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ARTICLE

The Political in the Anthropocene: Reflections on a Ministerial Veto, 2021

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Abstract
This article was prompted by a Ministerial veto (2021) of the Australian Research Council's decision to fund a research project by the authors to explore the student-led climate movement in Australia. It was also prompted by criticism of the veto which accused the Minister of bringing "politics" into what was represented as a scholarly matter. It addresses two questions: How should we understand this idea of "politics" in the context of Australian climate politics since the 1990s? Secondly it considers dominant ways of thinking about "the political" devised by ancient Greek writers and politicians which still inform the European liberal tradition. We question how fit for purpose this approach is in the Anthropocene? Our key argument is that the western tradition of thinking about "the political" is deeply anthropocentric. Historical traditions have encouraged inegalitarian and anti-democratic accounts of who can be political by excluding different kinds of people from political life. The Anthropocene requires a new, critically reflexive account of "the political" that is inclusive of people currently marginalized and excluded as well as nonhumans and nonliving components of ecosystems on which we all depend. This extends the idea of democracy beyond the human and points to a politics of climate justice.

Keywords: Climate; politics; critical education; democracy

Introduction
If it is agreed that we now live in the Anthropocene, then what Wendy Brown calls the paradox "that politics is our only hope, yet hopeless" is much more than an occasion for more academic seminars or journal articles (Brown, 2022, p. 5).[1] Since 2018 this paradox has provoked large numbers of children and young people to mobilize globally and in Australia, demanding that governments take urgent action to address the climate emergency. Read together Brown's observation and movements like SchoolStrike4Climate are examples of what Max Lakitsch referred to when he said the Anthropocene "sheds light on politics in the Anthropocene and invites us to reconsider its assumptions" (Lakitsch, 2021, p. 4).

These considerations informed the decision authors of this article made in 2020 to design a research project focused on the Australian SchoolStrike4Climate movement. We wanted to understand why large numbers of young people were mobilizing to demand action to address climate change. We were interested in how those children and young people understood the politics of climate — and what that might mean for democracy. Was there evidence, for example, that they were addressing the question Duncan Kelly posed: "Can modern politics be 'Anthropocenised' . . . in order to take the measure of what sort of political futures are at least

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plausible scenarios for a new Anthropocene time?" (Kelly, 2019b, p. 5). To fund the 3-year research project, we submitted an application for funding to the Australian Research Council (ARC) in March 2021. The ARC administers the National Competitive Grants Program, which delivers around $800 million to Australian researchers each year. The ARC grants process involves several rounds of rigorous review and assessment, by internationally leading scholars. The ARC then recommends to the education minister which proposals should be funded and the budget. The minister makes the final funding decisions. What happened next is the proximate motivation for writing this article.

The problem

On Christmas Eve 2021, we learned the fate of our ARC application. The good news was that the ARC recommended our project be funded. The bad news was that Stuart Robert, then Acting-Minister for Education in the Morrison Coalition government, exercised his ministerial veto and overturned the ARC's recommendation (Minister Robert also vetoed five other projects recommended for funding in that grant round). The reasons offered by the Minister for his decision were that the projects did "not demonstrate value for tax-payers money," or "contribute to the national interest."

Unlike the two previous Ministerial vetoes of ARC recommendations (in 2018 and 2020), Minister Robert's veto triggered widespread outrage. Many senior university leaders were publicly critical, while thousands of academics in Australia and around the world, signed petitions condemning what was called political censorship. Several members of the ARC College of Experts resigned in protest declaring they were "angry and heartsore" (Francis & Sims, 2022). Some critics pointed out that the way three Coalition Ministers vetoed ARC recommendations was not possible in other "liberal-democracies like Canada, Britain, New Zealand and the United States" (Francis & Sims, 2022).

Critics of Robert's veto emphasized how ministerial interventions affected the capacity of universities to practice independent research. Many also drew attention to the ways the Ministerial veto undermined the ARC's review processes designed to enhance the capacity of universities to discharge their social obligation as critical sites and "autonomous institutions" above, or beyond, the reach of political authority. These conceptions of university autonomy and academic freedom are central to the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (Magna Charta Universitatum Observatory, 1988) signed by hundreds of universities worldwide with a view to defining the role and value of universities and the academic research they do. That Charter, for example, declared "to meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be *morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power*."

The resonance of these appeals to critical rationality and freedom within the European liberal tradition associated with Kant and J.S. Mill seems obvious. What is not clear is the credibility of the assumptions those critical of the ministerial veto relied on, namely that principles like university autonomy, academic freedom and the rule of law remain unproblematic at a time when many observers think we now face a climate emergency.

