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DOSSIER: ANTHROPOCENE AND THE LIKE

Anthropocene and the like as challenges for organizations and society

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Abstract

This text outlines the motivations and expectations that led *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* to launch the call for papers titled "Anthropocene and the Like," stimulating reflections on issues that correspond to an era that has arguably succeeded the Holocene – one in which human presence has intervened in nature, often in a degrading manner. To delineate these expectations, we map the trends that have developed in these long-standing debates and present theoretical perspectives representing the most expressive currents of thought regarding this highly current object of study. We draw attention to the importance of dating this phenomenon – traced by some to a distant past and by others to a recent past beginning with the Industrial Revolution. Likewise, we highlight the debates that challenge the generalized attribution of equal responsibility to humanity, without distinction, for the processes that pollute the environment when not destroying it altogether. This is where organizations stand out, elucidating why a publication centered on businesses, institutions, and diverse entities chose to open its pages to such a sensitive topic. The result of this initiative, published in Volume 24 – this year's single volume – consists of the articles highlighted at the end of this text, which met the motivations and expectations of a debate that must continue. Above all, they aim to ensure that the reflections sparked by this call inspire corrective and preventive actions capable not only of postponing the end of the world, but of making the world a place to live.

Keywords: Anthropocene, organizations, environmental and social sustainability, public policies, society and state.

Antropoceno e quejandos como desafios das organizações e da sociedade

Resumo

Este texto traz a motivação e as expectativas que levaram os *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* a realizarem a chamada Antropoceno e quejandos, estimulando reflexões sobre as questões que correspondem a um tempo que teria sucedido o holoceno e em que a presença humana vem intervindo na natureza, frequentemente de forma degradante. Para indicar as expectativas, mapeamos as tendências que se desenvolveram nos debates, há tempos já abertos, e trouxemos algumas indicações teóricas que representam as correntes mais expressivas do pensamento sobre esse atualíssimo objeto de estudo. Chamamos a atenção para a importância da datação do fenômeno, para uns em passado longínquo, para outros em passado recente, a partir da revolução industrial. Igualmente, advertimos para os debates que questionam a generalização de atribuir ao ser humano, sem distinção, a responsabilidade, em mesmo plano, dos processos que poluem o ambiente, quando não o destroem. Aqui que se destacam as organizações e se explicita a motivação para uma publicação do campo das empresas, instituições e entidades de variados fins se propor a abrir suas páginas a esse sensível tema. O resultado dessa iniciativa, publicado no Volume 24 – volume único deste ano- foram artigos, destacados no final deste texto, que corresponderam à motivação e às expectativas de um debate que precisa continuar. Principalmente, no sentido de que as reflexões suscitadas por essa chamada inspirem ações corretivas e preventivas capazes de não só adiar o fim do mundo, mas fazer do mundo um lugar para viver.

Palavras-chave: Antropoceno, organizações, sustentabilidade ambiental e social, políticas pública, sociedade e estado.

El Antropoceno y afines como desafíos para las organizaciones y la sociedad

Resumen

Este texto expone la motivación y las expectativas que llevaron a *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* a lanzar la convocatoria "Antropoceno y afines", estimulando reflexiones sobre las cuestiones que corresponden a una época que habría sucedido al Holoceno y en la que la presencia humana viene interviniendo en la naturaleza, a menudo de forma degradante. Para señalar dichas expectativas, mapeamos las tendencias desarrolladas en debates abiertos desde hace tiempo y presentamos algunas referencias teóricas que representan las corrientes más expresivas del pensamiento sobre este objeto de estudio de gran actualidad. Llamamos la atención sobre la importancia de la datación del fenómeno: para algunos, en un pasado lejano; para otros, en un pasado reciente, a partir de la Revolución Industrial. Asimismo, advertimos sobre los debates que cuestionan la generalización de atribuir al ser humano, sin distinción, la responsabilidad en un mismo plano de los procesos que contaminan el medio ambiente, cuando no lo destruyen. Es aquí donde destacan las organizaciones y se hace explícita la motivación para que una publicación del campo de las empresas, instituciones y entidades de variados fines se proponga abrir sus páginas a este tema tan sensible. El resultado de esta iniciativa, publicado en el Volumen 24 – volumen único de este año –, son los artículos destacados al final de este texto, que respondieron a la motivación y a las expectativas de un debate que necesita continuar. Principalmente, en el sentido de que las reflexiones suscitadas por esta convocatoria inspiren acciones correctivas y preventivas capaces no solo de posponer el fin del mundo, sino de hacer del mundo un lugar para vivir.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, organizaciones, sostenibilidad ambiental y social, políticas públicas, sociedad y estado.

