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Some are Still Locked Out after being Locked Down: Review of Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown*

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How does it feel to be under lockdown because of the coronavirus epidemic? Bruno Latour, a leading scholar of the science studies community for the past four decades, answers: “I feel like a load of washing in the drum of a washing machine, turning furiously, under pressure and at a high temperature!” (119-120) How apt a description. The confinement, the endless turning of the drum, soaked and hot, in short, uncomfortable, helpless, hoping to get rid of dirt/contamination, and with no end in sight. One wonders if the choice of the washing machine was a gesture to the technoscientific advances of the Western hemisphere post WWII, when house appliances shorten the unpaid daily labor of women and made it possible for them to join the workforce.

One wonders as well if this haunting image of a person inside a machine is also supposed to express the compact quarters urban dwellers were limited to inhabit by comparison to the expansive landscape of their rural counterparts. Could they just stand outdoors and have the rain soak and cleanse them from the invasive virus instead of subjecting themselves to a washing machine? In either case, is this quasi-baptismal cleansing meant to be medicinal or religious, both, or neither?

Being Gregor Samsa

The second conceit and reference point throughout the thirteen short chapters (short enough to complete while waiting for the bus or train or when taking a break from binging on yet another television series) is Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1912). Latour moves gingerly from identifying with Gregor Samsa’s fate—seeing himself as a bug (2)—to a more thorough immersion in the point of view of a termite in the Anthropocene Age. From this perspective, the “critical zones” of life are limited in scope and range, suggesting, as we have all experienced during the lockdown, the precarious conditions of human existence. Earth and the Universe, as the story goes, have misoriented us, all too human beings, and without religious guidance (itself one form of escapism) we must recalibrate our position, just like Gregor does once he realizes he has metamorphosized into a hairy legged bug.

If the “correct” perspective is that of a termite, then just as the Samsa’s family’s life looks odd and at times vile so do human aspirations and concerns seem odd and at times misdirected. Why invest in space flights, as the billionaire class does, rather than tend to our all too fragile critical zones of existence? Nodding to Albert Camus’ famous assertion “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (1991/1955, 123), Latour claims that “we need to imagine Gregor Samsa happy...” (5). It’s the dot, dot, dot that tell the real ambivalence of Latour’s lament. While Camus upends the meaningless of Sisyphus’ fate, a punishment exacted by the gods, so as to insert meaning and happiness into the existential abyss, Latour sounds less sure that any upending is possible, that any imagining can bring about sufficient changes in the material conditions of humanity to broach the level of happiness.

When Latour suggests that “We’ve read Kafka’s novella the wrong way around” (6), he assumes the posture of bugs who probably view humans as “monsters” who have become themselves “inhuman,” failing to adjust to environmental transformations that have pushed life to the precipice of extinction. The so-called “engendering concerns” of the likes of

Gregor, the “immediate anxieties once he’s become a bug,” were tethered to “meet[ing] the needs of his family!” (23). Two themes then inform Latour’s free association: a Heideggerian “terrestrial” being in the world (chapters 4-5) and the collapse of the neoliberal “Economy.” Chapter 4 is dedicated to how terrestrials recognize their precarious existence in “critical zones,” not “on earth” but “with Earth or Gaia,” and how engendering concerns turn into “gender troubles,” (without mentioning Judith Butler (1999) but citing Donna Haraway). To say at the end of the chapter that “Gaia and the feminine are not unrelated” (37) sounds trite by 2021.

What is interesting, though, comes in chapter 5 when Latour calls out the hypocrisy that has separated “*the world I live in*, as a *citizen* of a developed country, and on the other hand, *the world I live off*, as a *consumer* of this same country” (41). The clash between the extractive activities and damaging effects of neoliberal capitalism were intensified by lockdown online consumption so much so that to be a citizen, as the American experience post WWII and right into the pandemic age, has meant to be a consumer without any recognition that the one came at the expense of the other so that it would be both hypocritical and dangerous to conflate the two subject positions. Referencing the devastating impact of Ayn Rand on the neoliberal turn of Western capitalism, Latour rehearses the standard critique of individuals as an “autotrophic living things that *leave no residue behind*” (44).

Terrestrials, like termites, live in mounds and are part of the critical zones of Earth. The Heideggerian moment is presented in chapter 6 with an accompanying dispensation with religion and its false promises of heaven and an afterlife. Latour asks if the best way to “sum up the experience of the lockdown” is not “*placing ourselves differently* in the same spot”? This is so because “Everyone started to live at *home* but *in a different way*” (54). This existential difference is equated here to a metamorphosis. Perhaps what Latour has in mind is that once Gregor is comfortable with being a bug, once he can jettison the material concerns of his family, he can be himself, freed from the world into which he has been socialized. In Latour’s words: “Thanks to confinement, we can finally breathe” (43). We? Who are the “we”? This is where Latour’s meandering and at times brilliant reflections turn from personal confessions to the standard, and by now fully derided, universalist Euro-centrist and colonial-racist contemplations of a “never better” world of “confinement.” Is Latour’s lockdown experience comparable to those who lost jobs and whose living conditions worsened? No, all those “others” could not “finally breathe.”

