

Introduction

Ecopolitics beyond the Human World

Now I would like to think of the possibility of a new humanities.

—Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space*, 127

During a global pandemic, while humans are battling tiny microbes, a group of orcas convenes off the coast of Portugal and Spain. After their meeting, the orcas start their campaign against humans by ramming the stern (rear) of boats. They cause substantial damage to rudders while some crew members face injuries due to the impact of the collision. Several boats must be towed back to land after losing the ability to steer. One boat sinks. The aggression towards boats baffles scientists, to say the least. Orcas may seem curious and playful, but their aggressive hunting strategies earn them the name killer whales. Yet, none of that can possibly explain this sudden vandalism. Humans, or their boats, have never been a target. Some aboriginal cultures address the truce between humans and orcas, indicating indeed a long-lasting peaceful relationship. For example, Haida and Tlingit cultures (in the Pacific Northwest) regard the orca (or Blackfish) as the representation of the force of nature. In the well-known story of Natsilane, it is made clear that humans are not the target of orcas. The story tells how Blackfish, the orca, kills the jealous brother of Natsilane. After this act of violence, Natsilane and Blackfish agree that the latter will never again hurt any human beings. While the story might be fiction, it is true that attacks on humans are virtually nonexistent—that is until now.

Why have the orcas in the North Atlantic broken their truce? One possible explanation may be stress, as they are an endangered species. Perhaps

an orca has been hit by a ship. Perhaps, indeed, a council of orcas decided to collectively harass the root of their distress: humans.

“What do you mean by a council of orcas?” the reader may ask. I suggest we find a political reality at work in orcas as well as in the relationship between humans and orcas, even if the trigger was indeed stress (a feeling not unfamiliar to human political players). In this book, I argue that non-human societies do have a lot in common with human political societies. Or, more accurately, I show how our political societies have a lot in common with earlier life-forms.

This argument implies a reassessment of both human and non-human collectives in which *logos* becomes less of a defining characteristic. The distinction between animals with and without reason or speech has been a crucial aspect in the history of Western thinking. As is evident in the *De Anima*, Aristotle in many ways makes a sharp distinction between animals that have *logos* and those that do not. *Logos* is our *capacity*. Likewise, he calls humans the political animal, suggesting politics is *our* realm. Etymologically, politics is tied to the *polis*, the city, or the country of which one can be a citizen. Sometimes *polis* is translated as “community” and *politika* as “social.” Thus, it seems that etymologically politics is tied to humans. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s own writing casts doubts on the exclusive political status of humans when he states the following: “The social (Πολιτικά / *politika*) animals are those which have some one common activity (ἔργον / *ergon*); and this is not true of all the gregarious (ἀγελαία / *agelaia*) animals. Examples of social animals are man, bees, wasps, ants, cranes. Some of them live under a ruler, some have no ruler; examples: cranes and bees live under a ruler, ants and innumerable others do not.”¹ The passage suggests that politics for Aristotle, at least in this passage, is defined as a community that collectively engages in a common activity, with or without a ruler. Using this definition, different animals could be considered as political, of which Aristotle only provides a few examples. Interestingly, today we call insects such as ants and bees *social*, whereas Aristotle uses the word *political*.

The difference between society and politics—and likewise between the social and the political—is not always clear. Politics typically involves structures of governance and power, whereas society refers to structures beyond the political that involve class, gender, race, education, and so forth. Thinkers such as Rousseau, Marx, Kropotkin, Foucault, or Bookchin have in different ways shown that political structures and techniques (or technologies) of power are found throughout our social structures. Charbonneau likewise takes politics beyond those who govern and defines it as “the act

of managing together.”² Political power is then not centralized in a few elected officials. For better or worse, it is found in larger structures. In that regard, we could say that we already live in a politically decentralized world. Economy, class, gender distinctions, and public opinion are all formed through historical, social, cultural, and economic structures of great complexity. The so-called leaders are in service of a system. The same can be said for parental and household structures, as well as education. None of our societal structures could function without a general inclination of people to follow orders, to be part of hierarchies and social structures. As we see in the Women Marches, Black Lives Matter (and earlier the Civil Rights movement), the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, or the #MeToo movements, resistance to governments and existing structures are typically collective endeavors, again falling into structures. How social structures are formed in particular depends on the social, economic, and political contexts in which groups and individuals live. Yet, beyond the particularities, it is a given that we can easily function in these contexts. Moreover, we need it as we could not survive as individuals. The two natural social functions that Kropotkin and others point out are *competition* and *mutual aid*. The latter especially cannot occur without structures. We can wonder if structures of freedom are made possible through the existence of necessary structures. Kant suggests our political structures and restrictions generate the conditions for the possibility of freedom.

