

Review of Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. 140 pages.

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Preview

Bruno Latour's 2017 publication, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, is Latour's analysis of the many political problems of today, including mass migration and worldwide inequality, all while the issue of climate change hangs in the global communities' political and intellectual atmosphere exacerbating these phenomena. Coming in at a short 106 pages of text, Latour argues that it is not adherence to "the facts" or bigoted ideologies that is the central political problem of our time, but that the vision of a common world has been abandoned—hence the explosion of inequalities, mass migration, and climate change denial all corresponding to the era known as "deregulation," "globalization," or "neoliberalism." Modernization, argues Latour, has been abandoned, and what the global community has entered is the "New Climatic Regime."

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 11 (2019)

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Latour touches upon many themes in this compact book: migration, class warfare, populism, climate change denial, the shortcomings of modernization, the concept of Nature, and more. One of Latour's political contributions from *Down to Earth* is his attempt of a new division replacing the political left and right. As Latour writes,

Do we continue to nourish dreams of escaping, or do we start seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit? Either we deny the existence of the problem, or else we look for a place to land. From now on, this is what divides us all, much more than our positions on the right or the left side of the political spectrum. (5)

In other words, politics and how we organize our political institutions, according to Latour, is now centered on the question of whether we direct our attention *down to earth* or if we ignore the problems and attempt to escape them—either by gated communities, climate denial, Teslas in space, stricter borders, or more concentrated wealth. The ethos of being *down to earth* connects with Latour's other political creation, what he calls the *Terrestrial*.

Before the Terrestrial though, there is the Modern: that intellectual paradigm and constitution of western culture that has survived for 200-plus years. Several of the major tenets of Modernity, according to Latour, are its common horizon towards progress, enlightenment, rationality, and wealth which could be shared by the whole world. These features composed the *direction* in which the world thought it could move together. In the industrialization of the nations of the earth, for example, was always in the promise of a better world—one where more people could be fed, advanced technologies would be deployed and shared, and human health was always advancing, whether by medicine or longer life expectancy.

But then something happened, says Latour. This direction was interrupted—interrupted by scientific articles published by the main proponents of the view as to why Modernity was now at its precarious political end, namely, climate change, and the denial campaign funded by the industries warming the planet. Such a denial campaign ensued once the likes of ExxonMobil, itself having published scientific work on the changing climate in the 70s and 80s, realized that if the public became aware of the dangers of what Exxon and other fossil fuel corporations were producing as a consequence of their trillion-dollar practice, there would be outrage, public pressure, and a new economy where fossil fuels would *have* to be abandoned, so long as we shared the collective vision of inhabitants of the earth all having a chance of pursuing prosperous and fulfilling lives.

So, instead of disseminating these facts and informing the public about such issues, Exxon, among others, poured millions of dollars into climate change denial, delaying the much-needed change and causing an epistemological delirium still playing out today, demonstrated most noticeably by a Trump presidency and especially Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement.

This is well known. What Latour helps connect is that this denial moves beyond just a changing climate. It reveals that the modernization efforts that industrial nations have been pursuing for over 100 years would have to be abandoned. The promise of a prospering shared globe could not be pursued because “if they all went ahead according to the terms of their respective modernization plans, there would be no planet compatible with their hopes for development. They would need several planets; they have only one” (5). Add to that the fact that climate change denial corresponds to the rise in inequality between the richest and poorest, while the poorest among us travel thousands of miles without a home or land to call their own, and one can see Latour's point—what he calls a “political fiction”—more clearly: these three phenomena all represent *the elites* abandoning Modernity and its promise of a shared prosperous world and instead pursuing their own

moneyed, crass, and protected interests. The elite modernizers have jumped ship leaving the rest of us to fight for the proverbial rafts that billions of us will need.

Most of the first half of *Down to Earth* is spent on this theme of a common world being abandoned. The two contemporary political events that Latour sees as most explicit and emblematic of this abandonment is Britain deciding to leave the European Union—Brexit—and the presidential election of Donald Trump. I will talk of Latour's analysis concerning the latter rather than the former.

