

The causes and consequences of the Great Acceleration in Brazil

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Abstract

The consensus on the existence of the Great Acceleration from the mid-twentieth century can be considered more solid and robust than on the existence of the Anthropocene itself. Macro-indicators and large numbers reveal that there has been a shift in the scale of human presence on the planet, considered in aggregate form. The historical and environmental consequences of this process are deep. However, the large numbers do not allow us to visualize the differentiated, often dramatic, social and geographic transformations that the Great Acceleration has produced in different areas of the planet. Observed from a global historical perspective, it can be observed that the Great Acceleration has not been happening geographically uniformly. The temporalities and backgrounds of its manifestation, on the other hand, are also quite different. It is within this framework that it becomes necessary to place and to situate our knowledge about this historical phenomenon. Environmental history offers a very appropriate analytical tool for this type of analysis. Brazil was one of the fastest growing countries in the context of the Great Acceleration. At times of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, its economic growth reached levels of 11% a year. The presentation argues that Brazil's presence during first stage of the history of the Anthropocene was relatively modest, both as a supplier of natural resources and as a relevant player in the beginnings of the industrial world. However, after the 1950s the country faced a rapid and intense process of population growth, industrialization and urbanization, simultaneous to the opening of new agricultural and mining frontiers in the savannas and tropical forests of the Western and Northern parts of its huge territory. The social and environmental consequences of this movement were in many circumstances dramatic, as in the case of rapid rural exodus and expansion of agribusiness, the unbalanced swelling and "favelization" of large cities, and the violent opening of deforestation frontiers in the Amazon. It is necessary to go beyond generic data in order to analyze geographic specificities, ecological bases, political decisions, international conditions, main social actors and new cultural patterns that informed this whole process. The presentation will therefore seek to discuss broadly the concrete and specific movements of the Great Acceleration in Brazil, even though this movement, of course, cannot be taken in isolation from what was happening in Latin America and the world. As the biggest national territory in the tropical world, with abundant albeit regionally unequal reserves of sweet water, biodiversity, and fertile soils, not to mention its vibrant and creative society, Brazil can become a major player in the building of economic strategies based on renewable sources of energy. But this potential role depends on complex and uncertain political disputes over the development model to be adopted in the near future.

