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Ejsing, Mads

*Published in:*
Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory

*DOI:*
10.3167/th.2025.7218303

*Publication date:*
2025

*Document version*
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Document license:*
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*Citation for published version (APA):*
Ejsing, M. (2025). Re-Assembling Democracy: A Nascent Theory of Nonhuman Political Participation. *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, *72*(183), 39-55. https://doi.org/10.3167/th.2025.7218303

Download date: 17. Nov. 2026

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# Re-Assembling Democracy

## A Nascent Theory of Nonhuman Political Participation

*Mads Ejsing*

*Abstract:* This article explores the concepts of political participation through the lens of new materialism and critical democratic theory. It argues that the concept of political participation must be expanded beyond rational and reflective actions by human beings in order to better encompass the agency of nonhuman entities. Drawing on the work of Jane Bennett, Bonnie Honig, Noortje Marres, and others, the article offers a new theoretical vocabulary for talking about political participation in ways that transcends human-centric boundaries and can help bring an increased ecological awareness to democratic theory.

*Keywords:* assemblages, democratic theory, new materialism, political participation

Democratic politics is often imagined as a distinctly human realm – a place of debate, negotiation, and rational decision-making – grounded in the assumption that political participation requires speech, reason, and intentionality. But what if politics is not only shaped by human actors? What if rivers, animals, viruses, soils, and machines also exert political force, influence decisions, mobilise responses, and reshape collective life? This article challenges anthropocentric notions of political participation. Drawing on recent insights from new materialism and critical democratic theory, it explores how nonhuman entities shape democratic politics in ways that often go unrecognised. By expanding our understanding of political participation beyond human reflection and intention, we can begin developing a more ecologically attuned vision of democracy – one that acknowledges the vibrant and

*Theoria*, Issue 183, Vol. 72, No. 2 (June 2025): 39-55 © Author(s)
doi:10.3167/th.2025.7218303 • ISSN 0040-5817 (Print) • ISSN 1558-5816 (Online)

entangled more-than-human forces that also structure our political world.

I engage in this project by demonstrating how existing conceptions of political participation within the discipline of political theory have relied on notions of rational decision-making that limit political participation to human beings at the very outset. Drawing instead on the work of Jane Bennett, Bonnie Honig, and Noortje Marres, I offer a new theoretical vocabulary centred around concepts such as *disruption, anchoring,* and *mediation* that make it possible to talk about political participation in ways that transcend human-centric boundaries and can help bring an increased ecological awareness to democratic theory.

In what follows, I begin by taking stock of existing notions of political participation within contemporary democratic theory, which tend to theorise democratic participation through the act of voting, by engaging in deliberation, or through other forms of direct action, such as taking part in public demonstrations. While some of these notions seem to open the door for nonhuman forms of political participation, none of them go far enough in that direction. Therefore, I draw instead on recent insights from theories of new materialism to show that many nonhuman entities already participate politically in ways that are poorly accounted for by existing theoretical vocabularies. I then use these insights to argue in favour of a less anthropocentric conception of political participation that could make it more attentive towards the many ways that *both* humans beings and all sorts of other more-than-human forces matter to politics.[1] Finally, I conclude with some brief reflections about what this means for democratic politics and the pursuit of multispecies justice in a time of deep ecological crises.

## Beyond Human-Centric Concepts of Political Participation

The most ordinary way for citizens in liberal democracies to participate in politics is through the act of voting. In empirical social science research on democratic participation, voting is often treated as the quintessential activity of political participation or even conflated to one and the same thing: If a country's voter turnout is high, the level of democratic participation is considered high (Rolfe 2012). The theoretical backing for thinking about democratic participation in this minimalist way can be found in the work of the Austrian political

economist Joseph Schumpeter (2016), who famously argued that democracy is, at its core, a method by which people appoint political representatives through recurring elections, who will then carry out their constituents' will. This minimalist conception of democracy has few, although notable, contemporary proponents, such as the political scientist Adam Przeworski, who has argued that voting is not just the most widespread form of democratic participation; it is also the only normatively desirable one (Przeworski 1999; Przeworski et al. 1999).

