



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Re-animalising Wellbeing: Multispecies Justice After Development

Citation for published version:

Srinivasan, K 2022, 'Re-animalising Wellbeing: Multispecies Justice After Development', *The Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221084781>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/00380261221084781](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221084781)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

The Sociological Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

© The Author(s) 2022

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Re-animalising wellbeing: Multispecies justice after development

The Sociological Review

1–15

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00380261221084781

journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Krithika Srinivasan**

Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

This article addresses contemporary socio-ecological crises by proposing a shift from the logics of protection–sacrifice that characterise developmentality, and by developing the idea of ‘re-animalisation’ as a pathway to multispecies justice. The pursuit of ‘development’ has been a key hallmark of the modern idea of progress. Long-standing critiques of the socio-ecological and other adverse impacts of development have not made much headway in effecting meaningful change. Engaging with this impasse, I argue that specific zoöpolitical notions of human wellbeing that are co-constitutive with developmentality are at the foundation of today’s socio-ecological troubles and multispecies justice concerns. Bringing together post-development and animal studies scholarship, I discuss the twinned logics of protection–sacrifice that underlie the pursuit of human wellbeing at societal scales, and that have come to characterise more-than-human responses as well. I build on this, in conversation with environmental philosopher Val Plumwood and degrowth scholar Giorgos Kallis, to suggest that achieving multispecies justice requires a renewed focus on the human in the form of a fundamental re-placement of the social in the rest of the nature. To this end, I offer thought experiments on re-visioning wellbeing via an approach of ‘re-animalisation’ to provoke reflection on crafting new foundations for equitable multispecies presents and futures.

Keywords

degrowth, development, multispecies justice, postdevelopment, re-animalisation

Introduction

The times that we live in are characterised by abundance; they are equally characterised by fear: abundance in relation to how we inhabit the planet and partake of what it offers, and fear that the ways in which we inhabit this world, that this abundance, is destroying the very conditions of possibility that make human life possible. It is this combination of

Corresponding author:

Krithika Srinivasan, Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, South Bridge, Edinburgh, EH8 9XP, UK.

Email: K.srinivasan@ed.ac.uk

abundance and fear that has now found articulation in the epithet ‘the Anthropocene’ (Mansfield & Doyle, 2017).

The term Anthropocene foregrounds the negative impacts that modern human lifestyles have had on the planet and the other creatures that we share it with. But alongside these negative impacts sits a ‘more-than-human’ turn in the form of widespread public concern and action about the adverse consequences of humankind’s interactions with nonhuman nature (encompassing ecological collectivities and individual organisms). This can be seen most obviously in environmental and animal protection initiatives that have emerged worldwide, and also in everyday actions and debate (Peggs, 2020; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019).

While the ‘more-than-human’ turn has been valuable, in this article I argue for a renewed focus on the *human* as a necessary response to the Anthropocene. Bringing together environmental philosophy, human–animal studies and post-development literatures, I suggest that the abundance and the fear that characterise this era are closely tied to a zoöpolitically exceptionalist vision of human wellbeing, and the near-universal pursuit of the same via the mechanism of development (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016). Human wellbeing is seen as something that is achieved by overcoming and controlling the risks that are inherent in being a part of nonhuman nature, and by becoming ‘*more-than-animal*’. The societal pursuit of this vision of human wellbeing has taken the form of ‘development’, which, as I explain, is reliant on the ethical privileging of humankind over the rest of life and characterised by twinned logics of protection–sacrifice. This ethical privileging and logics of protection–sacrifice produce outcomes that undermine the wellbeing of nonhuman life, and of people in manners that vary across spatial and temporal scales, and across axes of social (including species) difference. These adverse impacts are hard to contest and overcome because they are tied to what is seen as an indisputable ‘good’, i.e. human wellbeing.

There is thus a need to reconfigure dominant, zoöpolitically exceptionalist notions of human wellbeing in order to effect meaningful change in the processes that have produced the Anthropocene, and that have led to profound multispecies (social, ecological and animal) injustices (Celermajor et al., 2020). To this end, this article contributes provocations on what might be entailed in rethinking human wellbeing in ways that are oriented towards multispecies justice. This, I argue, necessitates the imaginative and practical task of re-animalisation, i.e. resituating humanity as one among other animals, and relearning how to inhabit this world accordingly. I further add that this requires a fundamental shift in approaches to wellbeing and justice – a shift away from logics and practices of protection–sacrifice, and towards the redistribution of the risks of earthly living in more equitable directions.

Development, human wellbeing and zoöpolitical exceptionalism

The ‘big’ socio-ecological problems of the Anthropocene have their roots in the pursuit of particular visions of human wellbeing. Climate change, biodiversity loss, air pollution and water scarcity are all outcomes of societal efforts to foster human progress – what is now commonly referred to as ‘development’ (McMichael, 2012). Developmental activities,

whether agriculture, concrete buildings, trains and cars, flush toilets, or air-conditioning, seek to improve human life, but also undermine it through negative consequences such as pollution, habitat degradation, and the exploitation and displacement of nonhuman life-forms. It is not just more-than-human problems that are the counterparts of development. The pernicious impacts of development on vulnerable people have been widely discussed (Escobar, 1995; Shrivastava & Kothari, 2012).

