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The Cultural Politics of *Politics of Nature*

Review of Bruno Latour *Politics of Nature*

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When the mirror does not reflect our own likeness, it does not mean there is nothing to perceive.

Pierre Clastres

This essay presents a review of *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* by Bruno Latour (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, April 2004, 307 pages).

There are a substantial band of readers who have awaited the just published English translation of Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* with considerable interest. While one cannot fail to respect Latour's creative energy and the scale of his ambition, one suspects that many will find his latest offering perplexing. Unquestionably, it opens a whole basket of critical issues for debate. Certainly, the book's provocations stimulate thought, yet contrary to several placatory caveats made, it is also frequently immoderate. Moreover, if the reader finds a way through the web of skilfully woven words s/he ends up having to decide if they are willing to be an inducted supporter/friend of his

project or accept their fate as an excluded critic/enemy. Positively, *Politics of Nature* declares a position that demands that one makes a choice.

This review will consider Latour's project, the critique it rests upon and the position he adopts. It will close by considering its links to design philosophy.

A Sketch of the Project

What Latour sets out to do is to unlock the transformative potential of 'political ecology' (defined at its most basic as a conjunction of ecology and politics) as a means of totally reconstituting the relation of science, public life and politics, which he asserts has been paralysed by the institutional division of "nature and society". His approach, based on "a certain conception of science", commences with a critical ground-clearing (in his introduction and first chapter) followed by the detailing of 'political ecology' remade as a domain of decision (over the four remaining chapters).

The overarching proposition is to deliver the politico-conceptual means to open an epoch in which nature, society and culture, plus politics and science as we know them, are all superseded by the elements and operation of a new collective understood as not "a thing in the world, a being with fixed and definitive borders, but a movement of establishing provisional cohesion that will have to be started all over again every single day" (147). The process and the product it aims to deliver are built with the tools of abstract ideas and a language of invention. This edifice, as it is elaborated, is a product of appropriation, transposition and fabrication mostly drawn from the language of law and political philosophy combined with a generous serving of formalism. Traversing his text is rather like reading road signs in a fog – one has to strain to see, sometimes there is clarity, often just a blur and frequently there is a need to reverse to check that one saw the word correctly. The following summary gives the baldest indication of what he elaborates at great length.

The central figure to enact change that Latour presents is the "new collective". This is to be constitutionally created, via enacting what he calls the "apportionment of capabilities" (these being:

- i. the distribution of speech between humans and non-humans;
- ii. redistributing the capacity to act as a social actor; and,
- iii. a redefining (i) and (i) by reality and recalcitrance), all of which permit the collective to be composed of "propositions".

Once the collective is constituted, a new separation of powers is to be sought, this to establish a system of power in constant reformation that is formally enabled by the interaction between two entities: an upper house that measures via the "power to take into account" and a lower house with the "power to arrange in rank order". These entities are to replace the old order's division of "facts and 'values'".

The entire exercise is to be administered by a new Constitution. Rather than mirroring the model of fixed binary structures of the old (existing) Constitution, the new Constitution aims to author a process in which "... the only way to compose a common world, and thus to escape later on from a multiplicity of interests and a plurality of beliefs, consists precisely in *not* dividing up at the outset and without due process what is common and what is private, what is objective and what is subjective" (93). The legislative agency of the new Constitution is put forward as the means to give voice and direction to both humans and nonhumans as those beings able to 'exchange' properties which can create in common "the raw material of the collective" (61) and its condition of continual process. Operation of the collective is to be facilitated by a specific set of skills that combine the abilities and wiles of four groups of players: Objective scientists [purists], politicians [compromisers], both of whom are 'committed' to faithful representation, plus economists [calculators and documenters], and moralists [judges].

The objective is to completely displace the old regime's metaphysical foundations and the division of powers it maintains and to bring a "new common world", equally a "pluriverse", into existence. This proposed new voluntarist regime can be characterised as a neo-scientific supra-pragmatism. It has all the feel of a functionalist utopia or dystopia (depending on one's disposition towards it).

This entire project only makes sense if one buys into the critique that Latour has been developing for a considerable time. This critique invites critical interrogation.

