

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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José Reis

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Ana Cordeiro Santos, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Fortuna, João Rodrigues,
José Castro Caldas, José Reis, Pedro Hespanha, Vítor Neves

Linguistic Revision

João Paulo Moreira

Editorial Assistant

Rita Kacia Oliveira

Design and Pagination

André Queda

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ANTHROPOCENE

António Carvalho

The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch to illustrate the inseparability between human actions – starting with the Industrial Revolution – and planetary phenomena such as climate change, global warming and extreme meteorological events. Global capitalism has reacted to the Anthropocene with a hypermodern response, deploying instruments such as carbon markets, the development of emerging technologies to control and manage solar radiation, and multiple legal and bureaucratic devices that increase the North/South divide, naturalising the extractivist drive of global capitalism.

The Anthropocene marks a new phase of global capitalism, in which nature and terrestrial systems are turned into commodities, creating new challenges for social movements. While the meta-narrative of climate change mobilises governments and supranational institutions to promote the hegemony of planetary capitalism, social movements have to resort to scientific and technical expertise to justify their struggles.

The Western technological and scientific matrix is strongly linked to the expansion of capitalism. Escaping the narrative of green capitalism is a complex challenge, as it manifests itself through apparently emancipatory material politics enlisting renewable energies, electric cars and “sustainable” forms of consumption. The very resistance of populist regimes – as in Brazil and the United States – to recognising the climate emergency reinforces

the technical-scientific narrative that sustains these new forms of capitalism, making it all the more difficult to adopt alternative ecologies of knowledge.

Social movements must critically position themselves in face of the transition to low-carbon societies, bearing in mind that the climate change narrative should not naturalize top-down decision-making processes. Also fundamental is the establishment of bridges with collectives from the global South, thus decentring the Anthropocene from its white and Western matrix, bringing visibility to the experiences and narratives of those who are actually affected by climate change.

Furthermore, it is urgent to involve “lay citizens” in participatory exercises regarding technological solutions aimed at addressing the Anthropocene, such as geoengineering. This will help avoid the trap of double delegation, which hinders citizens’ ability to have an impact on the design of contemporary socio-technical assemblages.

The social sciences should focus on analysing the material politics of climate change and related transitions, abandoning a dualistic heuristic matrix that does not take into account the material agency of non-humans. In light of this, new ontologies and methodologies need to be developed to pave the way for wider forms of political participation beyond the human.