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Gaia and COVID: A Review of Bruno Latour's *After Lockdown*

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After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis
Bruno Latour, Translated by Julie Rose
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148 pp.

Bruno Latour's new *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (2021) offers to the reader in what is said in the text Latour at his best—and also, by what goes unsaid, Latour at his most cryptic.

The Metaphor

Latour equates our 'awakening' from the time of the COVID lockdown as similar to Gregor Samsa's awakening in *The Metamorphosis*. Samsa discovers that he is an "ungeheures Ungeziefer"—some sort of "monstrous vermin." Gregor, unable to leave his room, reflects upon his job—which he would have quit, had financial need not forced him to continue. He has to have his food brought to him, and those members of his family who do not find themselves transformed feel only contempt for him, and seem entirely relieved once they can dispose of him. As Latour notes, many of us we are in the same situation regarding COVID; we were locked up in cramped flats or homes for months, reflecting on jobs which we might have left had we not been trapped by finances, bumping into families perplexed and frustrated by enforced proximity, and feeling the disdain of family whose ideologies did not permit them to think of COVID as 'something real.' And we underwent a transformation, as well; we felt like a new person, somehow foreign to the world in which we had once felt welcome; and many of our friends and relatives seemed revealed as strangers who insisted on vaccinations and masks.

Latour, with his gift for extended metaphor, superbly captures the sense of unfamiliarity with our own lives many of us felt during the times of COVID. And, as Latour showed in an essay in *Le Monde* which was later translated for publication in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2016,¹ he is an astute observer of the political scene; his predictions concerning the time of Trump and the decline of large-scale internationalism were prescient due to their understanding that intellectuals were blind to the appeal of nationalism to the broad groups within the body politic, whom they ignored as beneath comment. But such groups, as Latour understands, vote and decide to ignore pleas to take vaccines, with broad implications for the future of Western societies. It may have been Gregor Samsa who came to understand the truth about the brutishness of his family; but it was his family who survived—at least for the time being.

That "for the time being" is important to underscore. Since his *Politics of Nature* (1999), Latour has become increasingly vocal in his concerns for the environment. The entities that make up life on our planet are increasingly dominated, and threatened by, humans; and in Latour's estimation, it is thus time for a radical recasting of philosophy, one which gives a voice to the panoply of entities which make up life on our planet. In *An Inquiry into Modes of*

¹ <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/two-bubbles-unrealism-learning-tragedy-trump/>.

Existence (2013),² Latour begins to lay out an extraordinarily ambitious plan for a new system of metaphysics, one neither modern nor postmodern, and one common to humans and nonhumans. This new metaphysics, in one manner or another, has occupied his attention since his 2004 publication of *Politics of Nature*, and *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* represents another chapter in the unfolding of his vision for a new way in which humans and other entities might interact in the political realm.

On ‘Life’

Fundamentally, Latour has become persuaded that chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis, in their development of the ‘Gaia hypothesis,’ have made a major step toward an understanding of how our world works; in a 2020 interview with Jonathan Watts,³ Latour compared it in importance to Galileo’s discovery of the heliocentric motion of the planets. Lovelock and Margulis posit that the system of life on earth, called ‘Gaia,’ seeks to maintain the homeostasis of a physical environment suitable for life via a cybernetic feedback system operated unconsciously by the biota.

‘Gaia,’ or Life, depends on the interaction of all the form of life on the planet, from the micro-organisms that degrade inert minerals into soil to the life forms that concert ongoing inputs of energy solar energy into edible products for other life forms, which in turn excrete gases and nutritional products for other life forms.

As Latour suggested in 2010, this theory “is still not very much accepted by mainstream science.” Latour suggests that “[t]his may be because we do not yet have the tools to receive it,” although it might be more accurate to suggest that the theory isn’t widely accepted because there is substantial evidence against it.

