



## Down to earth social movements: an interview with Bruno Latour

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### ABSTRACT

Taking his most recent publications on ways to engage with the planet as a point of departure, this conversation with Bruno Latour considers some of the political and conceptual challenges associated with what he calls the New Climate Regime. Latour discusses the need for breaking with the modernist framework that set the stage for the environmental crisis in the first place, and which has also hindered the capacity of social movements to affect the situation. Latour argues that only a new body politic (inclusive of non-humans) and a new geosocial politics (attuned to Gaia) will open up the possibility for sustaining life on our severely damaged planet.

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In this interview, we discuss with Bruno Latour his most recent publications, *Facing Gaia* (2017) and *Down to Earth: Politics in the new Climate Regime* (2018a), which call for recognition of the grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on Earth. In this perspective, neither the abstraction of globalizing approaches nor the overly localizing focus of burgeoning nationalist isolationisms and ethnocentrisms will support an effective response to the environmental crisis in which we live. At the heart of our conversation is the possibility for developing a new politics that responds to the pressing climate crisis outside the modernist framework that underlies the institutions, mechanisms, and processes that produce environmental degradation in the first place. Latour argues that any effort to sustain life in the critical zone of our planet must leave behind the modern epistemologies which both reify and partition nature and science. His approach rejects the compartmentalization of disciplines and the use of tools that obscure rather than facilitate the understanding and collaboration among human and non-human agents necessary to survival. As Latour argues, non-human agents must be included in an expanded notion of the demos that encompasses the complex networks of relations that sustain life on Earth, as perceived through actor–network theory and assemblage approaches.

In Latour's perspective, the modernist framework also underpins social movements as we know and participate in them, inhibiting their evolution into networks able to mobilize agents to effect the transformations called for by what he calls the New Climate Regime. After disassembling the notion of the social and interrogating the concept of movement, Latour proposes a politics that moves individuals into active engagement and dialog, not driven by ideology but by interactive action and participation itself. According to his perspective, achieving a politics inclusive of non-human agents, which will allow us to transcend the modernist framework and ground us in life sustaining existence,

requires first recognizing that we are in a Hobbesian state of war. Ours is an increasingly dire situation of scarcity and struggle over resources that threatens future generations. No existing political institution will survive the environmental crisis. In the best case scenario, Latour expects a transition to a ‘middle-ground’ state (White, 2011) in which humans and non-human actants will interact on equal ground, ultimately leading to the evolution of a new body politic inclusive of non-humans, with Gaia – the ultimate assemblage of life on Earth – recognized as sovereign. In this context, neither politics nor society, but rather a new geosocial dynamic will be comprised from new ways of living and struggling on a damaged planet.

MMR: In *Facing Gaia* (Latour, 2017) you speak of our political, epistemological, and ethical unpreparedness to face the challenge of the New Climate Regime. Your work insightfully reveals the assumptions, subterfuges, and actors that contribute to this lack of preparation – to the immobility, or panic, that prevents us from building a new and timely relation to the world. One of your main concerns in that regard is how to set in motion different response-abilities – that is, how to ‘occupy the earth’ and mobilize collective action. This approach is especially interesting because it challenges some of the strategies and premises of mainstream environmentalism, a widely studied social movement. You are critical of its modernism, that is, of its tendency to sublimate nature and consecrate science even as it reinforces a division between science and politics that, as you say, leads us to a state of inaction. What would it take, in your opinion, to rethink environmentalism through engagement with Gaia and the territorialization that you advocate?

Latour: Since the time of *Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004) I have always admired environmentalists for the ways in which they have multiplied the issues to be tackled, but I have also criticized the general representation they provide of their many useful fights. The difference between the environmental movement and the history of social movements is so striking. From the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, socialists as well as communists have tried to rethink the entirety of Western philosophy to frame fights against inequalities and injustice. It is true that they had Hegel to help them frame the whole circus! The work of political ecology was never developed to that extent. They have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the perverse notion of nature – especially its exteriority to politics – the notion of the global, and the whole ideal of objective science, in a way that has ensured that social movements and ecological movements remain separate. Nature has indeed remained distinct and exterior to politics proper, just as it was entrenched in Western philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. I agree that it was easier to frame social movements rather than the ecological movement, especially for people in the West, but still, the work of rethinking nature and science should have been carried out. It was not.

