REIMAGINING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN TIMES OF ECOLOGICAL CRISIS
A DIALOGUE ON MULTISPECIES JUSTICE[1]

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY

Both as a discipline and as praxis, international relations (IR) have historically been permeated by an anthropocentrism and state-centrism that fundamentally condition their approach to the challenges the world faces, particularly the ecological crisis.[2] As a result of this bias, IR have disregarded the role of non-human entities as political agents.[3] This attitude of detachment from the environment by IR (with the exception found in traditional geopolitical studies) prevents the discipline from addressing the complexity and multidimensionality of ecological challenges. This has led authors like Joana Castro Pereira to call for a reimagining of the field.[4]

This appeal is shared by other IR theorists, such as Anthony Burke and colleagues, who assert that the Earth is not 'our' world, meaning a human world built upon an inert nature ready to be manipulated and controlled by human interests, institutions, and practices – which constitutes the prevalent narrative in IR.[5]

Instead, the Earth is a complex set of worlds that are shared, co-constituted, created, destroyed, and inhabited by and with countless other beings and forms of life.[6] Burke *et al.* assert that International Relations are being unraveled by the reality of the planet, as the relevant spaces of

ABSTRACT

This article departs from a political ecology perspective to build a critique against the predominant anthropocentrism in international relations. It argues that the acknowledgement of the agency of non-human beings, and their inclusion and representation in political decision-making processes, is not only essential to create socio-ecological sustainability in the multispecies communities that we are all part of, but that it is also, fundamentally, a matter of justice. The article introduces the concept of multispecies justice as a possible ally in a dialogue for the reimagining of international relations, both as a discipline and as institutional practice, so that the latter can more adequately, effectively, and fairly respond to the current context of planetary crisis. As an illustrative example of what multispecies justice is (or can become) in practice, the article resorts to the case of rivers and to some of the non-anthropocentric initiatives that have been arising for their protection, conservation, or restoration.

Keywords: international relations, anthropocentrism, non-human agency, multispecies justice.

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RESUMO

Reimaginar as relações internacionais em tempos de crise ecológica: um diálogo sobre justiça multiespécies

Este artigo parte de uma perspetiva de ecologia política para construir uma crítica ao antropocentrismo dominante nas relações internacionais. Argumenta que o reconhecimento da agência de seres não humanos e a inclusão e representação dos mesmos em processos de decisão política são não só essenciais para criar sustentabilidade socioecológica nas comunidades multiespécies de que todos fazemos parte, mas são também, fundamentalmente, uma questão de justiça. O artigo introduz o conceito de justiça multiespécies como possível aliado num diálogo para a reimaginação das relações internacionais enquanto disciplina e prática institucional, recorrendo ao caso dos rios e a algumas das iniciativas não antropocêntricas que têm surgido para a sua proteção, conservação ou restauração.

Palavras-chave: relações internacionais, antropocentrismo, agência não humana, justiça multiespécies.

action in the present day are no longer solely the local, the international, or the global, but rather the planetary. IR are academically, institutionally, and legally organized around the modern system of nation-states instead of around ecological and socio-environmental systems (e.g., biosphere, ecosystems, biomes), within which human life unfolds in interrelation with numerous other beings and ecological processes.[7]

The world as portrayed by conventional IR is state-centric, capital-centric, and anthropocentric; a picture that must be radically transformed into a project of reconfiguration of the global in order to respond to the planetary.[8] Indeed, due to its ontological and epistemological premises, IR recognizes a set of human actors or human creations (e.g., states, international organizations, civil society) and denies or undervalues the agency of multiple other subjects that escape the anthropocentric lens.[9] It is, therefore, essential to rethink and transform hegemonic political institutions and norms, especially regarding who is included or excluded, who is heard or silenced – not only, but also, beyond the human.[10] This project of creating a planetary politics will require amplifying marginalized voices and creating new forms of solidarity and governance among subjects.[11]

