

## Book Review

Bruno Latour: *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Polity, Cambridge 2018.

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I read Bruno Latour's *Back to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* amid a government shutdown in my country, President Donald Trump's demand for a border wall grinding the U.S. to a halt. Not long after I finished the book, and with the government still closed, the Rhodium Group reported that U.S. carbon dioxide emissions increased by nearly four percent in 2018 (Plumer 2018).

The times, it seemed, would make Latour's point for him. Here was the U.S. receding into itself, with talk of walling up the country's southern border and a faded government fading further still. Meanwhile, the nation remained global in the most consequential of ways, exhaling itself into an atmosphere with no room left for the carbon-laden breath.

*Back to Earth* opens by making sense of this seeming contradiction, explaining the former by the latter. According to Latour, the undeniably global nature of our lives is leading more and more of us to retreat to the local. Global climate change, in other words, is driving nationalistic and isolationist movements in the U.S. and Europe. It has done so by depriving us – all of us – of a home and a future on the earth. We realized this, Latour tells us, in 2015 with the Paris Agreement, which forced nations to confront simple, but shattering truths. The earth had rejected the modernization of the human world. It could not accommodate our present. And it would not promise us a land for the future that we had planned and indeed believed we deserved.

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But there is the fact, there is awareness of the fact, and there is the response to it. Officially, the Trump administrations and its supporters deny climate change and its human causes. But the administration denies something else, too; it rejects that the earth now refuses us and our projects. Trumpist America, rejecting global politics and the Paris Agreement, doubles down on the old ways: ‘We strongly believe that no country should have to sacrifice their economic prosperity or energy security in pursuit of environmental sustainability,’ Wells Griffith, the administration’s international energy and climate adviser, said during a UN panel discussion of fossil fuel in December 2018 (Plumer and Friedman 2018).<sup>1</sup>

According to Latour, the ensuing inward turn – the walls, the rejection of immigrants, nationalism walking hand-in-hand with xenophobia – is but the next step in this denial, an effort at impossible belief: the earth, at least here, within these borders, remains for us.

To be clear, *Back to Earth* doesn’t merely diagnose the U.S.’s pathologies. Latour sees these tendencies elsewhere, but particularly in the U.K., where Brexit reveals many of the same insecurities about borders, immigration, and the future of a homeland. But his analysis is most pointed and most political when aimed at the U.S. By the end of his brief book, he reaches a conclusion that ought to paralyze his U.S. readers: ‘no one will be able to count on the belated support of the United States’ (2018, 99). *Back to Earth*, it turns out, is not a book for this reviewer.

As an explanation of the rise of the Trumpist worldview, *Back to Earth* is unsatisfying. On one hand, all such explanations are. Trump’s presidency is predicated on, among many, many other things, the contingent and the idiosyncratic – Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election and the U.S.’s Electoral College system. Without both – perhaps even just one – of those, there might be no presidency, no inward turn, and no official rejection of climate change for commentators to explain. On the other hand, the populism, xenophobia, and racist ideologies undergirding Trump and his allies’ turn toward nationalism are not new to U.S. politics. They predate Trump, the Paris Agreement, and the recognition of climate change. Even the more proximate forces that lifted Trump can be traced at least to the earliest years of the Obama presidency, when Trump led efforts to convince the U.S. public that Obama was born in Kenya and, later, when assertions of white identity and power answered calls that ‘Black Lives Matter.’ This all predates the December 2015 recognition of earth’s rejection of modernization.

So as a manifesto, *Back to Earth* does not quite work; its political analysis is not quite political enough. It is also rather allusive, which probably explains why Jennifer Szalai (2019), reviewing it for the *New York Times*, says that many readers may find it ‘too philosophical and

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<sup>1</sup>A Twitter account associated with Bruno Latour tweeted this quote in late-December 2018.

too French.’ Indeed, the Latour of *Back to Earth* surrenders his secrets more readily if the reader spends time first with another brief, polemic Latour, that of *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). In fact, a sentence in that earlier book’s final paragraph portends *Back to Earth*: ‘If we do not change the common dwelling, we shall not absorb in it the other cultures that we can no longer dominate, and we shall be forever incapable of accommodating in it the environment that we can no longer control’ (1993, 145). We changed, but not in the way Latour then hoped. We surrendered our belief in a common dwelling, some citizens play acting their lives on a different earth than the rest, an earth still not torn asunder by climate change. (And still others imagining extra-terrestrial lives, trading life on this planet for life on Mars.)

But if *Back to Earth* stumbles on the familiar politics – the politics of parties, ideologies, and interests – it is because its gaze is elsewhere. The book calls out to its readers, asking them to reimagine, even re-describe, their relations with their allies, their opponents, non-human life, and the very soil itself. This is a much needed challenge, affirming, as it does, a social good as precarious today as the climate: pluralism. Though that word – ‘pluralism’ – does not quite do justice to Latour’s analysis, it’s the best I’ve got. *Back to Earth* demands that its reader recognize and come to appreciate the local, but not in Trump’s way. Not as a site of racial and ethnic purification and ecological denial, but as sites of lives living, teeming lives, lives dependent on one another and the earth too.

