

Down to Earth - Politics in the New Climate Regime

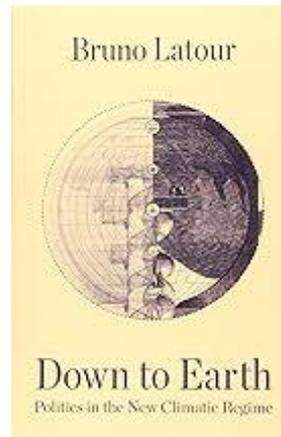
Bruno Latour

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Before going into the full text, I would like to say that the key to entering Latour's *Down to Earth - Politics in the New Climate Regime*, is to clarify the two concepts of "nature" and "modernity." The idea of nature that we hold will determine what kind of climate regime we build. The thought we have of "modernity" will determine how deeply we think about climate. This review will also follow this step, through Latour's most central concept in the book - *terrestrial*, in turn, nature and modernity will be briefly discussed.

Now climate is a hot issue in contemporary politics, closely linked to anti-globalization, rising populism, the disintegration of the welfare state, rising inequality and migration issues. Is there an outlook to save the planet from the current crisis, when Donald Trump announced his withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017; when the UK, faced with thousands of refugees, decided to withdraw from the game of globalisation; and when migratory flows swept across the globe with even greater ferocity, forcing countless people to lose their homes? Latour has the answer: *Terrestrial*.

Consider Latour's (pp. 74-82) description of *Terrestrial*:

(i) *Terrestrial* is not yet an institution, but it is already an actor whose role is markedly different from the role that moderns assign to "nature".

(ii) Saying "we are earthbound, we are terrestrials amid terrestrials," does not lead to the same politics as saying "we are humans in nature."

(iii) *Terrestrials* have to understand how much other existence is needed to sustain them.

(iv) In a subsistence system, all actors raise concerns about their ancestors and descendants, which is clearly different from moderns, for whom one has to choose between the old and the new.

(v) The production system is concerned only with human beings and resources. In the generative system, actors, activists and activities have their own paths and interests.

(vi) *Terrestrials* inherit materiality, heterogeneity, thickness, dust, humus, successive strata, surprising complexity, the need for close monitoring, the need for careful attention.

As we can see, Latour sees people who are closely connected to the earth as terrestrials. As the fourth mysterious attractor, terrestrial complements and surpasses the three main attractors of Local - Globalization - Out-of-This-World, which promote the process of modernity (p. 34). Under the modern progressive rational narrative, backward and conservative localization and rapidly expanding globalization make moderns homeless - localization often means national and country-oriented narratives, cultural heritage, historicism, nostalgia and anti-globalization, while globalization focuses on commodity circulation, economic growth, exploration and reproduction. Nature is thus alienated: for localists, there is a nature that was pre-determined harmonious, pure and mysterious, but now scarred; For globalization, nature is equated with resources, national borders and economic development zones, which are reduced as object. In this regard, Latour proposed that the terrestrial should include all activities and all organic matter between the earth and human beings, which is a completely organic world, different from "nature" or "human society." Also, the notion of *Terrestrial* is a continuation of Latour's ANT (Actor Network Theory), which aims to break down dualism and activate the "middle" kingdoms made up of countless excluded hybrids and life entity. According to ANT, anything that changes the state of things by making a difference can be called an "actor," which includes not only human beings, but also non-human beings such as ideas, technologies, and creatures. Secondly, ANT sees actors as dynamic, constructing society as an interconnected network, rather than some rigid description of essentialism or functionalism.

Thus, Latour created a new concept of "nature," which broke the inherent modernity dualities of nature-human/society, location-globalization, etc. Humans do not rule the earth, yes, that is not new, the key is how do we get along with non-humans? Build a strong network of terrestrials. In short, for Latour, terrestrial still constitutes a profound critique of modernity. According to his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), in our existing view of modernity, modern people can flip back and forth between the two poles of the natural-social order dualism, but cleverly offset the two poles, so as not to constitute a critical short circuit: Nature can be either transcendent (we cannot violate the laws of nature, disasters are real and meaningless) or internal (we have infinite possibilities; science is the product of laboratories + scientists + politics + society; we have entered the Anthropocene); Society can be either transcendental (society has its own laws; the economic foundation determines the superstructure; historic reincarnation) or internal (we are completely free; labor and practice). The existence of God is also reversible: it is precisely with God as an external guarantee that subject thinking in a safe, closed, windless environment is possible. In other words, Latour claims that moderns have never been modern because we thought we had distanced ourselves from the pre-modern human, from the pre-enlightenment world of undivided nature-society chaos, but in fact we have never left the undivided world. It is hidden under the dualistic horizon of nature and society as a network (a huge middle kingdom composed of hybrids such as quasi-object and quasi-subject).