We might take as an example what earth scientists call the Great Oxidation Event. During this period, about 2.2 billion years ago, Earth’s atmosphere and the then-shallow ocean experienced a dramatic rise in oxygen due to the activity of cyanobacteria during the Paleoprotozoic era. The presence of free oxygen caused the extinction of many existing anaerobic species, but enabled the later development of multicellular life forms.⁴ To describe this event as an example of “Life” or “Gaia” seeking to maintain a homeostasis is clearly not in accord with data from fossils and isotopes; it was a catastrophe for the life that *then* existed on Earth. It was fortunate for *humans*, who were to arrive on the scene in the future; but the event seems to argue against the notion of a life-supporting homeostasis on the part of “Gaia”.

More recent shifts in climate have threatened human existence; droughts 8200 years ago caused mass migrations of populations out of collapsing Neolithic centers,⁵ while droughts

² Latour, Bruno. 2013. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. Harvard University Press.

³ Watts, Jonathan and Bruno Latour. 2020. “This is a Global Catastrophe that has Come from Within.” *The Guardian*. 6 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/06/bruno-latour-coronavirus-gaia-hypothesis-climate-crisis>.

⁴ Lyons, Timothy W., Christopher T. Reinhard, and Noah J Planavsky. 2014. “The Rise of Oxygen in Earth’s Early Ocean and Atmosphere.” *Nature* 506 (7488): 307–315.

⁵ Weninger, Bernhard, Eva Alram-Stern, Eva Bauer, Lee Clare, Uwe Danzeglocke, Olaf Jöris, Claudia Kubatzki, Gary Rollefson, Henrieta Todorova, and Tjeerd van Andel. 2006. “Climate Forcing Due to the 8200 Cal Yr BP

approximately 5200 years ago led to the collapse of the late Uruk civilization with subsequent depopulation of urban areas as food supplies decreased.⁶

Even if we were to dispute examples within the historical time span, or dispute the best available data regarding the Great Oxidation Event, there are substantive arguments that suggest that the net effects of biological feedback systems is to increase Earth's sensitivity to changes in climate as a result of human activity rather than to attenuate it. Examinations of samplings of Antarctic ice cores suggest that biological by-products will serve to make our planet yet warmer as a result of anthropogenic climate change,⁷ and the current damage from anthropogenic climate change is becoming more evident with the passage of time.

At this point, proponents of the Gaia model make a crucial turn. Unless we are willing to posit that humans are somehow 'not nature' or 'not Gaian', Gaian thought regarding planetary homeostasis becomes muddled, and so Lovelock and his followers construe humans as an aberration, a sort of cancer on the body of Earth, which Gaia is now seeking to eliminate (Lovelock, for example, describes the COVID-19 virus as a part of Gaia's 'self-regulation' of the planet). Humans are seen as a monstrosity which is ultimately doomed if very significant changes are not made immediately.⁸

What sort of changes might be involved? According to Latour, it would not be sufficient to enact legislation that would decrease carbon emissions or enact similar small-scale initiatives. What would be required would be the abandoning of modernization for its opposite, "ecologization", a novel metaphysics that would put humans and nonhumans on an equal footing. All manner of things—human minds, trees, microbes, imaginary entities like ghosts, and all the rest—exist as actants, which no trace of metaphysical 'rank'.⁹

On Latour and Sociology

But Latour began as a sociologist of science, and a very important one at that; his *Science in Action* (1987) is, Mialet argues,¹⁰ a work without which STS would be very different. Latour's work in critiquing not only the "internal/external distinction vis-à-vis science", as Fuller says, but its underpinnings, is of vast importance in STS; but Fuller's broader conclusion that Latour's failure to maintain the idea that science should strive to be an enterprise somehow

Event Observed at Early Neolithic Sites in the Eastern Mediterranean." *Quaternary Research* 66 (3): 401-420.

⁶ Weiss, Harvey and Raymond S. Bradley. 2013. "What Drives Societal Collapse?" In *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Historical Reader* edited by Michael R. Dove, 151-156. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

⁷ Kirchner, James W. 2003. "The Gaia Hypothesis: Conjectures and Refutations." *Climatic Change* 58 (1): 21-45.

