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FOR ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS**

Abstract. *The ecological crisis is challenging the foundational premises of modern political vocabulary, including the nature–society dualism. Notions of ontological politics and the ontological turn are employed to illustrate the consequences of this dualism, its crisis, and the potential for a political constitution beyond it. Drawing on experiences in agro-ecology, recent developments in movements for climate justice and land protection, and the approaches of social movements against neoliberal globalisation, the article explores the renewed interest in ontological political questions. The author elaborates on the ontological proposition for a world of many worlds and asserts its validity against objections of perceived indifference targeted at relational ontologies.*

Keywords: *ontological politics, world of many worlds, nature–society dualism.*

INTRODUCTION

In the discourse surrounding climate change, the term “uncharted territory” is commonly used. For instance, lately there has been repeated mention that should the current trend of setting temperature records continue through to the end of this summer in 2024, we will find ourselves in uncharted territory (Igini 2023) At the same time, the announced commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are proving to be illusory. The intention of this article is not to reiterate the urgency of the situation surrounding human-induced climate change and the rapid ecological degradation. Instead, it seeks to provide a limited exploration of the uncharted territory: how this profound shift in our existential condition influences our understanding of the fundamental principles upon which we construct our perception of being in the world. The article does not aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of this new reality. Instead, it focuses on discussing the concept of ontological politics and the ontological turn – the latter term being used in anthropological discussions – and how these discussions resonate with the practical pursuit of eco-regenerative ways of being in the world

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and the eco-regenerative mode of world making. The article therefore introduces the argument for ontological politics or, more specifically, a particular political ontological proposition known as the “world of many worlds” (Stengers 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2014; Escobar 2020; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017) in the context of reflecting on practical endeavours to adapt to this new existential condition – to live and die well with others (Harraway 2016) in this uncharted territory.

How does the uncharted territory appear from a political theoretical perspective? The rapid acceleration of climate change underscores the fact that nature changes faster than society does or, to be more precise, that the history of humanity and the geophysical history of the Earth have become so closely intertwined that they are indistinguishable (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017). All of this points to the demise of the modern political constitution, which posits nature as a static and silent backdrop for the grand dramas of history, limited to human collectives. Uncharted territory thus suggests that the modern political constitution with its constitutive nature–culture, subject–object and human–non-human binarisms, along with the distinction between facts and values (Latour 1991), is crumbling and collapsing. The instability and unpredictability of the climate, no longer serving as a stable and predictable backdrop for human activities, soon transforms our discussions about weather into debates about its anthropogenic nature. This reality holds profound implications not only for our political discourse but it fundamentally alters our understanding of epistemology and ontology as well.

Hence, the case for ontological politics in this article is built upon the formulation of an ontological political standpoint derived from personal agro-ecological practices and the activities of social movements advocating against neoliberal globalisation and for climate justice. Such a subjective turn aligns perfectly with the principles of a new political constitution that is to be constructed via both experimentation in response to the collapse of the modern one and the affirmation of relational ontologies of various indigenous peoples as well as those that have challenged modernity from within. One of the earliest and most vigorous critiques of the modern constitution rooted in dualism was articulated by Nietzsche, with the goal of reinstating the unity of thought and life (Deleuze 2005). The political ontology of the world in which many worlds fit that is to be explored in the article nourishes such unity when “knowing is no longer a way of representing the unknown but of interacting with it, i.e., a way of creating rather than contemplating, reflecting or communicating” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 105) and when “the task of knowledge is no longer to unify diversity through representation but of ‘multiplying the agents and agencies populating our world’” (Latour, quoted by Viveiros de Castro 2014, 105).

An Agro-Ecological Introduction to Ontological Political Arguments

The argument for ontological politics initially considers three aspects of agro-ecology. First, it addresses subsistence, particularly examining what it means to live off the land and from the land beyond modern nature–society dualism. Second, it delves into a reflection on the economic and ecological value of a specific oak tree, revealing the constraints of the modern immanent critique. Finally, the argument sheds light on how the modern nature–society dichotomy is permeating the discourse on the green transition.

We All Live on the Land and off the Land

Modes of subsistence in modern societies are generally understood as being detached from the land. In such an understanding, moderns are not living on the land and off the land. As wage workers, capitalists and rentiers they are involved in subsistence activities that only indirectly are related to the land and nature. Just a small fraction of the population in modern societies, namely, farmers, directly relates to the land and nature for subsistence. Subsistence living is largely the domain of non-moderns, indigenous – they live on the land and off the land while moderns generally do not. But are we not already here caught in the molar oppositions, binaries and dichotomies that make up modern/western thought?

The term indigenous to depict a specific mode of life is certainly useful while thinking about alternatives to the ecocidal modernity. Indigenous communities are protectors of bio and cultural diversity that is indispensable for ecosystems' capacity to regenerate and support life (Nelson 2008). More crucially, when it comes to the argument of this text indigenous as a term and a mode of regenerative world-making is an important reference precisely because it does not conceive molar oppositions, binarisms and dichotomies. Instead, indigenous perspectives embody a conceptual practice grounded in the recognition of difference that is constantly differing and in a perpetual state of flux (Viveiros de Castro 2014) – a notion reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "generalized chromatism" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Accordingly, it would be better to say that we all live on the land and off the land; some in good (constructive, joyful) ways, others in bad (destructive, detrimental) ways. It is not about a molar divider but about molecular scales and degrees.

The practice of subsistence farming and reflection upon it initially informs the argument for ontological politics. Subsistence farming is certainly about living on the land and off the land. Such direct dependance on the land for self-reproduction is pedagogical and defines the guiding farming principle: I seek to sustain myself without compromising the capacity of others to reproduce themselves, without compromising the ecosystem's integrity, or its capacity to regenerate and reproduce. It does not mean that I am indifferent, that I am incapable of differentiating. I am involved in ecosystemic engineering that encourages certain organisms (actants, Others) in ecological niches. Still, this differentiation is supposed to happen organically, from below so to speak, through observation,

recognition of the dignity held by others, recognition that agency is not exclusively mine, that my agency belongs to an assemblage.

