

RESEARCH

Gaia and Political Sociology: On the Legacy of Bruno Latour (1947-2022)

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“Politics is not a science [...]. It is an art, or rather it is arts, what is rightly called the art of politics. The art through which one seeks to compose, little by little, a common world.”

(Latour 2013b:29, own translation)

If one had to discern a center of gravity in Bruno Latour’s voluminous and multi-layered work, one could find it in the question of the political. At first glance, this may seem unexpected. After all, it is only with his decidedly political texts since the turn of the millennium that many have become aware of the political dimension of his work. Are we not rather dealing here with the familiar case of a sociologist or philosopher who finally turns to questions of justice, ethics, or politics in his late work? And would this not be a prime example of the lure of retrospective reinterpretation? But what is mostly true for Bourdieu, Derrida, and numerous others, does not quite apply to Latour, for we are dealing with a different case of political writing, a different case of work, and not least a different case of politics. On the contrary, however, it would be a mistake to believe that Latour’s sociology was ever developed in isolation from his engagement with politics and political theory. Rather, Latour’s most recent work leaves no doubt that there is no way around the topic of politics (anymore) in the discussion of his writings in general. Given the death of Bruno Latour on October 9, 2022, this genuinely political dimension of his work will be re-examined in the following. In doing so, I would like to address some strands of Latour’s political sociology while emphasizing that he is to be understood as a political sociologist through and through—and not just in passing.

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1. The Politics of Society

In order to clarify what political sociology can mean in Latour's sense, it is first important to ask where and in what form political issues appear in his work. It is obvious that recent writings, such as *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Latour 2017a), *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Latour 2018), or *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (Latour and Schultz 2022), completed shortly before his death, are permeated by or virtually converge in the question of the political. But to what extent is this also true of his earlier works on the sciences and in sociology? In retrospect, it is remarkable how little the political dimension of his work, but also of actor-network theory in general, was present for a long time in the broader debates on Latour and the ANT. Despite a flourishing discussion within Science and Technology Studies, yielding numerous seminal works (see, e.g., Mol 1999; Gomart and Hajer 2003; Marres 2007; de Vries 2007; Law and Singleton 2013), in general sociology as well as in political sociology, this dimension was predominantly left out. Yet actor-network theory, as a project to redirect sociology toward a study of associations, to overcome the discipline's one-sided constructivism, and to take into account the role of nonhuman actors, has always been concerned with politics. This applies both to the study of the natural sciences and to the attempt to renew sociology.

With respect to the sciences, Latour's interest in their political dimension proved to be one of the greatest sources of misunderstanding toward his work. By viewing the a priori separation of science and politics as an epistemological obstacle standing in the way of an analysis of scientific truth production, he found himself to be one of the favorite straw men of furious science warriors (Latour 2000:299). Even a superficial glance, however, shows how much their accusations miss their intended target, since his aim was precisely to explore the actual process of scientific knowledge production—and, moreover, to do so empirically. In addition, his approach downright emphasizes the unique inner logic of science and thus by no means amounts to an indiscriminate conflation of science and politics: "Science is not politics. It is politics by other means. But people object that science does not reduce to power." Precisely. It does not reduce to power. It offers *other means*." (Latour 1988:229 emphasis in original) Even if in the earlier works such statements may still provide grounds for ambiguity, since the publication of *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013a) there should be considerably less doubt as to the prominence of this argument. For the point here is not to level the differences of politics, science, law, etc., but to be able to understand them as different regimes of truth and, building on this, to inquire about their entanglements.

With respect to the notion of society, the argument is quite similar. From the very inception of actor-network theory, it is apparent that Latour wants to dissolve sociology's concept of society in two directions: first, through a notion of collectivity that understands contestation regarding the composition, unity, and limits of society itself as a political practice of assembling and composing (Gertenbach and Laux 2018; Latour 2010b); and second, through the study of associations, which amounts to understanding power as a key element in the stabilization and hierarchization of relations (Latour 1986). Both of these aspects have been important in the discussion of Latour's work so far—but they have rarely been treated as political questions (Gertenbach, Opitz, and Tellmann 2016). This shortcoming is remarkable for another reason as well. After all, Latour's recourse to the concept of the collective reintroduces a political trope into the discipline from which sociology believed it could detach itself with the concept of society or the social. The concept of the collective breaks with their premises and, conversely, makes it clear that sociology is not able to detach itself so easily from politics. In fact, its main category has always been and remains a political one.

Even in one of the inaugural texts of the actor-network theory, the essay *Unscrewing the big Leviathan* (Callon and Latour 1981), this argument can be found. There, together with Michel Callon, Latour dismantles this sociological phantasm of society as an already assembled entity that can be taken as the mere object of sociological description. Finally, this culminates in objecting to an ostensive understanding of sociological categories and advocating a performative understanding of power and knowledge (Latour 1986, 2005:37). In this sense, even the most disengaged and neutral sociological description of society still has a stake in the assembly and creation of collectives. The performativity argument erodes the neat separation of sociology and politics, of sociological description and political articulation—and turns sociology as such into political sociology (in a broad sense). According to Latour, we must abandon the purity and totalization of the concept of society and find ways to engage with the political dimension of the practice of assembling the collective. This dissolution of boundaries, of course, affects political sociology above all where it sees itself as a sociological approach concerned with politics as a discrete and distinct social sphere; but it is also of central importance to Latour himself, for it is one of the main reasons why he has always been attracted to interdisciplinary work and has time and again refrained from seeing himself as a (mere) sociologist.