In effect, the pursuit of development has been a key hallmark of modernity and progress as well as a driver of the socio-ecological and more-than-human crises of the Anthropocene. The vast literature on developmentality's excesses has critically discussed the reasons for this. Capitalist logics of economic growth, commodification and extractivism have received much attention in this regard (Harvey, 2014; Moore, 2017). These problems are not restricted to capitalist regimes, with even community-oriented, left-leaning governments and civil society groups, subscribing to 'utterly conventional development strategies . . . organised around the extraction of natural sources' (Escobar, 2020, p. xviii). Post-development scholarship thus argues for alternatives *to* development that rethink development as a pathway to 'universal betterment' (Kallis, 2019, p. 6; Kothari et al., 2019).

To rethink development, it is useful to ask *why* development is done. At the most basic level, the assumed and stated end-goal of development is human wellbeing – to better human lives. Even if many of the negative impacts of development can be attributed to the profit-motives of privileged individuals or institutions, these profit-motives themselves can be understood as manifestations of the pursuit of wellbeing (of some people) – profits are valued because people and societies perceive them as contributing to their wellbeing (and perhaps that of others, as per the 'trickle-down' narrative). Even colonialism, the precursor of 'development', was justified in relation to the progress of the 'home' country and its peoples, and sometimes in relation to the 'improvement' of the colonised peoples – who were perceived as lacking the capacities and knowledges required to achieve human flourishing (Li, 2007).

This raises the question of how it is that something that is meant to promote human wellbeing ends up harming people, both directly through development-induced displacement, and indirectly, by harming nature.

To understand this, I would like to direct attention to the vision of human wellbeing that lies at the heart of developmentality. As Srinivasan and Kasturirangan (2016) explain, development is driven by a vision of a 'good' human life as something that (1) is achieved through insulation from the threats posed by nature and the vulnerabilities that are inherent to living as part of nature, including death itself; and (2) involves the maximisation of a range of capacities (e.g. intelligence, creativity) that are considered to be uniquely human, thereby finding fulfilment in going beyond the capacities of 'mere' biological organisms.

In order to make their point, they use as an example one of the most basic indicators of development – longevity. The higher the life expectancy at birth in a country, the higher it scores on the Human Development Index. Longevity as a seemingly unquestionable 'good' is taken for granted in mainstream society. (By 'mainstream', I mean all those societies that subscribe to ideas and practices of development. The exceptions would be societies that remain isolated from the rest of the world, and therefore from developmental norms, such as the Sentinelese in the Andaman Islands.)

Death is an integral part of life on Earth. A good human life, however, is seen as achieved only by preventing or delaying the many things that could put an end to life – ill health, storms, other animals. Many of these are things that kill other animals and life-forms, which is usually seen as ‘natural’. But when it comes to human society (including those nonhumans that are specially valued, e.g. pets, farmed plants and animals, gardens), death that occurs outside of human intention and purpose is seen as something that must be overcome through socio-technological advances.

Consider other things that are viewed as essential to a good human life: housing that protects us from the elements, assured access to food, healthcare. And also education, heating/cooling of built environments, internet, energy-powered transport, artificial lighting, the occasional holiday, clothes, phones, computers – mainstream societies across the world are characterised by an ever-growing list of ‘basic’ needs. As Esteva puts it in conversation with Escobar (2020, p. 108), ‘development changed the human condition through a grotesque transformation of necessities and desires into prescribed needs’.

All these are things that insulate humans from the ‘risks (and inconveniences) that are inherent to living as part of the “more-than-human world”’, and that enable us to exceed our animality (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016, p. 126). This vision of a good human life is built on *zoöpolitical exceptionalisms*: human wellbeing is achieved through separation from nonhuman nature, in particular, from the hazards and vulnerabilities that are part and parcel of being planetary life; at the same time, it is enhanced by activities and processes – such as a certain type of education, holidays, the internet – that are tied to those qualities and desires that are uniquely human in that they are not shared by other animals. This vision entails being and becoming *more-than-animal*.

These ontological nature–society exceptionalisms go alongside ethical exceptionalisms wherein the processes involved in securing development and/or human wellbeing involve ‘the use, exploitation and redesign of nonhuman nature’ or its destruction (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2016, p. 126). These processes also harm vulnerable human communities who are displaced in service of the greater good, and whose ways of life are often seen as ‘inferior’, and in need of ‘development’ (Li, 2007; Shrivastava & Kothari, 2012). Developmental processes and norms therefore have ecological, animal and social justice implications.

Modern medicine, for example, is built on the exploitation of nonhuman organisms for the manufacture and safety testing of healthcare products, and in some instances, including recent COVID vaccination trials, the exploitation of marginalised people (Bhuyan, 2021). Modern healthcare involves the delay of human mortality and the reduction of human vulnerability to disease by deliberately creating ill health in, and hastening the deaths of, other animals. As Kallis (2019, p. 92) writes, ‘we attempt to overcome [death] by subduing nature or by shifting death onto others’. While ‘animal welfare’ might be a concern in medicine and related fields, the normative assumption that other life-forms can and ought to be sacrificed for the sake of human wellbeing (whether in relation to cancer, hypothyroidism, allergies, or COVID-19) remains unchallenged (barring within marginal animal rights discourse).

