

Bozalek, V., & Pease, B. (Eds.) (2020). *Post-Anthropocentric Social Work. Critical Posthuman and New Materialist Perspectives*. London/New York: Taylor & Francis.

This collection of papers is guided by the question in Glenn Woods and Dorothee Hölscher's chapter, 'Should humans be social work's only, or even its most important, concern?' The volume was written largely before the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was felt, but takes this and the looming ecological crisis, racism and violence against women as points of departure to establish a new, post-humanist ontology (or 'alterontology') of social work. The topicality of these issues must be evident to everybody; they are simply calling out for social workers to address them. The question is, however, how and in what direction the perspective of social work practice and teaching can be shifted to best tackle these concerns. The approach taken in the book is to 'disrupt and develop alternatives to social work's status quo' (Woods & Hölscher, 121) and to challenge social workers to expand their professional concerns to cover the interconnected, material 'earth as a whole'. This is a tall order indeed, and the authors at times find it difficult to draw up an exhaustive list of issues that could define this agenda. Examples include 'the environmental politics on women's health, poverty, food security, forestry, urban ecology, indigenous peoples and environments, technology, the feminist connections to animal rights, femicide and infanticide, work, play, philosophy and spirituality, as well as ecological sustainability and feminist environmental justice' (p. 98). The Covid-19 pandemic is a timely reminder of how the exploitative colonial approach to nature that characterises modernity has placed humans in opposition to nature and made them forget they are part of it.

For these authors, social work's current conceptual basis is a product of the Anthropocene and was infused by the Enlightenment paradigm of the 'ideal human, often represented as a white, prime-aged, able-bodied, heterosexual and economically independent male, [who] is seen to relate to everyone and everything else along the lines of reason, rationality and progress' (p. 121). There are references in every chapter to the hegemonial impact that humanism with its 'grandiose and aggressive universalism'

(Braidotti, 2013) had on 'classical' theories of social work which, according to the authors, privilege rationality over emotions, culture over nature, males over females and whites over blacks, and which have disseminated globally through colonialism and latterly enforced by neoliberalism and its cult of individualism. The authors instead propose an agenda for social work that goes beyond the social and political goals of the Global Agenda for Social Work agreed by the IASSW and IFSW (2014); an agenda intended to drive a politically committed form of social work oriented towards social justice. They call for the non-human world to be included in this 'agonic' agenda infused by 'critical posthumanism, new materialism, ecofeminism, affect theory, quantum physics and indigenous knowledges', which all the authors uniformly take as their conceptual reference points, without in any way discussing these premises critically.

All chapters reference works by writers such as Braidotti (2018), Barad (2007, 2014) or Haraway (2016), with frequent repetitions of their 'disruptive' concepts that in turn go back as far as Spinoza and were more recently taken up by Deleuze and Esposito. The authors they quote pursue their cause by coining some startling neologisms. Terms such as 'entanglement' and 'enmeshment' (going beyond mere 'relationships'), 'assemblages' (and not just arrangements), 'hauntology' (the presence of the ghosts of the past), 'temporal diffraction' and 'spacetime-mattering' (referring to an all-encompassing, non-differing presence) all aim at the elimination of a 'subject', to overcome the dualism inherent in a 'traditional' view of the world where a subject observes or perceives 'others' (living or inanimate). With the cancelling out of all dualisms and 'relational ontologies', the idea of a 'unitary subject' is radically decentred and everything becomes fluid, porous, hybrid, processual and impossible to pin down by using definitions. For the quoted authors, the subject is substituted by a continuous 'becoming' that implies knowing and doing inseparably. Matter itself, as Barad (2007, p.°151) puts it, is therefore 'not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency'. Our way of relating to matter, including our own, must therefore not be guided by reasoning but by 'affect' in the sense of Spinoza's participatory openness aimed at releasing potentialities.

Part I: Philosophical foundations

Equipped with these tools, in the first section the authors tackle the philosophical foundations of post-anthropocentric social work in 5 chapters. In the first chapter, Stephen Webb asks 'What comes after the subject?' and answers that question by proposing a 'critical posthumanist social work'

which can encourage 'degrowth societies' by shifting the focus away from the human world and practising 'agential realism'. Webb quotes Bennett (2009) who states that 'if human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) "public" coalescing around a problem' (Bennett, 2009, p.°108). This somewhat cryptic quote sets the tone for the entire book as it releases social workers from any form of intentionality and invites them to be guided by the awareness of their constitutional enmeshment with matter in every form. Webb illustrates the application of this perspective briefly with cases of domestic violence where (good) social workers are already aware that such occurrences are always a combination of material, social and discursive processes that represent the embodiment of gendered relations. This begs the question of why a new ontology is therefore necessary.