Critique of the Critique

Many of the themes/categories (constitution, culture, modernity, nature, humans/nonhumans, society, politics), some of the argument, as well as a number of the contradictions found in *Politics of Nature*, have been circulating in Latour's work for a decade and more. They mark a committed effort to hone ideas over time and to develop a coherent position to express them. Constructively, what he says prompts a confrontation with one's own thinking. It follows that one can strongly disagree with much of what he proposes (as I do) without recoiling from engagement with his text, or without dissuading others from reading it.

This is a tricky book full of tricks. Some, one enjoys, others leave one puzzled or hot and bothered. This trait cannot but influence what is to be said about it.

With sweeping rhetorical gestures, postmodern thought is totalised and cast aside by Latour. Contempt for thinkers with whom he disagrees is hardly concealed and the 'truth' delivered by empirical scientific inquiry, to which he is so committed, is mobilised as the means to measure the worth of almost every theoretical practice other than his own. Yet when it suits him, he

employs other thinking, including quasi-deconstructive techniques. As Latour readers would affirm, he is not backward in strongly expressing his opinion. In reading Latour one finds oneself riding a pendulum swinging between his engaging insightfulness to his dogmatism, passing through his fertile imagination *en route*. Do such judgements stand the test of exposure to the available evidence? Let's see.

Latour uses Plato's allegory of the Cave as defining figure in the relation between 'Science and society'. He argues that it reveals a general determinate condition of mind that has profoundly delimited conditions for the advancement of collective human being – the problem is asserted as the division between Nature and Politics posed as a "double assembly" from which "our salvation" is expected to come.

Poor old Plato, he certainly takes some stick. It hardly seems fair, once one remembers that 'Nature' is a degeneration, via the Roman notion of *natura*, of the far broader ontically related Greek Idea of *phusis* (in which beings are enfolded and thus have no position of external observation). Likewise, Plato's highly rationalised understanding of politics (in common with Latour's) has little in common with the character of contemporary institutionalised politics.

Certainly, Latour's reading of the allegory is contestable and highly coloured by his back-loaded agenda. More importantly, he makes his particular understanding of nature/*phusis* and politics universal – commonality is imposed and different understandings within intellectual communities and amid 'Others' is ignored. Combined with his attachment to objectivity (itself a prefigurative idea) and his version of the key message of the allegory, one finds oneself dragged back to revisit philosophical disputes that have raged for centuries. In another way, by experiencing this, we witness a contest of ontologies and in so doing see how Latour chooses to think. Without question, it is possible to argue with just as much weight and conviction as Latour that in actuality, 'all that is' can only be thought according to 'ideas', expressed in the ordering of 'the real', which means that 'reality' and 'truth' do not have an existence that, for human beings, is *knowable* in a form independent of language, the sign and values.¹

Facticity is not in question here, what is being said is that nothing is unmediated; nothing becomes 'a fact' outside of an anthropocentric regime of intertextual representation. This is not simply a subjective hermeneutic, but the consequence of a collective with common rules of understanding. The 'pluriverse' is a locus of competing representationally constructed realities, these of variable functional efficacy, none of which can establish ontic correspondence. The real and nature are conjoined plural operational fictions, each with their own bonded epistemology delivering competing truths. Empiricism, realism, relativism, constructivism, and the turning of

the circle that circumscribes and animates the relation between metaphysics and ontology, are all subject to this non-transcendent condition of limitation.

The ‘worlds that are’ and the ‘worlds that are made present’ are *not* the same worlds; they are divided by knowledge rather than unified by it. One cannot enter the pluriverse and embrace the plural without accepting that ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ are perspectival and situated. This view does not imply pluralism wherein difference is effectively accommodated within a single world (view); rather it understands the pluriverse as a collection of worlds in exchange. Latour, in his assertion of immutable facts, wants truth to be singular, common and final, whereas ‘the enemy’ position recognises that truth may be plural and contingent as time, world-views, the state of knowledge, subject positions and circumstances change. We have no arbitrator (least of all science) to whom to appeal in contested understandings of worlds and things. The ‘obvious’ is never the same and common.

