

# Coronavirus, Democracy and the Challenges of Engaging a Planetary Order

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**Abstract:** As the challenges presented by the coronavirus are being processed within national communities and the international order, important new avenues for re-thinking democratic theory and practice present themselves. This short article discusses the potential implications of a shift toward planetary politics whereby we engage not only human communities but also non-human ones in our thinking and practice of democracy. New opportunities to rethink “international order” and how we negotiate with ecosystems are presented by opening up (rather than closing down) our political imaginations in the context of the coronavirus challenge.

**Keywords:** coronavirus, covid, democracy, liberal world order, planetary politics, posthumanism

There is much speculation, rightly, about the future of liberal democracies, and democracy as such, in the context of the emergence of the coronavirus challenge. Are liberal democracies able to take effective action in the face of such a crisis? Is action timely and effective enough? Are liberal societies willing to sacrifice economic well-being for the sake of collective self-defense?

What is the future of liberal world order in this context? Already considered in trouble, the crisis of liberal world order, and liberal democracy at the heart of it, may have been hastened. Many liberal states are floundering economically and struggling also to cooperate with each other internationally. Why, then, should liberal democracy be “promoted” internationally as an ideal system of governance? Has the coronavirus caused the collapse of the last vestiges of liberal democratic world order, and its “projects” such as democracy promotion? And what is the future of global order and liberal representative democracy in it?

In this short article I wish to suggest that some important new options for how to think about “global order” and “democracy” emerge



in the context of the coronavirus challenge; options that have been explored in some quarters of the global body politik, and in some academic literatures, but which have remained on the sidelines of social and political science scholarship pre-coronavirus. I will suggest that in the current predicament it is useful to think more carefully on how we might engage a more “post-human”<sup>1</sup> and “planetary order” (as opposed to continuing to advance an unchanged “liberal world order”).

In this planetary context, we may come to see democracy and “the human” as embedded in complex ecological systems and thus can engage more carefully not only with human polities and their relations with each other but with the complex entanglements of human communities with non-human actors across species lines. In this context promotion of democracy too must be something quite different from how it was once conceived. Certainly, it is not about advancing liberal representative democracy as we once knew it; democratic thought and practice should be about new ways of conceiving of democratic practices and new ways of thinking on representation, perhaps beyond the human communities too.

I proceed in three steps. First, I lay out the challenge to international order and suggest that deeper challenges are revealed by the coronavirus situation than is realized in much of contemporary public debate. Second, I briefly discuss the posthumanist literatures in the social sciences and humanities that have pointed toward new ways to think about democracy in the Anthropocene. Finally, I suggest some angles for us to think on further as we seek to develop more productive understandings of how to reconfigure politics in the current situation.

## **International Order and Democracy in Trouble?**

In the rampant public debates on the COVID-19 situation, one possible starting gambit is that the “liberal order,” or, at least, the neoliberal order with its agenda of austerity are, in part, to blame for the current predicament. On the one hand, it seems that the globalized system of trade underpinning the liberal order enabled not only the spread of the virus across borders but also that its very condition of possibility, the willful maltreatment of non-human life, enabled the jumping across species of such a virus. On the other, it can be suggested that the core mechanisms of a liberal order are at issue: international institutions for example have failed to generate fruitful responses, not least because states are unwilling to allocate adequate power to tackle the issues at hand (for discussions see for example Pickering and Trivedi 2020). As for liberal democracy: the

COVID-19 challenge has exposed the disfunctions and inequalities that liberal democracies, especially neoliberal democracies such as the United States, can harbor.

What is intriguing for me is not that such fairly classical(ly left) critiques of the liberal order abound. Instead what I find interesting in the current debates is that the discussion implies that the “order” and how it is “managed” is “up to us” – up to social and political institutions or up to their “critics” – up to human populations – now to reconfigure. Whether return to social democracy or a revival of cosmopolitan structures is called for, there is an emphasis for “us” to “think again” the global order we hoisted upon the world and the failing democratic systems that we have facilitated.

But what if it is not “up to us” and, indeed, who is this “us”? And what if coronaviruses are also actors in the global order? What if a renegotiation of both the human and the role of the non-humans in political orders is needed?