Chapter 3, by Tina E. Wilson, 'An invitation into the trouble with humanism for social work', compares the central tenets of 'modernity and humanism' and of 'postmodernity and anti-humanism' with those of 'post-anthropocentrism'. Going beyond postmodern 'deconstruction' fosters creativity, vitality, but also 'the uncanny' and 'speculation'. Wilson wants social workers to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) rather than striving for certainty and taking on the responsibility for solutions. Consequently, she advocates that social work education should become interdisciplinary and even include natural science subjects like physics.

Jacques Boulet postulates that 'Restorative and regenerative relational praxis must include the non-human' in view of the rationality-induced predatory destruction of the living planet committed by humans. He advocates a radical change towards exercising 'sensibility', i. e. relating to the world through the senses. Boulet finds that this can lead to 'regenerative practice' in social work and that "caring" renders our regenerative efforts sustainable as we move "beyond" the sole consideration of the human(s) we professionally work with' (p.°47). He believes that environmental considerations, as put forward by proponents of 'green social work' (Dominelli, 2012; Noble, 2016; see the overview by Krings et al., 2018) must be the sole focus of the profession's commitment to 'the common (good)' through 'practices of imagination, resistance, revolt, repair, and mourning, and of living and dying well' (Haraway, 2016, p.°51). Can the actions of social work really reflect all that?

In Chapter 5, Karen Bell even proposes ‘A philosophy of social work beyond the anthropocene’ in the interest of a ‘holistic transformation’. Post-humanist philosophy attacks the previous patriarchal ontology that ‘is foundational to gendered, disembodied, individualised forms of knowledge’ and operates instead with ‘relational ontologies of interconnectedness, interdependence and embodiment’ (p.°59). This promises to re-found social work as a ‘supra-discipline with a relational epistemic core, along with discursive, co-constructive and dialogic methodologies, affirmative ethics and material grounding’ (p.°61). These ethics are to be grounded in love (bell hooks, 2000) as ‘a political and spiritual foundation to sustain radical liberation’ which in turn is then expected to create ‘a dynamic interrelationship between all living and non-living things as they interact in sympoiesis as collectively productive forces’ (p.°64). It is at this point that a social worker begins to wonder whether this philosophy will ever connect with the everyday reality of work.

In Chapter 6, entitled ‘Feeling the ‘weight of the body’: Posthumanism and deliberalising social work’, John Fox criticises the ‘communicative turn’ in the humanist version of social work with its mind/body dichotomy. Against that, posthumanism proclaims that ‘matter matters’ because ‘life is ... the adaptation ... to the exigencies of matter’ (Grosz, cited in Hodder, 2012). The dichotomy is replaced with ‘configurations’, ‘ensembles’, ‘congealments’, ‘entanglements’ which emphasise the indeterminacy and ultimately insecurity of something that cannot even be called an individual any longer, as this term already implies a separation. All certainties are stripped away and it is the vulnerability of ‘existing (...) in communion with others’, of which bodily pains and aches are a constant ‘wit(h)ness’ (Ettinger, 2001), which characterises the radius of social workers’ actions. Discomfort indeed describes the situation of many social workers – the only question is: Do these references to its material origins offer any comfort? Can everything be left so fluid, to defend social workers against having to constantly achieve measurable results?

Part II: Theoretical and methodological approaches to doing post-Anthropocentric social work

Here, Vivienne Bozalek proposes ‘Slow Social Work’ and foregrounds attentiveness, responsiveness, response-ability, responsibility, curiosity, trust and rendering each other capable’ – all resulting from social workers breaking out of the market-oriented rat race of achievements. A ‘diffractive methodology’ replaces reflexivity and presumably results directly from the

‘slowness’ that the author finds everywhere: in food, archaeology, art, geography, journalism, information science, medical and nursing education, philosophy and sociology – social work cannot be left out! Quoting Ad-dam’s Hull House as a prototype for slowness on account of the founder’s ‘feminist and socialist sensibilities and a commitment to social justice, that apparently included environmental justice (for which no evidence is provided) is pure vagueness, justified by Truman and Springgay with their argument (2016, p.°259), ‘propositions do not give information as to how they function in concrete instances but gesture to how they could potentialize’. But is it sufficient to build social work methodology on ‘rendering each other capable’, ‘because we come into being through a multiplicity of forces’ (p. 88)? And is it really ‘transformative’ for social workers to ‘enable collective responsiveness’, ‘explore creatively’, ‘making new thoughts and feelings possible’, ‘enact curiosity’ and ‘ask the right questions politely’ by ‘foregrounding process rather than product’? What have they been doing so far?