However, as many other democratic theorists have argued, the concept of political participation cannot be reduced, either empirically or normatively, to the act of voting in recurring elections. Even in representative liberal democracies there is a wide range of activities both inside and outside of formal parliamentary spaces that play an immensely important role for the well-being of a democratic community (Barber 2003; Pateman 1970; Verba 1967). One of the most prominent lines of critique against the minimalist conception of democracy comes from deliberative democrats, who emphasise the role that public debate and deliberation play for democratic politics. While theorists of deliberative democrats do not dismiss voting in elections as an important aspect of democracy, they emphasise ongoing deliberation and public contestation as integral and indispensable elements of democracy (Benhabib 1996; Cohen 1989, 1997; Habermas 1994, 2015). A well-functioning deliberative democracy, therefore, depends not only on recurring elections but also on a proliferation of democratic spaces where citizens can voice their opinions and contest political decisions.

These theories of deliberative democracy go a long way in alleviating some of the blind spots of minimalist theories of democracy, such as their inherent elitism and pacifying ideas about the citizenry, but they remain heavily human-centred in their emphasis on the role of voice and human speech. Democratic politics is still portrayed as an exclusively human affair, with only human beings capable of taking part in political discourse and reflective decision-making. Animals, buildings, rivers, and bacteria do not speak or reflect in the way required for them to reach the status of democratic participant.

But voting or engaging in reflective deliberation are not the only routes to political participation, even for human beings. Another type of political participation is that of direct action, such as participation in public demonstrations, parades, blockades, or sit-ins. Theorising political participation through the lens of action rather than voting or deliberation resonates with, for example, Hannah Arendt's conception of political power as inherently linked with people acting in concert.

In *The Human Condition,* Arendt argues that action is the foundation of the political, because it is through action that people disclose themselves to others and exercise their inherent human creativity and freedom – their capacity for introducing something new into the world (2013). But for Arendt, too, this kind of action remains inextricably linked to humans and language (2013: 199–200).

This action-oriented way of thinking about political participation can be extended in a more radical and less cognitivist direction by turning to a thinker like Jacques Rancière, whose sensorial conception of democratic politics sees the disruptive moment when hitherto unaccounted people take to the streets as the quintessential, if not only, real political moment (Rancière 2015). Similarly, Judith Butler argues in *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) that people demonstrating in the streets during the occupy movements were making more than a representational or discursive claim. The physical bodies on the street did something in and of themselves. The mere public presence of corporeal bodies, whose materiality had hitherto been hidden away in the private sphere, provided a challenge to politics as usual (ibid.). Or, in more Rancièrian terms, their public presence sought to challenge, even disrupt, the sensorial distribution of politics itself.

Theorising political participation through material human bodies coming together and acting in concert suggest an opening for thinking about how other material bodies come together and affect politics in ways that exceed speech and human language, even if both Rancière and Butler have previously resisted such readings.[2] Their emphasis on collective action and attention to the political effects of material bodies suggest that there already are incipient resources within contemporary democratic theory for thinking about political participation and action in less human-centric ways. For our purposes here, however, even Rancière's and Butler's analyses of political participation remain too couched in the theoretical language of discourse, signification, and representation, which prevents them from going far enough in thinking about the political relevance of the more-than-human world.

In order to become more attentive to the more-than-human dimensions of politics, we will have to move still further away from human-centric distinctions between 'acting' subjects and 'passive' objects and towards what Bruno Latour calls a profound doubt about the nature of action itself (2004: 73). No, humans and rivers do not act in the same way, and although their different agential capacities should not be conflated entirely, the 'self-evident distribution of roles' must be replaced

by '*a range of uncertainties* going from necessity to freedom' (idem: 82, original emphasis). Such a redistribution of roles has profound implications for the way we think about the world around us, including democratic politics. Human beings are no longer assumed a priori to be the sole, or even most important, political actors. Many kinds of agencies, human as well as nonhuman, exhibit different powers and intensities that impinge upon each other. How and when particular nonhuman things and beings – whether it is a storm, a virus, or a public square – participate in politics will then have to be explored at the level of event.