When comparing human and non-human animals, the distinction is often made on the grounds that non-human animals merely act out of necessity, whereas humans, even while their society is generated out of necessity, act out of freedom. Thus, it is argued that we can engage freely in politics to think about and pursue “the good life.” This raises the question: if in today’s society the majority of people are not engaged in politics and do not reflect on or attempt to pursue the good life, then are our lives in any essential way different from those of other social animals?

Nietzsche, for good reasons, refers to humans as herd animals. Marx speaks of alienation from our human essence as social beings. Going back to Ancient Greece: while Plato’s political agenda is often difficult to accept at face value, his idea that we all live like prisoners in a cave is not blaming the oppression by rulers, but rather his point is that we ourselves are the cause of our own oppression. Within the Western canon, we encounter the danger of emphasizing individualism. Freedom is often confused with individualism, and we tend to neglect the fact that it is the collective in which we exist that makes individual choices possible in the first place. In

this book, I do occasionally engage with Zen Buddhist thinking insofar as it shows us that we are beings in relation to other human beings as well as to the natural world. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that there is no individuality in Buddhism. However, the point of Zen Buddhism, as I understand it, is rather that individualism always involves the context in which we function. Individuality can only occur within a collective, or ensemble of others, consisting of human and non-human entities.

As already indicated one might be hesitant to call non-human structures political. When I suggest that ants, salmon, or rats are political beings, I can already hear some readers protest: “that ain’t politics!” They will argue that politics involves active and conscious participation, making choices that are not driven by necessity and instinct alone, but rather through representation, government, laws, and envisioning a common good. On the basis of such definitions of politics and non-human animals, we can quickly dismiss the very possibility of politics for non-human animals because they do not conceptualize a common good and have no notion of “the good,” or “the good life” (as far as we know). Indeed, we typically do not find such political features in non-human animals. Yet, we should be careful about using too high a standard here, a prejudice sometimes called anthropofabulation. If we apply the same strict criterion to human beings, most will fail to truly function “politically.” Just like animals, humans typically, indeed, do not think about “the good.” How many people explicitly participate in a collective endeavor that aims at the good? Can we even agree on what we mean by “the good?” How many people manage to act freely? How many are well-informed? Interestingly, our contemporary human ways of living have moved away from the stricter definitions of politics. Along similar lines, organizational models we find in non-human animals are often considered purely necessary, in which it is assumed that freedom is impossible. Thus, it is suggested that they are not engaged in politics defined as such. After all, we suggest that animals behave most of all instinctually. If they have a goal, even a collective goal, they are not aware of this goal. They do not think teleologically, as opposed to humans.

Against this tendency, I claim that politics is much older than the human species. We have inherited certain traits directly from some species, or as the theory of convergent evolution suggests, species might have developed in similar ways by facing similar challenges and opportunities. In terms of language, *politics* is etymologically rooted in the city, the *polis*, yet we have seen above that already Aristotle uses the word *politika* to describe animal societies. In this book, I follow and exploit this Aristotelian trace and argue

how the chimpanzee colony, the ant colony, packs of rats, schools of fish, or tidepools can be considered “cities.” While I am not doubting that we humans are in some ways essentially different from other animals, at a very basic level, we share traits even with fish and ants. In particular, we share traits that make us able and want to collaborate. Species, including ours, can thrive because of that collaboration. Likewise, it is not an exclusively human characteristic to experience feelings for one another. For example, rats and chimpanzees also experience empathy.³

There might be a purpose to a *polis*, for example, the mutual benefits that arise from collaboration. Such benefits range from work and education to cultural events. A city, like any society, *ideally* provides food, shelter, safety, health, and education for all. While social contract theories suggest that the move towards society was a human one, animals live together and collaborate for exactly the same reasons we do: mutual benefit. This should not surprise us, since we are also animals. All animals, and in fact all living beings, need some level of collaboration in order to live, survive, and/or reproduce. The ant colony can consist of tens of thousands of individuals who—just like most humans—would not even know how to survive on their own. They build cities consisting of networks of tunnels and chambers, as well as engage in a sophisticated division of labor. Salmon can only reproduce through massive collective movements, and chimpanzee colonies function through complex social and, as De Waal argues, political dynamics.

Aristotle speaks about some animals as being involved in one common activity, whereas according to Kropotkin all species and organisms rely on what he calls “mutual aid.” A species that is not in some fundamental way drawn towards collaboration is bound to go extinct quickly. Even solitary species of animals will need to procreate and raise their offspring. Most species of animals spend the majority of their lives in groups. Groups need to make decisions, and we all know how difficult that is. Deciding which restaurant to go to with a small group can be a monumental task if all individual tastes, dietary restrictions, economic backgrounds, and quirks of all the members of the group are to be taken into account. The decisions most animals have to make as a group are perhaps less complicated than those of humans, yet the point is that collective decisions are made and that different animal communities use a variety of mechanisms to make them. We might be able to learn something from studying the dynamics of a variety of animal communities.

