

Is this the humanism we have been looking for?

I would like to start by thanking Brum Büscher for this commentary, which offers an erudite reading of an expansive range of literature within and beyond geography. Büscher paints with a broad brush, and while some differences are elided and some caricatures emerge, his essay achieves a constructive provocation while maintaining some sensitivity to the nuance and the intentions of the authors who are subject to critique. I approach these reflections as a more-than-human geographer with a long investment in decentring the human, in finding means of moving beyond the nature-society binary, and in recognising animals and other organisms as empirical and political subjects for critical enquiry.

In my reading, Büscher's paper can be interpreted less as a critique of one deficient conceptual and political position within the discipline (the nonhuman turn) and more as a review of the convergence between strands of post-Marxian and more-than-human praxis: by the conclusion we get the sense that there is much more that unites than divides these fields. A concern with how modern forms of government and capitalism render some 'less-than-human' has always been at the heart of more-than-humanism (see Philo 2017), and this concern has only become more prominent with the growing gravity and magnitude of environmental injustice (Hinchliffe et al., 2016; Guthman, 2019). Likewise, a concern with (what Büscher terms) the 'more-than-life' forces that press upon and jeopardise human and nonhuman survival is ever more paramount in more-than-human geography as a result of the conceptual turn towards the consideration of elemental forces – like fire, earthquakes, and extreme weather (Clark, 2011; Yusoff, 2021). Current work in more-than-human geography shares an emphasis on specific humans' political agency, precarity and responsibility. It has long shared a consensus that the inexorable pursuit of growth, by violent means and with a deeply unequal distribution of its benefits is the principal problem that should be the target for analysis and critique.

In this short response I identify one point of convergence and two problems that are raised by Büscher's account. The issues I raise are not specific to the approach he outlines but should be read as problems that face environmental geography at the interface of more-than-human and post-Marxian analysis. They relate to the thorny themes of the Human, Nature, and Progress and I can but offer brief signposts here and starting points for future dialogue.

First, it is clear to me – and to many, though not all, more-than-human thinkers – that we need a working definition of the human to guide empirical analysis and political critique. We require ontologies that are sensitive to specific forms of human difference, epistemologies that recognise specific forms of human knowledge, and a politics that can identify specific forms of human agency and can attribute responsibility. Flat ontologies for decentring the human were necessary at the turn of the millennium, given the prevalence of modern, dualist thought in contemporary social theory. And while the nonhuman turn has yet to affect several powerful disciplines (like economics), it might be fair to claim – as Büscher does – that it has profoundly challenged the figure of the human in human geography and cognate fields like anthropology and science studies. Exclusive, essentialist, hierarchical and binary models of agency are no longer so prevalent. Now is an appropriate time to take stock of what has been achieved and where to go next. For the work of flattening and

decentring should not happen at the expense of both an empirical commitment to understanding material differences and a political commitment to social and environmental justice. While there was undoubtedly some rhetorical excess in some of the early efforts to decentre the human, I don't believe that it was ever the intention to fully dissolve the human: for many in geography this has always been a 'more-than-human', rather than a 'posthuman' project (Whatmore, 2006).

But looking ahead Büscher suggests that we need to hold on to and affirm a figure of the human defined as a self-conscious actor. He argues that there are specific and powerful expressions of consciousness that are distinctly human and whose existence enables us to draw what Jeremy Bentham termed the 'insuperable line' between humans and other forms of intelligence. This focus on consciousness avoids biological definitions of the human as a species – cognisant of the scientific problems with this formulation and its potential for biopolitical violence (Kirksey, 2015) – but it risks recentring a version of the human founded on some essential and idealist property of the mind. It also risks affirming reason and free will as the defining epistemic properties of a proper human subject. I am concerned by this move. First, because humans are not autonomous minds-in-vats: the mind can not be easily separated from the body and/or its environment, a great deal of human behaviour is habituated and pre-cognitive, and a wealth of feminist and anti-racist scholarship has documented the violence done by the elevation of a White, male figure of the self-conscious subject (Todd 2016; Yusoff 2018). Second, because elevating self-consciousness risks maintaining a binary, hierarchical division between humans and other lifeforms that naturalises the exploitation of the latter. Büscher is sensitive to some of these challenges, but I am not convinced that we should start where he begins. We need more capacious ontologies of the human that recognise both the distributed nature of human consciousness and the multiple (but not infinitesimal) forms in which it can be found.