For the last 40 years, many have been impacted by a globalized economy, a stagnation of wages, an influx of immigrants coming to nations who could afford them, and other “neoliberal” policies favored by both Reganites and Clintonians. This neoliberalism and the populist revolt against it have seemingly crossed political lines. Trump spoke on these issues— although always in a repugnant, chauvinistic, and embarrassing way, tapping into the population of people in the United States who started asking themselves: “What about us? How come so much attention on the *global* community and not the soil under our own feet?”

In the Modern paradigm, Latour argues, the poles of the Global and Local have much to do with this feeling. The Global was promised as a horizon of prosperity in which the world could be fully modernized. Meanwhile the Local would have to be abandoned because of its archaic, backwards, identity-driven attitude, says Latour. This view of the Local is what Latour calls the “local-minus”, here emphasizing the way in which being Local meant resisting global forces in favor of the insurance that the local culture and tradition would give.

Such a direction of what issues were to be globalized and what were to be localized was the *vector* along which politics has operated for the last 40 years, according to Latour. Depending on the issue and which side, certain ideas were to be common in the world, while for others the hope was that they'd be anything but. Again, there was a common *direction* and *orientation* by which politics could take place: either expanding or contracting. For instance, it may be assumed that the fervent capitalist-Right would want markets globalized in total, while the Left, according to Latour, would want some sort of sexual freedom to be globalized.

Trump performed this global-local act with respect to the climate. Essentially, Trump abandoned the global community when he abandoned the Paris Agreement, shouting “America First!”—an appeal to the Local; meanwhile, Trump was still pursuing a globalized effort in extracting and selling gas, oil, and coal. Such an actor as Trump represents what Latour calls the other political attractor emerging in the New Climatic Regime: *the out-of-*

this-world. This attractor, or political direction as Latour describes it, “is the *Out-of-This-World*, the horizon of people who no longer belong to the realities of an earth that would react to their actions. For the first time, climate change denial defines the orientation of the public life of a nation” (35).

Trumpism, or the *out-of-this-world*, represents a new political direction, according to Latour, by which any sense of a common world is actively and explicitly being abandoned, and further, represents an attitude that denies that the earth is reacting to the greenhouse gas-consuming habits of (mostly rich) humans. The other political orientation Latour creates in order to oppose Trumpism is *the Terrestrial*. Whereas the Moderns seek a world to be continually modernized, and the Trumpists “drill, baby, drill” as if to mock climate change and those who know it to be a reality, *the Terrestrial* is highly sensitive to both of these characters. In one world, the earth is a stable entity in which humans will pay no consequences for their emitting activities (Trumpism), the other, as we will get to, is a world highly (re)active, animated, and sensitive to actors who inhabit it. Such an analysis of “different worlds” is not meant to be just an idiom here: Latour truly believes that there are those of us inhabiting one world, and those inhabiting another. Climate change, for Latour, is not simply scientific, or “social,” or “political”: it is a cosmological issue about how humans relate to, inhabit, and interact with the earth(s).¹

Where the Global and Local are seen as opposing, the Terrestrial tries to take the virtues of each and direct them towards a politics that is properly *down to earth*. As Latour sees it, the retreat to the Local—most extreme in the disdain for a migrating population of billions—can’t be seen as *all* just racism or xenophobia, although that certainly shouldn’t be ignored. Rather, the global situation of the last 40 years has produced a backlash from the increase of migrating populations who are finding the land retreating from under their feet: they are seeking *protection* from the globalized forces which have brought the climate, migratory, and inequality crises. This, Latour argues, is the avenue by which the Terrestrial can negotiate with these “locals” to help to bring them on board to the new political direction defined by the Terrestrial. Latour writes,

The negotiation...between supporters of the Local and supporters of the Terrestrial has to bear on the importance, the legitimacy, even

¹ See Latour’s lecture “The Politics of Gaia” from the University of Vermont’s *Feverish World* symposium, in which Latour demonstrates that there are actually seven differing earths. In *Down to Earth* Latour is really only dealing with three of those cosmologies: Modernism, Trumpism, and, as we will get to, the Terrestrial.

