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Animals in an Earthborn Democracy?

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Abstract
The animal question in politics is as old as politics itself. It is a question that drives my own work, where I consistently confront an absence of animals viewed on their own terms, in and for themselves, in conceptions of political life. Animals are often part of the story, but as mystical and allegorical figures, sacrificial bodies, and constitutive limits of the civil state. Modern liberal democracies take on the latter position of marking animals as the exit from politics, largely writing them (and nature more generally) out of the narrative altogether.

Keywords: animals; sacrifice

Earthborn Democracy: A Political Theory of Entangled Life by Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Schlosser is an attempt to shift that narrative, at least in terms of nature more broadly construed, and this essay will consider how animals, specifically, are figured into the myth of Earthborn Democracy that they weave together. Sadly, as I will explain below, animals do not fare well in their story of earthly entanglement.

Earthborn democracy is a story of conscious myth-making as Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser describe it—a new yet ancient mythology that ties to an ancient cosmology of earthly entanglement, a so-called entangled agency among humans, nonhuman species and the earth (Aslam et al. 2024, 5) rooted in the interdependence between the human and more than human world and their co-created power, which has been largely obscured and damaged by modern life and the hidden myth of modernity that sustains it. The myth of earthborn democracy is built on twin pillars of democratic and ecological consciousness, both of which arise from the material reality of living on earth—the struggle for life and freedom and autonomy as an individual and a species within a context of limits and constraints placed upon us by the planet and those other entities with which we share it. To be earthborn is twofold in this sense, as they explain: "Being earthborne denotes two overlapping conditions: First to be earthborne is to be carried and supported by the earth—borne by the earth and dependent on its ecological cycles; yet, second, to be earthborn(e) is also to be borne out of the earth—to be natal, something new and miraculous, an emergency being not previously encountered" (Aslam et al. 2024, 4).

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Adaptation and evolution emerge within morphic fields, which are collective, immaterial fields—reservoirs within which shared experiences and lessons for each species are contained, extend beyond genetic relations, across time and geographical distances, and emerge in relation to the larger ecosystem in which one exists. By the authors' description, these morphic fields appear akin to the collective unconscious, which in Jungian terms acts as a "'timeless and universal psyche' continuous across space and time, born anew in the brain structure of every individual" (Aslam et al. 2024, 75). From this collective unconscious arises processes of attunement with the earth collectively and the species-life it sustains as well as the emergence of new forms and the possibility of freedom and expression for each newly born member of the species—the two conditions of being earthborn, both by the earth and born out of the earth.

For Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser, the myth of modernity is its insistence that it is not a myth at all but rather myth's replacement—that the rationalism and realism that define it are an empirical reality unshackled from myths and from the constraints of nature. In this sense, the myth of modernity is one of domination (over nature and each other), hierarchy, management, control (of populations and environments), and security. Likewise, the modern liberal understanding of democracy reiterates the "mythless" myth of modernity in its dominant formations of liberal-democratic institutions, the settler colonial state, market economies—which are rooted in the so-called escape from the state of nature, the belief in terra nullius, and a promethean faith in expansion and development over limits at the expense of life itself—the drive of Thanatos over Eros—culminating in twin crises of ecological devastation and democratic decline. These are the "pathological results of inhabiting an anthropocentric myth of sovereignty over the earth" (Aslam et al. 2024, 4) that denies the intertwined material, spiritual, and psychic habitats necessary for democracy and planetary life worlds to flourish. In this sense, ecology and democracy are necessarily intertwined according to Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser and must be "thought and enacted together for each to flourish" (Aslam et al. 2024, 6).

This is obviously a very provocative attempt to think of a new myth that could have some traction, and it is certainly very hopeful in a time of great despair and thus a necessary intervention to the current debates. I suspect that it is an especially necessary dose of ecological consciousness and environmental political theory for the genre of democratic theory, which, perhaps ironically, suffers the very kind of habitat loss that the authors describe. I applaud the authors for their panoramic, hopeful, and utopian (in the sense of a better place) vision. Tying ecological and democratic habitats together is an intriguing idea, but I think it's important to remember—as I think the authors do—that there is nothing inherently democratic about nature and it certainly is not without hierarchies and order. Nature is filled with systems, processes, and flows, and with predators, deadly venoms, poisonous plants, torrents, cliffs, you name it. Symbiosis—the close, extended association between two or more different species—can take different forms. The symbiotic relations of nature are not all mutually beneficially, the most obvious being predation, which I will return to shortly. Biodiversity and democracy are both built on difference—the will to difference, to say yes to the other, the eternal return, in the Deleuzean-Nietzschean sense.[1] To deny this difference is to go under, which we are seeing now in anthropogenically driven mass

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species extinctions, extreme climate events, endless wars and conflicts, extreme wealth disparity, chronic diseases, as Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser describe. The planet is out of whack because the human species is out of whack.

Maybe we do need a new myth, and I think the authors present a compelling case that we do. But questions still linger for me: Is earthborn democracy a better myth? How does it not also suffer from an anthropocentric hubris that cannot fully accept, whether we like it or not, that humans alone are the mythmakers, the sole purveyors of this earthborn democratic consciousness? How is this embedded anthropocentrism particularly pernicious for other animals? Surely nature and animals speak, and the authors ask us to listen, but can we ever really hear anything other than ourselves? To quote the oft-quoted line from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him". As I have pointed out elsewhere, the result of this kind of ontological difference that Wittgenstein observes is that even though animals cannot tell us that they want to live, they indeed show us they do not want to die in their continuous struggle for survival in a world built on their literal deaths (most commonly as food).[2] This death work of animals, which we can trace to the earliest moments of human history, sustains the so-called reciprocal earthly entanglements praised in *Earthborn Democracy*.

