

Book review of Bruno Latour - *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*

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For over 100 years, the University of Edinburgh has been organizing lectures under the heading of 'natural theology.' In 2013 the honor to give these lectures befalls Bruno Latour. Latour puts the lectures down on paper, prepares them for publication - in English. The impossible task to translate these texts 'back' to French is taken on by one Franck Lemonde. Latour is dissatisfied with the results and proceeds to rework the entire translation, adds two new chapters and ends up with an entirely different text - *Face à Gaïa*. In november last year, during a lecture given to promote the Dutch translation of this new book, Latour slyly smiles when he says that he really doesn't understand why the translator ran into problems. "It's not a difficult text at all," he says playfully, and everyone chuckles (and feels sympathy for Lemonde). But it is in earnest, and it is clear from the introduction that Latour is very much concerned with the translatability of his (re)descriptions. It's just that there is no way to avoid a certain feeling of perplexity, due to the very nature of the project: "a hybrid style for a hybrid subject, aimed at a necessarily hybrid readership." (p. 16) So, we have a book that is absolutely lucid to at least one person, and an intriguing maelstrom of insights both new and old, familiar and unfamiliar, catchy and estranging, dangerous and harmless to everyone else. The reader is thrown back and forth. On the one hand: I have read this all before; there is nothing new here; this is all so *obvious*; who *doesn't* know this? On the other: I have never read anything like this; why is it all so complicated, convoluted even; give me something to hold on to, a scheme, a figure, an image, anything. There appears to be very little solid ground to stand on. But that might just be the point.

Due to the fact that the book consists of a series of lectures, there's inevitably some overlap. The reader is invited to follow his own order and encouraged to skip those lectures which contain familiar material. Reading the book from start to finish consequently feels like walking a spiral staircase. You keep moving in circles and still you're getting deeper and deeper into it. Step by step, steadily, tediously. Perhaps there is no other way to familiarize oneself with the figure of Gaia. And we had better become familiar with her (it?), because she is forcefully proposing herself to us. Ecological crises abound and it is becoming harder and harder to hide the fact that the spaces we inhabit are not indifferent to our actions. The Earth has become an actor, and we must become sensitive to its competencies, its agency, its powers, its history, if we hope to have any chance to live together. There is, in short, no other recourse than to face Gaia head on. "Gaia is the signal that we should return to Earth" (p. 308)

But a return to Earth is easier said than done, especially for the Moderns. Gaia is undetectable for them, impossible to place within their categories. Gaia is neither nature nor culture, neither whole nor parts, neither material or spiritual, neither self-regulating system or one big organism. The unworkability of these categories, a familiar thread in Latour's work, is once more taken up in the first half of this book. The first two lectures focus on the Nature/Culture divide and the question of agency, showing the impossibility of accounting for the novelty of Gaia by sticking to these categories and by having a concept of matter that is devoid of agency. If you deny agency to things, the earth is no more than a passive background for human actions, moving causally determined through time, lacking any history. If talk of an Anthropocene proves anything, it is the implausibility of this view. The Earth responds to us, shifts itself into the foreground.

This movement, which requires us to reconceptualize or reconfigure the earth, is the topic of the third and fourth lecture. The concept of earth as the Globe is untenable. Imagine the Globe and you see images of a painted plastic sphere on a desk, of maps, of pictures made from satellites. But as Latour showed in his 1998 book *Paris, invisible city*, there is no place from which we can see ‘the whole.’ The Globe, as a figure, is the pretense that we can capture the whole. It is consequently not a well-defined, well-delineated territory that we can inhabit. In a move that is reminiscent of his embrace of the awkwardness of the name Actor-Network Theory, Latour chooses to rebuild a realistic figure of the Earth using the figure of Gaia. Repopularized by chemist James Lovelock in the seventies, the figure of Gaia - the primordial mother, Earth, from Greek mythology - and Lovelock’s accompanying Gaia-hypothesis quickly spoke to the imagination of many - scientists, fiction writers as well as New Agey types. His theory of a self-regulating system consisting of organisms morphing their environment to suit their interests presented a genuinely new way to conceive of Earth. If - and that is a big if - *if* you are careful not to poison this figure of Gaia with the Modernist myths. Gaia does not mean that Earth is one big organism, or the sum of all parts, or the combination of all levels of existents (“there are no levels; the world is no puff pastry” (p. 382)). Gaia is a jumble, a mess, a tangle. It seems that with Gaia Latour has finally found a fitting figure, a visualization for Actor-Network Theory. The image of a network, so often visualized as a plane with connected dots, fails to capture what it means to *live in uncertainty*. Gaia is the recognition that there is no whole, no Providence, no guarantees, no predetermination. She is “what we have come to recognize *as history itself*” (p. 157). Gaia gives back agency to things, removes some agency from humans, and grants the Earth once more a history that it lacked when it was just the material, causally determined Nature serving as the background for Society. Four lectures in, halfway up the spiral staircase, and the reader is half dizzy from walking in circles. He asks himself whether he has just read another introduction to ANT. ANT gone global - sorry, not global. The Earth gone ANT, maybe.