Some of the outrage directed at Minister Roberts' veto implied that Robert breached the rule of law principle so central to the liberal political imaginary. Leaving larger questions aside briefly, even appealing to the liberal rule of law principle runs into trouble. Minister Robert's veto was a lawful exercise of his ministerial authority under the relevant legislation. It also became clear that most politicians and even the Australian Research Council itself had no problem with the Ministerial veto. This became apparent when an attempt by the Greens party to abolish the ministerial veto power collapsed in 2022, not least of all because the ARC itself supported the retention of the ministerial veto. Of the 80 submissions to a Senate Select Committee reporting on

the Greens bill to abolish the veto power, just three organizations opposed it: the ARC, the Federal Department of Education, and the neoliberal thinktank, the Institute of Public Affairs. This was a reminder that the academic "right" to engage in autonomous scholarly practices was not favored by lawmakers or even *by the ARC itself*. The Greens bill was quashed by the Senate committee with Coalition Government senators arguing that "removing ministerial discretion would raise serious questions about whether the minister was fulfilling their obligations under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act* 2013." Opposition ALP Senator Kim Carr concurred, arguing "The ministerial veto contained in the ARC Act is a mechanism to facilitate the accountability of executive government" (Lu, 2022).

There are more substantive issues raised when critics of the veto argue that the Minister bought "politics" into what many commentators claimed was, or should always be, a "non-political" matter. Following the Select Committee's decision, Green Senator Mehreen Faruqi claimed that "Politics has trumped good policymaking as the government and Labor have refused to concede their political power to interfere with individual research grants" (Lu, 2022). Academic critics thought that Robert's decision had sullied the "apolitical" character of the ARC Grants Program. The argument that academic research is "above politics," relied on assumptions that it is a scientific process grounded in practices such as drafting detailed research designs which are then subjected to rigorous, anonymous peer review practices characterized by scientific objectivity (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 227).

But how should we understand the idea that "politics" was at play, or that "politics" sullied an academic or scientific process, or trumped "good policy-making"? The substantive rationale for writing this article is the possibility that there never was much critical reflexivity about the category of "the political" being used in the Ministerial veto affair. We think there are two questions worth asking. Firstly, when critics of the veto argued that Minister Roberts introduced "politics" into what should not have been a political process, how should we understand this notion of "politics," especially in the context of Australian climate politics since the 1990s?

Secondly there is a larger question: is appealing to ideas like university autonomy, or academic freedom which assume the salience of the liberal political tradition in such a context justified? We have in mind Pierre Charbonnier's claim that "We inherit a world that no available political category is designed to manage" (Charbonnier, 2021, p. 261). If Charbonnier is right, we need to ask whether long dominant ways of thinking about "the political" associated with the European liberal tradition, are relevant or make sense in the Anthropocene.

We now turn to the first question: what, if anything, does the ministerial veto of 2021 imply about the "politics of climate," where "politics" is conventionally understood, now at work in Australia?

The ministerial veto and the "ecological paradox"

Phillip Payne's question about what a critical inquiry into the politics of "sustainable development" should look like given "the ecological paradox" is a useful point of departure (Payne, 2018, p. 72). What is that "ecological paradox"? According to Ingolfur Blühdorn (2011) it refers to:

> . . . the curious simultaneity of an unprecedented recognition of the urgency of radical ecological policy change, on one hand, and an equally unprecedented unwillingness and inability to perform such change, on the other (p. 36).

While this paradox provides an opportunity to think about "the limitations and silences of standard research practices" (Payne, 2018), we think it also offers the opportunity to think about how we can best understand politics in the prevailing context.

Conventionally politics refer to the idea that an issue has been "politicised" as bad because it implies "noisy even disruptive adversarial disputes." Typically it refers to processes "of

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manoeuvring to assert rival interests" or "competition over interests or power" over resources such as money, land or welfare (Boswell, 2020, p. 1). Yet how well does this account of politics map onto the idea of the "ecological paradox"? Yet as we saw, apart from the critical responses from academics, there was no contentious politics resulting from the ministerial veto. The major parties closed ranks and defended the ministerial veto. The defense of the veto by the major political parties in 2022 suggests that something was going on. More to the point, what are we talking about, when people talk about the "politics of climate" in Australia? For example, where are the policy debates and rival party policy manifestos offering clear and well-defined policy alternatives addressing questions about reducing greenhouse gas emissions?