the necessity of belonging to a land...without immediately confusing it with what the Local has added to it: ethnic homogeneity, a focus on patrimony, historicism, nostalgia, inauthentic authenticity. (53)

As the Terrestrial negotiates with the Local it must also find allies within the Global, for the earth is too large to be ignored: the global represents a transcendence of identities that must be able to make a collective “global community,” for lack of a better term. These two virtues can converge, in Latour’s eyes, to properly meet the goals of both the formerly Local and Global. We can have security, an insurance of a protected land, while also recognizing that this is not always the case for others, and we should pursue nothing less than ensuring that all have this protection, in my backyard and yours.

But the Terrestrial is not just about moving beyond the narrow confines of the Local nor beyond the “vision from nowhere” that the Global of Modernity offers. Latour claims that the Terrestrial may solve the limitations of the “social question,” including the failures of the ecological movements to really take hold politically. Latour believes that his Terrestrial has the answer as to why socialism and political ecology could not function together, and, moreover, he attempts to dismantle the false choice of dealing with both social and ecological conflicts simultaneously, as if they are not opposed in anyway.

Critiquing Marxism in its utopic vision and its failure to achieve a proper material analysis, Latour argues that what is needed in treating both the formerly strict class and ecological questions is to first jettison ‘nature.’ Latour writes of nature that

a certain conception of ‘nature’ has allowed the Moderns to occupy the earth in such a way that it forbids others to occupy their own territories differently... But you cannot make alliances between political actors and objects that are external to society and deprived of the power to act...; ‘we are not defending nature. We are nature defending itself.’ (64)

A heterogenous array of material, from bacteria to the discovery of the atom to the ecosystem of France, are all filed under one common concept, that of ‘nature,’ the political downfall of which, according to Latour, is that these heterogenous things exist in difference but are treated as unified from the onset. To achieve a “Politics of Nature” one cannot create a *body* of politics

for nature, for it is too vast and has too many assumptions to do the messy negotiating work that politics requires.²

Furthermore, with respect to tying nature to class struggles, Latour reminds us just how short-sighted so many questions regarding economics and systems of production have been in addressing the *consequences* of these systems of production. Latour writes,

How could we accept as ‘objective’ economic theories that are incapable of integrating into their calculations the scarcity of resources whose exhaustion it had been their mission to predict? How could we speak of ‘effectiveness’ with respect to technological systems that have not managed to integrate into their design a way to last more than a few decades? (66)

These questions put the economic model of extractivist, burn-and-churn capitalism into a proper ecological-class lens: where there is a shortage of natural resources—extracted by industry employing millions around the world—the livelihood of those people and their families who depend on the resources in order for them to get a paycheck is threatened. Ecological objects heavily dictate human economies, rather than the Modernist belief that humans can willfully superimpose on such systems and resources; or, at worst, find a new “resource in nature.” Latour gives objects their proper recognition in, quite literally, powering economies and class positions.

As Marxists, leftists, and the ecological movements have operated on the inheritance of the 17th and 18th century conception of nature, Latour proposes a new intellectual tradition for these movements in order to properly converge into a politics centered around the Terrestrial. The Terrestrial is conceived through the intellectual tradition typically called *Gaia Theory*—a scientific philosophy that animates every object, that treats the earth as reactive—and transformed Darwinian evolution in emphasizing the role of the organism in creating environments. Latour suggests, by becoming Terrestrial, that we move from *Galilean* objects—matter that is dormant, there from the onset, indifferent to human actions—to *Lovelockian* objects, named after one of the two founders of Gaia Theory, James Lovelock (75). Lovelockian objects “have agency, they are going to react—first chemically, biochemically, geologically—and it would be naïve to believe they are going to remain inert no matter how much pressure is put on them” (77). Rather than Cartesian mechanics or an inherently stable earth system, the “essential political point is that the Earth’s reaction to human action

² See Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.

looks...self-evident to those who see it as a concatenation of Lovelockian agents” (80). Humans are no longer, in Latour’s Terrestrial, something that can superimpose itself on the Earth, nor something that can have no effect upon it. Humans, along with other ecological entities, become their own Lovelockian agents. This is why the Terrestrial cannot be seen as simply a replacement for the human or an abdication of human responsibility in a highly-reactive earth: humans have an impact on the earth’s “homeostasis” along with many other agents—we must find ways to cohabit and compose a world amongst our fellow Lovelockian agents, according to Latour.

