

Book Review: Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People by Timothy Morton

In Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People, Timothy Morton offers further challenge to models of human exceptionalism by calling for solidarity between human and non-human beings. In reimagining what it means to 'have in common', this is a deeply pleasurable book that places enjoyment at the centre of contemplating our more-than-human futures, recommends Jodie Matthews.

Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People. Timothy Morton. Verso. 2017.

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When I think about a climate-changed future, I tend to picture something terrifying like Cormac McCarthy's novel [The Road](#). It is grey. There is scarcity, extinction, doom. Yet, it doesn't have to be like that, suggests Timothy Morton, in *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*: we can even do better than survival. We *must* do better than survival.

Environmentalism as an alternative to consumerism can be a hard sell: we might be able to save you from the doom bit, but you can't have any nice new stuff or any fun. However, Morton argues, 'talk of efficiency and sustainability are simply artefacts of the relentless use of fossil fuels'. The restrictive dullness is all part of seeing the future world according to the existing neoliberal, capitalist order. Maybe, in a solar economy, 'you could have a disco in every single room of the house': there will be strobes and decks and lasers all day and all night, with Björk's [Hyperballad](#) turned up to eleven, lizards and frogs sharing the dance floor and philosophers wiggling their bottoms. (Björk, the animals and the wiggling all feature in Morton's thought.) The disco image may seem frivolous for so important a topic, but the book is about economics, humans and the future, and 'economics is how lifeforms organize their enjoyment'. *Humankind* encourages thought about both the lifeforms and enjoyment.

In short, *Humankind's* central project is to consider the communist politics of the category of the human, and that category as a way of thinking about a planetary communism. Communism, says Morton, only works when attuned to the fact of our existence in a biosphere, the 'symbiotic real' from which we have been 'Severed'. Humans are discrete beings, but deeply interrelated with, and reliant on, other beings (viruses, bacteria, other animals): this is the solidarity of the book's subtitle, reimagining what 'to have in common' means. The book might have had another byline, jokes Morton: 'Yes, it's possible to include nonhuman beings in Marxist theory – but you're not going to like it!' Marxism's theories of alienation and use value lend it to the development of a posthuman economy, where human thought is no longer the top access mode to the world. Yes, Marx may be an 'anthropocentric philosopher' but, *Humankind* argues rigorously, this is a bug, not a feature, of Marxism.

