Situating Zoopolis

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Sue Donaldson's and Will Kymlicka's significant and demanding new book, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*, stimulates and challenges scholars already invested in the philosophical question and politics of historical human-animal relations; more broadly, it challenges liberals, in the name of consistency, to extend to nonhuman animals their liberal premises and values. To contribute to this symposium on *Zoopolis*, I aim to stimulate reflection by situating *Zoopolis* in two dimensions: first, amid some structural features of the contemporary world; and second, amid some current political theory. My goal is not to make a definitive argument but, rather, to turn these realities and resources toward and against each other as I pose my own large question: Are the standing concepts of Euro-American political philosophy adequate to theorize (and hopefully thus motivate critical political response to) the human-animal relations that constitute our historical moment? What concepts do we need for a politics of multifarious Earthlings, deeply varied in their being, whose lives are materially bound together on this planet, now itself in a state of material crisis?

Zoopolis makes two main moves. First, it frames the human-animal question as historical and political (6). Second, it articulates a specific politics to respond to the human-animal politics that organize the contemporary world: namely, a liberal democratic politics of justice—of intersubjective recognition of vulnerable subjects by way of citizenship and sovereignty rights (30, 31). *Zoopolis* frames as "citizens" the nonhuman animals who, in history, have been "domesticated" by *homo sapien* historical activity (e.g., dogs, chickens, perhaps snails farmed as escargot); it takes as "denizen" political subjects the nonhuman animals who have come historically to live liminally with but who do not seek fully to join with *homo sapiens* (e.g., some crows, some coyotes, snails who

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live in my vegetable garden); and it takes as "sovereign" political subjects the nonhuman animals who, in current history, live fairly separately from *homo sapiens* (e.g., most sharks, snowy owls, wilderness snails). That is, *Zoopolis* reframes standing human-animal relations in the familiar terms of existing political institutions and orders and practices, including sovereignty, territory, colonization, migration, political membership and liberal democratic citizenship (12, 13). The authors hereby follow further liberal democracy's call to pull Earthlings under the rubric of liberal justice, squeezing a huge new moment out of the modern project for political recognition and inclusion. They thus remind us of the still unexhausted, transformative potential of liberalism as they work both with and against prevailing habits in political theory.

In doing this work, Donaldson and Kymlicka aim to stay historical. That is, to clarify the demands of liberal justice for vulnerable subjects they theorize what they call the existing "social context" and "our society" (97, 100). It is here that I apply some pressure to stir reflection. What *is* the existing historical "social context"? What concepts do we need to illuminate and theorize our social context? It is true empirically, as Donaldson and Kymlicka assert as their starting point, that the contemporary world is organized into bounded political communities; and it is probably also true, as they argue normatively, that bounded political communities are good for political subjects (53). That said, as this latter normative claim helps secure the apparent adequacy of the empirical claim, these premises may partly obscure the fact that the world is—very consequentially for animals—organized by additional structures that exceed and trouble bounded political communities, and that existing bounded political communities may pose problems for sovereignty. Put another way, in *Zoopolis,* a description of actually existing "society" and the "social context" is distilled into an account of and positive claim about bounded political community which is itself distilled into an account of liberal democratic political community and state. It is in this way that *Zoopolis* comes to assume the liberal political state and to therein add animals. Such an add-in strategy is what liberalism pursues in its liberationist moments and, as we have been enjoying historically, to profound effect. But might this conceptual-analytical move in *Zoopolis* underreport the actually existing "social context", namely, some key ways in which human-animal relations are ordered, as well as the status and powers of the liberal political community and state? I am deeply sympathetic to the aims and politics of *Zoopolis,* and to the transformational and implicating force of this argument in a part of the world that considers itself already to have manifested the goods of liberalism. That said, as a political theorist equipped with Euro-American political philosophy's evolved but limited toolbox of concepts, I am curious to ask what political-theoretical tools we need for this world of multifarious Earthlings organized by prevailing historical structures and relations.

