



Book Review: Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime

Jaqueline Godoy*

Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark

Keywords: anthropocene, globalization, politics, crisis, climate

A Book Review on

Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime

Bruno Latour (Paris: Polity), 2018, 140 pages, Paperback ISBN:978-1509530571

“Learning new ways to inhabit the Earth is our biggest challenge.” –Bruno Latour

The “Anthropocene narrative” includes prominent authors like Bruno Latour and Arne Næss who are concerned about the human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change. Their works theorize explanations and ways to address the geological epoch in which we are living. In particular, Bruno Latour’s previous book, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime* coined the term “New Climate Regime” to describe the current era where our relationship with the Earth is the determinant for our future (Latour, 2017). Following from it, Latour’s new book *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, calls for a re-thinking of the climate crisis beyond the dichotomies of the “local” and the “global,” urging for a synergistic co-existence with nature. Crucially, the book treats nature as an actor who enjoys its own agency. It is thus able to act and react to society, rather than being the mere background setting on which social development happens. It is from this nature-as-an-actor perspective that Latour examines the world’s geopolitical challenges.

Despite the difficulties that readers might encounter with Latour’s metaphorical style of writing, the book is a valuable reading due to the strong conceptual and philosophical arguments Latour makes on the climate crisis. The most critical reflections of the book focus on the ecological questions of the identification of a new geopolitical organization, the creation of the Terrestrial concept to represent a *New World*, and the need to rewrite a new end to the climate crisis taking into account that we are not the only actors inhabiting the Earth, but are also dependent on the survival of all living species inhabiting it. By reflecting on the state of ecology, Latour proposes explanations for the inequalities, nationalism, and migration features of the present. He investigates the origin of the underlying conflicts, their causes and potential solutions, as well as how they relate to the climate crisis.

More specifically, *Down to Earth* is motivated by the US President Trump’s election as the culmination of a series of historical events which Latour argues are interrelated and the facets of the same phenomenon: the climate crisis. Alongside Trumpism, he focuses on the migration crisis, Brexit, as well as on a fourth event which he argues occurred simultaneously to the signature of the Paris Agreement: the subtle realization by the signatory delegations that the agreement was incompatible with the development plans of the countries they represented. Latour engages in the enterprise of formulating the cause of this climate crisis, as a starting point, he postulates figuratively that until the 80’s society could be situated in a continuum between two attractors. One which drives society toward the local, by which he means attachment to a dwelling place, to traditions and the soil, to a territory one defends. The second attractor is toward the global, in the sense of modernization and the weakening of international borders. Because globalization has

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Nicole Lisa Klenk,
University of Toronto, Canada

Reviewed by:

Fabiana Barbi,
Campinas State University, Brazil

*Correspondence:

Jaqueline Godoy
jdgo@hum.aau.dk

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Climate Risk Management,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Climate

Received: 24 March 2020

Accepted: 14 September 2020

Published: 26 October 2020

Citation:

Godoy J (2020) Book Review: Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime. *Front. Clim.* 2:524365. doi: 10.3389/fclim.2020.524365

been often associated with progress and moving forward, while attachment to a dwelling place is conventionally associated with an outdated attitude, these attractors seem to define a time vector from the local to the global. Latour exemplifies how the left and right political positions fluctuate along this vector at convenience, often engaging in contradictions, at some times advocating toward traditions and customs and at other toward globalization and modernity. Though always against each other. Using concise and persuasive language to discuss these attractors Latour formulates how due to their inconsistencies, the idealistic ideas of globalization and localization have changed, giving rise to their splitting into positive and negative dichotomies. In the case of globalization, as we have been experiencing it for the last 50 years, he concludes that globalization has, two opposing elements: globalization plus and globalization minus. Indicating that it is conventional to think that by going from a local to a global perspective, multiple viewpoints are taken into account, allowing the emergence of a global perspective (Globalization plus). However, he argues that paradoxically today's globalization is, in practice, precisely the opposite: adopting a single vision that represents a small number of interests, hence corresponding to a particular local perspective. In other words, the more one is globalized, the more one has the impression of adopting limited views and interests (Globalization minus). These realizations lead Latour to conclude the concepts of globalization and localization need to be redefined, but also the concepts of society, nature, and even of what it means to be human. Regarding nature, for instance, using an outdated definition of nature, the advocates of modernization, moved by the system of production, are occupying the Earth as if we were the unique species on it. Latour explains how this unsustainable practices of contemporary society, which disregard nature's agency, triggered an era of deprivation of shareable living space and a decrease of inhabitable land.

