

Rethinking environmental justice in the Anthropocene

An anthropological perspective

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Fig. 1. Walking in an arid area following a prolonged drought (Legal Amazonia, Maranhão, Brazil).

Fig. 2. A man near his roça, a mixed cropping area in the forest. Swidden agriculture, a rotational farming technique, is the main subsistence activity for this Amazonian quilombo (community of descendants of African slaves).

Fig. 3. A man sets fire to the area he cleared with his family to cultivate it.

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In 1982, Afton residents and civil rights leaders started to protest the decision to locate a toxic waste dump in their territory in North Carolina, USA. Sixty per cent of the 16,000 Afton inhabitants were Afro-American, many below the poverty line. Their protests could have been just an ordinary NIMBY (not in my backyard) fight, but it soon became a case of national relevance and a watershed in the Afro-American community's struggle against discrimination (Bullard 1990; Martínez-Alier 2005). Although unsuccessful, these protests represented a symbolic birth of the environmental justice (EJ) movement that denounced the unequal distribution of environmental 'bads' and risks within American society (Sze & London 2008).

Environmental racism

A decisive step for this movement was the publication in 1987 of the report *Toxic waste and race in the United States* by the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. Based on an analysis of quantitative data collected in a nationwide survey, the report claimed that '[r]ace proved to be the most significant among variables tested in association with the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities' (Commission for Racial Justice 1987: xiii). Benjamin F. Chavis Jr, Executive Director of the Commission, found evidence of an 'insidious form of racism' that 'all persons committed to racial and environmental justice' should challenge (Chavis 1987: ix).

By focusing on environmental racism, activists were implicitly moving away from the idea of 'risk society' successfully proposed by the sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992[1986]) in those same years. He foresaw humanity united by a shared sense of insecurity produced by global threats. According to Beck, this democratization of risk transcends class differences and sometimes even spatial distances, creating a 'commonality of anxiety' (ibid.: 49, original emphasis). In contrast to this perspective, which seems to prefigure a humanity united by a shared sense of fragility, the EJ movement emphasizes the profoundly unequal nature of environmental risk.

Forty years have passed since the Afton events. However, the issue of socio-environmental discrimination is still dramatically topical, as evidenced, for example, by the heartfelt denunciations of the Brazilian Network of Environmental Justice about the tragic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the environmental crisis on the Afro-descendant population and indigenous peoples (Rede Brasileira de Justiça Ambiental 2020). Nevertheless, one might ask whether the fertile and incisive notion of EJ can today benefit from some reflections that have taken shape in anthropology in the meantime regarding the meaning and use of categories such as 'nature', 'environment' and 'non-human', and the debates triggered by the notion of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000). This suggestion has several reasons rooted in the history of EJ itself, understood both as a specific experience of social struggle and as an interdisciplinary field of academic reflection initiated by the sociologist Robert Bullard (1990).

First, the EJ movement mainly offered a 'technicist' anthropocentric reading of the 'environment'. On the one hand, the EJ movement and studies interpret the environment chiefly as a material, objective and unambiguous substratum monitored through specific scientific parameters to address distributive equity issues. Many studies have, for example, sought to understand whether authorities placed LULUs (locally unwanted land uses) near



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Fig. 4. Area that will be cultivated as soon as the fire is completely out.

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black communities on purpose or whether this was merely a product of housing market trends (Holfield et al. 2009). On the other hand, the EJ movement declined environmental protection as a social and racial equity issue compared to ‘classic’ US urban environmentalism. As David Schlosberg points out, ‘early in the history of the conception of environmental justice, critiques of the limitations of conceiving of environment as wilderness and the “big outside” were combined with a recognition of the much more broadly defined conception of environment as “where we live, work, and play”’ (Schlosberg 2013: 38-39, citing Novotny 2000). Unsurprisingly, eco-centric animal rights activists and wilderness advocates greeted this ‘anthropocentric turn’ with concern (Sandler & Pezzullo 2007).

The second relevant point is that this technician and anthropocentric way of conceiving the environment has facilitated theoretical dialogue, especially with sociology, political science, environmental history and geography (Sze & London 2008). The role of anthropology, which is critical of using categories such as nature and environment, appears more marginal in EJ literature. On this basis, we can ask ourselves two questions. Is it possible to decentralize our anthropocentric view of the environment without losing sight of social equity issues? What role can anthropology play in this process of categorical re-signification? The following paragraphs will discuss these issues in response to instances of renewal expressed within this strand of academic studies.