All these questions and elements reveal certain thematic and programmatic continuities. They traverse Latour's work and can already be found in the foundational writings of actor-network theory. However, they do not only manifest themselves in the critique of the concept of society. It is precisely here that the more recent

writings reveal this to be only one aspect in a more radical problematization of the “modernist parenthesis” (Latour 2004:130, 2010a). In addition to the concept of society, there is—widely visible at least since *Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004)—also its counterpart: the concept of nature. For politics, so the essence of Latour’s political sociology, concerns not only the institution of the social, but also includes what we are accustomed to designate with the problematic concept of nature.

2. The Politics of Nature

In Latour’s writings, the engagement with the concept of nature is somewhat mirroring the critique of the concept of society (Gertenbach 2015). In both cases, the focus is on the practices of purification that distinguish between values and facts, construction and reality, or words and worlds. And in both cases he employs a political sociology that is attuned to mediations, entanglements, and hybridizations. In numerous writings and through a wide variety of examples and case studies, he demonstrates that nature and culture as well as science and politics cannot be separated from one another in the way postulated by the modern constitution (Latour 1993). Finally, this approach is increasingly vindicated in the face of current developments and crises that reinforce the urgency of a politics of nature and things—from the climate crisis and the undeniable ecological consequences of human activity to the numerous creations of technoscience; from the containment of zoonotic viruses to security infrastructures; and from the effects of artificial intelligence to the fatal energy policy dependencies of the present, and so on.

Thanks to the more explicit engagement with political questions since the late 1990s, Latour has at least been more widely perceived and discussed as a political theorist—albeit not always with a particularly favorable outcome. In general sociology, discussions of his political writings (see, e.g., Lindemann 2011; Noys 2010; Werber 2016 and, reflecting on this, Laux 2011) are to this day largely dominated by two aspects: first, the indignation about the proposition of an agency of things which ultimately leads to an expansion of the political, with accusations already sufficiently familiar from debates on actor-network theory (often without delving deeper into what is actually meant by this). And secondly, the astonishment about the invocation of Gaia as an alternative to the concept of nature—due to all the mystical connotations and the mainly esoteric contexts in which this figure is referred to. Thus, the centrality of the Gaia reference and the omnipresence of ecological issues in Latour’s recent writings have led many to perceive this as a departure from his earlier work—albeit ecological issues have had a prominent place in his writings for some time (Latour 1998). A closer look, though, reveals rather far-reaching continuities here as well. What changes, however, is the vigor with which these questions now arise in

Latour's work. Yet this should not be taken as a sign of a major shift in his thinking, but rather a reflection of the greater urgency of the task to measure the political and epistemic challenges posed by the ever-worsening climate crisis. "The uniqueness of Gaia opens a new definition of a polity just at the time when the situation summarized by the term Anthropocene reopens the connection between what philosophers used to call the domain of necessity—that is, nature—and the domain of freedom—namely, politics and morality." (Latour and Lenton 2019:678)

Accordingly, Latour's last writings before his death (see for example Arènes, Latour, and Gaillardet 2018; Latour 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Latour and Lenton 2019; Latour and Schultz 2022; Lenton, Dutreuil, and Latour 2020) above all reveal that his previous efforts to renew sociology and to move away from the problematic concept of nature converge in his work on Gaia. It would be rather misguided to dismiss this—irritating as it may be—invocation of Gaia or to dissociate it from what appears to be a more analytical and thus also: non-political part of his writings. On the contrary, without Gaia, the discussion of Latour remains incomplete. Hence, it is imperative to clarify what motivates this reference to Gaia and what significance it has for Latour's political sociology.

3. Connectivity without Holism – Gaia and the New Body Politic

When *We have never been modern* appeared in 1991, Latour still left open the question of how to replace the inappropriate modernist concept of nature (Latour 1993). Over time, he also articulated more and more skepticism about related concepts like Umwelt, earth, environment, and world (Latour 2017b; Latour and Lenton 2019:662). Drawing on James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, at the turn of the millennium he instead proposes for the first time to speak of Gaia in order to herald once and for all the "end of the modernist parenthesis" (Latour 2013a:176). The reason why the notion of Gaia should be able to do this is shown by Latour's specific reference to the works of Lovelock and Margulis (Latour 2016c:353ff.). He reads their writings mainly as contributing to a different conception of the earth, one that is fundamentally distinct from the classical concepts of nature, the external world, and the environment. That Lovelock's reference to Gaia as a living organism may sound highly disconcerting has, for Latour, more to do with the modern conception of nature than with the Gaia hypothesis itself. "Contrary to so many interpretations, [Lovelock's] Gaia hypothesis was not the vision of the earth as a single organism [...], but, on the contrary, as a formidable jungle of intertwined and overlapping entities, each of them creating its own environment and complicating the environment for the others." (Latour 2016b:168)