Instead of being immediately snagged by the conventional concepts in my toolbox, I want to stay close to the blood, the flesh, the breath, to the affective attachments as well as to the social bonds shattered, to the Eternal Treblinka of

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suffering and terror in the actual lives of Earthlings. And I want to make visible and keep open to interrogation all historical structures by which Earthly beings are organized. I therefore seek a material-theoretical standpoint from which to critique all historical relations and structures as well as all other theoretical concepts. To this end, I invoke the *commoners of the Earth as commons,* not to endorse as a normative good anything like a cosmopolitan political order (another familiar concept from the toolbox) toward which we should strive historically but, rather, to register theoretically that all Earthlings, first, collectively, interdependently and unavoidably, share a material attachment to Earth's biosphere and that this shared attachment is the only strictly necessary (that is, unchangeable) structure of worldly life.

To fuel further this exercise in reflection and to invite engagement, as Donaldson and Kymlicka work with(in) the ordering structure of the bounded liberal-democratic political community, I situate *Zoopolis* amid three additional *prevailing historical orderings* of the commoners of the Earthly commons: the capitalist world order, settler colonialism, and contemporary humanity's imperial drive absolutely to "make live"[1] *homo sapiens*—three orders that yield a fourth ordering condition, namely, global ecological crisis. As I thus situate *Zoopolis* historically, I also situate it amid some *other political theory* to map some other available concepts with which to think through these prevailing historical structures. Over all, I do this work of situating to energize my large question of what concepts and politics we need in order to clarify, critique and transform the contemporary organization of the commoners of the Earth as commons.

Capitalist World Order

To characterize the prevailing societal context, Donaldson and Kymlicka introduce the concept of the "mixed society"—a society comprised of *homo sapiens* and "domesticated" animals (95, for example). In this section, I turn to the fact that domesticated animals—their flesh, their bones—are a central material substance of the global neoliberal capitalist economy. John Sanbonmatsu writes that animal lives, annually, in the billions, are central to the "fundamental composition of [global] capitalism", that animal flesh is a "linchpin of the economic order".[2] That is, the existing mixed social context is structured not only by bounded political communities but by neoliberal capitalism and is thus, in key dimensions, global. So we must ask, how effectively can or might a bounded liberal zoopolitical community and its state map onto this global mixed social context? To depict some dimensions and challenges of the neoliberal global mixed society, I invoke some of Nicole Shukin's work from her book *Animal Capital*.

[1] Michel Foucault, 241.

[2] John Sanbonmatsu, 21, 26.

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Shukin takes up zoonosis, that is, diseases, such as AIDS, mad cow, SARS and avian flu, that move across species. More precisely, she explores *speculative fear* of bodies that purportedly carry zoonosis—speculative fear of bodies and their proximity amid neoliberal capitalism's logic of tearing down all borders. The contemporary capitalist world order seemingly poses "the potential of infectious disease to rapidly travel through the social flesh of a globally connected life world".[3] Shukin argues that today's discourse of pandemic conjures a vulnerable universal humanity as the object of biopower in the name of which particular populations—millions of humans and billions of animals—are "at risk of being socially ghettoized or materially sacrificed".[4] As it turns out, then, neoliberal capitalism does not break down borders between human and nonhuman animals but rather incites fear to erect and police such borders. As Shukin writes, the "specter of pandemic" grants "a universal rationale for institutionalizing speciesism on a hitherto unprecedented scale".[5]

In her analysis Shukin dwells upon recent global experience with H5N1. Although avian flu is probably mainly spawned by the rationalized large-scale meat industry, popular discourse located the disease origins in China's Guangdong province, positing it as a site of "excess of interspecies intimacy and, in the eyes of the West, its 'sick' intermingling of human and animal flesh".[6] Within weeks in Guangdong, "220 million ducks, geese, and chickens, healthy and sick alike, were burned alive, suffocated, strangled, shot, and beaten with pipes".[7] For Shukin, this global "pathologization of interspecies kinship"—the material structures and psychological dynamics—affects possibilities for human-animal collectives.[8] "At stake is the power of pandemic speculation to infect subjects like myself—well-intentioned, white, liberal-minded, middle-class subjects living in relative security in affluent pockets of the globe—with fear" that seems "to justify growing intolerance toward dangerously entwined ethnic-animal populations".[9]

Shukin's analysis of the contemporary global landscape leaves me wondering about the extent to which the far-reaching intersectional oppressions and diverse effects of neoliberal capitalism are susceptible to the justice of a bounded liberal zoopolitical community. What concepts do we need to grasp the intersectional oppressions and psycho-cultural effects of the global capitalist mixed society and facilitate its transformation?