Büscher's efforts to specify the human ultimately rest on the reassertion of a distinction between Nature and Society. He aligns himself carefully with other post-Marxian thinkers who argue that 'because nature and society are inherently interrelated, we need to distinguish between their different elements; only then can we meaningfully understand the relations that constitute their inter-relation' (2021: 4). This for me is the most difficult element to his intervention. While I agree that we need to define the human, we can't do so by placing humans alone in one of two categories of beings and matter. So much ink and so many keystrokes have been given over to deconstructing the Nature-Society binary, as well as to reporting on its popular resilience in the face of critique (Castree, 2012). Nonetheless, I still think it worth repeating the foundational insight of so much more-than-human research: Nature and Society are social constructions; they are powerful categories created at a specific historical moment in specific parts of the world and generalised elsewhere. They do not reflect a stable ontological reality or a universal way of knowing the world. Instead, they are complicit in the political epistemology of Western colonial modernity (Todd, 2016). As diverse post-colonial authors have shown, they can be undone, and are done otherwise in the interests of better scholarship and critique. Environmental geographers need to hold onto distinctions between humans and other forms of life without requiring a distinction between nature and society. There is a recklessness to Büscher's proposal: proceeding without adequately acknowledging the dangers that arise from

reinforcing the separation between Nature and Society risks a backward step in environmental geography.

I agree with Büscher that concepts like 'hybridity' and 'socionature' have ultimately proved unsatisfactory as alternatives to Nature and Society. For me they tend to assume the mixture of these two as pre-existent forms. But more recent strands of more-than-human thinking do offer ways of differentiating between modes of entanglement. This work specifies human competencies, recognises the 'radical asymmetry' (Clark, 2011) of some forms of nonhuman agency, and offers qualitative and quantitative measures for evaluating models of ecological politics, without making recourse to the category Nature and the separation between natural and social entities. For example, there is a compelling body of work that spans geography and political theory concerned with developing radical and revisionist models of socio-ecological systems theory (Wakefield et al., 2021). These authors challenge the orthodox conservative application of resilience theory while recognising empirical opportunities for transformative politics and ecological resurgence (Hoag and Svenning 2017; Tsing, 2017) amidst the worlds-ending disruptions of the Anthropocene. This work provides one possible political ecology for critiquing the pathologies of globalising capitalism that is founded on a nuanced typology of different forms of agency and responsibility. It makes consequential distinctions between humans and other actors, but it is not grounded in the impossible and unpalatable political ontology of Nature. Büscher selectively acknowledges some strands of this work but seems unwilling to accept and embrace its founding assumptions.

The problems with Büscher's model of the self-conscious human and his continued adherence to the Nature-Society distinction are amplified by his theory of alienation. Here he draws on Biro's distinction between 'surplus' and 'basic' alienation, where the latter is defined as 'the deep historical transformation from the rest of nature that allowed humans to develop distinct and exceptional forms of sociality and political economy' (2021: 3). He explains that for Biro basic alienation 'is premised on an "absolute dividing line" between the human and the non-human'. This divide, Biro argues, 'is historical, not biological. The historical event that constitutes the dividing line between the human and the non-human is human beings' self-conscious transformation of their natural environment' (2021: 8).

Büscher acknowledges that 'what, precisely, is meant by human-beings self-conscious transformation of their natural environment is a major debate' and that 'trying to pinpoint its (pre-capitalist) origin would be futile' (2021: 8). But his analysis comes to fundamentally rest on this historical narrative of The Fall: a historicity that indexes present problems to some past moment of estrangement. This is a familiar environmentalist (and religious) trope, in which the contemporary seer looks back to the past to diagnose problems in the present and to offer restorative solutions. Büscher's version of this is rather woolly and unsatisfactory. We are not told what unalienated social and ecological relations look like, while the generalised moment of estrangement is tied to a universal history of the emergence of the self-conscious human – the very subject that Büscher suggests should be recentred in his model of politics. There is an apparent contradiction between Büscher's effort to recentre the self-conscious human as the agent of politics while at the same time framing the emergence of the self-conscious subject as the cause of basic alienation. It is not clear therefore where the diagnosis of the 'historical fact' (2021: 8) of basic alienation

leaves us politically? Should we seek to go beyond the self-conscious transformation of the natural environment to address alienation? How desirable would this be in the context of the challenges and responsibilities of tackling the social and ecological problems associated with the advent of the Anthropocene?

Büscher's discussion of alienation is given greatest expression through a focus on platform capitalism and the commodification of virtual natures. This section is compelling and familiar to other work in post-Marxian political ecology. But his analysis of both surplus and basic alienation does not generate suggestions as to how basic alienation might be addressed. Furthermore, there is a tendency to universalise that occludes the different ways in which different people use new media technologies. Undoubtedly the infrastructure behind platforms like Instagram and Twitter does environmental harm, and Büscher (2020) has shown in depth elsewhere how much of new media traffic distracts from, or exacerbates, social and environmental problems. But there are also examples in which digital technologies and digital media enhance environmental understanding, democratise environmental knowledges and decision making and have the potential to promote progressive environmental politics (Turnbull et al., 2020). It is not at all clear how the concept of basic alienation would help us understand or shape the emergence of these digital ecologies.

To reiterate, in spite of these concerns, I welcome Büscher's intervention and the dialogue and reconciliation it should generate. There is much to build on here. We need this type of critical analysis, but we also need a mode of critique able to identity, affirm and amplify positive models of political ecology as and where we find them.

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