Therefore, when addressing the question of nonhuman political participation at a theoretical level, we must be careful not to approach it purely in an overly abstract manner. Many different things and beings often become lumped together under the category of 'nonhuman', but a river is not the same as a fox, which is not the same as a table, which is not the same as a hairdryer or a smartphone. In addition, the political efficacy of different bodies depends on relations with many other things and beings and therefore vary across time and place. A river can rise to the level of political participant in one context, while remaining politically irrelevant in another. Just like humans.

One of the risks with theories of new materialism is that their emphasis on the vitality and liveliness of matter could give the impression that everything is political *all the time,* rendering the concept of political participation analytically vacuous.[3] But in reality, we should be able to say that everything has the capacity, or the potential, to *become* political, even if such capacities and potentials are often unevenly distributed. The interesting political question, therefore, is not the general 'do nonhuman things and beings participate in politics?', but the more specific 'how do particular constellations of human and nonhuman entities become political participants at the order of event'?

To make these theoretical reflections a bit more concrete, I now turn to a series of examples from the scholarly literature on new materialism about how nonhuman things and forces become political participants. Again, there is no simple model for all kinds of nonhuman political participation, just like there are many different and complex ways human beings can participate in politics as suggested by the theoretical disagreements between minimal, liberal, and radical democrats previously discussed. In what follows, I therefore distinguish, somewhat heuristically, between situations where nonhuman things and forces *disrupt* politics in direct ways, situations where they *anchor* or orient politics in a democratic public, and situations where they

*mediate* by co-shaping the material conditions of human participation in everyday settings.

## Tracing Nonhuman Participation through Disruption, Anchoring, and Mediation

### *Bennett & Thing-Power*

In the book *Vibrant Matter,* Jane Bennett (2010) uses the case of the Northeast Blackout in 2003 to illustrate the disruptive capacity of material forces. On August 14 that year, the northeastern part of the United States, as well as the Canadian province of Ontario, experienced a massive power outage that lasted for several hours. To this day, investigators have been unable to pinpoint the exact causes that made the electric grid break down that day. What Bennett argues, however, is that the blackout is best understood as an emergent outcome of a distinct combination of human and nonhuman actants – an assemblage – whose combined forces exceeded that of each of the actants alone. Among the many actants that produced this emergent effect were the internal capacities of electricity itself, the power plants, transmission wires, energy-trading corporations, consumers, and energy legislation. The Northeast Blackout was, so to speak, the 'end point of a cascade', including both voltage collapses and human actions (Bennett 2010: 25).

Bennett's electric grid is a great example of what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage: a grouping 'of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' that is able to persist and generate effects without any single centre of control (2010: 23). The specific electrical grid of the Northeast Blackout was, in other words, 'a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood – to name just some of the actants' (idem: 25). Like other assemblages, the electrical grid entailed an intricate constellation of both human and nonhuman actants with differencing agentive capacities, able to produce unprecedented and emergent effects that resist easy explanation or prediction.

The central point here is that it is futile to point to a single, individual source of (human) agency that caused the blackout. A more conventional political analysis might point to the role played by the deregulation of the energy grid brought about by the Energy Policy Act of 1992, which allowed companies to buy electricity from power

plant in distant locations, thereby increasing the pressure on transmission lines and making a breakdown more likely. This is an important element of the story, but as Bennett notes, it is not sufficient to explain the event of the blackout. Here, an element of emergence is needed: On the day of the blackout, part of the electricity flow suddenly changed direction away from its intended path and started moving south-to-north, a phenomenon called loop flows. Contrary to our common-sense understandings, electricity 'sometimes goes where we send it, and sometimes it chooses its path on the spot, in response to the other bodies it encounters and the surprising opportunities for actions and interactions that they afford' (Bennett 2010: 28).