For me, more important today than a critique of the liberal order is the challenge of realizing that there may be an important foundational problem that underpins the liberal order, and indeed most conceptions of democracy. We treat institutions and democracy itself as exclusively *human* social or political orders without thinking on how “human” orders are made and managed and who benefits from them and not. In the classical humanist political imagination democracy is a negotiation between (equal) humans to manage “their” affairs and of course also their “context” or “environment” (material, physical, biological, etc.).

But interestingly, this precisely is what is at issue in the coronavirus negotiations. We cannot manage the virus as if it were merely inert “environment”: it is not simply “there,” passive; it is actively negotiating with our interventions. In this context, we cannot think of ourselves as “lifted” off the planetary relations with viruses, ecosystems, and climatic structures: “we” too are made in the messy interaction of the humans and the animal and the climatic and the viral. And we are forced to think how abstract constructions of equal humanity have systematically left others behind and treated them as less than fully human.

To open up such questions, arguably, causes some discomfort to (many) of “us,” which is why we want to fit the coronavirus in a box that feels more comfortable. The most comfortable and readily available box currently seems to be the “enemy” box. This is why many leaders have called for us to “make war” on the virus, to “kill it,” to “suppress” it; undo its dangerous sense of “power” over “us” (for discussion see for example Musu 2020). We are to be in control. We must manage. We must kill. We must dominate.

But “we” cannot kill the virus. “We” cannot easily achieve the “victory” we so desperately seek. The limits of our power are for us to see. And we see also the cracks in the “we”. It is scary.

And yet just because we are scared by the surprising fragility of our social and political order, we also cannot ignore the virus: we must learn to live with it. And this, as we are learning, changes how we metabolize the world, oil, food, social systems, transport. Our social and political systems are neither sealed off from nature, nor are they non-natural. Nature and the social are wrapped in each other: we are faced with “social nature” (Burke et al. 2016).

To grapple with this condition, important literatures on the Anthropocene, posthumanism, ecologism, and complex systems theory have been for some years trying to “help” the humans to rethink their condition in open systems. Below I suggest they also help us start to rethink democracy and possibly the (alternative) futures of a “less-exclusively international” and “less-totalistically global” planetary order.

## Entangled in Complex Systems

Anna Tsing (2016) argues that a fundamental weakness of current thinking across the social sciences is the inability to think of ourselves as “collaborating with,” as embedded in, relations with non-humans. Donna Haraway (2016) suggests to us that we are made in a kind of a symbiosis with “others”; “we” always process with “others,” so much so that we do not have clear lines around us, “we” are porously made in relations. Timothy Morton (2010) suggests we exist in a “mesh” of multiple relations, all at once.

All these authors suggest that whether capitalism or the state, “social orders” function in negotiations with fungi, trees, trucks, and financial algorithms, not just “between human actors.” Indeed, what we call “humans” themselves are made in relation to non-humans. In other words, humans are already “more than human”; that is, made by solar energy, bacteria, and in symbiosis with technologies. And, these scholars point out, humanity as an abstract universal category is also historically constructed and contemporarily too constructed in complex negotiation with concrete beings: not all humans experience or advance the same ways of being human.

The literatures on the Anthropocene and posthumanism have made a considerable impact on the social sciences in the last two decades. From sociology and anthropology to philosophy and international relations, these approaches have pushed for a more critical engagement with

humanism and the making of humans and non-humans in relation to each other.

Yet, writers associated with this literature have been on occasion challenged for not considering questions of democracy directly. Chandler et al. (2017), for example, recently challenged the “Planet Politics Manifesto” in the study of international relations for defending a kind of tyrannical politics where an amorphous “planet” does the “talking” for us.

Yet, others have sought to directly rethink how we conceive of democracy in more “post-human” ways: how we compose the constituencies—in Bruno Latour’s language—that matter for democratic and political negotiations. For Latour (2004), the challenge has been to think and practice politics in the absence of the House of Nature and House of Politics division. He puts forward the idea of a Parliament of Things (1993: an initially theoretical notion that nevertheless has been put into practice in concrete politics, for example in the Assembly of the North Sea, a concrete political community gathering together humans and non-humans, scientists, and artists (Parliament of Things 2020). On the other hand, Robyn Eckersley (2017), a leading theorist of green democracy, has put forward a geopolitical democracy. Within this framework we can shift the temporal and geographical parameters within which democratic communities are gathered. Liberated from specific human-centric timelines, concern for and within ecological forces are enabled in our political frames.