The endeavor at the center of this book is to regard the collective or ensemble of non-human animals as political. Returning to the issue of

relating the social and the political, we find that these words are often used in conjunction. For example, when we speak of political societies, the social contract is often the founding principle of the political unity. It is on the basis of this idea of an agreement that we find that a society indeed becomes political. Definitions of politics include some combination of elements such as laws, policies, leadership, government, and representative power. Our social abilities seem to either be a prerequisite for political unity, or our sociability is brought out when we function within a political body. When we speak of social animals, we are hesitant at best to describe, for example, a colony of ants as a political unity. It is argued that they do not deal with laws or governance, and/or that their association is not a free one. Others suggest we cannot speak of a political community if all the members of the colony are daughters of the mother queen. We tend to be good at creating exclusive definitions.

Aristotle's loose use of the words *politika* and *polei* to describe non-human animals, in the passage cited above, is heavily criticized by Hobbes in the *Leviathan*. This should not come as a surprise since it conflicts with Hobbes's idea that the commonwealth is artificial (yet necessary). Other animals live in natural unities that do not escape the realm of necessity, while our commonwealth is created by humans. The idea that other animals are social and political, collectively engaged in a common activity, does not rhyme with Hobbes's chaotic and violent version of the state of nature in which we are all beasts with only one goal: to preserve our existence. Mutual aid or collective work is not a possibility in the imagined world of the war of all against all.

The classical social contract theories (Grotius, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke) all regard the contract as an imagined one, which mostly means that no one signed the contract. Furthermore, the step into society is explicitly a thought experiment and not a historical event. In the imagined state of nature, we could supposedly do whatever we wanted. Regardless of whether they give it a positive or negative spin, all social contract theorists use the state of nature in their theories. It marks a rift between the pre-political society and the political one, a move in which we supposedly alienated some of our natural rights in order to obtain civil ones. It is no coincidence that this discourse of states of nature and social contracts arises in a time of colonialism. "Savage barbarians" who supposedly lack foresight and organizational skills are moved into civilization. The aboriginal scholar Yunkaporta objects to such characterizations of Indigenous cultures by writing that

if Paleolithic lifestyles were so basic and primitive, how did humans evolve with trillions of potential neural connections in the brain, of which we now use only a small fraction? What kinds of sophisticated lifestyles would be needed to evolve such a massive brain over hundreds of thousands of years? What kind of nutritional abundance would be needed to develop such an organ, made mostly of fat? How does the narrative of harsh survival in a hostile landscape align with this fact? If our prehistoric lives were so violent, hard, and savage, how could we have evolved to have such soft skin, limited strength, and delicate parts?⁴

These are some excellent questions that drive us towards the following hypothesis: we have been political (arguably much more political than we currently are) for hundreds of thousands of years.

After Darwin and Nietzsche the social contract theory has been revisited repeatedly, in terms of justice (Rawls), racism (Mills), sexism (Pateman), and nature (Serres). Yet, should we not revise (or reject) the social contract theory from a more radical post-Darwinian, postcolonial, and post-Nietzschean standpoint? The social contract theory obscures what we inherited from other life-forms. Biologically we inherited our natural tendencies to be social, to be drawn to groups, to compete, to collaborate, to be drawn to hierarchies. Historically, we forget the long Indigenous history of political communities, and even prior to that humans lived together with Neanderthals. While the classical social contract theories were given shape within a European Christian context, we are living within the idea of that contract in a secular and global world. As Mills points out, the social (or racial) contract is not just a thought experiment; it is real in the way we live together. Slavery, genocide, and the stealing of Native American land lie at the basis of our political reality. As part of the postcolonial perspective, we also have to consider the influence of Christianity. Even while the separation of church and state is at the center of political developments in the early modern period, the idea that humans evolved from other life-forms is entirely absent in the social contract theories that originated in that same time period (even while in that same period the idea of different lineages of human races, some more closely related to apes, was informing social political discourses). The story of how our social and political lives evolved is laid out in the respective theories. All those stories start from scratch, the famous (or infamous) state of nature.

In this book, I am revisiting the social contract by imagining a political and social world long before humans emerged. I am proposing to go back at least 100 to 168 million years in time when ants already lived on the earth. An even more radical approach would be to go back close to a billion years and include sponges and fungi. While not quite going that deep into the past, I will consider how the tidepool forms a society as well. By exploring different non-human societies, I suggest that we should get rid of the idea of the social contract altogether, while acknowledging that its specter will keep haunting us.

