

## Original Paper

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# Rethinking the Role of the Armed Forces in Statebuilding: From Annihilation to Acceptance

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## Abstract

This article analyses how international statebuilding has shifted from 'problem-solving' towards a new discursive regime of acceptance and affirmation. It seeks to explore how the shift to 'bottom-up' or 'post-liberal' approaches in the early 2000s led to a focus upon epistemological barriers to intervention and an appreciation of complexity. It then describes a process of reflection upon statebuilding as a policy practice, whereby the need to focus on local context and relations, in order to take problems seriously, begins to further undermine confidence in the Western episteme. In other words, the 'bottom-up' approach, rather than resolving the crisis of policy practices of statebuilding, seems to have further intensified it. It is argued that the way out of this crisis seems to be found in the rejection of the aspiration to know from a position of a 'problem-solving' external authority and instead to 'unlearn' from the opportunities opened up through the practices of exploring and engaging with the 'other'.

**Keywords:** Armed Forces, international statebuilding, intervention.

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## Introduction

In the late 1990s and the 2000s, discourses of international statebuilding hailed a new policy framework: the so-called ‘bottom-up’ approach, which was to overcome the limits of overly prescriptive and generic international programmes that assumed that ‘one size fits all’ (there is an extensive literature, summarised in Bennett *et al*, 2016; Collinson, 2016; Chandler, 2017a). However, this alternative framework - one which presupposed difference as a starting point, rather than the uniformity of problems and solutions (see Brigg, 2008) – similarly has today reached an impasse. Alternative approaches seem mired in discussion of the problems of ‘relational sensitivity’ (Chadwick *et al*, 2013), the ‘local turn’ (Randazzo, 2017), ‘hybridity’ (Millar 2014; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015), ‘friction’ (Björkdahl *et al*, 2016) or new forms of representation and inclusion (for example, Peterson, 2012). In fact, as long as these alternatives still shared the assumptions of external knowledge and direction, the attention to difference merely multiplied the points of impasse, bringing into focus further limits to external policy-practices and forms of knowledge (see, for example, Debiel *et al*, 2016; Heins *et al*, 2016).

The focus of this article is the analysis of a discursive shift away from these ‘external’ articulations of alternative ‘bottom-up’ understandings of international statebuilding and towards what are described here as exploratory or ‘affirmative’ forms of knowing and agency. This can be seen as a two-stage process. Firstly, with the opening up of the ‘black box’ of endogenous social processes, there is the growing recognition of the limits of ‘bottom-up’ forms of statebuilding intervention, as an attempt to establish a new ground for external problem-solving. Secondly, there is a shift to ‘the great outdoors’ through imagining alternative ways of perceiving and responding: accepting problems as emergent and interactive processes that are invitations to grasp the world in richer and more complex ways that are much more affirmative of the limits of knowing and the diversity of contexts and situations.

### The ‘Bottom-Up’ Approach

There is a growing policy convergence in international approaches to statebuilding intervention, increasingly covering the fields of peace and security, development and environmental sustainability (UN, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c), cohered through the United Nations’ 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN, 2015d). The UN Secretary-General argues that policy-makers need to move ‘beyond short-term, supply-driven response efforts towards demand-driven outcomes’ (UN, 2016a: p. 29). This trope of moving beyond ‘supply-driven’ responses problematizes the established frameworks and institutional arrangements of international statebuilding, breaking down the silos of expertise and authoritative knowledge, key to legitimizing international policy prescriptions. However, the difficulty of re-legitimising and repurposing international statebuilding is unlikely to be resolved merely through inverting the focus and direction of agency from the ‘top-down’ external ‘solution’ to the ‘bottom-up’ consensual understanding of the local ‘problem’.



