

# Anthropocentrism and the Politics of the Living

Written by Rafi Youatt

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## Anthropocentrism and the Politics of the Living

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RAFI YOUATT, OCT 18 2017

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The 'end of nature' has been widely proclaimed. At one level, it refers to the ongoing biophysical destruction of ecosystems, habitats, forests, species, individual creatures, and climate through widely varying processes of extraction, consumption, and production (Mckibben 1989; Wapner 2010). But at another level, it also references the end of a particularly western idea of nature, as something external to human politics, economy, and culture (Latour 2004). Such an idea of nature, in which the non-human world was largely taken as a form of 'standing reserve' for state extraction (Smith 2009), was central to the development of the contemporary state system under which the first, material end of nature proceeded, undergirding projects of colonialism and capitalism.

In this context, the long, slow crisis of biodiversity loss marks a double end of nature. The daily extinction of species, the general homogenization of species around the world, and the transformation of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, all due to human activity, all point to an end of material nature. Biodiversity loss, along with climate change, thus form some of the key conditions for the so-called Anthropocene – an era marked by deep human intervention into the deepest processes of nature. Nature, if it ever was external, is no longer so, and neither political practice nor political thought can rely on it quite so easily.

One reading of the relative lack of scientific knowledge about most species, and the general lack of world political attention paid to this crisis, is that nature is being extinguished before humans even know about it.[1] Moreover, even if we were to know more, we might not care. But this reading, while true in one sense, is also misleading. Non-human life has in many ways been one of the most intensively studied aspects of various political projects, ranging from colonial preoccupations with biology, species, collection and cataloguing, to the deep forms of knowledge and manipulation generated through contemporary global agricultural practices, to the forms of nature that are being produced in the Anthropocene not by neglect or distance but by deep, thorough-going intervention in nature. So a tempting way to think anthropocentrism and global politics – as a full, wilful blindness about non-human life – doesn't seem to be entirely right.

And yet, as Audra Mitchell (2016a) contends, not only is there an enormous blind spot about biodiversity loss, in the sense of political awareness about extinction, but this blind spot is produced through structural conditions of knowledge production. This is not just the natural sciences failing to complete their cumulative processes of collecting information, but also social sciences, including IR, failing to contemplate the challenges of planet politics (Burke et al. 2016). There are also blind spots when it comes to the ways in which we think about international politics and non-human life and persons, and in particular around the question of who or what can be seen as a political actor. Central to this blind spot are formations of *anthropocentrism*.

Anthropocentrism is a difficult term, given that it is not always entirely clear what constitutes the 'anthropos' or 'the human', nor is it clear what it means for such an entity to be 'centred'. I use it as a rather large term to cover a range

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of perspectives that in some way trouble the exclusive centrality of the human to our concepts and analyses of political life, *and* call into question that category of the human itself, prompting us to ask about multiple versions of the human articulated in and with different assemblages of the non-human, including animal, natural, material, and technological. Specifically, multispecies and multi-being assemblages, I suggest by the end of the article, may be a more fundamental political unit of global politics than we have previously tended to assume in IR.

There are also blind spots in anti-anthropocentric thought, when it comes to their own conception of the human, who sometimes paradoxically re-emerges as a universal figure, defined by species rather than history, carrying moral capacities to order and re-order the world. At the 'end of nature,' such a version of the human is regularly being articulated in global environmental discourses, such as climate change and Anthropocene, which in many ways *do* aim to reorient our understandings of what international relations is for. Such claims miss the historical responsibility of some humans over others; they underrate the specific structuring forces of colonialisms, capitalisms, and geopolitics, rather than species activity; and the historical and cultural human, rather than the biological human.

This article first suggests that any significant evaluation of anthropocentrism requires a critical engagement with the anthropos, or the human that is presumed to be at the centre of anthropocentrism, and it requires engagements with the specific ways that nonhuman life figures in these productions as well as on their own terms. The second part of the article suggests some of the pathways that such an analysis opens for IR, engaging both with interspecies relations and logics, and with the politics of collective personhood.