On the matter of the status of the metaphysical appeal to Nature as a unity that disables politics, as claimed by Latour, one wonders exactly upon what his eyes are cast. Does not the sickness of politics reside in a far baser place? Latour claims, “there has never been any other politics other than the politics of nature, and there has never been any other nature than the nature of politics. Epistemology and politics, as we now understand very well are one and the same thing, conjoined in (political) epistemology to make both the practices of sciences and the very object of public life incomprehensible” (28). Nature here only makes sense in the frame of the meaning Latour invents and includes in his glossary (which this quotation, in a circular fashion, itself defines). Here one asks oneself ‘does it ring true as an exposure of what underpins political theory in action?’ Or is one more inclined to think in terms of the dogmatism, blundering around in confusion, self-interest, desire for power and poll-driven character of the institution of formal politics of everyday experience, the epistemological motor of which is barely firing on one cylinder? Prosaically, the language of nature inflects everyday life in numerous ways with minimal semiotic force – the language is a habitual element of a habitus. The link between representation and referent in the case of nature (as in many other unifying concepts) constantly weakens as language sucks itself dry – natural resources, natural foods, natural timbers, natural fabrics, natural colours, natural complexion, natural oils etc.

Far less problematic in Latour’s argument is the critique of the ecology movement’s failure to liberate ‘political ecology’ from the biocentric essentialism that keeps nature to the fore and the geometry of the political “chessboard’ unchanged (5). It is not exactly correct though to say that ‘political ecology’ as is has changed nothing. What it has conspired with, is the construction of a semi-autonomous sphere of action that deflects resistance

to the defuturing status quo. 'Saving nature' thus maintains business as usual – changing nothing is not its failure, but its over-determined realised goal. In this respect Latour is right when he points out that political ecology uses "*nature to abort politics*". Equally "environmental ethics" (an unfortunate 'fag-end' of philosophy), and especially 'deep ecology', have their shallowness cruelly exposed.

What is lacking is recognition that the academy is complicit in this replication of unknowing. It is a central actor in maintaining an intellectual community that induces those who pass through it into a thinking that support subjectivities, practices, values and organisations the underpin 'being unsustainable'. Following on, one questions the wisdom in retaining an attachment to 'ecology' (the notion of relationality – which gets a passing mention by Latour – is a far less charged and much more useful notion). Above all, the fiction of 'ecological crises' needs overturning – crises may appear in ecological domains, but it is of 'our' making – 'we' are the crisis engendering crises. Certainly the claim that ecological crises "bring about more profound innovations in political philosophy than do their theoreticians, who are unable to wean themselves from the advantages offered by the conservation of nature" (93) is contestable and an unjust assessment of a broader range of thinkers committed to various forms of conservation than Latour is willing to acknowledge.

While agreeing with Latour that political ecology has not arrived, one also needs to recognise that if and when it does it will instantly disappear into (a) relationality it causes that will announce a totally transformed realm of politics and the political.

Unquestionably, there are serious and pressing ecological problems around the globe. These problems cannot be reduced to the breakdown of 'natural systems'; they are not a product of the causes usually characterised. While symptoms beg to be treated, the fundamental problem is anthropocentrism as it closes sense, sight, touch and hearing to the consequences of a restricted version of human self interests and to the needs of 'things' 'nonhumans' and 'others' as they exist with 'us' in relationality.

As soon as 'humans' started to become 'human' by making a world of their own, not least by entering the cave and marking its walls with the image of life outside it, they started to cease to just dwell in a biosphere and commenced the journey into an 'ecology of the image'. We dwell in an indivisibility that has dissolved any distinction between the natural and the artificial. Almost nothing is untouched by the transformative hand of artifice – no food is wholly organic, nor air or water totally pure; no body is untransformed by the made environments in which it exists; no ice shelf is free of pollutants; no animal chemically clean. Contrary to Latour's view that concern for the environment only arrived with its disappearance as nature (58), the position that really needs

exploration is how responsibility can be taken for the post-natural environments in which we all find ourselves (and depend upon). 'We' are sustained by the increasingly unsustainable and have yet to learn how to create sustainment in the finitude of our own formation (potentially an ecological, cultural, economic and political practice of unification able to secure a 'commonality in difference'). While the ecology movement remains unthinkingly embedded in sustaining the unsustainable, Latour's conceptual elaboration of 'political ecology', and his critique of those who still think the 'natural world' is definable, equally miss the mark in the qualified attachment to ecological crises and the designing of abstract, content-less and stranded political forms.

