

Review of Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. 300 pages.

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Preview

Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime (FG, 2017) in significant ways represents an ecological application of Latour's lifelong development of an anthropology of the moderns. Latour tells us in 2008, in an acceptance speech for the Siegfried Unseld Prize, that for more than thirty years he has been working towards the development of a system. This system was the focus of his 2012 *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* (AIME). This system aims at providing a metaphysical framework in which moderns, or those who have never been modern, describe the various ways—modes—with which one can and does make sense of the world. Anthropology here can be understood as attempts to describe the peoples of the world, how they situate and make sense of themselves and the worlds of others, whereas metaphysics here is how these worlds are cleaved at the joints. Thus, while FG is not the outline of his system, which was the project of AIME, it relies on the schemes developed there to provide a sustained exploration of the need for a new climatic regime in light of ecological collapse.

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Latour is keen in *FG* to distinguish “ecological collapse” from the more popular terminology “ecological crisis.” “Ecological crisis,” he suggests, carries with it the quietist notion that grappling with climate change is a singular exception. “This too, will pass,” when applied to the present ecological collapse, harkens back to an older providential metaphysics in which God will provide (13). In short, so long as we believe and are worthy, we can do whatever we want, and God has already providentially sorted out everything. But the phrase “ecological collapse” highlights that going forward our relation to the Earth (and God) will have to be dramatically transformed. In this regard, Latour is a bit like the proverbial Oliver Cromwell, “trust in God, but keep your powder dry.” In short, do your work and pay your bills in case you do not die today.

FG makes explicit the current imbroglio concerning inaction regarding anthropogenically induced climate change by invoking the work of institutes such as the IPCC, NOAA, and actants (human or non-human factors) such as the concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

These findings for Latour are not a variety of naïve scientific realism. They require considerable work to compile and perhaps more to piece together and understand. The sciences, like everything else, involve risks. The risks that the sciences take are situated in a vast network of institutions and publications, the outcomes of which carry degrees of certainty without being absolute. At the same time that Latour is making explicit said imbrolios, he simultaneously unearths many of the historical-religious roots that have hindered action and negotiation. Latour's writing is as erudite as the subject matter is vital. He seamlessly weaves together climate sciences, theology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and a consortium of other disciplines to elicit a possible means around impasses that have undermined a response to ecological destruction. Throughout *FG* he attempts to orient, or rather re-orient, the community of those bound to Earth. Repeatedly he argues for understanding that the problems of the Earth are coextensive with the problems that the communities of those Earthbound—as Latour calls us who cannot dream of some earthly escape, as in the dreams of some grappling with climatic disaster—must face.

Working out the agencies of Gaia, the Earth, and Earthbound is the project of *FG*. The lectures go on at length to underscore the reasons for which many imbrolios relating to climate collapse have come to little in the way of resolution. Drawing on the work of those such as Naomi Oresky, Latour points to the power of lobbyists and the interests of trans-national corporations to impede actions, to generate misinformation, and to obfuscate the states-of-affairs for profit. But Latour also includes a description of how misunderstanding historical context and metaphysical presuppositions have instituted hierarchies and ideologies that are incompatible with the kind of negotiation that the new climatic regime requires.

The work of James Lovelock and Lynn Margolis figure importantly into Latour's thinking, as the title of the book suggests. Gaia for Lovelock is not some deity, some mother-earth divorced from the material conditions that make it possible. Gaia for Lovelock, Margolis, and Latour is bound to its extant relations. Lovelock's scientific investigation of the ratios and relations of atmosphere gases led him and company to posit that

every element that we ignorant readers would have seen as part of the background of the majestic cycles of nature, against which human history had always stood out, becomes active and mobile thanks to the introduction of new invisible characters capable of reversing the order and the hierarchy of the agents. (92)

Gaia is the recognition that the elements of the background are implicated in the larger story of the Earth, that the story of the Earth and Earthbound is woefully incomplete without considering the sensitivity of the system to minutiae often left out of consideration due to a supposed insignificance. But more than just acknowledging the ignorance of extant relations, Lovelock's Gaia has the potential to bring awareness to problems that the Earthbound have not taken seriously, partly because of a misconception of inexhaustible Nature blocking discourse, and partly because those with the means to bring awareness to the issues are the same that profit from inaction. Nonetheless, Gaia raises several momentous problems that the community must address.

There are numerous references to the pragmatist tradition and the importance of action and community throughout *FG*. We have known since William James that the hallmark of belief for the pragmatists is action, and since Dewey, whom Latour seems fond of, pragmatism is concerned with communities and the problems that assemble them—problems, indeed, are what constitute communities for Dewey. *FG* is interested in belief and action, or the lack of action in light of pragmatic concerns that should assemble every community, because they are problems that we all, for better or worse, have no choice but to face together.