## Anthropocentrism

What I want to do first is map some of the critiques that work around anthropocentrism, and then move to an analysis of the important problematics that they open up for global politics. One general way that anthropocentrism is approached in global politics is as a matter of moral or ethical privileging of the human, as more important than various figurations of non-humans – whether nature or nonhuman animals.[2] Here, the critique is that humans have unfairly, or unwittingly, privileged their moral standing over non-human life, which has been reduced to some form of purely instrumental use. In environmental ethics, then, the response to this kind of anthropocentrism has been to discuss alternative subjects of moral value, such as biocentrism, in which all forms of life share in some form of value, or ecocentrism, putting ecosystems front and centre.

One of the most powerful aspects of this critique has been to show that anthropocentrism is not, as some assert, a problem that is inherent to being human – one is not inherently anthropocentric by being human. Rather, like other systems of moral value, it is possible to imagine other systems of moral value. The downsides, though, are twofold: first, such moves reinscribe the idea of a morally reasoning human subject as the arbiter of value, which seems to come full circle to the very problem it is trying to avoid. It removes us from the pull and push of the places where responses-among-and-between living creatures plays out, or where relations of 'response-ability,' as Haraway (2008) puts it, play out. Second, by staying largely on moral and ethical terrain, it also avoids the difficult questions about how such value systems play out in political practice. While this is not a failing of moral theory, per se, it does limit its utility in aiming to understand contemporary political ecological formations.

Rather than *moral* valuation then, other work has pushed us significantly to think about the *analysis* of global politics from a less anthropocentric perspective. Here, rather than assuming human beings to be the sole agents and authors of political events – whether as intentional agents, or as the bearers of social structures, social meanings, and discourses – a more careful, non-anthropocentric analysis of political life would reveal those accounts to be fictions that bury many forms of nonhuman agency under ideas like 'unintentional consequences' or 'structural constraint' or, in fact, ignored entirely. Instead, as Timothy Mitchell (2002) puts it in his seminal chapter in *Rule of Experts*, it means making agency a question to be pursued, rather than one to be answered in advance.

This empirical multiplication of political agency, at its best, shows not just a banal sense of causality through non-human materialities that intervene between human agents, but shows instead the specific kinds of differences that non-human entities make in particular political constellations (Robbins 2007; Salter 2015). At times, this work also suggests that greater *analytical* attention to the networks of becoming that make up politics also entails a shift in our

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*ethical* perspective, or at least an openness to the world that is more likely to result in positive environmental outcomes.

In its stronger guises, an analytical commitment against anthropocentrism involves an *ontological* argument, or a claim for what Jane Bennett (2001, 160-66), following Stephen White, calls 'weak ontology.' Much of Bruno Latour's work (Latour 1993; 2004) also functions in this space – advancing neither a moral claim, per se, nor a political claim about particular assemblages over, against, or with others, but rather a more general ontological claim about the way the world works across the Great Divides of nature, culture, using specific cases as examples.

But there is a missing element in this analytical anti-anthropocentrism when it does not directly call into question the production of the multiple humans in anthropocentrism – that is, in focusing its attention on non-human actants, it sometimes assumes (tacitly, at least) that the 'human' in anthropocentrism is best described as a category encompassing the entire species, rather than asking how particular versions of the human come into being, and what the regimes of inclusion and exclusion are around those figures.[3]

A third engagement with anthropocentrism, then, moves directly into this political space, to ask not only about moral questions of valuation, or empirical questions of distributed agency, but a number of political questions about hierarchy. It asks about the making of humanity as a category of practice – across lines of race (Anderson 2013), coloniality (Mavhunga 2011), migrants and borders (Sundberg 2011), war (Kosek 2011), humanitarianism (Ticktin 2011), and commodification (Tsing 2012). Anthropocentrism here is also a historically positioned ideology, working within circuits of colonialism, liberalism, and capitalism, but it works unevenly across place, space, and time. It is therefore more accurate to think about anthropocentrism in the plural.