MMR: The notion of the state of nature as something that society must transcend through a social contract is, as you contend, one of the ways in which we have tried, and failed, to escape the earth. What you propose is the opposite of that move: a contract that recognizes our life in and with Gaia, effectively territorializing our existence rather than building away from nature into an ungrounded future. In that context, could you address why nature is entrenched in Western philosophy?

Latour: There are many reasons for such an entrenchment, one is of course the way science has framed itself as being outside of politics entirely. On the side of politics, we have ideas of society as what is created ‘out of nature.’ Hobbes and his state of nature offer the typical case. Being a social, moral, and virtuous citizen in a contractual state requires breaking away from the state of nature. So when ecologists try to reconnect this definition of ‘society’ with that definition of ‘nature,’ it terrifies people rather than appearing as a good thing to do. In addition, the Hobbesian state is defined by a contract but not by any attachment or delineation to a specific soil, land or place. It could move anywhere without being modified in the least. And most of our political philosophy in the modern world comes from Hobbes. Those philosophers who talk about soil, land, blood, and ancestors, are perceived as the ‘reactionary’ ones, the losers of history. That too does not help.

So we are stuck with this awful situation: we hear the threat, and the news keep worsening and becoming more strident. It’s not that most people remain unconcerned, but that they feel powerless. It maddens them, which is for me the cause of this ‘great regression’ going on everywhere, in all countries: people everywhere call for returning to the land of old! But the land of old is in no way the Earth of ecologists and activists. It is the old utopian site of the nation state and ethnic communities – in Poland, Hungary, France, Italy, as well as in the England

of Brexit or the Trumpian US. Speaking of social movements, here we have too many! People are energetic and active indeed, but to return as fast as possible to the lands of their imagined past! So the only solution is to redescribe, rethink, relocalize, and reterritorialize the notion of land. What constitutes a territory to which people are attached and which they are ready to defend? And not an external nature, but the territory under their feet. The Left has not been well prepared for this. Attachment to land, turf, territory, and soil has always been perceived as reactionary by the modernizing Left; hence its total unpreparedness to counteract the new flight to Lands of Old – or indeed, the new discovery of an earthly abode.

MMR: We wonder whether it would be possible to harness the energy underlying this regressive sort of mobilization we are witnessing to this grounded idea of ‘the land’ which you describe as neither local nor global, and which enables territorialization (Latour, 2018a). We can think of instances where movements have begun to trace paths in that direction, for example, the *via Campesina* food sovereignty movement, which supports small-scale, sustainable agriculture. The Dakota Access Pipeline protests also come to mind. Both of those movements are connected to territory in a way analogous to what you describe. What do you think?

Latour: It’s clear that many already existing movements have perfectly understood that being linked to and defending a territory is in no way reactionary – even if some of their manifestations look odd, archaic or based on ethnic clichés, and you cite some of the obvious ones. We see this in the French ‘ZAD’ or ‘zones à défendre’ movement, and in countless movements in Latin America – a continent where, by the way, political movements have always emphasized the notion of being part of a land, for the good reason that this land was grabbed violently by Europeans. The same goes for North America. Western political philosophy was largely indifferent to land because it was occupying that of others! So it is no surprise that many of the examples that come to mind are American ones.