This project involves different animal communities. Needless to say, it would be foolish to say that humans are similar to fungi, ants, or even chimpanzees. How their communities function and what they are capable of as a society is different from human societies. Yet, we do find certain shared characteristics in all forms of life. First and foremost, the need to collaborate is universal. My argument is that we humans inherited social traits from at least some of these animals and that it has been a mistake to overlook this evolutionary aspect of our social and political being. Chimpanzee colonies form political units; rats share the important social feeling of empathy; fish and birds collectively migrate; ants work together in a decentralized social order. None of this could happen without an instinctual drive to be part of a group. Understanding the drive towards a collective and recognizing how we humans are also determined through similar drives are essential to, first of all, understanding ourselves. Such an understanding does not have to lead to resignation of our instincts and feelings. Quite the opposite: to understand ourselves as creatures driven by social impulses, along with selfish ones, could lead us to a political society in which freedom can finally be pursued.

As already mentioned, Kropotkin describes politics as “mutual aid.” This is a collaboration, or a working together, in which individual members provide and receive assistance to and from the group. As we will see in chapter 4, for Kropotkin, mutual aid leads to ethics and a sense of justice in the animal world. Justice occurs when members of an animal community that steal or in other ways act selfishly at the expense of other members are punished by the group. Many will accuse Kropotkin of anthropomorphizing the animal world, yet the real problem might be that we fail or refuse to acknowledge that the natural world is full of political relationships. The criterion for politics as mutual aid is simply that the members collectively work towards a common objective and, in doing so, follow certain standards. I suggest that even while the purpose is unknown or not explicit, maintaining the group collectively is the most important determining factor

in suggesting that a community is engaged in politics. The composition of the group does not need to be the same all the time because the size, shape, and duration of a group can vary between different species as well as within the same species at different times. Yet, what determines the group (in all its varieties) as political, is cooperation or mutual aid. Collaboration is “taking part in” or “co-working.” It requires involvement. When looking at salmon or ants, it could be suggested that they “participate” involuntarily in the group activities since it is their only chance at survival; and instead of making a choice, they simply follow a basic drive or instinct. I have suggested already that this classic distinction between necessity and freedom is problematic. Social contract theorists, from Grotius and Hobbes to Rawls, agree that no one explicitly or voluntarily agreed to the social contract. Even while we supposedly “give up” natural rights, the theory immediately involves an assumption of human “passivity” because we are born into a situation in which we are already subjects of the contract, and therefore subject to its rules. While conceptually the social contract indicates a subjection and passivity, in reality, we cannot be inactive. The same is true for non-human animal collaboration which is active and much more than an involuntary or passive involvement. As the Actor Network Theory (ANT) of Latour suggests, we are engaged in networks of actors. With that he is reconsidering who and what can be an agent. Along similar lines, I propose to rethink and reformulate the idea of human and non-human animal participation within their respective societies. I suggest that we can find an active engagement that steps beyond the passive-active dichotomy. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 1.

Thus, one of the guiding questions is whether non-humans take part, collaborate, and involve themselves in structures that could be called political. Ants constantly make decisions as individuals and moreover, as a whole. Rats have empathy, yet seem to exclude others from their group if exclusion favors the conditions of the group. In other words, their empathy seems to be selective. My suggestion is that similarities between human and non-human animal communities are abundant and that we have similar instincts, feelings, and structures. Therefore, ultimately, this project is a reassessment of our own political drives, needs, goals, and decisions.

The Beginning of Politics

In elementary school, we learn that human communities started as hunter-gatherer groups. How these groups exactly functioned is unclear. A

common narrative is that the groups consisted of several families that worked together in their efforts to survive. Some lived in huts; others were more nomadic. The character of these groups changed when agriculture developed. Social contract theorists, while typically emphasizing that their version of human history is speculative, either suggest that we simply had to work together in order to avoid Hobbes's "war of all against all," or that the contract was simply a ruse of the wealthy (or whites, or men) as suggested first by Rousseau. What all social contract theories leave unquestioned is that we humans (and even more: we European humans) created politics. It is never suggested that humans have always already lived in political communities. Against this long-standing viewpoint, I suggest that we have not created politics (as is assumed in what Rancière refers to as "the logic of the *arche*").⁵ I argue that we humans have always lived in a world full of politics. Other animals collaborate and are organized in structures. They belong to their community, depend on it, protect it, and are drawn to it.

On what exact basis can I make the outrageous claim that the human species came into existence in a world that was already political? Part of the justification lies in recent archaeological discoveries. Neanderthals are no longer considered to be the skull-smashing brutes they were once perceived to be. As discussed in chapter 3, chimpanzees live in political societies. It does not only seem unlikely, but even irrational to assume that hominids such as the Neanderthal (and the *Homo sapiens*) did not inherit (and further develop) the political aspects of other great apes. We see that chimpanzee leadership is established not just through an exercise and display of power, but through complex dynamics that involve all members of the colony and in which feelings of empathy are central.