The question of subsistence is hence a central ecological question. It is about the re-establishing of a direct relationship between our reproduction and the reproduction of others, between our reproduction, the reproduction of others and the capacity of ecosystems to reproduce and regenerate and (globally speaking) the capacity of the earth system (Lovelock 1979) to regenerate and reproduce. If I make myself dependent on my constructive insertion (and intervention) in the web of life, if my reproduction depends on my capacity to be a constructive agent in the co-making of the world, then I have firm reference point upon which I tailor the ways I act. The starting point for the ecological mode of existence is that we all live on land and off the land. This means we reject the basic dualisms that underpin the modern way of life: nature–culture; nature–society; nature–politics.

The Oak Tree

A farm intended for agro and social ecology experimentation was facing water supply issues with an insufficient reservoir that often dried up by August. The local authorities declined to assist, prompting neighbours to collaborate to fund a new water reservoir and supply system. During excavations, the operator of the excavator suggested removing a seemingly valueless oak tree to make way for a ditch. However, I contested this view, emphasising the oak's ecological significance by providing shade, contributing to the accumulation of biomass and the fertility of the soil, and preventing erosion. In the end, the oak remained in place, and the excavator operator found an alternative route.

This dialogue reveals contrasting views on value: while the operator prioritised the oak's economic value, I stressed its ecological importance. The oak occupies a unique ecological niche, and its removal would have necessitated the replacement of another organism to compensate for the then missing vital ecological functions (Dave and Toensmeier 2005). Reflecting on this event, I considered its broader theoretical implications. In modern capitalist societies, life forms are reduced to quantifiable objects, essential for defining economic value. While we recognise the negative impacts of this reduction and commodification, the ingrained binarism between humans and other-than-humans shapes social institutions and limits the possibilities for constructive coexistence within the interconnected web of life.

Modern critique is immanent, meaning that it operates from within society, focusing on immanent dynamics rather than transcendent values. Still, it often falls into the trap of equating relationality with entrenched binary oppositions like class, race and gender. This dialectical approach sees conflict between these poles as the pathway to an alternative society based on individual freedom within interconnected relations. Yet, this critique overlooks the possibility of grounding critique in positive social relations that predate or exist alongside polarisations.

For example, in the Marxist narrative of primitive accumulation, violent displacement is seen as a necessary step toward emancipation. This perspective, exemplified by accelerationism (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017), seeks human liberation by transcending nature and its constraints. However, modern immanent critique, such as Marxism, fails to address the underlying problem of the nature–society divide. While it condemns the violence that imposed this binary, it ultimately reinforces it through dialectical exploration, perpetuating the existence of such binaries.

The rise of alternative cosmovisions, like indigenous perspectives in Latin America (Abya Yalla), has shed light on the limitations of modern immanent critique (Mignolo 2012). These perspectives argue that the primary relationship in world-making is one of complementarity rather than opposition (CONAIE 2012; Ross and Marcy 2014). This challenges the traditional binary and dualistic framework of modern political ontology, which often naturalises the inequalities derived from these binaries. Nevertheless, these emerging cosmovisions offer a remedy for the flaws of modern critique. They introduce two regimes of multiplicity. One is state-centric, reducing differences to molar oppositions that enable domination, while the other disperses power and embraces differences for continuous differentiation. Liberation movements in the Global South, such as the indigenous movements in the Americas (Ross and Marcy 2014; Zibechi 2010, 2015) and the Kurdish national liberation movement (Öcalan 2020), have departed from Marxist-Leninist traditions and embraced local histories. They act as powerful examples of political ontological movements that challenge the modern binary and dualistic framework.

Another Farming is Possible

Modern intensive industrial agriculture considerably adds to the ecological crisis by driving up greenhouse gas emissions, depleting soil, and reducing biodiversity (Gliessman 2015). Is another farming possible? Examination of Slovenian subsistence farms, which have failed to modernise largely due to the terrain being unsuitable for large-scale industrial farming that relies on heavy machinery, reveals remnants of ecosystem management that have preserved high levels of biodiversity. Meadow orchards exemplify this, representing highly diverse ecosystems resulting from farmers' interventions in the environment or a specific mode of collaboration with nature. Fruit trees were often self-sown and their growth was encouraged through seasonal mowing and hay storage. The existence of this unique ecosystem called for significant investment of manual labour, with mowing being a reciprocal, mutual endeavour among farmers rather than wage-based or coercive. Meadow orchards thus form part of a biocultural landscape (a notion developed by Friedmann 2024) emerging from human and other-than-human relationships, supporting biodiversity and ecosystem integrity.

Apart from this regenerative mode of world-making, one can find more degenerative approaches. Fields tilled to accommodate a limited range of crops

reduce diversity and simplify ecology, even though they are territorially limited, and soil ecology is managed between tilling disruptions. In contrast, modern intensive industrial agriculture radically reduces ecosystem complexity and alters the biocultural landscape. Labour is predominantly mechanised, human relationships are wage-based and hierarchical, and other-than-humans are dominated leaving no space for self-sown plants to exist. The biocultural landscape of modern agriculture is uniform, with the disappearance of patch-like landscapes indicating the concentration of land ownership, extreme simplification of the ecosystem, and lower biodiversity. The capitalist industrial mode of world-making is leading to biocultural impoverishment.

This article was written at a time of mass protests by farmers in Europe, which represent a serious setback to the efforts to green the European agricultural sector. There are already signs that EU and national authorities are abandoning some core policies of the “green transition” (Taylor 2024). Still, this sequence of events is not surprising when we consider the assumptions underlying the policies aimed at the greening of agricultural practices. The fundamental assumption is that the interests of farmers are at odds with those of the environment or nature, while the latter are championed by environmental NGOs. This assumption, which shapes decision-making processes, is leading to a polarisation between farmers, viewed as a monolithic bloc, and environmentalists, alongside environmentally conscious public opinion¹.

