

wombat solidarity notizen

anka helfertová

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Text on the wall in the exhibition

In Australia, in the summer season 2019/2020, the fires in the bush were especially devastating. The intensity of the fires has been amplified by the droughts advanced by the global warming.

Wombats have apparently saved lives of many other smaller animals by sheltering them in their large and complex burrows. More than a billion of creatures have been estimated to have died in the fires, but not the ones that were hiding underground. The news of wombats' kindness circulated wildly in the news and on the social media.

Some scientists felt the need to explain to people, that wombats were not really helping other animals: they have done so by chance, they usually build spacious burrows and cannot inhabit them all...the other animals were just squatting in unused space, so to say. Ah, why is this so necessary, for certain scientists, to rush to "correct" our intuitive understanding? Why is it so important to articulate the idea that the wombats were not really being altruistic, solidary and caring for the neighboring species? It is a strange urge, to exclude animals (and other beings) from the domain of morality. Even more disturbing, I find here an echo of a strict Darwinism, a view that the basic principle, that drives the life and evolution in the biosphere is competition. As early as in 1902, a Russian anarchist and philosopher Peter Kropotkin has strongly argued to recognize the strict Darwinist approach as wholly anthropomorphic: a reflection of the human society and our own failings, rather than an accurate reading of the more than human situation. The societies of he had in mind were in a place of a rapid development of a world-wide capitalist system, which was (and still is) based on extraction of value from the natural world and from certain human communities. Our insistence on seeing conflict everywhere, Kropotkin pointed out, only becomes more hypocritical, as we continue to disrupt and exploit the habitats and societies of non-humans for profit. It was not nature's violence, but that of man.

Kropotkin insists there is solidarity among animals, and that mutual aid and the joy of shared social life are vital: "an instinct that has been slowly developed in the course of an extremely long evolution". So,

Text an der Wand, ins Deutsche übersetzt

In der Sommersaison 2019/2020 waren die Brände im australischen Busch besonders verheerend. Die Intensität der Brände wurde durch die Dürren, die durch die Erderwärmung gefördert wurden, noch verstärkt.

Wombats haben offenbar vielen anderen kleineren Tieren das Leben gerettet, indem sie ihnen in ihren großen und komplexen Höhlen Schutz boten. Man schätzt, dass mehr als eine Milliarde Tiere in den Bränden umgekommen sind, aber nicht diejenigen, die sich unter der Erde versteckt hatten. Die Nachricht von der Freundlichkeit der Wombats verbreitete sich schnell in den Nachrichten und in den sozialen Medien. Einige Wissenschaftler sahen sich veranlasst, anderen zu erklären, dass die Wombats anderen Tieren nicht wirklich geholfen haben: Sie haben dies zufällig getan, da sie normalerweise große Höhlen bauen und nicht den ganzen Raum bewohnen können...

Warum ist es für bestimmte Wissenschaftler so notwendig, unser intuitives Verständnis zu "korrigieren"? Warum ist es so wichtig, die Idee zu artikulieren, dass die Wombats nicht wirklich altruistisch, solidarisch und fürsorglich gegenüber den benachbarten Arten waren? Es ist ein seltsamer Drang, Tiere (und andere Wesen) aus dem Bereich des ethischen oder moralischen Handelns auszuschließen. Noch beunruhigender finde ich hier ein Echo des strengen Darwinismus, einer Ansicht, dass das Grundprinzip, das das Leben und die Evolution in der Biosphäre antreibt, der Konkurrenzkampf ist. Bereits 1902 hat der russische Anarchist und Philosoph Peter Kropotkin nachdrücklich dafür plädiert, den streng darwinistischen Ansatz als völlig anthropomorph zu betrachten: als eine Reflexion der menschlichen Gesellschaft und unserer eigenen Schwächen, und nicht als eine zutreffende Interpretation der mehr als menschlichen Situation. Die Gesellschaften, die er vor Augen hatte, befanden sich inmitten der rasanten Entwicklung eines weltweiten kapitalistischen Systems, das auf der Extraktion von Werten aus der natürlichen Welt und aus bestimmten menschlichen Gemeinschaften beruhte (und immer noch beruht). Unser Beharren darauf, überall Konflikte zu

mutual aid, an instinct? I like this wording.