To fully understand a political event like the Northeast Blackout, therefore, we cannot limit our analyses to human actors alone. Bennett's example of the Northeast Blackout illustrate that nonhumans too have the 'power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception' (Bennett 2010: 107). Nonhuman beings and forces are active partakers in emergent and more-than-human assemblages that have the ability to affect outcomes in politically salient ways. According to Rancière's definition of political action as an act that 'disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can "see"' (Bennett 2010: 106-7), the assemblage of the electrical grid, and all its human and nonhuman actants, indeed acted politically:

> The electrical grid, by blacking out, lit up quite a lot: the shabby condition of the public-utilities infrastructure, the law-abidingness of New York City residents living in the dark, the disproportionate and accelerating consumption of energy by North Americans, and the element of unpredictability marking assemblages composed of intersecting and resonating elements. Thus spoke the grid. (Bennett 2010: 36)

While the case of a blackout might seem like a curious example to illustrate the disruptive capacities of nonhuman things and forces, this sort of disruptive capacity is not an exception. In many assemblages across the world today, nonhuman actants of all sorts, whether it is in the case of storms, droughts, wildfires, or the spread of a contagious pathogen, are reminding us that they have the capacity to disrupt – and take part in – politics in increasingly spectacular ways.

### *Honig & Public Things*

However, nonhuman things and forces do more than occasionally disrupt politics. They also help anchor politics and thereby serve an important democratic function. This, at any rate, is the argument

made by democratic theorist Bonnie Honig in her book *Public Things* (2017). While Honig is not blind to the disruptive capacities of non-human entities, which can sometimes derail our world, Honig brings our attention to the capacities of public things to also provide a sense of integration and adhesion within a political community. In fact, Honig suggests that this ability of public things is an essential part of a well-functioning democracy and one that is often overlooked in contemporary democratic theory, which has been 'focused for a while now on a host of other necessary conditions of democratic life: just procedures, free and fair elections, mechanisms of deliberation, the constitution of the demos, the security of territorial boundaries, the ethics of immigration, legitimation crises, or the need to rethink democracy in transnational terms' (Honig 2017: 13).

However, without the existence of material public things – such as schools, roads, parks, power grids, prisons, libraries, and airports – democratic politics would be reduced to empty proceduralism. There would be 'nothing or not much to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest' (Honig 2017: 5). Because public things are stable objects that people can contest, gather around, or fight over, they offer a sense of permanence and stability in a world of flux and contingency. They provide what Honig, borrowing a concept from the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, calls a democratic 'holding environment'.

This need for public things to anchor or 'hold' politics and provide a platform for democratic action has become increasingly important in recent years according to Honig, after the proliferation of a neoliberal rationality that has led to an increased privatisation of public things in the United States and elsewhere (Brown 2015). It is therefore also no coincidence that many contemporary social movements of democratic resistance gather around the contestation or defence of public things: by occupying public spaces, such as parks and squares, and reclaiming their very publicness; by defending publics things from privatisation or downright destruction, as in the case of gas pipelines going through indigenous lands; or, as in the case of food sovereignty movements, by using the very thingness of food as a way to bring attention to the politicality of the material infrastructure that surrounds contemporary food production (Honig 2017: 20ff).

By asking questions about the specific public things that need our care and concern, Honig argues, we can help turn our political attention away from the abstract realm of symbolic politics and towards the finite realm of things. By moving from abstract questions of democratic ideas and values to an emphasis on public things and their participation

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in politics, theoretical discussions move from 'questions of orientation to receptivity, from subjectivity to objectivity, from identity to infrastructure, from membership to worldliness' (Honig 2017: 28).

But what are then some of the finite public things that need our care and concern today, and how might we respond to their call? Honig offers the example of public payphones in New York City during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, where floods, power outages, and broken cell towers led to a collapse of the mobile network. During this crisis, public payphones, which were 'normally treated as part of New York City's ruined landscape, emerged suddenly to become communications lifesavers' (Honig 2017: 29) and allowed friends and family to reconnect in times of great need. The public pay phones were there when people most needed them, despite having been neglected for years, as the rapid distribution of smartphones and its privatisation of communication modes made them seem superfluous.