However, a simple examination from the perspective of subsistence farming reveals that the world of farmers is far from homogeneous. It is a heterogeneous reality, with some farms having successfully modernised, primarily practising intensive, unsustainable, ecologically and socially degenerative farming methods, while others that have ‘failed’ to modernise and are still using or introducing regenerative farming methods. The current socio-economic model certainly favours the former group, whereas affirmation of the latter group and its eco-regenerative farming methods require and depend on a change in the capitalist socio-economic model, which is rooted in extractivism, privatisation, and market individualism. The story of the failed green transition in agriculture is part of a broader narrative of failed green transitions driven by the illusion that the interests of capital can guide the transition to an eco-regenerative future.

The presupposition that farmers’ interests exclude the interests of nature, which must in turn be defended by special advocacy groups, demands further examination. It implies the belief that all human activities related to subsistence and the reproduction of humans themselves are eco-degenerative. Human influence on ecosystems or nature is thereby assumed to be invariably negative, leaving a detrimental imprint. This belief permeates contemporary discourses on ecological crises, advocating for the reduction of humans’ impact on nature, the

¹ This claim is derived from listening to various lectures and presentations given by officials of Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia.

restriction of human-inhabited areas, and the return of significant areas around the globe to nature without a human presence (Wilson 2016). Although it may be tempting to agree with the assessment of the negative influence of humans on nature, this is not universally the case. In both the past and today one can find cultures that actually enrich ecosystems and nature. Consider recent discoveries proving the anthropogenic origin of the Amazon rainforest (Ferreira 2019) or contemporary permaculture movements (Dave and Toensmeier 2005). There is nothing inherently universal about the nature–human society binarism. Yet, the very assumption of such a binary informs a specific mode of relating to the world and world-making, one in which human action is seen as inevitably detrimental to nature. In other words, the notion of separation between human societies or cultures and nature fosters a specific relationship between humans and other-than-humans – one characterised by domination, violence, conquest (Escobar 2020) together with disconnection, alienation and isolation. This separation dismembers the experience into the experiencing subject and the experienced object, stripping other-than-humans of agency and sentience.

DISCOURSES ON THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

The health of our planet is severely compromised and its ability to sustain life is under threat. Alarm bells are ringing around the planet as human-induced global heating pushes the climate system into an unstable state, bringing grave consequences that are already being felt. The loss of biodiversity has reached such levels that we are on the brink of the sixth extinction event. In addition, soil depletion caused by modern, industrial and intensive agricultural practices has become so serious that we may face a future without harvests within a couple of decades. Among the nine planetary boundaries, six have already been breached (Richardson et al. 2023). While the scenario of a spectacular end of the world is common in science fiction, the reality is that if capitalist humanity continues on its current course the end will be neither sudden nor dramatic. Instead, we are facing a gradual decline in a world where the conditions for reproducing life are increasingly harsh, hostile and scarce (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017).

Looking from the perspective of social movements, there are three main approaches and discourses on how to address this self-destructive course. The first approach is rooted in the belief that there is a technological solution to the ecological crisis. Advocates of this view propose the introduction of green technologies to effectively reduce greenhouse emissions. Phrases like “carbon neutrality” and “net zero emissions” have become rallying cries for political and business representatives. Based on such an erroneous conception of the political neutrality of technology (Vrečko Ilc 2024), numerous environmental civil society organisations are strongly calling for a green transition based on green technologies. Moreover, movements like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Last Generation are protesting against the lack of commitment to the goals of the green transition by public authorities and energy industries. While

there is a tendency toward radicalisation within these movements (Malm 2021), it primarily concerns protest methods rather than any criticism of the assumption that technological solutions can solve the ecological crisis. Regardless of their level of confrontation with political authorities and business interests, these movements all aim to bring global heating to the forefront of public discourse and are demanding action from responsible authorities.

There is a third approach practised by certain movements engaged in defending territory against harmful investments. Movements like ZAD (Zone à défendre) (Collectif mauvaise troupe 2016) and those opposing the Dakota Pipeline (Estes 2019) are protesting against extractivist projects while simultaneously striving to redefine their relationship with the land and imbue it with a sense of belonging. As one activist against the Dakota Pipeline stated: “You can violently displace people, but you can never destroy the sense of belonging to the place” (Rankin 2022). In these movements, the act of opposing mega investments is paired with a conscious effort to reaffirm a connection to the land. Movements defending territory emphasise relationality and kinship. In the case of ZAD, defence of the territory against the construction of a mega airport is rooted in the cultivation of relationships among ZAD activists, local peasants, and communities, with assemblies serving as self-organising structures, and the land itself being sustained through agro-ecological practices. In the case of resistance against the Dakota Pipeline, protectors regard the territory as a sacred site that holds connections with ancestors and various human and non-human communities, representing a restitution of the principle of the interconnectedness of all existence.

The distinction between the mentioned struggles against ecological breakdown is that, on one hand, we have movements that seek to raise awareness about the crisis and primarily focus on influencing public opinion and decision-makers. On the other hand, there are movements that defend and liberate territories by reintroducing the principles of relationality and kinship. Yet the division between these two approaches is not fixed and stable. Movements attempting to mobilise public opinion certainly incorporate elements of relationality, as evidenced by Extinction Rebellion’s demand for people’s assemblies to deliberate on reorganising societies to avert an ecological breakdown (Harris 2020). Movements defending territories also aim to mobilise public opinion. However, there is a significant difference between these approaches in their understanding of agency. Protest movements, like the climate justice movement, affirm the role of citizens in designing environmentally friendly policies. In contrast, protection movements expand agency to include the territory as a living being. The defence of territory is predominantly not a confrontation with agents of extractivism, but, as seen in the case of Standing Rock, involves weaving relations, maintaining humility, and preserving the sense of interconnectivity and mutuality of all existence (ABC News 2017).