What we see in this time of climate emergency is liberal-democratic "politics" pitted *against* sustainability in which major political parties are entangled and complicitous in (re)producing the "ecological paradox" (Blühdorn, 2011, p. 36, also Frankel, 2021).

It might be objected that on the face of it, this is not that obvious. Hasn't global warming been a "prominent and contentious political issue which was central to several election campaigns, and was implicated in the overturn of three Prime Ministers"[2]? (e.g., Colvin & Jotzo, 2021, p. 254 also Crowley, 2017; Wilkinson, 2020). This impression of political conflict has been reinforced by a lot of public relations exercises designed to emphasize "brand differences" between the major political parties, that is, the Labor and Coalition parties. However as Grimmer and Grube (2017) note, there is an irony here in that the major parties actually enjoy lower levels of brand differentiation than, for example, minor parties like the Greens, accompanied by overwhelmingly negative "brand associations" in the minds of most voters as the major parties strive to be to be all things to all people so as to capture the electoral center (Grimmer & Grube, 2017, p. 269).

What is actually going on is a form of shadow politics which has been in play since the 1990s. Australia sustains a political regime in which every 3 years eligible citizens vote to choose between rival factions of a neoliberal political class. Since 1997 those rival factions steadfastly ignored, or even denied the evidence of global warming, while blocking effective policies that could begin to mitigate the climate crisis. It is worth mentioning, though, that there has been parliamentary opposition to the major party position from the crossbench, as well as from extra-parliamentary sources. "Alternative politics" has largely come from those extra-parliamentary sources, such as from NGO's, media outlets like *The Guardian,* or political mobilization by social movements like the SchoolStrike4Climate or Extinction Rebellion movements which emerged in mid-2018. Yet even this manifestation of "climate politics" has so far been ineffectual in terms of persuading governments to acknowledge the emergency or to do anything to address it.

Since the election of the Howard Liberal-National Coalition government (1996–2007), Australian climate policy has been shaped by the interests of carbon capital. Carbon capital has been successful in thwarting attempts to restrict greenhouse gas emissions especially after the export of liquid gas and black coal increased dramatically from the late 1990s (Fielding et al., 2012, Manne, 2011).[3] The Howard government decided not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol[4] in 1997 (Pearse, 2007). It is true that the succeeding Rudd (Labor) government (2007–2011) ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2007, but Australia's climate policy imploded after Rudd failed to get support for his Carbon Pricing Reduction cap-and-trade scheme from the environment movement or the Greens in the Senate and subsequently lost his leadership in June 2010 (Copland, 2020). The Gillard-led Labor Government passed the *Clean Energy Act* 2011 thereby introducing a carbon pricing scheme, but after Rudd's coup toppled Gillard, the ALP lost the 2013 federal election. The new Coalition Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the first of three leaders in the new Coalition government (2013–2022), declared that the "so-called settled science of climate change" was "absolute crap" (Mathiesen, 2017) and introduced the *Carbon Tax Repeal Act* in July 2014 to abolish the only major policy mechanism introduced by the former Labor government to address climate change. Successive conservative governments blocked policy measures designed to reduce Australia's reliance on fossil fuels. The Albanese Labor governments elected in (2022-) has so far demonstrated no interest in changing the Coalition government's commitment to the fossil fuel

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industries (Feik, 2023). Australian government policy has fallen significantly short of what was needed to avert a looming climate catastrophe (UNEP, 2021; Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2023).

This record of policy failure reflects a persistent and successful campaign by "climate change counter-movement" involving carbon-based industries and their peak bodies, think-tanks, legacy media publishers and far-right politicians (Lucas, 2021, McKinnon, 2017). As Geiger and Swim (2016) observe, while skepticism about climate science may be voiced by a minority, even small groups can be very vocal and influential. It is generally agreed that the Murdoch media group have encouraged doubt and skepticism about the science of climate change to frustrate effective climate change mitigation policies (e.g., Manne, 2011; Beeson & McDonald, 2013). We also cannot discount the effects of a well-funded project which began in the late 1990s involving right-wing think-tanks such as the Lavoisier society, committed to spreading doubt about climate science (Kelly, 2019a). Lucas' empirical research explores in granular detail how covert networks of political influencers and policy-makers have been strategically employed over many years by Australia's fossil fuel and resource extraction industries to further their own political and financial interests and to block effective climate change policies (McKnight & Hobbs, 2017).