This ability to show up when most needed is not a feature specific to public payphones, but a feature of public things more generally: 'the thing that hides in plain sight, but when you need it, it's there' (Honig 2017: 30). We can easily think of other examples, such as public hospitals during a pandemic or publicly managed water reservoirs during a drought. If access to these things become privatised, which they have in many places, they will not be there for people when they need them. Or rather, they will only be there for *some* people, namely the ones who can afford it.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, new political demands were made for ensuring better cell phone coverage during disasters, while few demands were made for securing and expanding the availability of public payphones. Perhaps there should have been more of the latter, as Honig suggests: 'Why not turn pay phones from relics of a lost past into the stable new infrastructure of a possible new future of public things?' (Honig 2017: 31). If we do not defend and support the availability of public things, whether it is payphones, hospitals, or roads, they are not going to be there when the next crisis hits and people need them – and there are only going to be more of such crises in the Anthropocene futures that lie ahead. In the absence of public things, we are not only going to lose the things themselves, but we will also lose part of the foundation for a shared public world to gather around as democratic citizens.

### *Marres & Material Participation*

The spectacular cases of disruptive infrastructure breakdown and collective contestations over public things are not, however, the only

instances where nonhuman things and forces participate in politics. So do the seemingly ordinary material objects we engage with on a daily basis. As Noortje Marres argues in her book *Material Participation* from 2016, the design of the material objects around us co-shape the types of political participation that become available in their wake. Marres' concept of material participation refers to 'a distinctive mode of engagement, one in which everyday material actions, like washing or foresting, are put forward as useful and valuable operations upon matters of public concern' (Marres 2016: x). But because there are so many different nonhuman things and beings with differing agential capacities, there really is no way of knowing a priori which forces will be most politically relevant, and what their effects will be. Therefore, we must study how specific material entities become, or fail to become, invested with the capacities needed for public involvement. We must ask: 'How are everyday things, technologies and settings invested with the capacity to engage?' (Marres 2016: xi).

To answer that question, Marres argues for pursuing a radically empiricist approach that insists on following 'the circulation of particular objects, technologies and formats of participation among different settings and practices . . . in order to examine what capacities for involvement they have and may enable' (Marres 2016: xv). For example, Marres uses eco-show homes – homes intentionally redesigned to reduce people's carbon footprints – to investigate how different material things and devices facilitate different kinds of public participation and enable different kinds of social and democratic change around an issue like climate change. All eco-show homes are, by their public nature, meant to become sites of political participation, but the connections they make between material things and political participation differ depending on their specific constellation of human beings, things, devices, and technologies. Different eco-show homes are 'equipped with an array of devices for the measurement, documentation and monitoring', and depending on the specific constellation of those material devices, they enable some forms of political participation while constraining others (Marres 2016: 126).

At one end of the continuum are prefabricated eco-show homes where the emphasis is on technical innovations and material re-designs that rely on performance optimisation through automated processes, such as self-closing windows or electronic sensors that reduce electricity use. These homes demand little to nothing in terms of the ecological behaviour and sensibilities of its human inhabitants, which is why Marres refers to them as 'the change of no change' (Marres

2016: 126). At the other end of that continuum are eco-show homes where families try to reduce their carbon footprint by experimenting with different types of simple living, while documenting their efforts on online blogs, such as 'The Greening of Hedgerley Wood' or the 'Ration Me Up' project. Here, the emphasis is on behavioural change and a cultivation of new conscious interactions between human and nonhuman participants. For example, in the Ration Me Up project, the material necessity of having to carry water from a well in order to take a shower makes visible the water used for such activities, and the labour required to bring it about.

Different material designs – and the different relations between human and nonhuman entities they enable – produce different forms of political participation, and these differences carry important normative and democratic consequences. Take for example the pre-fab eco-show homes of BRE and BedZED in Southern London. By relying primarily on monitoring devices and automated processes, they invest 'the domestic setting with disciplinary capacities: a thermostat that does not go up beyond a certain temperature, a smart metre that makes it possible to detect "some bad practice like opening a window"' (Marres 2016: 131). The designs of these homes are meant 'to control behaviour, so as to produce measurable (and commodifiable) forms of 'environmental' performance' (ibid.). While these designs might help sell houses on a market with raising 'green' demands, their environmental benefits happen regardless of its human inhabitants and offer little in terms of fostering a more general environmental consciousness. They have, in other words, little democratic potential to promote change beyond their specific context.

