



Bruno Latour, Camille Riquier

For a terrestrial politics: An interview with Bruno Latour

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Between post-human globalization and nationalist withdrawal, the ecological question pushes us towards the earthly ground, argues Bruno Latour. Traditionally rejected by the Left as reactionary, ‘the question of belonging to a particular soil’ has suddenly become urgent.

Camille Riquier: *In 2015, you published Face à Gaïa (‘Facing up to Gaïa’), [1] which was the continuation of an idea you had discussed in your Enquête sur les modes d’existence (‘An enquiry into modes of existence’). [2] The subtitle of your most recent book, Où atterrir? Comment s’orienter en politique? (‘Where to settle? How to find your way in politics?’) [3] is reminiscent of Kant and his question: ‘What do we mean by finding our way in our thinking?’ (1786), an occasional essay that attempted to find a way without having God as a guide. In your book, are you trying to find your way without nature as a guide?*

Bruno Latour: We have to go back a century and a half before Kant, by which I mean back to the time when people realized that, because of the discovery of the New World, there had to be a complete rethink of the entire cosmology, which, at that time, involved religion, geography, science and politics. If there is a parallel to be drawn it would be to compare what happened at the time of the scientific revolution to cause these various cosmological areas to be divided up, and what is happening today because of the discovery of a ‘new’ New World. My most recent book is more like a ninth lecture in the *Face à Gaïa* series, one that takes into account Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris accords.



Until now, no head of state had the nerve to bring out into the open what was obvious: that the climate question is a matter of war and peace and that, for thirty years now, it has been structuring all aspects of geopolitics. Prior to Trump, general opinion had been wallowing in a sort of generalized irenicism, a mood of conciliation typical of the UN and of climate conferences ever since Rio. The idea was that we were going to get out of the fix by exercising goodwill. Trump stated clearly that the US was declaring war on the other countries and that these countries had problems with ecological change that did not bother him in the least. It was the first time that any country had decided to leave the community of nations. It was tantamount to admitting that the environment is *the* major geopolitical question. Before this, certain nations were able to say: 'We don't have the same values; we don't share the same social or economic interests', but until then, no one had said: 'The material world that you inhabit is not my world.' Macron seized on this immediately, even though he isn't particularly interested in such questions. He saw that he could turn it to political advantage.

As regards Trump, you speak of a 'plot' to deny reality. What do you mean by this?

If I use the word 'plot', it is to make people think - I have absolutely no proof that there actually is one. However, it is obvious that there is a link between deregulation and an explosion in inequality. As we saw with the Paradise Papers, there is also systematic offshore organization. All we have to do is to add the hypothesis whereby, in the 1980s and 1990s, some people who had begun to understand just how serious the climate question was, contrived to flee or seek shelter from it. Sheltering can consist in organizing denial of the climate situation in order to hide that they are running away from it. It is perfectly obvious that, within the Trump government - which, in this respect, is very coherent - there is a clear vision of what organizing a departure, a general flight towards offshore havens involves. The metaphor is unmistakable: the construction of a wall around the 'American way of life', which no longer even pretends to be interested in matters of worldwide importance or solidarity. Those conservatives who remained within the boundaries of liberalism never said that it was necessary to abandon the rest of the world to its fate. You have to understand the extent to which 'Trumpism' differs from conservative thinking, as well as from liberal or Republican thinking. It is a political anomaly that can only be explained as a reaction to the new climatic regime.



The aim of nations in the post-war period was globalization. The idea was to abandon attachment to what was local, to the fatherland or the nation. Modernity was effectively built on a denial of nature. Charles Péguy said that modernity abolished this world by building another, modelled according to order and moderation. For three centuries, nature left us alone, but now she is back, as a fully-fledged political force that compels us to change direction.

Strangely enough, it makes you realize just how non-materialist the moderns were and to what extent their vision of material was idealistic: a heap of vague clichés about a poorly defined common world. One of the pillars of this common *Weltanschauung* was a view of the direction the world was taking, from the local and archaic towards the global and the future. Such a cliché made it possible to distinguish between what was reactionary and what was progressive. Our present-day disorientation makes such a distinction more difficult. Across all the countries in the world, you come back to a regressive definition of the nation-state at best case and to ethnic roots at worst. Any view of a common goal has been explicitly abandoned. Admittedly, this might not have been the primary concern of post-war governments, but nobody had explicitly abandoned it – especially not the US, which took on responsibility for protecting Europe by giving us the feeling that we were sheltered beneath the American umbrella, whether nuclear or moral. Who could now write, as Jacques Maritain could do in the *Encyclopaedia universalis*, that ‘America offers an image of generic man’? Nobody would say that nowadays. This abandonment of universality by the US in favour of maintaining a life offshore is a historical novelty.