Other animals manage their health through means that humans do not fully comprehend. For example, they heal serious wounds just through regular licking. There are

occasions when such healthcare fails, and ill health and death ensue. The human healthcare apparatus, however, is a fundamentally distinct endeavour. The underlying goal is ‘more-than-animal’ health and protection from the varied threats that all other life-forms have to deal with, and to achieve that at the level of entire societies.

The production of food in today’s world is equally implicated in multispecies injustices. Petro-chemical agriculture is accepted to have significant socio-ecological impacts, while others argue that these impacts can be traced to much earlier in the history of settled agriculture (Scott, 2017; Weis, 2007). Nevertheless, intensive agriculture continues to be the preferred mode of food production because its yields, however unsustainable, tend to be higher than other forms of food production and procurement – and high yields are understood as necessary to achieve ready access to food for people. This narrative, while debunked, dominates societal approaches to food (Emel & Neo, 2015).

All animals procure food for their survival and that of their families or communities. The procurement of such food is usually restricted to their immediate/daily needs, or in some cases, seasonal needs. Contemporary agriculture, by contrast, is a mammoth intervention that seeks to maximise and assure a steady flow of large quantities across global spatial and temporal scales – we want to be assured of food not only for the day, but for the foreseeable future, for not only our immediate communities, but geopolitical entities. At these scales, food becomes more than nutrition – it becomes a means of pursuing other wellbeing goals, such as through commerce and leisure.

The above examples of healthcare and food pertain to basic aspects of human wellbeing. In both cases, the effort is to achieve a state that is somehow more-than-animal – through insulation from the risks and uncertainties that are core to living as part of nature (e.g. hunger, mortality from disease), and through *more-than-animal* expansion of what wellbeing means, and to pursue it at societal and generational spatial and temporal scales. This maximisation has no theoretical limits – for instance, the idea of what constitutes premature death (in humans) has shifted towards higher and higher ages over time.

Developmental visions of human wellbeing are therefore about cultivating abundance in relation to how humankind inhabits Earth and continually differentiating humankind from the rest of life. Of course, there is enormous variation within humanity with respect to the extent to which different norms of development and human wellbeing are achieved, and even more variation with respect to the responsibility for the linked adverse consequences (Bauer & Bhan, 2016). Yet, these differentials are seen as having to be overcome by bringing such norms and associated materialities to those people and societies that do not have access to them – development is the process through which this is undertaken, a process justified by the differentials that it seeks to eliminate, even as it continually creates such differentials through its progressively expanding goalposts of ‘needs’ and wellbeing. It is in the pursuit of this zoöpolitical vision of humanity that developmental-ity ‘colonises and assimilates the lifeworlds of others, human and nonhuman’ (Kallis, 2019, p. 58).

More-than-human responses

The multispecies justice impacts of the developmental quest are hard to challenge because they can be justified with reference to human wellbeing. Hydroelectric projects

destroy forests, wildlife and communities, but they control flooding, and bring electricity and water to households, industries and farms. Intensive farming severely compromises the lives and deaths of the animals that it uses as well as local and global ecologies, but it provides livelihoods and food. Scientific and medical research similarly exploit other animals in ways that would need trigger warnings to describe, but they promise cures for cancer, dementia and malaria.

For as long as human societies have used animals, ecologies and peoples for such purposes, they have also worried about the ethics of the same – if Descartes came up with his infamous argument that animals are like machines, it is because, as he justifies later on in the same text, it would otherwise be ‘criminal’ to use them as we do (Descartes, 1991). Environmental and animal protection activism and research have been raising questions about development for decades. Yet, not only have those early concerns *not been* adequately addressed, but rather, they have grown in scale and severity (Bennett et al., 2018). The BBC’s *Green Originals* programme captures this when it points out that Greta Thunberg’s chastisement of ‘grown-ups’ for their ecological irresponsibility was eerily similar to the concerns raised by 12-year-old Severn Cullis-Suzuki at the Rio Summit in 1992. In the 30 or so years that have passed, nothing has really changed (‘Severn Cullis-Suzuki’, 2020).

This, I suggest, is because of the trump card of human wellbeing that is deployed as developmentality’s justification. Social, ecological and animal impacts become unfortunate consequences to be managed. Moreover, the response to these impacts tends to replicate and reinforce the logics underlying developmental processes, thereby reproducing their inherent problems. For instance, ‘green’ technologies are offered as solutions to pollution and resource depletion, wherein ‘side-effects’ are tackled even while continuing to engage in those activities that cause the problem in the first place. Even approaches to environmentalism that call for social and behavioural change rarely challenge developmental norms:

. . . the wants fueling a system that destroy the environment remain unquestioned. . . . The problem is that we can’t have it, for reasons that go beyond us, so what we should do is to protect and sustain as much of it as we can possibly have. (Kallis, 2019, p. 59)

Animal welfare similarly is directed at tackling some of the worst ‘side-effects’ of developmental institutions on animals even while continuing to use them (Haynes, 2011). Indeed, the idea of unnecessary suffering that informs animal welfare law and practice in many parts of the world is tied to whether such suffering (of animals) is necessary for the intended human use or not – as opposed to whether such suffering is necessary from the animal’s perspective.

