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Introduction to Geography and the Plantationocene

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Plantationocene has received increasing interest in recent years across a variety of academic fields. This article introduces a forum in which seven scholars debate the relevance of the concept for their own work. This introduction outlines the contributions of the concept for the field of geography.

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This article serves as an introduction to a Forum with seven contributions debating the analytical value of the Plantationocene concept. Coined by Haraway (2015), the concept of the Plantationocene builds on earlier scholarship around plantation histories, economies, and societies (Beckford 1972; Woods 1998; McKittrick 2013). Recent interest in the subject of plantations within the discipline of geography has come from two different areas. First, vibrant scholarship in Black geographies has located the plantation as a key referent, producing both a “black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011) and a legacy of violence that shapes ongoing experiences of Blackness in the U.S. South and Caribbean. Second, a growing number of scholars within the critical agrarian studies tradition have documented the return of the plantation as part of a twenty-first-century land rush stoked by fears of global food and fuel scarcity (e.g., Borrás et al. 2011).

There is no agreed-on definition of the Plantationocene, nor is there consensus that the concept is useful—several contributors to this Forum argue that the concept enacts a violence of its own. Those who have used the term (see, e.g., Haraway 2015; Aikens et al. 2017; Davis et al. 2019; Murphy and Schroering 2020; Carney 2021; Paredes 2021; Wolford 2021; Barua, Martín, and Achtnich 2023) argue that the modern era has been fundamentally shaped by plantation dynamics that have fostered a global market, enabling colonial expropriation of vast territories and dependent on racial violence in the form of indigenous dispossession and forced labor. The concept suggests that plantations knit together loosely held empires, justifying exploration, conquest, and extraction with tropes of “improvement” (Elden 2010; Fitzmaurice 2014), tying native labor and land to extraction at scale through dispossession and violence that was both

racialized and gendered (Stolcke 1988; Stoler 1995; Bhandar 2014; Nichols 2024). Across the colonial world, plantations redefined what it meant to be “human,” “productive,” and “civilized” (Manjapra 2020, 75–76), establishing an imaginary of efficiency and profit that persists to this day in monocropped extraction. Scholars who use the concept of the Plantationocene argue that the co-constitution of colonization, the global market, and plantations has massive implications for life today, generating racialized violence and socioecological devastation even as plantations reappear regularly as the logical solution to a set of problems one could argue they created: inequality, land degradation, scarcity, and poverty (Chao et al. 2023).

The contributors to this Forum were asked to discuss the relevance of the Plantationocene concept to geography in particular. They make several excellent arguments that I outline here.

The contributors share a methodological interest in ethnography, or the close examination of everyday life grounded in the particularities of place and time. They argue that creating a “magic category” (Sharad Chari) with “planetary delusions of grandeur” (Andrew Curley and Sara Smith) like the Plantationocene, “limits ... what we can see by insisting on a historical vision that maintains European agency, even if rendered as a problem” (Curley and Smith). Indeed, in emphasizing the relevance of history, the Plantationocene risks imposing a linear understanding of the unfolding of time, with plantations the original sin and the present a story foretold. This linear telling erases indigenous histories and, in so doing, narrates a singular future where settler-colonial violence is rendered as the abstract ideal (Curley and Smith). Sarah Besky sees a moral imperative in refusing the reductive generalizations of the Plantationocene, arguing that “being accountable to the people with whom we work requires historical and geographical specificity.” Nancy Peluso illustrates the importance of this specificity in her study of the different ways race is invoked and enabled at the national and regional levels in Indonesia. Plantations might have shaped the history and present of land and labor relations throughout the country, as Tania Li argues in this Forum, but they did so in ways that were locally specific with different implications for racialized laborers and planters.

All of the contributors recognize that plantations are important world-historical actors and spaces but insist that the characteristics and borders of the plantation need to be defined, not assumed. Saturnino (Jun) Borrás, Jr. and Jennifer Franco argue that the term should encompass both the monocrop plantations owned by individuals (whether public or private) and those commodity enterprises “established through contract farming schemes.” In many places where plantations have failed to produce profits or long-term development, governments and corporations have aggregated producers on contiguous plots of land, providing inputs for the cultivation of predetermined commodities. Although technically independent, there is often little functional difference between these “contract villages” and plantations (Chichava 2013). Plantations might be “self-reproducing” in that laborers are responsible for their own subsistence and social reproduction (Wynter 1971; Carney 2021), but they are

not autonomous; they do not function as islands, cut off from the surrounding areas. Plantation boundaries are porous by design, as when workers are housed off-site to reduce maintenance costs (Besky 2017) or brought in seasonally from distant regions (Borras and Franco), and they are porous by accident, as workers, ideas, pathogens, animals, and more escape the intended boundaries.

