
REVIEW ESSAYS

Politics of Nature: A Review of Three Recent Works by Bruno Latour

Bruno Latour: *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004a.

Bruno Latour: "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2, 2004b.

Bruno Latour: *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2002.

Bruno Latour is widely known for his contributions to science studies,¹ debates about postmodernism,² and, through the spread of his "actor-network theory,"³ methods in the social sciences. While one can draw connections between these works, it is hard to pigeonhole Latour. His originality, style of argumentation, and aversion to being defined vis-à-vis other thinkers make Latour enigmatic. More recently, Latour has called into question elements of his earlier project, arguing in his 2002 treatise, *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?*, that critique has "overshot its target"⁴ and asking "why has critique run out of steam?" in a 2004 essay of the same name.⁵ That puts Latour, who urged us to follow scientists to understand social life, under the microscope himself.

Latour's *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*,⁶ (hereafter "*Politics*") comes to the English-reading audience in the midst of the debate over Latour's doubts about critique. This coincidence is auspicious, since it allows us to

¹See especially Bruno Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1979); Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1987); and Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999a).

²Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³Latour, "The Trouble with Actor-Network Theory," *Philosophia*, 25, 3–4, 1997; and Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁴Latour: *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2002).

⁵Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 2, 2004b.

⁶Bruno Latour: *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004a); Latour, *Politiques de la Nature: Comment Faire Entrer les Sciences en Démocratie*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999b.

read the recent post-critical essays alongside Latour's most important work since *We Have Never Been Modern*.⁷ *Politics* is an often brilliant attempt to theorize "political ecology," a philosophical project with two broad aims. On one hand, it attempts to overcome the concept of nature as an asocial, objective source of truth. For Latour, this concept of nature is "the result of a political division" that identifies nature with "what is objective and indisputable" and collects all that is "subjective and disputable" under the guise of the *social*.⁸ Since nature is treated as the external real world, appeals to nature situate actors within a political order in which non-human actors cannot speak, and certain spokespeople (scientists, moralists) are privileged at the expense of others. Political ecology is therefore a critique of actually existing environmental politics, which claims to speak for nature. To practice political ecology is *not* to bring more "Science" to bear on "Nature" (terms often capitalized by Latour to emphasize their singularity) and promote conservation. Rather, Latour's political ecology means "the destruction of the idea of nature"⁹ and the politicization of practices that naturalize.

This brings us to political ecology's second aim: to recognize the complex associations of entangled socio-natural beings, instruments, and practices that constitute different natures. Political ecology endeavors to produce new collectives of facts, values, and practices that will allow plural actors – humans and non-humans – to speak about common "matters of concern."¹⁰ Latour takes the sciences as the model for this experimental work, which entails creating more well-articulated collectives that "include more articles. . . [and] mixes them together with greater degrees of freedom."¹¹ This second aim includes both a descriptive and a normative aspect. The descriptive element lies in the adoption of the appropriate approach to recognize the modern, complex world for what it is: instead of speaking for "Nature," political ecology seeks to recognize and extend the complexes of humans, non-humans, facts, and values that comprise particular natures. For Latour, reality exists, but it is neither unproblematic nor singular, subjective nor objective; realities are experimentally constituted as ensembles of practices and human and non-human actors. Consider the following illustration:

Let us suppose that a cellar in Burgundy invites you to a wine tasting. . . [I]n the course of an hour or two you are going to become sensitive, in the process of continually comparing wines, to differences of which you were completely ignorant the day before. The cellar, the arrangement of glasses on the barrel, the notation on the labels, the pedagogy of the cellar master, the progress of the experimental procedure all contribute to forming an instrument that allows you . . . to acquire a nose and palate Let us suppose that you are then asked to go into the laboratory and discover, in a white-tiled room, a complex instrumentation that is said to allow you to connect the distinctions that you have

⁷Latour, 1991, *op. cit.*

⁸Latour, 2004a, *op. cit.*, p. 231

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 86.

just sensed on your tongue with other differences, here recorded in the form of peaks or valleys on graph paper or a computer screen. ...[W]e no longer want to say that the first tasting is subjective...while the second is objective. ...Thanks to the cooper, thanks to the gas chromatographer, we have *become sensitive* to differences that were invisible before, some on our palate, others on logarithmic paper. We have gone beyond connective sensations, words, calculations to a pre-existing external thing; thanks to the multiplication of instruments, we have become capable of registering new distinctions. In the production of these differences and in the multiplication of these nuances, we must thus count ourselves and our noses, ourselves and our instruments. The more devices we have at our disposal, the more time we spend in the cellar. . .the more realities abound.¹²

Latour's account of the production of the wine differences does not reflect a social explanation of the way a subject approaches an object; nor is this a story of "social construction" of wine differences with no objective qualities. Yet the truth of these differences is neither strictly subjective ("taste") nor objective ("scientific fact"). In Latour's view, "reality grows"¹³ as actors, practices, propositions, and instruments create new coalitions of fact and value, being and recognition. The nose and palate, lab instruments, logarithmic paper, and wine constitute a reality.