As the Overseas Development Institute has highlighted, the shift towards bottom-up approaches is driven by the perception that international statebuilding agencies face a deep crisis of legitimacy; one that goes to the heart of their identity and the belief that international policy interventions can be neutral or objective in the desire to problem-solve and to capacity-build, 'regardless of context or culture' (ODI, 2016: p. 5). This idea of Western ethics, expertise and knowledge as applicable universally was crucial to statebuilding and to liberal internationalist approaches to peace and development assistance. However, it is seen to be problematic today and to represent a 'Western ethos' that others would wish to 'question or reject' (Ibid.):

...large parts of the current way the West conducts its... business - the reluctance to properly engage with and respect local authorities and cultures, the tendency to privilege international technical expertise over local knowledge and capacities, with 'exogenous "solutions" meeting endogenous "challenges" and "needs"' - [come] into question. (Ibid.: p. 23)

Over recent years, there has been a refocus of statebuilding policy intervention on the deeper engagement of international agencies and concern with developing new 'bottom-up' approaches to understanding problems and vulnerabilities. Rather than waiting for emergencies to happen, instead there is a deeper, longer-term engagement with on-going issues, such as extreme poverty amongst the 'most vulnerable'. This is often based on designing indirect forms of intervention for community engagement and empowerment rather than traditional 'top-down' policy assistance at the level of state institutions.

However, it is not easy to turn 'bottom-up' thinking into a viable form of problem-solving. The essential difficulty appears to be that of the barriers to access and understanding, despite an increasing awareness of the need to differentiate and prioritise by drilling-down further (getting more micro-level information) and enabling interventions to be more aligned with complex processes of interaction both within and between different local actors and agencies. This is why new digital technologies are often held to be key to the reform of international practices (UN, 2014; Meier, 2015; Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013), highlighted in the fact that the need to integrate new technological innovations is a constantly recurring theme for international agencies. The UN Secretary-General, for example, has urged that: 'Data and joint analysis must become the bedrock of our action. Data and analysis are the starting point for moving from a supply-driven approach to one informed by the greatest risks and the needs of the most vulnerable.' (UN, 2016a: p. 31; see also ALNAP, 2016)

The difficulty is that it seems that, whatever level of technological drilling-down or deeper forms of surveillance and information gathering may be deployed, it is not possible to capture all the potential variables within any given assemblage of interaction. It appears that any system of data-gathering could never be complete or able to grasp processes of interaction in their emergence. It is therefore little wonder that many commentators doubt that the aspirations for digitally-enhanced modes of access to relations, in order to fully understand a problem from the 'bottom-up', can be fulfilled (Read *et al*, 2016). As Nat O'Grady writes, the data categories used for cross-checking risk factors will always be too wide in scope and not targeted enough, thus increasing rather than ameliorating 'the problem of rendering invisible those most vulnerable' (O'Grady, 2016: p. 78).



## From Annihilation to Acceptance

By way of preface to the extent of the challenge facing international statebuilding agencies today it might be useful to think through the problem speculatively. To this end, *The Southern Reach Trilogy* makes a good starting point. The trilogy is a series of novels by the American author Jeff VanderMeer first published in 2014: *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*. A film adaptation of *Annihilation* by writer-director Alex Garland was released in 2018. Southern Reach is a military establishment sent to explore and understand the strange 'Area X'. The novels detail some of the experience of sending different missions to the area and how this process of exploration begins to unravel the self-understanding of those involved without ever gaining any knowledge or control over the area itself. In this mysterious and hypnotic landscape, the military explorers and researchers themselves become 'colonized', losing their illusions and their sanity but never discovering anything that could be called traditional knowledge. The allusions to the inversion of modernist or humanist understandings of the relation between the subject and the world - or the bifurcation of culture and nature, which places the human as the knowing active subject and the world as passive object - are clear in that the two main centres of engagement are the Lighthouse (with its allusions to Enlightenment knowledge) and its inversion, the 'tower'/tunnel that goes to subterranean depths (which leads to the disorientation and disappearance of the self).

