

ENGENDERING OR REPRODUCING POLITICS?
THE CURIOUS ABSENCE OF GENDER
IN LATOUR'S CLIMATIC REGIME

Bruno LATOUR, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*
(Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018)

The Sociology Department in which I work is organized by clusters, with colleagues in politics and human rights addressing themes related to populism and authoritarianism; inequalities addressing themes related to the global concentration of wealth by an increasingly small number of elites; and economy, risk and technology addressing climate change and the Anthropocene. These issues are separated from one another, largely to create a narrative for our research assessments but also to create clarity in our teaching for students. It is a strategic simplification, but one that obviously also shapes the way we think. We separate out politics, economics and science; as a result climate change and the Anthropocene are not necessarily seen as political issues proper.

Bruno Latour's most recent book to be translated into English takes on the separation of these three phenomena that arguably mark the current historical moment. He argues that neoliberalism, inequality and climate change are symptomatic of the same historical situation: that "the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as 'the elites') had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else" [1]. The material limits of the planet have bumped up against the economic dream of continual growth and this is shaping how the planet, economics and politics are being undertaken today. The planet is no longer understood as large enough or stable enough for progress and development to continue apace. While the very rich are accumulating wealth in an attempt to escape planetary conditions, an increasing number of people are finding themselves landless, propelling both migration and populism in all parts of the world including the UK and Europe as well its former colonies. According to Latour, a lack of land links refugees seeking to find their way into places like Britain with the "left behinds" who voted for Brexit to keep these refugees out.

Latour argues that we should therefore understand climate change and its denial as *the* primary lens through which we understand

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politics and economics today. It is an argument to which I am sympathetic, being in the economy, risk and technology cluster as a sociologist who does research and teaching on the Anthropocene. But I suspect it will be less than helpful for my colleagues in political sociology, who are trying to understand things such as why people in Wisconsin voted for Trump. Like Latour, my colleagues resist simple and disparaging explanations for this voting phenomenon. But they are more likely to focus on the organizational changes that have occurred in the Midwest with the decimation of trade unions, resulting in the Democrats having fewer trusted institutional places “to land” if you like¹. The retreat of elites from a common planet due to crass selfishness [19]—while a partial truth, in the way that class warfare as an explanation generally is—is not likely to be a helpful generalization for political sociologists or sociologists of class. This is despite a shared belief—across political sociology and STS—that one cannot explain Trump voters (or Brexit voters for that matter) through their intellectual deficits; both agree we need to focus on a “deficit in shared practices” instead [25]. This is the problem with bringing three processes together by centring on one; Latour potentially reproduces rather than dismantles academic hierarchies in the process of trying to make climate change, as opposed to institutions, the obligatory passage point for understanding global politics today.

Throughout much of the book, Latour focuses on mapping our current political situation from the vantage of climate change. The global and the local represent the foundational polarity here, where both were previously anchored to “the frontier of modernization” [27] as a shared vector. According to Latour, what we are seeing now is an ex-modernization front cutting across this polarity, resulting in what he refers to as globalization minus and local minus. As an example, global minus would refer to the politics of those who have been the most vociferous supporters of globalization (e.g., the Tories in the UK through Thatcher and the Republicans in the US through Regan) *and* who are fleeing from globalization through national protectionism in the form of Trump and Brexit. Globalization minus captures the “curious duality” of figures like Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has become rich through global investments all the while extoling British nationalism². And local minus refers to the nationalistic sentiments across

¹ M. McQuarrie, 2017, “The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 68: S120-S152.

² J. Meek, 2019, “The Two Jacobs: James Meek on Post-Brexit Britain”, *London Review of Books*, 41: 13-16, page 13.

the left and the right that events like Brexit and politicians like Farage have been able to capitalize upon in order to create unexpected political alliances. According to Latour, the reason for this curious duality is that “the elites” have rejected a common world and are articulating an “out of this world” politics rooted in escape from materiality. In this context, Latour contends that—if the local and the global criss-crosses with the terrestrial to create an out-of-the-world politics that needs to deny the agency of the planet and hence climate change—the response is to bring together all the terrestrials to resist this out-of-the-world selfishness.

