

АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ВОПРОСЫ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ НАУКИ

NON-HUMAN POLITICS AND THE DIALOGUE OF VULNERABILITY

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In the given article the author broadens humanistic dimension of world politics and civilizational dialogue. The comprehension of the unity of ecosystem of our planet, international cooperation in protection of nature must overcome corrupted logic of political realism, global capitalism and utilitarianism and become the corner stone of civilizational dialogue in the modern post-crisis world.

Key words: civilizational dialogue, vulnerability, ecosystem, globalization.

Introduction: A modern disaster

On April 20th, as the story seems to go, a methane bubble broke through a series of protective seals up the drill shaft of a BP well in the Gulf of Mexico, setting off an explosion which killed 11 rig workers and unleashed the largest oil spill in US history. The next victims, as is usually the case with such man-made disasters, were marine animals like turtles and water fowl. The potential economic impact in terms of money lost by fishermen and the tourist industry in the affected areas runs into the hundreds of millions; the potential ecological costs in terms of endangered animal death and habitat and wetland destruction are incalculable; BP itself stands by some accounts to lose \$30 billion as a result of the spill. The point here is not to condemn the event itself (although it is certainly a tragedy of epic proportions) or even those who caused it (although BP, Transocean, the rig's operator, and contractor Halliburton who built the cap on the undersea well, as well as US regulators, should all face serious disciplinary action), but to consider its causes and effects from a variety of perspectives.

To start, let us make something clear: oil is as much a part of nature as the affected waters and birds, as the affected human societies. The debate over the varying definitions of nature aside, that much we should be able to agree on. Nature might to some extent be “made” by humans — be a “hybrid” as some have argued — but it also entails humanity and affects it as much as any of its other component parts. So how came the oil to threaten the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and both its human and non-human inhabitants? Surely there is much more to blame than that methane bubble or shoddy construction. Of course the modern world is dependent on oil and its extracti-

on is therefore a necessity — both an economic and de facto existential one. But at the heart of the failings here is a lack of esteem for nature (in the broadest sense possible). As Benjamin Barber has recently suggested, there is a large dose of hubris involved here [1]. But the risk taken in the name of economic gain also shows a lack of appropriate consideration not only for the extent of possible environmental damage and animal suffering, but for the socio-economic complexity of ecosystems which directly involve human beings.

So let us look at the consequences and the affected stakeholders. BP is certainly among them — losing money, stock value, and prestige at an alarming rate. As is the global oil industry. Every disaster like this moves public opinion away from the category of “necessary evil” to considering alternatives. Then there are the people of Alabama, Louisiana, and the other potentially affected states, losing millions a day in revenue from fishing (and oil drilling) and potentially permanently losing jobs as well as coastal land. And finally there are fragile ecosystems and their non-human residents who risk destruction. So could we not argue then that to say that a part of the global ecosystem is in danger would be statement that includes all of the above? And does that mean that it is not in our common interest to work to prevent accidents such as this?

The gulf spill, at least in its first months, seems to suggest this is the case. The outcry and response to spill has crossed across American social and political lines. From environmentalists and anti-corporate activists to marine biologists and oil engineers to the affected fishermen and the US coast guard, diverse and divergent groups are aligned to some extent in the clean-up and response to the disaster. Many church leaders, building on a growing trend, and urging prayer and action in defense of the environment. The range of effects is so broad that the situation has created a spontaneous and unlikely coalition of allies. If we can agree on a problem, perhaps it is less important that we all come at it from the same angle than that we recognize it as a common threat, which might make us all be able to consider solutions together and to de-ideologize solutions, considering them policy and personal options.

