

Involving Anthroponomy in the Anthropocene: On Decoloniality

By Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

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As humanity faces the challenges of the Anthropocene, Bendik-Keymer reminds us that everybody is not evenly responsible for our planet's current state. Placing the burden of the contemporary planetary crisis on the processes of colonialism, capitalism, industrialism and imperialism (i.e., colonial modernity), this book provides a much-needed moral and conceptual grounding for doing decolonial work through the notion of 'anthroponomy', an engagement with human development in relation to their environment.

The term anthroponomy, derived from Kant's enlightenment thought, refers to a study of the normative human (what the human *'ought to be'*) as opposed to the empirical human (what the human *'is'*) – a remit of anthropology. From a decolonial perspective, Kant's thinking appears colonial for privileging liberalism over 'other' norms of governing human development. Yet, Bendik-Keymer's notion of anthroponomy neither advocates liberalism nor a study of 'other' forms of norm-making. Instead, Bendik-Keymer suggests decolonising 'our' (the colonising, racializing, and modernising peoples') inherited norms, so that 'others' (the colonised, the racialised, and the indigenous) can make their own norms and participate in organising "autonomous lives together" (p. 131).

Chapter 1 critiques the discourse of the Anthropocene for concealing specific processes of colonial modernity responsible for the planetary crisis. In contrast, anthroponomy offers a moral orientation to our planetary situation that demands being accountable to difference and disagreement within one's community and with other communities (p. 14). Contrary to the liberal paradigm that has abetted the expansion of colonial modernity on a planetary scale, anthroponomy proposes a relational morality that is accountable to those with no part in contemporary society, including past and future generations.

While liberalism advocates freedom for all, chapter 2 shows how upholding liberal freedom sometimes leads towards blatant disregard of the colonised, racialized and indigenous populations. To avoid hypocrisy, Bendik-Keymer suggests fostering "community politics" (p. 37) based on "good relationships" (p. 58) and shared governing norms. Good relations must nurture respect for each other and be responsive to disagreement and histories of legitimate distrust, hurt and trauma.

Chapter 3 expounds two temporalities through which we can relate to past and future generations. Elaborated through a letter written to his late mother, the author uses "spiral time" and "overtone time" (p. 50) to reach out to his colonial ancestry and his prospective descendants. Modern (linear) time alienates us from past and future generations. Instead, accepting non-linear temporalities, and not merely tolerating them, allows the author to hold his ancestors accountable for colonialism, while his descendants hold him accountable for his actions. Relating to past and future generations generates responsibility towards the planet and others in the present.

To bring responsibility and trustworthiness in community politics, chapter 4 calls for "emotional and relational maturity" (p. 75). This maturity arises from accepting different ways of sense-making without imposing one's sense onto others. Here, land becomes a mediator – a third in a relationship between two agents. Relating through and with land would preclude making it into an extractive resource – potentially supplementing the capability approach's scepticism towards development processes purely involving economic growth and capitalist production.

In reorienting the Anthropocene towards decolonial practice, chapter 5 demands “self-determination” (p. 108) against the ongoing project of colonial modernity. Many modern nation-states are created through colonial theft of land and many development projects are complicit in colonialism by supporting the institutions of the modern nation-states. Bendik-Keymer suggests that anthroponomists must actively deny modern nation-state’s claim to land so that indigenous sovereignty over their ancestral lands can be restored.

Resisting colonialism means resisting the totalising tendencies of modernity that seek to keep people and systems in their place by making them into objects for domination. In chapter 6, the author calls anthroponomists to treat humans as “ontologically free and anxious” (p. 128), and let people make sense of their anxieties without imposing senselessness upon them. Moreover, instead of fixing a goal on behalf of all humanity (and therefore totalising the future), anthropology proposes an “open-ended and open-bordered” (p. 133) process built around an evolving goal. This evolutionary orientation distinguishes Bendik-Keymer’s decolonial work from the more revolutionary and reactionary tendencies of the Marxist and post-development theories.

Ultimately, Bendik-Keymer invites us to take up anthropology elsewhere on our own terms. Julia Gibson’s critical response in the book’s afterword deploys anthropology on Ryder Farm in the US. Gibson, having inherited a share of the homestead land occupied since 1795, now runs the Ryder Farm along with her extended family. Gibson’s thought experiment shows that Bendik-Keymer’s notion of anthropology leaves the settler colonialists’ (i.e., her family’s) future too comfortable, since it does not seek to radically disrupt the status quo. Thus, to counter settler colonial mentality, Gibson finds anthropology useful but insufficient. Effectively, Gibson calls for more conceptual and practical tools along the lines of anthropology.

This book’s contribution to development studies lies in recalling and undertaking the work of righting the wrongs of ‘our’ colonial modernist history. Considering anthropology, development theory and practice could learn to resist the impulse of helping ‘others’ become more modern, whether through structural adjustments or capacity building programmes. Albeit well-meaning, helping others improve their capabilities could also impede them from making sense of the world on their own. After all, “a history of violence [perpetuated by colonial modernity] is more than a history of disagreements” (p. 153). Thus, we must collectively make room for alternative norms of governing human development to come into being on their own, and learn to work through our disagreement with them and their capacity to face to challenges of the Anthropocene. This book shows one possibility of decolonising in the Anthropocene and invites us to create others.

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