacatos.ciesas.edu.mx/index.php/Desacatos/issue/view/102/showToc>.

² We emphasize that the critical reflection on the relationship between organizations and the environment has been on the agenda of OS since the 1990s, as attested to by the chapter by Egri and Pinfield (1996) in the Handbook on Organizational Studies. In 2006, after the proposition of the term Anthropocene, the chapter written by Jermier, Forbes, Benn and Orsato (2006) updated the discussion, but did not address the issue. We do not ignore the contributions that critical studies to the perspective of sustainability and sustainable development have made to problematizing the impact of human action (enhanced by organizations) on planet Earth. However, we want to specifically highlight the lack of engagement with the Anthropocene. This word expands the vocabulary of the area, introducing a new concept that can help to explain reality in a more attuned way with contemporary problems, and the way they are being placed in other scientific domains.

Veiga's book is a shortcut for Brazilian researchers, which allows them to grasp the history and vocabulary surrounding the issue. The text comprises the Prologue (The new Epoch), three sections that are reasonably independent of each other (Overflight, Zoom, and Findings), and Epilogue (The Promise). In going through this text, the reader not only becomes aware of the facts surrounding the proposition of the new Epoch (in capital letters, as Veiga points out to be the correct spelling), but also remembers (and learns) distant concepts for OS scientists, who may possibly be unaware of the methods of Geology (such as stratigraphy, which is very important to understand the disputes regarding the proposal of a milestone for the beginning of the new Anthropocene Epoch). By avoiding costly forays into other sciences, Brazilian OS scholars can find out about the current debate on the Anthropocene from important scientific entities (such as IGBP, IPCC, and IPBES, among many other acronyms cited in the book), and they can also get to know the behind-the-scenes operations and idiosyncrasies of Earth System Sciences. The book brings knowledge about the Anthropocene to a global context, mentioning the contribution of some Brazilian scientists dedicated to the issue (although we would have liked to see more references to other Brazilian authors throughout the book).

Although Veiga does not propose a dialogue with the study of organizations, he hints at this possibility by showing the connections between Earth System Sciences and Social Sciences. The shortcut that this book provides could also be indicative of new paths, if we take the epistemological issue raised by Veiga between the lapsing of systemic perspectives in the face of complexity, or the ontological ones, such as anthropocentric thinking and its overcoming, and even the cosmological ones, such as the contradictory narratives of Gaia and Medeia in explaining the collapsing Earth. However, it is necessary to escape some of the pitfalls left by the author. These are only sketched thoughts or digressions, and they do little to make the book seem more than an introductory guide, to be cited more for its peremptory (and localized originality, after all, it is one of the only Brazilian books of its type) than for stimulating the development of the Anthropocene science in Brazil in different fields of knowledge.

Scrutinizing the text in its parts, in the chapter Overflight we see, from the first paragraph, the spectral reference to the civilizing process, by Norbert Elias. It is known that theories about the beginning of the Anthropocene refer to a certain idea of civilization. However, the meaning used by Veiga is vague and contradictory. For example, the author highlights two current and trendy references, which elaborated on different ideas about "civilization." First, Kate Raworth (2017), whose proposals are

enthusiastically described (even with the reproduction of the donut graphic representing the planetary limits and the limits of human action). Then, Yuval Harari (2015, 2016, 2018) is accused of being one of those who "distort the initial idea" (Veiga, p. 31) of the term Anthropocene, in a criticism that may sound unfair to those who have already gone through these works without finding the same figure to the Anthropocene perceived by Veiga. At the end of the chapter, one does not know why Raworth is exalted, or why Harari is condemned, for referring, each in their way and according to different purposes, to the impacts of human civilizations on planet Earth. Throughout the book, Veiga diminishes the importance of discussions about the definition of the Anthropocene from a stratigraphic framework (although he makes his reader know and understand the issue), by making explicit (without explaining) his adherence to the Great Acceleration Thesis. His sympathy for Raworth seems to corroborate the idea that the "civilizing processes" of developed countries is the main cause of the state of affairs of the Anthropocene, but this is not clear. Even more delicate is the vague mention, without a theoretical anchor, to "the psychic propensity of humans over nature," or "human nature," combined with the "civilizing process."

Another trap is an incursion into complexity departing from Edgar Morin. The epistemological debate on Earth-System Sciences, which starts in the Zoom chapter, gives us an idea of the difficulties of integrating science(s) into understanding the Anthropocene and its challenges. Veiga explains that some researchers in this field are more inclined to approach humanities than others. In the next chapter (called Findings), however, he reduces the melting-pot of complexity to Morin's proposals. He makes sure to describe the concepts and criticize some particular elements of this author's work. The reduction of complexity to Morin is limited, not to say outdated, if we think about the complexity of the Anthropocene (dynamic problems of planetary magnitude that reveal the integration of the Earth in an amazing way). Although Veiga elaborates on the distinction between Gaia and Medeia in earlier parts of the text, he does not return to this cosmological perspective to enrich the debate, or to expand the text's view on complexity. Likewise, although the author cites important references for understanding the contribution of Social Sciences to the definition of the Anthropocene, he does not address these sources, choosing instead to elaborate on the debate on the complexity by focusing only on Morin.

OS researchers will also have to deal with the fact that Veiga has restricted the definition of the new Anthropocene Epoch to the scope of Earth History in the concluding paragraphs of the book. After embracing the promise of integrating the