⁸ Lovelock, James. 2021. "Beware: Gaia May Destroy Humans Before We Destroy the Earth." *The Guardian*, 2 November. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/02/beware-gaia-theory-climate-crisis-earth>.

⁹ Harman, Graham. 2006. "Bruno Latour and the Politics of Nature" In *Humanity at the Turning Point: Rethinking Nature, Culture and Freedom: Essays on Contemporary Philosophy* edited by Sonja Servomaa, 147-158. University of Helsinki.

¹⁰ Mialet, Hélène. 2012. "Where Would STS be Without Latour? What Would be Missing?" *Social Studies of Science* 42 (3): 456-461.

autonomous from society is equally important.¹¹ The resultant ‘normative meltdown’, to use Fuller’s phraseology, has been to head toward a variety of research programs which, as Pickering says, involve “disreputable places”. As Pickering suggests, if the symmetric ontology of STS implies that humans do not have the ability to construct some sort of “objectivized” place from which to do science, how then is knowledge to be created? How is a sort of Foucauldian madness to be avoided?¹²

Latour’s response is to view “Life”—living things as they exist within the Gaian biota—as the referent for a new symmetrical ontology, one in which the asymmetrical ontology of past STS studies is abandoned. This notion of “Life” serves, in the final analysis, as the cornerstone of Latour’s ultimate argument about the ‘strong program’ in the sociology of knowledge. In the strong program, the argument is made that no account of knowledge is ‘privileged’, implying that we should try to evaluate science scientifically in the same manner in which we would attempt to evaluate any other system of knowledge creation;¹³ but the accounts of knowledge are construed as arising from human effort; the Strong Program, in sum is still STS, involving science and scientists.

In the Strong Program, it is the systems of beliefs which are regarded critically; every system of belief, regardless of how the analyst may personally evaluate that system, should fall under the same regime of inquiry as any other. The implication of this, as Bloor suggests, is that it is unlikely that any given *individual* might have the ‘view from nowhere’ that would enable them to look upon a domain of inquiry without bias; but it is logically possible to build social *institutions* that can create critical inquiries concerning domains of knowledge. These institutions remain human programs, arising from a critically-reformed scientific program.

As such, we can imagine within the ‘strong program’ a sort of schema of an object and a subject, in which the observing subject interacts with an independent reality, and, using principles of receptivity that the object has created either on its own or through interaction with other entities, creates a representation of the object that is construed as knowledge.¹⁴ Individual and group attempts at knowledge creation lead to the formation of stereotypical patterns of thinking, which Bloor calls ‘schemas.’ Such artifacts serve as norms which are sustained socially; science is one among a number of such schemas, which themselves serve to maintain societal homeostasis.¹⁵ The research program of discovering what sort of programs of belief-formation are reliable under what circumstances under the strong program might then be a goal of the Strong Program; how, say, could the schema of science function within a realist epistemic framework to construct knowledge?¹⁶

This possible goal of the strong program would seem to be one that Latour might support. But as Bloor suggests in “Anti-Latour” (2002), Latour sees himself as having abandoned the

¹¹ Fuller, Steve. 2012. “CSI: Kuhn and Latour.” *Social Studies of Science* 42 (3): 429-434.

¹² Pickering, Andrew. 2009. “The Politics of Theory: Producing Another World, with Some Thoughts on Latour.” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 2 (1-2): 197-212.

¹³ Bloor, David. 1997. “Remember the Strong Program?” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 22 (3): 373-385.

¹⁴ Bloor, David. 1999. “Anti-Latour.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 30 (1): 81-112.