Meanwhile, in the living experiments of Hedgerley Wood or the Ration Me Up Project where the designs of the homes necessitate corporeal practices, such as scooping water for a hot shower, the domestic environment promotes 'the cultivation of moral sensibilities through embodied material practices. Small but critical adaptations of the empirical equipment of the home then significantly modified the normative effects of what it means to transform the domestic setting into an "engaging environment"' (Marres 2016: 131). By working through and with the human and nonhuman inhabitants, the material designs of these homes allow for a different kind of material participation, one that maintains the 'moral capacities to render subjects environmentally aware' (ibid.). Moreover, the documentation of these practices online, though eco-blogs, offer the potential for a politics of contagion that is entirely foreclosed in the pre-fab homes, where the impetus of change remains technical.

In the end, eco-show homes are, like all other constellations of human and nonhuman entanglements, materially and normatively unstable phenomena. Nonhuman political participation, and material participation more specifically, are contextual and performative phenomenon that vary from setting to setting. The first step here is recognising that the material objects of our everyday matter for political participation. When realising that, we can start asking more pressing questions, such as whether some instances of material participation should be pursued 'in the name of democracy', while others should not (Marres 2016: 135).

## Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Conception of Political Participation

As these three brief examples illustrate, nonhuman beings and things are already participating in our political and democratic lives in various ways. In light of that knowledge, how might we then rethink our existing concepts of political participation to better account for the participation of nonhumans?

One way to approach this question is to follow Latour's cue from *The Politics of Nature* where he defines a political community as 'an assembly of beings *capable of speaking*' without delimiting what kinds of speech that will entail (2004: 62, original emphasis). This definition brings our attention to the ways in which more-than-human things and beings are also capable of speaking, even if they do not always speak for themselves. An important theoretical insight coming from the field of STS in recent decades is that scientific 'facts' are not stable entities that speak for themselves, but need ongoing labour from scientists working as their 'spokespersons' or 'mediators' (idem: 64).[4] Whether the amount of $CO_2$ in the atmosphere or the existence of a new protein, many nonhuman entities are made to speak in humanly intelligible ways only through the help of a long list of associates, including humans in lab coats, scientific instruments, and a surrounding academic community with peer-review processes and collegial debate. In its essence science is, Latour writes, an extraordinary and complex mechanism for 'giving world the capacity to write or speak' (idem: 66).

This understanding of science does not mean that facts can be construed freely in any way one sees fit or that scientific facts are therefore mere linguistic fictions. The laborious construction of scientific facts

takes place in exchange with a material world that itself speaks up. After all, if a hypothesis is repeatedly refuted by its application to the material world, it will not last for long. The reason why we are justified in believing, for example, the fact of global warming is not that it is true beyond any doubt, but because it continues to survive being tested against the material world despite widespread efforts to prove it wrong and leave us off the hook. This does not mean that scientific controversy can be avoided simply by appealing to the material world. It will always be possible to question the construction of a particular fact and the mediators through which it has been made to speak. Thus, the edges between science and politics are much more porous than often perceived. Both are places of ongoing contestation.

Why dwell on this here? Because it suggests that even if human beings are the only ones that speak in human language, the more-than-human world takes part in public discourse and are made to speak in ways that are politically salient. The point here is not just that many nonhuman things and beings speak if we learn how to listen, but that they regulate and co-determine what can be said about them. Even though their voices are often mediated or represented by human others, we are not free to speak about them any way they see fit. They take part in the conversation. They push back. Sometimes in mundane ways, other times as public disruptions.

If we limit our political and democratic concepts to collectives of human beings capable of deliberation, we will overlook the many ways in which our political conversations and communities are always-already imbricated with the more-than-human world. Therefore, a first step in the direction of learning how to listen and respond better to the world around us, could be to expand our political vocabularies beyond the overly cognitivist conceptions of participation that restricts speech to the immediate utterance of human language, to a more encompassing notion of political participation, which allows for different kinds of speech and modes of mediation, such as when speaking on behalf of someone or something else.

It might be worth highlighting, here towards the end, that the arguments presented in this article do not, in themselves, answer more ethical questions, such as who and what deserves to be given political consideration in democratic processes, or the practical questions of political representation – who gets to speak, in what manner, and on whose behalf? All these issues are certainly relevant not only among human beings but also when it comes to nonhuman things and other beings. Critical animal scholars, for example, have argued in favour

of extending citizenship to the many nonhuman animals we currently cohabitate with, such as pets and farm animals (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), and there is currently a growing 'nature rights movements' pushing for natural environments to receive status of legal personhood (Fitz-Henry 2022).

