

Tangled up in metaphor

Stefanie R. Fishel, *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). 144pp. £86.00 hb., £21.00 pb., 978 1 51790 012 0 hb., 978 1 51790 013 7 pb.

Taking to task the metaphor of the body politic that she claims is central to the concept of the state in International Relations (IR), Stefanie Fishel uses posthuman and new materialist theories, along with new developments in the life sciences (in particular metagenomics), to argue that the use of this metaphor needs to learn from *real* material bodies and their relations. Bodies, she argues, are always in dense entanglements with other communities and forms of life, particularly bacteria as well as microbes of the wider biosphere. *The Microbial State* thus seeks to develop metaphors of the body politic that reflect these deep entanglements. We require, Fishel argues, different metaphors to those characteristic of an exclusionary, inside/outside, medical or war-like model in order to move instead toward a view of bodies as fully embedded in our worlds with myriad connections.

As she makes clear in her opening chapters, International Relations in particular needs a bigger vocabulary: ‘new words for a world facing novel challenges’. Metaphors are the focus of extending this vocabulary in *The Microbial State*, with these seen as themselves actants in the political realm, ‘forming relations, developing meanings, and shedding light on the discursive and material foundations of the political process’. Too often, we are told, the use of metaphor in political practices is one that reduces complexity and tensions down to choices ‘between two supposed opposites.’ This is developed, most interestingly, in subsequent chapters through an argument that such binaries can be challenged by drawing on recent work in metagenomics and in the life sciences on bacteria and viruses.

Fishel’s aim is to take insights from the Human Microbial Project, the Committee on Metagenomics and the *Ending the War Metaphor* report from the Forum of Microbial Threats initiated by the Institute of Medicine, along with other research that suggests that people are indeed more than ‘human’, made up as they are of symbiotic relations with a whole plethora of bacteria without which we would not be able to live. The same goes for nearly all forms of animals which have symbiotic relations with bac-

teria in their guts (a possible exception being the wood-eating marine crustaceans known as gribbles). Fishel takes recent work on people’s microbial kin further here, arguing that with the exception of policies around pathogenic viruses and bacteria, microbes rarely register as objects important to politics. She suggests that it is time they did. Her aim is then to apply these insights to the discipline of IR and beyond this to develop ‘new designs for global thriving: to generate analogies for bodies to thrive in entangled communities and politics’. It is a bold aim, and one that can – in places – seem somewhat peculiar. At times the argument convinces. Nonetheless, Fishel’s approach is not without its problems, particularly in terms of its principal focus on metaphors.

Throughout the twentieth century, and back in to the nineteenth, there have been wars on viruses, pathogens, bacteria and more – this is the war metaphor that is so widespread in discussions of health and which the Forum of Microbial Threats has sought to challenge. These wars have been fought in modern western homes, on toilet seats, in human bodies, in seeking to render industrial chicken or beef farm facilities biosecure, in pathogen control policies in colonial east Africa around the tsetse fly (as detailed by Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga), and so on. Indeed, possible examples are profuse and are to be found in virtually all terrestrial spaces. There have been some major benefits, at least for some, to this biopolitics focused on what have come to be known as germs, pathogens and viruses. But as many environmentalists have been arguing for some time, there are also a whole raft of consequences following from these war-like attempts to wipe out viruses and germs, and an enormous industry services and creates desires for extinguishing germs and viruses as if they are simply things needing eradication. This approach to simplifying systems by removing other species can be seen in a whole series of activities such as in industrial plantation agriculture, and other examples of stripped-down ecosystems.

In recent years, all kinds of rewilding projects have been developed in various landscapes, especially in de-

veloped countries, to seek to restore species exterminated or removed by people, such as goshawks and beavers in Britain. The geographer Jamie Lorimer has recently written of how another 'rewilding' has been taking place, focused much more on bodies, specifically the rewilding of people's guts with all kinds of probiotics aimed at diversifying the microbial communities that are increasingly seen as important to people's health, whilst a small number of people seek to infect themselves with helminths or worms as a way of addressing auto-immune diseases.

New research on the gut and its flora, and its influence on immunological systems, inspires a widening of the notion of the human to include communities that co-produce bodies, and by extension, for Fishel, which serve to complicate the state-as-person metaphor relied upon in International Relations. A good deal of focus is placed here on the immune system and on recharacterising this from being seen simply as a defence against invading organisms to being seen as something that is formed by complex processes of a body living in relation to communities. For example, according to some, parasites like those aforementioned intestinal worms are often important in helping the immune system develop.

Fishel's biopolitical project seeks to extend this kind of thinking about the immune system, as something much more than just a line of defence, from the body to the State as a way of challenging the exclusionary state's presentation of outsiders as potential contaminants and threats.

Conceptually, metagenomics implies that the human body as a communal gene pool, and its self-extending symbioses are highly adaptive and robust against environmental perturbation and dynamic self-sustaining and self-repairing processes. Metaphorical framings built from these understandings of microbial communities aid in bringing system-based understandings of complex processes to the international realm. Many problems that the state in its current form has been unable to address – warming oceans, pandemics, climate change, flows of immigrants and migrants – may be easier to address.

This is a big claim about the effects of changed meta-

phorical framings, though it is one that seems to be mostly evacuated of political discussion, despite the call for more of a politics based around microbes. Such lack of an actual politics is, of course, one of the most oft-repeated criticisms of new materialism. More specifically, a crucial question here would be: how exactly do metaphorical framings change, and to what degree do dominant metaphorical framings emerge out of differing political positions?

This is where Fishel's approach can seem altogether too woolly, with a tendency to evade the complex political reasons why states consistently refuse to engage with the aforementioned 'novel challenges'. New metaphorical framings may indeed help with systems-based understandings but in *The Microbial State* we mostly get metaphors and approaches taken from the sciences that are then to be applied to the social, revamped as an extended social of actor-network forms. Fishel argues that metaphorical framings are crucial in the ways stuff gets done, or we might say the way in which people and things get stuffed. But if metaphorical framings are doing work, it is only some of the work and we need more than a simple call to change these. Otherwise, Fishel's claims begin to sound rather too much like the old environmentalist refrain that all we need for radical change is to change our 'values' and ways of perceiving the world. As we have seen with environmental issues, socio-ecological metaphors and ways of framing problems can change, but often political economic goals remain much the same, based on social-ecological exploitation and short-term profit.

This book seems to emerge out of health problems that Fishel experienced, fuelling a desire to change how International Relations frames the world it seeks to understand. Once the book gets through the usual materialist justifications for such reframings, it becomes an interesting attempt to work with potential changes in our metaphors. But it always feels like it needs more politics than the call for such changes can itself provide.

Chris Wilbert