Rafi Youatt also identifies anthropocentrism as a prevailing characteristic of IR.[12] Societies and human beings are constantly interacting and relating to other species and forms of life. Within Western modernity, whose pillars are the system of nation-states and the global capitalist economy, these interactions and modes of relating to non-human nature have been dominated by anthropocentric perspectives and norms that encourage and legitimize the unlimited exploitation of nature and the beings and resources that constitute it.[13] However, anthropocentrism is not inevitable; the goal, in any case, is not to forego a human perspective, but rather to promote a transformation of moral and political frameworks guiding our relationships with other species.[14]

The ecological crisis (e.g., deforestation, pollution of rivers and oceans, depletion of water resources, global decline in biodiversity, global warming, melting glaciers, extreme climate events), as well as the failure to mitigate it, can be understood as the most visible manifestation of this anthropocentrism underlying academic thought and environmental policies at all levels of governance.[15] However, an anthropocentric interpretation of the world, essentially rooted in the separation between humanity and nature,

is deeply contradicted by the very essence of the crises we currently face.[16] Ecological problems, which are not bound by national borders and cannot be dealt with autonomously or independently, lay bare the need to address our current condition through a holistic and multidimensional perspective. Understanding the ecological crisis and developing effective and appropriate responses to the challenges it poses requires breaking with conventional practice and thought equipped with a post-anthropocentric vision.[17]

In fact, it is possible to argue that these crises are ultimately the product of a dominant paradigm not only in IR but more broadly in modern (or industrialized) human societies. This point is crucial as it helps us understand the complexity and multidimensionality of the collective challenge we face: it is not just a problem concerning IR or other specific disciplines and practices but rather a dominant narrative permeating the political, economic, and sociocultural structures of Western modernity. This narrative arises from the Cartesian dualistic paradigm, which represents the belief in human superiority over other forms of life, legitimizing their control, transformation, and exploitation beyond any socioecological sustainability.[18]

IT IS NOT JUST A PROBLEM CONCERNING IR OR OTHER SPECIFIC DISCIPLINES AND PRACTICES BUT RATHER A DOMINANT NARRATIVE PERMEATING THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIOCULTURAL STRUCTURES OF WESTERN MODERNITY.

The dualistic paradigm has accompanied the development of the state and the market, and expanded beyond Europe through imperialism and colonialism, currently materializing, more obviously and destructively, in the global capitalist economy.[19] It is, therefore, logical to assume that responses to the ecological crisis must necessarily entail a rupture with this dominant paradigm, notably through the recognition of other narratives, practices, and modes of relation with non-human nature stemming from non--Western and indigenous cultures and peoples.[20] Mihnea Tănăsescu refers to the descriptive-prescriptive nexus to argue that how we describe the world (description) profoundly impacts how we act upon it (prescription).[21] Despite 'Anthropocene' being one of the most popular terms today when discussing the crises we face, Tănăsescu suggests the term 'Ecocene' to emphasize that ecological processes and environmental and climate changes are profoundly challenging human sociopolitical organizations, necessitating consideration of the agency of non-human beings and co-constituent ecological processes of the world and reality. The question naturally arises: how can non-human agency be reflected politically (i.e., in prescriptive terms)? How should politics respond to this reality?

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

In recent years, several proposals have emerged – from the fields of Political Theory, Critical Theory of International Relations, post-humanisms, and political ecology, among others – that can be understood as non-anthropocentric in their intentions or content.

These proposals suggest ways to break the traditional conditioning of IR and to consider the subjectivity, agency, and modes of communication of non-human beings in sociocultural, political, economic, and environmental processes.[22] These contributions stem from the so-called 'non-human turn' in the social sciences and emerge alongside new political and legal projects aiming to transform dominant modes of relating to non-human nature, as seen in the international movement for the rights of nature.

The challenges posed by these non-anthropocentric proposals to the dominant paradigm within International Relations illustrate the fact that all living beings are born and live their lives within multispecies communities.[23] This means that no living being (including humans) exists in isolation, and that, on the contrary, we all are part of networks of interdependence and mutuality with animals, plants, ecosystems, and elements such as water in the worlds we share and co-create. In this sense, Youatt calls for the development of interspecies relations.[24]

From Robyn Eckersley's proposal for the establishment of ecological democracies that allow the representation of the interests and needs of non-human beings and future generations through the appointment of human spokespeople;[25] to Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's proposal for the construction of political systems that recognize non--human animals as members of the polis or citizens of their own sovereign societies;[26] to Anthony Burke and Stefanie Fishel's proposal for the creation of eco-regional assemblies that allow for the representation of biomes and ecosystems in international politics,[27] all of them share the common goal of reorienting the way modern human societies relate to the non-human world.

