



## Book Review

### **Thinking with soils: Material politics and social theory**

Edited by Juan Francisco Salazar, Céline Granjou, Matthew Kearnes, Anna Krzywoszynska, and Manuel Tironi  
Bloomsbury Academic, 2020: 204 pages

Review by Kaitlyn Duthie-Kannikkatt

Following increased attention to the crisis of global soil degradation, the United Nations declared 2015 to be the International Year of Soils. The Year of Soils was launched with the release of a report published by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils demonstrating that the majority of world soil resources are in either fair, poor, or very poor condition, posing a serious threat to the future of global food security (FAO, 2015). Raising awareness and prompting action on this threat was, and continues to be, a critically important undertaking, to say the least. But for too long such efforts have failed to achieve meaningful action on addressing the crisis of soil exhaustion and collapse. What we are left with is an alarmist narrative that uplifts techno-scientific conservation approaches while simultaneously disempowering those in living relationship with soil throughout the world.

This disconnect, argue the editors of this thoughtful new volume, is the result of decades of theorizing soil exclusively in the realm of the natural sciences. When we fail to consider soil as an emergent outcome in a long and ongoing socio-political historical process, conservation efforts reflect purely technocratic solutions and therefore come up short in what they can accomplish in terms of meaningfully healing our relationships with soil.

Drawing on the pioneering work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, the contributors to *Thinking with Soils: Material Politics and Social Theory* argue that it is time for social scientists to deepen our own understanding of soil. We need to consider how to *think with* soils and recentre the set of embodied relationships that lie at the heart of this lively world beneath our feet. The only way to confront the ecological crisis we face is to decolonize our narratives of conservation and reimagine it as an ongoing process of socioecological entanglement in which humans and non-humans are active agents. The collection succeeds in prompting deep and

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meaningful consideration of what it might mean to live into our relationships with soil, and how sustained reflection on the material politics of soil might shift the way we think about and act on the so-called soil crisis.

The authors in *Thinking with Soils* consider this relationship from a variety of perspectives. The first few chapters work to un-theorize soil as purely a natural resource, easily divorceable from the historical processes of social life, and re-situate it within a broader and ongoing trajectory of soil-human alienation. Chapters one to four begin with unpacking the colonial modern belief in a separation between humans and nature (Escobar, 2018) and the productivist appropriation of soil for capitalist agriculture (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2005). It is here that our understanding of soil as something intimately connected with the land and our relationship with it both began to erode. Engel-Di Mauro and Van Sant expand on this separation by exploring Marx's notion of the metabolic rift in connection with soil, arguing that this rift has made possible (or, attempted to make possible) the commodification of soil as saleable product. This historical context sets the stage for understanding how new forms of soil governance continue to further distance soils from land. In particular, Kon Kam King and Granjou examine how digital soil mapping takes soil conservation out of the hands of people on the ground and into an exclusively techno-scientific realm that erodes the set of relationships that created the soil in the first place.

Later chapters explore soil relationships in a variety of place-based contexts. Together, these weave a colourful fabric reflecting the diversity of entanglements that emerge when we think with soils. Kryzowszyska, Banwart and Blacker consider how farmers live in relationship with soil through years of attentive observation. Bertoni explores how attempts to plan for the generation of soil on Mars fall short in their theorization of soil as a precise formula to perfect rather than a set of relationships difficult to replicate in an artificial context. Meulemans follows a group of urbanites as they reclaim areas paved over by the forces of development by harnessing the power of those 'freak' urban organic materials to generate soil. Salazar and Dodds unpack the violent colonial settlement of the north in service of the nation state, connecting this pattern of harm to our reluctance to act on climate change that will primarily affect Indigenous peoples who make their home with these marginalized arctic soils and territories. Together these stories paint grounded visions for a future of soiled alterity, where a new story about soil can be told that resists its imposed conceptualization as dirt, separate from the land and landscapes in which it is embedded and understands soil as both making and being made in a constantly evolving set of relationships among human and non-human beings.

*Thinking with Soils* is the result of a gathering of scholars and activists concerned with the state of soils but critical of efforts to advance conservation through commodification. Anyone disquieted by a path to ecological healing via carbon offsets, payment for ecosystem services, and other hallmarks of the green economy will find it a useful contribution to these ongoing debates. While few chapters approach soils from an explicitly interdisciplinary lens, the collection is diverse in its geographical representation and one would hope that this volume might serve as a conversation starter between social and natural scientists with a demonstrated

commitment to evidence-based conservation approaches. Furthermore, those considering their own path to decolonizing relationships with the land amidst impending ecological destruction might find inspiration and solace in the varied ways that those whose stories are told in these pages have gone about getting to know the soil under their feet and the new opportunities that process has enabled. Those new to considering the materiality of nature and the politics of modernity may find some of the social theory underlying these ideas a bit dense and ill-explained, but the volume very effectively holds space for a diversity of theoretical and practical approaches to cultivating human-soil relationships, so much so that anyone looking to dig deeper into their relationships with place can find something compelling and meaningful here.

The introduction closes with these thoughts from Donna Harraway (2016): “It matters what we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” The ways in which the authors in this volume have storied soils is critical work for deepening our collective understanding of the work to be done to heal our separation with nature. Amidst the urgency of the ecological crises we face, taking time to centre relationships among human and non-human agents and do the slow work of cultivating soil might feel inadequate. But as the authors eloquently convey, this is the necessary work. The stories we tell matter and these stories are critical to our collective efforts to make other worlds possible.

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