Paradise and Paralysis

For some reason, Latour undertakes a religious detour that prompts him to say that the very idea of paradise and the appeals religious leaders and institutions have traditionally made “ended up paralyzing all forms of action ‘to get out.’” And as if this strident observation isn’t enough, he pushes his point, perhaps with a nod to Marx, by suggesting that this appeal resulted in “spurring them on to smoke ever stronger doses of opium...” (52). The secularized substitution ended up being no better, especially since it offers no way out, as existentialists since the last century have reminded us. The futility of life, with or without the lockdown, isn’t relieved by finding some profound meaning. “Our experience of the world” is not limited to the materiality of Earth, but is neither spiritual. It is, instead, “*formed with other bodies*” (53). This interpersonal connection, according to Latour, brings us back to Gregor and the metamorphosis he is experiencing with his family on the one hand and his

economic life on the other. This pivot to the economy is an opportunity for Latour to insist on the lockdown as a way of “quitting the economy” (61) and as a mode of resistance.

Though it’s true that in the economizing age “the Economy casts its spell,” but is ordering through Amazon, for example, really quitting and resisting? Moreover, is any sort of resistance to the Economy possible for anyone by the very few on the top of the economic pyramid who can somehow “learn to exorcise it”? (64). Once again, an aspirational posture of the privileged is universalized to the rest of society, to those who cannot afford to “exorcize” their debts and other financial obligations, their dependence on what “the Economy” doles out to them. In its American reimagining, Gregor’s refusal turns into Willy Loman’s death. Arthur Miller transforms the dramatic metamorphosis into a slow, tedious, but just as heartbreaking *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Perhaps it’s easier to imagine Gregor happy, as Latour wants us to do, but can we imagine Willy Loman happy?

Latour’s lockdown brought him back to his European literary “tradition,” the one the “Moderns” discard. But unlike them, the postmodern in him can absorb and incorporate a wide range of sources and at the leisure of his “home”: one can imagine him surrounded by books and flat screens exhorting us, however flawed we remain, to “maybe finally [being] *capable of reacting* to the unexpected consequences of [our] actions” (90). However welcome the sentiment it is no substitute for taking stock of all the activists who have already reacted, who have marched and demonstrated, who have engaged in political action, and who have, in one way or another, taken risks outside the comfort of liberal rhetoric. If Latour is unaware of “them,” this would be a great opportunity to meet the members of the Green Party in Germany, for example, or the French people other than the groups he briefly mentions in chapter 9. Perhaps because and not despite of the lockdown, there is an obligation to “go out” more often and visit sites beyond the liberal bourgeois ones familiar to the academy, itself a shameless neoliberal bastion, as Wendy Brown (2015) reminds us.

Latour stays steadfast with his postmoderns, now renamed “extramoderns,” who have “stepped out of their boxes and deconfined themselves, or, rather, decolonised themselves at full speed” (104). One can forgive the cliché of thinking outside the box, even the paradoxical position of deconfining oneself while being confined in the lockdown; but how can one claim the position of being already decolonized when France, among other colonial nation-states, still struggles to come to terms with its Algerian atrocities (see, for example, Kaplan 2021)?

Between Countries and Worlds

Latour ends his short journalistic collection of essays (supplemented by an extensive last chapter that offers multiple references to the topics at hand) with himself still divided, as he was earlier in the book, between the citizen that he is and the consumer he must be. He lives now, as he says, “between two worlds”: one he lives “in” as a citizen and the “fuller and fuller and more remote” one he lives “*off*.” He labels his metamorphosis “ethnogenesis,” which “begins to dissolve my former affiliations.” The French intellectual laments, “I no longer know which country is mine. I’m lost” (111). The heroic decolonized extramodern who advocates “diplomacy” (108) seems to be “lost” without his “former affiliations.” But

perhaps I misunderstood him and what he has in mind is not the simple-minded, and nowadays dangerous turn to nationalist nostalgia, but rather a reframing of the Marxian class division into “Extractors and Menders,” always capitalized so as to properly name them (115).

The old American adage of moving from Red to Green of the previous century is finally finding its way into French science studies. Rehearsing the “victory over communism” in 1989, Latour claims that “the Anthropocene is the name of this total revolution,” without giving sufficient explanation of what he exactly means (116). And as he brings his book to an end, Latour pleads with us to “scatter” as much as we can, to “fan out, explore all [our] capacities for survival,” and what’s more, to “conspire, as hard as you can, with the agencies that have made the places you have landed on habitable.” One could mistake this “conspiring” as a nod to an inescapable complicity with the neoliberal institutions that brought us to the brink of disaster or, alternatively, with a more revolutionary move with other scattered individuals who wish to upend the status quo.

Unlike Gregor or Willy Loman whose death is tragic if inevitable, Latour’s final words are triumphant: “They’re coming out of lockdown. They’re being metamorphosed” (128). Who are the “they” he has in mind? Who on “Earth” is “coming out of lockdown” as yet another variant of the coronavirus is spreading globally? And even if some people will eventually be free from domestic and foreign lockdowns, is the metamorphosis awaiting them indeed liberating? Is being a terrestrial termite the ultimate symbol (and reality) of human freedom? Kafka and Miller may have got it right after all: life’s futility, with a metaphoric or existential lockdown, ends with death and not with a religious rebirth. It’s termites all the way down.

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