Shifting Ground

One of the more troubling omissions is that of the difference between politics and the political. This crucial distinction, which cuts across everyday life, has been recognised in modern political philosophy for nearly a century, not least in the debate between Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the 1930s.² On reflection the omission is perhaps no oversight, for the polarity Politics/Nature (or any other binary placed in relation to politics) cannot stand once the political is recognised as uncontained. The political spills into every region of human endeavour. Doubtfully science (old or new) can distance itself from politics, but it cannot not be political.

Consider 'conservationists' 'defending' trees in the face of a logging company contracted to clear fell an old growth forest that has taken five hundred years to mature. It is being logged in order to export wood chips to make pulp for paper (with a manufacture to disposal life of just a few months) Or consider a construction company bulldozing trees to level a site to build a supermarket. Do the 'militants' really think they are 'protecting nature'? Or are they making a political judgement that the value of the trees exceeds the value of the paper or the supermarket, or on the importance of retaining trees as a habitat crucial in the functioning of a particular ecology, or because the trees prevent salinity arriving from a raised water table? Moreover, is not such political action the way that some people deal with their feelings of helplessness and ineffectuality *en route* to anomie, when confronted with the formal political machine of democratic politics? For such people, for many people, 'democracy' as encountered offers a choice that is no choice. They know, 'we' know that democracy cannot, and will not, cede power to forces responsive to so many of the imperatives that need to be addressed to secure viable futures.

Latour mentions that democracy was invented by the Greeks and leaves it at that. Western parliamentary democracy has little in common with the Greek model that was purely exercised by the elite and based on a process of continual referenda. By social exclusion, the mass was structurally disenfranchised; now they are

culturally disempowered (there can be no real democracy without knowledge and choice – both of which either fail to arrive or are in terminal decline). The problems of democracy sit in Latour's text as an unopened box. This is surprising as nothing obstructs the passage from the Constitution of the old regime to the new, more than currently existing democratic politics (it can also be said, from a political relational perspective, that one can see little chance of sustainment arriving via the ballot box).

If our focus moves from politics to power, what we see offered by Latour is a fluid model which appears to be somewhat mechanical. In this context, Latour's notion of power(s) is far less persuasive than Michel Foucault's, who understands it as "a series of complex, difficult and never functionalised relationships" that always fails, with the result that we see power exposed (confirmation of this observation is ever writ large on the world stage at every moment of history).³

Power, politics and the political always coexist, with the result that nothing is outside a contest of major or minor forces (not least the sciences). The political models that Latour contrasts – the 'two-house collective wherein Nature/things is split from Society' and his concept of the "collective without outside recourse" wherein the collective is an extension of the human/non-human – need to be viewed against this backdrop. The 'before (binary) and after (collective)' contrast he presents is fallacious if one acknowledges that being has always been relational, and so always a collective in which sentient beings, 'humans' and objects are articulated in Being. Here one can say in harmony with Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'we are the flesh of the world' or equally the idea of ontological designing can be embraced as an idea expressing that 'the things we design and make also make us and our world, but likewise, our constructed world is continually transformative of other actively world designing worlds'.

Certainly, the problem is not science (however understood) finding its rightful or appropriate place so that 'due process' may be established, but the arrival of the rule of thinking.

Many other categories are either unproblematically mobilised or torched by Latour. While some of these can be dealt with briefly, his disposition towards anthropocentrism, culture and the human require a little more attention.

Latour is clearly correct in dismissing current political ecology when it claims to free 'us' from anthropocentrism (26), yet he fails to go on to point out that humans are eternally held in its clutches. No matter the ratio of things, hybridised nonhumans and humans making up the membership of a collective (be it established or regarded as permanently in the process of formation), humans will/must centre themselves to sustain their non-assured continuity of being. What 'we' can and must do, if a human future is to be, is to recognise and take responsibility for our its being self-centred

and accept 'our' 'we' have an interdependent relationship with others (animate and inanimate). Here then is the task of futuring and the primary content of a 'political ecology'.