Technological optimism, or the belief in technological solutions to humanity’s problems, cannot be separated from the history of capitalist modernity and its

accompanying scientific understanding of reality. Through research on the ways indigenous cultures in Bolivia perceive reality and how this differs from modern Western perspectives, Rodolfo Kusch (Kusch 2010) concluded that the Western enlightenment tradition views reality as an objective reality comprehensible through science, with technology enabling interventions into this reality. In contrast, indigenous cultures do not see reality as an external, objectively given entity and instead perceive it as an affective multiplicity. When confronted with challenges like drought, indigenous communities do not seek technological solutions – such as hydraulic pumps, as would be the case in the community Kusch studied – but instead aim to restore the web of relations and interconnectivity among existence through certain rituals. Further, the Argentinian philosopher recognised the value of indigenous political ontology, embedding it within the cultural foundation of Latin America at a time when intellectuals of the continent were attempting to conceive a new postcolonial cultural identity. This affirmation challenges the notion of the Global West as representing a universal model of human history and evolution, preceding contemporary decolonial thought.

When addressing the ecological breakdown, it is crucial to tackle its roots. While the extraction and burning of fossil fuels no doubt contribute to human-driven climate change, they are not solely responsible for the breakdown. Transitioning to renewable energy sources and green technologies will not completely resolve the problem of our diminishing world, where the Earth's capacity to sustain life is increasingly compromised. The root cause lies in the abstraction of modern humans and societies from the interconnected web of life that sustains them. This abstraction and alienation are unravelling this web. Rather than relying solely on green technologies, which may perpetuate a new capitalist accumulation cycle, we must reconnect with the density of being, as we might say following Spinoza (Negri 1991), or with the web of life, as Jason Moore suggests (Moore 2015). We need to understand how to constructively participate in it. This approach does not rule out the use of technology or technological development. Still, it emphasises the importance of a science that does not presuppose reality as an objective fact existing outside of us but acknowledges the partial connections (Stengers 2018, 90) and modes of affective multiplicity. Science should namely detach itself from state-centrism. State-centric science tends to establish a relationship with objects akin to how a sovereign relates to subjects – detached and exempt from the relationship (Viveiros de Castro 2017, 86).

The Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Plantationocene – Ontological Politics as Relocalisation

There is a wide consensus nowadays that climate change and other manifestations of the ecological breakdown are human-induced. Among natural scientists, the notion of the Anthropocene was proposed to designate a new geological epoch defined by the profound impact of human activities on Earth's geology and ecosystems (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The Anthropocene theory

certainly has the merit of unequivocally demonstrating that human activities are responsible for the rapidly deteriorating health of ecosystems and the Earth system. However, this theory is often criticised for generalising and attributing responsibility to humanity as a whole. Indeed, not all humans are equally responsible for the ecological deterioration; in fact, there are both culprits and victims. Further, such a generalisation overlooks a crucial political ontological argument: the existence of different ontologies, multiple worlds, and the very denial of such heterogeneity is the very cause of the ecological troubles.

Other notions have been proposed to substantiate the claim that climate change is human-induced while addressing the generalisation problem in the Anthropocene theory. For example, Jason Moore proposed the term the Capitalocene (Moore 2015) while discussing ecological degradation from the perspective of world ecology, which focuses on the development of capitalism as world ecology. The strength of this theory lies in its ability to transcend the nature–human society divide by asserting that capitalism represents a specific mode of double internality wherein humanity is embedded in nature and nature is embedded in humanity (ibid.). The modern binary of nature–culture fosters the illusion that nature is merely a silent or inanimate backdrop against which the human drama is unfolding. The commodification of what is deemed to be nature is consequently believed to hold no repercussions for human collectives – a tragic illusion that we are now beginning to acknowledge. Yet, the weakness of the world ecology approach is that by grounding the analysis in economic and material bases it overlooks the question of relationality among humans and other-than-humans. In so doing, in a way it repeats the traditional Marxist problem of failing to conceive a real alternative – a non-capitalist mode of double internality and world-making.

To tackle this issue, it appears appropriate to introduce another term that seeks to characterise the era of human-induced ecological breakdown – the term the Plantationocene (Mitman 2019). Anna Tsing defines plantation as a radical simplification of ecology, involving the disciplining of plants and coercive labour, all geared towards the reproduction of a limited caste of humans (ibid.). Historically and temporally, the plantation has acted as a colonial mode of world-making. Notably, the plantation model of the economy has persisted over time, serving as a blueprint for power structures within capitalist modernity (Tsing 2015). The Plantationocene, as a blueprint for modern capitalist societies, bears witness to the violent displacements, the enslavement of both humans and other-than-humans, and resistance against this profoundly alienating and ecocidal mode of world-making – a resistance fuelled by a deep-rooted sense of belonging to the place. Expanding on this idea, Malcom Ferdinand goes as far as to define the current epoch as the Negrocene (Ferdinand 2022), highlighting its foundation in the enslavement and confinement of racialised populations, who nonetheless retain the capacity to reclaim their long-lost, yet never-forgotten sense of connection to the place.

FROM DEONTOLOGY TO AN ONTOLOGICAL TURN

During her speech at Zuccoti Park at the time of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Naomi Klein was asked if the movement was a reaction to the Tea Party, a far-right faction within the US Republican Party. She responded that it was actually a response to the Democratic Party (Pinto 2011), revealing the time of the Obama presidency, which owed its success to the mobilisation of progressive social movements, had failed to enact the policies they desired. This scenario mirrors broader philosophical disagreements between the proponents of continental philosophy and liberal Atlantic philosophy. At the heart of this dispute lies the question of whether ontological inquiries have a place in politics. Continentals advocate for their integration, while liberals prefer a secularised politics devoid of philosophical contemplation, a kind of second wave of secularisation. This philosophical rift extends into discussions about the means of achieving progressive social change. (Neo)liberals have argued that institutional frameworks alone suffice, whereas social movement proponents insist on their indispensable role. This dispute, tracing back to the dawn of modernity, centres on constituent power vs. constituted power, (Negri 1997) with the advent of neo-contractualism further intensifying the discussion. Neoliberals call for institutionalised articulation, underscoring the need for politicians and bureaucrats to disseminate predetermined positions, i.e., original positions (Rawls 1999). Conversely, the proponents of social movements stress the importance of recognising social antagonisms as constituent powers within institutions, advocating for accommodation rather than exclusion (Hardt and Negri 2010).

