Review - The Microbial State

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The Microbial State: Global Thinking and the Body Politic
Stefanie R. Fishel
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Stefanie R. Fishel's **The Microbial State** is an important application of new materialist engagements with bodies in IR theory. Because I focus on disability studies and find it important to theorize the body, Fishel's book intrigues me, but it has some critical shortcomings. The Introduction claims that there are limits to using established, anthropocentric theories in IR in grappling with ecological crises. Fishel's solution is a theory that can account for the most microscopic and macroscopic of biocultural locations, both human and nonhuman. Fishel's intervention, therefore, involves retheorizing the body to prompt readers to have an immanently biocentric, not anthropocentric, view of politics. Metaphors are crucial for (re-)imagining the role of the IR state by doing more than just describe phenomena; metaphors bring things into being. Discussion of IR metaphors initiates Fishel's conversation with the broader IR literature, which applies body metaphors while having little interest in bodies themselves.

Microbes, which Fishel contends are actors, are the book's key focus. They decenter human actors, demonstrating that they are not the only important entities; microbes matter for numerous bodily and natural phenomena. To justify treating microbes as actors, Fishel draws on science and technology studies (STS) and contemporary biology. IR has, Fishel believes, ignored insights of human life that biologically informed conceptualizations of world politics would illuminate.

Chapter One examines why body metaphors matter in international relations, understanding (political) bodies as multiplicities of material factors and activities happening to, across, and within them. Bodies, as both active and receptive, blur the Cartesian subject/object distinction. States, unlike other bodies, require metaphors to constitute them. Fishel reflects on the body metaphor in political thought, noting that it has traditionally symbolized security. The imperative, Fishel believes, is to have a new way of thinking about the body (politic) that recognizes how the world shapes it and how, in turn, it shapes the world.

Chapter One, furthermore, discusses how new materialism and STS matter for rethinking the body politic. By stressing material contexts, they decenter the human subject, unsettle the notion of the human self/subject by highlighting the necessity of living with human and nonhuman beings alike, and recognize the agency of nonhuman actors. Such approaches emphasize that human bodies are fluid, interacting with many microscopic entities. Metaphorically, this helps us think of political societies as "**bodies** politic," insomuch that they are "a set of evolving and interlocking organic systems within systems" (43, emphasis in original).

Chapter Two's concern is "metagenomics, or the study of collective genomes directly from the organism's environment" (56), for articulating a political society made up of coinhabiting groups of interacting species and appreciates human relations with microbes. Humans are, Fishel stresses, hosts of a multitude of microscopic entities. We must think of microbes not as enemies (despite what popular conceptions of bacteria might suggest) but as vital to health.

IR can also rethink states too by applying insights of metagenomics. The archaic body-as-container metaphor, Fishel

believes, misses out on much of how the human body and the bodies politic "experience 'traffic' in and out" (63). To move away from the container metaphor of the body politic, Fishel applies "symbiogenesis," "the horizontal transfer of genetic traits" (65), which usefully helps comprehending human relations beyond the idea that human existence comes about merely through Darwinian competition. Likewise, Fishel believes in thinking of the international state system as an entangled, heterogenous cultural hotspot, which may ignite both thinking about problems in world politics and critiquing the appropriateness of present institutions that meant to solve them; Fishel stresses that solving climate change must be sensitive to how what humans are doing and can do will impact and collaborate with the broader milieu of human and nonhuman actors.

Chapter Three intervenes in the idea of states as contaminated by applying new scientific understandings to problematize negative connotations. Fishel uses the "old friends hypothesis" (76), which posits that an over-sanitized world that perceives all foreign bacteria and viruses as existential threats itself leads to health problems, to reformulate notions of what are and are not "healthy states" (77). Chapter Three emphasizes STS's deconstruction of the agent/structure and subject/object dichotomies and the concept of performativity to make sense of the state. With STS, Fishel claims that it is ideal to look at how actors use the state for "translations and interactions" (79) of humans, nonhuman bodies, political and governmental institutions, documents, and other objects.