Submitted on May 27, 2026 and accepted on July 28, 2026.
[Translated version] Note: This translation was supported in part by Google Translate.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120260232x

INTRODUCTION

To the authors and readers of this *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* dossier: two years have passed since the call for papers titled "The Anthropocene and the like" (*Antropoceno e quejandos*), and we would like to explain the reasons behind the delay in publishing this volume.

We identified two main factors. The first concerns the initial proposal to involve co-editors from Spanish—and Portuguese-speaking countries in the Global South—specifically from Latin America and Africa. Our goal was to assemble a geographically diverse group of co-editors to understand how different regions of the Global South have been discussing the meaning of the Anthropocene and its relationship to management studies and practices. Despite our efforts and outreach, we did not receive a response from researchers based in Africa.

The second factor relates to a situation frequently encountered by academic journals like *Cadernos EBAPE.BR*: the difficulty of obtaining timely responses from reviewers regarding submitted articles. This difficulty does not stem from a lack of cooperation, but rather from the multiple demands peers face in their daily academic lives, which often prevent them from responding quickly to journal requests. Furthermore, the authors themselves—operating within this same context—sometimes take a long time to respond to reviews, as they face challenges similar to those of the reviewers.

Let us turn to the theme itself. The Anthropocene, the various interpretations of the concept, and—above all—the significant debate surrounding it serve as the impetus for this edition of *Cadernos EBAPE.BR*, appearing at a timely moment when environmental sustainability has moved to the forefront of the public agenda.

ANTHROPOCENE

The Anthropocene—proposed as the successor to the Holocene—is a term explored by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) in an article titled "The Anthropocene," published in the *IGBP Newsletter*.

Crutzen and Stoermer—a chemist and a biologist, respectively—introduced a concept (now widely recognized) suggesting that we are living in an era where the Earth is increasingly a human construct, shaped by human interference in the biosphere.

In the article, the researchers discuss the degradation caused by these interventions, highlighting their effects on the atmosphere, water bodies, mangroves, and animal species—in short, on the ecosphere across all environments.

It is in this context that the term "Anthropocene" becomes meaningful to them; they no longer view nature as the primary protagonist in the strict sense, but rather see an Earth whose current configuration is defined by a maximized human presence. In the authors' words:

> Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term "anthropocene" for the current geological epoch (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000, p. 18).

More recently, an article published on the *Nature* website—bearing the emphatic title "Protect the last of the wild"—presented findings from scientists in the United States, Canada, and Australia. They reported that, a century ago, only 15% of the Earth's land was used for agriculture and livestock farming. In contrast, today, more than 77% of the Earth's land (excluding Antarctica) and 87% of the oceans have been reached and, to some extent, impacted by human activities (Watson et al., 2018).

Compounding the situation, this extensive occupation and its predatory nature extend beyond agriculture and the oceans, manifesting or reflecting across other dimensions as well. Spatially, the scale and variety of the damage are evident in, for instance, the massive presence of plastic waste or the clouds of atmospheric debris that surround us today. Temporally, one can observe—as noted in the previous citation—the acceleration of this transformative phenomenon; in just one century, the area occupied by humans, animals, and machines has expanded fivefold, filled with a vast array of products, nearly all

of which harbor significant pollutants. Finally, regarding production, an accelerated process of planned obsolescence has been employed to address the crisis of realization and overaccumulation that emerged in the 1970s (Arrighi, 1996; Brenner, 1998; Harvey, 1992), aiming—with partial success—to reinvigorate consumption. Alongside this success, a colossal volume of objects—instantly transformed into waste—is discarded on the streets, if not directly into rivers and seas.