¹⁵ Shapin, Steven. 1995. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ Lewens, Tim. 2005. “Realism and the Strong Program.” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 56 (3): 559-577.

subject-object schema, which he characterizes as an attempt to explain nature by explaining society. This is, as Bloor suggests, a mischaracterization of the Strong Program, which is explicitly materialistic in its formulation¹⁷ and whose symmetry principle argues that all explanatory models, whether they are evaluated as ‘true’ or ‘useful’ or “false” or whatever, should receive the same symmetrical examination.¹⁸

Latour and “Nature”

Thus, as Bloor argues, “Latour’s charge that the Strong Program denies agency to things, because it reserves all agency and power for social processes, is therefore wrong.”¹⁹ Having made this leap regarding the sociology of science, however, Latour wishes to introduce agency to non-human entities; not just to animals, but to what we might call *ousia*. He does so via the mechanism of Gaia, which, following Lovelock, he construes as the regulatory mechanisms brought about by life on Earth, except for humans. Humans, again following Lovelock, are seen as an aberration, a sort of cancer on the body of Earth, which Gaia is now seeking to eliminate (Lovelock, for example, describes the COVID-19 virus as a part of Gaia’s ‘self-regulation’ of the planet),²⁰ an aberration that is ultimately doomed.²¹

Such a claim is a far cry from more standard formulations of the Gaia hypothesis, which held that Darwinian pressures would cause the development of biologically-mediated feedback loops that would contribute to environmental homeostasis. Even such formulations are problematic; as Kirchner argues, there is nothing in Darwinian theory to suggest anything other than that natural selection favors those beings who have a trait which favors their survival, whether or not their survival is favorable to the biota in the long term.²²

But in Latour’s current thinking, as revealed in *After Lockdown*, the ideas of Gaia as a sort of realm full of entities, deserving of representation within a parliament of entities, raises a number of serious questions—questions which have been left hanging since Latour first began speaking about the Parliament of Things in *Never Modern* (1991), and detailed the idea in *Politics of Nature*. Readers of this publication, for whom STS is a primary concern, are likely to agree with Latour’s environmental concerns—but want detail and understanding about his ontological ideas. And readers coming to *After Lockdown* in search of specificity when it comes to the logical schemata of arguments regarding the study of human knowledge will leave disappointed. What we see here the Latour of the influential French public newsletter *AOC*, the Latour who remains a compelling public intellectual of the era of climate change and novel viral agents.

¹⁷ Bloor, David. 1991. *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Bycroft, Michael. 2016. “How to Save the Symmetry Principle.” In *The Philosophy of Historical Case Studies* edited by Tilman Sauer and Raphael Scholl, 11-29. Springer.

¹⁹ Bloor, “Anti-Latour”, 91.

²⁰ Watts, Jonathan 2020. Interview: James Lovelock. “The Biosphere and I are Both in the Last 1 % of our Lives.” *The Observer*. 19 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/18/james-lovelock-the-biosphere-and-i-are-both-in-the-last-1-per-cent-of-our-lives>

²¹ Goodell, Jeff. 2007. “The Prophet of Climate Change: James Lovelock.” *Rollingstone.com*. November 1.

²² Kirchner, James W. 2002. “The Gaia Hypothesis: Fact, Theory, and Wishful Thinking.” *Climatic Change* 52 (4): 391-408.

On display in this slim, 148-page volume are only glimpses of Latour's social epistemology and interest in the nature of science as a means of the creation of knowledge—and the glimpses that we get of Latour's epistemological thoughts fall prey to the same concerns expressed in depth some time ago by Eric Bloor. More to the fore is Latour's remarkable ability to create cogent metaphors regarding society and the predicaments that bedevil it.

At the same time that he writes as a public intellectual, however, Latour writes as a sociologist of science, and in this capacity the reader sees the development of a scholarly program of sorts that has raised fundamental doubts—doubts that *After Lockdown* does little to dispel. How might this new “metaphysics common to humans and non-humans” work? The pan, it seems would be a democracy of all actants, in which the human, the paramecium, the ghost and the locomotive each get a voice; no actant is seen as the condition for another, and each is given its place in the ranks of those who are empowered to be represented. Anthropologists, whose role is presumably to use some sort of process to come to be able to give voice to the voiceless actants, represent the objects that have no voice in this parliament of actants.²³