The evidence of state capture by the fossil fuel industry is evident in continuous expansion of Australia's carbon industries and high greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., Lucas, 2021). In early 2023, we saw 116 new fossil fuel projects on the Australian government's annual Resource and Energy Major Project list, two more than at the end of 2021 (Campbell et al, 2023). While Australia's greenhouse gas emissions in 2022 totaled 463.9m tonnes of carbon dioxide-equivalent (Mt CO2-e), down 0.4% or 2m tonnes from the previous year, this is explained by the impact of policies adopted to deal with the COVID pandemic. However, Australia's total budget under the Paris climate agreement is 4.353bn tonnes of CO2-e, and so far we have burned through 27% of the total in 25% of the accord's time period (Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 2023). State capture is also evident in the ways the fossil fuel and resource extraction industries managed to successfully repeal a national price on carbon, prevented the introduction of policies promoting electric vehicles, demonized efforts to phase out coal exports and overcome state-wide moratorium on coal seam gas extraction (Wilkinson, 2020).

Perhaps nothing suggests the extent of state capture by the fossil fuel industry more than the scale of government subsidies to the fossil fuel sector and the extent of massive but legal tax avoidance schemes. Every government, up to 2023, has subsidized fossil fuel companies: in 2021–22 total federal, state and territory fossil fuel subsidies amounted to $55.3 billion (Campbell et al., 2022). Australian coal production tripled while its natural gas production quintupled. Between 2012 and 2018, thirteen of the Big Four's largest Australian companies in the coal, oil and gas industries generated well in excess of $AU160 billion in Australian revenues but paid less than $12 million in income tax on that revenue, or 0.007% of total revenue. Powerful factions within the Australian Labor and Coalition parties made it clear that they regard renewable energy transitions as threats to their political and economic allegiances with the major energy, resources and finance companies and in the case of Labor, with workers and unions employed in the carbon industries. Research by Bichler and Nitzan reveal how the ability of dominant corporations to shape government policy is correlated to their financial investments and whether those investments are in critical economic sectors. These factors give those businesses *strategic capacity* to shape market conditions in their favor (Bichler & Nitzan, 2017).

While none of this is accidental, it suggests that our liberal-democracy is not working. Even though Lowy polls reveal around two-thirds of Australians believe global warming is a serious problem and want urgent action (e.g., Lowy Institute, 2019, 2023), this public concern has been rendered politically irrelevant. This suggests that something is not right. The normative functional linkages said to define or characterize a liberal-democracy which it is assumed or expected exists, for example, between public opinion and political outcomes are not working. Granting that the

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evidence adduced here sustains the hypothesis that the "ecological paradox" is real, this points to the need to address our second question: how do we conceptualize "the political" in the Anthropocene.

What is "the political"?

That global warming is one of the central points of contentious politics globally can no longer be doubted. As Bruno Latour says, the new "climactic regime" emerging from the confluence of "the ecological mutation," that is, the Anthropocene *and* neoliberal governance, is characterized by "exploding inequalities, massive deregulation, and conversion of the dream of globalization into a nightmare for most people" (Latour, 2018 p. 5). This state of affairs has prompted many scholars and theorists to think about the political implications of this circumstance (e.g., Eckersley, 2004, 2023; Forsyth, 2003; Bouzarovski, 2022). One conclusion is that we have arrived not just at an ecological, but a conceptual tipping point. The Anthropocene is not only challenging politics to become more "ecological" but is also forcing us to rethink the concept and the vocabulary of "the political" itself.

Thinking reflexively about "the political" might be thought a curious thing to do because many political scientists and others take the category for granted. This most likely is because the concept of "the political" was apparently so self-evident as to not require clarification about its meaning. Yet as James Wiley observes, while the idea of "the political" is admittedly "a strange term," [it is] one that has become central to a struggle to show what a more "politics-centred" political theory looks like (Wiley, 2016, p. 1, 3). According to Wiley the problem began when theorists like Dahl (1956) and Schumpeter (1950) generally understood to have contributed to a theory of liberal-democracy in fact were developing an economistic style of political science (Estlund, 2008, p. 2–3). Other theorists like Hannah Arendt (1958) and Sheldon Wolin (2004) made similar arguments that political theory had become subsumed by a preoccupation with "social" factors while not saying what was distinctive about "the political." Arendt and Wolin also cautioned us about following in Weber's footsteps by conflating the political with the study of the mechanics of the liberal-democratic state (e.g., Weber, 1970; Dahl, 1998; Leftwich, 2004).

