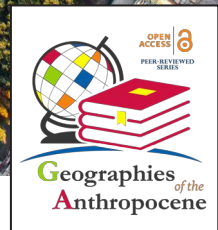


# GLOBAL THREATS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: FROM COVID-19 TO THE FUTURE

*Leonardo Mercatanti - Stefano Montes (Editors)*

Foreword by Paul Stoller

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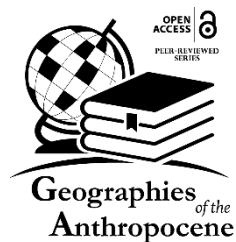


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Stefano Montes

*Editors*



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# Geographies of the Anthropocene

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## Foreword: Bush/Village/Anthropocene

*Paul Stoller*

West Chester University

When times are troubled, Songhay people in Niger and Mali look to the bush for solutions. For them, the world is divided into the bush, the wild, untamable and uninhabited wilderness, and the village which is the settled, rule-governed space of social life. In the bush you confront unimaginable and unrivaled power. In the village the fragility of the life-cycle imposes limits on the capacity for living. If trouble comes to the village, Songhay elders like to say, it's because people have demonstrated disrespect for the bush. The relation of bush to village, then, has much to teach us about being human in the Anthropocene. It has much to teach us about how to secure our future in increasingly troubled times. As the contributors to *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* suggest in clear-sighted and powerfully articulated essays, the "global bush" is looming over the "global village" each and every day, threatening us with nothing less than extinction (See Stoller nd1; nd2).

I recently participated in a seminar the subject of which was the phenomenology of looming. The presenter, Jason Throop, discussed his experiences at the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic. In a forthcoming essay, Troop eloquently discusses the impact that COVID-19's looming presence had on himself and his family. (See Throop forthcoming.) During the ensuing discussion, the participants tried to define the indeterminate fuzziness of "looming." For me, "looming" always brings to mind an image of a gathering wave of dust in Tillaberi, Niger, a wave of dust that is slowly but inexorably coming to engulf people, including me, in a towering cloud that eclipses the sun.

The COVID-19 pandemic is like a series of dust waves that are crashing down upon us. These dust waves are choking our future. We find ourselves today in a perilously stressful state. COVID-19 is everywhere and is going nowhere. Despite the increasingly rapid rate of highly effective vaccinations, there are new, more contagious and deadly variants of the virus that are spreading widely in Europe, North America, South Asia and South America.

What's more, COVID-19 fatigue is now the new norm. Tired of social-distancing protocols, people are taking risks. People are like resisting

vaccination a decision that could endanger not only themselves and their loved ones but also strangers they might encounter at a restaurant, a grocery store, or an airport. And who is to say that COVID-19 is a singular phenomenon? Given the ongoing degradation of the natural world, we can probably expect another virus to jump from the bush, as Songhay people like to say, to the village.

But the stressful realities of COVID-19's robustness are only part of the picture. There are other troubles in the world. In western Niger, the remote and poor region of the world where I conducted many years of anthropological research, the countryside is overrun with violence. Islamists loot small villages and demand protection tribute from farmers, who, if they're lucky, earn \$300 a year. If the peasant farmers don't comply, the Islamists kill them. In May of 2020, they killed 20 people in a Western Niger village that I know. In early 2021, they killed 100 villagers in the same region. What had been a poor place graced with gracious conviviality and beautiful ceremony is now beset with religious intolerance and the violence of hate.

Sadly, these trends are widespread. In the U.S. there is no shortage of systematic racism, ethnic discrimination, hateful violence, income inequality, and, of course, coronavirus infections, hospitalizations, and deaths—all of which creates ever-present anxiety and stress—especially if you are neither white nor Christian. If you combine these elements, which are inextricably linked, we are all standing in the path of looming waves of dust that relentlessly overwhelm us. In this troubling existential state, we are immobilized. Our lives flash before our eyes. What must we do to confront and adapt to these ever-looming waves of dust? (See Stoller, 2021).

As the contributors to *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* make clear, our contemporary state of emergency can be traced to the longstanding culture of extraction, the fundamental tenet of which is that human beings can dominate nature and one another. Since the Industrial Revolution, human beings have extracted from nature such wonders as fossil fuels, minerals, trees, and water. In doing so, we have depleted the Earth's natural resources and produced polluting agents that have brought on the death of forests and the degradation of rivers, oceans, coral reefs, and landscapes—all in the name of progress and capitalism.

Extraction also creates regimes of mastery, compelling states and/or individuals to exercise a "will to power" to establish and maintain social and political domination. The "will to dominate" has brought us incessant warfare, famine, disease, inequality, racism, and the aforementioned violence of hate. Even in the sciences and social sciences, we extract

principles, formulas, categories, definitions, and theories from the free flow of experience, all of which provide a sense of control and certainty. We study. We know. We understand—or think we understand.

In their revolutionary and insightful book, *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human*, Morton and Boyer (2021, p. 62) write:

Because mastery, transcendence, excess—that is the world that we know. Those are the qualities of this era. And with the refinement of excessive mastery in various localities has emerged relentless predatory impulses—monotheistic, capitalistic—to bring the world into alignment with our transcendence mission. An imploded form of subjectivity is worth considering as an antidote. One that is denser, but also more aware of the architecture of its density and of the gravitational forces that hold it together, one that is not constantly seeking the beyond.

Put another way, we can say that the practice of mastery underscores the illusory belief that the village can master the bush.

Indigenous people like the Songhay of Niger and Mali understand that the bush is always more powerful and dangerous than the village. If the forces of the bush are not respected, they bring drought, floods, destruction, diseases like COVID-19, and death. If you attempt to master the bush, as a Songhay proverb states, it masters you.

For Songhay people, who live in harm's way day in and day out, there is little control and no certainty. Most Songhay people have learned to accept their existential limits and live fully within them, which, in the end, enables them to live robustly in profoundly challenging physical, economic, and political circumstances. (See Stoller, 2014; See also Jackson, 2011) Wise Songhay elders say that to protect the village from the excessive power of an all-consuming bush, villagers need to practice more modesty, creativity, flexibility, and playfulness, and less certainty, mastery, and domination. Considering the aforementioned ramifications of the Anthropocene, it may well be prudent to adopt such counsel.

In the end the incisive contributions in *Global threats in the Anthropocene: from COVID-19 to the future* give me hope. Indeed, our extractive past may well have led us to the edge of extinction, but if we allow ourselves to follow the practices of wise indigenous elders, our future could become a truly human one.

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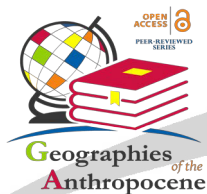
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The COVID-19 pandemic offers food for thought and an opportunity for humanities and science scholars who research our global condition to collaborate. The 21st century society is facing an unprecedented challenge right now: what can we learn from this challenge? Will everything really return to what we used to define as 'normal' at the end of the emergency? Probably not. Structural changes from political, economic, social, and environmental perspectives are already occurring, and impacting the fields of health, education, commerce, governance and travel. Concepts of social space are being redefined and rethought at various scales. Our society, unprepared for a global health emergency of this scale, has been engaged only partially in practices of mitigation and sustainability and we now realize the fragility of our planetary existence. This volume collects 14 original chapters which analyse the new scenarios that could lie ahead in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis in an interdisciplinary context.

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