Although geologists, biologists, and chemists—and their respective fields—predominate and effectively pioneered these debates, they are not the only ones concerned with or prompted to address the Anthropocene. Strictly speaking, since the Anthropocene is defined by the central role humans play in Earth's geological evolution, it is the social sciences—the humanities—that seem most challenged to comprehend, articulate, and confront this new era with potential solutions. When humans are the ones responsible for a threatened Earth—as the concept itself implies at first glance—the topic naturally transcends the boundaries of the natural sciences. Indeed, it is quintessentially a subject for the social sciences, albeit one that requires a fundamental dialogue with those pioneers who initiated the debate.

The same applies when, two paragraphs back, we examined the planes in which the phenomenon—or phenomena—associated with the Anthropocene manifest. There, as we delved deeper into the phenomenon, we realized the extent to which the economy, politics, and administration are predominantly present. We are, therefore, facing a challenge directed at the sphere and agenda of organizations—both public and private.

THE ANTHROPOCENE AND ORGANIZATIONS

While acknowledging that not all land use for cultivation and livestock farming is attributable to organizations, we cannot ignore the fact that these economic sectors are led by organizations—with agribusiness, for instance, playing a prominent role. Similarly, ocean navigation and the use of river and sea waters have largely been carried out by business organizations, whether for tourism, transport, or fishing. A major role can also be attributed to organizations—both private and state-owned—in the alarming process of atmospheric pollution, where cities are blanketed in CO2, to cite just the most well-known example. Likewise, planned and accelerated obsolescence—the root cause of the mountains of scrap piling up on our streets—is primarily the result of an economic strategy facilitated by organizational management since the 1980s, a period that saw a redefinition of quality and quality management.

Value creation, continuous improvement, or—as Juran (1990) put it—"endless improvements": this became the new meaning of quality. Since those years, this concept has served as the foundation for the aforementioned planned and accelerated obsolescence.

This new era and the frequently degrading consequences of such transformative human intervention are, without a doubt, issues concerning organizations. This holds true even though one might rightly argue that, driven by organizations and the centrality of work, a large part of society—having been ideologically won over—replicates these earth-polluting habits and actions within its own microcosms.

The fact that *Cadernos EBAPE.BR* is a publication dedicated to organizational studies is reason enough to expect manuscript proposals grounded in this theoretical field. However, beyond that premise, the aspects that immediately present themselves—at first glance—regarding the causes and consequences of said human action upon and with nature serve as indicators that this edition on the Anthropocene should expect approaches and debates to encompass organizations and their management.

This also points to a common critique regarding the attribution of the Anthropocene—particularly its destructive aspects—to humanity, to mankind, or to society; in short, to generic, indistinct, and homogeneous collectives. Consequently, the various debates surrounding the Anthropocene—which have inspired related concepts, including questions about when the new era actually began—carry more significance than might initially appear.

If the era is dated to thousands of years ago—as argued by researchers linking the Anthropocene to population growth, agriculture, pastoralism, and early deforestation (Bocquet-Appel, 2011; Certini & Scalenghe, 2011; Ruddiman, 2013)—certain conclusions follow, and it may be appropriate to speak of smaller, diverse periodizations—to speak of "Anthropocenes". Conversely, dating it to the late 18th century necessarily links the origin of the Anthropocene to the process of industrialization,

involving the extraction of material resources and the opening of new markets by industrial, colonial, and imperial nations (Ellis, 2023; Lewis & Maslin, 2015). This timeframe fuels the debate initiated by David Ruccio (2011), Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014), and Donna Haraway (2015), for whom "Capitalocene" is a more fitting concept. Here, we are referring to a process of increasing human intervention driven by the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production—that is, by the extraction and appropriation of surplus product, profit, revaluation, accumulation, and the centralization and concentration of capital.