When the Southern Reach teams cross the border into Area X, their experience of the world becomes 'weird' as they lose their compass on reality and their technological instruments become useless. This experience of the loss of power, control and understanding as leading international institutional experts arrive equipped with their statebuilding expertise and manuals of 'lessons learned', will be familiar to anyone with experience of statebuilding missions from Bosnia and Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan. The first novel, *Annihilation*, captures the experience of loss of the international statebuilding narrative of 'progress' and its assumptions that gradually more knowledge can be acquired and problems and barriers overcome:

Everyone [mission members] had died or been killed, returned changed or returned unchanged, but Area X had continued on as it always had... while our superiors seemed to fear any radical reimagining of this situation so much that they continued to send in knowledge-strapped expeditions as if this was the only option. (VanderMeer, 2015: pp. 158-9)

The biologist (the leading protagonist) is an expert in 'transitional environments' but while Area X is a transitioning environment, it is not transitioning in the way imagined by international statebuilders. As David Tompkins, in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2014), and Joshua Rothman in *The New Yorker* (2015), highlight, Area X can be understood as a 'hyperobject' in the terminology of contemporary speculative realist philosopher Timothy Morton (2013). For Morton:

Objects are Tardis-like, larger on the inside than they are on the outside. Objects are uncanny. Objects compose an untotalizable nonwhole set that defies holism and reductionism. There is thus no top object that gives all objects value and meaning, and no bottom object to which they can be reduced. (Morton, 2013: p. 116)



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Perhaps it would be useful to think of statebuilding in these terms as engaging with something that increasingly seems to make more sense if seen as a 'hyperobject'. Initially, statebuilders assumed that there was a holistic 'top object', which gave value and meaning to what they were doing in building peace, building democracy or building economic-capacities, this top object was the state and its institutions. Statebuilding 'from the top-down' seemed to make a lot of sense, especially in the mid- and late-1990s, with international powers highly confident in liberal universalism after the collapse of the Soviet challenge (Chandler, 2017a). With the perceived failure of statebuilding from the perspective of a top object of meaning from the late-1990s onwards, statebuilding 'from the bottom-up' assumed that instead of a top-object the focus should be upon a 'bottom object' which could be the (reductionist) key to the statebuilding project, starting from local and contextual knowledges and approaches and working upwards to achieve international policy ends.

Thus the 'annihilation' in the sub-title of this paper is not the disastrous experiences of 'top-down' interventions, of 'regime-change' and international protectorates but a much deeper problem of the realisation that international statebuilders have no handle on reality: that there is nothing to grasp to frame their policy interventions. That there is neither a 'top', to cohere statebuilding as an external project, nor a 'bottom' from which alternatives can be launched. This realisation and its consequences have been much slower to percolate through the levels of international statebuilding bureaucracy and the 'group-think' of the academy, where international institutions have been highly reluctant to think through the implications of the lack of mission legitimacy. The following two sections of this paper expand further on the perception of the problems of 'bottom-up' approaches and the exhaustion of the search for a reductionist ground or foundation. Instead of a 'bottom', international statebuilders found themselves in the disorienting experience of infinite complexity, where none of their knowledge or assumptions appeared to make sense. As will be suggested below, very much in line with the speculative 'weird' fiction of the Southern Reach trilogy, the inevitable outcome has been acceptance of the limits of external power and knowledge and, in some cases, a welcoming of the release from modernist or humanist responsibilities for 'problem-solving'.

### Annihilation

It, in fact, seems to be logically inevitable that any attempt to start from the perspective of the knowledge and technical mechanisms of international agencies and policy actors will constitute new forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Even if not starting from 'supply-centred' approaches, which assume Western superiority, these statebuilding approaches nevertheless assume the objective knowledge of these intervening agencies. In other words, their subject-centred perspectives (of their own role as the active agents, acquiring greater, more varied or more interactive knowledge) is not (as yet) problematized. Thus failures, to know 'the' problem or engage with it successfully, inevitably continue to expose external actors to accusations of being too Eurocentric or Western in their views and not being open-enough to the systems and societies in which they are engaged (Sabaratnam, 2013). These forms of criticism cannot be avoided by seeking to develop and innovate technologically, whether it is through Big Data, open source mapping technologies or other means, as whatever the nature of the innovation and no



matter how extensive its application and how efficient it may be in delivering information, real and complex life can never be adequately captured.<sup>1</sup>

The application of new technologies increasingly reveals the nature of the problem to be different to how it was previously imagined: they reveal communities to be much more differentiated and reveal that causal chains are often much more mediated and less linear than previously understood. Acquiring greater knowledge of depth, intricacy and complexity inevitably questions previous knowledge assumptions as well as bringing attention to the epistemological limitations of external attempts to know societies and processes from the 'bottom-up' (see, for example, Finkenbusch, 2016). The density is overwhelming. The problem for international actors tasked with policy intervention is that discussion and reflection upon the epistemological limits of knowledge is bound up with their own external, Western positionality (see Bagues-Pedreny, 2016).