STS articulates how the metaphor of the state as unitary, rational actor (or, to draw on biology, the "pure culture," "aseptic" [81] approach) obscures the actions taking place throughout the world that makes the state exist and operate. Such an approach frequently justifies extreme violence against those it perceives to be existential threats. Furthermore, an aseptic view (similar to a body with allergies) leads a political society that cannot differentiate between real and perceived threats. The aseptic view applies immunological metaphors: actors are "pathologies" and "viruses" threatening the state's existence. However, Fishel identifies new ideas of immunity in the sciences, like the old friends hypothesis, that support an interactive, more accepting understanding of health.

We could apply new insights of the body's relation with microbes for a new model for political bodies, which Fishel calls the "**contaminated state**" (90, emphasis in original), that promotes and embraces pluralism as key to their health. Fishel uses a more nuanced understanding of "parasite," recognizing parasites as important for stimulating the immune system, to make sense of the contaminated state's ethics. For example, immigrants, rather than "leeching off" societies, revitalize them; xenophobic responses would be inappropriate.

Finally, Chapter Four draws on systems biology and posthumanism to make sense of international relations' complexity. Biology assists understanding the intricateness, dynamism, and "interdependence" (100) of life. Systems biology, "the study of systems with biological components" (109), posits that these systems are not static but are always collective, changing, and multifaceted. For IR, it is an analogy teaching the importance of communicating the everchanging nature of the international system. Like cells, states emerge therefore as they engage with fellow states and actors. Interactions happening at the state scale will then lead to objects in the international scale.

Posthumanist methodology can make it possible "for the overlapping of things, or objects, and social concepts in such a way that the researcher can learn more about a set of relations than is possible by looking at each discreetly" (102). Abstracting humans from the nonhuman microbes they have evolved alongside inhibits comprehending natural sciences' understanding of what it means to be an individual. Posthumanism shows that the container metaphor is flawed, as humans live among, and transform with, other beings.

By challenging outdated conceptions of the body and how they misguide IR theory, Fishel's book is a major contribution to IR. However, I am concerned that, to use Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (1997) term, the "normate"—an ideal (which discourses construct against corporeal differences) that actors use to assess whether one deserves humanity and citizenship—hovers over Fishel's work. When one calls people "crippled" or "insane," one is taking the position of the normate, determining that something about them makes them less-than-human or undeserving of political privileges.

Fishel's normative understanding of political society is an ultimately healthy one, condemning other societies from the position of the normate. However, it is problematic to uncritically apply health to evaluating human bodies and

political societies. Disability scholar Susan Wendell (2013) highlights the importance of openness to "different**ways of being** that give valuable perspectives on life and the world" (171, emphasis in original), including those that societies problematically define in negative terms, like chronic pain and illness. It is not that avoiding or actively pursuing ways of ending suffering is problematic, but we do need to be more accepting of "unhealthy" bodies. The normate suggests that there is still discrimination of "unhealthy" political communities. While Fishel recognizes that metaphors of disease often lead to stigma, they are not the same as metaphors of unhealthiness and chronic pain. Fishel's approach could subjugate actors that contribute to long-term disease or pain, literal or metaphorical.

Defenders might amend Fishel's ideas to respect (political) bodies that defy the normate. Nonetheless, such an amendment may have its own baggage. Thinking of states as disabled or unhealthy, even when such a way of becoming is legitimate, could rely on problematic, reified views of disabled bodies and the actors they relate to. The book's shortcomings do not preclude admiring its provocation of microbes as actors in international politics and the implications of it. **The Microbial State** has piqued my interest and should excite other scholars who have been studying new materialism's implications for IR.

References

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Wendell, S., 2013. Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities. In: L. J. Davis, ed.**The Disability Studies Reader**. 4th ed. New York: Routledge, p. 161–73.

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