

# A PRISON BREAK INTO THE PAST?

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*A comment on Justin Rosenberg's  
'International Relations in the prison of Political Science'*

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Going against the fashion of declaring the end of International Relations (IR) or its theory, Justin Rosenberg envisions a beginning<sup>1</sup> and defends his stance successfully.<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg correctly underlines a central feature of IR, a multiplicity of social entities, and its consequences: co-existence, difference, interaction, combination, and dialectical change.

Yet, Rosenberg's inspiring account should ask itself whether it plans a prison break into a world that no longer exists, if it ever did. I am not blaming him; a theory of everything is unfeasible in a single article. But his examples look back in history and not into the future, not even fully at today.

Rosenberg writes about the 'fragmented character of human history itself'<sup>3</sup> – but why only *human* history? Such a limitation is unnecessary, perhaps unhelpful if thinking about the contemporary advances and probable future trajectories of knowledge.

Yes, multiplicity was, is, and will be a central feature in the future too, but the Anthropocene/Capitalocene<sup>4</sup> and our increasing knowledge about the relations between human and non-human (including non-living) challenge us to think of multiplicity and its consequences far beyond humanity. One "small" example is how non-human entities, microbes, create borders independent of human action and thus limit human co-existence and

<sup>1</sup> Justin Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science', *International Relations*, 30(2), 2016.

<sup>2</sup> See the forum introduced by Ken Booth and Milja Kurki, 'Editors' Introduction: Rethinking International Relations – Again', *International Relations*, 31(1), 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science', pp. 130, 35.

<sup>4</sup> See David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Liberal Cosmopolitan IR: A Response to Burke et al.'S 'Planet Politics'', *Millennium*, 2017.

interaction.<sup>5</sup> An alternative “big” example comes from the geography of life. Anthropogenic climate change impels a universal redistribution of life, which has consequences from economic development and food security to human health and culture and it feeds back on the climate itself.<sup>6</sup>

While Rosenberg’s desire for IR to express its ‘big idea’ in a way that has impact across human sciences is laudable; while his proposals of multiplicity and ‘uneven and combined development’ have high potential; while his motivation is understandable – break IR free from the prison of Political Science – he might re-enforce a disciplinary boundary at a time when we need a fusion and a synthesis of multiple disciplines in order to meet the challenge to re-think the organisation of anthropogenic life and human relations with the non-human.

The division between human and nature is no longer defensible,<sup>7</sup> and Rosenberg’s insights need to be put into perspective and applied beyond the human.

<sup>5</sup> Gitte du Plessis, 'When Pathogens Determine the Territory: Toward a Concept of Non-Human Borders', *European Journal of International Relations*, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Gretta T. Pecl et al., 'Biodiversity Redistribution under Climate Change: Impacts on Ecosystems and Human Well-Being', *Science*, 355(6332), 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Dalby, 'Environmental Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century', *Alternatives*, 39(1), 2014; Alf Hornborg, "The Political Ecology of the Technocene: Uncovering Ecologically Unequal Exchange in the World-System," in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, ed. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and Francois Gemenne (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).