In simplest terms, if there are no fish, there are no fish to fish for money or food, nor are there any fish to protect or study. Or, for the more religiously minded, let us reiterate Bruno Latour’s pointed question: “If you lose the Earth, what good is saving your soul?” And, even for the most profit-minded, consider a recent UN Convention on Biological Diversity report which suggests that the annual destruction of nature in terms of animal species, potential resources, and forests costs the global economy in excess of a trillion dollars a year [15]. The natural world may be fragile, but so is humanity. In such a case, does it not make sense to consider defense of nature as an existential priority that crosses civilizational and interest lines with the same ease that “natural” threats cross borders and civilizations? Even if Descola’s assertion that naturalism and ecological concern are an exception in human history holds true, now might be the time for them to become the norm [2].

Bridging the civilization debate

There is a three-pronged debate about the relationship between, broadly speaking, civilization and conflict. The first prong can be labeled the “clash of civilizations” ap-

proach. Given its name by Samuel Huntington — but hardly his sole creation — this viewpoint highlights the inevitability of conflict among civilizations (writ large and narrowly defined) based on the difference in value systems that form each one. These differences, proponents of this view hold, stem from differences in history, religion, and indeed the very epistemology of its civilizationally-ethnically categorized members and are, as such, well nigh irreconcilable. Indeed, Boris Kapustin suggests that, as they are a priori assumed to be irreconcilable and imply conflict rather than mutual indifference, these differences should be rightly called contradictions. The second, opposing group, highlights not the conflict but rather the potential for a “dialogue of civilizations.” This latter position, often attributed, or at least pegged, to its etymological originator Mohammad Khatami, is based on the notion that we should not necessarily approach “civilizations” from an ideological perspective. This approach suggests that there is common ground for dialogue among inherently different civilizations which and lead to a more harmonious international relations.

The Russian political philosopher Boris Kapustin offers a critique of the above dichotomy and thereby adds a third prong to the debate. He argues that both the “clash” and “dialogue” approaches” are *de facto* different faces of the same coin and thus can not go beyond the same, limited epistemological core assumption that “cultural difference inevitably leads to conflict.” Kapustin’s position bears quoting at length. He writes that:

“[t]he ‘dialogue among civilizations’, which claims to be *the* alternative of the ‘clash of civilizations’, fully accepts the logic of ‘naturalization’ typical of its ‘opponent’. The ‘dialogue’ admits that the ‘clash of civilizations’ is *the* major threat to the well being of humankind. Such a ‘clash’ is described as bearing an ‘existential’ rather than a functional character (*pace* Huntington’s dismissal of institutions). A theoretical similarity between the two allegedly rival approaches is further bolstered up by their equal incapacity to explain the logic of the ‘clash of civilizations’. Huntington fails to demonstrate why and how ‘cultural differences’ would culminate in ‘clashes’. This leaves the central thesis of his book about the ‘clashes of civilizations’ as the crux of international policy hanging in the air. The ‘dialogue’ reciprocates this by pointing to such mysterious things as the ‘fear of diversity’ or the ‘perception that diversity is a threat’ as the (only) causes of the ‘cultural’ conflicts. [...] Unfounded ‘fears of diversity’ and its misperceptions as a threat are believed to be curable and the ‘dialogue’ is presented as a correct medication to treat such maladies” [5. P. 56, P. 151].

The issue here, however, is that conflicts *do* exist and are often framed by — or even, let me venture — caused by schisms that might be rooted in some form of difference in culture or civilization. Diversity, inherent in different cultures (regardless of definition), socio-cultural systems, socio-economic conditions, etc. does *contribute* to the causes of conflict, at worst, or simply leads to a lack of common language so that dialogue can either be fruitless or become co-opted. Clashes among different cultural groups are certainly not inevitable, nor is it sound to suggest all modern conflict is rooted in fixed civilizational divides, but neither is it necessarily true that the “clash” and “dialogue” approaches are, by virtue of their “narrowness,” entirely unsound.