Here there seems to be a curiosity of Latour's thought. As Delachambre and Marquis (2013) suggest, one of Latour's goals in this metaphysical project is to overthrow the tyranny of language, but are the endlessly-multiplying entities in the symbolic real of actants as well-deserving of their own representation in the Parliament of Actants—that is to say, do we consider the word ‘Zamboni’ to be an actant, as well as the device for smoothing ice during an ice hockey game which that word represents? Do the signs in metalanguages, of the sort that arise in postmodernist discourse, count as actants? If so, might we think of Latour's metatheoretic enterprise as yet another postmodernist venture? Is “Thomas the Tank Engine”, beloved of children throughout the English-speaking world, an actant? In Latour's ontology, is there a latent hylomorphism? If this is so, as seems to be the case (with ‘life’ taking the place of ‘soul’ in an Aristotelian schema), how would Latour deal with Ackrill's questions regarding the nature of matter?²⁴

Latour, in this instance, is one step ahead of his possible critic. As we saw in his response to “Anti-Latour”, his response to critiques is to argue that criticism of his metaphysics are invalid because they do not follow the ‘flat’ ontology he has proposed; as Delachambre and Marquis suggest, Latour has essentially argued that all critiques fail in this crucial manner.²⁵

As Bloor suggests in “Anti-Latour,” the upshot of Latour's understanding of social and physical processes make Pasteur and his microbes into the same sort of thing, ontically speaking—in the Leibnizian, sense, they are monads, without external referents. As such, to use Bloor's succinct phrasing, “it remains wholly unclear how to connect this metaphysical talk to historical and everyday reality.”²⁶ But Latour himself cannot, as Bloor says, get away from talk of an existing society which acts upon an existing nature; in attempting to resolve this quandary, as Seguin astutely observed, Latour has moved beyond his past concerns with

²³ Delachambre, Jean-Pierre, and Nicholas Marquis. 2013. “Modes of Existence Explained to the Moderns, or Bruno Latour's Plural World.” *Social Anthropology* 21 (4): 564-575.

²⁴ Ackrill, John L. 1972/73. “Aristotle's Definition of Psyche”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 73, 119–33.

²⁵ Delachambre and Marquis, “Modes of Existence”, 66.

²⁶ Bloor, “Anti-Latour”, 97.

the formation of scientific knowledge toward a broader ontological approach to action and agency; Latour's initial interest in the ontological work of knowledge production in science has now developed into a full metaphysical program more like that of Whitehead.

In this, Latour's most recent work, Latour displays his remarkable ability to capture the sentiment of a moment. All of us, locked in our flats for a year, then re-emerging tentatively to a new realm of social distancing and masking and vaccine requirements, find ourselves estranged from ourselves. Friendly and familiar pubs are shuttered, and airline travel has changed from a normal annoyance into an unmitigated nightmare. Throughout there is a sense of incredulity; how could this happen in a world where science has eradicated scourges like smallpox and polio? The sense that there was some kind of conspiracy, something we weren't being told, was overwhelming.

Latour, as public intellectual, has the answer. Gaia is conspiring against us; our own planet, the womb that bore us, has decided we are toxic and has devised COVID as our 'cure.' And there can be no doubt, reading Latour, of how toxic some humans can be; Elon Musk, willing to spend a vast fortune on a vanity project to colonize Mars, a planet in which the best possible case will be that the planet is inhospitable to life; and Ayn Rand, a woman whose turgid fiction depicted 'captains of industry' who retreated to some imagined Shangri-La in a fit of pique when they weren't appreciated enough by the workers who slaved to make them rich, and whose vapid imaginings inspired such mental giants as Ted Cruz.

As Latour suggests, every thought we have turns to COVID; every decision we make involves some consideration of the climate. But this awareness holds only for those of us who know, like Gregor Samsa, that we have been transformed into some sort of novel life form. And that life form seems monstrous to those who haven't changed; to those for whom today should be just like three years ago, we seem like giant bugs, for whom the best option is (like Gregor) to be thrown into the trash. Latour expends a good deal of effort on emphasizing the ecological crisis we face; and his depiction of the defamiliarizing aspects of the COVID lockdowns and their emphasis on the fragility of life are evocative and memorable. As a public intellectual, we see Latour at his best.

