

DECONSTRUCTING THE GLOBE

Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime

By Bruno Latour (Polity Press, 2017)

Reviewed by Herman Greene

Bruno Latour was trained first as a philosopher and then as an anthropologist. He came to prominence for his work in “science studies,” which is a field that studies how scientists do their work. He came to fame in 1979 with the publication of his book *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, which argued that scientific “facts” are constructed by communities of scientists and there is no clear way to disentangle its social and technical aspects. Later he focused on an anthropology of the moderns, the modes of thoughts and action since the scientific revolution of the 17th century. An aspect of his study has always been the social construction of the concept of “nature.” His inquiry became more acute as the reality of the Anthropocene became ever more real. Then his inquiry became how have modern modes of thought and action brought about the Anthropocene, and how are they affecting our response to the Anthropocene.

Climate change is the most prominent feature of the Anthropocene. So, Latour uses the term “New Climactic Regime” to summarize our “present situation, in which the physical framework that the Moderns had taken for granted, the ground on which their history has been played out, has become unstable” (p. 3). The astonishing new reality is that Earth now seems to be responding to our actions. In the old regime nature was the passive backdrop to human history. We could bring nature under control without affecting the functioning of Earth as a system. Now the transcendent scientific powers of modernity are falling back down to Earth. A new vocabulary is being invented with such terms as “the great acceleration,” “planetary limits,” “geohistory,” “tipping points,” “critical zones,” and many others. We are now facing the “intrusion of Gaia” (p. 5).

In such a situation one would think ecology would unite all of us, humans and other-than-humans alike. But in any number of ways “ecology is driving us crazy.” We of Earth have crossed a series of thresholds. Some react with calm stoicism, the sleepwalkers. Some call for “precaution.” Some nonchalantly take an interest in “future generations.” Some are sure scientific data is being manipulated by “dark forces,” by those who wish to bring “socialism” to America. They insist we must not believe the “catastrophists.” Some entrust the salvation of Earth to God. Still others want to gain total control of nature through “geo-engineering.” Some artists, naturalists, hermits, gardeners gain equanimity in near isolation. Ecology is not bringing us together, it is driving us crazy.

Latour undertakes the difficult task, which only a few will appreciate, of deconstructing how we moderns think of nature and culture and of the intrusion of Gaia. To give an example, he deconstructs the globe. On the one hand, it is what humans in the mythology of Atlas tirelessly bear and somehow have the ability to do so. On the other, it is like a table globe, something we can hold in our hands and is subject to our control. In the latter sense, the globe implies that total and complete knowledge is possible, when in truth, Latour asserts, no one can “think

globally” (p. 130). “The figure of the Globe authorizes a premature leap to a higher level *by confusing the figures of connection with that of totality*” (p. 130). The globe gives us a “view from nowhere.” We can see this, can’t we, when we observe the activities of global corporations? But Latour says this view from nowhere also applies to many other modes of modern thought that contemplate the universal, including universal solutions.

The globe would be better understood as a vast 25,000 mile expanse of people, plants, animals, and geological, atmospheric and hydrological realities of great diversity interacting with each other. Latour says the globe has to be composed by becoming sensitive to these interactions at billions of locations, just as we have come to understand the weather (composed the weather) by monitoring at countless locations. The self-regulation of “Gaia” as developed by James Lovelock, Latour observes, has been misunderstood as some transcendent organizing mechanism, when in truth it is multiple actors connected through loops engaged in reciprocal co-evolution. The penchant for describing other transcendent organizing mechanisms extends to terms such as “society as a whole,” the “social context,” “culture,” “globalization,” “capitalism,” “nature,” and “Earth” “Each time, we are presupposing the existence of a superorganism” (p. 135). What is needed now, Latour says, is “the relocalization of the Globe, [a] move from the Globe to the quasi-feedback loops that tirelessly design it in a way that is broader and denser each time” (p. 136).

The Anthropocene is not a reconciliation of humans and nature, rather, according to Latour, it is that everywhere in what we used to call nature, we find the anthropos. This is understood, but then a leap is made that there is some anthropos that acts collectively, is a moral agent, and is morally culpable. Here the anthropos becomes the human species, when in truth there is no unitary anthropos capable of acting or of bearing this guilt.

Further, the Anthropocene is not something we get over and adjust to. It is not a crisis that will pass. It is a permanent condition, there is no hope of things being as they were before. We must face Gaia.

In this book, following Gaia, Latour brings us down to Earth. In a former work he said the new name for the human is “Earthbound” and this theme is continued here. He writes on difficult subjects—if now history is now both geological and human what is the concept of “agency”? How do we understand the two principal characters, the “Anthropocene” and “Gaia”? How do we “define the peoples who are struggling to occupy the Earth and the epoch they find themselves in”? And finally, how do we understand “the geopolitical situation of the territories involved in the struggle”?

It is not an easy book to read. Close attention is required to both the text and footnotes. Novel insights emerge over many pages of reading. For those who are willing to undertake the challenge of this work, they will be rewarded and grounded.