



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Critical review

Furthering post-human political ecologies

Jared D. Margulies^{a,*}, Brock Bersaglio^{b,c}

^a University of Sheffield, Department of Politics, Elmfield Lodge, Sheffield S10 2TY, UK

^b University of Sheffield, Department of Geography, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK

^c Aga Khan University, East African Institute, Box 30270 00100, Nairobi

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Post-humanism
Human geography
Political ecology
Myth
Tiger
India

ABSTRACT

This critical review aims to facilitate explicit, ongoing consideration for how post-human geographies and political ecology stand to benefit one another empirically and theoretically. In it, we argue that post-human political ecologies are well-equipped to ensure that the broader post-human turn in geographical thought engages critically with the roles that humans *and* non-humans play in enactments of injustice – both as subjects of (in) justice and as beings whose actions have justice implications for myriad forms of life. By engaging with empirics drawn from research on tiger conservation in India, we deploy myth as a conceptual tool and as an heuristic device to illustrate how post-human political ecologies might further engage with the politics and power asymmetries embedded in conservation science and practice. To conclude, this critical review summarizes the merits of bringing the ‘cutting edge’ of post-human geographical literature into dialogue with the traditional concerns of political ecology and recaps the potential power that myth retains as an analytic in post-human political ecologies.

1. Introduction

Human geography has embraced post-humanist thought. Broadly, post-humanism represents a turn away from human/nature dualisms prevalent in Anglo-European political philosophy. Post-humanism strives to unseat the human as the dominant subject of social inquiry while rejecting onto-epistemologies that render humans as categorically separate from the worlds they co-inhabit with proliferating forms of life – forms of life ranging from megafauna to microbacterium (Barad, 2003; Kirksey, 2015; Lorimer, 2016; van Dooren et al., 2016).¹ In human geography, engagement with post-humanism has coincided with the production of knowledge that repositions non-humans as legitimate subjects of social inquiry with the capacity to act, disrupt, and resist in surrounding webs of life (Sundberg, 2014).

Drawing insights from post-human geographies, this review aims to advance the critical application of post-humanism in political ecology – political ecology being a community of practice traditionally committed to engaging with the social and political dimensions of environmental inequalities and injustices (Robbins, 2012). Recognizing that post-humanist analyses have, on the whole, been critiqued for eschewing matters of everyday politics, we argue that post-human political ecologies can help to ensure that the broader post-humanism turn in human

geography is equipped to engage critically with enactments of injustice while drawing attention to human *and* non-human forms of life that are colonized, disenfranchised, or impoverished through unequal relationships of power (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Sundberg, 2014; Srinivasan and Kasturirangan, 2016; Menon and Karthik, 2017). In doing so, we deploy myth as an analytical tool and heuristic device to illustrate one way that the goals of post-human and political-ecological analyses might be made commensurable in practice.

The following section begins with an overview of how some human geographers have engaged with post-humanist thought to theorize about non-human subjects. This overview draws attention to how political ecology stands to benefit from an expanded purview that accommodates non-humans as subjects of social inquiry. The subsequent section identifies a few key critiques of post-human geographies and discusses opportunities that exist in post-human political ecologies to address such critiques. Before concluding, we engage with myth underpinning tiger conservation efforts in India to illustrate the value of post-humanist thought in political ecology as well as how post-human political ecologies might contribute to sharpening post-humanism's critical edge.

* Corresponding author at: The University of Sheffield, Department of Politics, Elmfield Lodge, 132 Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TY, UK.

E-mail address: j.margulies@sheffield.ac.uk (J.D. Margulies).

¹ The term ‘onto-epistemology’ attempts to separate the study of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology): ‘the separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and non-human, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse’ (Barad, 2003: 829).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.03.017>

Received 26 December 2017; Received in revised form 2 March 2018; Accepted 17 March 2018
0016-7185/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

2. Post-human geographies and political ecology

Given the aim and scope of this review, we avoid rehearsing at length the meritorious contributions post-humanism has made to human geographical thought over the past two decades. Discussions by a number of scholars articulate how post-human geographies help to resolve the false dichotomy of ‘socio-nature’ in critical geographical thought and to advance non-humans as legitimate subjects of social inquiry whose actions contribute to the co-production of more-than-human worlds (Braun, 2004; Castree and Nash, 2006; Lorimer, 2005, 2012; Whatmore, 2006; Panelli, 2010; Anderson, 2014; Sundberg, 2014; Hovorka, 2016; Bastian et al., 2016).

By implication, post-human geographies have paved the way for political ecologists to consider why non-humans are subjects worthy of social inquiry rather than just inanimate backgrounds or hapless objects embroiled in human contestations over the environment – the latter being the mainstay in political ecology (Hobson, 2007; Srinivasan, 2015). Drawing inspiration from post-human geographical work on flora (Head et al., 2014; Fleming, 2017), fauna (Collard, 2012; Barua, 2016; Jampel, 2016), and microbacterium (Lorimer, 2016, 2017), among other non-human actors (Kirksey, 2015; Tsing, 2015), there is ample scope for political ecologists to consider the contributions they might make to debates about how diverse forms of life behave and misbehave in ecologies that are explicitly political.