MMR: We perceive the Gaia you describe as an interweaving of relations. Its interdependent layers include overlapping and nested social worlds composed of plants, animals, and non-living agents. Recognizing Gaia as a multifaceted agent challenges the boundaries of what we have understood to be the realm of political interaction and negotiation until now. In your discussion of *Make It Work*, the simulation of the COP21 conference that took place at the Théâtre des Amandiers in 2015, you illustrate the practice of what may be called ‘compositionist diplomacy.’ In this remarkable event, traditional political institutions such as diplomacy or the international summit were transformed by new parties inhabiting them (e.g. oceans, atmosphere, indigenous peoples, cities). This institutional reimagining reminds us of your own ‘Parliament of Things,’ which, in our view, builds on a republican political imaginary. However, unlike parliaments familiar to us, this one does not demarcate interior and exterior. Within it, everyone participates on an equal footing. What led you to erase these boundaries that characterize political institutions while holding on to the notion of representation?

Latour: First, the key move is to bring non-humans into politics instead of leaving them outside in the environment, or in nature. Don’t forget that I came to political ecology from science and technology studies. I developed with my colleagues an alternative description of scientific practice which brought non-human agents to the center in the making of scientific objectivity. But not as the silent, silly, obdurate objects of most scientific descriptions, just waiting to be known, but as full *co-participants* in the act of doing science. From this, the step to the second move was small: controversies. Scientists and engineers are engaged in complex controversies around the behavior, legitimacy, action, and reactions of non-human agents. So, when I began to follow controversies around what were formerly known as agents of ‘nature’ – I started with the politics of water – I had no difficulty understanding that non-humans would be represented by their spokesperson, and that they could be brought into the middle of controversies, just like in ordinary politics. The last step was to realize – and this was done in *Making Things Public* (Latour & Weibel, 2005) – that politics, republican, radical, progressive, reformist or whatever, has always been *object-oriented* and has always turned around the question of providing arenas, voices, and rules for the imbroglia of humans and non-humans. So I have never tried to *extend* politics to science or to ecology, but *exactly the opposite*: I have shown how, by following those who make non-humans speak, we could rely upon what politics has always been. So the Parliament of Things has nothing especially ‘republican’ about it. Or rather, *res publica* understood as public ‘things’ or public ‘issues’ has been the interest of all collectives from the beginning of politics, and the Western notion of representative democracy has been nothing but a small excerpt of the vast experience of humanity in what may be considered

dispute resolution around common and composed issues. We, the Westerners, are immersed in a process of learning or relearning all those other solutions we have tried to eradicate or simplify. That's my starting point. Now diplomacy may start all over again, not from nation states in a UN type of situation, but in some sort of ethno-politics (I understand the expression 'ethno' as it is used in ethno-science), what I call the middle ground, to cite Richard White's (2011) marvelous book. In this situation, all collectives are lost in the new world and grasping at any scrap of forms, laws and institutions to figure out how to survive. This is what Tsing calls rightly 'the art of living on a damaged planet' (Tsing, Gan, & Bubandt, 2017).