Though Latour's political ecology is descriptive, insofar as it provides a way of approaching particular natures (as with the wine differences), it is equally a *normative* project. This is clearest in the second half of *Politics*, where political ecology collides with liberal-democratic political theory. By bringing the sciences into democracy, Latour feels that we will create the conditions for a more democratic and just world. *Politics* reveals that the Constitution called for at the conclusion of *We Have Never Been Modern*¹⁴ is both a means of describing the actual constitution of the world and a political constitution. Drafting this constitution entails addressing the problems of politics, science, speech, and ecology together:

Not a single line has been written – at least within the Western tradition – in which the terms "nature," "natural order," "natural law," "natural right" – have not been followed. . .by an affirmation concerning the way to reform public life. . .When one appeals to the notion of nature, *the assemblage that it authorizes counts for infinitely more than the ontological quality of "naturalness," whose origin it would guarantee.*¹⁵

Overcoming the political effects of this metaphysical affiliation will require that we "put into play" the four concepts that have structured Western thought about environmental politics: "*oikos, logos, phusis, and polis.*"¹⁶ With this claim – *Politics'*

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 84–5.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴Latour, 1991, *op. cit.*

¹⁵Latour, 2004a, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–9.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 2.

most daring thesis – Latour suggests the destructuring of the metaphysical tradition that has linked truth and politics through nature.

Unfortunately, Latour’s way of proposing that we take up such work is disappointingly formulaic and idealist. The overarching narrative of *Politics* aims at joining these three critiques of Nature, Science, and politics: as Science gives way to *the sciences*, as Nature loses its grip as the singular basis of truth, and as non-human nature becomes part of political life, then politics will be more just. For Latour, every advance in the philosophical destruction of “Nature” reflects progress for political ecology *qua* political project:

By refusing to tie politics to humans, subjects, or freedom [as in humanist political philosophy], and to tie Science to objects, nature, or necessity, we have discovered the work common to politics and to the sciences alike: stirring the entities of the collective together in order to make them articulable and to *make them speak*. There is nothing more political than this activity, and nothing more scientific.¹⁷

Making collectives that can speak is a reasonable goal, and arguably a political one. But whereas Latour argues persuasively for the theoretical importance of such work, he never offers an equivalent explanation for why this should be a political priority. Instead he produces a kind of constitution made up of political roles, forms of power, collective requirements, and responsibilities to different actors in a manner that is stultifying in its wonkishness: in Box 3.1, for instance, we find his recapitulation of “the two forms of power and the four requirements that must allow the collective to proceed according to due process to the exploration of the common world.”¹⁸ Readers who are not put off by the tone of Latour’s rules of order may wonder how he expects these requirements to be met (e.g., #2: “make sure the number of voices that participate. . . is not arbitrarily short-sighted,”; #4: “once the propositions have been instituted, you shall no longer question their legitimate presence”).¹⁹ These metaphorical powers are presented with no analysis of the barriers that exist to their actual existence and no discussion of how they might come into being. Latour rarely mentions his sources in the main text, but his theory of “experimental deliberation” seems to be the product of joining Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality with the political theory of John Dewey. From Dewey, Latour borrows the notion of a public-state relation that is not *a priori* but experimentally produced,²⁰ and Latour’s emphasis on making articulate collectives simply translates Habermas’s

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey argues that what matters in any human association is “how they come to be connected” and that the scope of the state’s functions is to be “experimentally determined” (J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927, p. 74). On Latour’s use of Dewey, see: 271 n8, 275 n30 and n34, 280 n20, and 281 n25. Note that all of these citations appear in the footnotes; Dewey is never (to my knowledge) actually discussed in the main text. The same is true of Habermas: cf. pages 262 n16, 263 n21, 266 n6, and 281 n22. The only reference to Habermas in the main text is on p. 171.

principle of discourse ethics – “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as *participants in a practical discourse*”²¹ – in a way that includes non-humans.²²

As the argument unfolds and the lists of “skills,” “powers,” and “roles” accumulate, the humor and clarity of the early chapters fade, and *Politics* becomes pedantic and tediously repetitive. Concrete illustrations, such as the wine cellar, are rare. And Latour’s neologisms steadily proliferate so that one reads through an increasing density of internally referring terms (*Politics* includes a glossary with definitions of no less than 68 Latourisms). These points provide a clue to the book’s major weaknesses. *Politics* offers a philosophical system with its own language and logic that lacks worldliness. It’s nice to imagine, as Latour beckons, “that a cellar in Burgundy invites you to a wine tasting,”²³ but what does this have to do with political struggles? Latour never deigns to apply his approach to a complex historical-political situation. The grand metaphor that sustains *Politics of Nature* – that opening the sciences broadens democratic possibilities – proves to be an empty gesture. The problem is not that Latour is simply too philosophically abstract. It is that his shift to a political register is asserted with so little historical and theoretical care that one cannot but demand some stronger arguments and illustrations.