That 'we' are not one but many, and thus interdependent on each other (society and culture) is undercut in Latour's argument by his negative view of society (an 'old' collective that, as far as he is concerned should be replaced by "a slow work of political composition" (187) and culture (again a figure reinstated in his appeal to a new collective and reformed public life). Is there more going on here than a nominalist bit of bat and ball? Certainly, Latour dumped 'Culture(s)' in the same trash can as 'Nature' some time ago: "Cultures – different or universal – do not exist, any more than nature does."⁴ How exactly he understand cultures is however unclear – the category does not make it to his glossary (there are other stark omissions, like democracy), neither is it subjected to any kind of rigorous dismembering. One is given the impression that Nature is an invented site of sin, with culture roving over it as the chimera that defiles. Yet 'our' culture formed the idea, 'nature', and while Latour points out that others have no need of nature he underplays their varied cultural creations of other ways of making sense of the being of their world (maybe facing cultural relativism is too unsavoury a prospect).

Attempting to define culture has of course been a notoriously difficult, controversial, protracted and politically charged exercise. Yet misrecognitions and unjust judgement proliferate. Latour says "there are no cultures", and he asserts:

Countless words have been written ridiculing the miserable whites who are guilty of wanting to master, mistreat, dominate, possess, reject, violate, and rape nature. No book of theoretical ecology fails to shame them by contrasting the wretched objectivity of Westerners with the timeless wisdom of "savages," who for their part are said to "respect nature," "live in harmony with her," and plumb her most intimate secrets, fusing their souls with those things, speaking with animals, marrying plants, engaging in discussions on an equal footing with the planets. Ah, those feathered savages, children of Mother Earth, how nice it would be to be like them! (42–3)

Here Latour is diminished by his mockery. Of course, there are ill-informed, misguided romantics who have written rubbish, and there are voices here one can recognise, *but* there are equally scholars with knowledge and integrity who strive to understand the worlds and cultures of others with humility. Moreover, while it is easy to find flaws in the life-works of these scholars, people like Joseph Needham, it also significantly added to the corpus of knowledge upon which later generations trade

and built (as the work, for instance, of François Jullien evidences – a scholar who has benefited from Needham’s labours and for whom respect is shown by Latour). Anyone who thinks there is nothing to learn from other and non-modernised cultures or cultures outside the circle modernity privileges is in a state of self-deception and auto-enforced ignorance. More than this, that western culture reduces culture to entertainment and mobilised constructed desires as weapons of subjugation to produce modern subjects (be it well or poorly announces) demands critical exposure. Unquestionably cultures do wish to explore “what they have in common” but then equally they demand that difference upon which they identity depends. To set-out to devalue culture is erase the value of imperfect histories.

How the subject is characterised by Latour is a problem. He chooses to overlook that the establishment of its sovereignty was central to the formation of the discourse of modernity. For example, as Etienne Balibar makes clear in his essay ‘Citizen Subject’, the moment when the sovereignty of the subject was established in philosophy, was predicated on drawing a distinction between (the hu)man and ego – thereafter, to become deterministically viewed as subject.⁵ In this respect, the human came before the subject as a prior discourse. The human is, though, just as much a construction as nature, and just as culturally relative (what we are, as a specific being, has been differentially culturally understood, and the erasure of this difference was/is one of the principle aims of modernity). If one accepts these observations then the claim that distinguishing “humans from subjects” is an ability to be gained thanks to “political ecology”, (51) makes no sense (because the subject is a product of this very distinction).

What is actually needed is an answer to the question “what is the essence of what we are (body/subjects), what we so easily revert to (what we were before we were human) and what we are able to become (which cannot be named as hybrid, for that is what we have always been)?’ The facticity of what remains the same – arms, legs, digestive systems, neural networks and so on – tells us no more than the mechanism of the clock tells us about time. Comprehending what essentially changes (if anything beyond appearances and worldly trappings) in the being-of-our-being is a crucial enquiry inseparable from our finding a place for ourselves in the future as that which to conserve or remake. This enquiry cannot but take place in the shadow of globalisation as an amplification of modernity’s ethnocidal and defuturing impetus. ‘Being negative’, in this context, does not reside in naming our circumstantial being, but in turning our eyes away from it, and towards created distractions.

