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In Search of Terrestrials: A Review of Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth*

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Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime

Bruno Latour

Polity Press, 2018

106 pp.

I want you to picture Bruno Latour on a tightrope. He is way up there near the top of the big circus tent. You will need binoculars to see his face, the sweat on his straining brow. All necks are craned upward—the elephants, the clowns, etc. The kids are at the edges of their seats with handfuls of popcorn poised at their gaping mouths.

It is a long fall, this one *down to earth*. He needs to cross to the other side where there is a ladder to climb down safely, sustainably. To get there, he must walk on a wire that is as slender as a page, as diaphanous as the written word, as light as “reason itself.” On his shoulders, he carries you and all the other intellectuals crowded up there like capuchins. This is the high-wire act in what he calls the new climatic regime. Can we *think* our way across these new dizzying heights?

Down below, on one side of the tightrope we find the hungry lions. On the other side, the ravenous alligators. Latour calls up to us on his shoulders, “Against globalization and against the return to national and ethnic borders” (100). On one side, the chomp of ecological limits. On the other side, the snapping jaws of fascism. The earth cannot sustain the globe—the growing economy of industrial capitalism—any longer. The globe is what Hegel called a “bad infinity.” But we cannot run back to the local; it has been evaporated. We cannot build walls to hold back the forces we have unleashed. We can try, but it will be a bloody failure. This didn’t used to be a high-wire. It was solid ground, but it dropped out from below us in what geologists would call a subsidence event. It’s like the sinkholes out on the Permian Basin in west Texas where they are sucking up 2.5 million barrels of oil daily. Things out there are coming down to earth.

The solidity we once knew was called “the West” or modernity. It was movement toward “a common horizon, toward a world in which all humans could prosper equally” (1). Latour argues that this was all a scam. The ruling class decided forty years ago that this earth didn’t have room for them *and* for everyone else. So, they have been talking a big game about the wonders of economic growth, and “modernization for all.” But, Latour calls out, don’t be fooled by their dreams of what lies ahead. Look, rather, at what is behind them: “the gleam of their carefully-folded golden parachutes” (11). All this risk-taking, this moving-fast-and-breaking-things, only applies to the suckers. The elite are playing it safe. They are not in solidarity with *our common fate*. They are stocking their bunkers and living in a different world.

Enter Donald Trump: an orange fever dream, the paroxysm of a clownish culture, the bile of a decadent democracy. In addition to the local and global poles, he introduces the “out-of-this-world” pole. A new attractor that is so *attractive* for those folks tuning in to the television program known as politics. It’s a make-believe soap-opera that speeds along a plotline of scandal, outrage, and norm breaking fit for a meth-head. You are never bored! No dead air! In denying climate change and pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord, Trump lets it be

known: “We Americans don’t belong to the same earth as you. Yours may be threatened; ours won’t be!” (3). Then Britain, one of the originators of globalization, decides to stop playing the game when the refugees remind them that the stakes were real (the old Empire plugs its ears with Brexit and shouts ‘nah-nah-nah’). Now President Bolsonaro in Brazil is blaming the NGOs for setting fires and denying the satellite imagery from his own government! The developing world keeps learning all of our lessons.

Climate denial. Deregulation. The explosion of inequalities. These are the key pieces. What holds them together is crass, selfish escapism. The ruling class has decided it is time to party on the Titanic. To keep it going as long as possible, they deny that the damn thing is sinking. With deregulation, they tap as many kegs as possible to heighten the buzz. And they siphon more and more into their own gullets while scapegoating immigrants. They play identity politics by pitting faction against faction (Pelosi vs. the Squad!) so that we are thoroughly distracted with shooting ourselves in our own feet while Rome burns.

We should add to the picture the Russian chaos monkeys and other gleeful nihilists who delight in the psycho-social mechanics of hate and fear. The scientific precision of this with Cambridge Analytica (5,000 data points on every Facebook user!) only adds to the surreal storyline.

