

RECENSIONI

Stefania BARCA | *Forces of reproduction. Notes for a counter-hegemonic Anthropocene*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 88.

Stefania Barca's 2020 book, *Forces of reproduction*, is an advancing contribution to the growing body of literature that critically examines the Anthropocene concept through unearthing its constitutive silences. Like other critical alternatives to the Anthropocene narrative, such as those embodied in the concepts of *Capitalocene* or *Plantationocene*, *Forces of reproduction* proceeds in two steps: first, it identifies the denials implicit in the Anthropocene master narrative; second, it reinstates marginalised subjects into a non-hegemonic account of human-extra-human relationships at a time of generalised socio-environmental crisis. Barca's succinct exposition captures her previous work's political and analytical core. In a mere 60 pages, she lays out the case for synthesising eco-feminism and historical materialism. She sketches what she terms the four levels of denial upon which the Anthropocene narrative is built: colonial, gender, class, and species relations.

Like other contributions to the *Elements in Environmental Humanities* book series, *Forces of reproduction* is meant to offer a synthetic, authoritative, and comprehensive coverage of a core problem. The stated goal of the text is to displace the hegemonic Anthropocene master's narrative and "allow counter-hegemonic visions of modernity to emerge" (p. 1). If, according to the hegemonic narrative, the forces of production as carried forward by industrial capitalism represent the key drivers of progress, Barca's overview is a brief and effective contribution to the case for reclaiming the agency of marginalised subjects whose care of the biophysical environment ensures the reproduction of human and extra-human life. This endeavour is situated within a broader project of narrative justice that recovers alternative



understandings of modernity; as such, it is a path to historicising and provincialising dominant ways of understanding and enacting nature-society relationships.

One of the outstanding merits of the book is how it identifies core political-analytical tensions. No doubt aware of the essentialising tendencies of many academic attempts to recover non-Western ontologies, and with a critical gaze sharpened by the tools of historical materialism, the author alerts of the dangers of reconstructing alternative modernities as traditional visions and contained sociocultural worlds. Similarly, the case for the feminist lens takes the form of a remarkably clear and synthetic argument for employing materialist eco-feminism as a tool for revealing the patriarchal power structures hidden under the pretence of gender neutrality of the Anthropocene narrative. The critical analysis of relations of reproduction is built around a refusal to see connections between gender and non-human nature as fixed or immanent. It adds to a significant and urgent case for a relational analysis of “other-than-industrial ways of interacting with the biosphere” (p. 37). This is complemented by an imperative corrective to numerous alternative accounts of non-dominant socio-ecological relations, namely the insistence that the recovery of actual and potential reproductive agencies is a way of revealing “autonomous ways of being *within* modernity” (p. 25). At stake, then, is not only the recovery of non- and anti-capitalist relationalities but also the reclaiming of modernity, as process and project, as a terrain of struggle.

The merits of *Forces of reproduction*, best read as an insightful and judicious introduction to the expanding record of critiques of the Anthropocene concept and an eloquent summary of the argument for bringing eco-feminism and historical materialism to bear upon each other, also imply inevitable limits. Thus, while the overview of actual and potential eco-feminist contributions to the renewal of historical materialism is achieved with an impressive economy of means, the case of and for historical materialism appears less accomplished. Nonetheless, the case *for* historical materialism is convincingly made through the overall dynamic structure within which colonial, gender, class, and species relations are revealed as co-constitutive. However, the case *of* historical materialism as a long-standing source of internal critique within a broadly understood Marxian tradition needs to be more accounted for. Genealogies of historical materialism will necessarily be a function of the political field into which analysis is inscribed. Yet, the transversal contributions that historical materialism as critical epistemology

has made to the critique of both scientific materialism and the proliferating new, ontologically inflected materialisms indicate a deep current of Marxian thought in the light of which the synthesis such as the one proposed in *Forces of reproduction* appears less as a novel agenda and more like the inheritor of a sustained if marginalised multivocal critical tradition.

The uneven structure of the case for the integration of eco-feminism and historical materialism, with much more attention devoted to the former, has other implications that remain important, albeit unsolvable within the constraints of the format. One of them is the privileging of the category of modernity at the expense of that of capitalism. Thus, the reader feels that capitalism, rather than being treated as a social formation, appears as a derivative category of modernity, the latter the master frame within which ideological processes and valuation conflicts unfold. While this does not pose significant problems for identifying how global inequalities structure and mediate human-extra-human relational configurations, it encounters its limits in general statements about “turning commoners into proletarians” (p. 42) or the readily accepted opposition between capitalism and state socialism.

Nonetheless, the section about the class denials of the Anthropocene master narrative remains one of the most moving and inspiring in the book. Here, questions about the contradictory positions labouring classes inhabit as insider-outsiders within capitalist production processes (or what could also be fruitfully characterised as the reproduction of capital) come to the fore. The tense relationship between agency and resistance emerges as an open-ended political question about the relationship between the refusal of alienation, ecological relations and industrial working-class subjectivities. As the author walks the reader through the poems of worker-poet Ferruccio Brugnaro, the “obstinate refusal of objectification” (p. 59) is revealed not only as an extension of alternative modes of habitation but also as a demand for recognition from within the lives of those already dispossessed. Those that critical historical materialism has obstinately refused to throw to the dustbin of history are reinstated as subjects capable of recognising alienation as an ongoing process rather than an inexorable identity they inhabit. The transformative potential of resistance, in its ambiguous relationship with agency, is thus reinstated in the recognition that workers’ bodies are the front lines of capitalism’s sacrifice zones. *Forces of reproduction* thus guides the reader to the heart of one of the most pressing contradictions of

our times: that change must come not only from a real or postulated outside to capitalist socio-ecologies but from within landscapes of pervasive socio-ecological injustice and deep histories of subordinating the inescapable unity of human and non-human nature to the reproduction of capital.

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