Seeing anthropocentrism as political ideologies does not mean solely approaching them through forms of critique. Rather, precisely the terms on which anthropocentrism is constituted – on human language and reason as the grounds of political belonging, for example – mask the many ways that 'non-linguistic' activity *already* constitutes the political. This means a turn *back* to the areas on which the human is constituted – and here, it is useful to return to some of the moral and ontological critiques of humanism, but with a more political eye. For example, the divide between human and animal comes into view not just as one separating humans from non-human animals, but as a more general category of animality that structures life conditions for a range of creatures. It also means that a more thorough reading of the political, through non-anthropocentric lenses, means asking more fully about the ways we interact with non-human life as itself political – across the wide range of contexts in which that happens – and as worthy of our attention.

So anthropocentrism in this particular sense – as a question of political ontology and historically positioned productions of differences in and across species lines – opens up a very fertile and important set of issues in global politics. Rather than looking at environmental issues solely as matters for human politics to sort out, for example, it asks us to look at intersections between them and the production of hierarchy through shifting categories of species, animal, living, and natural and through interactive practices among humans and other species. Rather than looking at questions around non-human animals as a question of how far existing rights should be extended, it asks us to think about how concepts of animality function to structure the lives of both human and non-human lives. And rather than looking to move past the human or to transcend the human, it asks us to stay with the production of different kinds of humans as a question of political analysis.[4]

### Politics of the Living?

On one hand, I am particularly committed to understanding a politics of the living, moving slightly away from the analytic space of new materialisms. When materialisms become political, they often seem to reduce to a kind of weak anthropocentrism, where people are walking assemblages, and we care about the assemblages because we care about the people. But there is something important in the combination of a) the squishy, embodied fact of living bodies (Calarco 2008; Hayles 1999), and b) in particular about the interpretive moments that living beings share (Kohn 2013; Uexkull 1982), and c) the ways they increasingly seem to me to be enmeshed in a kind of biopolitics of the living, one that is both problematic in its effects, but promising in the resistant alliances it points to (Youatt 2008),

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and d) offers a potential for particular interspecies assemblages as politically salient (Tsing 2012).

We could take this to be an opportunity to start to enquire about how particular *productions* of humanism work within a broader politics, practice, and symbolic economy of life. To take one example, at the US-Mexico border, I have been trying to understand the circulation of anthropocentrism, across species lines, and how this implies a sense of the political as something already involving multiple species – not in a benign sense of inclusion, but as a sometimes violent, exclusionary process that works alongside possibilities of affiliation, and companion species. Who counts as human, subhuman, animal, endangered, protected, and when? Ocelot politics involve an assemblage of endangerment: an endangered species in the US under the endangered species act (though ocelots fare much better in Central and South America), and discourses around endangered nation and culture; and endangerment that ocelots face trying to cross roads (the major source of death for ocelots in the region). Invasiveness, too, is a multispecies assemblage at the border: the invasive Nilgai antelope (brought from India to Texas for hunting purposes in the 1930s, and now largely feral), crossing into Mexico, and re-crossing a quarantine line designed to keep ticks bearing cattle fever out of American rangelands. This quarantine line runs parallel to the border, now with designed tactical infrastructure (the product of a limited wall-building project) designed to keep illegal immigrants out, or at least minimised. Invasiveness and endangerment, central to IR imaginaries around security, might be in this case best understood not as a discourse, nor as security facts, but as a multi-species and multi-practice assemblage.

What does it mean to elevate certain species over others, and sometimes for them to be elevated above other humans? In the most challenging vein of inquiry, what would it mean to start to think about politics as something multiple communities of different species engage in – how does one research something like that as a matter of global politics? (In one sense, we already do, in any research involving claims about eco-systems, which are made up of living species interacting with one another, on and through various non-living elements; why ecosystems and their constituent parts should remain off limits to IR is a mystery, given that this has been taken up by anthropologists, environmental studies, geographers, and others).

