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Representation, Democracy, and the Ecological Age

Representación, Democracia, y la Edad Ecologica

Abstract: We live in the age of ecology—the Ecocene. And if we start from the messy ecological relations that are pushing radical changes in human societies, new problems and new questions arise. This research note is concerned with how the ecological age is shifting the meaning of political representation, especially in relation to non-humans. Taking cues from ontological pluralism and specific situations it proposes that representation can no longer be uniquely thought as the practice of making present that which is absent. Instead, it becomes the creation of hybrid voices based on an ever-expanding array of beings that come to matter.

Resumen: Vivimos en la era de la ecología: el Ecoceno. Y si comenzamos desde las desordenadas relaciones ecológicas que están impulsando cambios radicales en las sociedades humanas, surgen nuevos problemas y nuevas preguntas. Esta nota de investigación analiza cómo la edad ecológica está cambiando el significado de la representación política, especialmente en relación con los no humanos. Partiendo del pluralismo ontológico y de situaciones concretas, propone que la representación ya no puede concebirse únicamente como la práctica de hacer presente lo que está ausente. En su lugar, se convierte en la creación de voces híbridas basadas en un conjunto cada vez mayor de seres que llegan a importarnos.

Keywords: political representation, Anthropocene studies, environmental humanities, environmental political theory.

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Palabras clave: representación política, estudios del Antropoceno, humanidades ambientales, teoría política ambiental.

Introduction

ALL DEMOCRACY IS REPRESENTATIVE. Nadia Urbinati and Mark Warren (2008) went as far as arguing that the distinction between representative and participatory kinds is essentially false. They remind us of David Plotke's argument that "the opposite of representation is not participation. The opposite of representation is exclusion. […] Representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy modern realities. Representation is crucial in constituting democratic practices" (1997). This suggests that there is no such thing as direct and unmediated participation. In fact, there is a moment of representation even if one speaks for oneself. After all, a person, etymologically, is a *persona*, a mask, an actor in their own play. We are all, in some sense, multiple.

If this theoretical argument is not enough, perhaps an example will convince. What is regularly now called the ecological crisis[2] has imposed a new concern with the non-human in all of its guises. In other words, democracy can no longer ignore what had traditionally been conceived as its outside: broadly, Nature (see Latour 2004; 2017). But it can also not take it into account without some form of representation. So, in a very pragmatic sense, the irruption of ecology into politics has sedimented the necessity of seeing representation as a core feature of what democracy is. Everything hangs, therefore, on how political representation is understood in this context, how it may work, if at all possible, outside the nature—culture divide that presupposes what it purports to find in the world[3].

The necessity to take non-humans into account—to make them count, as it were—presents new questions and problems. Questions such as: who can speak for nature? Once the concept of nature has been so thoroughly critiqued, does it have any useful meaning? What kinds of ontological positions are helpful in thinking through the voice of non-humans? And what does it mean to conserve nature in a world where everything has been changed, in what is now called the Anthropocene?

[2] The fact that the concept of crisis is often invoked does not imply that it should be, or that it is the obvious framing for thinking eco-social imbroglios. See, for example, Stengers (2015; 2018a; в) and Tănăsescu (2022в).

[3] For the now-classic treatment of the problem of nature—culture dualism, see Descola (2013).

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The new problems that these questions approach and try to feel their way around can be formulated as puzzles. For example, how to put together the often-non-electoral form that speaking for nature takes (social movements, local territorial defense, indigenous and campesino politics) with *electoral* representative democracy. How to restructure a political system that is structurally blind to non-human forces. How to rethink a legal system that looks beyond the human. How, in other words, to live in what has been called the Ecocene (Tănăsescu 2022b; also see Youatt 2020; Armstrong 2016), the era when ecological forces seem to be driving social and political change. The Ecocene is a new problem, and it generously distributes new and challenging puzzles.