Latour's understanding of the cost, both literal and figurative, of facing ecological concerns is informed by decades of work in Science and Technology Studies (STS), hermeneutics, anthropology, sociology, and other areas. Together they have taught him the many ways that networks interweave, as well as the costs required to hold them together. For Latour, dualisms such as subject and object, or nature and culture, are best understood as subject-object, or nature-culture, since they are not opposing binaries but are interwoven and connected actants—hybrids. From his earliest works, we see, again and again, Latour making explicit the work that is required to maintain networks and relations. The same point emerges in *FG*. Climate change and other ecological ills are themselves the outcome of networks of relations. Thus, to have ecological change, we have to act in new ways, we have to put in the work to change how we relate to the Earth. We need a new way of acting and thereby relating, that is, if we desire a comfortable existence, and possibly to mitigate suffering for the majority of sentient beings bound to the Earth. From gut bacteria to snails blocking dams, human beings must come to realize the sensitivity that these other entities have to their environment and the force they exert in shaping the environment. We cannot wait to be saved, against the will of many Western industrialist lobbies and radicals engaged with the Truth. Truth here is the rhetorical tool employed either to end debate, since it relates to the way

things 'really' are, or, when convenient, how no knowledge of this kind is possible, so that we can continue doing whatever action we desire since there is no certain knowledge that our actions are negative.

The notion of "ecological collapse" emphasizes how nothing will be the same, that the organizing principles that we use to make sense of our surroundings, that is, the way we relate to each other and things, are in need of renewal. There is no world, no one thing or Nature capable of situating and ordering everything; henceforth there are only relations. Nature, the great Pan, is dead and, for Latour, this is for the best. We have not survived the Apocalypse, "Modernity is living entirely within the Apocalypse or, more precisely,...after the Apocalypse. This is why Modernity has condemned itself to understanding nothing about what history is bringing it that is really new" (194). The revelation is that the Earthbound have to make our allegiances to the Earth known, to act on these beliefs, and when necessary fight for these beliefs. But this call to arms has been historically hindered by the alienating power of monotheistic religions.

Latour unpacks this with the help of Michel Serres' etymology of religion, which argues that religion is about bringing people together. But, as Jan Assmann has suggested to Latour, the notion of religion as bringing people together ended with the mosaic division. Before the mosaic division, there was not only a multiplicity of competing gods capable of being interchanged, but this plurality did not relegate the status of the many gods to mere beliefs divorced from efficacy and existence. Negotiation is neither efficacious nor possible when one of the parties is in direct relation with the "Truth" while the other is merely in relation with the appearance of truth. Assmann's work demonstrated for Latour how with the help of translational processes—in Assmann's case translation tables—one could begin negotiations between peoples of different religions by investigating the characteristics and activities of their respective deities. In this way one group might come to respect and recognize the supreme entities(s) that mobilize the other groups, often through recognition of the other's deity as their own, though denoted otherwise.

Understanding such a negotiation involves understanding the agency of various deities and, only afterwards, proposing to equate the name. This process, which Assmann argues was possible among pre-mosaic peoples, enabled interchange and negotiation while simultaneously not reducing the other's deities to mere fantasy. Different peoples might discuss the agencies of the gods they worshiped and thus come to an agreement. For instance, the agency of Greece's Zeus was more (rather than less) coextensive with Rome's Jupiter. But the mosaic division ended

negotiations by initiating a hard and fast distinction between the real and True God on the one side, and the imagined and false gods of others on the other side. Hence the mosaic division inaugurated a period of the irreligious. The mosaic division is irreligious because it neglects equivalences among deities, and further because the irreligious “neglect materiality” (210). One knows, the others merely believe.

Tracing the fracture initiated by the mosaic division enables Latour to draw apt comparisons with dualisms, such as nature-culture, object- subject, and the tripartite interweaving of facts-power-discourse that is constitutive of networks. *FG* marks Latour’s interest in the ability of pre- mosaic religions to be brought together by translation tables. What this religious and irreligious distinction amounts to is an analysis of how negotiation has been hindered or made impossible by a false dichotomy starting with the religious division between True and false gods, between knowing and believing. This dichotomy, Latour argues, has spread from religion to the sciences and has resulted in a distinction embedded in the modern psyche, one that posits nature and culture as vastly different categories. The distinction has debilitated political ecology before it could even get off the ground, because it assumed that it needed to get off the ground—i.e., political ecology has mostly mistaken conceptual aspects of the Earth as standing in place of the Earth. What political ecology has needed to do, according to Latour and others, especially Michel Serres, is to come back down to Earth in recognition that concepts do not exhaust things, they do not exhaust ecology. Nature as a concept, like the flattening attempt of Casper David Friedrich’s *Das Grosse Gebege bei Dresden* marks “the great impossibility... [of] believing that Earth can be grasped as a reasonable and coherent Whole” (223). It is believing that the Earth can be neatly ordered, which differentiates the Earthbound from others. Idealized Nature for the moderns is removed from the networks and attachments that instituted and provided it with efficacy—its attachment to the ground, to the vibrancy and cybernetics of the Earth. Nature for the moderns is thus unable to mobilize the forces required to address ecological collapse. Ecology never got underway for Latour, as for Michel Serres, because it has first to come back into relations with the terms of the Natural Contract, a contract emphasizing how Nature was always already bound up with the social contract, ever-present but silent.