Occasionally, special protections are offered to particular animals (e.g. Great Apes in Spain) or plants (e.g. endangered cacti) or habitats (via protected areas) that act as deterrents to their exploitation. These special protections, however, replicate developmental logics: (a) they work by shoring up the ethico-political status of particular organisms or landscapes, much like developmental logics are focused on shoring up the human; (b) while developmentality rests on ethical exceptionalisms between humankind and the rest of nature, a lot of ecological and animal protection action rests on ethical exceptionalisms – between human and nonhuman life as well as between different nonhuman life-forms.

The domain of biodiversity conservation is replete with ethical exceptionalisms – organisms classified as ‘invasive alien’ are subject to extermination justified by the protection of other more valued organisms, echoing developmental justifications of harm done to vulnerable people and nature in pursuit of a superior human life (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan, 2017). Biodiversity conservation also displays ethical exceptionalisms at different ontological scales – for instance, when individual members of valued species are subject to harms such as captivity, artificial insemination, ranching and hunting in the name of the protection of the species as a whole. Here, the ontological level of species is granted an ethically exceptionalist status, with individuals sacrificed for the sake of the collective (Biermann & Mansfield, 2014).

The domain of animal welfare is equally characterised by ethical exceptionalisms (e.g. rats are attributed less ethical value than primates in laboratory animal welfare protocols) and even between members of the same species in different social locations (e.g. a dog that’s a pet is offered more protections from human-induced harm than a dog in a laboratory). Pet food, whether for adult animals or formula for newborns, is almost always made from other animals, and is a co-product of intensive farming. Vaccinating or treating a dog with antibiotics involves privileging that dog over all the other dogs that have been used to develop and safety test the vaccines and medicine.

In essence, societal responses to the more-than-human crises of our times have implicitly retained the zoöpolitical exceptionalism of developmentality by conceptualising nonhuman wellbeing within and in relation to norms about human wellbeing – through approaches that stay anthropocentric, or by shoring up select nonhuman entities via ‘an enlargement of the elite and a retention of intensification of conceptual strategies of erasure and denial for excluded groups’ (Plumwood, 2002, p. 152). As such, they do not escape the conceptual and material ‘side-effects’ of developmentality: better more-than-human relations are sought via protection that inevitably goes alongside sacrifice (of ‘lesser’ Others).

Protection–sacrifice

On the whole, the twinned logics of protection–sacrifice of the developmental apparatus are co-constitutive with the pursuit of human wellbeing, and also suffuse more-than-human responses. The entrenchment of these logics can be seen in the response to COVID-19.

COVID lockdowns are exemplary developmental measures. They are aimed at protecting humankind from getting infected by a nonhuman threat, and in doing so, have serious negative impacts on vulnerable people by suddenly depriving them of their livelihoods in market economies, rendering them destitute. The social, cultural and livelihood displacement generated by lockdowns has been dealt with similarly to how development-induced displacement is dealt with – through social security measures that barely scratch the surface of the human destitution that has been created (Kalu, 2020; Samaddar, 2021).

While COVID lockdowns are meant to protect everyone, in reality, the health benefits they offer are predominantly restricted to the non-poor – those who have the resources to be ‘distanced’ from others. COVID lockdowns mirror development projects in their inequitable distribution of costs and benefits and have transformed a ‘non-discriminatory’

virus into a ‘disease of the poor’. These impacts have been evident from the beginning, and yet these lockdowns are repeatedly deployed and justified by narratives about safeguarding humanity – just as development justifies itself.

More crucially, the response to COVID has replicated the very same logics and processes that created the conditions of possibility for the infection in the first place. If it is true that the virus has its origins in some animals that are considered wildlife (World Health Organization & China, 2021), and if it is true that people have always cohabited with wildlife, then how is it that we face what is seen as a dangerous (to human society) pandemic? It cannot just be proximal interactions between human society and wildlife, including the consumption of wild animal meat – that is not new.

What has changed are the social conditions under which those interactions take place. These include the farming of domestic animals; the globalised character of human settlements and lifestyles; the transformation of landscapes and their multispecies inhabitants everywhere which has enabled zoonotic transmission and rapid contagion. All of these changed social conditions fall under the umbrella of development.

It is these very same logics of development that the response to COVID reproduces: in the use of sanitisers and disposable personal protective equipment, the exploitation of animals for vaccine production (European Animal Research Association [EARA], 2020), and measures such as lockdowns which have caused immense social displacement. The logics of development have for long justified harm done to marginalised Others, whether human or nonhuman, as necessary in the interests of ‘collective’ progress. This can be seen in the COVID response too.

These years of COVID have been emblematic of the developmental status quo and of the ‘ruins’ of progress. The pandemic has been created by developmental logics and zoöpolitical visions of human wellbeing, but it is more of the same that characterises the response to it. The ‘new normal’ might be the most-used term of recent times, but things have been different only on a very superficial level wherein much of living, for some humans, has been taking place behind computer screens and closed doors – inside mini-fortresses that are serviced by less-privileged human and nonhuman Others. The underlying narrative of human sanctity and ingenuity has not shifted in the slightest, neither has the tacit decision that this can be achieved through the sacrifice of ‘lesser’ Others; on the contrary, they have been reinforced and strengthened, as seen in the hopes, calls and promises of defeating COVID, whether through lockdowns or vaccines. All of these ‘reproduce continually the same elements of failure – including the arrogance and ecological blindness of the dominant culture – even while we seek desperately for solutions within it’ (Plumwood, 2002, p. 6).