Luckily (or not, depending on whether the reader enjoys the sensation of dizziness), the more surprising lectures are yet to come. Gaia motions us to return to Earth, but who is this ‘us’? The fifth and sixth lectures confront this question. Latour develops a way for peoples ‘to present themselves,’ a project that reminds the reader of Latour’s *An Enquiry into the Modes of Existence*. For ‘us’ to live together with other collectives, we must first develop some way to present ourselves, to make ourselves translatable, comparable. “Every people is being called up [convoked] by a different entity which defines, orders, classifies, organizes, composes, spreads, in other words *distributes* other agencies, each according to their own cosmology.” (p. 217). As is clear from the quotation, this is an inherently religious operation. The trouble with the Moderns is of course that they believe themselves to be secular and definitively post-religious. By way of an impressive excursion through the history of religion, Latour describes the unfortunate predicament of the Moderns: having inherited the poisonous aspects of religion (the idea of an absolute arbiter, Nature; a contempt for matter, the intent to create a ‘paradise on Earth.’) but being powerless to create an antidote for having lost the ability to speak religiously. Instead of being post-religious, the Moderns are contra-religious. What’s the difference? There’s a world of difference, according to Latour, between living with the belief in absolute knowledge (whether it be in the form of God or Nature) or living in absolute *uncertainty*. Religion is just that, according to Latour: the recognition that *things end*, that there are no transcendental or supernatural ‘guarantees,’ and that we must consequently be thoughtful and sensitive to all the others that share in this world.

No wonder that the Moderns remain apathetic in the face of impending ecological disaster. Everyone knows, only few act in accordance. “It is as if,” Latour writes, “we have *chosen to remain insensitive* to the reaction of a *certain kind of beings* [‘matter’].” (p. 271) This particular insensitivity breeds another: the ‘matter’ of the moderns hurtles through time causally, passively, predictably and consequently lacks any *history* (nothing really happens). If time passes and nothing ever happens, then the destruction of the Earth is necessarily something that happens *outside of time*. Digging deeper into religious talk, Latour suggests that this means that the Moderns have disastrously misinterpreted what it means to live in the end times. The point is to live with the knowledge that the end of times will be achieved *during* time, and also *because of* time. To know that everything will end and yet to be always uncertain because it can only ever be revealed *in time* - this is the tension that should never be dissolved. But the Moderns unknowingly *do* dissolve it, convinced as they are that they are radically and fundamentally divorced from their past. They are definitively modern, their time only moves forward, there is no way back. To Latour this proves that the Moderns place themselves definitively *after* the Apocalypse. And why change your ways when the end of times has come and gone?

Latour reserves the last part of the book for the most volatile themes: enemies and war. (Once again, we find Latour using words that are extremely liable to misinterpretation, as if he chooses them exactly for this reason. As if he is trying to shake the reader to remind him that a realistic description of the Earth hinges on the most minute differences in interpretation. Slip up once, and Gaia reverts back to Nature or the Globe or the Whole.) We must realize, he writes, that, because Earth is not a coherent whole or a neatly organized system, it is necessary to politicise once more the question of the borders of our existence. What is the territory that your people, your collective requires? Nation-state borders are clearly not up to the task - our networks ignore them as nonchalantly as a child filling in a coloring page. What is necessary is a *re-politicisation* of ecology. And this requires that we should be willing to recognize others not just as opponents but as our enemies. It requires shaking off - by way of “the poisonous but (...) indispensable” (p. 320) Carl Schmitt - the notion of an overarching authority or arbiter. Whether it is God or Nature, any ‘sovereign arbiter’ would mean the end of politics. Because politics starts with the recognition that there is nothing or no one *from outside* to turn to who can ‘set things right.’

Gaia is not and cannot be made ‘whole.’ We cannot fight climate change on a ‘global scale.’ So what do we do? How do we govern in the Anthropocene? The retelling of the *Théâtre des négociations*, in which two hundred students took up the task of realizing Latour’s fiction of a ‘parliament of things,’ provides some clues. Only *some*, indeed, as Latour readily admits. The fiction of a parliament of things is just that: the imagination of a possibility. Gaia urges us to redistribute agency - this artificial parliament was an experiment to try and do just that. That it could fail (that in a certain sense, it did fail), only proves that this setup was really able to do politics. Success is not guaranteed. The existence of nation-states, forests, rivers, oceans, animals, tribes, peoples, corporations is always at stake. All you can do is represent the different voices as truthfully as you can, and to speak as best you can in your own voice, ‘under your own banner.’ Every voice would say: “By opposing you [representatives of other actors], we determine the borders of our territory and we *redefine the form of yours*.” (p. 367)

All the way up the stairs. Does the reader now have a clear view of what it means to place themselves under the New Climate Regime? At the very least he will say that it has become clearer than ever that everything is really unclear. Be prepared: you are not prepared. That is progress, because the

alternative means speeding towards the Apocalypse in the false but crystal clear knowledge - or, worse, hope - that things will set themselves right. If there is anything that ties these lectures together it is this unsettling feeling. Feeling dizzy at the prospect of having to “start all over again with drawing our maps in order to include other, newly discovered territories that force us to free ourselves from Nature and Humanity, and at the same time to redistribute the sciences, religion and politics.” (p. 403)

References

Latour, B., *Oog in oog met Gaia: Acht lezingen over het Nieuwe Klimaatregime*, Octavo publicaties, 2017 (all translations are my own)