We no longer inhabit the same world. We do not live in the same reality. Latour reminds us that facts are the complex product of a common world—trusted institutions, shared norms, and a reliable media. This has all collapsed and Trump and other leaders are playing the resulting “epistemological disaster” to their advantage. Fake news! The press is the enemy of the people! Oh you intellectuals: did you really think that after the subsidence the facts would somehow remain standing all by themselves like monoliths? Didn’t you see how the wingbeat of a tweet could topple the entire IPCC? Descartes warned us about “palaces built on sand and mud,” we just didn’t realize that it is sand and mud *all the way down*.

Things are so zany now, Latour notes, that Trump is able to push on both levers—forward headlong into global profit-maximizing extraction economics *and* backward to ethnic and national identity. He’s hybridizing the alligators with the lions. The fever dream is of white nationalism and a triumphant trade war with China while somehow you can still get a cheap pair of jeans and a dollar hamburger at the neighborhood Walmart. Stephen Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, recently told American companies that it is “time to bring your supply chains home.” As if supply chains were the kinds of things that had homes!

Does Latour believe that his book, even though it is slender, has a chance in this new ecosystem of tweets and clicks? The biggest lesson from the 448-page Mueller report on Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election was that the media and the public are no longer capable of reading. The new climatic regime is not going to be rooted in a typographical, literary culture. One press conference or even a meme can leave a crater in public discourse while the heaviest tome, no matter how damning its contents, lands like a pillow. Even the crater, mind you, is quickly kneaded back into putty by the next asteroid from all these new epistemic *outer dimensions*.

Still, though, we intellectuals read on. And we cling to his shoulders tightly, because we fear the lions and the alligators. Latour is right: we need a shared practice, a shared culture, and

shared stakes. Imagine *sharing*?! But what do we share? The earth we need to come down to has to be something we all have in common. So where is Latour taking us? He wants to mobilize our political affections toward a “third attractor.” It is not the global or the local. It is not the out-of-this-world. It is the terrestrial. It is a 90° shift off of the global-local axis. The tightrope turns perpendicular to the usual course of things. The audience gasps ... or was that a yawn?

The sharing must be earthly, not universal. Here science is hero and villain. Obviously, we intellectuals must get in the business of ‘bunking’ science after years of debunking. We need to shore up the institutions of truth-making, of shared-reality making. But the science Latour wants bunked must be stripped of “the ideology of ‘nature.’” Galileo taught us to look at earth from the stars—as another floating speck, unremarkable, indifferent. The Galilean object is a fuzz-ball stuffed full of resources. There is the origin of our *Unheimlichkeit*—we are metaphysically without a home. But what is he suggesting? That we smash the telescopes? Wasn’t Bolsonaro the one denying the satellites? Are we to play the same game as him, only with footnotes?!

Latour doesn’t want an earth as a factor of production seen from afar through abstractions. He wants “*an Earth finally grasped from up close*” (74). Seen up close, earth is teeming with agents, more than enough to displace any center, including the anthropo-center. The politics of terrestrials is one of attachment and dependency rather than rootless liberty. It is about care and engendering rather than thoughtless productivity. Latour admits that it is not that attractive. The global still looks shiny and offers emancipation and eternal youth. The local still looks warm and offers reassurance and an identity. The problem, though is that the global does not exist and the local “does not exist either” (92).

The other problem: the terrestrial also does not exist. Whatever Latour is inching toward on this high-wire is shrouded in fog. Like a gestating butterfly in the chrysalis, it can’t take shape in any of the existing body structures... that’s the whole point! But it does make it seem even more unreal than the global and the local.

Latour has sketched the question for the R&D enterprise in the new climatic regime: How can we become Terrestrials? This is the new direction of innovation, the one leading toward the third attractor. “Innovating by breaking all limits and all codes,” Latour writes, “is not the same as innovating by profiting from these limits” (81). Learning to live *down on earth* means learning to live as one among the earthlings. This is the new science, which requires new laboratories and “psychological equipment.” The turn is from outer space to inner space, from bad infinities of production to good infinities of care. The Terrestrial does not target escape velocity, weightlessness, and an extra-terrestrial vector. The Terrestrial, rather, is *digging into earth’s* “thousand folds.”

I always enjoy Latour’s fancy footwork, but there is a simpler way to put the point. It is time to grow up and face reality. Rather than weightlessness, it is time seek the moral weightiness appropriate to this moment on earth.