The position taken in this paper is that dialogue is needed to manage conflicts, and that, if we are to engage in a dialogue “among civilizations” this needs to be approached from a broader perspective that looks at potential “civilizational commonalities” that might serve as the basis for discussion leading to a potential greater global good. The goal here is specifically not to focus on specific aspects of different civilizations, but to seek out a policy-relevant “interface.” This gives rise to two fundamental questions: (1) can we find common ground that would serve as a basis for inter-civilizational political or social action?, and (2) what might these “civilizational bridges” look like? In other words, how would one frame an acceptable theoretical approach that might be used in guiding practical actions as a *tool for the partnership of civilizations*?

This is also an addendum to the debate on how to try to de-politicize and de-ideologize the current debate. This latter part is a prerequisite for better understanding of opportunities and limitations for peaceful coexistence in the chaotic international environment of the emerging multi-polar world system. In other words, it is a search for acceptable (both theoretically and politically) common space for a new wave of the civilization debate that seeks to escape being either too ideological or — equally importantly — too detached from tangible applicability. Where might one even start?

Vulnerability as a (pre-)condition for dialogue

Before finding a common ground for dialogue, how might one structure the foundations of “civilizational bridges”? What should be the preconditions for a true dialogue?

Dialogue should optimally take place among equals, but suggesting that all civilizations be treated as “equal” in a paper suggesting a pragmatic approach may ring hollow. Let me at least suggest that as a basis for constructive dialogue, starting from categories such as “oppressed” and “dominated” on one hand and “developed” or “advanced” on the other will frame the debate from the start in purely political categories, so common themes might be sought outside mainstream political categories. It is also crucial to acknowledge the complexity and hybridity of cultures and specifically Arun Saldanha’s conclusion that “the geography of modernity is a complex affair” and that therefore the interaction and mutual influence of cultures should not be over-simplified or ignored. Cultures are not static, be they “Western” or otherwise, and changes to cultures are the result or a complex interplay of factors. Specifically when it comes to the non-West, as Saldanha has noted, “Third World modernity” is far more complex than simply being “their’ adaptation of ‘our’ occidentalisms and orientalisms” [12. P. 344].

The second consideration is the acceptance that sometimes the optimal result of the process may simply be to agree to disagree. As Mark Kingwell has noted, “[n]ot only does it allow a minimal cohesion, staying off the anarchy of war between all and everyone, but the conditions of rational disagreement actually indicate a significant upgrade in human intelligence” [6]. Disagreement, after all, is not synonymous with “clash” nor must it lead to one.

Thirdly, might we bypass the problem of “civilization” altogether through the recognition of our shared, global, human vulnerability as a potential catalyst for common action. A shared sense of human vulnerability creates a sense of community, a

sense of global collectivity whereby group interests might be, if not eliminated, then mutated. This might happen not because of the notion of civility or any value attached to ethical pluralism but due to fear of future survival, both as “civilizations,” however defined, and indeed as humanity as we know it. *Thus we have to list areas where we all seem to be vulnerable regardless of our culture and the space we occupy.* Obviously, this is not a search for a “global identity” but rather an attempt to identify some overarching global worries. And, as such, the bridges being referred to are not an attempt at rapprochement between irreconcilable universals but rather an attempt at conceptualizing a set of relatively universal talking points.

The main idea here is to shift the discourse on civilization from broad and often carefully delineated areas such as religion, economics or society (which are usually framed in “cultural categories” related to key values and “real politics” and thus related to culturally rooted differences) to the mutual recognition of *globally shared notions of concern*. In other words to replace one frame of the discourse (dialogue-clash) with another one that de-emphasizes history, de-europenizes, de-modernizes the discourse and attempts to create — or at least take a step toward trying to establish — a basic *universality of concerns*.

I do not purport to suggest some cohesive set of talking points that fit the above criteria. I would like, however, to suggest one. Broadly speaking, the natural world is under threat and, as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill shows, this in turn directly threatens humanity. A cross-civilizational debate on nature — broadly speaking — may add to our understanding of human-animal relations, global bio-politics, and bio-economics. It may also reveal our different understandings of human limits in relation to nature and suggest potential points of consensus for social and political action.

