

Sustainability and Posthumanism

Mareike Zobel / Carsten Ohlrogge

In the light of current global, environmental and social emergencies, questions about the relevance, place, and perspectives of humans have come into focus. A socio-ecological transformation of society, actively proclaimed and pursued by governments, organisations, and individuals alike, is diagnosed as failing by an increasing number of scholars and experts – and inextricably linked to the self-understanding of humans. Climate change in particular exemplifies this entanglement: Human life is possible only in an interdependent relationship with other species, technologies, and planetary processes that cannot be understood as a merely passive environment. The term Posthumanism encompasses approaches that question the assumption that humans occupy a separate or naturally privileged position in the world. Rather than diminishing the importance of humans, these approaches investigate how humans and more-than-humans are interconnected, how agency and responsibility are distributed within these relations, and what implications for the (self-)understanding arise from a de-centred positioning of humans.

Posthumanism: Extending the Sociological Frame of Reference

Poststructuralism had raised serious doubt about the human subject as a central discursive and ethical entity in the middle of the second half of the 20th century (Foucault 2003: 463). Subsequent discourses in sociology as well as disciplines such as philosophy or anthropology turned towards exploring the

significance of the material dimensions of social relations with nature. These debates questioned the idea that humans exist as autonomous subjects outside the material, ecological, and technological relations of social life. Following a non-dualistic logic (Ferrando 2013), posthumanist approaches aim to withstand the established binary between humans and non-humans, and understand human subjects as always already constituted within complex, human and more-than-human relations.

Posthumanism can be seen as a prominent discursive strand in these attempts to decentre humans by challenging the assumption that only human subjects constitute social meaning and agency. As it is understood here, posthumanism is defined by a critique of human centrality, of hierarchies between human and more-than-human dimensions, and of historically changing definitions of the human and the non-human (Ferrando 2013). Posthumanist theories thus challenge classical sociological perspectives that analytically isolate human actors and treat material or ecological relations as passive contexts of social life. Regarding socio-ecological challenges in particular, posthumanist perspectives contribute to examining the situated and contingent position of humans in order to broaden the view on other possible ways of life and on more-than-human justice.

Posthumanist Perspectives on Sustainability

The field of posthumanist approaches in sociology as well as posthumanist contributions to a sustainability discourse have diversified significantly over the past decades. The following sections zoom in on four selected but overlapping debates that underline the contribution of posthumanist thought to a sociology of sustainability. They should not be understood as mutually exclusive theoretical schools.

The Anthropocene

The debate on the Anthropocene, i.e., a contested term for a period defined by the planetary impact of human activity (Crutzen/Stoermer 2000), is among the most fundamental to the current socio-ecological crisis. In 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) together with the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) rejected the proposal to formalise the Anthropocene as an official unit of the Geological Time Scale; the term nevertheless remains influential as a scientific and societal diagnosis (IUGS/ICS 2024). From a posthumanist view, it is particularly relevant as the idea of the Anthropocene revolves around the human as a central factor in planetary dynamics. Posthumanist approaches fulfil a dual function as both diagnosis and critique of the Anthropocene: They recognise that human activities have become a planetary force while also questioning the generalisation of ‘the human’, which can conceal unequal responsibilities associated with colonial histories, capitalist production, industrial infrastructures, and patterns of consumption. Dürbeck (2018), for example, distinguishes different Anthropocene narratives that assign agency, responsibility, and possible solutions in divergent ways. For a sociology of sustainability, this tension opens up the possibility of developing alternative planetary relations by rethinking more-than-human connections (Pötzsch 2025).

New Materialisms

The already mentioned significance of the material dimension of social life, laid out in post-constructivism, is further developed in theories of New Materialism. New Materialist approaches align with Bruno Latour’s objection to treating objects and material processes as merely passive resources or backgrounds to human action (Latour 2010; Coole/Frost 2010). Their central contribution is to show that material properties, substances, and infrastructures make a difference to how social situations develop. The posthumanist implications of neo-materialist approaches become explicit where the turn to materiality is understood not simply as an expansion of the analytical field, but as a critique of the anthropocentrically privileged subject. Materiality then appears not as a passive object domain, but as constitutive of relational forms of agency, knowledge, and ethical responsibility. Ecologically, this becomes visible when pollutants and atmospheric processes are understood not simply as external objects of analysis but as forces that shape bodies, practices, and possibilities for action. By focusing on these relations, New Materialist approaches aim to dissolve the subject-object dualism. Socio-ecological crises appear in a new light as environmental dynamics are no longer understood as a human manipulation of the (natural) environment, but as a nexus of interdependent, material and non-material forces.