Herein lies *Politics’s* major failure. Latour does not inquire into the political and historical conditions under which realities actually emerge – outside of the wine cellar. The thorny problems of power, discourse, and history are wholly elided. In turning towards Habermas’s communicative approach to political ethics, Latour does not ask *why* only certain actors can speak effectively. He has no way to account for the interests of the scientists he encourages us to follow. His discussion of the state²⁴ is arguably the weakest section of *Politics*. Citing Dewey’s experimental view of the public-state relation, Latour sets himself against all “totalizing definitions of the State.”²⁵ But rather than exploring, in non-derivationist fashion, why the capitalist state tends to adopt the liberal-democratic form,²⁶ Latour presupposes the impossibility of any non-deterministic Marxist account of politics.²⁷ Of all of Marxism, Latour says “its goal was not to rehabilitate politics [!] but to subject it still further to the laws of . . . Science.”²⁸ The fact that Latour dodges a serious confrontation with

²¹J. Habermas, “Discourse Ethics,” in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 185. Republished in J. Habermas, *The Habermas Reader* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1996), pp. 180–192.

²²Latour, 2004a, *op. cit.*, p. 262 n21.

²³Latour was born into “a wine family in Burgundy not Bordeaux” according to his web page: http://www.ensmp.fr/PagePerso/CSI/Bruno_Latour.html/faq-en.html.

²⁴Latour, 2004a, *op. cit.*, pp. 200–209.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 281.

²⁶See, for example, B. Jessop, *State Theory: Putting the Capitalist State in Its Place* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁷Latour, 2004a, *op. cit.*, p. 267 n9.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 271 n10; see also 281 n24.

Marx²⁹ leaves open the question of whether it is possible to weave his approach to scientific practices with a nuanced, historically informed approach to power.³⁰

The repudiation of critique?

Do you see why I am worried? I myself have spent some time in the past trying to show the “lack of scientific certainty” inherent in the construction of facts. [...] But I did not exactly aim at fooling the public by obscuring the certainty of a closed argument – or did I? ...I’d like to believe that, on the contrary, I intended to *emancipate* the public from a prematurely naturalized objectified fact. Was I foolishly mistaken?³¹

These weaknesses of *Politics* cast light on Latour’s recent doubts about whether critique has gone too far.³² These concerns emerged in *War of the Worlds*³³ and were elaborated in “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” Latour’s anxieties are piqued by two facts – or rather the interpretation of two facts. On one hand (the right), he is faced with denial by U.S. Republicans of the truth about global warming. On the other hand (the left) appear critical interpretations of September 11, 2001. Latour finds a frightening parallel between these two situations. In each case the project of complicating the facts about facts – i.e., being critical about knowledge – has gone too far. Since social construction has gotten out of hand, we have lost our ability to say what’s what. “Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not?” Latour demands. “Why can’t I simply say that the argument is closed for good?”³⁴

²⁹Latour also avoids Derrida. I agree with Timothy Mitchell that Latour’s “brief dismissal of Derrida” in *We Have Never Been Modern* is “disappointing” (T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 309). Latour’s failure to address Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics and its treatment of truth and nature in *Politics* is even more unfortunate, cf. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, G. Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). As with his broadsides against Marxism, Latour criticizes Derrida – for being critical! – and yet without engaging with his arguments. Latour asks: “Since September 2001 ...[does] idle criticism not look superficial now that nihilism is truly striking at ‘us’ – at US – putting what we call civilization in great danger of being found hollow? Who needs to add another deconstruction to a heap of broken debris?” (*War of the Worlds*, p. 1–2). The same question reappears in the opening of “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”: “Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction [after 9/11]?” (Latour, 2004b, *op. cit.*, p. 225). For Derrida’s reading of 9/11 – more rigorous than Latour’s – see J. Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁰As for instance in the work of Donna Haraway (see D. Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Haraway is only cited once by Latour in *Politics* (260, n58) – without dwelling on her socialist and feminist politics.

³¹Latour, 2004b, *op. cit.*, p. 227. Quotations taken from the longer version of the essay published in *Critical Inquiry*. Read alongside *Politics*, the version of “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” published by *Harper’s* feels like a paranoid rant. In its six paragraphs the reader is pummeled relentlessly by more than 40 questions.