It is now generally understood that the political theorists Carl Schmitt initiated modern discussions about what is specifically political about "the political" in the course of developing his critique of liberal-democracy. For Schmitt "the political" refers to "the relation between friends and enemies" (Schmitt, [1932] 2007, p. 7). Without subscribing to Schmitt's notorious encomium for the authoritarian state, major political theorists including Arendt (1958), Crick (1962/2000), Mouffe (2005), Rancière (2010), Ricoeur (1964), Wolin (2004) and Sluga (2014) have all used the concept of "the political" "to [explicate] the value of politics and defend it from its detractors" (Wiley, 2016, p. 1). However, for reasons which will become apparent, we see no point in continuing or adding to that discussion.

This is because we agree with Geoff Mann and Michael Wainwright that the "inescapable reality of the Anthropocene and the kinds of political demands being made," for example, by the SchoolStrike4Climate movement, are "not likely to be easily reconciled within the existing terms of political thought" (Mann & Wainwright, 2018, p. x). As they argue, a stable concept of the political can only hold in a relatively stable world environment; when the world is in upheaval, so too are the definitions and content of the realm of human life we call "political" (Mann & Wainwright, 2018, p. xi). To this Duncan Kelly (2019b) adds that the Anthropocene is an occasion to think again about "the political":

> . . . and thus, its history, to show the interconnections between "nature" and the "artificial" world of politics. And if this is done, then it suggests the need to seriously critique our conventional thinking in relation to political values, economic limits, population growth and the nature of unevenly distributed ecological indebtedness (p. 2).

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What follows is best read as a reflection on the fallibility of liberal politics in the Anthropocene, a fallibility highlighted by Schmitt's suggestion that "There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos." (Schmitt, 2005, p. 3) If we understand what the Anthropocene is, we will understand that it is neither "humanity" *or* "nature" which has entered into a state of emergency. The Anthropocene means "we" can no longer continue thinking of the world as "inert matter only moved through physical laws, but as something acting upon us" (Harrington, 2016, p. 491). This raises ontological questions which have implications for how we understand and engage "the political."

The political in the Anthropocene

In effect the Anthropocene has rendered the liberal political imaginary irrelevant. Central to the liberal tradition is an ontological premise shared by all proponents of liberalism; central to liberalism's ontology is the ontological premise fully articulated by philosophers such as Descartes and Kant that modern human actors are "rational" "individuals" (e.g., Lukes, 1973; Maclntyre, 1988, p. 3-4). The individual *per se* is a "symbol of a humanity which is master of its own destiny" (Ouroussoff, 1993, p.283) and rationality — alternatively "reason" — prefigures identity (Mathews, 2017). Thus, because we possess rationality, we can separate ourselves from the socio-historical conditions of our own existence *and* from the natural world. This liberal ontology always relied uncritically on binaries such as individual-society, social-nature, subject-object, reason-emotion, free will-determinism, (or agency-structure) and fact-value. These are binaries that constitute the liberal ontology.

It may be more surprising than it is to discover that many modern liberals like John Rawls, arguably the greatest modern liberal theorist, maintained that liberalism needed no ontology. Rawls argued that that our presuppositions about the constitution of agents and the world (i.e., an ontology), needed to be avoided in political thought (Rawls, 1996, p. 375). Our point of course is that whether we know it or not we cannot avoid making or relying on ontological assumptions or theories. While liberals may be surprised to learn that they have an ontology, German Bula reminds them that "ontologies are like our accents: although some deny it ... everybody has one" (Bula, 2018, p. 17). It is impossible to perform any inquiry without an ontology, implicit or explicit. Being unaware of one's own ontology comes at a cost, which includes "theoretical inconsistency and alienation from one's own reflexivity and thought" (Bhaskar, 2000, p. 52).

Among other things this means that those who uncritically take the liberal tradition as their starting point, will have some trouble making sense of Latour's claim that the earth now hosts a "war over a planetary future," a conflict about "who," and "what" will, and will not be part of that future (Latour, 2018). The careful reader will have seen that Latour has subtly interpolated a non-human dimension into his account of the great planetary conflict now underway. To put this another way, if humans are embedded in what Lakitsch describes as a "dynamic relationship between nature and culture, [then] politics is no longer an autonomous sphere, carved out of nature and shaped and guided by human rationality" as proponents of the liberal tradition believe (Lakitsch, 2021:4, Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 211; Chandler, 2018, p. 15–21). As Brown argues (2022), this new nonliberal ontology requires that we:

> ... allow the climate emergency to alter our received understandings of politics and freedom, so that the very practices appearing to produce an impasse in addressing it, could become our way through (p. 2).