Those terrestrials, on the contrary, are attached to the land. Each person on the ground, in his own way, determines what needs to be used, what needs to be protected, what is the boundary between globalization and localization, what is the boundary between nature and society. Just try to consider the Fukushima nuclear contaminated water discharge in Japan in August 2023, when the scientists presented the top paper proudly proved that the discharge would be no problem, and the mass panic was based on the lack of scientific knowledge - it is precisely this nature-social, rational-emotional dualism that blinded us. We must pay attention to the split between the news media reporting on the economic devastation of fishermen off the coast of Japan and laboratory scientists telling us that the emissions are safe; One side is

global anxiety and condemnation, the other side is Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida personally sampled seafood from nearby Fukushima Prefecture. If we follow Latour's warning, the absurdity is clear: human beings divide nature into laboratory nature, geographical survival resources, or mythic continents of nostalgia, but do not integrate themselves into a whole network of interconnected lands, oceans, wetlands, deserts, plants and animals, microbes, hybrid compounds, and even geographical proletariat, thereby preserving privileges.

At the end of the review, I would like to discuss Donna J. Haraway's and Slavoj Žižek's view of nature in an additional way to illustrate that Latour is not alone:

“The earth of the ongoing Chthulucene is sympoietic, not autopoietic. Mortal Worlds (Terra, Earth, Gaia, Chthulu, the myriad names and powers that are not Greek, Latin, or Indo-European at all) do not make themselves, no matter how complex and multileveled the systems, no matter how much order out of disorder might be produced in generative autopoietic system breakdowns and relaunchings at higher levels of order. Autopoietic systems are hugely interesting—witness the history of cybernetics and information sciences; but they are not good models for living and dying worlds and their critters. Autopoietic systems are not closed, spherical, deterministic, or teleological; but they are not quite good enough models for the mortal SF world (Haraway, 2016:33).”

“We are all lichens; therefore, we can be scraped off the rocks by the Nemesis, who still erupts to avenge the crimes committed against the Earth. Or, we can join the metabolism between rocks and critters, allowing ourselves to live and die well (Haraway, 2016:56).”

“From AIDS to ecological catastrophe to the Holocaust, the key to resisting meaning is when we are confronted with potential or existing catastrophes: these catastrophes reject deeper meaning (Žižek, 1991:32).”

Both Haraway and Žižek have distilled the horrors of nature; for the former it is a biological “Chaos Faction” of the Chthulucene Age; for the latter, the response of nature belongs to the realm of the Real in the sense of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and we must endure its meaninglessness. Further, according to Haraway's artistic, peculiar, and baroque-style description, human was reduced to the basic components of earth in the Age of Chthulucene, coexisting in mix with a wide variety of creatures. In reality, the “monsters” are merely eliminated by anthropocentric tales and relegated to a peripheral role. For instance, the terrible tentacles of octopus, the slick lichen of moss, and the scary twin eyes of insect that are always glaring at us from the shadows. It can be said that this coincides with Latour's thought, they are not especially to reduce the autonomy of human status, but to promote some kind of human and non-human equality. Second, the companion relationship between humans and non-humans is emphasized, and the fact that non-human beings also shape our behaviour.

Echoing this, Žižek sees natural disasters as horrors that cannot be symbolised, and that we must acknowledge the rootlessness of the Big Other, just as we acknowledge that “nature” does not exist. Therefore, contemporary mainstream ecological thought is worthy of criticism in Žižek's view, because they often presuppose a nature-in-itself, independent of human values, so returning to that harmonious nature is the ultimate goal. However, as Žižek (2008:444) says, it is always assumed the reality-in-itself underpins our lives as an ordered whole of meaning: the balance of mainstream ecological thought is naturally long gone, and it can only alleviate our inner fears and traumas. In other words, that balanced nature-in-itself, also known as the purified *nature as universe* by Latour (p.65), is only a retrospective projection of meaning by human beings using discourse symbols, and what we really have is a second nature. Seeing the same, Žižek and Latour no longer cling to the symbolized first

nature, bravely cut the foundation of nature, and turned to face the new world. However, Žižek's new world is a radical envision, a world of horrific in-human subjects and artificial life synthesized by technology. Human beings must face the self-denial of ecological crisis and step into the abyss of freedom. However, Latour's new world is gentler, full of the primordial hope of growth, where nature still has the potential to provide spiritual solace rather than merely an echo of the dark winds of the Real.

At last, Latour concludes by saying that this time we should not expect belated help from the United States. When the American political elite desperately escapes the earth, denying the reality of climate change and seeing themselves as the absolute exception, does it ironically suggest that the primary condition of rootlessness is exactly the very essence of our existentialism? Latour, however, appealed with greater verve for a new landing. This time, human society and nature are no longer dualistic opposites, subject and object that must be separated from each other both ontologically and epistemologically. On the contrary, human beings, society and nature are truly integrated organically, moving from binary opposition to binary tension - we are all actors, along with things that don't belong to us.

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