Bruno Latour's Climate Evangelism

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Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Catherine Porter (trans.), Cambridge, Polity, 2018, 128pp, £12.99 paperback.

Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, Julie Rose (trans.), Cambridge, Polity, 2021, 148pp, £14.99 paperback.

Bruno Latour is an uncommonly dedicated missionary, delivering provocative, instructive and inspirational sermons, particularly to 'Moderns', seemingly tirelessly for more than a quarter of a century. Though the broader aims of what he sometimes calls his 'project' were not in open view in his early works in science studies, they could be glimpsed in the ironic, admonishing allusions to a 'crossed-out God' in *We Have Never Been Modern* and are increasingly evident in his lectures and writings.[1] *Down to Earth* is an essay in political speculation and *After Lockdown* what Latour describes as 'a philosophical fable'; but both, clearly, are also sermons. At the same time, the values and virtues they promote are by no means otherworldly. Indeed, as Latour would (and often does) say, 'Just the opposite!' Refusing temptations to escape to other worlds, keeping concerns focused on Earth, is what distinguishes reformed 'terrestrials' from unregenerate Moderns.

We are all, Latour tells us in *Down to Earth*, left aloft in space by 'the loss of a common orientation' (p1). Questions of 'where to land' unite us across national and ethnic divides.[2] Anxieties about future habitable dwelling places are shared by those displaced by planetary ills and those fearing 'replacement' by the migrants at or within their borders. Where other commentators see the rise of a dangerous populism, Latour sees signs of 'a new universalism', grim in collective condition but hopeful in 'the possibility that certain political affects might be channelled to new objectives' (p2). It is, he writes, an 'hypothesis' he will explore.

Crucially, Latour explains, to be able to orient ourselves in the New Climatic Regime we must radically readjust the political compass. Old notions of 'left' and 'right' have been made obsolete and hobble efforts to form effective political collectives. Friends, enemies and potential allies must be sorted not as 'progressive' or 'reactionary' based, as now, on their positions regarding 'the modernisation front' but on how they view and inhabit Earth. The desirable new orientation emerges in *Down to Earth* through the elaboration of a set of graphic metaphors illustrating different visions of the planet, different aspirations and different ways of moving between them: attempting, like the super-rich, to escape entirely; continuing, catastrophically, to push outward toward a global frontier seen as infinite; seeking, like nostalgic

1. See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 'Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously,' *New Literary History*, 47:2/3, 2016, pp331-35; Timothy Howles, 'The Political Theology of Bruno Latour,' PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2018, Oxford University Research Archive.

2. *Down to Earth* was originally published as *Où atterrir? Comment s'orienter en politique*.

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'locals', to return to a place that never existed; hoping, like misled faithful, to be transported to a habitation 'above' (the scriptural ascensions and elevations were toward higher values, Latour insists, not unearthly realms); or, like those humans who become terrestrials, finally turning, like a compass needle, toward the 'attractor' Earth as their recognised and desired home.

Sharp contrasts are drawn accordingly throughout *Down to Earth*, with names and phrases, many invoked repeatedly, marking New Climatic friends and enemies, virtues and vices: James Lovelock versus Galileo, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing versus Ayn Rand, Pope Francis versus Elon Musk; 'knowing up close' rather than 'viewing from Sirius'; 'processes of engendering' rather than 'processes of production'. Here, as in Latour's *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Polity, 2017), Galileo's name is a metonym for the scientific revolution, seen as deeply implicated in the ravages of the planet. (The book is a revision of Latour's 2013 Gifford Lectures, which had the subtitle *A New Inquiry into Natural Religion*.) It was Galileo who taught us to think of Earth as 'one planet among others'. Those who followed – philosophers and physicists, astronomers and astronauts – made us forget that only Earth brings forth human life and is thus (via *humus* and *natus*) our original and sole 'nation'. Like the God's-eye view claimed for the sciences of a misunderstood 'nature', the de-familiarising, de-animating 'view from Sirius' was sought and claimed for knowledges of humanity, absurdly by philosophers, disastrously by economists. In the New Climatic lexicon, 'naturalise' names a deeply profaning process.

Latour's language always bears close attention. *Climate* is an elastic, endlessly metaphoric term (not only for Latour, of course), used in *Down to Earth*, he writes, 'in the broad sense of the relations between human beings and the material conditions of their lives' (p1). At the same time, *material* is what 'matters' to us, or should. Importantly here, Latour writes *politics* or *political* where others would write 'ethics', 'moral' or 'spiritual' (the last a term he emphatically eschews). Moving toward the exposition of his hypothesis, he writes:

> Neither state sovereignty nor inviolable borders can take the place of politics any longer. … The most basic right of all is to feel safe and protected, especially at a moment when the old protections are disappearing. This is the meaning of the history that remains to be discovered: how can we reweave edges, envelopes, protections; how can we find new footing …? Above all, how can we reassure those who see salvation only in the recollection of a national or ethnic identity …? And, in addition, how can we organise a collective life around the extraordinary challenge of accompanying millions of foreigners in their search for lasting ground? (*Down to Earth*, pp10-11.)

