

RAZMISLEKI O POLITIČNI EKOLOGIJI

REFLECTIONS ON POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Cirila TOPLAK*

EDITORIAL

The thematic section “Reflections on Political Ecology” is a collection of scientific articles that brings original insights into topics of great relevance for contemporary political science. Although the term political ecology was coined almost 90 years ago (Thone 1935), its importance has recently been revealed in full by the current multi-crisis. Conceived as an interdisciplinary field of scientific research intersecting politics, the economy, society and the environment, thematic transversality is somewhat self-evidently expected in reflections on political ecology. The texts that follow indeed address political issues pertaining to the interactions of humans and land, humans and natural elements, humans and technologies, youth and institutions, in summary, of societies and nature. The authors push the boundaries of common perceptions of ‘political’ that tend to stem from the complex effects of power relations, inequality and patriarchy to yet more complex and intricate effects of anthropocentrism, this ideological crux of the capitalist economy and the (self)perception of humanity.

As the multi-crisis demands from academic citizens not only critical analysis and theorisation but innovative societal intervention, these texts are not inwardly oriented and self-gratifying intellectual exploits of academic perspicacity; the thematic section is outward reaching with well-founded proposals for solutions to the ecological issues determining our societies’ well-being at present and the human species’ survival in an ever nearer future.

The thematic section begins with “For Ontological Politics”, an overarching text by Andrej Kurnik that bridges agroecology and political philosophy. The author explains how the current ecological crisis is challenging the foundational premises of modern political vocabulary, notably the dualism of nature and society. He draws on experiences in agroecology, recent developments in movements for climate justice and land protection, and the social movements against neo-liberal globalisation to demonstrate the relevance of a reconsideration of fundamental ontological political concepts. The author elaborates on the ontological proposition for a “world of many worlds” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) and asserts its validity against objections of perceived indifference that relational ontologies have been criticised for. For Andrej Kurnik, humanity is also many, not one, and in the web of life beyond the dualism of nature and society

* Cirila Toplak, PhD, Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: cirila.toplak@fdv.uni-lj.si, Guest Editor.

human bodies, like all other bodies, are an interface between different ontological worlds, an environment-making environment. Transcending all notions of dualism, even the one currently opposing environmental activism and (f)actors of environmental harm and destruction, “a world of many worlds” holds truly ground-breaking and mind-changing potential to address the multi-crisis first from within our minds to pass on to our words and deeds.

In a similar line of argument as Andrej Kurnik, Cirila Toplak establishes the grounds for a concrete transformation of the current political vocabulary with ontological effects. In “Elemental Politics between Minoritarianism and Live Democracy. A Case Study of the Soča River Basin”, she argues that human interaction with natural elements makes water, air, earth/soil and fire inherently political. Access to the elements and the way they are treated cause fundamental injustices and inequalities between living beings, while the elements are recognised for their importance for the well-being and prosperity of human societies and ecosystems. The author defines the terms elemental politics, elemental democracy, elemental citizenship, and elemental justice and, based on a case study of past and recent elemental politics pertaining to the Soča River basin and the natureculture (Harraway 2008) of the Nature Worshipers of Primorska, she proposes a thorough reconsideration of natural elements, especially their holistic dimension, in view of the elemental legal and political subjectivisation. The latter might be achieved, the author contends, by a fundamentally modified elemental vocabulary and collective imaginary inspired by naturecultures’ ontologies, and by considering recent theories on glocalism. Elemental justice for all living beings within a multitude of symbiotic glocalities is the way to a worthwhile life for humans, she concludes. There can be no new form of social contract for the paradigmatic and institutional changes that human societies presently need to avoid the threat of collapse, if they do not first acknowledge their origin as naturecultures, with all the political consequences this implies.

Andrej Kurnik and Cirila Toplak’s insights are counter-balanced by Blaž Vrečko Ilc’s sobering and sombre reflection on the role of technologies in the capitalist economy and subsequently the relationship between humans and technologies. In “Technology and/in Capitalism” – The Genesis and the Relevance of the Relationship for the Present Ecologically Unsustainable Order”, the author analyses the capitalism–technology(ies) relationship, stressing its unprecedented nature-altering dimension. He claims that existing research in political science and progressive and emancipatory critiques of the unsustainable, exploitative nature of contemporary capitalism lack a critical interrogation of this relationship (Bridle 2018). Building on materialist and neo-luddite critiques, Vrečko Ilc re-interrogates the genesis of the factory system, modern transportation, and modern ICTs, and points to the crucial role played by the gradual development and implementation of technologies of the factory system, the modern fossil-fuel-powered transportation and logistics system, and the modern information and communication systems in the processes that have radically and irreversibly

altered the planetary ecology and the subsequent modification of our conditions of living, our bodies and our minds. Since, according to Vrečko Ilc, human social reproduction is conditioned by and dependent on industrial capitalism and its social ecology, potential emancipatory sustainable social movements should avoid the two central pitfalls: the focus on changing the ownership of the means of production without radically transforming them to make them emancipatory, sustainable and democratic; and the idealism of visions of “a world of many worlds” that fail to account for the fact that the dismantling of the industrial capitalist system will be extremely difficult due to its economic and repressive power.