Contemporary debates over the limits to what international statebuilders can achieve thus construct policy interventions as a performative epistemology (see Pickering, 2010): the failure of policy-making is seen to directly manifest the limits of a Western way of knowing. This failure is driven by the conflation of epistemological limitations with a Western, Eurocentric or colonial positionality. This positionality is then held to have historically been elitist, hierarchical and exclusionist. The inability to drill down to the required level of depth, to grasp the rich interactive density of complex relational processes, then gives the lie to statebuilding claims of objectivity or of epistemic superiority. All interventionist actors (who, by definition, are external agents intervening with instrumentalist intentionality) are caught in the problem of their inability to see the problem in the ways in which it may appear to those more closely involved, despite their claim to be objectively knowing and addressing it. Contemporary political, scientific and philosophical sensitivities necessarily bring international aspirations 'back down to earth', in the knowledge that interveners cannot escape their own socially, politically and technologically mediated frameworks of understanding. It appears that 'bottom-up' approaches cannot step outside of their positionality, even with the nicest and most generous of intentions (or with the most reflexive awareness of the recursive processual nature of assemblages and emergent causality; see Körppen, Ropers and Giessmann, 2011; Ramalingam, 2013; de Coning, 2016).

Bottom-up or post-liberal statebuilding interventions (see Chandler and Richmond, 2015), while appreciating non-linear and emergent causality, appear to be unable to overcome the epistemological limits of international policy-intervention. Statebuilding, as a 'problem-solving' discourse appears trapped in a modernist deadlock, still reproducing 'objective' Western understandings in the attempt to externally 'resolve' problems. However, I argue here, this experience has opened the possibilities for these limits to be legitimised or worked around. In response to the problems of legitimising knowledge claims, policy innovators are increasingly shifting perspective towards a richer 'posthuman' understanding of knowledge generation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Critics have argued that new scanning and mapping technologies may distance humanitarian actors even more from these societies (Scott-Smith, 2016; Duffield, 2016; Meier, 2015) or that they may reproduce epistemological blind spots and exclusions in different forms (Read *et al*, 2016; Kitchin, 2014; Aradau and Blanke, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Posthumanist phenomenology is often seen as starting with Thomas Nagel's famous essay, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (1974) or with Deleuze and Guattari's popularization of Jacob von Uexküll's 'ethology' (Deleuze, 1988: pp. 124-



Problems are increasingly recast as ones of phenomenology rather than merely epistemology. Access to and the construction of ‘the problem’ is transformed through the attention to the understanding or perceptions of other agencies or actors.

This shift begins to go beyond the assumptions that the problems are merely ones of epistemology: of extending the knowledge of external actors themselves. Considering how the world might be perceived and questions articulated in different ways, with different tools and techniques, begins to raise questions about the nature of the problem itself (see also Barad, 2007). It is at this point that the necessary limits to ‘bottom-up’ approaches of designing problem-solving interventions appear to become much clearer. Attempting to resolve ‘the problem’ is then no longer a purely epistemological concern of extending modernist forms of knowledge deeper into social and cultural processes of interaction by fine-tuning techniques of data gathering and breaking down categories of analysis or speeding up the feed-back from digital recording and sensing equipment.

A fundamental gulf opens up between the agency of the international statebuilders and the problem itself. Or rather the understanding that there is ‘a’ problem constitutes a fundamental gap between the statebuilding agency and the society concerned, which is continually apparent when the intervener needs to acquire knowledge in order to address the problem through providing information and assistance or in terms of knowing more about capacities, choices and needs. Bottom-up interventions emphasised the need for intervention to be ‘bottom-up’ but increasingly it becomes apparent that there is no ‘bottom’ to be found; no solid ground for external problem-solving knowledge and expertise. With this shift, inevitably, governing and knowing agency necessarily becomes understood as more widely distributed.