These issues cannot be fully or comprehensively addressed. Perhaps they don't need to, being sufficient that they surface, make us think and, therefore, make us act. Their strength may lie in their power to change our mind, to jostle us out of the complacency of thinking that we already have the tools to build an ecological politics. In any case, here I can only focus on one theme that is central to this Special Issue, and through which I can indicate the shape of the shifting ground remodeling contemporary thought and practice. It may be worth noting at the outset that what we are talking about here—the challenge of ecology—is not *a threat* per se, and neither is it an opportunity. It is a literal reshaping, without promises and without end. What is made of it is in the making. Or, rather, what is made *through and with* ecological processes is not itself the end, or the beginning of a new democracy. It is a perpetual practice that must be democratic in order to be at all (Büscher and Fletcher 2020).

The theme occupying the rest of this note is double: the problem of political representation of non-humans—what it means, what it does, who can do it, and the problem of ontological pluralism—what onto-epistemic commitments are called forth by the ecological era we have entered. In short, rethinking what it means for natural entities to have a political voice needs a variety of ontological positions, of living resources maintained through the cracks of modernity.

1. Political Representation

What is political representation, and how can it function in a world teeming with non-humans? If we start from the premise that representation is not second best, but a necessary feature of democracy, how may we understand it, how is it enacted, and what does it do? Why, if we follow this argument, is it necessary for democracy?

To start with a scandalously abbreviated version of the story so far: political scientists have offered different typologies of representation, different

ways in which the relationship between representatives and the represented is organized. In terms of how the relationship may be modelled, the classic forms are those of representation as delegation (charging the representative with a specific job) versus trusteeship (trusting the representative to act well on your behalf, in general, using her own best judgment). In terms of more general views of what representation is, Hanna Pitkin's classic *The Concept of Representation* (1967) introduced four possible kinds, among which substantive (representation should accomplish precise interests) and descriptive (women, for example, must be represented by women) have become widely important.

Lastly, Michael Saward (2006; 2008; 2010) has introduced the most influential constructivist critique so far, called the claim-making framework. The basic argument is that representation is a kind of performance centered around the presentation of claims (also see Saward 2017). Whether these are successful or not doesn't strictly depend on *what* is being said, but on *how* and on the response of relevant audiences. Under this guise, representation is more about forming political subjects than translating interests. But the political subjects it forms are not known outside of the relationship and cannot really be thought of as pre-existing a representative claim (Tănăsescu 2014; 2016). This implies that the relationship between represented and representative is constructed without a necessary reference to how things are, that is to say, without an explicit ontology. The sign and the signifier are free-floating, and the only real is, in a sense, the performance itself.

Despite the enormous variety of accounts, typologies, and forms of political representation so far[4], its basic infrastructure keeps coming back to Pitkin's formulation: *representation is making present*, in some sense, of that which is absent. So, to re-present is to bring into presence, and by extension what is so called forth had been absent. This insight, the duality of presence and absence, has also bled into theories of non-human representation which, for the most part, have kept within a similar overall framework. So, even though political representation starts with specifically human relations, it can be fairly unproblematically extended to non-humans, inasmuch as we agree—and this is increasingly the case—that non-humans too can have interests and needs, or that their interests and needs can be constructed as much as their human varieties. Non-human representation, then, would be a problem of extending tools and modifying them accordingly, not an existential challenge, the irruption of a new problem that risks unsettling what we mean by humans to begin with.

What it means to speak on behalf of non-humans in a fashion similar to human representation can also take many forms: parliamentary, through

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[4] See, inter alia, Celis *et al.* (2008), Celis and Childs (2020), Mansbridge (2003; 2011), Dovi (2012), Eckersley (1992), Dobson (2014), Goodin (2008).

proxies or parties dedicated specifically to animals (like the Party for the Animals, PvdD, in the Netherlands); perhaps a parliament made up in equal part of human and non-human representatives, beyond animals, to includes water bodies, mountains, and so on (for example, Latour's "parliament of things", 2018). Similarly, granting legal personality to landscapes, as has been the case in Ecuador, Bolivia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Colombia, Spain, and an increasing number of other places, makes it possible for political and legal representation to interact in potentially fruitful ways (see Tănăsescu 2022a). Experts, in a more technocratic vein, can also speak for natural entities and processes, based on their specific knowledge (climate scientists speaking for the climate, conservation biologists for species, ecologists for ecosystems).