To speak of animal solidarity is all but an attribution of human terms and qualities to non-humans. Rather, it is the full acknowledgement that we share a world.



sehen, so Kropotkin, wird nur noch heuchlerischer, je mehr wir die Lebensräume und Gesellschaften von nicht-menschlichen Wesen aus Profitgründen zerstören und ausbeuten. Es ist nicht die Gewalt der Natur, sondern die der Menschen.

Kropotkin besteht darauf, dass es Solidarität unter den Tieren gibt und dass gegenseitige Hilfe und die Freude am gemeinsamen sozialen Leben lebenswichtig sind: "ein Instinkt, der sich im Laufe einer extrem langen Evolution langsam entwickelt hat". Gegenseitige Hilfe ist also ein Instinkt? Diese Formulierung gefällt mir.

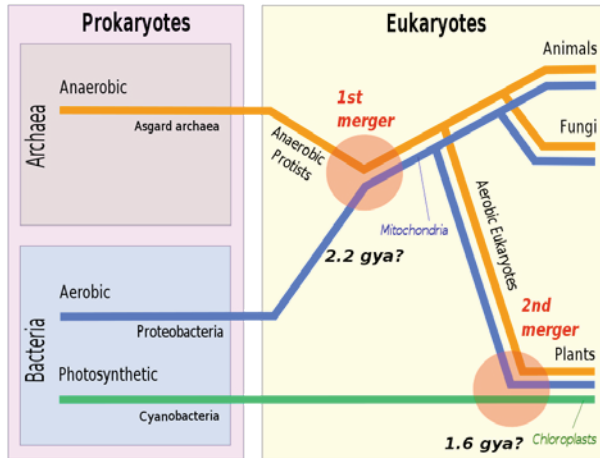
Von tierischer Solidarität zu sprechen, ist alles andere als eine Übertragung menschlicher Begriffe und Eigenschaften auf nicht-menschliche Wesen. Es ist vielmehr die volle Anerkennung der Tatsache, dass wir eine Welt teilen.



As for solidarity. The story of wombats creating environments, where also other species can hide, is beautiful and strong in its imagery – the fire, the complex space underground. The setting is a little abstract, for us here in central Europe. I was walking down the river Amper, which you can still see out of the window, there are not too many leaves yet. I was amazed by the presence of beavers – other animals, who in turn around here change the landscape on the same scale as wombats in Australia. Their dams also provide shelter, in the curled up, slowed down waters around it, insects and fish can breed, and so on and so on. They must live here for many generations, I have seen maples carved down so long ago, that on the stumps moss was growing thick like fluffy pillows and the hard wood has begun to transfigure into mushrooms.

There is of course one more story, definitely my dearest, on the case of mutual aid as a factor of evolution. You might have heard of eukaryota? This is the class of beings, that include very many – starting with slipper animalcule (that beautiful one-cell organism, which resembles a fine renaissance slipper) and also us, mammals. We all have in common, that our cells have varying functions: they have a cell nucleus, and a more complex way to deal with energy thanks to mitochondria, and some cells can also turn light into energy – photosynthesize. So, basically the story is, that differently specialized very simple cells got together, and it worked out that well, and they spent so much time together they could not be without each other anymore and they merged in one cell. This process is called endosymbiosis. I don't mean to say that all this happened in perfect harmony – we can also imagine those smaller specialized cells as getting into the big one as its food and managing not to be digested... there is always a lot of engulfing and eating going on. This explanation on how complex cells came about has been proposed already in the beginning of the 20th century, and more precisely developed as soon as humans could look at cells through electron-microscopes. Lynn

Margulis, a biologist who was behind this precise research, was very vocal about what this history shows about the workings of life: “Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking”, that is, by cooperation.