You argue that, in the face of the new challenge, the way we structure political life is inadequate: all the problems that await us – migration, populism, inequality – are linked to climate change and that this is precisely what is being denied.

Until recently, the question of belonging to a soil and a territory had not been systematically addressed by the Left. Ecology had a reactionary side that forced the Left to reconsider material questions about soil, animals, plants, life and climate, which it felt it had left behind when it became modern. The prospect of emancipation that the Left was offering never led towards belonging to the soil. Even the use of the words ‘soil’ and ‘belonging’ would have been considered reactionary. But suddenly, there is a realization that the question of belonging to a particular soil has to be taken into account, and that the question is increasingly about a land that



must be cared for. Of course, this is not the national or ethnic territory towards which people have been regressing ever since the prospect of modernity became untenable.

This conjuncture forms a triangle. First, the move towards globalization continues in a baroque form of hyper-modernization that is futurist and post-human – one that imagines that it does not have to deal with the problems of billions of people who have become, to use a horrible term, supernumerary. Second, a massive regression, in all countries, towards an ethnic or national sense of belonging. Third, the question of another way of being in the world, of having roots in the world's earth. This is not the earth in the sense meant by Maurice Barrès, an earth made up of blood, of the dead, of cemeteries and churches. Here we must outline a new opposition: between the utopian prospect of a return to the native soil and the new question of earth itself. It is not a matter of deciding whether you are on the Left or not, but whether you are *terrestrial* or not: 'Have you thought about the material nature of a soil upon which nine or ten billion of us must live?' It is in this context that the question of migration intersects with the question of climate. People who do not think that the question of climate is important, or who deny that question's existence, can still see the question of migration perfectly clearly. It is one that is decisive in every country, election after election, and it is driving people back to focusing on national frontiers at precisely the moment when these are least suited to dealing with either the question of climate or of refugees.

As long as people fail to take account of the terrestrial question, they will be caught between two alternative strategies: flight towards the hypermodern future and withdrawal into the sense of national belonging. Does that mean that your policy is that of the centre?

It is rather a 'decentring'. A policy can be defined by an opposition, but it can also be a place, a territory. Right and Left have ceased to function today because they have failed to specify the material framework through which to differentiate themselves from each other. Ecological change obliges us to raise more material questions: How many of us are there? Where do we live? What is the climate where we live? What do we eat? How do we exploit each other? How can we place limits on exploitation? These questions are all to do with what we used to call the 'social question', but with a definition of 'social' that was so narrow that we forgot all the other factors that necessarily constitute the collective. Even ecologists failed to make the link



between the social question in this restricted sense and the new question in its fuller sense.

Has political ecology failed and if so how?

Since the end of the Second World War, there has been a tragic separation between the social question, in its socialist sense, and external nature. Political ecologists have fallen into the trap set up by the modern constitution, written in stops and starts throughout the eighteenth century, a constitution that distinguished the politics of humans from the politics of nature. For thirty years now, I have been arguing that non-human beings are not part of a nature that is exterior to society; that they too form part of the collective. Political ecology has accepted this idea of the external character of nature. Green parties have largely disappeared, which is not a bad thing, since they no longer appear capable of doing their job of formulating political complaints. Nevertheless, political ecology rears its head again in the shape of questions about territory and migration: Whom are we going to live with and where? On what kind of Earth?

You have also criticized the negation of politics by ecological science, despite it having delivered indisputable proof of the reality of global warming.

In November 2017, *Le Monde* ran a headline saying, 'Tomorrow will be too late', [4] in a 60-point typeface – the size that would be used if the headline were 'North Korea bombs Washington'. And yet, this sort of headline has no effect: the very next day they were talking about something else. It is enough to drive you crazy. On the one hand, a threat, of the greatest possible gravity, trumpeted by fifteen thousand research scientists; on the other, a complete lack of action. I am becoming more and more interested in the psycho-social aspect of this indifference. We are bombarded with news, but we do not have the emotional, aesthetic or mental equipment to deal with it. That is the main reason for the return to a mythical definition of the nation. When it comes down to it, this attitude is understandable: if we are going to have to experience a catastrophe, we might as well stay in the gated community we are familiar with, or keep ourselves safe behind a wall. Large and small adopt the same strategy: the wealthy flee to their offshore havens, the common people head for the nation-state of yesteryear.

How can we settle, where should we find our own land, and which way



should we go to find our terrestrial hub?