In her reworking of "the political" and like Latour, Brown draws on the Gaia hypothesis.[5] The Gaia hypothesis emphasizes the co-evolution of biology *and* the physical environment where each influences the other. For Lovelock and Margulis the earth and its biological systems work as a large single and dynamic self-regulatory system using negative feedback loops to keep the conditions on

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the planet within boundaries that are favorable to all life (Lenton, 2003). Lovelock triggered a major controversy when he argued that life actively participates in shaping the physical and chemical environment on which it depends in ways that optimizes the conditions for life just as all of the elements of the physical milieu including soil, water, gases, solar energy and wind shape the forms life takes.

This does *not* however mean as some like Richard Dawkins (1999) argue, that the Gaia hypothesis imputes a kind of holism, or teleology to the planet, or that there is some kind of spiritual or religious process that can be used to "explain" the variety and connectedness of life on earth. Rather as Wendy Brown notes, the Gaia hypothesis rejects conventional liberal ontological binaries set up between "nature" and "social." Proponents of the liberal rational tradition have used these ontological binaries to emphasize how "everything is an exploitable resource for the human species" (Brown, 2022, p. 4). However, the Gaia hypothesis resists discursive binaries such as "nature"-"human" which have played a major role in the modern story about how humans are separate from and placed in dominion over "Nature." Significantly the Gaia hypothesis sponsored a paradigm shift in the social sciences. Similarly, environmental feminist such as Mathews (1991, 2017) and Plumwood (1993) argue that the binaries — or "dualities" in their terms — were not only inherently gendered but also were a denial of an ecological self, a self that was identified not by its singularity but by its relations to others.

Since the 1980s an increasing number of social and political theorists have argued for a renewed theoretical interest in matter and materiality. What Lemke calls the "new materialisms" do not represent either an homogeneous style of thought or a single theoretical position so much as a range of different approaches to the "new materialisms" (Lemke, 2021, p. 4–5).[6] One common feature of the "new materialisms" is their critique of the dominant role played by social constructivism and the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences, arguing these do not offer an adequate understanding "of the complex and dynamic interplay of meaning and matter" (Lemke, 2015, p. 4). The "new materialists" offer a new understanding of ontology, epistemology, ethics and politics, that can be achieved overcoming anthropocentrism by enlarging the concept of agency and power to include non-human entities. This has major implications for how "we" rethink the political.

An excursion through the conceptual schemes and vocabulary in Classical Greece dealing with the political, highlights certain problems with what is seen by many as the origin of western political thought and the way that tradition has played out in modern liberal political theory.[7] The ancient Greek city states (*polis*) like Athens generated a rich etymology of "politics" including *politika* ("common affairs of the city") and terms like *polites* to denote a citizen who participates in the *polis*, and *politeia* referring to the entire order of social and political relations constituting a *polis* and its "constitution" (Wolff, 2014).

The value in thinking through the consequences for subsequent western political theory is highlighted when Brown notes how the ancient Athenians identified the *polis* and *politika* with practices of "freedom" (*eleutheria*). After all this was a political order characterized as much by who was included in the political life of the city as much as by who was excluded. This exclusionary scheme is a problem for modern attempts to make distinctions between "politics" and "freedom" whether by liberals (e.g., Berlin & Rawls), or neoliberals like von Hayek and "the commonplace conclusion that 'politics' and 'freedom' are each other's limit" (Brown, 2022).

To begin as Arendt (1958) and Isin (2002) remind us, the ancient Greeks drew a sharp distinction between the *polis,* comprising "free men" (or what we would later call "citizens") *and* the *oikos* ("the household") which gives the modern conception of the "economy." The "household" was the place where slaves, women and workers labored to produce the material basis which enabled the free men to be "citizens" and "*scholē*" or men of leisure left free to philosophize. As Brown argues, that distinction between the *polis* where "free men" hung out *and* "the household" where the slaves, women and workers worked, enabled other important distinctions to be drawn.

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For one thing "politics" was split from "economics" meaning that the "political" and "political freedom" (*eleutheria)* was separated from what we today call its "social" and "economic" expression. Greek citizens, that is, property-owning men understood themselves as uniquely capable of being freed from necessity. In order that "we" may think and act freely, "we" are entitled to use other animate and inanimate beings to produce this freedom.