The shift to ‘bottom-up’ or ‘problem-centred’ approaches seeking to redesign policy interventions, appears to have had the additional implication of making societies and ‘problems’ much more opaque, or rather infinitely complex, than initially imagined. Thus, forcing problems to be increasingly recast as ontological rather than merely epistemological. The point of the distinction is the vantage point or positionality of the knowledge that is required. An epistemological problem can be solved through an expansion of existing frameworks of knowledge, from the subject position of an external actor (in this case, the statebuilding agency concerned). An ontological shift in perspectives also makes the problem itself less clear, even knowing what ‘the problem’ is cannot be resolved through such an extension and requires indirect access through the ways of thinking and relating internal to the policy target or situation itself. The question is then no longer: ‘How can we understand more?’ or even ‘What do they want?’ or ‘What do they need?’ but an entirely different presentation of the question, away from the initial assumption of the existence of ‘a’ problem. Instead the starting point is more a question of the ways of knowing of others: ‘How do they think?’ ‘How do they see the world?’

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6), drawing attention to how our perceptions of the world are very different to those of other actors and agencies. This approach pluralizes the world, enabling us to see the world as constituted through many multiple ways of being, decentring the human as an all-knowing actor. A variety of related approaches - such as speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, actor network theory, new materialism and post-phenomenology - have extended the pluralizing perspectives of critical, gender, feminist, black and de-colonial studies to the nonhuman, thus radicalizing perspectivism (see, for example, Bogost 2012; Bryant 2011; Ihde 2009; Morton 2012; Harman 2016).



'What language do they use?' 'How do they use it?' 'What tools do they use?' 'What instruments or technologies do they use to make sense of the world?' The knowledge sought is how phenomena appear - how information is processed and things are perceived – to others.

In this way, the barriers revealed by the 'bottom-up' approach appear as the barriers of the modern or Western episteme itself and the renegotiation of intervention as a set of knowledge practices begins to formulate the problem in terms which parallel discussions of posthuman or object-oriented ontologies: as the object of analysis seems to be increasingly obscure: to withdraw or recede from the direct or unmediated view of the external actor (see, for example, Harman, 2016). The more that the external statebuilding agency or actor thinks that it grasps the problem in bottom-up approaches - understands the processes involved, locates the most vulnerable, finds the mechanisms of mediation, interpretation and translation - the more the problem recedes or disaggregates; and it is clear that what was mistakenly taken as knowledge of 'the problem' was merely a self-projection of the categories and understandings of the external actor itself. Rather than coming closer to the problem, to addressing causes and removing barriers, the problems appear to be further away, or, more precisely, to have much more relational depth.

### Acceptance

The critique of earlier 'top-down' or 'supply-centred' policy approaches as well of those of the alternative 'bottom-up' or 'demand-driven' solutions is precisely that both remain based on projections of Western understandings: of a liberal, modernist or Eurocentric episteme, which makes 'God's eye view' assumptions that the epistemological barriers to problem-solving can be overcome while ignoring the possibility of ontological barriers to knowledge (see, for example, Chandler, 2015). In the work of object-oriented ontology or speculative realism, this problem of ignoring ontological barriers is often termed 'correlationism', a problematic, first coined by Quentin Meillassoux (Meillassoux, 2008: pp. 5-7), which is seen to stem from Kant's transcendental idealism. Phenomenological barriers to knowledge are not taken seriously as it is assumed that we never have access to the inner world of experience of other subjects or objects, only to the world as we perceive and experience it, trapped within our own phenomenological world of perception. Thus, problems are always understood epistemologically: within our own set of correlations between the world and ourselves.

Problems thus are always framed as 'problems for us', never constructed in the ways in which they may appear for other forms of being or ways of existing. The perceived need to overcome or to bypass these limits has been increasingly raised by decolonial approaches (see, for example, Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo and Escobar, 2010; Shilliam, 2015; Wynter, 2003) and these fit well (in this regard) with the concerns of posthumanist, speculative realist or object-oriented theorists. The key problematic for bottom-up forms of intervention, is thus that of not taking alterity seriously enough (Candea in Carrithers *et al*, 2010: p. 175): the study of different local relations and interactions from the God's eye view of a Western observer or governance agency appears to risk affirming the modernist worldview (of 'phenomenology-of') rather than questioning the hegemonic Western assumptions about the objective or scientific nature of





knowledge; i.e. that the world is single and uniform and only socio-cultural understandings and responses differ (Holbraad in *ibid.*: p. 181).

