

DK: This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

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An Anarchist Bestiary

In the previous episode of this series I looked at Bestiaries, manuscripts popular in medieval times containing illustrations of animals, birds, trees and even stones. Along with some natural history about the illustration they contained moral lessons premised on the idea that the natural world reflected the Word of God.

I went on to suggest that as the bestiary waned in importance with the waxing of modern Western science, the fundamental assumptions of the bestiary were carried through into scientific thinking.

The first of these assumptions was a hierarchy in which humans have dominion over the rest of the natural world.

The second assumption was of hierarchies between humans which are reflected and reinforced in the natural world. For example, the assumption that men are superior to women is used as a lens to view nature, observations and experiments are interpreted through that lens and confirming data found which is used to support and reinforce the initial assumption, so we say: "Look, in nature, males are superior to females, it must be the way of the world!"

There has been a turn to more-than-human perspectives from academics, activists, practitioners and enthusiasts, particularly since the turn of the millennium. However, these assumptions continue to influence modern Western science, and are deeply embedded in popular discourse, infecting the rhetoric around immigration, gender relations, non-heterosexual lifeways, the exploitation of nature, climate disruption and much more. In this episode, I want to turn to criticisms of these assumptions from within and beyond the scientific establishment and to a view of the more-than-human world that would allow us to imagine futures in which all inhabitants of the planet can thrive.

Unweaving the hierarchical bestiary

Humans as distinct from nature

Let's begin with the assumption that humans have dominion over nature. In the medieval bestiary, humans were considered unique divine creations, set above the rest of nature by God. Similarly, for modern Western science, humans are unique and separate from the rest of the natural world in their capacity to study it from an objective 'view from nowhere', in the complexity of their cognition, language and societies, and in their capacity to impact the planet.

I would like to draw on the work of philosopher Timothy Morton to challenge this assumption.

Morton argues that the very concept of "Nature" is the biggest obstacle to our understanding of the world around us. It is a container for something 'over there', a place we can visit, protect, romanticise and exploit, but separate from us. Morton argues that we must drop the word nature if we want to understand ecology- indeed they titled one of his key works 'Ecology without Nature'. Morton specifically argues against a hierarchical view of nature in which humans are able to look in from outside and objectively observe the world. Instead, Morton says, we are intimately and inseparably part of the world- there is no clear line as to where humans end and nature begins, as we are increasingly aware when looking, for example, at the bacteria that are integral to digestion in our guts or at our own impact on ecosystems.

Morton coined the term hyperobjects to describe things like climate change or plastic pollution that are so massively distributed in space and time that humans cannot possibly be outside or separate from them, but are always immersed in them, always a part of them. Hyperobjects dissolve the idea of nature as separate from humans as we realise how unavoidable, constantly present and life affecting they are.

Morton claims therefore we are forced to consider a new morality based on a new way of thinking where we stop seeing ourselves as separate from nature, exploiting it or trying to save it, but instead navigate the messy intimacies of our entanglement with the rest of the planet.

I think there are many who would resonate with the idea that humans are part of nature, yet the way our economies and societies are organised, and our language which describes nature as a resource to be exploited, implicate us in a view of the world which is still trapped in the bestial hierarchy.

Human hierarchies reinforced through nature

Let's turn next to the way we read nature as reinforcing human hierarchies. The medieval bestiary works as a self-fulfilling loop. Observe the natural world through the lens of Christian doctrine. Find explanations for those observations that fit the doctrine, then take those observations of evidence for the veracity of the doctrine.

Modern, Western science inherited this circular thinking replacing christianity with evolution so that hierarchies based on race, gender, wealth for example, are assumed to be reflected in the natural world and to represent the end point of a natural and inevitable evolutionary progression.

To dismantle this assumption I would like to refer particularly to the work of anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, particularly his 1902 book, *Mutual Aid: a factor of evolution*, and then more recent feminist posthuman scholar Donna Haraway, particularly her 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble*.

Kropotkin criticised the way Social Darwinists used the idea of the survival of the fittest as a self-fulfilling thinking tool. Competition was considered as the key mechanism for evolution and so the nature and behaviour of every species was interpreted using this lens and thus seen then as evidence for it. Social Darwinists then drew an analogy between

biological evolution and human cultural development which was interpreted as animated by an analogous mechanism of competition and survival of the fittest.