I wanted to have wombats present in this exhibition. So, as I believe everybody has enough flat images in their own pockets, I wished to come closer to other senses and worked with ceramic clay.

I wanted the viewers to come close to wombats, to get something of their way of life. This is particularly difficult, because they are animals of the earth. Living at and in the ground, ordinary humans have difficulties to take them seriously. They do build weird surroundings they for themselves – their tunnels are in fact quite big, a small human could crawl in – there was in fact a boy in the thirties in Australia whose hobby was to climb down those tunnels: he collected bones he found, until he assembled a whole wombat skeleton. Uff.

Researching wombats has been a very strange experience. The amount of “cute” content is quite overwhelming, and cute they are. Well, wombats spend a rather long time being children – the little ones hang out with their mothers for around two years, so they are definitely playful and cuddly for long. The internet testifies, that (in their infancy), wombats actually can get very comfortable in human homes. On sofas, in beds, burying their claws into pillows and carpets... Eventually I worked myself through the thick layer of sweet wombat babies, and I saw very many dead ones by the sides of roads, many sick ones with a kind of a mite eating up their skin and making them itch so much that they neglect looking for food and doing normal wombat things. Here I am thinking of David Attenborough, the renown filmmaker and biologist, who in his 2020 film *A Life on Our Planet* reflects upon his career. He describes how the documentaries he has been making at BBC increasingly did not depict the immediate reality he saw, how the species the films were about were becoming harder and harder to find, the populations declined, the landscapes have been disturbed.

On one tired evening, my partner suggested watching a documentary about wombats. It turned out in this movie there was much more footage of other animals, and of the landscapes they live in. No surprise, they are nocturnal and spending a lot of time in their spacious underground homes. In the course of the documentary, the spectators follow also a northern hairy-nosed wombat mother with her young one, getting through a tough, extraordinarily dry Australian summer. Eventually, the young one dies, sick from eating plants imported by the settlers that are poisonous for him, weakened also through this parasite that makes their skin itch. Somehow, unlike in most documentaries, the camera lingers on the dead body of the young animal, who my eyes got to know in the course of the previous footage. My tears were bitter, it hit me hard – I got very much into wombats, by mimicking their shapes with my hands. Their movements

became familiar, their shapes printed into my body. I felt the injustice very bodily – that this being, who has done all it could, and nothing wrong, has died anyhow. They were trying so hard. I keep thinking of this animal.

So, after this first- or second-hand experience of climate injustice, I once again come to the conclusion, solidarity is what has to happen. This is the best what comes to my mind now to say goodbye with. Maybe also this one quote I came across, a little off-topic, but I hope you can forgive: Aldous Huxley said, apparently: God resembles the animals, rather than men. I can relate. And let's not forget that humans are animals too.

Books the cat and the wombat are reading

and that I was reading too and can highly recommend:

Sally Weintrobe: Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis, 2021

Deutsch: Psychische Ursachen der Klimakrise

James Bridle: Ways of being: Beyond Human Intelligence, 2022

Deutsch: Die unfassbare Vielfalt des Seins: jenseits menschlicher
Intelligenz, 2023

Peter Kropotkin: Gegenseitige Hilfe in der Tier- und Menschenwelt, 1904
(übersetzt von Gustav Landauer (!))

English: Mutual aid: a factor of evolution

Oksana Timofeeva: Solar politics, 2022

Carolyn Merchant: The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the
Scientific Revolution, 1980

Deutsch: Der Tod der Natur: Ökologie, Frauen und
neuzeitliche Naturwissenschaft. 1987

Andreas Malm: How to blow up a pipeline, Learning to Fight in a World
on Fire, 2021

Deutsch: Wie man eine Pipeline in die Luft jagt. Kämpfen
lernen in einer Welt in Flammen, 2020