Feminist Posthumanisms and Eco-Feminism

The connections between posthumanist and (eco-) feminist thought are central to the sociology of sustainability as they shed light on the entanglement of social, natural, and power relations. Posthumanism intersects particularly with (neo-)materialist, post-colonial, and ecofeminist traditions in their shared critique of exclusionary humanist ideals. These feminist traditions challenged the notion of a humanist universalism that privileged male perspectives. Post-

humanist approaches take this critique further to include anti-dualist and anti-anthropocentric questions (Ferrando 2013). Scholars such as Donna Haraway (2016a) or Rosi Braidotti (2019) brought posthuman and feminist thought together by reimagining subjectivity beyond fixed identities, emphasizing embodiment, more-than-human relationality, and the interconnectedness of systems. Eco-feminist and material feminist perspectives highlight the interdependence of ecological and social issues, e.g., how environmental destruction, societal structures and gender inequality are linked (Åsberg 2017; Cielemecka and Daigle 2019). A sociology of sustainability can draw on both feminist posthumanism and eco-feminism in their emphasis on everyday practices, their concern with the ethics and economics of care, and their understanding of sustainability as extending from environmental concerns to inseparable matters of social justice.

Environmental Humanities

In the field of the environmental humanities, scholars from anthropology, philosophy, literary or cultural studies have been rethinking social relationships with nature, the position of humans in relation to the more-than-human world, and more-than-human agency. Due to the diversity of disciplinary approaches that compose the environmental humanities, they can be defined more broadly by a shared interest in and concern with the posthumanist emphasis on “naturecultures” (Haraway 2016b: pp. 93), which understands culture not as a human activity set against nature, but as an entangled nexus of humans, more-than-humans, and technologies. This interdisciplinary field of the humanities integrates concepts from animal studies (Wolfe 2009) and multispecies research (Rose et al. 2012), emphasises the entanglement of bodies, technologies, and other materials, or reflects on the relationship between bodies, ecologies, and politics in the light of the climate emergency (Neimanis 2017). Posthumanist ecocritics oppose anthropocentric and human exceptionalist thinking,

recognising agency as distributed across species and systems while rethinking the ethical implications of humans embedded in these relations. Integrating approaches from literary and cultural analysis such as an attention to narratives and a posthumanist understanding of multispecies coexistence represents a chance for a sociology of sustainability to address questions of experience, responsibility, interdependence, and vulnerability in more-than-human relationships.

Follow-Up: Posthumanist Desiderata for Sociological Sustainability Research

A sociology of sustainability benefits from an engagement with posthumanist positions as they offer a perspective on sustainability as dependent on the relations between humans, non-humans, things, and environments. New Materialisms draw attention to the agency of matter: nature, technology, bodies, and substances are not merely passive backgrounds of human action, but material forces that participate in and co-shape processes of sustainability. This allows sociologists to understand phenomena such as climate change, resource flows, or energy cycles not as contextual conditions but as active forces in social processes. The Anthropocene debates sharpen this perspective by demonstrating that social action can no longer be thought apart from its geological planetary entanglements. For a sociology of sustainability, this expands the view beyond social institutions or cultural patterns to take planetary scales into account. Posthumanist and eco-feminisms shine a light on the intertwined dimensions of ecology, power, and the social. They point to the exploitation of nature as interwoven with patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures, and thereby highlight that sustainability is not only an ecological and environmental matter but inextricably linked to questions of social justice. Finally, the posthumanist environmental humanities expand sociological perspectives by

taking a post-dualist and post-anthropocentric approach to the narratives, experiences, and material dimensions of human and more-than-human relationships. Taken together, posthumanist perspectives enrich a sociology of sustainability in three central ways: On a conceptual level, they shift its anthropocentric focus, consider material and more-than-human actors as constitutive of social relations, and draw attention to planetary scales. On a methodological level, this opens new perspectives on research focus and practice, as it implies a repositioning of the objects and subjects of research, and opens the door for less established approaches to knowledge and experience (Gherardi 2019). Practically, this means following sustainability problems across material flows, infrastructures, species relations, and institutional arrangements rather than treating nature as an external context. With regards to the political dimensions and possibilities of research, posthumanist perspectives foreground the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice and open the view to post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic cultural imaginations. Latour's "parliament of things" (Latour 1993) serves as a classical example for concepts that include more-than-human entities as well as ecological systems into collective decision-making processes and can inspire researchers to continue questioning assumed orders of knowledge. In this sense, posthumanist sustainability is not only a normative guideline for more-than-human coexistence or a thematic field concerned with human-nature-relationships, but a relational, more-than-human perspective for rethinking the social itself.

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Authors:

Mareike Zobel is Research Associate at the Forest Research Institute Baden-Württemberg, and Affiliated Researcher at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge.

mz333@cam.ac.uk

Carsten Ohlrogge is Research Associate at the Institute of Sociology, University of Münster.

carsten.ohlrogge@uni-muenster.de

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