

The post-colonial Anthropocene: Petroleum and emancipation in 20th century Brazil

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This paper aims at identifying new historical causes for the making of the Anthropocene (the rise of humans to a geological force) by addressing Brazil's transformation into an oil producer and an oil-dependent country. It looks at petroleum production, politics and culture in Brazil between 1930 and the mid-1970s, a period roughly corresponding to the country's industrialization. By exploring the emergence of a nation-wide project of energy transition, it traces backwards in time the construction of norms regulating the relationship between Brazilian society and oil. In this sense, it reflects on the making, in a specific place, of the patterns of cultural dependence on fossil fuels which have "catapulted" humans to the status of actors of the Anthropocene. This example permits to escape the essentialist explanation of the Anthropocene as the result of humans' insatiability, commonly rooted in an analysis of the Western, mass consumption society, and to focus instead on the notion of freedom in a former colony. Indeed, in the context of nation-building and modernization debates, petroleum appeared for many Brazilians as an opportunity to emancipate the country from its peripheral role as global raw material provider.

The rise of petroleum gave a post-colonial sense to the nation-founding myth of Brazil's exceptional nature, which served as romantic background for a movement towards resource sovereignty embedded into a global anti-imperialist context. In twentieth century Brazil, the expansion of petroleum carried a promise of energy transition catalyzing hopes of accomplishing other unfinished transition processes: from colony to self-standing nation, from a master-and-slave society to a community of free citizens, from semi-feudal land oligarchies to centralized government. Against the background of these transitions stood the reinvention of the relationship between nature and the nation, and through this reinvention, the vision of a safer place for Brazil in the world economy. In this sense, many Brazilians depicted and perceived the quest for oil as a project of collective liberation. It even appeared as a solution for stopping the unsustainable destruction of tropical forests. Ultimately, these petro-ideals of emancipation, by positively linking nature and the nation, also hindered fully detecting the scope of the pollution problems that oil was generating. As argued in the paper's conclusion,

this example should rekindle the discussion about the unintended link between freedom and geological change in the analysis of Anthropocene causalities.

Energy in twentieth century Brazil was not primarily craved for to replicate the social norms born out of the Western industrial revolutions, but to overcome the colonial order of the world economy and subsequent subaltern place of Brazil in it. In this sense, there is a need for a different story for post-colonial countries about energy dependency, the use of fossil fuels, and ultimately climate change, because the dominant historical narrative of the Anthropocene is currently very much about the rise of European and North American imperialism.