Natures, environments and non-humans

As stated by political scientists David Schlosberg and David Carruthers, ‘[I]ndigenous demands for environmental justice go beyond distributional equity to emphasize the defence and very functioning of indigenous communities – their ability to continue and reproduce the traditions, practices, cosmologies, and the relationships with nature that tie native peoples to their ancestral lands’ (2010: 13). This statement is interesting because it reveals a process of reflection within the same EJ approach, which, once globalized, is necessarily confronted with culturally different visions of what the Occident defines as ‘nature’ or ‘environment’. Later, Schlosberg suggested that ‘the environmental justice movement brought indigenous perspectives on the relationship between human beings, non-human nature, and culture into conversation’ (2013: 39). In this regard, anthropology is a necessary interlocutor to deconstruct the nature-culture dichotomy that characterizes EJ.

Anthropologists have long ceased to consider the environment as a mere material substratum or background for human action, interpreting it instead as the dynamic outcome of a constant co-productive work between humans and non-humans (Descola & Pálsson 1996). According to Philippe Descola (2013), the very process of identifying

a boundary between ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ is contextual. The idea that ‘nature’ constitutes a non-human otherness that can be dominated and managed by human beings is, in fact, the full expression of the *naturalist ontology* that characterizes the Western world.

This conception is in stark contrast to indigenous *animist ontologies*, where the non-human is based on a plurality of subjectivities endowed with a specific agency. Another indigenist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998: 470), formulated the concept of ‘multinaturalism’ ‘to designate one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to Western “multiculturalist” cosmologies’. The latter would entail the mutual implication between the idea of the oneness of nature – based on the objective universality of bodies and substance – and the diversity of cultures. On the contrary, indigenous cosmologies presuppose a specular perspective. Humans and non-humans share a common culture, as a reflection of an ancestral humanoid state common to all existents, in contrast to a plurality of ‘natures’, differently experienced through the physical diversity of bodies (Viveiros de Castro 2013: 480).

Therefore, stepping outside the epistemic space defined by Western social theory means exploring the *relational ontologies* (Escobar 2016) based on subjects’ concepts, worldviews and practices challenging modernist universalism. According to Arturo Escobar, such ontologies assume that nothing exists apart from its relations. In other words, things and people are the relations between them and do not exist a priori. This reading lays the foundations not only for thinking about the possibility of alternative worlds able to rebel against the conformity of the one world but also for enhancing existing ones. Escobar’s theoretical proposal, which at bottom summarizes the very mandate of anthropology, invites us to move away from the idea of a single universe to think in terms of a *pluriverse* made up of worlds that co-constitute themselves while remaining distinct.

In this pluriverse, otherness is configured as a constitutive dimension of relationality and not simply as an irreducible other. From this perspective, the struggles against injustices in defence of territories, which in some contexts often coincide with the defence of cultural difference, can then be read as ‘ontological battles’ to defend the plurality of worlds that make up the world (ibid.). The ethnographic research I carried out in the Brazilian Amazon in a community of descendants of enslaved Africans showed, for example, how the sense of belonging to a territory follows from the intertwining of a system of customary rights relating to the use of vegetation, land and river, and the awareness of having to share these ‘natural’ places with non-human entities with their own agency in relation to humans (Tassan 2013, 2017).

Notions such as ‘flow’, ‘movement’ and ‘becoming’, as conceptualized by Tim Ingold (2013), also make it pos-



(From left to right, above to below)

Fig. 5. A man plants the maniva, the stem of the cassava.

Fig. 6. Fishing with basket (cesto) in a small stream. Fishing is another key livelihood activity for this quilombo.

Fig. 7. Once harvested, the cassava is left to soak in forest streams for at least a week to release its toxic substances and make it edible.

Fig. 8. A woman goes to her roça to pick up some corn cobs.

Fig. 9. A woman completing the preparation of her fishing net.

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sible to highlight how each living being contributes to defining the conditions of existence of others, thus creating the conditions for forming a constantly evolving picture. The environment is not simply 'that which surrounds' but a 'zone of interpenetration' (ibid.: 11, emphasis added). In this zone of interpenetration, various conceptions of what is human and non-human relate.

By incorporating sensitivity towards diverse ethnographic cosmological conceptions, our understanding of the environment could become more nuanced and relational than the one-dimensional Western human vs non-human dichotomy. It would also signify a multi-layered meaning of the environment as a subject of right and a victim of injustice. This last aspect is crucial according to Schlosberg, who believes in shifting from 'environmental conditions as an example or manifestation of social injustice' to a position where 'justice is applied to the treatment of the environment itself', because 'the origins of environmental injustices are as much in the treatment of the non-human realm as in relations among human beings' (2013: 44, emphasis added).

New assemblages in the Anthropocene era

The above considerations on the notion of 'environment' also imply some aspects that emerged in the debates on the Anthropocene. According to Donna Haraway, the specificity of this new geological era has enabled us to grasp the decisive fact that 'assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too' (2015: 159).