Since the dawn of modern politics, the role of ontology in political discourse has been a pivotal consideration as illustrated starkly by the contrasting views of thinkers like Hobbes and Spinoza. Hobbes attributes social order to transcendent sovereignty, while Spinoza emphasises its immanence, asserting that it emerges from the political composition of antagonist social subjects. However, the disparity is found not in the mere presence of ontology in politics, but in the fundamental divergence between political ontologies – one denoted by a belief in pre-existing truth and being, detached from relational contexts, and the other viewing truth and being as emergent within webs of relations; the former being essentialist and the latter relational. The argument for excluding ontology from politics thus reflects a specific political ontology – one that upholds power relations based on domination and control, positioning power as external to relational webs and imposed upon them (Escobar 2020). This stance disregards the horizontal dispersion of power inherent in relational ontology where agency is evenly distributed and individual actors participate as equals.

Political ontology, which concerns questions of being, reality and truth within political discourse, has been championed and highlighted by social movements. This advocacy serves as a critique of neoliberal efforts to sideline antagonist social subjects, such as labour, from the political landscape and affirms the idea of social immanence, asserting that social order arises from a complex network

of social relations rather than from a transcendent source (Hardt and Negri 1994). This affirmation finds its intellectual roots in the resurgence of interest in Spinoza during the heightened social upheaval following the events of 1968. Philosophers and political theorists like Gilles Deleuze (1968 and 1981) and Antonio Negri (1991) contributed to this understanding through their readings and interpretations of Spinoza, which informed social movements that were rejecting the pursuit of state power in favour of building autonomies. This intellectual endeavour charted a different course from traditional essentialist ontologies by affirming a redefinition of ontology rather than calling for its abolition. In this view, reality is characterised by a multiplicity that cannot be reconciled into any form of unity, whether dialectical or transcendent. There are two conceptions of multiplicity: while one sees power as a centripetal force that unifies, the other sees power as characterised by disjunctive synthesis, where difference continuously differentiates rather than unifies.

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 (Zibechi 2015) brought about a radical shift in political ontology. The indigenous movement in Mexico rejected neoliberal globalisation and proclaimed a struggle for a “world in which many worlds fit”. This slogan not only refutes the existence of a single, universal mode of social life – such as capitalist Western society – but also suggests an alternative understanding of the common, based in the recognition of diverse modes of life. The Zapatista uprising showed that political ontology is not confined to the Western tradition of thought and its immanent critique; it is also linked to the reaffirmation of other cosmovisions and the restoration of the epistemic dignity of colonised peoples (Mignolo 2012) who learned from the setbacks of the initial generation of anti-colonial struggles.

The Zapatista political vision embodies relational political ontology in action. They have caused seismic shifts by declaring that their revolution is not about seizing power. Instead of using the state’s repressive tools for social change, they advocate for grassroots autonomy and new modes of life. They argue that autonomy is the most effective means to combat capitalism, while also embracing poverty as a form of resistance against it². By so doing, they challenge two pillars of colonial and post-colonial dominance: the State-Form and the notion of universalism or a singular historical trajectory. The Zapatistas’ appeal lies in their rejection of the nation state and the philosophy of history that assumes a single model of progress, leading to hierarchies among different human groups. Moreover, they champion the defence of Mother Earth by reintroducing a matristic principle rooted in a relational web of life, countering patriarchal principles based on domination and hierarchy (Escobar 2012, 17–18). The impact of the Zapatista uprising on the alterglobalisation movement has been profound.

² Quote from the discourse of the Authorities of the Council of Good Government that took place at the end of Escuelita Zapatista (12–16 August 2013). The entire discourse is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS5SgDHcwJ8>.

While conventional history often portrays the spread of domination and liberation from the European West to other regions, the Chiapas uprising has reversed this narrative. Liberation strategies are now flowing from former Western colonies to former metropolises.

POLITICAL ONTOLOGICAL PROPOSITION “FOR THE WORLD OF MANY WORLDS”

The proposition of a world of many worlds challenges the idea of a single, objective reality shared by all. The concept of the One World World (OWW) described by Escobar (2020) reduces the richness and diversity of worlds into a dualistic framework, with one canonical world and others seen as deviations to be disciplined, assimilated, normalised or tolerated (Stengers 2018). This universalism inherent in the One World World notion arises from the assumption of a specific history and political ontology claiming universal significance and serving as the sole telos of human and social development (Mignolo 2012). Affirming the existence of many worlds carries two political implications. First, it rejects the supremacy and exclusivity of modern Western political ontology, relegating it to just one among many. It thus offers an alternative approach to understanding what is common or how to construct commonality based on the acknowledgment of diverse cosmovisions. A political ontology based in the One World World concept perceives the common as predetermined, reinforcing the supremacy of Western (both religious and scientific) ways of perceiving the world as separate and objective. Conversely, a political ontology embracing the idea of a world of many worlds views the common as emergent, evolving through processes of mutual recognition, accommodation, and appreciation of differences. When Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas declared support for a world where there is space for both Zapatistas and the Mexican president, he was not only challenging the exclusive claims of state actors to existence but also endorsing an alternative approach to understanding and creating commonality. This statement is deeply subversive to the state-centric political ontologies inherited from colonialism and capitalist modernity that refuse to recognise other political ontologies as equals.