The inconsistency of these local and global political attractors added to the inability to reconcile the spectrum they define with both nature and finiteness of resources, make it impossible to continue in either direction. This caused the emergence of an orthogonal or alternative axis spanning two other extrema. Latour names the first alternative attractor *out-of-this-world*. It emerged in the 1980s, and it is characterized by the attitude of denying the crisis altogether, hence, fleeing out of this world. Latour proposes that people oriented toward such an attractor are driven by the awareness that Earth is "*reaching its limits*" and the recognition that the climate crisis is a reaction of nature (as an agent) to human activities, in particular to globalization. It may be expected that by understanding how the ideas of modernization and globalization are not compatible with the resources available in nature, and that we have become indebted to the Earth as our shared living space, we would try to pay restitution for the resources taken from it. Nevertheless, the "*obscurantist elites*" as Latour calls them, decided to turn away from this idea of restituting the land for the abuses done through centuries, instead, dismantling the idea of a planet shared by all and giving rise to the phenomenon of climate change denial, resulting in a growth of nationalism, a wave of populism and the migration crisis. Latour concludes that the *out-of-this-world*

attractor is precisely the underlying cause of four historical events above.

After his reflective characterization of the state of geopolitics, Latour seeks a possible way forward for society and nature as a single system. It is clear from his discourse, that to solve the climate crisis, overcome the geopolitical challenges and achieve a shared world, it is necessary to position oneself beyond the dichotomies of the local-global spectrum, the left and right. Society requires a redefining vector toward a new attractor. He realizes the solution should be in the same alternative spectrum were the obscurantist elites reside but in the exact opposite direction. His challenge turns into deciphering the features of such an attractor. He first discusses the differences between perceiving a world as composed of materialities or as composed of agents. To him, the agency attributed to humanity differs if we live in a system of production or in a system of engendering. In the former, as nature is seen as a resource, a source of economic growth, humans play the role of workers. In the second, with nature-as-actor, where materials and non-material elements are actors connecting as a whole, humans understand that all our practices have influence and impact. Notably, the ones that see nature as raw material fail to realize that there is non-human life on Earth capable of suffering. Despite the seemingly move toward political ecology, Latour's analysis argues that the actions of "political ecology" or the climate emergency manifestations have failed. The reason for this, he explains, is two-fold: these were oriented toward the wrong object, or a common orientation did not exist. Yet, changing our perspectives (or in this case the object we are orienting toward) will consequently change our actions, the move has to be then toward nature but moving away from both, strictly local, strictly global, and out-of-this-world. To ensure that we and nature are entitled to inhabit a dwelling place on Earth, Latour reflects on the need for alternative descriptions of what is a dwelling place, in the same lines of localization plus.

Similarly, by rethinking and building a new understanding of the concept of *nature*, accepting it as an agent, we can rebuild geopolitics and drive collective action against the climate crisis. Latour's proposed solution is to follow a common orientation, as it was supposed to be the case with globalization plus, but this time to follow the alternative attractor which is in the exact opposite direction to out-of-this-world, toward what he names "the Terrestrial" (translated from the French Terroir, meaning the Earth we live on). To Latour, the *Terrestrial* is the only possible way forward and is characterized by a society in which nature plays its central role. The ultimate goal of the essay appears to be advocating for the Terrestrial.

Engaging with this book, the reader will be exposed to an alternative interpretation of the current era and can expect a deep epistemological reflection on this historical moment, where the climate crisis confirms the sense of instability. Given the urgent shift we need to fight the climate emergency, the full potential of the essay will, however, only be realized if the reader reflects on Latour's arguments and such a process motivates action. It will not come as a surprise that those following the out-of-this-world attractor will disagree with Latour's strong ideas, or at least feel uncomfortable with these. Paradoxically, the reception of Latour's arguments by ecologists

is neither apparent as the author explicitly points out the weaknesses of the ecological movement. For instance, when reflecting upon the conditions of ecology in the modern world, Latour claims that ecological movements, by their mobilization of questions about “nature,” gave rise to the idea of the existence of yet another dichotomy: to either modernize or to ecologize. To modernize is to favor economics or the defense of human rights, in contrast, to ecologize is to advocate for the preservation of an ecology of pure nature, e.g., often resulting in *green militarism*. For Latour, these ideals are a source of controversies and are embraced by both the political left, as well as the right. His criticism could nevertheless be leveraged for fruitful debates.

Although the specificities of the way forward are not evident, it becomes clear throughout the manuscript that fundamentally different political regulations are needed to reach zero CO₂ emission until 2050, as re-agreed in the Conference of the Parties (COP25).

REFERENCES

Latour, B. (2017). *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. John Wiley & Sons.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

FUNDING

This work was supported by ENSYSTRRA (this project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 765515).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to Kathrin Otrell-Cass, Kristian Høyer Toft, and Anne Worrall for critical suggestion and proof-reading of the manuscript.

Copyright © 2020 Godoy. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.