The Politics of Nature. Designing for an Ontological Turn. DESIS Philosophy Talk #7.2

Virginia Tassinari
Department of Design, DESIS Lab
Politecnico di Milano, Italy
virginia.tassinari@polimi.it

Arturo Escobar
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
USA
aescobar@email.unc.edu

Ezio Manzini
ELISAVA Barcelona
School of Design and Engineering,
Spain
Ezio.manzini@polimi.it

Liesbeth Huybrechts
ArcK research group,
Faculty of Architecture and Arts,
University of Hasselt,
Belgium
liesbeth.huybrechts@uhasselt.be

Annalinda De Rosa
Department of Design,
Polimi DESIS Lab,
Politecnico di
Milano, Italy
annalinda.derosa@polimi.it

ABSTRACT

Today's environmental emergency requires specific efforts in terms of thinking/acting in designing. The consequences of anthropocentric ways of producing, consuming and living are becoming painfully clear. Design played (and often still plays) a role in this, and therefore has in many ways contributed to feed this anthropocentric mindset, considering human interests separated from the ones of the planet's. Design has a shared responsibility in this – what Fry calls – "de-futuring process" (1) produced by anthropocentrism, and it is hence obliged to recognize the risks connected to this anthropocentric mindset and its consequences. In this regard, designers are currently, and increasingly, becoming aware that an ontological shift is needed. What does it mean to take this "ontological turn" seriously? Which thinking in contemporary philosophy and anthropology can help designers – and particularly the ones dealing with subfields of design such as Participatory Design and Design for Social Innovation - to develop non-anthropocentric, non-de-futuring reflective practices that might account for the radical interrelationship between people and the planet? Which kinds of transformative reflective practices might these modes of thinking possibly nurture?

Author Keywords

Non-anthropocentric design; politics of nature; political ontology; ontological design; radical interdependence

INTRODUCTION

We are currently dealing in many parts of the world with the consequences of anthropocentric design practices, that have not considered the interrelationship between human and non-human natural agents, as if humans' interests could be separated from the interests of other natural actors. In other words: every time humans solely pursue what they consider their own interests (which are often, at the end of the day, just the interests of a small privileged group of people), they actually make a perspective error, as they do not acknowledge the fact that human interests cannot be seen as separated from the interests of the whole planet. This perspective error is suicidal, because humans in this way actually undermine their own interests. Ins-

tead, they made of our planet a place where life is becoming more and more difficult, both for non-human as well as for human actors.

The environmental crisis we are facing is, at the end, first and foremost, an anthropological crisis. Design played (and often still plays) a role in this state of affairs. We designed (and still design) many products, services and systems aimed to fulfil human interests only and often only for a small portion of mankind. Thus, the blindness of this anthropocentric mindset in design research and practice has also contributed to the environmental crisis we are in. Fry refers to this outcome as the de-futuring aspects of design (2). Designers share a responsibility in this de-futuring process and, yet, they can also share the responsibility to undertake new courses of action to counter it. This means that we. as designers, can step out from the anthropocentric mindset and recognize the interrelationship between humans and the planet, between human and non-human natural interests. In order to do so, we first need to reflect on what this ontological shift might mean for us: what does it imply for our practices? Which theoretical frameworks can guide us in this complex endeavor? Which philosophical and anthropological theories can guide design beyond the Western-, anthropocentric mindset that, for many, is actually at the root of the global crisis of climate, energy, poverty and meaning?

The Philosophical and AnthropolOgical context

Although the critique of anthropocentrism and epistemological and ontological dualism (from Cartesian mind/body split to the separation of humans from non-humans, or the nature/culture divide) has a long history in Western philosophy and anthropology, it has experienced some sort of a revival over the past two decades, often encompassed under the rubric of "the ontological turn" (the return of questions of ontology besides, and beyond, the concern with epistemology, which shaped social theory for a number of decades, particularly with post-structuralism) (3).

Possibly the most prominent aspect of this "turn" has been to reopen in multiple ways the question of the non-human, and particularly the human/non-human relation. These debates have been heated in anthropology, geography, and political philosophy, among others. Some of the main names here are, Haraway and Latour, but also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, Anna Tsing, Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Isabelle Stengers, Jane Bennet

and many others, dealing with the "more-than-human" from diverse perspectives.