These and other different ways of extending representation to non-humans follow the same premise that what is brought into the polis through representative claims had henceforth been absent. Whether what has been absent is *really* there and awaits discovery and translation, or whether it is entirely constructed, doesn't change the presence—absence dualism. And it is this dualism that marks political representation in this guise as a modernist enterprise, in a very precise sense. Modernity is characterized by the operation of separating nature into measurable, observable, universal elements (primary qualities represented in factual knowledge) and subjective impressions, feelings, and opinions (secondary qualitites of subjective fickleness; see Tănăsescu 2022b). This is what, following Whitehead, Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers call "the bifurcation of nature" (Debaise 2017a; b).

For pre-ecological politics, this has meant that the only nature that counts is human nature, variously constructed throughout the centuries as rapacious, competitive, cooperative, and so on. Non-humans, on their own terms, can only be accounted for by science on the basis of their properties. But their proper environment is not the polis. We are political animals, as Aristotle said, but animals are not political.

For non-human representation, perhaps more surprisingly, this same modernist structure has held. It's just the conclusion that changes: the absent that are to be made present *can* be known objectively, if only enough facts are gathered about them. Humans can achieve an objective knowledge of non-humans, science being *the* guide. Humans, under this account, continue being exceptional as political animals. In other words, human exceptionalism, variously justified, is what allows for political speech to be conjured out of non-humans, through an inventiveness that only we possess.

The question of good representation of non-humans, then, hangs on the kind and amount of information that we can gather about a species, ecosystem, water body, or whatever else may be the case. Politics, as Bruno La-

tour proposes in his commentary on Stengers' work, would be about "quieting down passions and emotions by bringing in rationality from above" (Stengers 1997, xiii).

If we step out of this dominant modern narrative that relegates non-human nature to a subject to be made present by speaking *on behalf of*, we start to see that this ontology is a specific, regional one (even provincial, as Chakrabarty 2008 would say). Next to it there have always been many a-modern, often called indigenous ontologies, that do not institutionalize the idea that the natural and the political are separate realms. The idea is not to deny that there are traits proper to humans (as there are traits proper to anything else), or that making present may be part of representation. Rather, it is to make a bet: thinking ontology in the plural is a worthwhile journey in the face of the new problems our ecological era articulates.

2. Ontological Pluralism

Ontological pluralism means two things: that there is no stark separation between epistemology and ontology, and no ontology can claim universal truth (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018; De Castro 2019). If we start from this double premise, then social science is forced into dialogue with intellectual and practical traditions that have completely different assumptions as to what the world is and, accordingly, how it can be known. Anthropology is one possible guide here, though by no means the only one[5].

The new position that the social sciences find themselves in is occasioned, perhaps even required, by the change of era I earlier referred to as the Ecocene. It would help, then, to be more precise as to how this era appears if we shift the focus from humans (the anthropos in the Anthropocene) to ecology. The Ecocene is a name that doesn't purport to describe an objective reality, but rather to propose a heading that conjures different kinds of challenges. The main challenge is how to think politics if we consider that the current era of ecological derangement is being in a sense led by ecological forces themselves, and not by omnipotent humans. Obviously, aggregate human actions *are* very powerful and destructive, but this does not mean that we can only think in terms of the human—nature duality that sets one (the human) as the driver of the latter (nature).

What if, instead of thinking from that blind human power, we think from the processes and changes that have always driven the world and have

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[5] Indigenous authors and scholars are a necessary guide, as are "minor" Western histories and thinkers that have also approached ontological pluralism. See Tănăsescu (2022b).