Carolyn Noble defines a clear agenda in Chapter 8, moving social work beyond ‘ecofeminism to adopt feminist materialism’. Feminist materialism is concerned with liberating the whole non-human sphere from oppression. Does this imply essentialism when she quotes Braidotti: ‘being a woman is always already there as the ontological precondition for my existential becoming as a subject’ (1994, p.°187) on account of menstruation and childbirth? Noble concludes ‘that social work practice, values and ethics, policy and research need to place environmental ecosystems above economic and social goals’ (p.°103). This sparks curiosity as to how social workers (particularly men) can ever fulfil such a huge task while dealing with cases of poverty, child neglect or domestic violence.

In Chapter 9, entitled ‘Fostering non-anthropocentric vulnerability in men – Challenging the autonomous masculine subject in social work’. Bob Pease argues that men must relinquish their claim to autonomy and acknowledge their vulnerability towards other humans and non-humans. Humanism ending in phallocentrism, domination and masculinity can only be a spectrum rather than an embodiment. Pease is convinced that an awareness of ontological vulnerability leads (even men) to ‘entangled empathy’ that reaches beyond the human sphere. This remains to be seen.

In Chapter 10, Woods and Hölscher illustrate the ‘Return of the post-human’ in Australia as a means of ‘Developing Indigenist perspectives for social work at a time of environmental crisis’. They compare how indigenism and critical posthumanism deal with environmental issues raised by Australian First People. Critical posthumanism has parallels with indigenist

worldviews which ‘represent humanity’s most long-lived and continuously developed reactions and responses to the mysteries, dynamics and changes of the cosmological, social and physical world’ (p.°128). Woods and Höl-scher believe that social workers should strive for ‘environmental justice’, although what this means is spelled out only in very general terms.

The most concrete application of critical posthumanism in this volume is provided by Heather Lynch in Chapter 11 under the title ‘More-than-human community work – The affirmative biopolitics of life in a Glasgow neighbourhood’. She analyses the ‘dirt problem’ in a (‘notorious’) Glasgow street from a radical environmental perspective and shows that the very attempts to ‘eliminate’ dirt and infestation in that multi-cultural neighbourhood backfire, causing further adverse ecological and social consequences. Lynch uses Esposito’s (2011) ‘affirmative biopolitics’ and his term ‘com-munus’ to denote that community is not defined by borders and the exclusion of ‘others’ but seeks instead to bring all life together in a communal evolving. Her suggestion of ‘composting not cleaning’ presents a more sustainable approach to the threat of degradation. This takes the form of non-invasive, non-chemical small-scale initiatives that, however, are not further explained.

Chapter 12, in which Pam Alldred, Nick J. Fox and Yohai Hakak examine ‘Posthumanism, sexualities education and the production of citizenship’, compares different sex education programmes. Fostering ‘citizenship as an ‘emergent capacity ‘ (p.°146) is described as ‘best suited to establish young people’s sexual citizenship’ because this approach renders them ‘autonomous and potentially sexually active’ (p.°153). However, it could be argued that enabling young people to become autonomous rather than threatening them with references to moral and health consequences is actually the key purpose of humanist liberalism, an objection which finds no response in this chapter.

Part III: More-than-human sites of practice in post-anthropocentric social work

The title of Part III raises expectations of more concrete applications of the post-humanist ontology in social work. It is therefore somewhat disappointing that the first chapter in this section. ‘Animals as domestic violence victims, a challenge to humanist social work’ by Heather Fraser and Nik Taylor, ultimately amounts to an appeal to social workers not to forget about the fate of animals when dealing with incidents of domestic violence or homelessness. As they quote, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of

Social Workers' code of ethics already includes a reference to recognising 'the sentience of animals'. Therefore, proposing completely new modes of enquiry that 'attend closely to the rich array of the senses, dispositions, capabilities and potentialities of all manner of social objects and forces assembled through, and involved in, the co-fabrication of socio-material worlds' (p.°165) seems to add little to the classical competences of social workers.

In Chapter 14, Ross, Bennett and Menyweather strive 'Towards a critical posthumanist social work' by proposing a 'Trans-species ethics of ecological justice, nonviolence and love'. They start with the by now familiar critique of humanism's implied 'speciesism', highlighting the 'intersectionality of all forms of oppression across species boundaries' (p.°176) this has caused. 'Trans-species ethics' instead affirm the 'supportive co-existence of all species, nonanimal beings and the materiality of the planet' (p.°179). The authors recommend 'biosocial communitarianism' or 'subjectless sociality' to revise existing notions of social justice to include ecological justice. The mode used to achieve this is, apart from veganism, the re-activation of 'love' – which 'refers to more-than-human being, knowing and relating that transforms violence and injustice' (p.°180). It is that simple – or is it?

In Chapter 15, Laing criticises 'speciesism' through 'Encountering interspecies homelessness – Resisting anthroparchy in social work and the all-too-human services'. The majority of households in Australia and the USA are already 'interspecies families', meaning that they keep pet animals. Homelessness risks their non-human companions being counted as problematic for re-housing. 'Anthroparchy', Laing argues, needs to be 'smashed' through 'subversive social work practice'.