Thus, we first of all stand in a lineage of political creatures that reaches back to other great apes. Yet, there are political structures much older, reaching back to social insects and other animals that live in groups. As Kropotkin, Allee, Ricketts, and De Waal suggest, cooperation or mutual aid is essential for all life.⁶ Our tendency to be drawn to groups is a very old animal instinct, even a tendency of all forms of life. While Darwin's theory is often explained (especially by the social Darwinists) in terms of the survival of the fittest, leading to an emphasis on struggle, his theory also emphasizes the need for individuals to work together. Thus, there is struggle *and* there is cooperation. No species can survive without *both* components. Once we recognize that these two forces are at work in all life, non-human communities become much more complex and dynamic. Individual members might

be driven towards their own selfish needs, but they are also driven towards one another, among others to assist other members of their community.

It is tricky to make speculations about animal intentions. Even if the intentions of most animals are not consciously aiming at the common good, they might nevertheless serve the common good. If the intention of an animal is a subconscious drive to self-preservation, does this mean that the animal is not political? As mentioned, Hobbes explicitly argues that non-human animal forms of organization are not political. Yet, his *Leviathan* proposes the body politic precisely on the account that human beings are creatures that act out of one impulse: self-interest. The only thing that keeps them from brutally killing one another is the social contract, which constitutes the artificial body. Thus, while human beings are merely matter in motion, and are nothing special as they are driven towards their own self-interest, the Leviathan is special. While I do not agree with Hobbes's assessment of human nature, he does show beautifully how the artificial state is in fact, an organic whole. While lessons are to be taken from this, I want to bring the Leviathan into question at its most fundamental level by first of all simply noticing that other animals can survive without a similar contract. We are the only animals who need a contract, or who have been convinced that we need one. We might possibly be better off without a contract, without an organizational structure in which we have alienated our right to truly participate in governing. In order to rethink our own organization, I propose to understand ourselves as part of a greater organic whole, a greater organizational structure in which we have to find (or retrieve) our proper place.

Human and Non-human Others

This book is written in the context of the disenfranchised in both the human and the non-human realm, framed within what I consider failed human politics. We live in a world of great contrasts. Streets are full of so-called homeless encampments while second (or third) residences are mostly vacant investment properties. Refugees try to cross borders while we vacation effortlessly all over the globe. Meanwhile, wildfires and storms are displacing and disrupting communities, leaving more people without a home. While we could mitigate these issues, we have not, and as long as we continue electing climate change deniers who serve industries rather than people, nothing

will change. Even in a best-case scenario, it is very questionable what a “green” government can accomplish. International climate agreements aim at *reducing*, not *stopping* global warming. The latter is what we need while even the first is failing. Our current political reality has turned our actions into reactions to symptoms, failing to address causes. Instead of limiting consumption, we are sold on the idea of green consumption. Instead of reducing greenhouse gasses to stop climate change, we are talking about climate change mitigation (typically only available to wealthy communities). Instead of aiming for a peaceful world in which all humans can thrive, we are building walls and increasing border security. Or to take another example, a 68-million-dollar suicide barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge is supposed to keep people from jumping to their deaths, while the support of mental well-being is failing and underfunded. Walls and barriers are mostly symbolic measures. Fighting causes is not impossible even while the current system calls it exactly that: impossible. It calls one crazy for even imagining something beyond the current system. In fact, the current system seems to deplete our imagination to such a degree that even envisioning anything beyond the current situation is impossible.

Failed human politics has enormous consequences outside of the human realm. We fail when we open up areas from mountains to oceans for mining and oil winning. We fail to meet (or place) caps on carbon emissions. We fail to preserve mountains and forests, and “harvest” them instead. We fail in our fish quota and the standards for industrial farming. In all these examples, failed human politics is in direct relation to non-human politics.⁷

It sometimes seems that in the development of political systems, we have made very little progress, if any. The problems of the Greek democratic *polis* such as corruption, the influence of wealth, political demagogues, and those who lack true knowledge are representative of our problems today. Power seems to corrupt people, which is also confirmed in other political systems such as aristocracies and dictatorships. Our democracies today fail to live up to their name. Considering the long history of failed politics and the lack of true solutions to recurring problems, we could conclude that all human political models are bound to lead to the same negative outcomes.