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rendered it—from an animal standpoint—as so many difficult problems to solve? Indeed, ecological processes are changing faster than human societies, in a dizzying reversal of geological and historical times (Chakrabarty 2009). And it is precisely ecological change as such, as a feature of the world, that is unsettling previous political and social arrangements, including the practice of political representation.

The challenge that the Ecocene presents is to think humans and non-humans as so many temporary and precarious alliances. Politics, then, is a way of making new alliances, of extending the kinds of things that matter in any given situation. Through this, politics is no longer the subjective field opposed to the objectivity of science, but rather a fellow traveler in interrogating the world. For example, the last two decades of scientific work in microbiology have revealed that relationships with bacteria and viruses literally make the healthy human body, and we therefore now know that a representation of the microfauna is necessary for a healthy life (Brives 2022). We therefore speak together, as a hybrid, in political arenas that would touch on public health, or on the industrial deployment of antibiotics. In those situations, it is not just microfauna that is being represented *by* humans, but rather a composite, what has been increasingly called a holobiont, a hybrid being instead of an individual. In the words of Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber (2012), "we have never been individuals" (also see Gilbert & Tauber 2016; Tauber 2017; Guerrero, Margulis & Berlanga 2013). It is this composite that speaks with a negotiated voice for its common being because it cannot exist without the relationships that generate it.

The Ecocene, then, is a way of conceptualizing the era that has started in dialogue with an ontological pluralism that also has precedents in Western traditions (see, for example, the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or David Abram). Importantly, the relations that humans entertain with different kinds of beings, are not finite; through various practices, different kinds of important relations that were previously ignored are revealed, and therefore the arena of representation is in continuous expansion. Representing, then, would no longer be a distinction between true and false, "but rather between well-constructed and badly constructed propositions" (Stengers 1997, xiii).

To take another example: Indigenous activists in many parts of the world speak as a common mountain-human, or river-human voice, because human begins cannot exist in a flourishing way without the presence of healthy environments. The question of what a mountain or a river *really* is remains moot. The point is not to determine an objective ground outside of which politics cannot exist. A construction, as Latour argues, "is not a

representation from the mind or from the society about a thing, an object, a matter of fact, but the engagement of a certain type of world in a certain type of collective" (Stengers 1997, xiii – xiv). What may that look like?

3. The river's human face

In 2017, the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand became a legal person. There are already detailed accounts of this and similar cases elsewhere (see Tănăsescu 2020, and 2022a for the case of Te Urewera as well). What I want to do here is look at the representative arrangements that are part of this piece of legislation. Even though it may seem more appropriate in legal analysis, Te Awa Tupua Act (2017) in fact sets the framework for the exercise of political representation based on ontological pluralism, namely on the input of both Crown (the New Zealand government) and Māori descent groups, in this case the Whanganui iwi, the traditional riparian communities.

Te Awa Tupua (the Wanganui River in the Māori language) is defined as an "indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements" (Te Awa Tupua Act, art.12). This definition is already a challenge to ontological dualism because the river itself is seen as *living*, as well as *unclear*, in the sense that it has no fixed borders. In other words, the being to be represented is, as other living beings are, in continuous evolution, partly because of its relationships with humans.

The Act creates a specific representative for the river, namely a Board (Te Pou Tupua) made up of half Whanganui iwi, half Crown representatives. The composition of the Board points towards ontological pluralism and mutual learning. But what is most interesting here is how the Māori-inspired legislation subverts the idea of a separation between humans and the river, and by extension of a representative that would make the represented present. Though this legislation has been widely interpreted to give the Board guardianship, the Act itself refers to this new governance body as "the human face of the river". "The purpose of Te Pou Tupua is to be the human face of Te Awa Tupua and act in the name of Te Awa Tupua" (Art. 18.2). Act *in the name of*. This is a different way of conceiving interests, needs, and the congruence between these and the representative's actions. Not that these categories are excluded, but the text of the Act is more suggestive than that.