- MMR: So, in this context, how do you perceive the relationship of representation between non-humans and those who speak for them? Who is it that makes non-humans speak? Is it scientists, politicians, artists, or all of them? Given that scientists rely on the financial support of government institutions and non-governmental foundations and organizations, they are, in a sense, beholden to those sources. On the other hand, politicians are beholden to their funders, to their constituencies, and to the power hierarchy within which they circulate. Artists are similarly embedded in the institutions that fund and disseminate their work. But none of these count as constituents. What types of exchanges characterize the relationship of representation and support? Do these representatives run the risk of losing the 'support' of their non-human constituents because of their reliance on 'old regime' institutions?
- Latour: But those are exactly the reasons why I can be so confident about the representation of non-humans. As you rightly say it is exactly that *uncertainty* about the faithfulness, the directness, the reliability of the representatives that you find in science, in politics, but just as well in contact with the divinities. Not being sure of representation is the default position of any speech act, no matter whether you say 'we the people,' or 'the arctic ice is disappearing,' or 'God instructed me to do this,' or, for that matter, 'I, Bruno Latour, utter these very words.' To be surprised by the uncertainties of representation in every speech act proves that you are trying to judge those acts by the shibboleth of double click: that is, representation should be faithful and direct... But that never happens anywhere. Who it is that speaks when you speak is determined on the spot each time and is never definitely settled, especially when you say 'I think.'
- MMR: Although your work builds on familiar political norms and institutions, the recognition of Gaia as an all-encompassing political agent, and the call for territorialization also seems to open the way for a new political theory, one that transcends inherited notions of democracy such as the division of power, checks and balances, and traditional ways of distributing constituencies among representatives. In this context, what types of political imaginaries do you envision might go beyond the classical institutions of Western modernity?
- Latour: The situation of ethno-politics and the middle ground is entirely redefined if we are facing Gaia. This is why I insist so much on the discovery that Gaia is not Nature, and has nothing to do with the Globe of the modernist cartographic imaginary. Readers are very surprised that I mix science, theology, art, and anthropology to talk of Gaia. But that's because they take it as an ersatz of nature, simply bigger and more connected. They forget that when nature, the modernist one, was invented in the seventeenth century, a similar work of theology, art, science, politics, and economy had to be carried out to obtain the modernist cosmology of Galilean objects in the infinite universe. There is nothing especially natural and commonsensical in this. That is exactly the cosmology that environmentalists did not deconstruct in time for the irruption of the New Climatic Regime I discussed earlier. So there is not a chance that the older format of politics will be used to handle the new situation – no more than the first American constitution resembled anything like, let's say, the norms of the German Roman Empire. That's where the notion of diplomacy comes in handy. We are back to the middle ground where all sorts of destroyed nations are fumbling in the dark about what constitutes a people, a ground, a cosmos, and a god. Remember that in White's book it was not an encounter between French or British *states* and the Iroquois or Huron *nations*, but minuscule groups of 'coureurs des bois' trying to encounter weakened collectives ravaged by smallpox, and those people in turn trying to imagine how to rescue their ancient ways and cope with the invaders' attempt to grab their land. The situation is now similar to this common uncertainty, the one I try to imagine very clumsily in *Facing Gaia*: Which people, which gods, which territory, which cosmos is facing Gaia? This is nothing like what was known in the past as the 'discovery' of people by their modernizers. It is no longer a question of social movements, it is rather an encounter between ravaged people, each trying to find some sort of definition by meeting – peacefully or violently – with others.
- MMR: We are wondering about the distinction between the notion of 'facing' Gaia, which encounter initially establishes an opposition, and therefore also a boundary, and the idea of the 'coureurs

des bois' or also the voyageurs, whose interweaving with indigenous communities through trade led them to 'co-exist with' not just 'face' those communities. In other words, these coureurs (and it would be fascinating to think about who would be the coureurs now) were intermediaries that eventually melded into the world that they initially encountered as external or other to their own. So, are we really facing Gaia and becoming conscious of this, or are we already immersed? And, if the latter, then is the work at hand less about representing and more about figuring out how to communicate and survive, perhaps also through a kind of creative misunderstanding?

Latour: I might have gotten carried away a bit by the 'coureur des bois' metaphors. What I meant is that White, in *Middle Ground*, describes, on the one hand, Indian nations destroyed by European-brought disease and, on the other, a weak but ambitious group of people including 'coureurs des bois,' representatives of the Crown of France or England, plus missionaries, and a few explorers. So there was this situation of common relative weakness *on both sides* that established the necessity for building a provisional, tentative, acrobatic 'middle ground.' The term refers simultaneously to the land being occupied and discovered, and to the social and political assemblages being produced by the encounters. It is this situation that I now draw upon to compare with our situation of Facing Gaia: weakened Nation States encountering many half destroyed 'nations' – constituted of humans and non-humans – who have tried to defend, protect, and use this new land; land that, again, is not 'nature.' I am not sure how far this parallel can be played. What counts is the symmetry between weakened players, and the intrusion of a third party: the land, the Earth, Gaia.