This endeavor is crucial if we intend to find robust and appropriate responses to the ecological crisis. However, the proposals for a reimagining of IR that have emerged in recent years still linger on the margins. It is thus essential to create further dialogue between concepts, movements, and initiatives, as well as to foster increasing inter- or transdisciplinarity to reflect on different knowledge and practices. Inter- or transdisciplinarity is, after all, one of the qualities of IR, which is why I believe that they have the potential to reinvent themselves and respond to the socioecological reality in which we live; after all, several of these non-anthropocentric proposals arise from politics or even Critical International Relations Theory.

Pereira argues that the current notion of 'international' requires new ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies.[28] This is undoubtedly necessary, although it is also important to critically question the term 'new', recognize and (re)valorize ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies (often ancestral) that form the basis of multiple non-Western and indigenous cultures and knowledge systems, which have been (and continue to be) repeatedly silenced and erased during imperialist and colonial periods and, more recently, through global capitalism.[29] This process of reclaiming and (re) valuing other narratives, practices, and modes of relating to non-human nature should also accompany efforts to achieve justice for indigenous and non-Western peoples, who

have been and continue to be exploited by colonial and anthropocentric capitalism, along with other species and ecosystems.

In this regard, it is also important to emphasize that, despite making up less than 5% of the world's human population, indigenous peoples bear the responsibility for the protection and conservation of around 80% of global biodiversity.[30] Here we come across a fundamental point: the ecological crisis inevitably and profoundly involves issues of *justice*. However, existing concepts (such as 'environmental justice' or 'climate justice') fail to do justice to the subjectivity and agency of the multitude of beings and forms of life that are intertwined in networks of vulnerability, loss, and extinction, but also of resilience, survival, and coexistence with humans.[31] These concepts remain, first and foremost, about human beings. Therefore, the concept of *multispecies justice* has been introduced to reorient political dialogues about justice, particularly in the current context.[32]

In line with Pereira's suggestion for the creation of new ontologies, new methodologies, and new epistemologies, I understand the concept of multispecies justice as one of these 'new' creations – based, however, on principles and worldviews long existing in different non-Western cultures and geographies[33] – with profound ramifications at the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical-political levels. Bringing this concept into the realm of IR paves the way for a non-anthropocentric dialogue that can inspire and promote the development of narratives, practices, and modes of relationship that are more just and capable of addressing the complex socioecological reality in which we live today. There are two main reasons why I believe this concept is useful for IR. First, because justice issues are inherently political, as they concern relations between subjects, particularly power relations, and how these relations enable the construction or destruction of common worlds, include or exclude certain subjects, and are attentive to or silence certain voices. Second, because the multispecies dimension is much more representative of the world (or worlds) in which we truly live than an anthropocentric perspective that rejects non-human subjectivity and agency.

TOWARDS TRANSDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUES: IR, POLITICS, AND MULTISPECIES JUSTICE

The term multispecies justice aims to draw attention to the fact that all forms of life on the planet – human, animal, plant, rivers, mountains, forests, oceans, etc. – are inseparable and interdependent. This suggests that the worlds we co-inhabit are created and transformed by a variety of beings and forms of life with agency, of which only some are human. Consequently, in a context of increasing loss, vulnerability, and injustice such as the ecological crisis, speaking of justice in these shared worlds must necessarily include the multiple subjects (both human and non-human) that constitute them. At its core, multispecies justice invites us to expand the concept of justice to encompass a greater number of subjects, including individuals of other species (animals, plants) and communities of subjects (ecosystems such as rivers or forests).[34] Furthermore,