In some areas, the concern with the non-human has led to important re-articulations of nondualism, or radical interdependence. The large social theory field where "the question of nature" has been posed over the past five decades is political ecology, an interdisciplinary field in which anthropology, geography, ecological economics, environmental philosophy, etc. all participate. An outgrowth of political ecology has been "Political Ontology" (PO) (4), a term coined by Argentinean anthropologist Mario Blaser about a decade ago, and which has been further developed by, for instance, Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar (5). If an important concept within political ontology is that of the *pluriverse*, the entry point (and direct link with design) of PO is yet the notion that often times environmental conflicts (e.g. gold mining, the expansion of agrofuels such as oil palm, large scale development projects) are indeed ontological conflicts, that is, conflicts over life itself and diverse modes of existence. A recent work touching on these several matters is *A World of Many Worlds* (6), edited by de la Cadena and Blaser based on a year-long seminar at UCDavis, with contributions by Haraway, Stengers, Viveiros de Castro, Strathern, Hellen Verran, John Law, and a few others. This ought to be considered an up-to-date statement on the "philosophy and anthropology of the non-human" (7).

All of the above takes place largely within the confines of modern social theory, particularly the Anglo-American and European academy. This leaves out a huge discourse in non-Western, Latin American, and indigenous approaches to nature and the non-human. Some of these of course take place in conversation with Western philosophy. The most well-known is probably Mexican environmental philosopher and political ecologist Enrique Leff. In his last book (8), he advocates for a non-Eurocentric framework for understanding what he terms the "ontology of life" to really counter "the ontology of capital" (9). One of his main arguments is that the ecological crisis is a crisis of a particular model of thought, that of Western metaphysics with its dualist thought and logocentric rationality; the Australian environmental feminist philosopher Val Plumwood also made the same argument in her *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (10).

There are also a whole set of debates in Latin America (even if some similar debates are also getting a

foothold in Asian and African contexts to talk about the Global South, as well as among Indigenous Canadians and Maori ones, etc.) that deal directly with the need to re/articulate issues of relationality, radical interdependence, and the non-human as part of a project of revisioning society and social action. For instance, Canadian Native scholar and activist Leanne Simpson has a powerful set of works on these issues, the latest being *As We Have Always Done,* where she outlines her "radical theory of resurgence," centered on the re/constitution of non-anthropocentric, relational worlds. (11). Furthermore, indigenous (and to a lesser extent Afro-descendant) activists in Latin America have spearheaded the concept of Buen Vivir (Sumak Kawsay in Quechua), a non-anthropocentric view of life that is holistic, an alternative to the concept of development (12).

Relevance for the topic of the conference

Most of these works have profound implications for design theory and practice – for instance for the subfields of Participatory Design and Design for Social Innovation – that largely still need to be explored. The aim of the "DESIS Philosophy Talks 7#03 The Politics of Nature" is precisely to elucidate such implications. What might, for instance, be the implications of notions such as Buen Vivir, radical interdependence, relationality, the "more-than-human" etc., for design? Can designing be reoriented to respond to the cultural/civilizational imperative to heal (mend, repair, reconstitute…) the web of life?

In this Conversation, we will question what design can do to answer to the current need for non-anthropocentric, post-dualist, post-capitalist and post-patriarchal approaches to life and the world, in order to better understand the possible relationship between design itself and these ontological needs. What world-making practices centered on the politics of nature - some possibly unprecedented - (seen as a non-anthropocentric ontological-political project) to be possibly enacted to counter un-sustainability and de-futuring? How can these reflections within design possibly lead to "conversations for action" based on an ontology and on a politics of relationality, non-anthropocentricity, and radical interdependence? How can they possibly lead to transformative actions in the public realm?

Designing for a politics of nature: questioning the role of participatory design

Around the world designers are currently working "politically", by prototyping in situated contexts what it may mean for local stakeholders to take their own responsibilities in the public realm seriously, engaging again in collaboratively discussing/acting with others about common matters of concerns (12, 13, 14). Yet, what does it concretely mean to consider interests beyond the human sphere? What if common human interests could first be grounded in those of the planet? Within the Participatory Design community, we have been talking a lot during the past few years about "design as politics" (15, 16, 17, 18 and 19) (included the last PDC2018). But what if *design as politics* should include those other forms of agency? What about expanding our understanding of concepts such as politics to include a "politics of nature" (by borrowing Bruno Latour's words) (20)?