It is also worth noting in this regard that the process of the planet's predatory transformation, driven by industrial development and the specific dynamics shaping it, overdetermined - particularly its acceleration and the resulting consequences -prompted researchers from the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS) and the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) (n.d.) to date the Anthropocene to a more recent period, stratigraphically assigning its onset to the mid-20th century. This decision did not meet with consensus within the scientific community; it sparked various controversies, and both the vote-based resolution and the ensuing public protests became yet another indicator of the growing intertwining of nature and the humanities in the contemporary era of science "tout court".

However, even when considering earlier dates for the Anthropocene—or indeed not recognizing it as the epoch succeeding the Holocene—we cannot ignore the technological leaps of the last two centuries and their intimate connection to productive projects and ventures, whether in the private or public sectors, not to mention the massive investments of the so-called military-industrial complex. In these instances, one can speak of the extraction of natural elements and the production of goods at a frenetic pace, without regard for consequences or sustainability; one can also point to world wars and localized conflicts, whose profound and irreversible damage extends directly from human beings to the spaces they inhabit.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

For this reason, too, the debate opened by this edition introduces—into the field of public and private organizational theory—an issue that is empirically found within and evolves alongside organizations, though not exclusively so. Beyond the previously mentioned motivations, the decision to frame the reflections in this publication in such dramatic terms rests on the premise that the economic, political, and organizational forces underlying many of the problems of this new era might, if combined, also serve as agents for overcoming them. Or—should this appear utopian—the hope is that any solutions devised, particularly those emerging from civil society, will be grounded in a theory and action capable of confronting the seemingly unstoppable momentum of predatory exploitation.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the texts that were selected following peer review:

"**How to postpone the end of the world: globalization and algorithmic governance in information and surveillance capitalism**," by Ana Lucia Guedes and Renata Couto de Azevedo de Oliveira, revisits the discussion on the consequences of the uncritical idealization of technological development—specifically when its effects are ignored, threatening rights and downplaying critical agendas such as the environmental crisis itself.

"**Management in the Anthropocene: rethinking boundaries through becoming-with**," by Filipe Cabacine and Leticia Dias Fantinel, focuses on management—assigning it a central role in the Anthropocene—by analyzing its possibilities and seeking to offer references and principles to guide human action within organizations in a way that ensures due regard for social relations and nature.

"**Intertwining LinkedIn's organizational practices with contemporary life beyond surveillance capitalism**," by Raquel Prá and Claudia Simone Antonello, draws on ethnographic immersion in LinkedIn to analyze what and how people post, comment on, and share information, as well as the consequences thereof—ranging from whistleblowing and problem-solving to data leaks and scam attempts.

"**Technological transformations in the Technocene: theoretical challenges for work and social protection**," by Maristela Dumas and Maria Lucia Figueiredo Gomes de Meza, debates the relationship between algorithmic automation, platformization, and the datafication of life and the world of work, highlighting the potential link between these phenomena and the currently observed accelerated process of labor precarization—if not outright unemployment.

"**Digital platforms and work organization: inadequacy of digital Taylorism and the insurgency of the new putting-out system**," by Leandro Theodoro Guedes, investigates the concept of digital Taylorism, problematizing this analogy—which the author rejects—and arguing instead that digital platforms correspond to pre-capitalist forms, a regressed technical basis, and a return to home-based work, now renewed and more productive.

"**Anthropocene, environmental crisis, and cannibal capitalism**," by Maria Elisabete Pereira dos Santos, Kleverton Melo de Carvalho, and Andrea Cardoso Ventura, highlights the limitations of the Anthropocene concept when generic human action is singled out as the risk factor—thereby naturalizing degradation and diverting attention from determining factors such as, among others, the interests involved in the appropriation of environmental resources.

We take this opportunity to thank everyone who submitted their work to this call for papers, and especially the many individuals who made significant contributions through the evaluation, coordination, administrative support, and final shaping of the published texts.

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RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study was published in the article itself.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We identified no conflicts of interest.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE

This translation received partial support from Google Translate.

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