The recognition of the colonial wound is a precondition for embracing the political ontology of the world of many worlds. Mignolo argues that only by rejecting the supremacy and universality of Western modern epistemology can we engage in dialogue among different epistemological traditions, including those silenced and suppressed during colonial and capitalist modernity. This rejection is essential for restoring epistemological dignity to millions (Mignolo 2012). Such dialogue becomes imperative while addressing issues like ecological degradation, which are the result of Western modern epistemology. Viveiros de Castro takes the call for decolonisation further by calling for the recognition not only of the equal dignity of radically different epistemologies and traditions of thought but also for acknowledging ontological plurality, known as

multinaturalism (Viveiros de Castro 2014). What was silenced and suppressed during colonial (and postcolonial) enterprises are the 'indigenous traditions of thought' that allow for the conception of many worlds. In these traditions, intentionality is not solely a human quality but is shared among humans and other-than-humans. Other-than-humans are therefore not stripped of intentionality, spirit, and the capacity to think. They are rendered as such by the imposed nature-culture dualism which constitutes modern and Western thought and is both the cause and result of colonial conquests. Western rationality is shaped by the dialectical construction of identity forged during a history of violent colonial conquests and is based on a grand divisor, i.e., a fundamental binary or categorical division that serves as a foundational concept shaping societal structures, hierarchies, and modes of thought (ibid.).

What happens if we consider the intentionality of other-than-humans, what happens if other than humans think? To think means something completely different than Cartesian thinking. While the latter presupposes dismembering experience into experiencing subject and experienced object the former presupposes experience from within the incessant flux of participation, as Stengers claims while drawing on Abram (Stengers 2018). This perspective fundamentally alters our understanding of agency, which is not confined to individual subjects but emerges from assemblages. These assemblages may manifest in various forms, such as territories perceived as living beings interconnected within a continuous flux of participation, or ecosystems shaped by relations among all entities and their interactions with other ecosystems, collectively forming the Earth system. This reimagined agency is evident in the struggles for territories opposing extractivist projects.

The notion of agency based on the recognition of the dignity of every existent denies the exclusivism of One World World and affirms the existence of many worlds. Here multiplicity is something completely different than the one conceived in OWW political ontology. If agency is vested in assemblages, meaning that it is equally distributed among every existent without exclusivity, and if the world and reality are not separate from the subject of knowing and acting but are instead affective multiplicities, then the difference is intensive rather than extensive or external. When Viveiros de Castro compares Western metaphysics (or rather its hegemonic version) with the metaphysics of 'savages', he underscores the difference in the very notion of difference (Viveiros de Castro 2014). While Westerners understand difference in relation to borders that delineate homogeneous unities, 'savages' regard borders as points of articulation between opposites. This articulation is seen as the abduction of the agency (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 81) of the other – a mutual implication whereby implicated agents diverge from themselves rather than confirming and solidifying their identity, as in the case of dualisms that assume the existence of homogeneous identities. The political ontological presupposition of the One World World, on one hand, and the proposition of a World in Which Many Worlds Fit, are different modalities of

a relational synthesis. The one we embrace can be elucidated by the definition of disjunctive synthesis provided by Viveiros de Castro, drawing on Deleuze:

Disjunctive synthesis or inclusive disjunction is a relational mode that does not have similarity or identity as its (formal or final) cause, but divergence or distance, another name for this relational mode is “becoming”. (...) It is the movement of difference as such – the centrifugal movement through which difference escapes the powerful circular attractor of dialectical contradiction or sublation. A difference that is positive rather than oppositional, an indiscernibility of the heterogeneous rather than conciliation of contraries, disjunctive synthesis takes disjunction as “the very nature of relation” and relation as a movement of “reciprocal asymmetric implication” between the terms or perspectives connected by synthesis, which is not resolved either into equivalence or into superior identity. (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 112)

In the relational political ontology of many worlds, these worlds continually proliferate and diverge, contrasting with many as the sole representation of One in the political ontology of OWW. Worldly ecology (Ferdinand 2022) that rejects the nature–society dualism exemplifies a similar mode of relational synthesis. The concept of edges illustrates points where divergences are articulated. Edges, acting as seams connecting and separating patches with distinct ecological traits, are among the most fertile and versatile spots in ecology, fostering the diversification of an ecosystem and thereby enhancing its health (Dave and Toensmeier 2005; Gliessman 2015). Each entity functions as such a point of articulation, a site of ongoing agency abduction and consequent perpetual transformation. An oak tree, for instance, is inherently part of an assemblage, intricately woven into the web of life and existing not prior to but within affective relations, continuously influencing and being influenced.

From the OWW standpoint, the notion of many worlds appears to breed relativism and indifference. Without addressing colonialism’s imposition of binaries – without decolonisation as colonial onto-cide (Estes 2019) – the assertion of many worlds would be seen to be a cynical form of relativism. Conversely, in relational political ontology, advocating for a world where many worlds fit requires a profound re-localisation, implying an embeddedness within the intricate web of life. According to Law, the world is not an independent entity as Westerners and modernists often assume; it is instead actively performed. Reality is not a fixed, detached construct but is continually shaped and reshaped through ongoing acts and rituals (Law, quoted by Escobar 2020, 14) In this view, reality emerges from affective relations, constituting an affective multiplicity inseparable from its various assemblages.

The history of colonialism and capitalism is rife with violent displacement, primitive accumulation, enslavement, racialisation, and epistemicide, all of which imposed dualisms and enforced the universal truth of the OWW. The idea

of many worlds reflects a deep sense of belonging to the place that persists despite attempts to erase it. This sentiment has been nurtured through the struggles against colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. Today, the resurgence of this connection to place, the proposition of many worlds, and the embrace of relational political ontology offer hope that we can reverse our self-destructive trajectory towards an ecological breakdown, whether in the form of a climate disaster or nuclear devastation.

CONCLUSION: IS THE ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS OF THE WORLD OF MANY WORLDS INDIFFERENT?

The argument on ontological politics developed in this text draws from various sources, including agro-ecological farming practices, the state of movements advocating for climate justice and against ecological degradation, and discussions within movements opposing neoliberal globalisation. Theoretical frameworks by authors like Isabelle Stengers (2018), Viveiros De Castro (2014), Jason Moore (2015 and Arturo Escobar (2020) have played significant roles in shaping this concept, each offering unique perspectives stemming from their diverse concerns, scientific backgrounds, and critical traditions. This diversity enriches our understanding of ontological politics and its potential applications. In this discussion, I aim to partially synthesise the proposition by addressing a challenge that has been levelled against ontological politics ever since its emergence as an alternative within European modernity. It is important to note that relational ontology and ontological politics do represent alternative currents within modernity, often existing beneath the surface or in infra-political realms. The challenge at hand is the accusation of indifference. Critics argue that immanence, with its proliferation of differences, fosters indifference, making it incapable of discerning right from wrong or making coordinated decisions and taking action in a unified direction.

