

Becoming indigenous:

A review of *The Ends of the World*

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About the author

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About the book

Authors: **Déborah Danowski** and **Eduardo Viveiros de Castro**

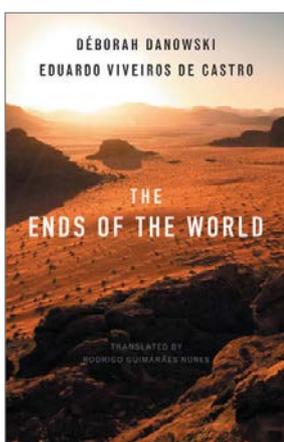
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This book is an intelligent, learned and passionate analysis of some of the main ways in which humans are now responding to what, it appears, could turn out to be the end of the world – for us, at least. I want to give a broad-brush idea of its contents before going on to suggest a few improvements.

The authors are Brazilian, a philosopher and an anthropologist respectively, and the references are dominated by French philosophy and South American ethnography. Although well and sometimes wittily written – and, so far as I can tell, well translated – it’s not an easy read, and those whose background is the sciences rather than the humanities will have to work especially hard. Nonetheless, I recommend it to all.

Much of the book is structured around the idea of the Anthropocene, to which is counterposed the figure of Gaia as its ultimate limit and severe antidote. (This is Gaia as taken up and developed by the influential philosophers of science Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers.) Anthropogenic climate change provides the paradigmatic instance of that correction. In its course, humanity itself, as such, becomes a catastrophe.

The authors point out that the Amerindian world was brutally destroyed, in relatively short order, 400 years ago; so now that we are facing the possibility of a global recapitulation – the ‘coming barbarism’, in Stengers’ phrase – we could do worse than consult those who survived it and continue to do so. The authors’ term for the world’s ‘enormous minority’ of broadly indigenous people (around 370 million) is Terrans, as opposed to the Earth’s primary destroyers, the relatively worldless Moderns. Aided by their knowledge of indigenous South

American cosmologies and practices, they argue that the former people are the main repository of wisdom needed for “a mythology that is adequate for our times” (p 6). An example is the concept of *vivir bien, non major*: living well, not always needing better or more, or what the authors call ‘intensive sufficiency’. While such a value is not in itself ecocentric it opens the door to it, and no sentimentality about indigenes is required to recognize its positive potential.

Along the way, the authors enquire with characteristic insight into what makes the slogan ‘we cannot go back’ such an article of faith for the dominant classes, and why they reject so vehemently any call for self-limitation, deceleration or degrowth – or in Teresa Brennan’s words, to “go back, slow down” (p 242).

Certainly the Moderns will not supply the mythology we need. One of the most brilliant chapters anatomizes the messianic madness (the word is not too strong) of two current responses to ecocrisis, on the political right and left respectively: the Breakthrough Institute of Nordhaus and Shellenberger, and the authors and adherents of the Accelerationist Manifesto. The former are Silicon Valley techno-cornucopians and the latter cyberpunk neo-Stalinists, anti-capitalists but with, as the authors say, a serious case of Stockholm syndrome. But what unites them is more significant. Both parties want to intensify capitalism, ramp up human control and big up Big Science. Both also favour human supremacy, an extreme form of anthropocentrism and, like most other fundamentalisms, a toxic ideology (Crist, 2017). Their common enemy is any ‘environmentalism’ that recognizes human limits, and neither side evinces

the slightest concern for – awareness of, even – the countless others for whom the Earth is also their only home, except for those who are to serve us. The denialism is extraordinary – as if humans could, never mind should want to, go it alone – but no more so than the master–slave ethics.

Despite the prevailing virtues of the book, I have a few criticisms and suggestions. The authors refer respectfully to “a multiplicity of intricately connected multiplicities” (p 68) but they still slip on occasion into anthropocentrism. The fact that there are “too few people with too much world, and too many people with way too little,” is indeed a big problem but not “the problem above all” (p 97). It needs to be framed by the fact that there are even more non-human animals with far too little world or none, compared to whom all humans have more than their fair share. And from the perspective of this Journal, concentrating on the intra-human problem will eventually guarantee both their immiseration and destruction and ours.

In the same way, the authors’ counterposing of Terrans and Moderns needs to be contextualized. It is far from trivial truth that both – the one more-or-less consciously, the other more-or-less in denial – are Earthlings. What else could they be? Contrary to Stewart Brand’s fatuous slogan, we are not ‘as gods’ but citizens of the Earth, and that’s what we all need to get much better at being.

I would also say that notwithstanding its gravity, climate change is not coterminous

with Gaia, as is implied here; nor does it exhaust ecocide. The authors cite the seminal paper by Rockström *et al.* (2009) detailing the parlous state of most of the nine biophysical processes which maintain life on Earth, but they don’t give it sufficient weight. The present mass extinction and decimation of biodiversity will suffice, at present rates, to destroy most life unaided by climate change, not to mention their effects on the resilience needed to survive it. Here too, ecocentrism is a *sine qua non* for any remotely desirable outcome.

Finally, the authors have good reasons, based on Amerindian ethnography, for ascribing humanity to all animals. That perspective also draws force from its diametric opposition to the Western tendency to try to make humans all animal, so to speak. But ecocentrically, both moves miss the point, because both humans and other animals are, at least potentially, *persons* (Harvey, 2006). This kind of animism is based on shared personhood and extends, among many indigenous cultures, to kinds (species) and places (ecosystems). And unless it finds a firmer footing in global culture, soon, then the outlook will remain very dark. ■

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