MMR: *Facing Gaia* takes up a Hobbesian perspective on our present state, which underlines the urgency of the situation, and the possibility that we may be coming upon a sea change in political organization. Drawing from Schmitt, you argue that 'we need to acknowledge a new state of war before seeking new forms of sovereignty.' In other words, we need to recognize the absence of a sanctioned arbiter or forum for settling differences before we recompose ourselves politically. A politics of conflict (the only politics that deserves that name for Schmitt) is therefore a necessary step toward the establishment of a new consensus through diplomacy. In short, we must admit having enemies before reaching peace. This raises two questions for us: first, we are interested in the transitional space between the state of war and a renewed peaceful democracy. What do you think happens in this interval that enables the shift? What actors are able to participate and may be invited to join as political agents? Secondly, staying with Schmitt, there is a sense in which the successful transition to a New Regime, as you call it, would mean the end of politics proper, since there would be no enemies and no outside/inside distinction to it – the renewed institutions would be legitimate arbiters with the capacity to resolve disputes. Depending on how you interpret it, this could be an argument for an agonistic politics along the lines of Chantal Mouffe, or rather the opposite: an argument for a post-dissensus politics. Can you elaborate on this?

Latour: I don't see how you could reach a 'post-dissensus' state of politics! That would be a religious ideal, that of Isaiah (11:6): 'In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all.' We live on earth and we should not imagine heaven on earth, this is the gnostic ersatz religion, as Eric Voegelin calls it (1968), which I criticize in *Facing Gaia*. This being said, it is very difficult, as you point out, to have agonistic politics in ecology. That's just my point. By swallowing the peaceful notion of nature, ecology has never been able to trigger politics, precisely because the turn to a notion of nature that is external and known objectively by science, that is, epistemologically understood, was supposed to provide a peaceful horizon of agreement. 'Turn to objective science, peace will follow.' My point is precisely the opposite: nature divides. Thus, a declaration of war is better than the constant hope that nature as external and objectively known will bring agreement among all warring parties. The dispute on the truth of climate mutation would make this argument ridiculous anyway, even if I had not criticized it. Facts divide. If I use the expression New Climatic Regime it is not to move from wars to the state described by Isaiah, but exactly for the opposite reason. I mean to move away from the Old Climatic Regime – 'politics divides, science unifies, let's all become scientists and we will all agree' – toward the New Regime, where all the issues of earthly conditions are squarely brought into focus, thanks to a clear-cut war and peace distinction. Once again if I had not used Schmitt, Donald Trump would have made the point for me by reneging on the Paris agreement and isolating the U.S. behind a wall. That's a declaration of war that clarifies the situation and allows us to get rid of all those pieties around ecology bringing peace to the planet! Now you are right that there is a moment that links the time of war with that of diplomacy, but as far as I know we are not yet there, we are rather in a situation where undeclared war makes



the articulation of real conflicts impossible. This is especially true of the unfortunate climate scientists who are not authorized to say that they are at war with the climate negationists who trash them every day. So my solution, admittedly a dangerous one, is to say: 'but declare a war for God's sake, so that at least we reach the moment of diplomatic encounters faster.'

MMR: The notion of Gaia is not incompatible with your description of the critical zone, which facilitates territorializing our existence. This grounding involves recognizing the falsity of modernist abstractions including the idea of the global, or its counterpart, the local. Beyond this, in *Down to Earth* (Latour, 2018a), you articulate a new materialism which, distinct from Marxist historical materialism, contributes to a politics of genesis instead of a politics of production. Moving beyond a politics of production goes hand in hand with relinquishing ideas about class struggle as a driver of history, and, potentially, transcending political divisions between the political left and right. We have observed, ever since the end of the Cold War, the receding role of ideology in progressive social movements. Opposite to this, religious movements and far-right movements have increasingly organized around common ideologies. Where do you locate ideology in contemporary and future social movements, especially ones that are territorialized? Does a politics of genesis give rise to a post-ideological form of organizing, or does it lead to a new ideology as yet to be articulated? Within this context, what, for you, is the relationship between knowledge and ideology?