This attitude, first of all, ignores the fact that political societies have existed much longer than the democracy we find in Ancient Greece. Unfortunately for us and the planet, the ecopolitical wisdom of Indigenous cultures has been largely destroyed. We are just working with 2,500 years of knowledge, and even beyond that we can suggest that the human species has only just started its attempts to figure out our human politics. We

are in the developing stages, at best. Our species is, without a doubt, the most dominant species on earth at this time, yet we have existed only for a brief period. If we consider that human political systems are a tiny part of a much longer history of politics, we might find some hope. Ants have lived in collaborative models for 130 million years. *Homo sapiens* have only been around for 300,000 years, modern humans for around 40,000–50,000 years, and democracy only for 2,500 years. This might seem like a long time, especially if one's country has only been in existence for a few hundred years, but not if you consider that some trees are older than that! We are only at the beginning of learning how to live together successfully. Indeed, Gary Snyder suggests that we should think about “our situation in nothing less than a forty-thousand year time-scale. That is not very long. If we wanted to talk about hominid evolution we would have to work with something like four million years.”⁸ Challenging the notion of progress, he suggests that there is an indication that our brains have actually become smaller, which he blames on human society, through the loss of “personal direct contact with the natural world.”⁹ What he then proposes is the possibility of “a new humanities” which “would take the whole long *Homo sapiens* experience into account, and eventually make an effort to include our non-human kin. It would transform itself into a posthuman humanism, which would defend endangered cultures and species alike.”¹⁰

My project follows Snyder's sentiment in which the idea of a new humanities emerges. In a “posthuman humanism” different (endangered) cultures and species are regarded as political. Snyder (and Haraway) speak(s) of non-human “kin.” By grasping ourselves within a much larger context, a context that I call political, in which the family—kin—is the original political unity, we can start to make a place for a humanities that saves rather than destroys cultures and species.

In this book, I discuss different individual species, yet we always find that species can never be seen in isolation. In discussing a particular species, I try to understand how they function together and collaborate as communities or societies. While some aspects of non-human communities are extremely fascinating, I am not romanticizing or idealizing their existence. To state it bluntly, being an ant is a brutal existence. Nevertheless, we find that other species are successful at maintaining their species long-term, while we seem to be on track to self-destruction. We humans still have to learn how to live without destroying one another and without destroying the very ability to live in the first place. E. O. Wilson points out that ant colonies always fail and so do human colonies. Some human empires (super-colonies,

one could say) might last for a few hundred years, but failure is inevitable. If we examine our own history of wars, genocides, slavery, oppression, and environmental destruction, what are we to conclude from this? Are we bound to fail as individual colonies or as a species? Can we, out of our failures, establish a truly functional human political system? The problem of the human species is that we are acting on a global scale. In his famous piece “Is Humanity Suicidal?” Wilson calls the human species an “environmental abnormality” and blames our intelligence.

Besides Snyder, phenomenological perspectives argue that we should again open our senses and experience the natural world. As we have lost direct contact with our environment, we are also losing direct contact with other humans, partially because communication has moved in virtual directions. Our brains seem to be shrinking further, along with our feelings towards non-human animals and other humans. Elisa Aaltola suggests in her book on empathy and animal ethics that with “the birth of the faceless, consumeristic, information- and market-based society governed by fragmented social spheres, an increasingly optimizing, instrumentalizing, profit-orientated approach to existence and the diminishment of embodied, attentive encounters, we are quickly detaching from the experiential lives of others. This signals a loss of empathy.”¹¹ The loss of experience of the world is a common theme in phenomenology since Husserl. In focusing on feelings such as empathy as part of this loss, our ethical existence is brought into question. Emotions themselves, Aaltola suggests, have become brands. Certain products promise pure bliss; passion itself can be expressed by fashion (Just Do It); hotels guarantee to relax you; and Valentine’s Day proves that love can be purchased with flowers, cards, jewelry, and dinners.

It seems that we have largely lost empathy for other human beings, as well as for the non-human world. With Snyder (as well as thinkers such as David Abram), we find that the loss of direct contact with the natural world has diminished our intellectual capacities, whereas Aaltola focuses on diminishing empathy due to the lack of embodied attentive encounters. Both are problems in our increasingly technological worlds, in which humans are often communicating with a person they have never met in person (who might not be the person they claim to be or they might not even be a person at all) while we are oblivious to the others physically closest to us. We pay little to no attention to the food we consume, or to our environment, urban or natural, while whatever is left of our brains is occupied with the junk social media is feeding us.