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3 Nicole Shukin,182.

4 Ibid., 183.

5 Ibid., 184. As I complete this essay, a report has just emerged of a squirrel in a California state park testing positive for the (zoonotic) bubonic plague.

6 Ibid., 206, 209.

7 Sanbonmatsu, 3.

8 Shukin, 189.

9 Ibid., 207.

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Settler Colonialism

I now turn from this question about "domesticated" animals to one about "wild" animals. In *Zoopolis*, Donaldson and Kymlicka argue that, historically speaking, "wild animals" and humans are variously interconnected and that these relations should be informed by justice, particularly by respecting sovereignty. That is, the mixed society as bounded political community should follow norms of international justice in its relations with sovereign wild animals, grasping these as "relations *between* self-governing communities" (63, 69, 168).

Again curious about conceptual framing, I am concerned that the mixed liberal democratic community, pressed by Donaldson and Kymlicka to recognize the sovereignty of wild animals, may itself be a zoo-colonial society organized by a zoo-colonial state. In America, European colonization assaulted Indigenous human nations and other American Earthlings as one piece; the contemporary Canadian and U.S. liberal political communities, for instance, including their contours as "mixed societies", are effects of empire and settler colonialism. Domesticated animals, like cattle and pigs, have been key European instruments for transforming the pre-colonial, material-zoopolitical landscape and society of North America into a Euro-colonial political community.[10] Today as we survey the contemporary social context we see not a past transcended: as Patrick Wolfe argues, "invasion is a structure, not an event".[11]

Compellingly, *Zoopolis* uses the concept of sovereignty to ban colonization by mixed society of wild animals and their territories. But how might Donaldson and Kymlicka speak to the fact that the liberal mixed-society political community, which is meant to practice such international justice with wild animal communities, is itself imbricated with zoopolitical colonial power? In the spirit of taking seriously the colonial dimensions of existing mixed society and disrupting the notion of society that this colonial history has produced, let me point to some Indigenous conceptions of human-animal society that both overlap with and challenge the framework found in *Zoopolis*. Although Donaldson's and Kymlicka's conceptualization of wild animals as sovereign political communities may seem novel to some readers, for First Nations of the North American prairie, the buffalo are a nation and the prairie is the buffalo commons.[12] Yet whereas *Zoopolis* configures only "domesticated" animals as humans' mixed society co-members, for First Nations of the American prairie, the human and buffalo nations are bound together societally and as kin (the buffalo are older brothers to the humans) such that to violate or harm the buffalo is to violate or harm the buffalo's human relatives.[13] Anthropologist Paul Nadasdy's work with the Kluane Nation (of the now Yukon) mobilizes the Kluane (and some

[10] See Winona LaDuke, 139-66; Alexander Cockburn, *passim*.

[11] Patrick Wolfe, 388.

[12] LaDuke, 154, 155.

[13] Ibid., 154.

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other American Indigenous) conception of society, specifically the view that a legitimate society entails a reciprocity-based web of long-term social relations among human and animal persons including "wild" beings such as wolverines, caribou, geese and rabbits. Nadasdy is concerned that even when First Nations members participate in contemporary state policy discussions, such Indigenous conceptions of society and long-term obligation do not find their way into state policy, thanks to the colonial nature of the liberal state.[14] Might Donaldson's and Kymlicka's notion of the mixed society and of international justice be elaborated in relation to Indigenous conceptions of society and long-term reciprocity, including to address the colonialism of existing liberal mixed society?

Humanity's Imperial Drive Absolutely to "Make Live" *Homo Sapiens*

What is the prevailing social context? Theoretically and politically, part of what we need are political concepts that properly describe *humans* in society. *Homo sapiens* are seven billion and growing exponentially, furnishing the planet with far more bodies than the commons and commoners can endure. Humanity's political response to this primal material crisis is pretty much non-existent; there remains an unwaning, blindly patriotic, blindly imperial drive absolutely to "make live" humans.

Against this imperialism, like the work of Bruno Latour,[15] albeit from another theoretical angle, *Zoopolis* positions the voices and interests of non-human animal Earthlings within democratic political institutions. Such a move begins to secure a political mechanism—though only within the bounded political communities of liberal democracies—by which to hold *homo sapiens* politically accountable for their grotesque self-reproduction. Such an extension of practices of democratic representation could drive dramatic change, including by disrupting the imperial valuation of *homo sapiens* in liberal democracy's constitutional, criminal and administrative law, and in science's large-scale breeding, mutation and killing of Earthlings in laboratories in liberal democracies.