The notion of multispecies assemblages proposed by Haraway recalls actor network theory. This theoretical approach took shape to analyse the agency distribution between humans and non-humans. These latter are conceived respectively as actors and 'actants' who give rise to networks of entities that influence each other (Latour 1996). It is not a question of whether humans and non-humans exercise the same kind of agency or are ontologically equivalent (Holifield 2009). As Bruno Latour (2014) has more recently pointed out when reflecting on the Anthropocene, today the point is that the very notion of 'subject' can be understood in terms of an entity subject to the action of another entity, not necessarily human.

Through a multispecies ethnography, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) has explored, for example, reciprocal influences between species. More specifically, she has focused on how these continuous adjustments between species – humans, mushrooms and trees – take shape in an era marked by structural uncertainty given the ecological and social precariousness and vulnerabilities due to capitalism. An ethnographic analysis of the eco-social adjustments produced by the interaction between species and between biotic and abiotic elements can undoubtedly contribute to understanding today's socio-environmental conflicts. Haraway has recently acknowledged that EJ, together with climate justice, is a multispecies issue (2016: 193).

Therefore, the Anthropocene has fostered revision of the notion of assemblage between humans and non-humans in a multispecies perspective. Moreover, it has undoubtedly allowed us to grasp the dramatic confluence between human and geophysical temporalities. Latour has observed that the Anthropocene has unexpectedly led to measuring 'the influence of humans on the same scale as rivers, volcanos, erosion, and biochemistry' (2017: 117, original emphasis). In other words, humanity, understood as the 'human species' or 'mankind', has assumed the guise of a 'new global historical actor' acting as a 'geophysical force capable of destabilizing the boundary parameters of its own existence' (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017: 27). One of the undoubted changes brought about by the proposal of this new geological era has been the

centrality that questions of 'scale, rate/speed, synchronicity, and complexity' have assumed (Haraway 2015: 159). A new 'temporal awareness' invites us to explore the 'multispecies assemblages' through a careful look at becoming and the connections between past, present and possible futures (Haraway 2016: 160).

In this perspective, the well-known notion of 'assemblage' is enriched with a new temporal depth that brings us to reflect on the role it assumes in the construction of 'collectives' (Descola 2013; Latour 1993) of humans and non-humans. In other words, a 'tentacular thinking' (Haraway 2016) applied to ethnographic experience would allow us to explore how the multiple spatio-temporal levels of socio-ecological change give rise to infinite relationships linking together the existing elements on the planet.

This temporal awareness is crucial in understanding current environmental and climate justice movement developments. As Andrew Mathews points out, there is, in fact, 'a structural tension between the urgencies of focusing on a particular mine, dam, or toxic waste site and a *longue durée* anthropological analysis of the processes that have produced environmental degradation and social deprivation' (2020: 76, emphasis added). Since Anthropocene processes often are 'unintentional consequences of past events', 'traditional methods of participant observation and ethnographic interview need to be expanded to include attention to the traces of the past in present-day landscapes' (ibid.: 73).

Indeed, ethnography offers the incomparable advantage of giving access to the way subjects interpret the *longue durée* of geo-historical processes, thus enabling the capture of diverse cultural perceptions of temporality (Hann 2017). Françoise Vergès confirms the importance of the anthropological *longue durée*. She writes, 'we must add to the United Church of Christ's 1987 study of racialized policies of the environment in the twentieth century a history of racial Capitalocene, with an analysis of capital, imperialism, gender, class, and race and a conception of nature and of being human that opposes the Western approach' (2017: 77).

However, the importance assumed by temporality in constructing the contemporary notion of assemblage does not mean looking only at the past. On the contrary, it becomes fundamental to 'a reconsideration of our ethical and political relation to the future' (Mathews 2020: 74) while reconstructing the different temporalities involved in socio-environmental processes in fieldwork. As Arjun Appadurai argues, the future is a cultural fact understood as the 'ethics of possibility', or 'those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what I have called the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative, and critical citizenship' (2013: 295). Exploring the ethics of possibility in the socio-environmental field means putting ourselves in the position to analyse how social actors imagine possible futures in which the socio-ecological heritage of the past can take shape differently from the inequalities and discriminations experienced in the present.

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Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017: 12) find that the EJ concept, while it claims to address social justice issues, merely represents a terminological make-up operation to restore the nature-culture dichotomy. As I tried to show in this contribution, I believe that thanks to the assistance of anthropology, we can distance ourselves from their pessimism. Rethinking EJ through anthropology means going to the heart of contemporary eco-social problems as advocated by Pálsson et al. (2013), namely to combine the issue of equity with a sensitivity to human constructions of nature. ●