Animals, Nature, and Shared Vulnerability

Part of the problem when it comes to discussing nature and animals in a political forum is that we have become accustomed to treating nature as something outside human affairs. Many thinkers, notably Bruno Latour, have written at length about the false separation of society and nature. Indeed, the relationship between humanity and the natural world is primarily an instrumental one: we use resources, land, and animals to suit our own (primarily economic) needs. By treating nature as a commodity, we tend to disqualify it from political consideration. A step forward would be to consider, as Raffi Youatt and some others have suggested, that humans are not only one small part of nature, but also that they implicate nature and non-humans in the politics of their actions.

Let us return to the Gulf of Mexico and reconsider the various interactions between humanity and nature at play. The Gulf is an oil- and gas-rich area which provides, respectively, a quarter and a fifth of the United States’ supply of these strategic resources. But the extraction of these resources requires a literal colonization of the sea. The drilling of deep-water wells, establishment of rigs, constant ship traffic, and innumerable “minor” spill occurs in a territory formerly inhabited exclusively by marine life. Simultaneously, the same area is the site of constant incursions by fishermen who hunt for sea creatures to kill and sell for their income. The income of those who

drill below the sea's surface and those who hunt its inhabitants derives entirely from the pre-existing natural conditions in the Gulf. Moreover, the claimed right to drill and hunt is unquestioned in a Lockean logic that allows humans to claim property at will out of the natural world. But this economic rationale misses the point that humans have a profound effect on the marine life in the region. Overfishing threatens tuna and snapper species, drilling and shipping disrupt animal migration and breeding patterns, and oil spills threaten marine animal and plant life. Humans are an intrusive member of this biosphere and one which makes all other members vulnerable. In itself, this is problematic in that it shows that non-humans are directly implicated in anthropocentric political economy to their unquestionable detriment. But this vulnerability goes both ways. The reliance of humans on natural resources means that disasters like the latest oil spill are very much human disasters. As fish and shrimp die, those who relied on them lose their livelihoods; as oil washes up on beaches, tourist towns become ghost towns; and the companies who caused the oil spill lose money for their shareholders as global tensions rise on fears of oil scarcity. Looking from this perspective, the threatened fish and the threatened humans share the same vulnerability, at the root of which is the exploitative relationship we have with the natural world.

Let us look at few more recent examples to demonstrate the above point. At the recent CITES conference, a number of proposed bans on the use of endangered species — most publicized being the case of the bluefin tuna — were voted down by countries whose economic interests are served by not only the exploitation, but the overexploitation of various animal populations. Even from the most business-friendly perspective, this is highly irrational behaviour: why would we willingly destroy a “renewable resource”? More importantly, why would a government subsidize such an industry, or the equally incomprehensible — and unprofitable — whaling industry?

But this is far from being a “Japanese problem.” Consider the fact that according to a recent University of York study, fish stocks around the UK have been depleted to the point that 17 times more effort (in terms of hours, staff, and investment) is necessary to make equivalent catches to those just over a century ago [17]. A similar situation exists on the European continent, and yet the EU subsidizes the destructive — and by extension self-destructive — fishing industry to the tune of billions of Euros [16]. And, by extension, this “European problem” has a more global reach.

A recent investigation carried out by the NGO Environmental Justice Foundation has revealed the human aspect of pirate fishing off the coast of Africa fueled by the European appetite for fish. Vessels fishing illegally and flying “flags of convenience” operate with virtual impunity off the west coast of Africa, with the tripartite effect of threatening endangered fish stocks, impinging on fragile coastal economies, and “exploit[ing] human labour in shocking conditions” [8]. By preying on fragile fish populations (75% of which are deemed exploited or depleted), this trade is not only ecologically criminal, but threatens the possibility of sustainable future fisheries regimes at a global level. Second, small community and subsistence fishermen are pushed out by armed and well-equipped pirates, threatening local economies and communities [14]. Finally, the illegal fishing trade is a source of severe human rights violations, with pirate vessels employing workers who work in unsafe and unhygienic conditions,

sometimes without financial remuneration, and who are “effectively imprisoned” [8]. There is a direct link here, often overlooked, between animal exploitation and the exploitation of humans.