it represents not only a new research agenda but also a fundamentally normative project based on the rejection of the fiction of liberal individualism in favor of recognizing the vast and complex ecological matrix of relationships that sustain all life.[35] Multispecies justice is also described as an intersectional approach, which recognizes that multiple identities and categories of difference and inequalities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class, age, ability, species, being) exist simultaneously and are intertwined in processes of oppression and injustice.[36] One of the main goals of multispecies justice, according to Brandon Jones, is the devising of a politics for constructing a common world that accounts for the needs and livelihoods of a diversity of human and non-human life.[37] This interpretation is especially important because it emphasizes that multispecies justice is essentially a political issue. It concerns the relationships and power structures that exist not only among human societies and groups but also between humans and other beings and forms of life. Adopting a non-anthropocentric position that recognizes these relationships and structures encourages us to reflect on two central aspects. On the one hand, it involves considering how our practices and policies affect a wide variety of subjects, both human and non-human, and how excluding non-human beings from our ethical-political considerations is not only discriminatory and unjust but also leads to destructive modes of socio-ecological relationships. On the other hand, in response to these processes of discrimination and exclusion, it involves exploring how it is possible to include and represent the perspectives, interests, and needs of non-human beings in our political decision-making processes.

These two central aspects involve a series of complex questions and challenges. A key question that arises is: what does multispecies justice mean (or might mean) *in practice*? After all, this is the central axis of IR: it is about developing *relationships* or modes of political relation and *practice*. In turn, this question inevitably leads to one of the greatest challenges or dilemmas of various post-anthropocentric proposals for the political inclusion and representation of non-human beings: how to truly know the perspectives, interests, and needs of non-human nature? This challenge is, of course, closely related to questions of voice, language, and communication. As any debate on multispecies justice (and associated issues) is extremely complex, in the next section I present a few ideas through the case of rivers and some movements and initiatives that have emerged to protect, conserve, or restore them.

ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES OR DILEMMAS OF VARIOUS POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC PROPOSALS FOR THE POLITICAL INCLUSION AND REPRESENTATION OF NON-HUMAN BEINGS: HOW TO TRULY KNOW THE PERSPECTIVES, INTERESTS, AND NEEDS OF NON-HUMAN NATURE?

MULTISPECIES JUSTICE IN PRACTICE? THE CASE OF RIVERS

Rivers are examples of justice subjects according to the 'new' political-normative agenda of multispecies justice. They constitute the primary freshwater resources on the planet,

covering less than 1% of the Earth's surface but (along with other freshwater ecosystems) representing the habitat of approximately 10% of living species.[38] These places them among the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet.[39] Rivers are indeed crucial not only for the subsistence of countless human riverine communities but also for the survival of multiple species of animals and plants.

However, the planet's rivers have increasingly faced challenges caused by the combination of two threats, namely human action and infrastructure (e.g., channelization, dam construction, pollution, excessive water extraction, and depletion) and the impacts of the climate crisis (e.g., prolonged drought periods, major floods). Combined, these threats have severely affected the water quality and environmental flow of rivers, placing them among the most threatened ecosystems on the planet. Since the 1970s, over 80% of global populations of freshwater species have been driven to extinction due to the state of increasing river degradation[40]. It is important to note that these ecosystems face a combination of threats constituted by a dominant and anthropocentric paradigm of water resource management and governance, i.e., by processes of transformation and industrialization whose impacts are further exacerbated by the climate crisis.

Over the past decade and a half, several networks, movements, and alliances have emerged to address river degradation and protect, conserve, or restore them. Comprising different groups of human actors (e.g., local communities and indigenous peoples, environmental organizations, legal experts, scientists, academics), these mobilizations focus on different agendas, including the recognition of river rights at the local, national, or international levels. The latter agenda is particularly relevant as it is part of a counter-hegemonic paradigm that has gained popularity in recent decades, that of rights of nature.