Although political ecology has much to gain from embracing post-humanism; post-human geographies remain plagued by troubling silences and practices that political ecology has traditionally endeavored to speak to and to redirect. While some political ecologists are apt to recognize that there is something theoretically cutting edge about post-human geographies, some are also apt to question whether this edge is sharp (i.e. political) enough for political ecology (Arboleda, 2017). The next section discusses critiques of post-humanism that are likely to resonate with political ecologists while mapping out a few directions that might be pursued in political ecology to ensure that post-human geographies are equipped to wield a critical edge. Specifically, we highlight some of the ways that political-ecological conceptions of time and space might contribute to this task before drawing attention to the power of myth as an analytical tool and heuristic device for post-human political ecologies.

3. Time, space, and the power of myth

Braun (2004) raised an essential concern about historicist post-humanism – a concern exemplified in our cumbersome use of the word ‘turn’ in this review, which fails to signify that humans have always been entangled with non-human assemblages (see also Castree and Nash, 2006). Although the exercise of post-humanist philosophy has facilitated recent empirical and theoretical engagement with more-than-human worlds in human geography, the exercise itself did not initiate a more-than-human age. In reality, humans have never existed beyond or before such an age. As Braun (2004, 271) explains:

To talk about the present as a time when the boundaries between the human and the non-human are blurred, to imagine that now, *more than ever before*, our lives are entangled with things, is to produce the historical fiction of the autonomous ‘man’ [sic], the human before its entanglements. In this temporalizing mode, posthumanism *requires* the human, it relentlessly calls it into being.

Thus, our use of the word ‘turn’ in this review implies that there existed a temporal moment before post-humanism – an age of humanism. This slippage problematically (but not uncritically!) enshrines humans as categorically distinct from non-humans.

The conceptual dilemmas associated with historicist post-humanism also engender ethico-political concerns (Braun, 2004). One concern is the rise of a ‘nihilistic politics of “free play”’ – particularly in the fields of bio- and techno-science. Such a nihilism purports that ‘any and all

experimentation is acceptable’ regardless of its ethical or political connotations (Braun, 2004: 271). Another ethico-political concern is the propagation of a ‘nostalgic politics of purity’ that ‘fights any and all transformations in the name of recovering a prior essence and a lost unity’ between humans and non-humans (Braun, 2004: 271). These attributes of historicist post-humanism are problematic, as they depoliticize more-than-human worlds by fantasizing about hypothetical realms that exist free of politics (Braun, 2004). When considered in tandem with spatial critiques of post-humanism (below), these concerns necessitate further critical engagement with philosophical exercises or scientific experiments that understand post-humanism as a phenomenon discovered recently by Anglo-European scholars at a specific historical juncture. Like post-colonialism, post-humanism ‘better signals a political-analytical perspective than a historic moment even if that theoretical perspective is in response to historical conditions’ (Castree and Nash, 2006, 502).

With this in mind, spatial concerns about post-humanism also require consideration. Specifically, Sundberg (2014) draws attention to implicit epistemic and geographical silences in post-human geographies about where post-humanist thought tends to originate from, geographically, and the geographies through which post-humanist discourse circulates. Referencing Kuokkanen’s (2007) notion of epistemic ignorance,² Sundberg (2014) argues that an unqualified reliance on Anglo-European philosophy in post-human geographies privileges colonial and settler-colonial onto-epistemologies (see also Chakrabarty, 2007). When matched by a lack of reflexivity, post-humanist discourse risks re-enacting epistemic violence against Indigenous and other non-dualistic onto-epistemological traditions (Kuokkanen, 2007). Accordingly, these silences make post-humanism complicit in re-producing a colonial intellectual tradition that problematically appropriates, erases, or invalidates other ways of being and knowing (Sundberg, 2014; Loftus, 2017).

Although the temporal and spatial concerns outlined above are by no means exhaustive, they begin to reveal why political ecology is well-positioned to sharpen the cutting edge of post-human geographies. Political ecology has proven to be adept at demonstrating the impacts that shifting ecological, economic, and political relationships have on landscapes across time and space (Robbins, 2012). Such analyses are by design historically and geographically explicit, producing situated knowledges about how such landscapes are shaped by and, in turn, shape variegated forms of inequality and injustice. Indeed, the explanatory power of political ecology resides, in part, in its tradition of drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and science and technology studies to unsettle taken-for-granted truths about environmental change (Watts, 1983), environmental degradation (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987), and environmental science itself (Forsyth, 2003; see also Robbins, 2012). Whereas the explanatory power of political ecology stands to be enhanced by conceptions of non-humans as political subjects that act – rather than simply as material objects that are acted on – post-humanism stands to benefit from the historically and geographically situated analyses of inequality and power at the heart of the political ecology tradition.

‘If political ecology’s central tenet is social justice, and we acknowledge that animals play some role in enactments of injustice, then how animals are constituted as subjects of justice (or not) is an important analytical question’ (Hobson, 2007: 255). We add to this that the politics enacted by researchers themselves in constituting non-human lives as subjects of (in)justice is of equal importance. Thus, while post-humanist thought presents political ecologists with the theoretical language and tools to conceive of non-humans as subjects of social inquiry and as subjects of (in)justice; political ecology’s

² Epistemic ignorance refers to academic practices and discourses that enable the continued exclusion of other than dominant Western epistemic and intellectual traditions’ (Kuokkanen, 2007: 60).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353408>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353408>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)