³²Latour, 2002 and 2004b, *op. cit.*

³³Essentially an abstract of *Politics*, *War of the Worlds* was published as a slender book by Prickly Paradigm. As compared with *Politics* it makes for quick reading, since Latour does not have room to introduce his terms, rules, and powers. *War of the Worlds* could be substituted for *Politics* in the classroom.

³⁴Latour, 2004b, *op. cit.*

One reason the argument isn't over is because, as Latour knows, the ensembles of actors, facts, values, and effects woven through the global climate change debate are vast and complex. Close up one fact and others open. But a second reason the warming debate continues – one Latour is apparently unwilling to accept – is that certain powerful groups keep it open against better reason. Such an answer presupposes, of course, a theory of class interests, and for Latour such explanations are no more than conspiracy talk:

[W]hat's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired for instance by a too quick reading of . . . Pierre Bourdieu? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because "of course we all know" that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* on their real motives. Then, after disbelief has struck and an explanation is requested for what is really going on, in both cases again, it is the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism – while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation. . . . What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness?³⁵

Latour seems to feel that the Left is incapable of doing anything except attributing the world's problems to invisible forces. This is a rude caricature of critique, but one Latour applies to everyone from Marx to Derrida. What distinguishes conspiracy theories from historically and theoretically informed accounts is precisely the refusal, by the latter, to be satisfied with reductive theories that account for everything. One of the main tasks of critique is to discern between the strengths of different explanations; the mark of conspiracy is the lack of rigor and evidence. The solution to the dilemma Latour notes here is simply to struggle against just such facile accounts of power that attribute problems to "powerful agents hidden in the dark."

But precisely this sort of critique is foreclosed by Latour, who is allergic to attempts to think through the connections between, for instance, capitalism and violence. The question of September 11 figures prominently in his recent essays. He asks: "What has critique become when. . . Baudrillard claims in a published book that the World Trade Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight. . . undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself – as if the terrorist planes were pulled to suicide by the powerful attraction of this black hole of nothingness."³⁶ As Latour's critique of critique hinges largely on this reading of Baudrillard's essay, this reading is worth pursuing. Unfortunately, Latour does not say exactly where Baudrillard makes

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*

the purported claim. As far as I can tell, the passage that piques his outrage comes from the end of Baudrillard's essay, "Requiem for the Twin Towers:"³⁷

The collapse of the towers is the major symbolic event [of September 11]. Imagine they had not collapsed, or only one had collapsed: the effect would not have been the same at all. The fragility of global power would not have been so strikingly proven. The towers, which were the emblem of that power, still embody it in their dramatic end, which resembles a suicide. Seeing them collapse themselves, as if by implosion, one had the impression that they were committing suicide. . . . Were the Twin Towers destroyed, or did they collapse? . . . The architectural object was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish. One might think the physical destruction brought about the symbolic collapse. But in fact no one, not even the terrorists, had reckoned on the total destruction of the towers. It was, in fact, their symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around. . . . The symbolic collapse came about, then, by a kind of unpredictable complicity – as though the entire system, by its internal fragility, joined in the game of its own liquidation, and hence joined in the game of terrorism. . . . [T]he increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it. . . . [I]t was party to its own destruction.³⁸

Without defending Baudrillard, it is clear that Latour's gloss on Baudrillard ("the Towers destroyed themselves") grossly oversimplifies the argument. To be fair, Baudrillard's argument is vague (e.g., where he claims that "it" was party to its own destruction, it is unclear whether "it" refers to "the power of power" or "the entire system"). But Latour hardly improves the situation by failing to cite Baudrillard and by glossing over the distinction between the *symbolic* collapse of power and the destruction of the Towers as architectural *objects*. Latour's criticism thus has the appeal of vulgar realism: "if Baudrillard can't see the obvious, that the buildings were destroyed by terrorists, then critique has gone too far!" Whether or not one accepts Baudrillard's reading, we should recognize what is at stake in Latour's attack: the brute rejection of any attempt to interpret an event like September 11 with concepts like power, capitalism, and hegemony. Even Marxists who cannot abide Baudrillard's postmodernism should see the danger here.

The question Latour could have raised is central to critical theory: how should we understand the ways discourses, empires, or capitalist social relations contribute to the constitution of "realities?" Such a question could be raised more strongly after *Politics of Nature*, and yet Latour wants to foreclose this discussion. Ironically, it is precisely because arguments about the causes of global warming or September 11 cannot be closed off that these critical tools must be sustained: the things Latour worries over are concepts needed to build politically effective collectives. – **Joel Wainwright**

³⁷J. Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Twin Towers," in *The Spirit of Terrorism*, C. Turner, trans. (New York: Verso, 2002).

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp.47–49.