Here are I am reminded of an example of hunting and animal sacrifice positively referenced in the first chapter *Earthborn Democracy*: The Blacktail Deer Ceremony, in which two (human) tribal communities, the Piikani and the Ktunaxa, created a reciprocal sharing between peoples through "a mutual sacred obligation to the deer," and through this shared respect and responsibility to the deer, were able "to find common ground together and peaceably share the fruits of the hunt" (Aslam et al. 2024, 58, 60). Clearly, there is an obligation to kill and consume the deer, although I am not sure how this is an obligation to the deer itself. As they describe it, the ritual of Blacktail Deer Dance represents "broader myths of reciprocal entanglement and distributed agency" (Aslam et al. 2024, 62), although, again, it is unclear how this is reciprocal or agential for the deer who are killed. And finally, probably one of the examples that stuck out to me the most was the page and a half discussion in Chapter One of a Harvard university experiment in which rats were tortured via containment and electroshocks as supporting the theory of morphic fields with no critical reflection on the lives of the rats themselves or the irony of using this example while claiming to be non-anthropocentric. Excluding the disturbing torture of the rats, perhaps the other examples of using and consuming other animals may have made sense at earlier times, but do they make sense now? Should we hold onto rituals that naturalize violence against animals, especially in our contemporary context, where killing and eating animals is unnecessary, unhealthy, and has devastating environmental consequences? We could argue questions of scale, but that does not negate discussions of carnivorous desire and demand. Are not animals, like humans, entitled to breath on their own, to be free and autonomous in the ways that the authors describe? Certainly, hunting and killing animals literally denies them their breath, permanently snuffing out their will to live for human needs. No animal willingly sacrifices itself. No animal wants to be killed. They want to live. Our relationship to animals, at least the ones described in *Earthborn Democracy*, are not mutualism in the sense that each species benefits from the relationship—the relation to the deer is one of predation, where we benefit, and the

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animal dies. Anthropocentrism is anthropocentrism, no matter the scale or the story. How does a myth of earthborn democracy reconcile this cognitive dissonance?

The myths of early societies were attempts to make sense of a world in which humans did not dominate or have control, where they were simply plain citizens of the earth who had to compete with other animals to survive in sometimes the harshest of conditions. Nature is brutal and indifferent and without the comfort of our modern technologies—and even our most simple tools for hunting and killing animals—we are powerless to it, as our predecessors well knew. This power of nature—of the wolves, the bears, the mountains, and the rivers, the collective of diverse species with which we share the earth and which could also kill us at any moment—evokes awe and respect and demands that we as humans, particularly when stripped bare of our weapons, tools, and gear, know our place in the food chain and pay respect to the cosmology in which we exist. Early ecological myths were stories of survival.

Perhaps the functioning of myth has changed, but the logic has not. It is a logic of equivalence and sacrifice, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno discern in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Magical rites and rituals, as they note, are an attempt by humans to influence their conditions: "Every ritual includes the idea of activity as a determined process which magic can nevertheless influence" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1999, 8). And these rituals are built on an identity-logic grounded in sacrifice. These sacrifices, the first of which are human and then become animals, are attempts to trick the gods—fetishes themselves, subject to the law of equivalence and holding power over people who practiced them. With the myth of Enlightenment, they observe, equivalence itself has become the fetish (Horkheimer and Adorno 1999). Like Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser, they recognize the mythology of Enlightenment, but also that "[m]ythology itself set off the unending process of Enlightenment" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1999, 11). As Adorno says to Walter Benjamin in his letter critiquing Benjamin's Arcades project, purely mythical thinking in the form of the collective unconscious suppresses the ambiguity of the Golden Age, its relationship to Hell (Adorno et al. 1977). It is also noteworthy that Herbert Marcuse points to the ill-treatment of animals as a sign of our modern-day capitalist form of Hell at the end of *One-Dimensional Man*.[3] Marcuse, in particular, is especially relevant to our current discussion because he calls out the death work of animals, their reproductive labor; and rather than romanticizing it as a form of earthly entanglement as in *Earthborn Democracy*, instead offers an alternative myth that rejects the ideology of death in favor of Eros, or the life instincts for humans and animals alike:

> Can the human appropriation of nature ever achieve the elimination of violence, cruelty, and brutality in the daily sacrifice of animal life for the physical reproduction of the human race? To treat nature "for its own sake" sounds good, but it is certainly not for the sake of the animal to be eaten, nor probably for the sake of the plant. The end of this war, the perfect peace in the animal world—this idea belongs to the Orphic myth, not to any conceivable historical reality. In the face of the suffering inflicted by man on man, it seems terribly "premature" to campaign for universal vegetarianism or synthetic foodstuffs; as the world is, priority must be on *human* solidarity among human beings. And yet, no free society is imaginable which does not, under its "regulative idea of reason," make

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> the concerted effort to reduce consistently the suffering which man imposes on the animal world (Marcuse 1972, 68).

What Marcuse allows us to see clearly is that any new emancipatory myth which is worth its salt must also include within its practices a regulative ideal of reducing substantially, with the goal of eliminating altogether, animal death and suffering at the hands of humans. I believe this is a valuable lesson for any impending earthborn democracy, one that I hope the authors will consider as they continue with their mythmaking journey.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the will to difference, see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (Deleuze 1983).
2. For example, see Katherine E. Young, "Vegetarianism as Utopian Figuration" (Young 2025).
3. Here, Marcuse writes: "Materialism, which is not tainted by such ideological abuse of the soul, has a more universal and realistic concept of salvation. It admits the reality of Hell only at one definite place, here on earth, and asserts that this Hell was created by Man (and by Nature). Part of this Hell is the ill-treatment of animals—the work of a human society whose rationality is still the irrational" (Marcuse 1964, 237).

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