How can such practices, which do not even make sense within their own internal circuits — never mind the entire body of critique which attacks fishing practice and even the right of humans to kill animals for food — be allowed to continue?

Although there is no conclusive proof, it has been suggested that last year’s outbreak of swine flu originated at a pork factory farm in the Mexican city of La Gloria. This plant, owned by a subsidiary of US-based Smithfield foods, raises pigs in an inhumane, mechanized manner, has repeatedly faced allegations of contaminating local groundwater, and may well have caused the contamination of humans by swine flu. This local transmission of disease in the La Gloria ecosystem — if that is where it occurred — led to human deaths, travel bans, plummeting stock markets, and, after an over-reaction, a serious blow to the reputation of the World Health Organization. And yet the plant continues to operate. On a less global scale, we see similar impunity in Hungary, where the MAL Hungarian Aluminium Production and Trade Company plant responsible for a toxic sludge spill responsible for killing nine people, effectively destroying several local villages, and causing as yet undetermined damage to the local ecosystem, has been allowed to restart production less than two weeks after the catastrophe [4]. In a global ecosystem where we destroy the natural world at a spectacular rate, we are perhaps paradoxically more a part of nature than ever.

I have purposely not mentioned global warming and the carbon debate here because even if — as highly unlikely as it is — anthropogenic global warming is not occurring, this does not mean we humans are not having a terrible effect on the earth which, to phrase it in a way which is not used enough, is our one and only habitat. This bridge of concern can then open us up to action to preserve our habitat and therefore ourselves. I will briefly mention a few relatively mainstream solutions which now, in light of our argument, must be treated not as ideological or fringe ones, but rather as viable options for personal or policy action.

Vegetarianism and animal rights: An “acivilizational” dialogue?

One of the primary reasons for focusing on our global vulnerability is that vulnerability need not be framed or caused by any overt conflict. Indeed, as the above examples show, much of our vulnerability — at least in terms of the natural environment — comes from human exploitation of the environment and its resources due to economic imperatives or survival needs.

The world is facing an ongoing food crisis. As Raj Patel wrote recently in the *Guardian*, “for most hungry people, 2008 isn't over. The events of 2007—2008 tipped more than 100 million into hunger and the global recession has meant that they have stayed there” [10]. 1.02 billion people, the most ever, are undernourished. This, in a world where 40% of all grain, more than 50% of all corn, and approximately 80% of all soy beans is used to feed livestock. The rearing of livestock for meat production is also responsible for heavy levels of CO₂ and methane emissions, extensive global deforestation, and pollution of waterways and soil.

Indeed, it increasingly appears that the meat we eat is a threat to our existence, or at least to cosmopolitan goals of poverty alleviation and reduction of pollution. In many ways, meat is like oil, but unlike oil it is far easier to substitute. Consider vegetarianism or at least a predominantly plant-based diet. Reducing our dependence on meat — nevermind the strong ethical argument for not harming animals presented by thinkers like Peter Singer — would reduce the ecological damage done by the meat industry. As Pimentel and Pimentel have demonstrated, a vegetarian diet can provide the same amount of protein as a meat diet at a considerably lower cost in terms of energy and non-renewable resource use [11]. And it would mean more resources globally to feed an increasing and increasingly undernourished population*. A reduced meat diet would mean no overfishing, meaning no wasted fisheries subsidies and healthier oceans. It would mean no polluting factory farms or swine flu outbreaks. It would also mean less economic reliance on animal resources, meaning paradoxically that disasters like the current oil spill would have less economic or human impact. On the other hand, it would necessitate a new and robust agricultural industry and new non-animal products to appeal to a new market. There are many cultures, notably Hinduism and Buddhism, with rich traditions of healthy vegetarian living. I am by no means suggesting vegetarianism is a panacea to global problems, but might it not be time to focus economic and social policy, or at least discussion, on something as simple as diet? And might a dialogue about something as relatively unthreatening as diet and nutrition not bypass the risk of a civilizational clash? If we all eat meat and meat is bad for us, should we not stop eating meat? Even if the argument is not accepted, it is hardly grounds for conflict and, at the very least, dialogue will have been achieved.