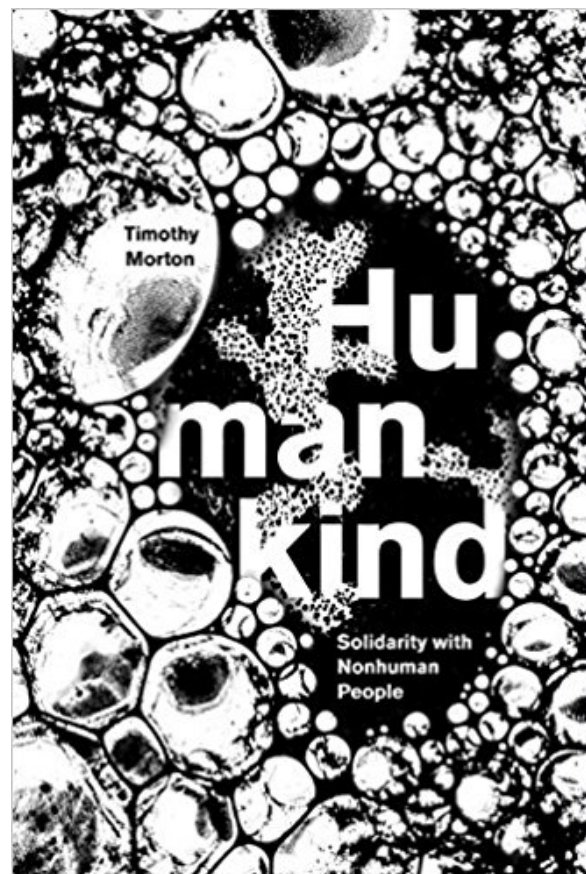




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Morton reads Marx in an explicitly twenty-first-century context: not just Marxism's application to contemporary concerns, but a reading that goes back to Marx, together with the insights of Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Including nonhuman aspects of ourselves in thought about economics and the future is to work with spectrality: 'a convocation of specters will aid us in imagining something like an ecocommunity, a communism of humans and nonhumans alike'. Evolution theory itself tells us that we coexist with and as species' ghosts. Morton's return to Marx is, like the work as a whole, audacious. It reminds us that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* was part of his extended phenotype (no contract, no money; the poem just poured out of him like a silkworm), and that biting into a peach is production (with commodity fetishism being the alienation of entities from their sensuous qualities).

It would, of course, be impossible to write about Morton without mentioning Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Object-Oriented Philosophy was a term [coined by Graham Harman in 1999](#), with the OOO movement inaugurated at a [conference at Georgia Tech in 2010](#). The organisers contended that OOO 'steers a path' between scientific naturalism and social relativism to draw attention to 'things at all scales (from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis), and pondering their nature and relations with one another as much as with ourselves'. Morton's [Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World](#) was profoundly shaped by OOO, suggesting that by the end of that book, 'the reader will have a reasonable grasp of how one might use this powerful new philosophical approach for finding out real things about real things'. OOO is also woven through [Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence](#) (2016), to which *Humankind* might be seen as a companion piece. (The last words of *Dark Ecology* are even an encouragement to disco, taken up in *Humankind*.) OOO certainly gets a few mentions in this book, but I suggest that a). OOO has had so much scholarly and online discussion that it needs less of an introduction, seven years on from Georgia Tech; and b). it now permeates Morton's readings of philosophy, economics, life and culture without needing to be constantly made explicit. Paradoxically, this also means that readers not so enthused by OOO can enjoy *Humankind* without finding it an obstacle to accessing the rest of Morton's ideas. And that is something that *should* be made explicit: it is an enjoyable book about the organisation of enjoyment.

My enjoyment of the book should be put in some disciplinary context. I have read plenty of Heidegger, Marx, Lacan, Derrida et al. I also share many of Morton's cultural references: he had me at *Hyperballad*. It may be that readers coming at these ideas from different angles will find Morton's breezy tone and melding of science, philosophy and literary critical methods less engrossing. But the part I really enjoyed was his exhilarating treatment of the film [Interstellar](#).

Christopher Nolan's 2014 film explores, according to Morton, a basic problem: 'you should save the world. But how do you *want* to?' The human idea of survival in *Interstellar* is murder-suicide at a planetary level. The film enables us to reimagine who we are, 'crushed by current social conditions and the shock of the Anthropocene'. Morton fully acknowledges that the narrative's ostensible mission to allow us to leave Earth looks dangerous, especially coming from an ecological philosopher. However, 'the way the "leaving Earth" scenario plays out is strangely ecological'. It is we, the audience, right now, who 'live in a world disconnected from other life forms': like all sci-fi, *Interstellar* isn't just about the future. Once embarked on their interstellar mission, the film's buddy/elder-brother robot, TARS, can detect quantum data from inside the black hole, but can't communicate it to Earth. This profound problem of communication and interpretation is linked by Morton to describing a dream, phenomena that are 'futural as well as pictures of the past because they can be interpreted infinitely'. He suggests that dreaming can be contrasted with aggressive and apocalyptic ecological information delivery (even if we can save you from the doom, life will still be like *The Road*). Morton asserts that 'the tactic is how to include not just prediction and accounting for things, but spectral, open *futurity* in our ethical and political decisions'. If *Interstellar* can make us realise this, it might not just be about saving humankind. It could enact it too.

Daring, hopeful and enjoyable enquiries into the lives we lead and the future they might engender are what readers can expect from *Humankind*.

Jodie Matthews is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Huddersfield. Her work explores the place of waterways in British culture, and the historical representation of British Romanies and Travellers. [Read more by Jodie Matthews](#).

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