Latour: I am not a great fan of ideology, but if you accept taking it as a synonym of cosmology,<sup>1</sup> I could use it. Marxism developed a materialist explanation of class struggle which, we realize now, was not so materialist considering it skipped over many material conditions of existence that are part and parcel of this dynamic. We are now discovering this as we, to use Sloterdijk's term, make those conditions more explicit. Now, there are thinkers, such as Jason Moore or even Naomi Klein, who try to extend Marxist theory to include those new forms of materialism. It is certainly doable. The problem is always the same: does it allow for 'moving' people, that is, pushing them into action because they have internalized that the issue of territories is just as important as the concerns they associate with social struggles. After all, those 'emotions,' those 'movements,' that 'setting into motion' is necessary to trigger social *movements*. You have to be able to extend the notion of the social to include non-humans and then to make this new type of composite people *move on* to fight against their condition. When you have to defend your own life or goods you don't need a long time to be convinced by an argument, you just do it. Why is this not the case when you defend your Earth? Because you don't *own* it. It is outside you. The only question is figuring out how we can shift this from outside to inside; the former being synonymous with passivity, and the latter with energy and mobilization. So this is where a contrast between class struggle around systems of production – the twentieth-century version of Marxism – and *geosocial* class struggle around *systems of genesis* – "engendrement" in French – could be useful. When you point out '*the receding role of ideology in progressive social movements*,' I am sure you are right since you know this scene better than me. On the other hand, it seems that we have seen a constant *amplification* in movements linked to systems of genesis: after all, feminist movements turn on the question of reproduction and its control; and what are the innumerable ecological movements, if not ways to generate, grow, cultivate, and care for everything from food to animals and soils, another issue of genesis; in a way, the renewal of anti-racist movements also turns on the question of which land has been occupied by whom; the same goes for the central question of migrants and refugees; also on the key question of education: what does it mean to educate kids and transmit a civilization to the next generation?; same thing again around the notion of protecting territories and caring for lands; you could add to this list the Christian rediscovery of Creation as ecology in the way of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*, quite a nice way to talk about injustice and ecology in the same breath, and it is not so much about production but really about how to generate people. And of course, people are no longer exclusively human in their makeup. I do not mean that all those movements have a common ideology akin to that of Marxism, I mean rather that the notion of narrowly defined *social* movements has fallen behind those newly defined explorations which attempt to 'land' somewhere, as I said in my little book, *Down to Earth* (forthcoming in 2018a). There, I don't talk of movement, which implies a direction, a goal, and some avant-garde, I refer instead to the notion of exploration. In that book, I call for a redirection of the attractor that should redefine the Left: the Earth is not the Globe. This is my little triangulation, as laid out in my forthcoming paper in *Critical Inquiry* (Latour, 2018b).

MMR: The example of Standing Rock comes to mind again now, as another indication of how mobilization might evolve past 'social' movements proper.