Such an ecosystem of Lovelockian agents reveals the ambiguity behind whether Latour is being anthropocentric or ecocentric. But it doesn’t really matter in a Lovelockian world. The argument seems futile in the case of a world that humans can’t fully control, but also inevitably contribute to. However, what Latour seems to suggest that the human will be essential to in the warming and sea-rising present is “digging deep down into the Earth with its thousand folds” (81).

For those familiar with Latour’s anthropology of science, one could recall how Latour is keen on observing how scientists designate plots of land, setting up markers for where they will perform their study, which, once the research is done, is supposed to speak for the *whole* of the land (and possibly beyond), rather than the designated spot in which the research was actually done.³ This point reveals two insights in relation to Latour’s Terrestrial: in trying to ensure protection and security of one’s land, while not reducing the various plots of land on the earth to “nature”, Latour’s *down to earth* ethos would suggest, not thousands of folds of the Earth, but rather millions of ecosystems which one could designate if they wish. Latour seems to suggest that in bringing the sciences to trace the conflicts that ecology has revealed, one must treat their land as its own ecosystem different from the millions of others but still on the same earth, for as Latour reiterates, *Lovelockian* objects are highly active, reactive, unsure actors. Being *down to earth* in many ways means attempting to understand, trace, and plot a place one could *land*—*for the meantime*. Or, in simpler terms, the earth is no longer one big blue planet unified under nature, but rather a multiverse of ecological designations in which the million-fold of designations must be understood each in the context of its own ecosystem along with its relation to others. A sort of *ecological pluralism*. Latour’s vision means, in many cases, that humans would be creating thousands of scientific communities where ecology, for instance, could be used as a model in exploring the social, political, and scientific controversies within one’s own ecosystem and the relation to

³ See Latour’s *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

others. We would be a “society of the sciences” in constant observation of the ways in which a multitude of things are interacting, reacting to, destroying, dying, being introduced, and so much more to *take into account*. Or so, at least, is my interpretation of a *down to earth* ethos in its practical *scientific* form.

This interpretation describes the detailed, specific, and “on the ground” type of *down to earth* science that Latour is espousing. But he also zooms out in order to give proper orientation to the larger *boundary* from which we should be studying the earth. This boundary is called the *Critical Zone*, and it “designates the thin layer in which life has radically modified the earth’s atmosphere and geology—as opposed to either the space beyond or the deep geology below” (123). Further, “the Terrestrial is in fact limited in a surprising way to a minuscule zone a few kilometers thick between the atmosphere and the bedrock. A biofilm, a varnish, a skin, a few infinitely folded layers” (78). This Critical Zone boundary provides the map that Latour was searching for in the beginning of *Down to Earth*. Whereas Modernity and Globalism had no direction but “further and more,” Latour provides us with limits for our research and direction in order to understand the New Climatic Regime. It is between the earth’s atmosphere and the few kilometers below ground that we can begin searching for those millions of folds. As we do so, Latour prescribes a system of *engendering*, as compared to a system of production. As he explains, “The two analyses differ first of all in their principles—freedom for the first, dependency for the second. They differ next in the role given to humanity—central for the first, distributed for the second. Finally, they differ in the type of movements for which they take responsibility—mechanism for the first, genesis for the second” (82).