The relationship between knowledge and belief, power and discourse, are themes that Latour returns to again and again. It would be surprising if he failed to mention the link in *FG*, especially considering that it was adapted from his own 2012 Gifford Lectures Series. Latour’s *Facing Gaia* lectures series follows in the tradition of the Gifford Lectures

inquiring under the heading of “natural theology.” Latour points out that “natural theology” can be understood in at least one of two ways. Either one can understand ‘natural theology’ as the attempt to prove the existence of God via a naturalistic approach, and thus in the modern sense via a scientific one, or else, given the materialistic world in which we currently find ourselves since the takeover of the sciences from theology, one might instead attempt to offer a space of relevance or meaning for theology in a disenchanted world.

If *Facing Gaia* can be said to do either of these, even in part, it is the latter. The main focus of the lectures, however, is not finding a place for *theos*; that is the work of his *Rejoicing: The Torments of Religious Speech* (2013). The focus of *Facing Gaia* is to use comparative anthropology to symmetrically compare competing religious and metaphysical systems in an effort to open a dialogue for renegotiating ecological collapse, especially given the fractured dualisms under which moderns operate.

Latour’s goal in *FG* is to return moderns, who have never been modern, to the Earth. He does this by employing his expertise in knowledge production, especially in STS, to demonstrate the inconsistency of a view from nowhere—Nature divorced from its contexts. Thus, the Earthbound come to recognize, or re-recognize, that continued existence of those bound to Earth is irrevocably linked to the fate of the Earth. The Earthbound also recognize that negotiation is a part of every relationship and that irreducibility is a fundamental category of existence. The recognition of irreducibility is not meant to hinder the Earthbound, but to allow them space to acknowledge that there is always an ongoing play between acting as if something is true and confusing it for being True. Here Latour is touching on a key point taken from Alfred North Whitehead’s own 1927 Gifford series: that confusing the two is what Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

In later sections of *FG*, Latour carefully and cautiously employs the work of Carl Schmitt. He uses Schmitt to argue that the negotiation involved in political ecology has been drawn to a halt because of rhetorical tools deployed by lobbyists to construct controversy about anthropogenically induced climate change. One issue in Schmitt that Latour brings attention to is that a declaration of war is needed to enable negotiation. Without a declaration of war, there exists the frightening possibility of an unending war. Unsurprisingly, given the stakes of ecological collapse, Latour opts for a declaration of war against the alternative of unending war. What Latour finds notable in this is the idea that the declaration of war stipulates what is permissible and what is forbidden as rules for warfare. But crucially, once a war is acknowledged, negotiations can begin to end it. Negotiating

ecological collapse requires that we understand that a declaration of war is needed to start addressing the unending ecological war in which we already find ourselves.

According to Naomi Oreskes, in her well-known *Merchants of Doubt* (2010), the acknowledgement of carcinogenic properties of tobacco smoke took 50 years, due to the lobbying of tobacco companies. Latour and others, myself included, do not think that the Earth and the Earthbound have fifty plus years to face the present ecological collapse. Declaring war on those who deny climate change is a first step, a necessary one, to open up negotiations. A declaration is needed to combat those who are actively and knowingly subverting action and democracy by obfuscated relationships in order to increase profit margins and propagate ideologies favourable to a handful of the wealthy.

For Latour, doubt regarding anthropogenically induced climate change is not reasonable. It is not reasonable because numerous sciences and scientists looking at the network of earth sciences have maps of interactions ascending from the Earth to the atmosphere and back down again. Science studies have signalled, in an all but unanimous voice, the impact of the Anthropos on the Earth and the Earthbound. Those who deny climate change are not just wrong; they are the enemies of the Earth and the Earthbound. So, if action is the hallmark of belief for the pragmatists, then either we act or remain silent, accepting that God is not the only entity we will have killed. Gaia too is an actress. In her play, all the Earth is a stage, all the actors, humans and non-humans alike, are merely players, and so they have their entrances, but also their exits.

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