That was indeed the criticism levelled at Spinoza. Without a transcendent origin of the social, or rather – to be up to contemporary challenges – cosmopolitical order, and without the dualism of a thinking subject and inert reality, every action becomes deemed necessary and therefore justifiable. Only the reintroduction of a single and unique God allows for the discrimination between good and bad, thereby facilitating the construction of social order. Secularisation halts at this point, calling for the reintroduction of an external mover; otherwise, understanding change and differentiation would be impossible (Negri 1991). The philosopher, often seen as an alternative to the Hobbesian foundation of sovereign power presented in “Leviathan”, insisted on immanence and the intrinsic link between freedom and necessity, leading him to elaborate on ethics based on encounters and relations, as discussed by Deleuze and Negri (Deleuze 1968 and 1981; Negri 1991).

Those who did not grasp the modern moral and political order rooted in Western dualist metaphysics – and according to Viveiros de Castro (2014, 44),

Western metaphysics is *fons et origio* of colonialism – were deemed uncivilised savages, unworthy of citizenship and hence any rights to the land. These individuals could not interpret the message of power conveyed by the frescoes in the cathedral built by Spanish conquistadors in present-day La Paz, Bolivia. They did not see the images of heaven and hell as promises of reward or punishment for obedience or disobedience; instead, they viewed them as evidence that Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) can be both benevolent and malevolent, and that suffering is an inherent part of life, just like well-being is.³ However, today we understand that the conquest has had negative consequences, and the hope for an eco-regenerative future lies with those very ‘savages’ who could not grasp the moral order based on dualism.

To further complicate the situation, Western metaphysics with its dualism of nature vs. society deeply infiltrates what is known as Green Thought. The prevailing narrative suggests that human economies and societies are responsible for all the crimes against nature, and we must thus unite as a single humanity under the unquestionable authority of science. While it is true that these crimes have been and continue to be committed, they are largely a result of the nature–society dualism, as convincingly argued by Jason Moore (2015). This dualism, Moore asserts, is not just one among many, but rather the foundational dualism. “The separation of peasants from the land and the symbolic division of humans and nature were part of a single process” (Moore 2015, 55). While the critique of environmental degradation and the urgent need to address the runaway climate change carry significant moral weight, if based on the humans as perpetrators–nature as victim dualism they run the risk of rendering actions ineffective and even perpetrating new injustices against Others, those who hold alternative political ontologies. These naturecultures (Toplak 2024) do not assume dualism and thus do not recognise the unquestionable authority of science or the global power centres now expressing concern for the future of planet Earth.

One might argue that we are on thin ice here. What could be the benefit of contributing to the dismantling of the existing global authority, especially the authority of the globalised West? Would not such a philosophical assault on Western hegemony undermine any concerted effort to combat climate change? Does not challenging the hegemony of the globalised West, rather than addressing it, potentially weaponise climate change? Consider, for instance, the Ural Siberian strategy adopted by a power positioning itself as the vanguard against Western hegemony in favour of the global majority (Karaganov 2023). These questions inevitably arise when considering Isabelle Stengers’ defence of ontological politics. Her philosophical examination of the Zapatista proposition for the world of many worlds strongly resonates with contemporary geopolitical

³ While discussing social movements in Bolivia with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, she showed me a reproduction of a fresco from La Paz cathedral and explained its significance in relation to the unique perspective of indigenous cosmivision.

discussions, particularly her assertion that “the global West is not a world and recognizes no world”, that it is “world-destroying machine that can not fit with other worlds” (Stengers 2018, 86).

However, the question is not either/or: either aligning with the globalised West or advocating for a state-centred challenge to its hegemony. The political ontological proposition for the world of many worlds should be understood as follows: Wherever there exists a world, there are many worlds. The difference is intensive; it is not about the difference between worlds but the ever-proliferating difference within the world, to paraphrase Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro 2014). According to his observations of indigenous cosmologies, beings are not fixed entities with predefined attributes and should instead be seen as dynamic and relational, constantly shifting and transforming in their interactions with others. The same applies to worlds. The realm of multiple worlds embodies interconnectedness and interdependence, facilitated precisely by the absence of a predetermined shared reality – a concept epitomised by Deleuze and Guattari’s N-1 (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The true challenge to the hegemony of the globalised West, to the world-destroying machine that cannot fit with other worlds, lies in a radical shift in the conception of agency beyond the dualism of nature–society and, correspondingly, beyond the division into experiencing subject and experienced object. This challenge is not a form of relativism, suggesting the existence of multiple albeit homologous civilisations – homologous in the sense of being variants of capitalist world ecology. The ontological proposition of the world of many worlds has nothing to do with relativism, as Viveiros de Castro convincingly argues. For him, perspective resides in the body, not in the mind, and what we call “body isn’t merely the specific physiology or characteristic anatomy of something but an ensemble of ways or modes of being that constitutes a habitus, ethos, or ethogram” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 72). The body is not a fixed and predetermined set of attributes; rather, it is a contingent interface between different ontological realms or worlds – an affective multiplicity, an environment-making environment. Each singular body co-shapes its environment and is reciprocally shaped by other bodies. “We are shaped by the environment-making activities of extra-human life, for whom humans (individually and collectively) are ‘environments’ to be made, and also to be unmade” (Moore 2015, 54). Further, it serves as the site of creative transformation and becoming, continually actualising new forms of existence and experience. There is no plane of immanence without infinite difference internal to each person and agent, without virtualities that are contingently actualised as finite and external differences constituting the actual world’s species and qualities (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 66).