Campaigns and initiatives advocating for the recognition of river rights are often inspired by indigenous, non-Western ontologies and worldviews that recognize and relate to rivers as living entities, as ancestors or sacred relatives, or as multispecies communities.[41] The most emblematic cases include the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand; the Atrato River in Colombia; the Vilcabamba River in Ecuador; the Ganges and Yamuna rivers in India; and the Martuwarra/Fitzroy and Muteshekau-shipu/Magpie rivers in Australia and Canada, respectively. These cases have called for the recognition of specific rights for the rivers and their human guardians (e.g., biocultural rights in the case of the Atrato River) or the acknowledgment of legal personhood status for the rivers themselves (e.g., in the case of the Whanganui River). These movements highlight not only the subjectivity and agency of the rivers themselves but also the fact that they are co-constituted by a multitude of beings (human, animal, plant, mineral, spiritual) actively participating in their socioecological processes. In recent years, several academic articles have been published exploring the agency of other beings in the processes of river transformation and preservation. For example, the role that fish play in debates about dam removal in rivers;[42] the indirect action of otters in ecological

restoration processes;[43] or the deliberate habitat creation and transformation work of beavers, leading hydraulic engineers and ecologists to consider them as potential partners in river restoration processes.[44] These works invite us to think of ecosystems such as rivers as co-constituted territories transformed by multiple agents and their interactions, turning these agents into *political* actors.

Rivers are a good example to illustrate debates around multispecies justice because, on the one hand, they constitute shared worlds where multispecies communities live intertwined in patterns of vulnerability, (in)justice, life, and death in the current context of ecological crisis; and, on the other, because in recent years cases have emerged that help us think about how multispecies justice can be materialized. For example, the fishing communities of the Magdalena River in Colombia, whose lives and livelihoods are intimately connected with the fish and other animals that inhabit the river, practice daily forms of interspecies communication where people refer to the voices and songs of the fish or their ability to predict the weather based on what the animals tell them.[45] During an interview, an artisanal fisherman from one of the communities along the Magdalena River stated:

> 'Of course fish have a voice. [...] An animal sings, and I already recognize the sound. We feel accompanied by the animals, and they stay by our side – animals, birds, *babilla* caimans when they start roaring. You won't believe it, but the fish also have their song'.[46]

This description is an example of interspecies relations that – fundamentally for the purposes of this article – also manifest in the development of ethical criteria for fishing, aiming to safeguard populations and respect specific aspects of fish life (for example, it is forbidden to fish in areas where the fish are sleeping). However, these practices are disregarded by others engaged in intensive fishing or causing pollution in rivers, particularly through mining. They are also overlooked by a national water resource management and governance system that has led to a growing loss of biodiversity in ecosystems like the Magdalena River, jeopardizing the survival of animals and plants and the livelihoods of human communities.[47]

The fact that artisanal fishermen are not recognized as political actors in the Colombian context means that their perspectives, practices, and ethics are not taken into account by the dominant system.[48] This harms not only the human subjects in the region but also various subjects of other species that are interrelated with them, and whose survival also depends indirectly on these human communities and the more sustainable and just ways of relating to non-human nature that they practice. In a case like this, multispecies justice could mean the recognition, inclusion, and participation of artisanal fishing communities in political decision-making processes regarding the management and governance of the Magdalena River, which could also indirectly promote better representation of the interests and needs of other beings, such as fish.

This example points to one of the possible responses to the challenge of representing non-human beings in political processes: the appointment of human spokespersons or guardians.[49] Certain groups and human individuals may be better positioned to represent non-human perspectives, such as indigenous peoples and communities that have lived for thousands of years in relationships with non-human nature based on principles of care, interdependence, respect, and reciprocity;[50] people who study or work directly with animals, plants, or ecosystems (e.g., biologists, ecologists, geologists, botanists); academics and legal professionals involved in socio-environmental causes, animal or nature rights, or with an interest in more ecological deliberative and democratic processes; and concerned citizens. In most cases, the challenge lies in creating more inclusive, intersectional, and less anthropocentric platforms within the constraints of a hegemonic political system that is still fundamentally anthropocentric, capitalist, and colonial.

IN MOST CASES, THE CHALLENGE LIES IN CREATING MORE INCLUSIVE, INTERSECTIONAL, AND LESS ANTHROPOCENTRIC PLATFORMS WITHIN THE CONSTRAINTS OF A HEGEMONIC POLITICAL SYSTEM THAT IS STILL FUNDAMENTALLY ANTHROPOCENTRIC, CAPITALIST, AND COLONIAL.