These are important and promising developments towards a more-than-human democratic politics aimed at multispecies justice (Celermajer et al. 2022). What I have focused on in this article, however, are the more ontological questions about who and what contributes to the making of politics. As soon as we realise that many sorts of nonhuman things and beings always-already participate in politics, knee-jerk reactions against including nonhumans – such as 'trees don't speak' or 'whales can't vote' – fall short. Then the question becomes how to rethink and redesign our democratic and societal institutions so that the needs and desires of nonhuman others are both heard and represented.[5]

## Conclusion

The overarching aim of this article has been to show that it makes perfectly good sense to talk about the political participation of nonhuman things and beings, even if it requires moving beyond human-centric notions of political participation, such as voting or rational deliberation, and towards more materialist concepts like disruption, anchoring, and mediation.

Contrary to conventional belief, nonhuman things, beings, and forces do not simply provide a static background to human politics but are themselves a dynamic part of politics. We, human beings, are ourselves part of a complex and increasingly fragile world of interconnected assemblages with emergent properties, where 'no one body owns its supposedly own initiatives, for initiatives instantly conjoin with an impersonal swarm of contemporaneous endeavors, each with its own duration and intensity, with endeavors that are losing or gaining momentum, rippling into and recombining with others' (Bennett 2010: 101)

This new materialist understanding of political participation does not aim to erase the very real power differentials that exist among humans, and between humans and nonhumans. As I have tried to emphasise throughout this article, the fact that other things than humans have the capacity to participate in politics does not mean that all things matter equally all the time. On the contrary: 'Persons, worms, leaves,

bacteria, metals, and hurricanes have different types and degrees of power, just as different persons have different types and degrees of power … depending on the time, place, composition, and density of the formation' (Bennett 2010: 109). Human beings and their intentions and actions matter, but they do not make up the entire story. Therefore, we must be careful not to assume prior to empirical analysis of a specific event or political assemblage that the primary sources of political influence always begin and end with humans.

As the advent of the Anthropocene has made it evidently clear that human beings inhabit this planet alongside a myriad of other nonhuman forces that are speaking back and whose collective powers exceed our immediate control (Ejsing 2022; Ejsing and Denman 2022). The more pragmatic political question is what to make of this insight. Considering that many nonhuman things and beings already participate politically, how might their political presence be better accommodated within existing, or future, democratic institutions rather than simply being relegated to an outside? What modes of political and legal representation might be suitable, if any, for including different nonhumans into our democracies? And how, in turn, should a more ecological and multispecies understanding of politics affect the way we go about promoting political outside formal institutions? If we want to promote a more inclusive democracy, which extends beyond our current human-centred dispositions, questions like these will have to become matters of shared concern.

**Mads Ejsing** is a postdoctoral researcher in the Center for Applied Ecological Thinking at University of Copenhagen. His research revolves around topics related to democratic theory and climate justice. E-mail: mae@hum.ku.dk; ORCID: 0000-0002-6498-5318

## Notes

1. For a few, but notable, examples of other scholars, who have recently followed a similar line of thinking, see Asenbaum 2023; Asenbaum et al. 2023.
2. Bennett (2005) writes about Rancière's refusal of including nonhumans in the political. Butler seems to have changed their position somewhat in their most recent book, *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), where they argue for including nonhuman entities into a politics of precariousness and thus into the realm of political and ethical relevance, even if the active capacities of nonhuman things and beings remain somewhat muted.
3. This is not actually the position of the new materialists. Latour (2004) and Bennett (2010) go to great lengths to show that it is in the specific entanglements of particular

things that assemblages produce emergent effects. Nevertheless, the critique has often been raised against them.

4. It is worth mentioning here that Latour's representation understanding of facts cannot be ascribed to the field of STS as a whole, and there remains disagreements within the field about the best way to understand the relationship between facts and mediation. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.
5. I have addressed these questions in more detail elsewhere. See for example chapter 4 of my dissertation, 'Approaching the Edge' (Ejsing 2021).

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