What is implied in this description is precisely what Latour is starting to be fascinated by in this figure: it is not the supposed animism or the esoteric and holistic overtones, but rather the rupture with that identitary and totalistic conception of a singular and unified nature. And furthermore, it allows him to address the specific urgency of the climate crisis, since Gaia cannot be seen as a merely passive entity—a point, which Latour emphasizes by referring to Isabell Stengers notion of the “Intrusion of Gaia” (Stengers 2015, 2017; Latour 2017a:5). Although the talk of Gaia has a rather idiosyncratic appeal, in the end the underlying idea is hardly spectacular at all. For Latour, it is primarily a term for a certain model of connectivity, with the advantage, however, that it can also be extended to the realm of nature. The formula he finds for this, following Lovelock and Margulis, could as well be found in numerous other texts by him or even be used as a motto for actor-network theory. It simply reads, “Connectivity without holism” (Latour 2017b:75; Opitz 2016).

Consequently, Latour also uses the Gaia approach to counter the environmentalist models of protecting and conserving nature and the environment with a different political ecology. For him, two key consequences of the Gaia hypothesis follow from this: first, it forces a turn to the “terrestrial.” This contributes to a reorientation of the political to the questions of the soil and of territory, since this call to become terrestrial must be understood in a proverbial sense as grounding (Latour 2016a, 2018). Latour’s pragmatist conception of politics is reflected here, as it is a matter of “finally making politics turn around topics that generate a public around them instead of trying to define politics in the absence of any issue, as a question of procedure, authority, sovereignty, right and representativity.” (Latour 2007:814f.; see further Marres 2005) And secondly, the Gaia hypothesis conflates the question of “nature” with the question of political collectivity, as Latour has just highlighted once again in some recent texts in which he takes up the concept of body politic—for instance under the rather telling title *Composing the New Body Politic from Bits and Pieces* (Latour 2020).

Without being able to expand on this here (see further Gertenbach and Laux 2018), it should be apparent where this leads based on the above-mentioned symmetrical critique of the concepts of nature and society: Latour is not solely concerned with the critique of certain models of nature that are problematized following the natural sciences. The Gaia discussions also point back to sociology. After all, the principle of “connectivity without holism” ultimately condenses once again the contribution of actor-network theory to social theory: namely, the attempt to think relationality and hybridity without the fiction of a wholeness that always already exists—or, as Latour puts it in a text on Gabriel Tarde that further elaborates on this kind of connectivism: *the whole is always smaller than its parts* (Latour et al. 2012). In the end, this all comes

together in a notion of Gaia which “should modify political concepts on both sides of the older division between nature and society.” (Latour and Lenton 2019:675)

Despite all the problematic implications that are no doubt apparent to Latour as well, it is nevertheless obvious why he has continued to adhere to the concept of Gaia and why this might even be the most important contribution of his thinking. Ultimately, it enables a demarcation from two dominant models of thought that is difficult to achieve by other means: on the one hand, from the model of the environment and the resulting notion of “entities-in-contexts”—an ontology of the social that has already been intensively criticized in actor-network theory (Callon 1991:137; Callon, Barry, and Slater 2002:292). And on the other hand, the model of a totality and universality of nature, which is sometimes echoed as well in political notions of totality such as the global or the planetary (Latour 2016c). Thus, for Latour, the Gaia hypothesis by no means leads to a departure from ANT. On the contrary, it makes it possible to raise some fundamental questions of actor-network theory once again (although in a slightly different way), and it also enables us to see even more clearly the extent to which the latter, too, has always renounced the bifurcation of nature and culture.

4. Challenging Sociology (again)

As should have become clear, the notion of a politics of nature does not amount to a clumsy phantasm of political omnipotence, surrendering even the realm of facticity and natural laws to a voluntaristic play of meaning. Rather, we can draw from Latour how inadequate the bifurcations of modernism are in the face of these issues. For it is precisely the a priori separation between culture, society, and politics on the one hand and nature and materiality on the other that is the problem here. With its limited understanding of politics (presumed to be decoupled from the realm of nature) modernism reveals itself incapable to adequately confront the problem of its own agency vis-à-vis nature; and with its limited understanding of nature, modernist politics is unable to break out of the notion of a passive and mute matter. Latour has, and this is probably not to be valued highly enough, identified with remarkable persistence which obstacles have to be overcome and which problems have to be dealt with, if one wants to face the problem of the climate crisis in a way that takes into account its existential magnitude. Thus, it is not to be expected that henceforth talking about Gaia will lose its irritation. But perhaps that is a good thing in a sociology which, for a long time, regarded the realm of nature as irrelevant. It is to be hoped, then, that Latour will continue to be a somewhat disruptive element for sociology by pointing out the task it must face if it wants to grasp the urgency of the current crises.

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