

Ontologies as Deep Leverage Points: Interconnectedness and Production

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Introduction

- While many people are aware of climate change, the broader ecological crisis remains less widely acknowledged (Leiserowitz et al. 2023; Novacek 2008).
- Because this crisis spans many interconnected systems, solutions that target surface-level problems often fail to produce transformational change.
- Human production—the ways we organize our engagement with the more-than-human world to reproduce social life—lies at the center of this ecological confrontation.
- Scholars such as Peter Maggs and Michael Robinson (2016) argue that addressing the crisis may require ontological change, not just more information about environmental problems.
- Ontologies, as shared frameworks that structure how people interpret the world and their relationship to it, will be argued to function as deep leverage points for systemic transformation. Because dominant and marginalized ontologies frame human–nature relations differently, they may lead to contrasting visions about how societies organize production.

Research Question

How do differences between the dominant Western capitalist-scientific ontology and relational ontologies that emphasize human and other-than-human interconnectedness shape understandings of production, and what does this reveal about the role of ontological change in addressing the ecological crisis?

Thesis

I will be arguing that the site of ontological change has the capacity to be a key leverage point for political-economic transformation surrounding the ecological crisis by looking at how the Western capitalist-scientific ontology produces economic organization based upon a narrow conception of what is important for human life, grounded in human distinctness, social progress and abstract growth, and how a phenomenologically-informed and a Potawatomi Indigenous ontology promote productive organization which emphasizes fundamental human embeddedness in the more-than-human world, reciprocal care and mutual flourishing, respectively.

Theory and Methodology

This research adopts a ‘flat’ new materialist lens, which understands reality as unfolding within a shared plane of experience encompassing humans and a broad other-than-human host of actors who are recognized by the fact that they are in causal relationships. From this perspective, social and linguistic categories are tools that material beings use to label and interpret the world’s ongoing dynamic processes. Informed by this, ontologies will be treated as frameworks composed of particular kinds of information about the world. Building on critiques of the information-deficit model of change (e.g., Maggs & Robinson 2016), the key issue for transformational change related to the ecological crisis is not the absence of information, but the type of information that structures our understanding. Ontology therefore concerns information how we understand the world and our place in it.

This project uses close reading and interpretive analysis. It draws on the work of Val Plumwood, Carolyn Merchant, and Joel Kovel to examine how scientific and capitalist worldviews have shaped human–nature relations. To explore alternative understandings of relationality, it also engages with works from Robin Wall Kimmerer and David Abram.

The ecological crisis is not only a problem of knowledge, but of ontology: how we understand our relationship to the more-than-human world shapes how we organize production, the critical site of interaction between humans and the rest of nature where societies are reproduced.

Key Findings

Reproducing Hyperseparation

Human Distinctness

- Western philosophical traditions increasingly framed humans as fundamentally separate from nature, grounding this distinction in the possession of reason (Plumwood).
- During the Scientific Revolution, thinkers such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes advanced a mechanistic view of nature as passive matter that could be understood, controlled, and used for human benefit (Merchant).
- Capitalist modes of production further entrenched this worldview by organizing human activity around the extraction and control of natural processes (Kovel).
- Ecological thinkers argue that this framework produces a false sense of human autonomy, obscuring our fundamental embeddedness within the more-than-human world.

Abstraction of the Other-Than-Human

- Scientific and Enlightenment thought encouraged abstract knowledge of the world, replacing experiential engagement with generalized categories.
- Through mechanistic science, the more-than-human world came to be studied by isolating objects from their ecological contexts (Merchant).
- This abstraction encourages humans to encounter beings as types or resources, rather than as particular participants in shared ecological relationships.
- As Plumwood argues, modern objectivity constructs knowledge as disengaged and monological, obscuring the relational processes through which humans remain embedded in the more-than-human world.

Hyperseparation and Production

- Understanding the natural world as something that humans are distinct from has allowed us to see ourselves as uniquely capable of manipulating nature in pursuit of ideas of “growth” and “progress” constituent of capitalist frameworks.
- By both understanding the other-than-human world as fundamentally different in kind than the human world and believing that knowledge of the other-than-human is best achieved by breaking it up into its component parts, humans have encountered nature in terms of abstractions rather than knowing it through experiential relations. When experience is mediated through abstraction rather than encountering things in their particularity, the relational character of life is obscured, enabling production to be organized around narrow, short-term interests as if humans were separate from the more-than-human world.

Framing Understandings of Interconnectedness

David Abram’s The Spell of the Sensuous – A Phenomenological Route to Ecological Interconnectedness

- Phenomenology, beginning with Edmund Husserl, redirects inquiry toward the world as directly experienced, arguing that all scientific knowledge ultimately emerges from lived experience.
- Building on this, Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is embodied and relational: the sensing body and the world continuously shape one another through reciprocal encounter.
- David Abram argues that modern abstractions, particularly scientific reasoning and alphabetic language, distance humans from the sensuous, more-than-human world.
- A phenomenological perspective instead reveals humans as participants within an interconnected field of life, rather than as detached observers of nature.

Key Findings cont.

Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass – An Indigenous Account of Ecological Interconnectedness

- Kimmerer’s a democracy of actors in the world, rather than living as though there is a tyranny of one.
- Realizing how many perspectives are available to us if we understand the other-than-human world as teachers who carry wisdom.
- Understanding that everything is in a sense downstream from everything else, that there is no way to cut us off from the rest of the more-than-human world. “All of our flourishing is mutual” (166).
- Understanding that gifts come with responsibilities and that our human capacities are not for our unique use, but it is our responsibility to use them to care for the world that takes care of us.
- Realizing that scientific names for things cannot tell us all there is to know about who a being is, and that stopping our exploration of it only after simply identifying it, cuts us off from relationship with it.

How Understandings of Interconnectedness Might Impact Production

- Because human wellbeing is inseparable from the flourishing of the wider living world, productive systems should prioritize mutual thriving rather than isolated economic gain.
- If human abilities are understood as gifts that carry responsibilities, productive activity should be organized around reciprocal care for the ecosystems that sustain it, rather than unsustainable extraction.
- When humans are understood as necessarily embedded in a relational field of life that becomes evident when attended to prior to conceptualizing it, productive organization must account for our inseparability from, and dependence on, this web of mutual affordances.



Conclusion

This research argues that ontological frameworks shape how productive organization is understood and enacted. Dominant capitalist and scientific ontologies often naturalize a worldview in which humans are separate from, and dominant over, the rest of the living world, contributing to extractive and growth-centered forms of production. Drawing on relational perspectives articulated by Robin Wall Kimmerer and David Abram, this research highlights alternate ontologies that emphasize interdependence, reciprocity, and more-than-human participation. Recognizing these ontological differences, and how they might inform different visions of production suggests that transforming how we understand our place within the living world may be a key leverage point for reimagining productive systems and thus for making transformational change in relation to the ecological crisis.

References

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