4-year PhD Position in Social Sciences is offered at The Institute for Social Sciences Research (IRSS) at the University of Liège (Belgium)

To begin October 1st, 2023

Within the framework of the project Human-Animal Collectives Assisting the Biosphere (HACAB), we are looking for a PhD student to join our interdisciplinary research team.

About the project

The project asks if it is possible, in these times of global warming, to contribute to build political collectives of all subaltern beings who are the first victims of climate change. In the Capitalocene, the long-term survival of many species is under threat (Moore 2016, Haraway 2016). Those who are already suffering from global warming and the rising cost of raw materials are those whom modernity has tended to subalternize and reduce to the status of ‘productive resources’: racialized people, women and working poor, as well as animals, plants and ecosystems (Charbonnier, 2020). While subaltern human critics (working class at the crossroad of the 19th and 20th century; women and racial minorities in the 20th century) found ways to take part in public debates because they could rely on a common language to communicate, these critical perspectives didn’t really consider how modernity affected non-human subaltern individuals and groups, such as animals (Latour 2015, Vasseghi 2022, Frère & Laville 2022). The present project takes on the challenge to ask if it is possible to establish a joint inter-species voice in order to draw the outlines of a political and ecological collective able to hold a project shared in common in the public space (Stengers 2009).

The overarching goal of the project is to investigate the conditions for the development of multispecies political collectives. As such, it aims at articulating animal studies and human-animal communication studies together with intersectionality and former critical theories of domination, in order to build an interspecies critical theory and methodology as well as exploring empiric points of departure that could contribute to resisting the global subjection (and destruction) of Earth. We will thus investigate the possibilities of a political discourse together with animals, and work towards a multispecies politics.

We believe that if we are to research animal political participation with a view to emancipation, it is worth to seek to understand how some interspecies collectives are sometimes trying to create a real common world, living peacefully together and trying to defend this way of life from the modern capitalist global social order, which domesticates both human and non-human animals for production and profit (Bonneuil & Fressoz 2013, Calvert 2018). By exploring such alternative micro-models of political participation outside of the realm of individualist
liberalism, we aim at understanding how human and non-human animals can build political collectives towards emancipation with and within a politicized environment. By associating the question of domination, conceptualized in traditional critical studies, and the one of communication, taken up by recent multispecies ethnographies research, we seek to develop a novel interspecies critique. This critique intends to add animals (and more broadly “nature’s”) voices to other intersectional voices, to build a shared political identity and an ecological way of life (Dardot & Laval, 2014; Petitt 2023), which is respectful of all the beings and able to make sense “together” (Stengers 2020).

The theoretical objective of this project is thus to operationalize a multispecies ethnography into an interspecies critical theory. More precisely, the project aims to:

- challenge notions of what might be seen as a common interspecies political collective in which everyone tries to find a way to live peacefully with others
- put forth theories of multispecies intersectionality and zoocialization (Petitt 2023; Petitt & Brandt, 2022) by understanding how this kind of collective contributes (or not) to the renewal of critical theory in time of the Capitalocene
- develop a (non-anthropocentric) view of communication and language that can account for the voices of animals and their participation to political decisions
- explore an interspecies look on emancipation to challenge together our threatened collective life conditions on earth

Methodologically, we situate the project in the growing field of multispecies ethnography and artistic methods to develop ways to take seriously (animal) language and interspecies communication as crucial for multispecies politics (Meijer 2019) and to answer the call for empirical research that places non-human actors and their point of view at the centre (Wadham 2021). Empirically, we aim to explore multispecies settings that are marginal to the western productivist traditions in the societies where critical theories have been developed, such as farm animal sanctuaries in Europe and mounted pastoral communities in Mongolia. Farm animal sanctuaries are places where human beings take care of animals who were saved from slaughterhouses or from industrial farming. Most of the literature understands these sanctuaries as places where human and non-human collectives are building together the critique of productivism and the critique of the capitalist interspecies exploitation (Blattner & al 2020), trying to create a “new social world” (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2015). As such, farm animal sanctuaries are among the best places where the emergence of a political sense of common might be studied. But, as noted above, a theory of political participation of animals should not be limited to the western model of liberal democracy. This is why we have chosen to investigate the multispecies (political and social) relationships and communication that are taking place in a pastoralist setting in Mongolia. We expect this second fieldwork to offer multispecies interactions and communication that are not framed by a capitalistic, productivist and “modern” context.