The case of the Whanganui River in Aotearoa, New Zealand, can serve as an inspiring example here. Known as the first river in the world to be granted legal personhood status in 2017, the Whanganui is recognized as a living entity and a sacred ancestor or relative of the Māori indigenous communities that have lived alongside its banks for multiple generations. The Te Awa Tupua Act, which acknowledges this river as a living being and a multispecies community, includes Māori language representing fundamental non-anthropocentric principles (such as the expression *Kōau te Āwa, kō te Āwa kō au*, 'I am the river, and the river is me') and has established a co-governance and co-management system for the river involving Māori representatives and Pakeha (non-indigenous New Zealanders) representatives.[51] Although there are criticisms of the likelihood of real success for the Act or the possibility that it could be a strategy of 'appeasement' of Māori territorial and anti-colonial claims (not granting them effective sovereignty over their ancestral territories),[52] other voices also argue that, despite ongoing challenges and tensions, this case represents a positive step, particularly in processes of recognizing indigenous ontologies.[53] As Māori ontology acknowledges the subjectivity and agency of non-human beings, as well as the interdependence between these beings and humans, connecting them through relationships based on principles of interdependence, respect, care, and reciprocity, I would say that this is also a case of multispecies justice.

HOW TO BRIDGE IR AND MULTISPECIES JUSTICE?

The current context of ecological crisis demands a profound restructuring of the dominant paradigm in the international system. Above all, what is required is a transformation of

hegemonic narratives about the world we live in, and of the practices and modes of relation with non-human beings that have thus far (within modern human societies) led to increasing levels of socioecological destruction and forms of multispecies injustice.

IR are not equipped to respond in an adequate and fair way to the challenges we face today, but the discipline has the potential to do so if it undergoes a post-anthropocentric reinvention. The potential stems from a few particular aspects. For example, the recognition of the existence of different scales or levels of action within IR (local, international, and global) can help understand the importance of acting simultaneously or concertedly at various levels. While I agree with Burke *et al.*'s call for the development of a planetary policy, I believe it is fundamental to also act within the levels traditionally recognized by IR and the current political-legal system. As the examples of the Magdalena River and the Whanganui River demonstrate, localized practices and political processes at the local level can profoundly impact modes of relation between humans and non-humans, contributing to greater socioecological sustainability or environmental protection. Additionally, local initiatives can have a national or international impact, as is the case with the Whanganui River, whose example has inspired movements and campaigns for the recognition of river rights worldwide in recent years.

Acting at the local or regional levels can also be more accessible and feasible than trying to develop global and planetary policies or strategies, especially because the international system is still governed by nation-states with different political priorities and agendas, deeply influenced by the global capitalist economy. In this sense, I agree with Robyn Eckersley, who argues that one cannot assume that the State will cease to be a particularly powerful political actor in the near future. This requires, on the one hand, seeking strategies to transform the State itself and, on the other hand, strategies for action outside or beyond it.[54]

Here lies the relevance of post-anthropocentric proposals that have been developed in different political fields and within Critical International Relations Theory. Implementing these proposals also requires negotiation and diplomatic practices that are already part of the field of IR and should continue to be developed, particularly through a non--anthropocentric perspective that seeks to represent and negotiate on behalf of non--human beings.

Finally, IR must leverage its inter- or transdisciplinarity to establish and promote more engaged and profound dialogues with other concepts, movements, disciplines, and fields of action, such as those advocating for forms of multispecies justice. This transdisciplinarity should be manifested not only through a dialogue between the social sciences and the natural sciences but also through an intercultural dialogue that recognizes different knowledge systems (e.g., traditional ecological knowledge, non-Western and indigenous sciences and knowledge) historically excluded by Western modernity. Building alliances and new forms of solidarity and governance may not only contribute

to greater socioecological sustainability but also respond more effectively, appropriately, and justly to the ecological crisis. RI

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■ ■ ■ ENDNOTES

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