- Latour: Right, many people have already connected – to use older terms – the social and the ecological in their movements. But don't forget that this is also what the 1% have done with great effect in carving out the offshore world in which they now live, as we have learned from the Paradise papers. So we have to learn from the bad guys what it is to carve a place, what I call for this reason 'geosocial classes.' We have a lot to learn in terms of ethno-politics on how the land grabbers have functioned in the recent past.
- MMR: Several authors, including ourselves, have found ANT instrumental to facilitating an engagement with a politics of invention, that is, oriented toward multiplying realms of possibility and open to alternative ontologies. This literature has shown, among other things, how art and science may share a capacity to bring new entities into being, as well as to redistribute established partitions between science and politics, or nature and culture. This resonates with your own use of exhibitions or theater to experiment with these questions on a sensory level. Can you comment on the possibilities that you attribute to embodied practice and other forms of engagement through art? This of course takes us back to the notion of representation, but from a different angle: Could representation itself manifest through embodiment rather than speech, especially of a non-human constituency? And if we think of artists (so often thought of as tricksters!) as participating in this type of translation, then how do you envision their incorporation to the new body politic?
- Latour: If you accept giving the notion of ideology a rest and instead focusing on cosmology, and if you realize that we are back to a situation like that of the turn of the sixteenth century into the seventeenth century, then it becomes obvious that without art – in this case the well-known problem of perspective and representation in painting – it would have been impossible to invent nature – again, nature as understood at that time. The same is true today. The feeling of crisis comes from the fact that we don't have the politics, but also are lacking the sensibility and, of course, sufficient knowledge, to absorb the New Climatic Regime emotionally and efficaciously. As I said before, the discrepancy between the threat and our feeling of powerlessness is maddening to us. This is what makes art so important, because it provides us with the emotional and esthetic equipment to cope with the situation. Because of this, I have collaborated with artists through many exhibitions, theater performances, lecture shows, etc. For me, it is exactly on par with learning science or the philosophical study of Gaia. The book starts with a dancer, after all. In that sense I have many friends who could be part of *Ensayos!*<sup>2</sup>
- MMR: Moving to what we may call techno-scientific forms of activism, we have seen a proliferation of groups and collectives engaging in interesting and diverse ways with science and technology production. Within this category we have observed embodied health activisms, expert-driven forms of citizen science or environmental justice, grassroots forms of technological innovation, and concerned groups that become legitimate stakeholders in a market-oriented techno-science. In what ways do you understand these forms of activism to be transforming the who and the how of techno-scientific production? In your opinion, and to use the terms of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME; Latour, 2013), how are these activisms talking more politically than those based on identity politics?
- Latour: See, like me you can cite hundreds of ways in which activism is already transforming the question that social movements had tried to define. But social movements were goal-oriented and that goal was to coalesce at some point on some sort of revolutionary or at least emancipatory ideals. Not so today. Geosocial movements are land oriented and they seem to be going in all sorts of directions, not sharing any common goal, and certainly not a revolutionary one which would induce them to abandon the planet again! So we sort of agree. But the real problem for me is that I am not sure we agree on what is called politics. Since you allude to AIME, you might remember that acting or speaking *politically* is something entirely different from acting or speaking *about* politics. In the latter case, it looks as if it is political, but in effect it does not create the incredibly rare and difficult movement of politics, what I call activating the political circle. So this is why we encounter what could be called *immobile* social movements... They look political but only because they repeat a small number of sentences, though nothing really moves. This is probably what you call identity politics, which I would define as politics based on three elements: expression of indisputable *values*, affirmation of indisputable *opinions*, and exposition of weaponized *grievances*. Now those three elements are understandable, but they don't produce politics. They render politics impossible since, by definition, engaging those elements *politically* means that you are ready to *dispute* your values, to *discuss* your opinions, and to *abandon* or at least *demilitarize* your grievances. I am convinced, and I have been for a long time, that politics in this sense is disappearing just as fast as religion disappeared – religion

as a movement, not as an identity, of which we have aplenty. So if there is no social movement that really *moves*, it is probably because less and less people are willing to speak politically. This is one of the causes of what is rightly called the brutalization of public discourse. Inarticulate people sit side by side with other inarticulate people. None of them utter anything politically. But they do indeed speak ceaselessly *about* political value, opinion, and grievances... A good description of the situation, no?

MMR: Your critique of identity politics is in line with a notion of politics as movement, translation/transaction, event, and differentiation. From the perspective of mobilization, we also understand the importance of alliances and 'distributive wholes' – to bring in Deleuze (1992) – as forms of relation in which the parts are not subsumed into the whole. In this context, does the construction, not of identity politics, but of collective identity as a basis for mobilization retain any galvanizing power? And how might mobilization be connected to affect independent of identity?

