

THE CHALLENGE OF THE GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS FOR WORLD POLITICS¹

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The ecological crisis is one of the greatest challenges humanity faces in this century. Climate change and ecosystem degradation pose real threats to the future of life on the planet.² However, despite global security and survival being key themes in the study of international relations, environmental issues have remained on the sidelines of the discipline in recent decades.³ This reality seems to be changing with the publication of an increasing number of works that seek to rethink the discipline and the practice of world politics through the lens of ecology.⁴ These works call for a political transformation to address the crisis⁵ and challenge the traditional institutionalist approach dominant in the literature, which focuses on the analysis of intergovernmental cooperation and the effectiveness of international environmental institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) climate and biodiversity regimes.

The critical interdisciplinary literature emerging in this area recognizes that human existence now transcends not only the international or even the global but also extends to the planetary realm. This is evidenced by the anthropogenic subversion of the fundamental processes of the planet. Human actions and the globalization of economic, social, and political issues not only affect the social world but also modify the natural and physical structure that regulates the functioning of the Earth system.⁶ In other words, the concept of an Earth system increasingly destabilized and profoundly altered by human activity – encapsulated in the concept of the Anthropocene, a new proposal of geologic era⁷ – reveals the existence of a complex planetary socioecological system. It underscores the need to transform how we think and relate to others and the planet. We are facing unprecedented (socio)ecological challenges that open doors to alternative conceptions of ontology, ethics, and politics. Particularly for international relations, this reality implies adopting a ‘post-anthropocentric’ perspective on world politics that embraces its inherent interconnectedness with the Earth system. That is, a theoretical, conceptual, and analytical framework capable of incorporating the permanent role that nature plays in the social world and vice versa, integrating the relationships between humanity, the planet, and the non-human species that inhabit it into all analyses of world politics.⁸

It is within this framework that the present dossier falls in, comprised of five essays that critically address the challenge of the planetary ecological crisis, contributing to the construction of a post-anthropocentric perspective of world politics and paving the way for future research. The authors explore themes such as climate and multispecies justice, as well as ecological and energy transition in particular.

Carlota Houart initiates the dossier with an essay in which she offers a critique of anthropocentrism and state-centrism that characterize world politics and its study (or modern human societies more broadly), which hinder a holistic approach to the ecological crisis. In particular, the author argues that the inclusion of a multispecies justice perspective in the analysis and decision-making process is crucial for promoting global sustainability. This perspective, grounded in the principles and worldviews of indigenous peoples and others beyond the Western context, recognizes the complex relationships between humans, animals, plants, ecosystems, and elements such as water. It also acknowledges human dependence on nature and the subjectivity and agency of multiple beings and forms of life. To illustrate multispecies justice, Houart refers to the case of rivers and various initiatives aimed at protecting these ecosystems, inspired by the counter-hegemonic paradigm of the rights of nature. The author concludes the essay with a brief reflection on possible paths for the multispecies reinvention of international relations, including ecological (cosmopolitan) democracy⁹ and interspecies diplomacy,¹⁰ as well as the creation of collaborative networks for knowledge production involving natural, social, and human sciences, as well as the traditional knowledge of indigenous and other local communities.¹¹

The essay by Mariana Riquito follows, in which the author critically analyzes the predominant narrative on climate crisis and the ongoing efforts for energy transition, particularly the 'new extractivism' or 'green extractivism', exemplified by the rush for lithium exploration in the mountainous region of Barroso, located in the Vila Real district of Portugal.¹² Like Houart, Riquito rejects the modern dualistic ontology that separates society and nature. Moreover, she emphasizes the dichotomy between climate and ecology present in major academic and political discourses. Understanding the non-human as mere raw material to be exploited, along with the almost exclusive focus on carbon emission reduction, legitimizes socially and ecologically destructive practices, and reduces public responses and policies to climate change to the goal of capital accumulation, often through technological solutions, suppressing all dialogue focused on alternatives.¹³ The author therefore calls for an 'ontological transformation', recognizing the coexistence of plural and interrelated worlds, human and non-human – the pluriverse.¹⁴ Inspired by ecofeminist literature, Riquito speaks of an ethic of care for all beings on Earth and encourages us to view the mountains of Barroso as living entities and guardians of life, prompting a reconsideration of the principles and values that shape the 'green' transition.


