

How did we get here? The Organization of Anthropocentrism

Supervisors: Dr [Caroline Clarke](#), Department of People and Organisation, The Open University Business School and Dr Matthew Cole, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Project description:

Below we set out some of the proposed aims of this project, although we are open to suggestion and adaptation around these from candidates.

1. To explore how anthropocentrism has become embedded in a set of organisational practices, routines and rituals that largely ignore the links to the current crises of climate and pandemic
2. To appreciate how the conditions that enable zoonotic disease – caused by germs that spread between animals and people – are rooted in the organisation of taken for granted assumptions concerning animals as objects and disposable resources.
3. To consider posthumanist perspectives as one avenue to challenge the dominant ideology that humans and their (economic) concerns must be privileged above all else. How could these ideas be refigured to help us organise, so we can ‘live well’ with all who rely on planet earth as their future host?

Theoretical perspective

In the last half century, we have witnessed an alarming increase in climate problems such as global warming, as well as an exponential rise in novel zoonotic diseases at the interface of the interaction between humans and animals. These two crises are not distinct, but co-constituted through anthropocentrism, combined with the ideology of human exceptionalism and misplaced illusions of mastery. In speaking about his activist film *‘the planet of the humans’*, Michael Moore suggested that during global lockdown ‘Mother Nature has sent us to our time-out rooms’ (The Hill, 2020), for grave reflection on past, present and future practices that our precarious situation necessitates (see also Attenborough, 2020) Despite the voluminous text and conversations about COVID19 that is emerging from all parts of society, there has been almost no mention of how we have arrived at this juncture, despite the possibility that it holds for pushing us over the precipices towards destruction. This is partly because many of the findings and discussions will be unpalatable for individuals and organisations alike, requiring us to facilitate a radical ‘reboot’ if we are to avoid frequent and more deadly pandemics in the future (Benatar, 2007; Greger, 2020). Moreover, we also need to find ways to halt the juggernaut of climate destruction that continues, even gathers momentum, but these problems are synergistic.

A rare example of such a discussion is found in a report by the World Health Organisation, citing seven reasons for the emergence of COVID19, with climate change being one, and our treatment of animals comprising four of the remaining six factors (UNEA, 2020). The organisation of animal feeding and its regimes, the ubiquitous incorporation of antibiotics for animals to ingest and our increased consumption of animal body parts (Smart and Smart, 2017) all form part of the problem. There is also substantial scientific evidence that shows how agribusiness bears considerable responsibility for greenhouse gas, deforestation and other forms of ecological and environmental devastation (Cowspiracy; Nyberg and Wright, 2020), already being evidenced by disastrous wildfires from the Amazon rainforest and Australia to Siberia and

Portugal, floods, and melting icebergs. However, in the media, and even critical management and organisational studies, discussing the consequences of the Coronavirus appear preferable to explanations of the conditions for its emergence. Crucially, COVID19 is neither an isolated nor unpredictable occurrence, as shown by multiple zoonotic forms of disease that have emerged in the last two decades e.g. bird flu, swine flu, and mad cow disease (vCJD). With each outbreak, it is predicted that the frequency and severity of the next is likely to increase (Smart and Smart, 2017), while the deadliest strain H5N1 is already waiting in the wings (Greger, 2020).

While the organisation of animals is a fascinating, yet under-researched topic in the field of organization studies (for recent examples see: Clarke and Knights, 2018, 2019; Doré and Michalon, 2016; Hannah and Robertson, 2016; Hillier and Byrne, 2016; Labatut et al., 2016, Sage et al., 2016; Sayers, 2016; Skoglund and Redmalm, 2016; Krawczyk and Barthold), the current urgency of the context outlined requires more research in this field, and in conjunction with other disciplines. Despite their omnipresence in organisations, until recently very little has been said about animals, whether in relation to their explicitly productive 'purpose' (as food), or their implicitly 'productive' worth in terms of being hunted, performing in circuses, or as pets in animal shows. As a species, we humans simultaneously profess to care for animals, while also ruthlessly exploiting them for food, pleasure, clothes, companionship, experimentation, transport or so-called sport/entertainment, often without acknowledging any moral contradiction (Wolfe, 2003; Francione, 2004; Cole and Stewart, 2016). This is predicated on ideas of our own superiority and dominance in relation to those 'Others' we live among, while Organisations facilitate, encourage, profit from, and arrange for the smooth execution of (bureaucratic) processes that make these specific human-animal relations possible. As scholars of organisation, we must not remain uncritical of their /our role in presenting animals as taken-for-granted, disposable resources.

It is for this reason that we wish to propose a posthumanist theoretically informed study, involving an interdisciplinary marriage, between Critical Management Studies and Critical Animal Studies, for one cannot be fully understood without the other. This call should appeal to students who would be interested in pursuing a radical analysis and reconfiguration of the affordances given to animals in any organisational context. This could relate to alternative managing in or outside the capitalist market in the Global North or the Global South, encouraging symbiotic lifestyles that benefit life as such, or planetary vitality, including but not exclusive to humans. Or, radically different approaches to organising the existing food system that shift from agribusiness monocropping, and Concentrated Animal Feeding Organisations etc, towards veganic practices or some form of permaculture that foster biodiversity at the same time as feeding humans. Crucially, these must not be predicated on our existing anthropocentric assumptions of subservience to economic success at all costs.

Proposed Methodology

This PhD proposal will appeal to those who enjoy qualitative methods. For example, we would be open to interviews, ethnography or documentary analysis, to multi-modal methodologies and those drawing on cultural studies, literary criticism or visual analysis (Bell and Davison, 2012). Finally, novel theoretical contributions to the field(s) are desirable, so long as there is a clear connection to organisation studies. The former could be informed by philosophy, critical theory and critical animal studies as well as any other relevant stream of literature.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Caroline Clarke has studied veterinary surgeons and published papers in relation to anthropocentric practices, touching on the area of critical animal studies. Caroline has supervised many doctoral students successfully, on subjects as diverse as identity, gender, surveillance, and whistleblowers.

Dr Matthew Cole's work encompasses the socio-cultural reproduction of nonhuman animal exploitation across various domains such as academia, mass media, and childhood socialisation practices. He also studies the history and representation of veganism and is currently interested in developing a social harm/zemiological perspective in critical animal studies.

Please note that this is a cross-faculty, cross-disciplinary PhD studentship. For administrative reasons the successful candidate will be formally based in the Department of People and Organizations, Faculty of Business and Law.

References / readings:

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