Basically, all ecological movements have been asking these questions for a hundred and fifty years. The forces that are called progressive have changed their programmes too. We find ourselves in the position where we have lost the focuses represented by globalization and the nation, but where the question of climate change has become central. From geopolitics to the many and varied experiments of feminists – not forgetting the return of anthropology as a contemporary form of resistance, or the proliferation of works about the new reality of soils and the quite astonishing development of soil arts and alternative agricultural experiments – the landscape has already changed. But it has no unified political representation, because it lacks any shared goal.

You are suggesting that there should be a new opposition: between being modern and being terrestrial.

The problem is that the definition of the world of modernity is very abstract. When the plan for modernity was being drawn up, people didn't know what temperature the modern world would be or whether we were going to total nine or twelve billion. These basic organizational questions of our communal life were left totally vague, just as they were in classic utopias, even though we laughed at these. We are now suddenly realizing that modernity is a utopia and that moderns are unsuited to the future. We are unable to change rapidly at the very moment when there are threats on every side. Because the modern world has the wrong idea about materialism, it takes it a long time to adapt in an emergency. Ironically, the modern world has precisely the characteristics of what we used to call 'archaic closed societies' – societies incapable of adapting quickly to modernity. In reality, it is our society that is incapable of changing.

What do you think of France's policy at CoP23?

Nicolas Hulot, the French minister of ecology, is dragging Emmanuel Macron towards a terrestrialist position. How far he has dragged is open to question. The fact that he has changed his mind with regard to nuclear energy is a good sign: the anti-nuclear obsession had been paralysing part of the discourse on the subject of ecology. If, instead of moralizing and threatening to resign the minute that there is a problem, he acts politically, then we can have just a little hope that he will succeed in changing the situation. But if



policy is left to the state, then little can be achieved: matters of ecology cannot rely on the normal procedures of the state. State policy is always concerned with whatever activists have previously been able to make visible; it can never act in anticipation of future questions. That is the political task of researchers, citizens, activists; it is something that the state can only organize after the event. This is so-called 'areas to be defended' [5] are interesting: they resist attempts at take-over by the state. Matters of ecology remain outside social preoccupations as long as there are no people to link them together.

The question of territorial inequalities – in the broader sense – also arises with what I call the 'geo-social classes'. There is also the papal encyclical *Laudato si'*, which makes the link between inequalities and ecology and which makes it possible to mobilize politics in a different way. The most urgent task is also the slowest: a people has to be found that corresponds to the question of ecology, just as there was, for a long time, a people that corresponded to the social question. Belonging to territorial spaces is still too abstract an idea. To find the link between the ecological crisis and the social question we need to identify the territory, the land, the habitat where such a people live.

Are you proposing that grievances should be addressed to Europe in order to identify the problems on the basis of which such a people could be constituted?

The practical procedure that I am proposing would indeed involve a ledger of complaints, like those presented in 1789. They would provide a description that was detailed, rapid and shared by territories that were in conflict with each other; that is, one made up of geo-social classes settled and defined within a specific territory. What people without much education were able to do two centuries ago ought to be feasible today. Anyone can define or situate themselves. You cannot practise politics if you have no people and you cannot have a people if you have no territory.

I mention Europe for personal reasons, because you cannot ask where you can settle if you do not say where you yourself *wish* to settle. The European question illustrates the ambiguity of belonging: Europe is at once national, post-national and regional. This European homeland is good in terms of scale: neither too small nor too large. Some people object to my use of the term homeland. However, even if you do not promote Europe, you



nevertheless have to admit that it is defined negatively by its simultaneous rejection by the US and the UK, not forgetting Turkey and by the insistent hostility of Russia and the competition from China. Can the existence of Europe as a homeland to be defended not be defined in relation to these at least?



Footnotes

1. Bruno Latour, *Face à Gaia. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique* [Facing up to Gaia. Eight lectures on the new climatic regime], Paris: La Découverte, coll. 'Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond', 2015.
2. Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes d'existence. Une anthropologie des Modernes* [An Enquiry into modes of existence. An anthropology of the moderns], Paris, La Découverte: 2012.
3. Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir ? Comment s'orienter en politique ?* [*Where to Land? Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter, forthcoming from Polity], Paris: La Découverte, 2017.
4. See the appeal, signed by over 15,000 scientists from 184 countries, in the journal *BioScience* and *Le Monde*, 13 November 2017.
5. *Zones à défendre* - areas scheduled for development that are occupied or blockaded by activists, with the aim of preventing the development from going ahead - trans.