Latour is thus advocating for a politics of the terrestrial, one that is rooted in humans that are part of a reacting world, understands the material conditions of production as always also geological concerns, and understands science as situated and constitutive. In articulating this terrestrial politics and seeking to bring a new coalition about to resist out-of-the-world elites, he summarizes this as a shift in struggles, “from an analysis focused on a *system of production* to an analysis focused on a *system of engendering*” [82]. For Latour “systems of engendering” are meant to analyse those systems that cultivate attachments, that value dependency and that create obligations.

Engendering is an interesting choice of word for Latour to use in order to articulate, in words, this shift and, in practice, a political response. Engendering seems to emerge from nowhere in the book, and so a little research is required here. *Engender* stems from the Latin root, *generation*. We know from the history of science that ideas about generation were supplanted by ideas about reproduction³, which was linked to the rise of hereditary thinking⁴. *Reproduction* would to my mind be a far better word to express the shifts from systems of production, indeed it is an argument that Sarah Franklin⁵ has already made quite persuasively. Latour’s *engendering* thus appears as a new word, a new analytic lens and a new source of political collaboration, but it seems to this reader to come at the expense of rendering an entire body of feminist scholarship invisible and marginal in the process.

³ N. Hopwood, R. Fleming and L. Kassell, 2018, *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

⁴ S. E. Muller-Wille and H.-J. Rheinberger, 2012, *A Cultural History of Heredity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press); H. Ritvo, 1995, “Possessing mother nature: Genetic capital in eighteenth-century Britain”,

in J. Brewer and S. Staves, ed., *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London, Routledge: 413-426).

⁵ S. Franklin, 2007, *Dolly Mixtures: The Remaking of Genealogy* (Durham NC, Duke University Press); S. Franklin, 2013, *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship* (Durham NC, Duke University Press).

Latour's decision not to use *reproduction*—and all the allies gained through that term—may be because he understands the sociology of reproduction solely through the work of Pierre Bourdieu [61-62]. This is curious, however, as it would ignore feminist scholarship in the sociology and anthropology of reproduction. While a range of different analytic approaches are used in this field, probably the most well-known is kinship studies through the work of Marilyn Strathern in particular. Kinship studies explore the different ways in which the social and the biological or nature and culture are brought together, connected to be sure but never collapsing into one another. It is *how* relations are made that matters here.

Latour's decision not to use reproduction through kinship studies is possibly related to his critiques of nature: as vague [40], as uninspiring [8] and as too ideological [65]. Of course decades of feminist scholars, ranging from neo-Marxists to post-structuralists, have also critiqued the ways in which science has made nature into an "inert", "passive" and "determining" entity or an "intimate" and "subjective" experience [65] but these scholars have also shown how this nature was co-constituted with the feminine. This feminine nature is one that Latour wants to reject: "We need to be able to count on *the full power of the sciences*, but *without the ideology of 'nature'* that has been attached to that power. We have to be materialist and rational, but we have to shift these qualities onto the right grounds" [65]. But what precisely are the "right grounds"? For Latour, the right grounds seem to be the engendered terrestrial who appears to me rather masculine—unencumbered by the feminine dirt of nature but attached to the soil of the land. Systems of engendering, as defined by Latour, seem too optimistic an attempt to "escape" from gender.

It is worth noting that in 2017 Laura Briggs also published a book concerned with our current political situation as embodied by Trump, arguing that all politics—at least in the United States—are reproductive politics. Briggs does not reference climate change. Latour does not reference reproduction. And yet the two are so entangled, so attached—as Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway⁶ have made so clear. For a book that is about sharing and about coalition building, Latour's detachment from these areas of scholarship is at best confusing.

Ultimately, Latour challenges all of us to consider how we might land in, rather than escape from, the places we inhabit: "Each of us

⁶ A. E. Clarke and D. J. Haraway, 2018, *Generations* (Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press).
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thus faces the following question: do we continue to nourish dreams of escaping, or do we start seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit?" [5]. It is a curious question to me, as I have always felt quite landed in a body that is emplaced and attached. I don't want to become terrestrial; I have always been natureculture⁷.

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⁷ J. Latimer and M. Miele, 2013, "Naturecultures? Science, affect and the non-human," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30: 5-31.