Latour has long been a pluralistic thinker. He wishes the world to be more complex, filled with human and non-human agencies alike. This is, first, a philosophical, anthropological, and sociological urge. In his earlier works, but especially *We Have Never Been Modern* and *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour argues that social theorists and scientists cannot explain the organization and structure of social life without acknowledging the role of non-human things. In this sense, Latour’s social theory aspired to diversify the agencies of the social sciences, to include ‘*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference’ (2005, 71).

In *Back to Earth*, Latour’s pluralism – joyfully written with exclamations and their marks – is primarily a political project. This project contrasts sharply with what he calls Globalization-Minus and the Local-Minus. Both of these modernist urges tend to purify, or even cleanse, reality of complexity and diversity. Globalization-minus involves the effort of the relatively few, usually western elites, to remake the globe in the west’s image of capital and culture. Its consequence is climate degradation, global inequality, and the erasure of the needs and interests of those who could or would never be ‘global’ in this sense. These consequences, in turn, drive global crises, particularly mass migrations from failed states, war, and environmental disasters. Local-minus – a reassertion, through discourse and policies, of a purified, nationalist identity – is one response, particularly in the west, to these crises. This is the politics of walls, closed borders, and child separations.

It is the politics that conjures the ‘other.’ For Trump, these are the ‘rapists,’ ‘coyotes,’ and ‘terrorists’ associated with ‘caravans’ of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America.

Against purity, Latour seeks diversity, characterized by his notions of Globalization-plus and the Local-plus. The former seeks an expansion of worldviews, cultures, people, and living things. It also requires us to recognize that we are not only constituted by the local, but by social-ecological agencies and systems stitching a global across locals: CO<sub>2</sub>, aquifers, antibiotics, epidemics are a few that he names (2018, 93). But if we exceed the local, we are never detached from it. The Local-plus engenders life in its place, the very soil itself. This is not the soil of purification, of calls of ‘blood and soil’ (Latour 2018, 16). Nor is it the soil of the state and Globalization-minus, a surveyed, assessed, marketable, exploitable resource. Rather, it is the soil of matter – organic and inorganic alike: ‘materiality,’ Latour writes, and then, ‘heterogeneity, thickness, dust, humus, the succession of layers, strata, the attentive care it requires’ (2018, 92). It is the soil that we work, turn over, adding compost, covering in mulch. It works us too, following us home in the treads of shoes, cuffs of pants, beneath fingernails. And it is a ‘local’ that exceeds any calls for property lines, city limits, or national borders. The soil on which I stand runs toward yours, giving way gradually, its composition changing though its essence, as a precarious provider of life, holds.

Latour’s is an expansive view of reality, with room enough to allow the social and the ecological to both overflow with life. But what, though, of politics? Near the end of *Back to Earth*, Latour describes a politics of description. ‘Generate alternative descriptions’ of the ‘dwelling places’ of life, he proposes (2018, 94). Recover, in other words, the Local-plus from the purifying vision of the Global-minus by describing the human and non-human lives that depend on the former. Ultimately, this descriptive question pushes into politics, forcing us to confront the central questions of coexistence: ‘With whom can you live? Who depends on you for subsistence?’ I’d add: on what do you depend? Also, ‘Against whom are you going to have to fight? How can the importance of all these agents be ranked?’ (Latour 2018, 96).

This, too, seems like a continuation of the work of *We Have Never Been Modern*. Then, Latour called for the establishment of a ‘Parliament of Things,’ a new politics that better represents the complexes of actors, human and non-human, that make up our world. For Latour, politics appears to mean representation of actors, a composition, through representation, of those actors’ live and interests, and, then, an attempt to build common worlds that provide for the co-existence of people, their cultures, and the things with which we live. Here is that Parliament, imagined

Natures are present, but with their representatives,  
scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present,

but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial. Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all speaking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites. (Latour 1993, 144.)

So much depends on the qualification here: “what does it matter, so long as they are all *speaking about the same thing*.” Latour, like many of us, no longer believes we are talking about the same thing. How could we be, if here, in the U.S., fossil fuels will make us great again and the climate will hold? And so the work he proposes in *Back to Earth* must precede the establishment of a “Parliament of Things.” We must, in other words, re-represent our world, so we can, someday and hopefully soon, begin speaking of those same things again.

It is tempting to read Latour’s descriptive project as an ecological one only, as a demand that we all must become amateur naturalists. This work, after all, seems to begin with soil. And this is also where the descriptive project that Latour has in mind already seems the most fully-formed. Across the globe, descriptions of fauna and flora pour in through apps like eBird and iNaturalist. In Europe and the U.S., amateur entomologists drive with nets attached to their vehicles to catch flying insects or else fill and weigh traps of insects, documenting local – and global too – changes in populations (Jarvis 2018). Bird-watchers, in turn, conduct their annual surveys, contributing immense amounts of data about bird populations and migrations (Kimberling 2013).

