

Workshop and Lecture – Thursday, 9 May 2019 , 14:00–21.00, in English

The workshop addresses the growing popularity of post-constructivist perspectives within the social sciences and humanities and explores their implications for environmental politics. These perspectives, which include ontological, posthumanist, and new materialist schools of thought, have compelled many researchers to account for the ways in which a wide range of nonhuman actors and objects influence political processes. Yet these attempts have also been criticized for contributing to or even undermining the environmental politics needed to confront the daunting threats to future of life on earth.

For the workshop, Robert Fletcher explores different positions within this debate and proposes that only a *via media* offers a productive path forward. Taking the important challenges advanced by post-constructivist perspectives seriously, one can nonetheless ask where they advance an effective environmental politics. The workshop focuses on the so-called ‘ontological turn’ within social anthropology and related fields. Proponents of this perspective commonly present themselves as promoting a radical, even revolutionary politics. Yet others have seen in them a post-political intervention that may undermine the ability to take a firm stance among the various perspectives competing in today’s political landscape. Fletcher suggests that a certain understanding of ontology – what he calls a ‘strong ontological position’ – is indeed incompatible with the type of political engagement that an effective environmental politics demands. The strong ontological option, Fletcher argues, leaves actors with only two options: brute power politics or a retreat into ontological particularity. He concludes that a strong ontological position is incompatible with – and indeed, quite detrimental to – both research and political engagement committed to social and environmental justice.

Robert Fletcher is associate professor in the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. His research interests include conservation, development, tourism, climate change, globalization, and resistance and social movements. He is the author of *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism* (2014), co-author of *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Capitalocene* (forthcoming), co-editor of *NatureTM Inc.: Environmental Conservation in the Neoliberal Age* (2014) and *Lessons from the Ecolaboratory: Negotiating Environment and Development in Costa Rica* (forthcoming). Author of more than sixty additional academic articles and book chapters, he is also one of the editors in chief of *Geoforum* and associate editor of *Conservation & Society*.

Y. Ariadne Collins holds a doctorate in Environmental Sciences and Policy, a Master’s in Research in International Environmental Policy and Politics and a Bachelor’s degree in International Relations from the University of Guyana. She was a visiting researcher at Wageningen University before joining the 2018-2020 cohort of research fellows at the ICI Berlin. Her research interests include climate change governance and environmental policy and politics, especially in relation to the historical and cultural uses of forests in the Guianas. More specifically, she conducts research on neoliberalism and development through an analysis of market-based conservation and post-colonial development.

Please note: there is no need to register for the evening lecture, but the workshop session will discuss reading materials from Robert Fletcher. Please contact [info@ici-berlin.org] or register online if you would like to participate in the workshop and receive the excerpts in advance.

Lecture 19:30

Robert Fletcher
Can the Posthuman Speak?
In Defense of Anthropocentrism

What are the implications of the increasingly popular ‘posthumanist’ and ‘new materialist’ perspectives challenging human privileges in research and political action by claiming agency for a range of non-human entities, animate or otherwise? These efforts are commonly framed as responses to anthropocentrism in environmental politics and as championing an ecocentric perspective. Robert Fletcher argues, however, that a certain form of anthropocentrism is in fact indispensable for environmental politics. Effacing the distinction between humans and nonhumans risks undermining not only human agency but also human responsibility for causing and hence also redressing environmental problems. Fletcher therefore proposes a conceptual platform for future research and practice that he calls a critical humanist political ecology. Combining critical realist and critical humanist perspectives, this approach advocates, firstly, recuperating a conception of bedrock reality not to be confused with homogeneous ‘nature’. Second, it advocates preserving a distinction between humans and nonhumans that allows to reserve a measure of agency — and hence blame — for the unique ways in which humans manipulate and degrade the world they inhabit.

The Ontological Turn

Radical Politics or Post-Political Impasse?

Organized by
Y. Ariadne Collins



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