For another, that distinction enabled an even more toxic distinction to be drawn between those living within the polis and those who were outsiders. Given the political was identified exclusively with relations between and the concerns of "free men" in the *polis*, *politika* and *politeia* served to constitute a difference between the city and the people and the lands outside the walls of the polis. This distinction between "us" and "them" has informed xenophobic tribalisms and nationalisms which reverberate into our own time. This is the burden of Schmitt's account of the origins of law and politics which drew attention to the role of laws *and* the walls of the city.

As Schmitt notes, laws (*nomos)*, link order and orientation: "*Nomo"* comes from "*nemein"* — a [Greek] word that means both "to divide" and "to pasture" (Schmitt, 2006, p. 70). In effect "*nomos* is the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible" (Schmitt, 2006, p. 70). For Schmitt the boundary line, or wall, takes on a positive and spatially visible relation to that which is enclosed and protected by walls/law:

> [T]he solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences, enclosures, boundaries, walls, houses, and other constructs. Then, the orders and orientations of human social life become apparent. Then, obviously, families, clans, tribes, estates, forms of ownership and human proximity, also forms of power and domination, become visible (Schmitt, 2006, p. 70).

Erecting walls and making laws constitutes order out of the notion of political space, that is, the *polis.*

Enclosing political space in this way informed binaries such as "urban-rural" and "social-natural". Not only was the urban set off and apart from the rural, but the "rural"-"nature" binary was deemed to be both inferior and subordinate to the "city"-"social". This anthropocentric binary had the effect of constituting and legitimizing a hierarchy which apart from excluding the unfree humans, that is, slaves and women, also subordinated the non-human world to the political order.

There would be other serious long-term consequences of this primal act of separation including endless cycles of colonizing projects, wars of conquest, genocide and ethnic cleansing that has characterized the political history of the west. The ancient *polis*, defined by its protective walls and its "order-guaranteeing laws" generated and sustained a specifically Greek self-portrait which presupposed the supremacy of the *polis* in relation to all "foreign peoples" beyond the polis referred to as "barbarians." Greeks understood the Hellenes as the only "political animal" in the world because, "barbarians" were either isolated *idiotes* or enslaved masses who lacked the defining political condition of freedom (*eleutheria*) (Arnoploulos, 1995, p. 3). Aristotle claimed humans (i.e., Greeks) are "by nature political animals," (*zoon politikon*) who are "meant to live in a polis" because "we" alone have language, enabling us to reason and deliberate about ethical matters. Who the "we" is here matters: for Aristotle the "we" refers to Greek, male, property-owning "citizens" placed in dominion over women, slaves and "barbarians." This Greek-barbarian binary was primarily political. It was no accident that this conceptual framework was evolving as the Greek city states embarked on a military backed colonial project that began after 750BC (Cartledge, 1995). Brown reminds us of the durable toxicity of this distinction used to simultaneously dehumanize and justify whatever those who call themselves "civilized" might do to those they nominate as "barbarians" (2022).

As Brown points out not only does this account of the political estrange politics from its social-human milieu by forgetting our embeddedness in the world, it contains the very instrumentalist orientation toward Gaia "that portends our devastating conduct within it" (Brown, 2022, p. 5). In

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this originary exercise in western political thought, the Greeks built into politics an ontology of mastery, rule and sovereignty. As Brown (2022) explains:

> . . . the understanding and practices of politics gestated in the ancient Athenian polis naturalized relations of domination and instrumentalization, ontologized politicalness and citizenship apart from provisioning and protecting life and produced a figure of freedom reflecting these relations and estrangements (p. 5).

The legacy of the Greek framing of the political induced a long-term amnesia that continues into the modern liberal era. The Anthropocene highlights how this western liberal conception of "the political" is ontologically wrong. Proponents of this western liberal order forget two things. Firstly, the unequal social relations which enable the production of that material life which frees political elites to be political. It is a freedom which those elites have long taken for granted. Secondly, they forget that the institutionalization of anthropocentrism has the effect of "sustaining those social elites for whom and by whom politics is itself constructed and conducted" (Brown, 2022, p. 5).

The challenge we now face is how to rethink or reconstitute a more inclusive, democratic account of "the political" which does not reinstate these hierarchies of human privilege and inequality. The clear and present danger of this possibility becomes evident when we consider recent efforts to think about climate justice. There is a persistent, deeply anthropocentric disposition at work in much of the recent advocacy for climate justice evident when Livia Luzatto offers "an account of the scope of our obligations which clearly shows that, and why, we have obligations of climate justice to future people" (Luzzatto, 2022, p. 1; see also Mary Robinson Foundation, 2012; MacPherson, 2013; Resnick, 2022).