Situating Ecopolitics

The “disenfranchised” discussed in the previous section are placed within the particular context of our current ecological crisis, the Sixth Great Extinction, anthropogenic climate change, the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or whatever we want to call the current global crisis in which both humans and non-humans are oppressed, destroyed, suffering, and/or dying. As discussed in the previous section, I indeed emphasize the double nature of the oppression of humans and non-humans alike. Within the last couple of decades, the discipline of “environmental philosophy” has quickly established itself in reaction to the self-induced crisis that we are facing as a species. Nature has always been a predominant theme in philosophy, in both Western and “non-Western” approaches. Indigenous philosophies presumably were established through lessons nature provided. Western approaches have often separated humans from their “environment”—a term that already indicates distinction. We are confronted with the results of this separation. Like no other period in human history we are confronted with and have to address the scale of environmental destruction of which we ourselves are the cause. We have to face the obvious and uncomfortable reality that our way of living destroys the very possibility of living.

Most of the approaches that call for a radical rethinking of ourselves as political beings and members of a political community lie on the fringes or even outside of the field of what is traditionally called philosophy. Remaining true to the very meaning of *philosophia* as a love of wisdom, I am bringing philosophy into conversation with literature, poetry, art, and science, and I am listening to voices in the “environmental humanities” and “science studies” in order to engage collectively in these important questions.

One of the thinkers on the fringes of philosophy is Bruno Latour, who is particularly discussed in the first chapter and is known for presenting us with a different way to think about agency through his Actor Network Theory. By placing human and non-human agents in a network in which (what Latour calls) “actants” are acting and reacting to one another, he provides a different interpretation of what it means to participate. We find, for example, that in scientific research, the object of research—that what is researched—actively participates.

For Latour, the idea that science has access to primary qualities (“the essential ingredients that really make up the world”) as opposed to secondary qualities (“that do not refer to what the world is like but only to

their cultural and personal imaginations”) is refuted.¹² Scientific truths and social constructs or narratives cannot be separated. Science itself presents different imaginations and articulations. Within this multiplicity, all we can do is add more imaginations and articulations. This insight will open up the world in entirely new ways. The world will be enriched through what we imagine and learn to articulate.

What we can learn from this is not so much an application of science to politics, or that science is political, but rather that we consider both the interaction and participation (or collaboration) between different entities and the singularity of every territory as a form of politics. Along similar lines, Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* writes about “sympoiesis” or symbiotic assemblages. She uses here the idea of sympoiesis as defined by Dempster: “Collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components.”¹³ Like Snyder, Haraway recognizes the significance of kinship with the non-human world. We are related to non-human beings, including animals, organisms, technology, and inanimate beings, in such a way that we become or make *with*: “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing . . . *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company.”¹⁴ Everything is organized with others, in company, assembling different entities.

Haraway does not frame her project explicitly as a political one. Politics, typically, uses a discourse of rights, stakeholders, and obligations. Such a language is in itself exclusionary, since it cannot be applied unilaterally to all different entities, or the language is used to explicitly exclude certain entities from rights. We can name some examples of natural entities such as rivers that have rights, but this is rare. Moreover, the language of rights is ultimately limiting: we cannot provide equal rights to all beings, and we ultimately end in a binary opposition between having and not having rights.

I would like to suggest that Haraway’s language of assembling and organizing is an alternative political language. In Haraway’s words, we become, live with, and are “worlding” in company with all kinds of organisms. If we can say the activity of worlding constitutes a political community, we find that we are living together with beings that can pose a threat to our existence. The political community consists, thus, of both beings with which we can cooperate, and those that can kill us. It is thus not a community of equals, and we would not want to give equal rights to all those with whom we are worlding, if that was even possible.

To provide an example of this we can think of our own bodies: One will take antibiotics without having to wonder about the rights of the poor bacteria that are being killed. However, we also know that the issue is not that straightforward since antibiotics will not make any judgments about which bacteria they will kill. It simply kills all the flora in your “guts,” including the millions of good bacteria that are part of the digestive system. Medicine is, then, perhaps insightful in how we are organized with other beings even in our own bodies. In Haraway’s language of worlding, we are an assembly with these organisms, a unity in which rights have no place. Outside of our bodies we likewise are co-organized, first of all with other humans but also with the rest of our world. We are worlding with different entities, such as the buildings in which we dwell, the technologies we use, the food we eat, the infrastructure of cities, the soil, air, and water. The whole constitutes a unity in which we all depend on others who build, dwell along, provide and maintain technologies and infrastructure, grow, distribute, prepare, and sell food. The whole also includes non-human animals, including the ones that fertilize the soil and pollinate plants and trees. The whole includes all kinds of organisms, some living in our bodies. Finally, the whole also includes inanimate objects, from the concrete of the sidewalk to the laptop and gadgets, which often seem more animate (and animating) than our next-door neighbors.