Reconfiguring wellbeing and justice

In this article, I have argued the most troubling social and more-than-human concerns of our times are tied to a positive vision of what humans are and how their wellbeing can be achieved at societal scales. The back and forth between doing harm through processes of ‘improvement’ and progress, and trying to undo or mitigate such harm, lies at the root of extreme but highly uneven prosperity, on the one hand, and extreme current and future vulnerability, on the other. Those activities that have ‘caused’ the Anthropocene are

geared towards pursuing a particular vision of human wellbeing – as something that is achieved through separation from and exceeding nature, by becoming more-than-animal. As such, it becomes futile to challenge these activities without changing the vision of humanity they are directed by.

Critical scholarship and action on and in the Anthropocene has devoted much attention to reconfiguring systems of ethics and politics to make space for the more-than-human. But the continued prevalence, and indeed, exacerbation of social, ecological and animal injustices suggest that it not enough to address the negative impacts of developmentality or challenge the ways (e.g. capitalism) in which development is done. Nor is it adequate to shore up the more-than-human or indeed, ‘lesser’ humans, or to make existing ethico-political frameworks more inclusive of nonhuman life. Such reconfiguration remains incomplete without revisiting the human.

Plumwood (2002, pp. 142, 8) makes this point in her call for a ‘reconception of the human self’ [and] a deep and comprehensive restructuring of culture that rethinks and reworks human locations and relations to nature all the way down’. An exciting body of scholarship has taken up this task (e.g. Country et al., 2019; de la Cadena, 2015; Kimmerer, 2013; Kothari et al., 2019). Encompassing scholars, ideas and practices from diverse communities, the overarching tenor has been to explore ‘the ontological politics of radical interdependence’, in particular, examining relational ontologies for better ways of being on Earth (Escobar, 2020, p. xvi). This work has generated rich discussion, including analyses of how some of these ideas (e.g. rights of nature and *buen vivir*) have been co-opted by developmental regimes (Laastad, 2020; Merino, 2016).

A key difficulty in rethinking more-than-human relationships lies in identifying when/ at what point human use of the rest of nature becomes problematic. As Plumwood (2002) argues, more-than-human ethics has been dominated by the (flawed) use/respect dualism where respect and use are seen as mutually incompatible. Earthly living is impossible without using human and nonhuman Others. The challenge is in ensuring that relations of use are also respectful of nonhuman Others (e.g. I may use the services of a plumber, but I am concomitantly respectful of her as a fellow being). Not having a sense for when use becomes exploitation and instrumentalism at individual, societal and planetary scales allows for the co-option of even radical ontologies.

It is here that Plumwood’s (2002, p. 11) emphasis on tackling the ‘human’ end of the human–nature relationship becomes vital: ‘what requires critical philosophical engagement in the context of anthropocentric culture is self rather than others, the limits imposed by the human rather than the nature side of the ethical relationship’. Nearly 20 years later, Kallis (2019) makes a similar point in showing how what environmentalism sees as the ‘limits’ of nature, or ‘planetary boundaries’, is actually tied to the human Self – ecological ‘limits’ make sense only in relation to human intentions and desires. For instance, freshwater scarcity arises in relation to how human societies use and want to use water. To Kallis (2019, p. 60), the focus on external, ecological limits hides that ‘they are ultimately about us and our own wants’.

Both Kallis and Plumwood, in different ways, are advocating for the redirection of more-than-human responses – away from the nonhuman Other, and towards the human Self. Instead of focusing on how to protect nonhuman nature or to what extent nonhuman nature can be used/exploited ‘sustainably’, the emphasis would be on humans and how

they inhabit the planet. Plumwood (2002, p. 2) articulates this in terms of the need to 'situate dominant forms of human society ecologically'. Building on these insights and the article's earlier analyses of dominant concepts of human wellbeing, I suggest that what is needed is the re-placement of humankind in the rest of Earth through the *re-animalisation* of human wellbeing.

From a vision of a good human life premised upon insulation from the vulnerabilities inherent in living on this planet, we need to examine what it means to live as part of nature, as one among other animals. Equally crucial is a fundamental shift in approach to inequities. Instead of addressing social, ecological and animal injustices by 'shoring up' and seeking protections for vulnerable human or nonhuman Others, the focus would be on more equitably distributing the risks of living on this earth so that they are not borne primarily by marginal people and nature.

Re-animalising the human

How might we approach this task? We might start by asking what it means to live as part of nature, as animals. Given that other animals inhabit Earth without causing the kind of devastation (some) humankind does, this could offer a way of understanding the difference between respectful use and exploitation. As I explain below, re-animalising the human entails overturning some of our most basic ideas of what (human) wellbeing is.