Everywhere, it seems, ‘citizen-scientists’ are establishing with whom us humans live and on what those other lives depend. Everywhere, it seems, these actors are agitating for the restoration of habitats, the protection of local wildlife, down, even, to the seemingly problematic – wasps, spiders, and beetles (Weintraub 2018). More than one commentator believes that citizen-scientists – a Latourian, hybrid-actor existing at the intersection of amateur and professional, the natural and social, discovering the global in their tiny patches of local – are well-equipped to confront climate change. Mary Ellen Hannibal, author of *Citizen Scientist* (2016), believes that ‘the collective brainpower and data gathered from legions of everyday citizen scientists is critical to combating climate change and understanding natural global events, because all this information would take colossal amounts of time and money to gather through other methods’ (quoted in McElhatton 2019).

To salvage what is left of this world, perhaps we all do indeed need to learn how to describe the soil of grubs and growth. But what of the soil of human culture, history, and borders? Here, Latour offers a centuries' old example, the construction of a 'ledger of complaints' in pre-revolutionary France. This ledger attempted to construct a common political world out of the description of the 'living environments, regulation after regulation, plot of ground after plot of ground, privilege after privilege, tax after tax' by the entirety of France (Latour 2018, 97).

If we all must be citizen-scientists to salvage our earth, Latour would also have us as citizen-ethnographers to salvage life with each other. He sees this work as an antidote to the Global-minus, which hollows out the local by stamping it with its own image of the global. The descriptive project would represent the lives of humans, those who Latour, writing with great empathy, describes as feeling 'disoriented and lost, for want of such a representation of themselves and their interests' (2018, 98). This includes,

those that move and those that stay put, those that emigrate and those that remain behind, those who call themselves 'natives' and those who feel like foreigners, as if they have no lasting inhabitable ground under their feet and have to find refuge somewhere. (Latour 2018, 98.)

Latour's willingness, in *Back to Earth*, to extend understanding to the self-described 'natives', those who drive the populism of the Local-minus, is one of the more surprising features of the book. Latour argues that those drawn to the Local-minus have been misled, indeed betrayed, by a relatively few elites. Here, he goes deeper into recent history, highlighting how Exxon-Mobil (Latour 2018, 19) and, in his earlier work, *Facing Gaia*, Republican strategist Frank Luntz (Latour 2017, 25) intentionally and in bad faith obscured climate change.

These 'obscuranist elites' (Latour 2018, 21) realized earlier on than most of us that the earth could no longer accommodate modernization for all. So, seeking to protect their own interests and future, they attempted to hide this fact. Latour describes this as a profound betrayal and one that has conditioned politics and its people. 'The issue of climate-change denial organizes all politics,' Latour writes (p. 24). Having shattered a common culture of fact, as well as our common world, climate change deniers set the conditions for the contemporary politics of disinformation, propaganda, and 'fake news.' But, Latour cautions, 'before accusing "the people" of no longer believing in anything, one ought to measure the effect of that overwhelming betrayal on people's level of trust' (Latour 2018, 23).

This analysis may let down readers who wish to hold, and rightfully too, the populist followers of populist leaders accountable. It seems, to be sure, ill at ease with much of what we now take for politics in the U.S.: fractious polarization, incivility, and cycles of performative outrage,

shaming contests, and degradation ceremonies. Perhaps Latour senses this. *Back to Earth* seems to sputter near its close: ‘There, I’ve finished,’ he seems to sigh (2018, 106).

That sentence returned me to the book’s epigraph, a quote from President Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner: ‘We’ve read enough books.’ I first thought Latour’s inclusion of this quote meant only irony and attack: ‘And here’s another,’ I took Latour to be communicating, ‘aimed at you, your family, and your allies.’ But perhaps it means something else. Perhaps it is an affirmation of writing-as-politics; perhaps it is an explicit statement that this slim book, too, is not simply about politics, but the essence of politics.

Latour’s politics of representation and composition are necessarily literary, albeit his are a literary politics engendered by the world. ‘More representation, more composition,’ might be Latour’s rallying call. These before another dwelling place is stamped out, paved over, build up and out, the lives that claim it displaced, other lives – fewer in number and less diverse – moving in. ‘Any politics that failed to propose redescribing the dwelling places that have become invisible would be dishonest,’ Latour writes. ‘We cannot allow ourselves to skip the stage of description. No political lie is more brazen than proposing a program’ (2018, 94).

*Back to Earth* is, in the end, Latour’s politics, his offer of an ‘alternative description.’ It is, in other words, his answer to the question of with whom he agrees to share a dwelling place. It does not prescribe what world we ought build. It does not answer the question of with whom *you* or I agree to share a dwelling place. But it is a beginning of politics in the new climatic regime.

And so then, after the sigh, comes the invitation with which Latour closes: ‘Now, if you wish, it’s your turn to present yourself, tell us a little about where you would like to land and with whom you agree to share a dwelling place’ (2018, 106).

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