The second insight Latour gives the reader is his embrace of Europe—his homeland and “their refuge” (102). In his embrace of populism Latour excavates the *ledger of complaints* from late 18th century France. The ledger of complaints (*Cahiers de doléances*) was ordered the first year of the French Revolution (1789) by King Louis XVI in order to suspend revolution to pursue reformist methods in gathering the Three Estates of France. Citizens from all professions and classes could issue their grievances directly to the King, in which a ledger of 60,000 complaints was composed. Even after their grievances were heard the people still revolted, leaving open for interpretation what impact the ledger actually had given its reformist intentions. For Latour to set up the problem concerning the most pressing political events of our time and how they are related with such acuteness, to then leave the reader with something so banal and bureaucratic makes me question the end of this political fiction. Latour would only need to do a

quick internet search to find a whole ledger of complaints from many different people—whether or not they are legitimate complaints is debatable. Further—and this may be the mysterious side of what Latour is hinting at, since the French Revolution happened even as the ledger intended to prevent such a thing—is Latour prescribing the ledger in order to galvanize revolution rather than reform? Would the State, by issuing a formal ledger, help galvanize the citizens to organize and say “we’ve had enough”? That may be the most interesting part of Latour’s ledger, for in his dedication to description he always seems to be moving too slow when things have become much more pressing. Now in 2020, compared to when Latour was writing a very similar political ecology in 2004 with the *Politics of Nature*, Latour’s prescription for *taking into account* has seemed to change names with a bit more political history behind it.

There is virtue in Latour’s coming around to class politics though. This is unfamiliar ground in much of Latour’s literature, but given the circumstances, even Latour feels compelled to take the subject on. The most refreshing part of Latour’s analysis is to see someone so concerned with the climate crisis actually have sympathy for many of the Trump and Brexit supporters. It is a good reminder to know where we came from and how we got into this mess before passing judgement and, moreover, knowing that *elites* are the common enemy, not each other. Latour is known by many economic leftists as anti-Marxist, claiming capitalism doesn’t really exist, even referring to the term itself as “numbing” (119). As one can see with Latour’s *down to earth* approach in political ecology and his anthropology of science—a more particular, specific, and networked approach—Latour contests overarching narratives that stabilize the workings of politics, science, and economics. Given that most democracies in the world serve associal democracies—a mix of universal government programs, free-markets, and cooperatives and benefit corporations, our economic systems in the industrial west are more *hybridized* than the Marxist vision as depicted in the soliloquy: “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”

Add to this the fact that Latour emphasizes the role of nonhumans in economic and class structures (for instance, without fossil fuels modernity would have been very different and therefore different for class struggle), and one may feel a burgeoning alternative to the Marxist paradigm that has wrapped up so much of our political-economic talk. However, due to the brevity of *Down to Earth*, Latour leaves the reader without much to think on other than critiquing Marxism and emphasizing nonhumans in economic systems. It’s good to see Latour exploring alternate space; it’s just that he

doesn't do much to provide a clear way out of this Marxist paradigm to which, he claims, we're all still tethered.

Down to Earth could properly be described as Latour's *Terrestrial Manifesto* in a similar way to Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* back in the 1980's—a short, historically and scientifically driven “speculative fiction” that gives theoretical form to a character defined by political conditions of science, technology, and modernity. Latour's greatest virtue is his ability to connect varying phenomena to be part of the same narrative, applying his acute scientific and political philosophies to work in tandem in becoming *Terrestrial*. Latour is a great map-maker whose emphasis on direction and orientation are a good reminder to us to ask ourselves, “where are we going? With whom will we be going? And how will we get there?” Although I admire his input into class warfare and immigration, readers won't wonder why Latour has been historically silent on these issues, because frankly, he does not provide much new insight with regards to *solving* these problems. A *ledger of complaints* won't give people healthcare, ensure security of land, nor increase wages. Latour is excellent at framing and connecting the problem(s), but struggles with a set of solutions with which today, tomorrow, or even next year we can tackle all these pressing political problems. As someone who thinks that Latour and Gaia Theory have similarities with the practice of permaculture, even that is still too “down to earth” for Latour to prescribe. At best *Down to Earth* gives us a roadmap from where we came and makes us question a new direction that we haven't mapped out yet; at worst the reader feels as if they are still left standing in the same spot.

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