In these times, the idea that humankind is ontologically a part of nature is widely accepted (Mansfield & Doyle, 2017). And yet, most scholarly and public discourse retains zoöpolitically exceptionalist visions of human wellbeing. It remains unimaginable that humans should live like other animals: with shorter life-spans perhaps, and unsupported by the infrastructures of agriculture, medicine and engineering that currently insulate many people from the vulnerabilities that are inherent to being a part of nature, including being killed by other animals. So while on the one hand there is awareness and acceptance of the idea that humankind is part of nature, this coexists with the assumption that human life and wellbeing are and ought to be more important than, and therefore different to, the rest of nature.

On a practical, everyday level, what would it look like to reject exceptionalist visions of the human and re-place people *as* animals? It might mean that I stop using flea medication on my cat. It might mean that I stop benefiting from all those animal lives that have been sacrificed at the altar of biomedicine. It might mean that I learn to cohabit with rats, tigers, elephants, cockroaches, gulls, wolves and pigeons instead of expecting far-off rural communities in India or Zimbabwe to protect wildlife. It might mean that a person being killed by an elephant or a virus is seen as no worse than a person being killed by a car or a hen being killed by a person. It might mean that I live with risks, inconveniences and mortal threats that I am accustomed to seeing only in the lives of more vulnerable human and nonhuman Others. Crucially, it might mean that I stop viewing human life as somehow more *not killable* than other animal life (Derrida, 2008).

To be 'killable' is to be in a social location where one can be killed without sanction. Killability refers to social status, and not the material act of being killed (one can be *not killable* and yet be killed). The killability of animals, i.e. the fact that they can, in general, be killed (whether intentionally, unintentionally, or as collateral damage) without it being

considered ‘criminal’ has been the subject of contemplation (Schrader et al., 2017). By contrast, humans are not killable – if they are killed, then the act of killing is, in general, subject to investigation, and often sanction. Much of the more-than-human turn has been focused on challenging the killability of animals. The approach of re-animalisation turns this on the head, to instead dismantle the special status of humankind as ‘*not killable*’.

Take, for instance, the basic life activity of feeding. While the ways in which human societies have institutionalised the breeding, rearing and killing of animals for food have received critical attention, the assumption that humans are not and ought not to be food for other animals has remained mostly unquestioned. After her encounter with a crocodile, Plumwood (2012, p. 91) writes about the revelation that she could be, and almost was, crocodile food, identifying this as a crucial moment for ethical contemplation: ‘human exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten’.

The non-killability of humankind is such a deeply entrenched norm that the idea that people can be food is almost unthinkable. For instance, the term ‘man-eater’ that is applied to wild animals that kill and eat humans signals the zoöpolitically exceptionalist idea that it is not normal for people to be food for animals. Wildlife histories and presents are full of narratives about and investigations on *why* particular individual animals become man-eaters – they are old; they are injured; they have been forced out of the forest into ‘human’ habitations (Baynes-Rock & Thomas, 2017; Masurkar, 2021). ‘Man-eaters’, and those who are mistaken for them, are systematically hunted down and killed or put into captivity, even if bestowed with conservation ‘protections’. That some animals may feed on humans just like they feed on other animals is outside the realm of acceptability. The search for some special reason why an animal may kill and eat a human, and its subsequent extermination, are premised on the assumption there is something uniquely intolerable and abnormal about people being killed for animal food.

Re-animalisation would entail dismantling this assumption and the zoöpolitical exceptionalism that underpins it. If humans can kill and eat other animals, then the reverse should be an integral part of more-than-human relations. Re-animalisation goes beyond decisions to dedicate one’s bodily wastes or body after death for permaculture; it is not just about becoming food after excretion or death, but about being *killable* for food. And food for not just charismatic large animals, but also for the many miniscule creatures, pests or pathogens, for example, that feed or live off humans, at times injuring or killing them (humans) in the process.

The non-killability of humans produces societal responses of management and extermination of other life-forms, big or small, that use humans for food – and even those who eat what is considered human food (e.g. ‘crop-raiders’, agricultural ‘pests’) (Beisel, 2010; Buller, 2008; Dempsey, 2010). Re-animalisation would mean eschewing such responses that seek to eradicate or otherwise manipulate entire species or populations because they feed on humans, and instead learn to live as one among other animals. Any act of self-protection would remain at the level of the individual or family and the immediate (like seen in other animals), without the arsenal of technoscience – and not at societal, institutionalised and long-term scales. Navigating the realities of *also being food* might well offer clearer understandings of the precarious balance between respectful use and exploitation.

Redistributing earthly risks

Dismantling the taken-for-granted non-killability of humankind will generate fresh questions of equity. Non-killability manifests with variation across lines of socio-economic privilege. The developmental response to this is to enhance the non-killability of those who are socially marginalised, usually by emphasising their ‘human-ness’. Dominant notions of humanity and human wellbeing require inequities *within* humanity to be addressed by bringing zoöpolitically exceptionalist norms of human wellbeing to everyone everywhere. They require the ‘upliftment’ of those who are *less* insulated from nature to meet the standards of those who are *more* insulated.

Re-animalisation would entail inverting this approach to inequities and injustices. It would be focused on re-locating within nature those humans who lead the most insulated lives. Instead of displacing marginal people in trying to ‘uplift’ them, the goal would be to learn their everyday practices (intentional and incidental) to live gently and tread lightly on the planet. Instead of tackling social inequities through practices of ‘improvement’ that cause socio-ecological and animal injustices, the task would be to redistribute the dangers that are inherent to life on Earth so that they are equally borne by all those, human and nonhuman, that inhabit the planet.