One of the potential contributions of the Plantationocene is to focus attention on the racialized violence of colonization, settlement, and the global market both historically and today. Although Davis et al. (2019) argued that the original “multispecies framing [of the Plantationocene] conceptualizes the plantation largely as a system of human control over nature, obscuring the centrality of racial politics,” the Plantationocene can help us to foreground racial dynamics in ways largely missing in conceptions of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene. Tania Li in this Forum invokes Cedric Robinson’s definition of racialism as the “practice of forging differences among people for the purposes of extraction, although treating such differences as innate.” In her study of agrarian life in Indonesia, Li argues that racializations were “deployed routinely to extract value from both humans and the land although this took different forms during the colonial period and contemporary plantations and in different places.” Although not generally in favor of the Plantationocene framing, Sharad Chari argues that there is potential in bringing agrarian studies together with Black geographies because the former has largely left out questions of race, whereas Black thought, Chari argues, “is grappling with intersectionalism and internationalism—both represented by agrarian studies” (see also Barca 2020; Murphy and Schroering 2020).

Ultimately, the Plantationocene is only useful as a -cene if it has political salience. If it is an essentialism, is it a strategic one? The political power of the Anthropocene was in insisting that humans were responsible for climate change, and the Capitalocene focused attention on the extraction of surplus value as the ongoing engine of both profit and impoverishment. Borras and Franco argue that the Plantationocene can be politically useful if we understand how to unite the different “categories of workers” across the plantation: “migrant farmworkers, smallholders in contract, villagers expelled by plantations, and nonagrarian rural working and lower middle classes.” Individuals within and across these different groups alternately advocate acts of reform, revolution, exit, resignation, and acceptance, and it is not yet clear if the plantation can mobilize resistance across these groups. A key political contribution that the Plantationocene makes to mobilizing is unmasking what Bezner Kerr calls the “spatial imaginary” of large-scale, monocrop market-oriented production as the ideal organization of landscape and labor. Plantations have existed for hundreds of years in remarkably similar forms not because they are necessarily efficient at extraction or profitable (see Li and Semedi, 2021) but because they are embedded in local histories and “common sense” and take advantage of government policies, infrastructure, labor laws, property rights, global trade agreements, and so on, created precisely for their continued domination. Bezner Kerr argues that this imaginary of efficiency and productivity underpinned the most recent

agricultural revolutions: “The Green Revolution narrative deploys a plantation imaginary—a set of ideas, ideologies, and narratives that depends on the cognitive, psychological, and epistemological aspects of plantation colonialism.” Bezner Kerr argues that the concept of the Plantationocene can reinforce indigenous counterpractices of agroecology if they are understood to be in opposition to the plantation form of production. Naming the Plantationocene allows us to trace the many different influences and effects of plantations and begin to build a stronger case for the alternative, for a world where extraction is not the organizing principle for so many. Demands for land distribution, property size caps, and new forms of production and social provisioning are then not simple demands to redistribute property but demands to reorganize society and the socionatural environment.

Beyond agrarian studies and Black geographies, plantations have been studied in nuanced ways across the discipline of geography. Trimble’s (1974) influential work described soil erosion as highly and positively correlated with enslavement (see also Bruno’s 2023 article about the biophysical afterlife of plantations), whereas others argued that soil exhaustion in plantation agriculture led to the demand for territorial expansion among southern planters and directly to the Civil War (Bagley 1942). The spread of plantation agriculture is reshaping local and global geographies today from individual fields to climate change (Weisse and Goldman 2021). Large-scale agriculture is likely responsible for up to one third of all carbon emissions, and the industrial nature of the agro-food system fed by plantations has been rightly critiqued on nutritional and health grounds. Today, plantations drive land-use and land-cover change in much of the world, whether through deforestation for soy farms in the Brazilian Amazon (Baletti 2014), corporate investment for oil palm in Indonesia (Li and Semedi 2021), or state plans for agricultural intensification in China (Xu 2020).¹ Disease biogeography illustrates the connections between deforestation, agricultural intensification, and urbanization (Wu 2021, 824) as habitat loss forces woodland animals into the open, shedding viruses such as COVID-19 in areas more densely populated by humans (Morand and LaJaunie 2021). Studying plantations requires and sharpens the diverse geography toolkit. As Barua (2022) argued: “Such a conversation also builds an expanded vegetal geography attentive to the role of plants in mediating animal lifeworlds and in influencing the politics of landscape change, holding violent colonial histories and their postcolonial legacies in sharp focus” (26).

In conclusion, and as a segue to the articles themselves, both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Plantationocene concept are evident in this introduction. Any attempt to classify or categorize involves generalization and is potentially dangerous: To be useful, concepts should be used as signposts rather than destinations, windows onto the whole rather than airtight containers. I follow Barua, Martín, and Achtnich (2023) in thinking with the Plantationocene as a method and a mandate (and a “condition”; Barua 2022) that is extremely useful to analyze how and in what ways interests, ideologies, and innovations come together at particular (but not preordained) moments, places, and spaces to

shape landscapes, laboring bodies, property lines, class formations, ideas about community, inequality, “good crops,” bad bosses, and more—long after the plantation itself might have disappeared. As such, the concept should not be wielded bluntly, even by its proponents, as if it were the only possible analytical frame or one that can be used without attention to the particularities of place and time. Rather, the concept should be used to generate place-based and globally situated research on the ongoing struggle for land and livelihood in a world where the plantation hides in plain sight, shaping our everyday sustenance, norms, beliefs, aspirations, and material possibilities.

Notes

At the same time, some research in India suggests that larger plantations generate more tree cover for bird habitat although they require toxic chemical inputs that might endanger the long-term health of those species (Robbins et al. 2021).

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Note

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