The theme of energy transition is also the focus of Vera Ferreira's essay. More specifically, the author addresses energy democracy, a concept encompassing democratic control over the energy industry, the redistribution of political and economic power, the recognition of universal rights to renewable energy, and the promotion of social and environmental justice opposed to 'green capitalism'. Ferreira argues that this perspective provides a unique outlook for both critically analyzing the political, socio-economic, and environmental implications of changes in the energy sector and imagining alternative futures. In her article, she presents a set of criteria for identifying and analyzing tools for energy democratization on the national scene. Portugal has committed to becoming a carbon-neutral economy by 2050, making it crucial to ensure that the cost of the energy transition is not unfairly borne by the most vulnerable groups. Ferreira also points out relevant future research lines for comparative politics and international relations, such as analyzing the application and development of energy democracy in the European Union, understanding similarities and differences between member states, and studying the international evolution of energy democracy, addressing challenges in forming a global movement, questioning its Eurocentrism, and evaluating its application in regions of the Global South.¹⁵

The dossier continues with an essay by Lorenzo Feltrin and Emanuele Leonardi on working-class environmentalism, particularly the convergence between the struggle for workers' rights and climate justice towards an ecological transition originating from local contexts. The authors criticize public policies for mitigating climate change oriented toward economic growth, to the detriment of social well-being. Feltrin and Leonardi remind us that the working class played a fundamental role in politicizing environmental issues, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, in the fights against industrial pollution. They argue that the ecological transition will only be effective if it addresses the concerns of workers (industrial, informal, unemployed) and the communities they belong to. The authors highlight the example of the workers' struggle at the GKN automotive factory in Florence, Italy, who joined climate justice movements to demand a fairer and more democratic ecological transition. They proposed the creation of a workers' cooperative to produce and distribute components for electric vehicles as a sustainable alternative to producing parts for luxury cars. Studying such cases of association between the working class and the environmental movement can help us understand how and under what conditions are workers willing to organize themselves for the sake of an ecological transition.¹⁶

Thais Lemos Ribeiro and Verônica Korber Gonçalves conclude the dossier with an essay dedicated to the negotiation of carbon credits with the Munduruku indigenous people within the scope of the application of the mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+), an international initiative negotiated under the United Nations climate regime. The authors research how this mechanism interacts with considerations of local governance and justice, exploring five key ana-

lytical perspectives provided by the Earth System Governance Project (a research network dedicated to advancing knowledge at the interface between global environmental change and governance), namely ‘architecture and agency’, ‘democracy and power’, ‘justice and allocation’, ‘anticipation and imagination’, and ‘adaptation and reflection’. The case study on the Munduruku reveals the complex interaction between global climate governance, indigenous rights, and environmental justice, disclosing the need for a more inclusive, fair, and transparent REDD+ framework that considers diverse worldviews and the interests of all parties involved. Ribeiro and Gonçalves thus contribute to our understanding of the intricate relationships between global climate governance and actors on the ground, emphasizing the importance of exploring spaces wherein different worldviews intersect, as well as recognizing and respecting the rights and knowledge of local communities in environmental initiatives and beyond.¹⁷

Due to their critical nature, the contributions included in this dossier prompt us to reflect on (and research) the crisis facing the planet and the ecological transition beyond the limits of the conventional paradigm shaping world politics. In particular, they challenge us to view the crisis and its possible solutions with imagination and creativity, from the perspective of the most vulnerable, those who remain invisible (the non-human, the indigenous populations, and other local communities, the working class, among others), towards the construction of a truly fairer and more sustainable world for all beings – human and non-human – that inhabit it. This is one of the possible (and more desirable) ways to build the much-needed post-anthropocentric perspective of contemporary and future international relations.

In an era of planetary ecological crisis, to change is of the essence. However, the necessary change will never materialize if we do not allow ourselves to find and explore other perspectives and possibilities, or the various worlds that coexist on the planet. 

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- 5 See, among others, BURKE, Anthony, et al. – ‘Planet politics: a manifesto from the end of IR’. In *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. Vol. 44, No. 3, 2016, pp. 499–523; CHANDLER, David; MÜLLER, Franziska; ROTHE, Delf, eds. – *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches*. Cham: Springer, 2021; EROUKHMANOFF, Clara; HARKER, Matt, eds. – *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017; KURKI, Milja – *International Relations in a Relational Universe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; LEEP, Matthew – ‘Introduction to the special issue: multispecies security and personhood’. In *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 49, No. 2, 2023, pp. 181–200; PEREIRA, Joana Castro; RENNERT, Judith – ‘Animals in International Relations: a research agenda’. In *International Relations*. Vol. 37, No. 3, 2023, pp. 389–97; PEREIRA, Joana Castro; SARAMAGO, André, eds. – *Non-Human Nature in World Politics: Theory and Practice*. Cham: Springer, 2020; PEREIRA, Joana Castro; TERRENAS, João – ‘Towards a transformative governance of the Amazon’. In *Global Policy*. Vol. 13, No. S3, 2022, pp. 60–75.
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