The degrowth movement in some ways tries to do this by focusing on the economies and lifestyles of the ‘developed’, instead of trying to ‘develop’ the poor (Demaria et al., 2013). Re-animalisation pushes these ideas further and deeper to disturb the zoöpolitical exceptionalism that supports mainstream human lives by redistributing the risks of earthly living instead of expanding the reach of more-than-animal norms. The material and conceptual onus for this shift in approach would lie with the non-poor, those who lead lives of privilege and insulation. The initial inspiration and lessons for how to live more in tune with the rest of Earth would be taken not from distanced romanticised Others, but from spatially proximate marginalised human and nonhuman neighbours and co-dwellers (e.g. Lynch, 2019). Thus, when it comes to rethinking humans as *also food*, the emphasis will not be on tigers and villagers in Central India, but on the urban elite, bedbugs and mosquitoes in New York City and Mumbai.

These are difficult thought experiments, for they are very far from how we have been schooled to think about ourselves and the other beings that share our species identity. They are even far removed from how we engage with preferred nonhuman Others. Yet, as Kallis (2019, p. 101) argues, social and political change would remain impossible ‘if we begin with the premise that they are not [possible]’ (p. 101). If developmental aspirations of material insulation from nature have been achieved in some form or the other, there is no reason why re-animalisation should remain in the realm of the ‘unthinkable’, and why it should not become ‘a credible alternative to what exists, and the credible to the achievable’ (Escobar, 2020, p. 131).

Conclusion

I will conclude with a set of issues for further conceptual and empirical enquiry. The very idea of re-animalisation is bound to generate problems given the material and political force that the idea of dehumanisation has. For one, the negative coding of the ‘animal’

and the concomitant privileging of the ‘human’ mean that the idea of ‘animalisation’ is seen as deeply problematic, as is the suggestion that nonhuman nature and animals can be guides for how human society ought to inhabit Earth. The task then is to show that *becoming and being animal* can be an achievement and not inevitably a demotion of ethico-political status. One aspect of this would be to develop grammars to denounce and combat the material processes associated with ‘dehumanisation’ without resorting to negative references to ‘being animal or animalised’, i.e. without being zoöpolitically exceptionalist. It surely is possible to challenge incarceration or torture in and of itself, regardless of who (human or animal) is subject to the same. Another aspect would be to frame narratives and strategies that shift societal imaginations: from the focus on ‘shoring up’ human and nonhuman lives at the expense of others, to relearning how to be vulnerable and to live as one among many forms of life on Earth. Instead of ‘protecting’ biodiversity or animals or ‘developing’ people by sacrificing spatio-temporally or ethically distant Others, more-than-human and social initiatives would concentrate on reconfiguring human lives in ways that are more exposed to and accepting of the risks of earthly living. At the same time, they would highlight how ‘animalised’ ways of inhabiting Earth can contribute new dimensions to wellbeing. For instance, this can involve exploring and articulating a sense of connectedness where one’s wellbeing is tied to the wellbeing of others, human and nonhuman.

Crucially, re-animalisation needs to be carried out with attention to social justice. This entails the redistribution of the risks of living on the planet as a means of addressing social and more-than-human inequities. At the most basic level, this involves divesting the privileged (humans) of their multifarious layers of insulation (from nonhuman nature) as a way of approaching justice. This, obviously, is not easily done, which is where narratives that recode *being animal* as positive become necessary. These are tasks that are simultaneously ontological, epistemological and ethical, and are tasks that are vital for constructing pathways to multispecies justice in a world ruined by progress.

Funding

The research and writing for this paper were supported by the Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Sabbatical Research Grant (grant number 65100).

References

- Bauer, A. M., & Bhan, M. (2016). Welfare and the politics and the historicity of the Anthropocene. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(1), 61–87.
- Baynes-Rock, M., & Thomas, E. (2017). We are not equals: Socio-cognitive dimensions of lion/human relationships. *Animal Studies Journal*, 6(1), 104–128.
- Beisel, U. (2010). Jumping hurdles with mosquitoes? *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28, 46–49.
- Bennett, C., Thomas, R., Williams, M., Zalasiewicz, J., Edgeworth, M., Miller, H., Coles, B., Burton, E. J., & Marume, U. (2018). The broiler chicken as a signal of a human reconfigured biosphere. *Royal Society*, 5(12). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.180325>
- Bhuyan, A. (2021, January 14). How Covaxin trial participants in Bhopal were misled. *The Wire*. <https://science.thewire.in/health/peoples-hospital-bhopal-covaxin-clinical-trials-exploitation-ethics-ground-report/>