Acting in the name of a river as its human face raises very important questions. But to pose these successfully, we need to understand that "the Māori universe is a gigantic kin, a genealogy" (Salmond 2017, 14). And,

just like family relations in general, being a daughter or a son can only exist through a parental relationship. One cannot be a mother or father without having a child or having a relationship that would be its equivalent (it is not biological criteria that matter most). In other words, "it is the relation itself […] that is ontologically prior" (idem), and what dominant Western traditions would identify as separate beings—the human, the river—exist and *come to matter* through their relationships.

Te Awa Tupua Act proposes a form of governance (the Board) that is specifically tasked with inventing a new representative form, based on the idea that humans are themselves an ecology. Humans as ecology, as holobiont, suggest that representation can be a form of listening (and speaking) through attunement.

The idea that representation is the formation of a hybrid voice is not simply plucked out of Māori philosophy but is itself a compromise between different ways of seeing. For example, the representative institutions that the Board must function through are decidedly of settler colonial origin, while the ontological relationality structuring representative speech is of Māori origin. This is not a shortcoming, but a potentially fruitful way of understanding how ontological pluralism can come to change dominant ways of understanding what representatives do, can do, could do, in an age when learning to pay attention to the environing world has become a political imperative.

This also suggests that the legitimacy of representative claims in a context of relationality and pluralism comes precisely from the ability to pay attention and to expand the relationships that matter. Here, too, hybrids are important. For example, in Māori traditions listening to the river, inasmuch as it is kin, is an ongoing dialogue based on ecological knowledge. In a Western tradition, the sciences are continuously multiplying the beings that make the living world, as the example of microbiology illustrated. The representative acquires powers of representation, develops its specific hybrid voice, by being part of vast networks of sensing, whether these be traditional local knowledge or ecological science.

Conclusion

Ontological pluralism presents political representation with difficult challenges. For example, how may we judge, according to what criteria, whether a non-human has been well constructed and represented? But there is a trap in that kind of question, a nostalgia for the certainties of presence—absence, nature—culture dualism. That question cannot yet make justice to the radical novelty that the Ecocene introduces.

Looking for criteria of good versus bad representation resists the uncomfortable position that relational alliances presuppose. Hybrids—the river speaking with a human voice, the human being a holobiont—are always uncomfortable because their membership can never be finally counted. There is no possibility of knowing with absolute certainty exactly what the make-up of a holobiont is. There is no possible full list of participants. That is the very point of ontological hybridization, and the very reason why it so deeply challenges political practices, which are always based on discriminating between what counts and what doesn't.

Democratic politics, too, depends on this kind of discrimination: citizens versus non-citizens, poor versus rich, autochthon versus allochthon, cetacean versus pest, humans versus animals. The formal requirements of equal representation cannot hide the practices of *fixing a line of demarcation*. But the new hybrids that speak with a strange voice, a human-river or microbiome medley, can only exist *without* such a line. That is their greatest challenge. If we understand representation as the coalescence of hybrid voices, then we immediately see the radically democratic fashion in which different elements come together to form unexpected alliances.

The question of true versus false, as much as good versus bad, is changed into a question of power. What kind of power does a new alliance gather? How does speaking as human-river modify already-established relationships, whether these be of domination or collaboration? And what kind of power keeps an alliance together, what is the attractor, to use Latour's language? Political representation is no longer about making the absent present, or constructing through performance, but rather about the stubbornness of limitless membership in changing power configurations.

The holobiont, in speaking *as* holobiont, *as* the hybrid that sustains it, must leave open the possibility of, for example, viruses counting in new ways, ways that change current human and non-human power relations (Brives 2022). The human-river, in speaking with the voice of a previously unthinkable Board, conjures a being that cannot be defined with any amount of precision.

A comprehensive list of the "physical and metaphysical elements" of the river would be absurd, not least because many are bound to change. Or, rather, these kinds of elements only endure through change. And this, perhaps, is the greatest challenge that ontological pluralism and the Ecocene raise, namely the problem of building a representative democracy that is forbidden from discounting ahead of time. A representative democracy that must be vigilant, on the lookout for new alliances that may build an inclusive and radically democratic age of ecology.

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