While contemplating the need to include other-than-humans in what we might term a political constitution, Isabelle Stengers refers to the Deleuzian notion of an assemblage, which she describes as “the coming together of heterogeneous components, and such a coming together is the first and last word

of existence. I do not exist and then enter into assemblages. The manner of my existence is my very participation in assemblages. I am not gifted with agency, the possessor of intentions or initiative. Animation, agency, intentionality, or what Deleuze and Guattari called ‘desire,’ belong to the assemblage” (Stengers 2018, 105). While this definition in a sense exhausts the question of agency on the plane where every being is another being’s environment, she rightly adds that academic references and notions cannot take us beyond the modern authority of science, which is based on the constitutive nature–society and thinking subject–known object dualism. The challenge to it, as she puts it, must make us “feel the smoke in our nostrils” (Stengers 2018, 106). It should expose us to the suspicious gaze of the inquisitors, the self-policing practice that protects the modern scientific notion of agency from regressing into an (animistic) understanding that the “truth of what I perceive, of what I feel, of what I think resides in an Other” (Nathan, quoted by Stengers 2018, 98). The feeling of smoke in our nostrils is a precondition for dethroning science and freeing it from the pretension to universality, rationality, objectivity – to “reduce” it to another particular, partial connection so that it can enter into the process of horizontal translation with other partial connections in an “ecology of practices” (Stengers 2018, 91). It is only through such self-provincialisation that science can constructively contribute to solutions against acute ecological crises. In times of the crumbling constitution of modernity – i.e., the erosion of its constitutive dualisms – the battle cry that something must be done because science tells us so is destined to fail. Science, as a particular and partial connection with reality, will have to enter into an ecology of practices with other “sentipensars” (Escobar 2014) other rationalities, epistemologies, ways of wording and worlding. Such a dethroning of science as the absolute authority does not inaugurate an era of indifference but an era of horizontal translation among radically different actants that reside in many worlds – an era of politics as cosmopolitical diplomacy that accommodates heterogeneous and divergent powers and worlds.

If we are stuck in the modern constitution with nature–society dualism, we tend to conjure humanity as a subject, as the guilty party, as victim and as the solution. Are we not in the same boat? However, delving into the problematic nature of such generalisations and abstractions falls outside the scope of the argument for ontological politics. Not all of humanity is equally to blame, and there are both perpetrators and victims of the ecological degradation. To defend the political ontological proposition for the world of many worlds from potential accusations of indifference, we might simply assert that humanity is not one, it is many. This notion of multiplicity varies from the understanding of disunity in modern immanent critique, which stems from dualisms based on class, gender, race and sexuality. As the nature–society dualism crumbles, the assertion that humanity is many takes on an entirely different meaning. Now, we are dealing with multiplicity akin to a mycelium or network of concrete embeddings within the web of life, where the human is immediately intertwined with the

other-than-human. Here, the human body, like other bodies, serves as an interface between different ontological realms or worlds, functioning as an environment-making environment. Perhaps we should even consider abandoning the term “Humans” in favour of “Terrans”, as proposed by Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017). “Humans” could then refer specifically to those who adhere to the modern constitution, reinforcing the seemingly impenetrable borders of their bodies, nations and species, whereas “Terrans” are those who are actively fine-tuning their membranes.

The final word on Moore’s assertion that green thought remains entrenched in the modern nature–society dualism. While condemning the economic and societal crimes against nature holds undeniable moral weight, can it truly inspire affirmative and transformative action? Might proposals rooted in the denunciation of humanity’s negative impact on nature deepen the divide between two poles that only exist separately within the modern constitution and capitalist world ecology? Is not the real solution to the acute ecological crisis the dismantling of such separations and the reaffirmation of a world beyond dualism, one where the world becomes many worlds? Moore is correct when asserting that despite such separations capitalist society and nature are co-constituted (Moore 2015). Let us revisit the agro-ecological argument here. The history of capitalist world ecology is the history of society in nature and nature in society, they are co-constitutive. Yet, the dualism of nature vs. society has blinded us to this interconnectedness and interdependency. After centuries of farming within the political ontology of capitalist world ecology and the prolonged history of the Plantationocene, the other (nature) and the self (human and society) of the dualism were continuously shaped and reshaped according to capitalist power relations and the colonial mode of world-making. The ecology, landscape, and web of life shaped by capitalist power relations require more of the same to reproduce and persist. The web of life of industrial farming demands more of the same in terms of farming practices. Moore proposes a specific ethical orientation: “Nature can be neither destroyed nor saved, only reconfigured in ways that are more or less emancipatory, more or less oppressive. But take note: our terms ‘emancipatory’ and ‘oppressive’ are offered not from the standpoint of humans narrowly, but through the *oikeios*, the pulsing and renewing dialectic of humans and the rest of nature” (Moore 2015, 56). Moore suggests that if the biotariat allies with the proletariat and femitariat, we could witness the emergence of a new subject of transformation. However, Moore’s challenge lies in his inability to envision alternative world ecologies – an issue characteristic of immanent critique rooted in Western capitalist modernity. This is a gap that the ontological proposition for the world of many worlds richly fills.

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ZA ONTOLOŠKO POLITIKO

Povzetek. *Ekološka kriza izziva temeljne predpostavke modernega političnega besedišča, vključno z dualizmom narava in družba. S pojmi ontološke politike in ontološkega obrata skušamo opisati posledice tega dualizma, njegovo krizo in možnosti politične konstitucije onkraj njega. Članek tematizira ponoven interes za ontološko politična vprašanja. Pri tem izhaja iz izkušnje agroekologije, nedavnega razvoja gibanj za podnebno pravičnost in za zaščito zemlje in iz pristopov družbenih gibanj proti neoliberalni globalizaciji. Avtor razvija ontološko predpostavko za svet mnogoterih svetov in zagovarja njeno veljavnost proti ugovorom domnevne indiferentnosti relacijskih ontologij.*

Ključni pojmi: *ontološka politika, svet mnogoterih svetov, dualizem narava/družba.*