Who is going to engage in the political action needed for a different future? Young people hold the highest stakes, and the two articles that follow focus on them. In “Institutionalisation of Youth Political Participation in the EU: A Neoliberal Attempt to Castrate the Political Engagement of Young People Outside the Ballot Box”, Tomaž Pušnik observes that young people are increasingly withdrawing from institutional and representative forms and turning to alternative political practices. He examines how the political participation of youth is addressed in relevant institutional mechanisms in the EU and Slovenia and, by applying the Foucauldian analytical tools, demonstrates that even though young people’s political participation within the European integration processes coincided with the student protests of 1968, the critical and alternative voices of youth have since been mostly ignored and negated. Simultaneously, neoliberal rationality has transposed the responsibility for (non-)participation onto young people and favoured citizen consumers who participate in the designated ways only. Existing youth structures like the European Youth Forum and the official support for youth organisations therefore actually amount to a diffusion of government (Burchell 1993) that legitimises the EU’s institutions, especially the European Commission, to formulate and adopt policies in the name of and alongside young people.

Tomaž Pušnik recognises a form of resistance in young people’s withdrawal from EU-dictated forms of political participation and engagement, while in “Youth Environmental Activism: Subversion or Confined to the Existing Order?” Marinko Banjac extends this line of reflection to a variety of forms of youth environmental activism and focuses on the complex interplay of youth with strategies, practices, and power mechanisms in the field of environmental regulation. The author argues against the prevailing notion that holds youth environmental activism is not a new phenomenon; its origins, sources, practices and strategies are in fact a continuation of earlier episodes of environmental activism. Drawing on the Foucauldian eco-governmentality and the analytical concept of counter-conduct (Foucault 2001), Banjac then examines how young activists address, co-constitute and potentially subvert or undermine power structures. From this perspective, young environmental activists’ critique of power structures while they press the authorities with their specific initiatives and demands, thereby

legitimising them as actors with the leverage to bring about change, is only seemingly nonsensical, incoherent and inconsistent. According to Banjac, youth environmental activism is not only characterised, but empowered by a diversity of tactics and strategies. The Foucauldian counter-conduct employed by young people includes overt and covert, individual and collective action against the power structures; they conceive and implement novel ways of organising social relations and human relations with nature, thus challenging the dominant paradigms and practices of environmental governance by the powers that be.

The thematic section is rounded off with Žiga Vodovnik's "Possibilities in the End Times: (Re)Imagining Care as Politics". The author claims that our societies require new principles of political, social and economic organisation as it is becoming increasingly clear that the climate crisis first and foremost threatens political and social collapse. The societal impact of the climate crisis can be seen in the inhibition of the democratic political process, the undermining of political communities and the commons, and in the growing popularity of authoritarian approaches to situations of emergency. Discussions on the climate emergency should accordingly start with reflections on politics and society and enable social scientists to create adaptive categorial and methodological tools, especially pertaining to relationships between life and work, production and consumption, and the individual and the communal. The author introduces the concept of care as the fundamental notion and practice of the new (palliative) political and economic paradigm (Tronto 2013). The central aim of this text is to re-examine and re-connect various debates on care in various alternative theoretical models and to connect care with democracy and with youth and their political repertoires. Vodovnik proposes that the notions of care and freedom be used as the new economic paradigm since the economy should, after all, be a means by which people take care of each other. Importantly, such fundamental changes would also bring about a paradigmatic shift in the very logic and role of research in the social sciences, which should focus primarily on the future.

Reflections on political ecology are joining the pressing conversation in global political theory on not just why and how we currently interpret all things political, but why humans live the way we live today and how we might or should live in a future shared with other-than-humans, as well as why and how academics might and should engage in interventions generated by this conversation. To begin with, solutions to the multi-crisis seem to call for a core conceptual turn that will undermine some of the political dogmas of modernity, along with the crumbling hegemony of the western scientific model. This is where we are stepping in theoretically, and the perspective from the periphery of the centre may in the present circumstances be one of the more lucid ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bridle, James. 2018. *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. London: Verso Books.
- Burchell, Graham. 1993. "Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self". *Economy and Society* 22 (3): 267–82.
- De la Cadena, Marisol, and Mario Blaser. 2018. *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, Vol. 3. London: Allen Lane & the Penguin Press.
- Harraway, Donna. 2007. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thone, Frank. 1935. "Nature Rambling: We Fight for Grass". *The Science Newsletter* 27 (717): 14.
- Tronto, Joan C. 2013. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: NYU Press.