Based on his own studies, Kropotkin countered that solidarity and mutual aid have a greater influence on both biological and cultural evolution than competition. He gave multiple examples from his own observations to support this contention such as the cooperative life of ants, or shared hunting techniques used by pelicans, writing: *Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle. Mutual aid is as much a law of animal life as mutual struggle.* If we accept his argument, then we also accept that hierarchy and oppression in human society is not inevitable, and is therefore within human control. He believed the analogy between biological evolution and human social history was untenable and served to justify social inequalities which had very real and traceable historical origins.

Kropotkin's argument is therefore twofold- he is arguing against the simplification of evolutionary theory to the survival of the fittest and arguing against a simplistic translation of the mechanisms of biological evolution to human culture in which there are other historical, political and social factors in play.

Since Kropotkin's time Sociobiology, Evolutionary Psychology and Human Behavioural Ecology have taken the place of Social Darwinism, still applying a similar lens to human society. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway takes aim at these scientific approaches. For example, she criticises the way animal studies, particularly in primatology, are informed by the assumption that modern Western capitalism is the pinnacle of evolution and thus the exploitation, sexism, racism and inequality in our Western societies must be inevitable; a demonstration of the genetically strongest individuals making it to the top of society. The vision of humans as the pinnacle of evolution and separate from the rest of the natural world is reinforced by an experimental approach to biology which builds on this assumption and then continues to find evidence of it. Haraway's refrain in her 2016 essay collection 'Staying with the trouble' is that it matters what stories tell stories. This means the following: if we begin with a story of hierarchy where male dominates female, then we will find evidence for that story when we investigate the natural world and retell the same story in our societies. Assumptions about gender identity are treated as biological imperatives and then encapsulated in the idea of genders as 'natural'. Through this circular logic, scientific study has been used to ground and justify neoliberal morality, human exploitation of the natural world and patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial and racist structures.

Haraway points out the reductive and circular thinking going on here and points the way to a different kind of science that embraces a richer view of other species on our planet who can speak for themselves and offer their own insights.

Haraway argues for different stories, stories of interdependence and of relating across species that she calls "making kin". When we come to a deeper appreciation and respect for those we share the earth with, celebrating our interdependence and finding ways to live together in which we all thrive, then we are making kin- developing kinship with the more than human world. These stories are increasingly being told by scientists and many others, but their impact on global, extractive capitalism is yet to be felt.

It is those kinds of stories that a reimagined bestiary can help spread.

An Anarchist Bestiary

I have chosen the name anarchist bestiary for this project, because hierarchy is at the heart of the way of thinking I want to challenge and dismantling systems of domination is at the heart of anarchism. This does not mean that every writer I have found helpful in thinking through this bestiary would accept the label anarchist, nor that every anarchist would accept the approach and ideas I am sharing. But as a title for a bestiary that eschews dominion and hierarchy and shares stories of mutual aid, solidarity, creativity and kinship on a shared planet, anarchism can offer a valuable orientation.

The human and the more-than-human world are seamlessly interwoven with no hierarchy, says Morton.

Mutual aid and mutual survival are at the heart of evolution, says Kropotkin.

Oppressive ideologies justified through circular analogies with the natural world must be uncovered and rejected, claims Haraway.

The old bestiary was animated by hierarchy and domination. We need a bestiary that assumes interconnectedness and mutual thriving.

We can reimagine the bestiary in an anarchist context animated by no god and no master, but by practices for living together in a world where all can thrive.

In an Anarchist Bestiary our world is no longer seen as a hierarchy. Mutual aid and solidarity become fundamental principles with humanity deposed as the 'arche' that is the measure of all value, replaced instead by recognition and expression of our interdependence.

Imagine an ever growing zine which highlights new research, activist experiences, stories from the more than human world, collaborations and untold stories from marginalised voices and communities.

The Bestiary would be built from the bottom up with a simple intention: that humans and the more-than-human world find ways to build together and share futures in which all inhabitants of the planet can thrive.

In the next few episodes, I will give examples of those stories and entries that can become part of the Anarchist Bestiary.

Recorded June 2026, Brighton. DAJK