On the other hand, the analytics of new materialism have opened up the question of how apparently non-living, or abiotic things like mountains, canyons, buildings, IEDs and deserts, act on us, interact with, disrupt and make possible political life (Boyce 2015; Grove 2016; Salter 2015). But I am increasingly cognizant that my relationship with the non-living comes out of a particular kind of philosophy of life and nature (rooted in biological sciences), and a particular politics as well (secular). In my more recent research, I have become interested in how apparently non-living things, like mountains or ecosystems, are encountered by global governance, and what it means for them to be positioned as non-living. I have been particularly influenced by anthropological work, here including Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), Marisol de la Cadena (2010), and Eduardo Kohn (2013). This body of work pushes hard against my assumptions about the nature of the divide between the living and the non-living – what does it mean for Mt. Taylor in New Mexico to be a living being, for example, as asserted by Zuni tribes (Colwell and Ferguson 2014)?

Recent efforts to use 'sacred mountains' as a new marker for setting areas of international conservation similarly highlight claims about the personhood of mountains. To take on example, Mt. Kailash (or Kangrinboque) in Tibetan China, draws pilgrims from Buddhist, Hindu, Bon (animist), and frequently, syncretic traditions, who come yearly for circumambulation. The site is also beginning to be developed by China and perhaps India and Nepal as a tourist destination, and there is potential for mineral resource extraction nearby. Each of these religious traditions work within worldviews in which Mt. Kailash is not a mountain per se, but a person or divinity who is enmeshed in a wide-ranging set of relations that go beyond its geographic site, including social and ecological relations. While such personhoods are usually relegated to 'religious belief' in secular politics, perhaps such framings are too biological in their limiting of living beings. Rather than resolve the question of what is living and what is not, it might be more important to understand the living in a more open fashion, and as itself a site of political contestation, sometimes in incommensurable ways.

What do we make of multiple personhoods existing in the same place, then? Can we mix the registers of collective state personhood with collective persons that are perhaps divinities or perhaps invoking nonhuman living beings? What happens when that place is transnational, rather than contained within state frameworks of law? These questions cannot be answered on an intellectual scaffolding that has already determined who gets to count as a

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collective person up front, nor one that limits discussions of the human to biological registers or to teleological, universalist humanism.[5]

In these examples, the question starts to shift from the ways that forms of life interact with one another against an abiotic backdrop on which varieties of cultural meanings are projected, to one where 'the living' is not yet settled. In this context, we might wish to work through the problems of understanding these other formulations of the living, and at times, we may need to understand that these worldviews are not commensurable with one another – that is, they cannot be fully reduced to one particular framework or fully translated, on any side. At the same time, neither should we assume full incommensurability of worlds, as the very process of interpretation, nor that politics involve forms of learning, understanding, and translation. The question of what is and is not commensurable, and how they are made so, is ultimately a contextual one – it is something that we can ask about in global politics, rather than stipulate up front.

Questions around the interactions, sortings, and practices of living beings to produce international outcomes; questions of who is a person and who is a collective person, and why; and questions about how multiple humanisms work in practice, are key avenues of inquiry that open up in IR around the politics of life after anthropocentrism.

## Notes

[1] Thanks are due to the participants in the Global Politics without Ignorance Workshop, held in October 2016 at the New School for Social Research. The discussion there informs a number of points in this article.

[2] These points are explored in greater depth in (Youatt 2014). On ecocentrism and international relations, see the pioneering work of Robyn Eckersley (2004)

[3] Among those who have raised this issue are (Sundberg 2014)

[4] In many ways, this approach is not new – though it has been largely absent from Euro-American international relations. This work comes from anthropology, geography, political ecology, science studies, and elsewhere.

[5] Similar questions exist around the emergence of collective persons as legal subjects in what gets translated as "rights for nature" politics, in Ecuador, Bolivia, New Zealand, and a number of other localities. See (Fitz-Henry 2014; Gear 2013; Shelton 2015)

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