While agreeing with the merit of refraining from making a distinction between reason and the irrational (94) the question arrives without the consideration it invites (as Leibniz tells us,

“Nothing is without reason”, this including the irrational and the force of faith in it).

One feels that how the terms modernity, modernisation and above all modernism were viewed and presented by Latour do not take sufficient account of their differential political, economic and cultural configurations and assessments within critical theory.

Design: Connections

Notwithstanding the attempt to make it so and the scientism of a significant number of members of the design community (architects, industrial designers, interior designers, urban designers, graphics designers, design historians, theorists et al) design is not a science. But like (the) science(s), design has played a pivotal role in making the modern world, its things and subjects. Again like science, design turns on a dialectic that straddles creation and destruction. Again like science, design is deeply implicated in ‘the political’ and structures of institutional, political and interpersonal power. To lack the possibility to design the conditions of one’s own life is to be powerless. Conversely, the greater what is designed is brought into being, the more power manifests itself. Yet again like science studies, design has the potential to make a major contribution to ‘political relationality’ and recombined divisions of knowledge. So while Bruno Latour is the super salesman of science studies, and heavily promotes the role he thinks it can and should have, he should be aware that there are new players coming onto the block, design philosophy being one of them. Collectivity, in its most practical form, has the possibility of bridging academic and professional practice, while also bringing thinking into the dialogue that is ruptured from the instrumentalism that now dominates institutionalised technocratic education.

Design also shares a common danger with the sciences – a propensity to embrace utopias. This remark takes me to the most substantial criticism of *Politics of Nature*.

Concluding Remarks

Latour works hard to communicate complexity. He uses evocative language and polemic, he writes well, uses diagrams, an end of book summary and a glossary. He is however caught in the familiar dilemma that arrives once one sets out to remake numerous old terms with new meanings. To induct the reader into the ‘new’ language while presenting a complex and abstract argument is a big ask and task. As an exercise of communication it is only partially pulled off.

As a political project what Latour presents has three massive shortfalls.

1. He fails to make any clear case for the change he proposes beyond what I will call epistemological politics (and while he condemns epistemological policemen he often sounds

awfully like one). Contemporary existence resides under the dark shadow of the socio-political conjunctures of late modernity and the new Empire of globalisation. This is evident in the likes of: the maelstrom of injustice and conflict in the Middle East; the growing numbers of environmental refugees world-wide; the massive Aids infected inequity of Africa and its perpetual, extensive and mostly unreported state of violence; the proliferating unsustainment of hyper-consumerist global economies; and the bankruptcy of UN humanism. These events, and more, are produced, ignored or at best, tokenistically addressed by ‘democratically’ elected governments, and these are governments many of us vote for!

2. He fails to identify and address the hardest task of all when putting forward a fundamentally new politics – how to remove what obstructs. Creation is the easy bit; ethical destruction is the hard nut. In this respect the key strategic manoeuvre – getting from where ‘we’ are to where ‘we’ need to be – is absent.
3. His science/politics model (his “utopia”) is devoid of desire. In trashing of culture he trashes what he most needs. For a political ecology to be a viable politics it has to be a desirable political culture.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to have expected so much from Bruno Latour, but he is billed as “one of the more innovative thinkers of our time”. One wonders if the shortfalls named rest with him, or our time.

Notes

1. Here we have a conclusion drawn by Martin Heidegger’s reading of Plato’s Cave allegory, *Pathmarks* (trans William McNeill) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. The contrast between Latour’s selective, and Heidegger’s close, reading of the same text makes interesting reading in itself.
2. See Carl Schmitt *The Concept of the Political* (trans George Schwab) Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996. This text includes the Strauss/Schmitt debate. The friend/enemy distinction is one of Schmitt’s central arguments, so one asks: is his voice faintly echoed in Latour’s text when he speaks of the divisions of friends and enemies (the excluded)?
3. Michel Foucault *Foucault Live* (trans John Johnston) New York: Semiotext(e), 1989, 183.
4. Bruno Latour *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans Catherine Porter) Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 1993, 104.
5. See his essay in Eduardo Cadava et al (eds) *Who Comes After the Subject?* NY: Routledge, 1991, 33.