Latour: I think the difference between what was to be called 'social movements' and the exploration of 'geosocial' struggles is that they differ in their composition, their directions, their degree of convergence or absence thereof, and, finally, in their ultimate horizon. Social movements were defined by their revolutionary horizon of ultimate convergence with a somewhat coherent enemy, geosocial struggles spread everywhere without any converging goal, and without any sort of 'avant-garde' leading them. They are exploring a new land, occupying as many niches as possible, settling on partially ruined landscapes. There is no longer one agent of history that each movement would, in a way, illustrate or anticipate. That is also why the Left is so disoriented. Instead of converging they diverge because the space they are led to is not the same. The perspective of the first Left was the Globe – the utopian horizon of modernity – the new Left has spread as broadly as possible to explore surviving values for a maximum number of people.

MMR: How do you think your work and ANT may enrich the study of social movements? How can a concept such as the actor–network help to rethink the very notion of social movement? What is at stake in rethinking the 'movement' and the 'social' in social movements from a constructivist point of view? Conversely, we are also interested in considering how the study of social movements may contribute to enriching our description of the social. From early 'crowd behavior' approaches, the psychosocial imaginary mobilized by this field of study has been prone to metaphors of turbulence, waves, eruptions, flows, and contagions. In this sense, how do you think that the study of social movements could contribute to your own approach, and a reconceptualization of collective action and the social at large?

Latour: You would surprise my French colleagues very much in asking this question! They have never seen any relation between ANT and social movements ... They think ANT is anti-political and anti-social movements. They are still strongly Durkheimian: the social is the social made of social ties among social humans. Period. So they have never been able to see social movements in science, technology, law, and of course not in ecology. All of that is *exterior* to the social. No wonder nothing moves much in their view! The Left has disappeared in France largely because of that sort of social theory. This being said I am in no way a specialist of the history of social movements. My feeling is that the very notion of social movement is being slowly replaced by another question, that of *people* – if you accept linking this old notion to that of *genesis* we talked about before. We are in a period of renewed *demogenesis*. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) made the provocative remark that Trump is the first *white* president – of course all the presidents before (except one) were white, but they did not claim to be the head of a United States made by and for white supremacists. So here we seize on the spot the refabrication of a *people* out of what was a vastly more complex assembly of Americans. And of course *against* other people who suddenly have to realize that they too have to define themselves as people. It is very clear also in the realization by Europeans, suddenly abandoned by England and the US, that they have to redesign themselves as a people – but which one? Not a modernist one, not a universal one, not a national one? This is the question that is slowly replacing, it seems to me, the problem of social movements, which had a sense in the past, because they were partial *social* movements *inside* a well-defined people. This is no longer the case. It is as if the return of geopolitics had expanded the notion of social movements, renewing it in one way and deeply modifying it in another.



## Notes

1. Latour writes, ‘If there is no unity either in Nature or in Science, this means that the universality we seek has to be in any case woven loop after loop, reflexivity after reflexivity, instrument after instrument. It has to make this effort of composition at least thinkable that I proposed, in the first lecture, to define collective lives through the distribution of agency and through the choice of connections that link these forms of action. This is what I have called a metaphysics or a cosmology, something that may allow us to escape for good from the Nature/Culture format by leading us toward something like the world’ (2017, p. 143).
2. Ensayos is a nomadic collaborative of artists, scientists, and local residents, based in Tierra del Fuego, of which Denise Milstein is a participant (see <http://ensayostierradelfuego.net/>).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Note on contributor

*Bruno Latour’s* work may be categorized as philosophy, sociology, or anthropology, but transcends disciplinary boundaries true to his own interrogation of those divides. Early on in his career, when his research focused on scientific laboratories, Latour developed actor–network theory (ANT), an approach that privileged relations among agents over an atomized focus on the subject, and contributed a foundational perspective to science and technology studies. His work has evolved since then, with a sustained critique of modernity that has gained traction especially relevant to social movements in his current focus on the environmental crisis. His critique of the division between subjective and objective renderings of reality, his insistence on incorporating non-human agents to our understanding of the relationships that make up our world and its dynamics, his rejection of the reifying or reductionist observations that evolve from subjection to dominant theories, incite a reconsideration of social movements, both as entities and in the ways in which we examine them as social scientists.

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