Of course, one can go further. Meat-eating aside, might we not begin an inter-institutional dialogue that would seek to truly treat global food from the perspective of the nutrition ecology approach? This approach attempts to deal with the food chain in its entirety, from growth to consumption, with a focus on “human health, the environment, society and the economy.” If our dialogue about food went beyond simply feeding people and making money, we could begin to look at changing the way we approach food, including consumption, farming and rearing practices, and the prices we pay. From an economic perspective, might we not begin considering nationally-mandated food-price controls which would acknowledge that “food price should include all costs caused by the nutrition system, especially environmental damage” [9. P. 658]?

And might the above considerations not, in turn, aid in the mainstreaming of the massive yet politically marginal animal rights discourse. As Donna Harraway has asserted, “[m]ovements of animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture” [3. P. 85]. Radical as it might seem, considering the effects of our ac-

* The author agrees here with Schleifer in discarding the notion that “humane slaughter” is a more ethical form of meat consumption. As Schleifer has noted, such lines of argumentation “sugges[t] that the taking of life is not the problem [and] to make matters worse... ignor[e] the fact that the specific moment of death is only a fraction of a larger process.”

tions because they affect animals, not only because they affect humans, and trying to include animals or at least consideration of them in politics might not be contrary to human interests. For one, this is because, as Bruno Latour posits, “[n]on-humans have not been emerging for eons just to serve as so many props to show the mastery, intelligence, and design capacities of humans or their divine creations” [7. P. 16]. But, in a more anthropocentric vein, if a politics of shared vulnerability could extend across species lines, would our actions, by virtue of being more ecologically sound, not diminish our own human vulnerability?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have asked a number of questions and provided relatively few answers. The aim of this approach is to attempt to broaden the debate about civilization and make room in it for new considerations and critiques which diverge from a socio-political dichotomy concerned with conflict (or the avoidance thereof). By introducing the concept of vulnerability as a driver of dialogue, I have demonstrated that humans are indeed the worst threats to humanity, but that this threat lies not in civilizational differences, but at least in part in the way we interact with nature and non-human animals. Seeing ourselves as part of nature and developing empathy with the natural world might allow us to talk about how to change the way we interact with our surroundings and with each other. As a start, we should see that animals and the natural world are inherently a part of human politics and should accordingly be given due consideration. We also need to recognize that in exploiting and threatening nature, we threaten ourselves. My discussion was limited to only a small aspect of this issue: diet. There are of course myriad other topics to be discussed here, including natural conservation, renewable energy, protection of endangered species, and human overpopulation. But for now, might thinking about diet, food production, and animal rights not be one way of not only bypassing civilizational divides but also diminishing our human vulnerability? That is a question that can and should be asked regardless of one’s position in the broader debate about civilization. After all, without humanity — and the natural world on which it relies — civilization is an impossibility.

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«НЕЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКАЯ» ПОЛИТИКА И ДИАЛОГ УЯЗВИМОСТИ

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В статье автор расширяет гуманистическое измерение мировой политики и цивилизационного диалога. Осознание единства экосистемы Земли, совместная забота о сохранении природы, частью которой является и человечество, должны преодолеть ограниченную логику политического реализма, глобального капитализма и утилитаризма и стать важным краеугольным камнем межцивилизационного диалога в современном посткризисном мире.

Ключевые слова: цивилизационный диалог, уязвимость, экосистема, глобализация.