Each of these new orientations differs in how they approach questions of species-ism, representation, power relations, or the limits of human and non-human actors. That is, the democratic theorists exploring new Anthropocentric ways of thinking about democracy do not necessarily see eye to eye on what a democracy might look like.

Yet, I want to suggest that considering them (and others) raises at least three important kinds of challenge for democratic theory, and in particular for liberal democratic theory, which it will be productive to reflect upon in the context of the coronavirus.

1. *Representation and “subjects.”* Classical approaches to liberal democracy assume an “I” (an actor) and they assume a “we” (a collective body). But if in a posthuman “mesh” we are “together,” porously assembled, do we have representation or subjects in anything like the sense we used to have? Do we instead represent assemblages of actors “gathered” in (sometimes) overlapping constellations? What is democracy when it has no clear-cut “subjects” (“selves” to represent) or a clear-cut community to gather/direct?
2. *Rationality, affect, silence.* Classical approaches to democracy—liberal or otherwise—assume that rationality has a role in organizing if not individual minds, the constitution of the order. But the idea of rationality of a human

organizer lifted off the “stupid” planet is itself a production of a particular kind of humanism. What is it then to represent experience, affect, silence, situatedness in assemblages, rather than an “interest”? How does the aim of representation and modes of it change – for “humans” and non-humans? Does art represent democratically, and science, and collective forms of living, or silence?

3. *Democracy in a pluriverse.* Anthropocene authors show an interest in thinking through the “ontological turn.” If the world consists of multiple (overlapping?) worlds – rather than “one world” – how do worlds speak to each other? How do we do politics in the “pluriverse” (Querejazu 2016), rather than assuming a “one-world” world within which representation can take place?

Answers to such questions are not straightforward, and stretch our capacities to think and act (as “humans”) in important ways. But crucially, if nothing else, they cause us to pause, to think, to reframe.

Indeed, if anything, the coronavirus situation brings home the need to think of democracy as a dynamic notion, not to be fixed in its meaning. If democracy promotion has been criticized for selling too fixed a “product” (see for example Bridoux and Kurki 2014), today’s crisis calls out for us to let go of “owning” democracy. Democracy is not an object, and it is not even “ours.”

This means also that the future of international order cannot look how democracy promoters once imagined it: a playground for liberal states to pass on their values. Instead a posthuman planetary politics bursts the bubble of a “global” universal order and calls for more situated, less humanist, ways of re-imagining politics. This re-imagining does not respect states, or the “international,” but sees them as partly complicit in the humanist “project” of control over democratic constituencies and possible planetary modes of negotiation (Kurki, 2020). The challenge is to take seriously both the old order – its persistence and its stultifying effects on political action – and at the same time to imagine new ways forward beyond the current order (Kurki 2020).

## Challenges

The questions facing societies, their ecologies, and the political interactions on the planet will be challenging in the coming years. Yet these questions are not surprising as such: the coronavirus has brought to the table questions that have for a long time concerned post- and critical-humanist thinkers. We must now take on important but difficult new questions, in both democratic theory and practice; questions that also

speak to how the crisis of the “liberal world order” might be reconfigured through notions such as planet(ary) politics.

The challenge ahead for democratic theorists and practitioners then is not *just* to rethink social democracy and to invest in, for example, national health services. It is not to figure out new ways of promoting classical models of democracy. And it is not just to revive a more capacious international order as classically conceived. It is to see how our societies metabolize the world beyond the human and it is to think through relationalities and representations within that. And it is to do planetary politics and planetary democracy where we seriously allow porosities of relationalities to converse, to intersect. Where this will take us is unclear, but in the current world, which is more open (because it has to be) to dealing with uncertainty, more open (because it has to be) to non-human actors, more open (because it has to be) to thinking beyond existing modalities of politics, new ways of opening up democracy, perhaps even liberal representative democracy, and indeed world order are made possible. What was once unthinkable is now thinkable, perhaps even imminently necessary to think.

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## NOTE

1. Posthuman does not here mean “past” or “beyond” the human but designates lines of thought interested in how the human and the non-human are constructed.

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