Some Questions

As is so often the case, however, the devil is in the details. Latour, in his larger "AIME" project, is engaged in a large-scale ontological project, a project at once difficult to nail down and one that is self-immunized from criticism. But the details of what seems to be a marriage of a relational ontology with an ecological program in the political realm are not fully clear.²⁷ How are problems like infinite regress to be dealt with? Are internal relations reified?²⁸ Is Latour's "Gaia" like Plantinga's God in that, as Man suggest, when one speaks of such an entity, when one ascribes a quality to it, one is saying that that entity is an instance of that

²⁷ van Inwagen, Peter. 2011. "Relational versus Constituent Ontologies." *Philosophical Perspectives* 25 (1): 389-405.

²⁸ Hakkarainen, Jani and Markku Keinänen, 2016. "Bradley's Reductio of Relations and Formal Ontological Relations." In *De Natura Rerum - Scripta in Honorem Professoris Olli Koistinen Sexagesimum Annum Complentis* edited by Hemmo Laiho and Arto Repo, 246-261. Turku: University of Turku.

property?²⁹ Can we apply the medieval notion of divine simplicity to Gaia—that nature is the source of all substances other than itself, and that Latour sees Gaia, at least in this sense, as simple?³⁰ Might our best model for understanding Latour be, as Sherman suggests, the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of Saint Victor?³¹

Perhaps not. As Bloor's effort to situate Latour and Latour's response, suggest, understanding Latour's program is going to be a difficult matter. In his response to Bloor, for example, Latour said that actants "are not in nature, nor in society (nor in any language)."³² At that point, one might ask: Where, then, are they?

Are we still dealing with the 'nature' of *Science in Action*, where Latour says there is no difference between Nature and the Representation of Nature? As Amsterdamska remarked, if Nature is the consequence of the settlement of arguments,³³ how then can we argue for the homeostatic properties of nature with regard to the biome of the Gaia hypothesis, as Latour seems to do in *After Lockdown*? Latour seems to follow T.H. Green in his critique of the empiricist tradition in his argument that relations produced by mind, and hence 'unreal'; and thus even the simplest notions only have meaning by dint of their relations with other relations—which are also products of the mind. Green posited a single (and eternal) consciousness who action in creation such relations grounds reality;³⁴ does Latour likewise mean for us to take Gaia somehow as this base for the existence of actants?

These questions are, as far as I can tell, not answered in *After Lockdown*. What Latour does do in this book—with panache, with elegance—is to present an evocative metaphor to describe the malaise of our particular moment in time. As a public intellectual, he is eloquent and thought-provoking. But perhaps it is a tribute to his importance to the world of Science and Technology Studies that those of us in the field would like him to answer some of the questions about his research program that have been outstanding for a while. Breaking new ground is important; being misunderstood is a part of the landscape for the innovator. But when the same questions arise, and the response of the innovator is to object that they have been misunderstood rather than to offer explanatory models that scholars can debate, the question that will inevitably arise is an old and unpleasant one, one that arises on occasion for emperors who choose to present themselves in new clothes. Are they, in fact, clothed at all?

²⁹ Mann, William. 1982. "Divine Simplicity." *Religious Studies* 18 (4): 451-471.

³⁰ Leftow, Brian. 1990. "Is God an Abstract Object?." *Noûs* 24: 581-598.

³¹ Sherman, Jacob Holsinger. 2020. "Reading the Book of Nature after Nature." *Religions* 11 (4): 205-217.

³² Latour, Bruno. 1999. "For David Bloor ... and Beyond: A Reply to David Bloor's 'Anti-Latour.'" *Studies in the History of Philosophy of Science* 30 (1): 113-129.

³³ Amsterdamska, Olga. 1990. "Book Review: Surely You Are Joking, Monsieur Latour! *Science in Action*, by Bruno Latour." *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 15 (4): 495-504.

³⁴ Dimova-Cookson, Maria and William J. Mander, eds. 2006. *TH Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy*. Oxford University Press on Demand.