Not all of these entities have rights and certainly not equal ones. Yet, that does not mean we should not respect these other beings with which we are worlding. They are part of the assembly that is our world, and we are part of their world. The idea that not all these entities have the same rights might sound problematic as it suggests inequality. One of the principles Isabelle Stengers sets up in her “cosmopolitics” (discussed in some more detail below) is that of “*mise en égalité*,” translated as equalization (as opposed to equivalence). Even while we are all tied together, this does not mean that we are all equals. Stengers suggests that the cosmos does not make us all equals in the sense that we cannot use equal measures or interchange positions, but the cosmos sets us all on equal footing. With that, she suggests we can, first of all, think about the common good as a shared world with other species.

In a time in which equal rights, equal treatment, and equal opportunities often inform political discourses, the challenge of equality calls for more clarification. A helpful image is provided by Snyder who describes an ecosystem as “a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relationships that are all-powerful and instructive . . . Although ecosystems can

be described as hierarchical in terms of energy flow, from the standpoint of the whole all of its members are equal.”¹⁵ From the perspective of the whole, bears, salmon, eagles, and trees are all equal. Relationships within the whole are complex. All members give and take, but not in equal ways, as one species might be the main nutrition of another species. Bears eat salmon, trees are fed by the carcasses of salmon, bears fertilize the forest, salmon find a place to lay and fertilize their eggs in the forest that is maintained by all. The ecosystem could not exist in the way it does without all of its members. This seems to rhyme with Stengers’s idea of equalization in which we indeed are not all equals, but at least on equal footing in relation to the common or shared good, which is for her the cosmos, for Snyder (and myself) the *oikos*.

It is indeed the whole to which we have to find a perspective, and I will further suggest that to assume homogeneity would lead to injustices. In order to explain this, I turn briefly to Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophy of the “differend,” the injustice that occurs exactly in the inability to express or challenge it. His philosophy of “discourses,” which is loosely based on the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game, consists of rules and goals. From this philosophy, politics is defined as a whole ensemble of different discourses or games, each with their own rules and goals. Lyotard uses examples of human activities, each framed within its own set of rules, and each striving for its own goal. For example, an academic working in a university encounters different rules and goals than a nurse working in an emergency room, or a stockbroker on Wall Street. While we might be tempted to think about a common goal that ties all these activities together (let’s say “advancing humanity”), for Lyotard, a meta-discourse is a dangerous idea to be avoided at all costs. A meta-discourse assumes that somehow we can all agree on a common goal, yet instead of agreement, we will find that one discourse will try to dominate all others. For example, if “the common good” or “advancing humanity” is translated into economic growth and the economic genre takes over—one of Lyotard’s justifiable worries—all other goals will be subordinated to this goal. The nurse and doctor, operating within the medical system (hospital and health insurance), will then no longer act and make decisions in pursuit of human health (and the common good) but only on the basis of economic interest. We immediately see ethical problems arise. In fact, for Lyotard, the task of ethics is precisely to make sure that discourses do not dominate others. Some (notably Rancière and Esposito) have suggested Lyotard leaves no room to express injustices, yet for Lyotard, the point is that the inability to communicate should not be

dismissed. Instead, we should develop sensitivity towards silence, towards issues that cannot be expressed. I will return to this in the concluding chapter of the book.

When stepping beyond Lyotard, while maintaining his ideas regarding heterogeneous discourses, we can again say that different entities in the world, even in human society, pursue different goals and follow different sets of rules in order to pursue these diverse goals. Salmon swimming up the river, a bear rummaging through garbage, trees competing for light, rats overrunning a farm, insects in our homes, and humans all have conflicting goals and live according to (unwritten) rules. As I will argue through, among others, Kropotkin, many species of animals follow rules and even have a sense of justice to guide them in maintaining their political community. Besides the rules of each separate species, the lives of species in an ecosystem are also intertwined or integrated. Even while one might be the food for the other, they do not impose the rules of their discourse upon that of another species. Lyotard's "differend" does not seem to exist here, yet we could argue that it occurs when we set up new forms of animal living in zoos, labs, or factory farming.¹⁶

If we regard our society as an ecology, we find a plurality of discourses, each with its own rules and goals. It is the fear that one discourse dominates. In such a situation the goal and rules of one discourse (such as the capitalist economic one) prescribe rules to other discourses. Thus, returning to Snyder's image of the mandala, the suggestion would be that all parts constitute the whole, and from that perspective, they are all equal. The spider and the bear are equally important members of a natural ecosystem, while health care and poetry are equally important members of a social ecology. They bring different strengths, follow completely different rules and goals, yet influence one another, directly or indirectly, within a common home, or *oikos*.

Redefining Home

In my first book, *Ecopolitical Homelessness*, I argued for a retrieval of a sense of place on the basis of which we can redetermine ourselves politically, philosophically, ethically, and practically in a larger ecological unity. I am further building on that idea. Inspired by different animal political communities, I suggest that in order to make progress in our collaborative models, we should first of all study the long history of politics before