This presents a major challenge. If the new materialists and other post-humanists are right, then the Anthropocene requires an appreciation of how *and* why human thought and life are embedded in a materially integral relation with nature. The Anthropocene also highlights the contingency of a world many people had thought until recently was the domain of human sovereignty enabling us to do as we please. The Gaia hypothesis "reveals the irrational character of the world and thus irritates and shocks the guardians of reason and enlightenment" including we imagine, government ministers (Stengers, 2017, p. 43–50).

As for rethinking "the political" we do not need a "government of things" (Lemke, 2021) so much as a "democracy of things." Latour, for example, suggests that we invite the non-human world into democracy and freedom by establishing a "parliament of things" (Latour, 2018, p. 35). This aligns with efforts by critical political ecologists who argue that a new politics of ecological justice needs a model of proxy representation for those not yet born and for non-human entities (Eckersley, 2004, p. 121) or perhaps as Schlosberg (2014, p. 86) argues, a mechanism for democratizing engagement on the provision of justice is a "politics of sight" that brings recognition and receptivity to ecological systems and needs. Symbolic representation, representative thinking and or notional consent can be used to ensure the interests of beings who cannot speak like the yet-to-born, flora, fauna and the oceans and mountains are represented.

Conclusion

This article was prompted as much by a Ministerial veto in 2021 of the Australian Research Council's decision to fund a research project designed to explore the student-led climate movement in Australia, as it was by criticism, of the veto accusing the Minister of bringing "politics" into what was represented as a scholarly matter. This chapter utilizes this contemporary example to frame the evolution(?) of Australian "politics" in the context of climate politics since the 1990s. Following this, we explore the ways of thinking about "the political" devised by ancient

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Greek writers and politicians that still inform the European liberal tradition. Not only is that tradition of thinking about the political anthropocentric, it has sponsored an inegalitarian and anti-democratic account of who can be political by excluding different kinds of people from political life. As Carol Pateman (1970) argued, the extent of the antagonism to allowing "ordinary people" anything like genuine political participation, or anywhere near the mechanisms of government, is an extraordinary feature of mainstream democratic theory in our time. Following this, we outline an approach to politics that overturns hierarchies of human privilege and inequality and is thus, more fit for purpose in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene requires a critically reflexive account of "the political." Such an account is now being developed by the post-humanists like "new materialisms," an account that needs to be inclusive of entities other than the human and that extends the idea of democracy beyond the human.

Notes

1 The Anthropocene refers to a confluence of disruptions in the natural, social, economic and governance systems of earth. These disruptions include: The destruction of natural habitats and the extinction of species, the poorly regulated capture, marketing and consumption of non-human animals, the influence of lobbies to nullify or delay measures to protect natural and social systems, the limitation of current scientific knowledge and the contempt by governments and companies of the available evidence, have all worked in an orchestrated sequence to facilitate the current COVID-19 pandemic (O'Callaghan-Gordo & Antó, 2020, p. 2).

2 That said, there are grounds for thinking that climate policy provided an excuse for people inside the relevant parties to move against Rudd, Abbott and Turnbull for a range of other political reasons other than policies designed to mitigate greenhouse emissions. The more general point remains that there has been no significant commitment by any Australian government to make the kinds of reductions in emissions needed since 1997.

3 From the early 2000s coal was Australia's second largest resource export, after iron ore, and since 2015 has averaged around one- quarter of annual resource export values and 14% of total export values (Cunningham et al., 2019)

4 The Kyoto Protocol puts into action the objectives of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It does so by requiring developed countries and transitioning economies to adhere to specific targets for curtailing and diminishing their emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) (https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol).

5 This was earlier advanced by Lovelock in (1972) and by Lovelock and Margulis in (1974).

6 The new materialisms include object oriented ontology (Harman, 2018), agential realism (Barad, 2007), post-humanist feminism (Braidotti, 2002), vibrant materialism (Bennett), assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), actor network theory (Latour, 1993) and new materialism (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012) and flat ontology (Harman, 2018; DeLanda, 2003).

7 While the focus here is on the legacy of Greek political theory, we acknowledge work by John Keane (2009) which argues for a non-Greek origin for democratic ideas, and Graeber and Wengrow (2021) which documents the role of non-European resources in Enlightenment political theory.

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