Ultimate Global Ecological Crisis for all Earthlings

What is the prevailing social context? In May 2013, carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere passed a "long-feared milestone", reaching a level that foretells global catastrophe.[16] The social context is ineluctably structured by the fact that the biosphere is the shared material body of all animals and plants and seeds, by the fact that everything is connected, by the fact that we are all one. How do we theorize this politically?

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14 Paul Nadasdy, 27.

15 Bruno Latour, 108; see Jane Bennett.

16 "Heat-Trapping Gas Passes Milestone, Raising Fears," http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/11/science/earth/carbon-dioxide-level-passes-long-feared-milestone.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed 10 May 2013.

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Donaldson's and Kymlicka's fundamental concern and point of departure is the protection of vulnerable individuals with subjective experience. "We do not deny that humans have moral duties to plants and inanimate nature," they write. "Rather, we claim that [humans and animals] are different [from inanimate nature]—sentience generates distinctive vulnerabilities, and hence distinctive needs for the protection of inviolable rights". The authors argue that "animals, as subjects, need to be protected *the way human subjects are,* and not simply as components of nature" (36, emphasis added).

In other words, *Zoopolis* adds animals into a category that modern Euro-American humans invented for themselves. Yet might some Earthly animal beings experience life ontologically in a manner other than as vulnerable individual subjects? Some Earthlings may be square pegs in the round hole of the modern individual with subjective experience; what might be the political effect on the square pegs of *Zoopolis*'s conflation? Moreover, given the global crisis in basic ecological viability, the way that historically victorious modern Western humans have imagined "humans" and their rights may be somewhat problematic. The point is not that animals are better left conceptualized as "nature". Rather, perhaps all animals, including *homo sapiens,* need to be reconceptualized somehow better to capture the actual material interdependency among the commoners of the commons and their collective material dependency on the biosphere.

In sketching an ecological ethic as part of his approach to public philosophy, James Tully points to the "emerging vision of the interconnected network of all forms of life in the life sciences and systems theories" as well as within eco-feminism, deep ecology, and so forth.[17] Tully asks what this interdependency of all life imposes upon humans ethically. Perhaps, on one hand, we must ask the same about nonhuman animals if, as *Zoopolis* prescribes, they are to enter the individualizing domains of liberal citizenship and sovereignty. Ethically, what do *Zoopolis*'s cows owe the biosphere and other commoners of the Earthly commons? On the other hand, we may interrogate the modern European conceptualization of the human individual. Jane Bennett, for her part, works to conceptualize humans less as discrete individuals and more as material assemblies of overlapping materialities that, in concert, produce action and effect. On this view, a public is neither a body of individual citizens endowed with rights nor is it a sovereign community. According to Bennett's new materialism, publics are "human-nonhuman collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm".[18] She thus imagines a public as a collective that "discerns instances of harm to the (affective) bodies of animals, vegetables, minerals, and their ecocultures".[19] Still, Bennett wonders whether the humans

[17] James Tully, 77.

[18] Bennett, xix.

[19] Ibid., 103.

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in such publics would care enough "to systematically care for" harm to eco-cultures and nonhuman bodies; she accepts that "not every ecosystem is democratic" and expects that humans will always put humans first.[20] Here I am reminded of and reassured by the power of codified, juridically-entrenched rights. We might say that *Zoopolis* is more formally democratically insistent than Bennett's materialism, despite her materialism's horizontalizing effect on our view of all matter.

Conclusion

To conclude, I simply reiterate my question: in the light of the world's bounded political communities but also in the light of the structures of the world capitalist order, of settler colonialism, of humanity's imperial drive absolutely to make live *homo sapiens,* and of today's global ecological crisis, for this world of multifarious Earthlings necessarily and collectively tied materially to the Earth's biosphere, what theoretical concepts do we need to illuminate, understand and transform?

Acknowledgement: In this paper I remember my friend, the radical, the compassionate political theorist and activist, Joel Olson, who died suddenly a year ago.

[20] Ibid., 103-04.

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