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1 The mutual and iterative learning and socialization between species.
DOCTORAL RESEARCH WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATE

The work of the PhD student in the HACAB project is a four-year position and will take its point of departure in an *ethnographic study of human-animal communication in a formerly farmed animal sanctuary in France or Belgium*.

Building on previous research within subaltern studies showing that the issue of communication and language is closely linked to the question of political participation, the PhD student will undertake a critical ethnographic investigation of human-animal interactions and communication in a formerly farmed animal sanctuary in France or Belgium (1 year of immersive, ethnographic fieldwork). Existing ethnographies of these “safe spaces” suggest that people and animals are reformulating their social and political relationships together, through their everyday routines and interactions (51). Such a fieldwork invites us to theorize from the ground up and to look closely at what people and animals are doing together, instead of starting from pre-existing, and human-centred, definitions, in order to build a non-anthropocentric understanding of both interspecies communication and political participation, and how they interconnect.

REQUIREMENTS AND PREFERRED PROFILE OF POTENTIAL CANDIDATES

The candidate for this PhD position within the HACAB project will work independently and in collaboration with the two professors leading the research and the three post-doctoral researchers that together with the PhD student will make up the research team. The candidate thus needs to demonstrate the competency and confidence to work proactively and independently while at the same time being able to, and enthusiastic about, working together with a larger team. The project aims explicitly at a closely iterative process between theorization and methodological development and is thus looking for a candidate with both theoretical proficiency and ethnographic skill. Specifically, the successful candidate will have:

- A Master’s degree in sociology, anthropology, political science or an equivalent subject, with a focus on, or interest in, human-animal studies or more-than-human studies.
- Previous experience of successful ethnographic field work, preferably with farmed animals.
- Considerable French as well as English language skills, both verbal and written.
- An aptitude for working interdisciplinary, independently and in a group.

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT AND ACADEMIC MILIEU

The doctoral student will start their employment on the 1 October 2023 and will be based at French speaking Université de Liège, at the outskirts of Liège, Belgium. They will be integrated in the vibrant social science research milieu at the *Institut de Recherches en Sciences Sociales* with its overlapping research centres *Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale et culturelle (LASC)* and *PragmApolis* (focusing on social theory, gender and social movements). Regular physical attendance at project meetings, the laboratories’ seminar series, and other events will be required and thus the doctoral student is expected to take up residence in Belgium.
The doctoral student will be co-supervised by Véronique Servais (Professor, Anthropology of Communication, LASC, IRSS) and Bruno Frère (Research Director, FNRS, PragmApolis, IRSS) and work closely with the three post-doctoral researchers recruited in the project, among them Dr Andrea Petitt (Multispecies ethnographer in the HACAB project, Université de Liège).

The doctoral position, including a monthly renumeration (+/- 2.490€ net) and a modest field work budget, is financed by Université de Liège (Action de Recherche Concertée), but the doctoral student will be encouraged to identify and apply for additional funding.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE

Interested candidates are invited to submit their full application by e-mail to Véronique Servais (v.servais@uliege.be), Bruno Frère (bfrere@uliege.be) and Andrea Petitt (andrea.petitt@uliege.be) before 15 August 2023.

The application must include:

1. A research project description of no more than 3 pages font 12 (excluding bibliographical references placed at the end of the document) in which the applicant sets out an initial understanding of the subject and avenues for exploration. In addition, the text should show how their previous training, skills and experience can contribute to the start of their thesis, both theoretically and methodologically.
2. A detailed Curriculum Vitae.
3. A cover letter of no more than one page.
4. One to two significant pieces of writing (e.g. an article, draft, dissertation, report, conference paper) demonstrating writing skills. A pre-write of a Master’s thesis or of a chapter of a final thesis if it is in progress.
5. The names and contact details of one or two referees who can attest to the applicant’s research skills.

The candidates selected for interview (which will take place in mid-September at the University of Liège) will be announced at the beginning of September. The results of the interviews will be announced at the beginning of the following week.

MORE INFORMATION /CONTACT

By e-mail to Véronique Servais (v.servais@uliege.be), Bruno Frère (bfrere@uliege.be) or Andrea Petitt (andrea.petitt@uliege.be). We will be happy to provide candidates with any additional information they may require to ensure that they fully understand the subject of their work within the HACAB project and the conditions under which they will be working.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