This reversal of positionality in relation to the problem increasingly links new developments in policy practices with posthuman, speculative or object-oriented approaches. In international policy discourses, bottom-up approaches are fundamentally challenged by the need to go beyond correlationism; beyond merely the projection of a Western external, or modernist, framing of problems and solutions in order to think outside these mental constraints. As Meillassoux puts it, this shift can be understood as an exciting challenge of entering 'the great outdoors' (Meillassoux, 2008: p. 7), no longer forced to be constrained by traditional frameworks of gaining access to problems but rather to explore other ways of being and knowing.

It cannot be emphasised enough that previous approaches to international statebuilding are seen to have black-boxed societies, being too little interested in their internal workings and relationships and instead focusing on surface appearances and offering policy advice and assistance on this basis. The opening up of this black box has provided the dynamic which is driving and transforming the design of policy-intervention, which increasingly seeks to draw from the rich plurality of the new worlds opened up in the problematization of a narrow 'bottom-up' approach. In fact, as articulated here, it becomes clear that there are two stages of the opening up of the problem. The first stage, external and subject-centred, seeks to drill-down, operating within the legacy of the modernist episteme, pluralizing the variables and localizing the factors (as described above). The second stage begins to shift to a less modernist framework with a pluralising ontology, speculating upon multiple ways of knowing or perceiving reality, or of being in the world.

The attempt to move away from addressing a problem to exploring the ways in which it may appear to others transforms the self-understanding of statebuilding actors. This shift from a subject-centred position (which assumes a universal or objective perspective) to a posthuman approach is often unclear in the remaking of international discourses of policy-intervention because this means dealing with the alien nature not of objects but of communities constituted as vulnerable or 'at risk'. Thus Meillassoux's 'great outdoors' becomes recast as an open-ended engagement with the 'other', with the 'local' or with 'grass-roots communities' (see, for example, Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). The fact that the other can never really be known is not a problem but, on the contrary, positive and enabling, and 'expands possibilities for opening to "new" understandings of difference' (Brigg and Muller, 2009: p. 136) where external actors can 'value cultural difference independently of claims to have or know culture, attend directly to the process of constituting culture, and open to other ways of knowing human difference' (*ibid.*: p. 138).

Regardless of the 'bottom-up' terminology through which this shift is recast, the phenomenological framing is the same: policy interventions increasingly start from the perceptions of actors closer to the problem itself and its articulation in its concrete 'local' context. The problem is then posed in terms of the ways of knowing and interacting of the 'local', vulnerable, marginalised or most at risk. Thus the 'project design' shifts from assuming the problem and looking for its solution to a more open-ended enquiry into understanding the



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perceptions of the 'other' or the ways in which the problem emerges on its own terms (see, for example, Bahadur and Doczi, 2016). Thus, interventions seek to see a more affirmative mode of engagement, exploring how other actors and agents see and understand these interactions, grasping the world in its 'ontological multiplicity'. This provides a major challenge to the approach of drilling down to access and open up problems to an external understanding, as these 'bottom-up' approaches are limited by retaining the baggage of the modernist episteme.

### Conclusion

This article has sought to bring clarity to the discussion of the limits and possibilities of the practices of international statebuilding intervention, which bring to the surface the difficulty of maintaining the legitimacy of the internationalist imaginary of intervention from a universalist, detached, or objective perspective (even if it were possible for statebuilding interventions to be free from the blinkers of power or ideology). Understanding the 'conditions of impossibility' for traditional or modernist conceptions of international statebuilding - the inability to legitimate the separations and cuts necessary to demarcate a distinct or separate policy sphere – shines an important light on the frameworks through which policy interventions are understood and contested today. It also suggests that to dismiss posthumanist, speculative realist or object-oriented approaches, as somehow not 'policy relevant' would be to miss the broader context in which both academic and policy processes are evolving.



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