Read allegorically, with scriptural and homiletic allusions appreciated,

Latour's replies to these questions – and the questions themselves – are not too different from the those offered from select pulpits and in works of a recognisably similar genre by comparably dedicated, extensively informed, highly literate theologians.[3]

Latour acknowledges in *Down to Earth* that the radical collective reorientation promoted there sounds implausible. In *After Lockdown*, he points to signs that it is already occurring. The confinements and deprivations imposed on all of us by the pandemic prefigured the far more drastic conditions predicted for life on a violently reactive Gaia.[4] Ironies and reversals abound. Forced into a different way of living, Moderns began to free themselves from their frantic desire for 'freedom' (a thoroughly compromised word, of course, but many American readers will be puzzled by Latour's scorn for 'emancipation'). Made to share small spaces, they – or, as he now begins to write, 'you' – came to appreciate how extensive are the attachments that sustain them/you. From dislocated, disoriented Moderns, we are being transformed into terrestrials: those who know that they live on Earth and must care for what they depend on and choose to care for what depends on them. The metamorphosis thus welcomed in *After Lockdown* is akin to the one in Kafka's story, which Latour reads appreciatively but also rewrites to frame his own parable. In Latour's version, Gregor Samsa's becoming-insect is an enabling, liberating and finally glorious event. At the end, he grows wings.

The larger ambitions of the hypotheses, fables and parables that Latour offers are not modest: 'altering the arrow of progress', 'giving another meaning to the long history of the West, doing away with modernisation', he writes in an earlier book (*Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, 2013); to 're-tie the Gordian knot that the sword of modernisation cut', he writes here (*After Lockdown*, p89). Latour takes some pains in *After Lockdown* to distance his views from those of other theorists and activists who cite him for projects quite different from his own. Contrary to those who would decentre the human, he stresses the necessity of anthropocentrism (the explanatory symmetry of human and nonhuman agencies in Latourian actor-network theory was never a 'posthumanism'). Contrary to those who would decentre the West, he promotes Europe's role in the New Climatic Regime as crucial. *Down to Earth* opens with note taken of the Brexit vote and of Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Accords. It ends with a caustic reference to both events and something of a paean to Europe. 'Continental Europe,' Latour writes, 'is said to have committed the sin of ethnocentrism and to have claimed to dominate the world, and therefore it has to be "provincialised" to bring it down to size. But this provincialisation is saving it today' (p101). To repay its debt for past crimes and because of the wisdom it has acquired over its long history, Europe must lead the way to a restored common world.

Clearly there is much to admire and applaud here, but resistance can be anticipated – and is, I think, called for – on several fronts. Latour's descriptions of planetary ills and proposals for their remedy are laid out in both books

3. See, for example, Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, Fortress Press, 2008; Timothy Beal, *When Time is Short: Finding our Way in the Anthropocene*, Beacon Press, 2022.

4. *After Lockdown* was originally published as *Où suis-je?: Leçons du confinement a l'usage des terrestres*.

with extraordinary inventiveness as well as passion. The expositions are so densely figurative, however, and, at the same time, oblique, allusive and euphemistic, that there is always some question as to what actually is being described or proposed. Major concepts, even with assigned valences as in the rather cumbersome 'globalisation-plus' and 'globalisation-minus', are invoked in ways that obscure the considerable heterogeneity and variability of the phenomena or ideologies they name. Passive verbs and indeterminate pronouns make it hard to pin down the reference of endorsements or denunciations: who, for example, are included in 'ordinary people' as distinct from 'elites'. Latour, like others promoting cosmopolitics, speaks of the need for 'diplomacy', and studied ambiguity may be required to assemble a common world in the face of sharp divisions and fundamental conflicts. What is gained, however, in keeping everyone listening – and Latour appears to be uncommonly successful in this regard – can be lost in the hollowness of proposals for unity or announcements of its achievement.