In Chapter 16, Ranta-Tyrkkö reports on 'Natureculture dilemmas in Northern Finland'. This region is swampy and a precious natural reserve, both for the traditional rural population and recently also for big mining companies keen to extract minerals. This poses a real dilemma for social workers – to welcome mining companies as a solution to widespread unemployment or show ecological responsibility? The author unravels this dilemma with excellent attention to the real constraints impinging on social workers: her post-anthropocentric conclusion 'there is no social sustainability without ecological sustainability' thus shows realism and carries weight.

The final chapter, by Shanaaz Hoosain and Vivienne Bozalek, entitled 'Hauntology, history and heritage – Intergenerational trauma in South African displaced families', is characterised by similar concreteness. It traces the effects of the trauma of slavery and racism over many generations using

Barad's term 'hauntings' which means not mere rememberings of a distant past but the 'ontological indeterminacy of time-being/being-time in its materiality' (Barad, 2017, p.°G113). The authors posit that social workers should consider the history of oppressed people and recognise that trauma has a long intergenerational history and often manifests itself in 'hidden' forms such as shame and internalised blame. The reader is left wishing that the other chapters also ended their advocacy of post-humanism in a similarly persuasive way.

Conclusion

This book can be read on two levels. On one level, it acts as a wake-up call for social workers to expand their field of vision beyond the 'usual concerns' of inter-personal conflicts, poverty, violence and oppression and also consider the suffering of nature, which plays a role in people's welfare. This could help lift social workers out of the constraints that have increasingly dominated their work due to the rise of managerial target-setting and cost-cutting, enabling them to support the integrated well-being of the planet.

On the other level, it has exactly the opposite effect of discouraging social workers from really becoming engaged in that project. The use of obscure terminology, inflated agendas and vaguely defined objectives is simply bewildering.

The criticism of the oppressive sides of the Enlightenment project is more than justified on account of the destructive use of instrumental rationality to which it has given rise. But critical theory in the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the Dialectic of Enlightenment (2016) has long taken up this warning, even with reference to rationality's exploitative impact on the environment.

The central mission of post-humanism is to negate critical humanism's core elements: the responsible subject and communication. What effect will this have on social work? Communication through language is the only tool available to social workers, and their professional responsibility rests on their being able to act as subjects who are charged with making decisions and standing up to the consequences. The authors rely on Barad's dictum (2007, p.°396) that 'responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming'. This reliance is highly problematic. Can social work really depend on such a vague notion when making decisions that can have life or death consequences, as they are often demanded in child protection cases?

Lastly, the ethical implications of this new ontology are deeply worrying. When posthumanism heralds the ‘radical immanence’ of ethics and shifts ‘the ethical instance’ from ‘within the confines of a self-regulating subject of moral agency’ to ‘a set of inter-relations with both human and inhuman forces’ (Braidotti, 2009, p. 145), the question arises whether violence is then also simply immanent. Can the dilemma faced by many in the Covid-19 pandemic, of whether or not to get vaccinated, be solved by letting the ‘inhuman forces’ of the virus take their course or do human actors have the responsibility to make decisions with the help of rational arguments? This book provokes one to pose questions like these and the debate it thereby triggers could turn out to be extremely productive.

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1. Kontext der Studie

Die vorliegende Publikation thematisiert das hochaktuelle, jedoch bislang viel zu wenig systematisch erforschte Problem von Ursachen und Wirkungen innerorganisationaler Gewalt gegen Kinder und Jugendliche in der stationären Jugendhilfe. Es handelt sich um eine Folgestudie der Untersuchung „Gewaltförmige Konstellationen in den stationären Hilfen. Eine Fallstudie“ (Kessl & Lorenz, 2016). Gegenstand des hier besprochenen Buches ist die Analyse von vielschichtigen Gewaltformen an Kindern und Jugendlichen mit Behinderungen durch Mitarbeiter_innen in einer Einrichtung der stationären Eingliederungshilfe. Zentral für die Entstehung und Legitimierung von gewaltförmigen Praktiken an den minderjährigen Bewohner_innen zweier Wohngruppen („Räuberhöhle“ und „Lernfenster“) war der behaviorale Therapieansatz „IntraActPlus“ mit seinen Belohnungs- und Bestrafungslogiken. Hierin zeigen sich Bezüge zu einer österreichischen Studie (vgl. Loch et al. 2022): Auch hier wird herausgearbeitet, dass körperorientierte Behandlungsansätze in Institutionen des Gesundheits- und Sozialwesens dazu verwendet wurden, um Gewalt an fremduntergebrachten Kindern und Jugendlichen zu ermöglichen und zu legitimieren.