This new series of DESIS Philosophy Talks "*Designing as politics (of nature)*" will question what this ontological shift - from an anthropocentric to a non-anthropocentric mindset - may possibly mean for designing today. We discuss how this ontological awareness may further shape our thinking/acting in designing, making it more eco-systemic by making tangible the interrelationship between the interests of the planet and those of humans, thus ultimately also between social and ecological sustainability. What could design as politics (of nature) concretely mean? We need both to imagine a theoretical frame of reference by drawing, for instance, on those theories from philosophy and anthropology (as some of the aforementioned ones) that tackle this ontological shift, and discuss how these frameworks can help us to re-think the instruments we use in designing, questioning how far we are in really thinking in a radically relational and eco-systemic way, when dealing with concepts such as participation and social innovation, and finding in those theories the possibility to open new perspectives. For instance, how can design find ways to include in the political arenas of conversations for action natural non-human agents as essential for more organic, truly eco-systemic cities? Which instruments are needed to give voice to those silent, and yet relevant, human and non-human voices and to their agencies? What does it mean to design from the perspective of radical interdependence? How can design contribute to articulate a politics of nature, one that might place interdependence at the core of the political concern?

Potential to draw participants and their active participation

Before the conference, the organizers will launch a call on the PDC2020, DESIS Network, DESIS Philosophy Talks and Cumulus websites, where we will communicate the theme and set-up and invite participants - both internationally and locally - to take part in the Conversation. Once registered, participants will receive a position papers written by the organizers and will be invited to contribute to the conversation, and to bring a particular case (possibly coming from their own practices, but not necessarily) with their own definition of ontological design; each participant would fill in a card with her or his own definitions (the format will be developed by the organizers). Before the Talk, we will use these cards to examine the various understandings of ontology emerging from the practical aspects of the cases, arriving at a cognitive map that disentangles and problematizes the definitions. This cognitive map will be the basis for the conversation. Two of the organizers will work on the map during the conversation, and different cards will be developed to identify challenges and opportunities by marking tensions/opportunities on the map (on the nodes, between the nodes).

METHODOLOGY

The Talk will open with a presentation of the collaborative mapping on ontological design, and with a position paper that articulates the organizers' perspective on the matter of the politics of nature starting from the collaborative map. The organizers will also personally invite a few (from three to four) Participatory Design researchers selected from the conference participants who are academically publishing on this particular theme (such as those mentioned in the bibliography) to take part in the discussion as Respondents. The Respondents will be closely briefed by the organizers before the Conversation will take place. Also some key philosophers/anthropologists working on these issues (three of four scholars, such as for instance Bruno Latour, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Marisol de la Cadena and Tim Ingold) will be asked to develop a short video-statement (max 5 minutes) in which they introduce some key concepts for the discussion, and explain how they foresee a potential value for their insights for design research/consider some experiences coming from design research within their theoretical reflections.

During the conference, the conversation will engage the participants in the form of an experimental seminar which starts with the discussion paper (that will be shared with the all participants on beforehand) that positions and frames the topics at hand within the design practice. These topics will be accompanied by a philosophical framing of some key authors and concepts chosen by the respondents along with the organizers, included those of the philosophers/anthropologists asked to contribute to the discussion remotely with the video-statements. After the philosophical and anthropological framing, each of the invited Respondents (max 5 min) will briefly present and frame her/his selection of concepts, relate them when possible to ones proposed at the beginning of the session, possible also by presenting case studies related to those concepts, bring them into relationship with the collaborative mapping, and raising a series of questions for design that connect practice to more philosophical insights. The questions will be printed and will become the starting point for the open discussion with all the participants.

In the following open and interactive discussion, different questions for designing will be tackled. A larger number of attendees (max 80 people, registering before the conference) are invited to actively participate in the discussion. Arturo Escobar and Virginia Tassinari will wrap up the discussion, highlighting the concrete outcomes of the discussion and their potential value for PD research.

The session will end by asking all the participants to make a small podcast (max 3 min) providing their own definition of ontological design. These podcasts will be shared on the DESIS Network website and will serve as a basis for putting together the proposal for a Design Journal Special Issue.

After the conference, the results of the discussion (together with the video-statements and the small podcasts) will be presented to the international community in various ways through live streaming on the DESIS Network website, and by means of the Design Journal Special Issue to which everybody actively participating in the Tutorial is welcome to contribute.

Proposed schedule:

10:00 - 10:30 Welcome & Philosophical and anthropological positioning (Arturo Escobar), and link with design (Ezio Manzini)

10:30 - 10:50 Presentations given by the three respondents

10:50 - 11:20 Open interactive discussion

11:20 - 11:30: Wrap up (Arturo Escobar and Ezio Manzini)

Proposed location: the Botanical Garden

Small proposed bibliography:

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11. Bruno Latour, Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime (Polity Press, 2018)
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22. Val Plumwood. 2002. Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason. Routledge, 2002.
23. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2017. As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance. University of Minnesota Press
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