Latour's interpretations of general trends and spotting of connections among them are often strikingly original, but they are also notable for ignoring factors seen by other analysts as crucially involved. His sense of human motivation can appear, as a result, strangely innocent. Much is made in *Down to Earth* of the 'fears', 'doubts' and 'despair' of 'ordinary people' betrayed by the false promises of modernisation, but no notice is given to resentment or Schadenfreude, or to the primitive affects and impulses aroused, now as ever, by those attuned to current grievances and skilled in the techniques of contemporary media. The impression of innocence is conveyed as well by the oddly happy spins that Latour gives to developments regarded by many as distinctly unwelcome. Thus, having suggested that the naming of an environmental movement 'Extinction Rebellion' is an expression of 'agonising doubts about the flow-on of generations', he continues:

> Am I wrong to discern a similar concern on the other side of the 'political spectrum' ... to the point where 'gender theories' are seen as an intolerable assault 'on the family' that obliges people to take up ever more stridently the 'fight against abortion' and the other forms of sexuality? How can we talk more directly about engendering concerns? … At the very moment that opinions are believed to be more radically divided than ever, aren't they unified, after all, by the same anguish? (*After Lockdown*, p39.)

That Latour frames this tortuous set of ideas as a somewhat poignant question suggests that he is conscious of strain or of likely objections here. In a later passage he writes, 'I'm reduced to inventing a sort of astrology, spotting auspicious or inauspicious alignments of celestial bodies that have become more and more incommensurable' (p102). Searching for signs and omens is a practice shared by millenarians and utopians (not to mention conspiracy theorists) of all stripes, who, like Latour, not only look for alignments but are

especially adept at finding them.

Remarking that terrestrials such as himself are often at risk of being called 'reactionary', Latour writes:

> When they encounter terrestrials, old-school progressives always accuse them – this really makes me laugh – of wanting to 'go back to using candles'. And it's true in fact that, if the Moderns burned their bridges so as to rule out the possibility of retracing their steps, there are probably only a few candles left in the boxes wrecked by the fire! But we terrestrials are not reduced to a few bits of wreckage. Saying that we've gone back to being 'archaic' is an understatement, we've become totally unused to resorting to the axe of 'modernisation' … The despised word 'tradition' doesn't scare us; we see it as a synonym for the capacity to invent, to pass on and, so, to carry on (*After Lockdown*, p89).

Preserving traditional skills and retaining a link to past technologies is certainly desirable, and can be critical, when faced with a return of primitive conditions. There is nevertheless good reason to question any promotion of 'tradition' as such. To continue the chain of metaphors: as Latour would no doubt acknowledge, it was not only candles that were burned in Europe before some modernisation of traditional thought; and, even now, there are regions of the planet where a restoration of 'tradition' has been bitter news for a good portion of the inhabitants.

Latour presses a distinction between the knowledges given by the scientific revolution and the epistemology that celebrated and extended it. 'We need to be able to count on the full power of the sciences, but without the ideology of "nature" that has been attached to that power' (*Down to Earth*, p65). There is some question, however, of how to pry these apart: for example, how to disentangle the scientific understandings represented by the discovery of electricity, such powerful applications as domestic lighting, and the naturalistic assumptions and broadly economic motives that have attended and to some extent enabled and encouraged both. A related and more difficult question is how the development of such applications can be disentangled from the extractive and exploitative practices that often attended them and of course still do. Latour suggests that current planetary ills and devastations are products of mistaken ideologies and vicious practices that arose after a catastrophic, culpable fall into modernity by sixteenth-century Europeans, extended in succeeding centuries across the globe by heedless, hapless progress-minded Moderns. Those naturalistic ideologies and the various practices that attend them could also be seen, however, as fundamentally ambivalent – contingently 'plus' or 'minus' – features of the landscape that emerge often and everywhere from knowledges produced by our characteristically responsive, resourceful, and exceedingly variably motivated fellow humans.

Latour has always reminded us of how entangled everything is – nature with society, humans with nonhuman agents, lifeforms with other sublunar formations – and also of how dynamic their relations are. The responsiveness and resourcefulness of humans and the ambivalent operations of the knowledges and technologies they produce are as thoroughly entangled as the elements of any of the systems revealed and described by actor-network theory or by such contemporary fields as science and technology studies or ecological-evolutionary-developmental biology. Indeed, the latter field seems to have become especially significant for Latour. His fascination with the knowledge it affords of the co-producing, co-sustaining activities of 'symbionts', 'holobionts' and 'heterotrophs' in a remarkably Heraclitan – and, in fact, Darwinian – universe is clear in the later chapters of *After Lockdown*, especially in his detailed, often lyrical, descriptions of the adaptive flow of lifeforms at every scale, from turtles and termites to the viral viruses of the pandemic and the cancer cells whose resourcefulness he knows too well. Toward the end of his fable, in a chapter titled 'Mortal Bodies are Piling Up', Latour reports the interest he has learned to take in the medical accountings of his body and very existence. His brief reflection there on his own mortality, extremely up close and utterly naturalistic, is rather breathtaking.

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