- Biermann, C., & Mansfield, B. (2014). Biodiversity, purity, and death: Conservation biology as biopolitics. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 32(2), 257–273.
- Buller, H. (2008). Safe from the wolf: Biosecurity, biodiversity, and competing philosophies of nature. *Environment and Planning A*, 40, 1583–1597.
- Celermajer, D., Chatterjee, S., Cochrane, A., Fishel, S., Neimanis, A., O'Brien, A., Reid, S., Srinivasan, K., Schlosberg, D., & Waldow, A. (2020). Justice through a multispecies lens. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 19, 475–512. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00386-5>
- Country, B., Suchet-Pearson, S., Wright, S., Lloyd, K., Tofa, M., Sweeney, J., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., & Maymuru, D. (2019). Goṅ Gurtha: Enacting response-abilities as situated co-becoming. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37(4), 682–702. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818799749>
- de la Cadena, M. (2015). *Earth beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Demaria, F., Schneider, F., Sekulova, F., & Martinez-Alier, J. (2013). What is degrowth? From an activist slogan to a social movement. *Environmental Values*, 22, 191–215.
- Dempsey, J. (2010). Tracking grizzly bears in British Columbia's environmental politics. *Environment and Planning A*, 42, 1138–1156.
- Derrida, J. (2008). *The animal that therefore I am*. Fordham University Press.
- Descartes, R. (1991). *The philosophical writings of Descartes: Volume III: The correspondence* (J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, & A. Kenny, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Emel, J., & Neo, H. (2015). *Political ecologies of meat*. Routledge.
- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Escobar, A. (2020). *Pluriversal politics: The real and the possible*. Duke University Press.
- European Animal Research Association. (2020). *How animals are helping in COVID-19 research: A global overview*. www.eara.eu/post/how-animals-are-helping-in-covid-19-research-a-global-overview
- Harvey, D. (2014). *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism*. Profile Books.
- Haynes, R. P. (2011). Competing conceptions of animal welfare and their ethical implications for the treatment of non-human animals. *Acta Biotheoretica*, 59, 105–120.
- Kallis, G. (2019). *Limits: Why Malthus was wrong and why environmentalists should care*. Stanford Briefs, an imprint of Stanford University Press.
- Kalu, B. (2020). COVID-19 in Nigeria: A disease of hunger. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 8(6), 556–557. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30220-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30220-4)
- Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (1st ed.). Milkweed Editions.
- Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F., & Acosta, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Pluriverse: A post-development dictionary*. Tulika Books and Authorsupfront.
- Laastad, S. (2020). Nature as a subject of rights? National discourses on Ecuador's constitutional rights of nature. *Forum for Development Studies*, 47(3), 401–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2019.1654544>
- Li, T. M. (2007). *The will to improve: Governmentality, development and the practice of politics*. Duke University Press.
- Lynch, H. (2019). Esposito's affirmative biopolitics in multispecies homes. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 22(3), 364–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018804156>
- Mansfield, B., & Doyle, M. (2017). Nature: A conversation in three parts. Special forum on intra-disciplinarity. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 107(1), 22–27.
- Masurkar, A. (2021). *Sherni* [Drama]. Amazon Prime Video.
- McMichael, P. (2012). *Development and social change: A global perspective*. Sage.

- Merino, R. (2016). An alternative to 'alternative development'? Buen vivir and human development in Andean countries. *Oxford Development Studies*, 44(3), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2016.1144733>
- Moore, J. W. (2017). The Capitalocene, Part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 594–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>
- Peggs, K. (2020). Animal rights movement. In C. Rojek & G. Ritzer (Eds.), *Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*. Blackwell.
- Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.
- Plumwood, V. (2012). *Eye of the crocodile*. L. Shannon, Ed. Australian National University Press.
- Samaddar, R. (2021). *A pandemic and the politics of life*. Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women.
- Schlosberg, D., & Craven, L. (2019). *Sustainable materialism: Environmental movements and the politics of everyday life*. Oxford University Press.
- Schrader, A., Johnson, E., Buller, H., Robinson, D., Rundle, S., Sagan, D., Schmitt, S., & Spicer, J. (2017). Considering killability: Experiments in unsettling life and death. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 3(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.28968/cft.v3i2.28849>
- Scott, J. (2017). *Against the grain: A deep history of the earliest states*. Yale University Press.
- Severn Cullis-Suzuki. (2020, January 24). *Green originals*. BBC. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000df4k
- Shrivastava, A., & Kothari, A. (2012). *Churning the earth: The making of global India*. Viking.
- Srinivasan, K., & Kasturirangan, R. (2016). Political ecology, development and human exceptionalism. *Geoforum*, 75, 125–128.
- Srinivasan, K., & Kasturirangan, R. (2017). Violent love: Conservation and invasive alien species. In J. Maher, H. Pierpoint, & P. Beirne (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of animal abuse studies* (pp. 433–452). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weis, T. (2007). *The global food economy: The battle for the future of farming*. Zed Books.
- World Health Organization & China. (2021). *WHO-convened global study of origins of SARS-CoV-2: China part*. www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-convened-global-study-of-origins-of-sars-cov-2-china-part

Author biography

Krithika Srinivasan works as Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Edinburgh. Her research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of political ecology, human–animal studies, and post-development politics. Her work draws on research in South Asia to rethink globally established concepts and practices about nature–society relations. Through empirical projects on street dogs and public health, biodiversity conservation, animal-based food systems and non-elite environmentalisms, her scholarship has focused on reconfiguring approaches to multispecies justice. Krithika's research and teaching are deeply rooted in long-term field engagement and praxis in India.