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Gerard Kuperus's *Ecopolitics* constitutes an important effort to theorize the significance of nonhuman experience to contemporary politics. To do this it asserts both that animals exhibit “political” behavior, and also that such behavior can act as inspiration for building more egalitarian, ecologically sustainable societies. In this argument, Kuperus draws not only on studies in ecology, biology and zoology, but also on theorists such as Peter Kropotkin and Bruno Latour. While the book does fall somewhat short in adequately developing the practical implications of its philosophical account, it contains important insights concerning how nonhuman agencies can inform a politics relevant to the period of the Anthropocene.

Kuperus begins his argument by joining the growing chorus of thinkers who challenge traditional conceptions of sovereign personal identity and agency. He invokes Bruno Latour’s actor network theory to suggest that, instead of viewing actions as originating in the thoughts and desires of autonomous individuals, one must begin any definition of personhood by acknowledging the fact that we are always engaged in networks of action, causation, and intention. He argues that this observation suggests that what seem to be motivations that come from us and that react to a static environment filled with inert objects are indelibly intertwined with webs of actors, agencies, and energies outside of the individual’s control. He continues by claiming that acknowledging the networked nature of individual agency leads to the reciprocal observation that objects most consider to be inanimate or governed only by instinct should be considered to possess their own agency. Kuperus particularly focuses on the agency of animals and what he would characterize as their social norms. He does this because he believes that animals do not merely “follow” each other and conform to repetitive biological impulses, but instead constantly negotiate relationships with their
fellow animals and the environment. Thus, animals do not simply form herds, schools, or gaggles, but instead must “collaborate” with each other and their surroundings. Kuperus claims that such processes of collaboration offer models that both challenge our understanding of human agency, identity, and social interaction and can be used to construct new visions of society.

A prime example of Kuperus’s use of animal behavior to envision new understandings of politics is his discussion of salmon. He claims that because these fish live in both salt and fresh water and their bodies dramatically transform depending upon the phase of their life and the environment corresponding to that phase, they exhibit a particularly fluid, interactive, and “networked” existence. As opposed to exhibiting merely rote instinct, Kuperus argues that we should regard the salmon as reacting and re-reacting to the demands of the particular environment in which they reside at a particular time. Furthermore, because salmon make these journeys and transformation in schools, they constitute an example of a particularly self-organized and networked form of agency, with schools not being led by one fish but instead forming through fish reacting to other fish and their group reacting to their surroundings. Kuperus notes a further dimension of such networked agency through observing how the humans interact with the salmons’ environment. He recounts how North American Native cultures who live in salmon habitats both take from and protect the integrity of such environments, thinking of the rivers and their inhabitants such as salmon as partners as opposed to resources. In contrasting contemporary capitalism’s extractive orientation toward the environment with this understanding based in mutuality and respect, Kuperus articulates a compelling vision of both networked agency and mutual and egalitarian community.

Another way Kuperus uses examples from the animal kingdom to construct new conceptions of politics and community is to use contemporary biological and zoological studies to challenge many of the stereotypes of animal behavior that are often used to justify authoritarian politics. For example, Kuperus notes how, as opposed to living in hierarchical groups where one or few alpha males dominate, recent scholarship instead demonstrates that “chimps notably establish many horizontal relationships that form a hierarchy. Chimpanzee power is not to be understood in terms of a ladder, but rather as a network that involves other strong males, weaker males, females and children.... Male chimpanzees also bargain with one another (often involving grooming one another).... Yet the females are not powerless in the process. In fact, mating only occurs if the female allows this to happen” (p. 95).

This nuanced recounting of chimp behavior, which is so often invoked as indicative of deep-seated qualities of “human nature,” portrays their groups as not military-like organizations with clear lines of influence, but instead as constantly shifting associations based on negotiations between actors with unique yet equally important roles. Just as salmon constantly change in relation to their different environments, chimpanzee groups also constantly change through reconfiguration of the relationships between their individual members. Kuperus presents other animals and their environments such as rats, ants, and the various denizens of tide pools to build on this understanding of animal behavior as being rooted in collaboration, negotiation, and networked agency.

In terms of the larger political implications of these investigations into the animal kingdom, Kuperus claims that the networked, fluid, communicative relationships he observes in animals bear striking resemblance to those of anarchist groups, especially those portrayed by the anarchism of Kropotkin. To those who know Kropotkin’s work, this should not come as too large a surprise due to his frequent invocation of Darwin and other biologists and naturalists to support his views. But for those only familiar with folk interpretations of
Darwin and anarchism, this linkage between animal behavior and egalitarian politics might seem absurd. In fact, both Darwin and Kropotkin note that interspecies cooperation constitutes an important evolutionary advantage, and that adaptation to environments as opposed to rapacious mastery of ecosystems constitutes the best strategy for long-term survival. Despite the fact that cooperation with others and our environment, as opposed to competition, constitutes a powerful evolutionary precedent, Kuperus is not so naive as to leave the propagation of such attitudes to instinct. He recommends cultivating micro-political practices, developing discourses, and placing ourselves in environments that could build on this evolutionary heritage. For example, he gives the example of a nature preserve on the Marker Meer in his native Netherlands. To him “the islands are functional and provide an opportunity for humans to connect with other species to be in an ecosystem planned and engineered to some degree by humans and in which we can collaborate with the non-human world” (p. 180). The islands were not simply designed with human needs in mind, but instead represent a “collaboration of humans, water, silt and sand, wind, seeds, insects, birds, and fish” (p. 179). Through this and other experiences with nature, Kuperus contends that humans can adopt the collaborative practices and networked understanding of identity so prevalent in animal behavior.

All in all, Ecopolitics articulates a compelling vision of both how natural science can be integrated with political theory and politics based on collaboration between individual humans and their environment. His account does raise questions about how his interpretation of the political promise of animal behavior can be applied to practical politics. As discussed above, Kuperus claims that micro-political practices such as traveling through collaboratively built environments both demonstrate and could in fact prompt humans to adopt his model of collaboration. But merely existing in a certain environment for a certain period of time and even describing it in new ways that might or might not seep into other areas of one’s life presents a picture that does not fully represent the true implications of collaborative practices. Kuperus’s understanding in this example is frustratingly unidirectional—the environment affects the person moving through it, but the person need not affect the environment. True collaboration represents a dynamic back-and-forth that sometimes leads to tension, problems, and unsatisfactory and temporary resolutions. It seems more appropriate to say that those who build and maintain such environments actually enter into a collaborative relationship with them as opposed to those who merely stroll in them. It is they who actually feel the qualities and perhaps resistance of the soil and observe and recalibrate the paths of both water and wildlife produced through their interventions in the environment. Furthermore, those actually both allowing themselves to be changed and changing environments will most likely be the ones who both value and establish procedures that encourage collaboration. Whereas animals collaborate instinctually, humans can, and some would say need to augment their unforced collaborations with at least habits and practices that can sustain such difficult endeavors. While Ecopolitics presents a compelling argument for humans to look to the nonhuman realm for new understandings of politics and community, it falls short in translating this call into a workable transformation of this vision into practice. But this does not negate the vision itself, nor the methodological innovations of this study. In offering a powerful argument for the political relevance of the relationship between the human and nonhumans, Ecopolitics constitutes a book that both merits discussion and will hopefully spark many experiments in political and social activism.