

STEVE FULLER

reviews

*Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, by Bruno Latour

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This is the book in which Bruno Latour, the leading figure in science and technology studies, turns his hand to science policy. In so doing, he reveals his membership in the somewhat touching but profoundly flawed tradition in French political thought that would cut the Gordian knot of historically entrenched oppression by establishing a new order that would have the oppressed spontaneously embody the democratic ideals they have so eagerly longed to express. Latour stands out only in that for him the league of the oppressed extends across species boundaries – and maybe even chemical boundaries (e.g. from carbon-based organisms to silicon-based computers), though the book under review stays within the realm of ‘nature’ as an ecologist might understand the term.<sup>i</sup> It seems that to be eligible for the ‘parliament of things’ that Latour would have preside over the ‘politics of nature’, one will need to be sentient, with the understanding that the realm of sentient beings is likely to expand as we learn more about how things respond to their environments and hence become able to confer political significance on those responses.<sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless, the mind boggles at exactly what deliberations in this ecologically correct assembly would look like: How would claims to knowledge and power be transacted? How would matters be decided? How would consequences be judged?

The history of constitutional thought offers an important precedent for Latour’s project. The late eighteenth century witnessed the rise of two paradigms of constitution-making, American and French, which drew opposite lessons from many of the same Enlightenment sources.<sup>iii</sup> The closed-door sessions of the Philadelphia constitutional convention of 1787 produced a document that doubted that spontaneous expressions of self-interest would serve the public interest without an elaborate system of checks and balances and separation of powers. In contrast, the open-door sessions of the Paris convention of 1789-91 produced a document that presented a vaguer, more sanguine and consensual sense of government operating in the public interest to realize ‘the rights of man’. Latour belongs to this latter tradition, whereby ‘representation’ is conceived as ‘self-representation’. And while it may play to the gallery – as it did in revolutionary France -- to maximise self-representation, there is no guarantee that such representatives will do their constituencies, let alone the entire polity, the most good. After all, the oppressed are likely to be just as short-sighted as the elites, except that they lack the experience with wielding power against resistant parties that have honed the negotiating skills of the elites. In short, rather than worry about the *resemblance* between the representatives and the represented, the political focus should be on the *accountability* of the representatives to the represented. This is the lesson the Americans early learned, which is why they have stuck to the same constitution (with periodic amendments), whereas the French have gone through a dozen in the last two centuries.

This last point bears on the fundamental flaw of Latour's project. Like his French forebears, who replaced their constitution as they replaced their collective self-understanding, Latour believes that a change in the categories salient for making sense of social life *ipso facto* requires a radically new political order. This belief constitutes a much worse example of the 'scientisation of politics' than anything dreamed up by Friedrich Hayek and his neo-liberal followers, who were obsessed with the technologically enhanced authoritarianism that the social sciences seemed to license.<sup>iv</sup> Latour appears to have succumbed to *The Temptation of Hobbes*: that 'representation' means the same thing in both scientific and political contexts. (I too have struggled with this temptation in my own work on social epistemology and, needless to say, it is always easier to identify one's own errors in others.<sup>v</sup>) To be sure, the scientific and political senses of representation do converge at one point: Both are strategic abstractions from the welter of phenomena. However, there is the 'temptation' to conclude that the *point* of abstraction in both cases is the same. It is not. Scientific representation is the reproduction of a source in some other medium, such as a trace of some event or a sample of some population, whereas political representation involves holding a medium accountable to a source. The one is about getting the origins right, the other about getting the consequences right. This helps to explain why *evidence* has an ambiguous role in politics. It is not because politicians are especially duplicitous or unrigorous but because they are more concerned with the future than the past – and evidence is always about something that has already happened, which of course may or may not be relevant to what happens later.

Francis Bacon (under whom Hobbes served as personal secretary) had tried to convert the temptation to conflate the scientific and political aims of representation into an overarching virtue by introducing the idea of 'crucial experiment', which would allow the scientific politician to generate evidence specifically designed to test competing visions of the future – what scientists call 'hypotheses' and politicians 'policies'. As it turns out, *Politics of Nature* deploys the expression 'experimental metaphysics' but Latour uses it to refer to the need to track empirically the connections between the various interest groups in the parliament of things. The word 'experimental' appears simply to alert the inquirer to remain open to the possibility of surprising interdependencies among otherwise ideologically opposed groups. Latour's intent here is clearly to facilitate the drafting of legislation that can accommodate the widest range of groups. However, there remains the question of whether groups should be so easily co-opted into a future on the basis of little more than their having shared a common past. In other words, Latour's 'experimental metaphysics' may be 'experimental' for science and technology studies investigators like himself but, with regard to the political agents under investigation, it is nothing but a scientifically cloaked appeal to the path of least political resistance, if not conservatism more generally.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the American over the French founding fathers was their ability to design a robust yet supple system of government capable of withstanding substantial, albeit unknowable, long-term changes in the constitution of the polity. The secret to their success lay in having devised better procedures, *not* for representing society's various interest groups but for discouraging those groups from becoming rigid in their conception of self-interest. The argot that has grown around American politics – including 'porkbarrel' and 'logroll' – captures the incentives politicians always have to creatively rethink their constituencies' interests without

resorting to revolution or civil war. Of course, a politician may cut one too many deals and effectively sell out his or her constituency's interests. But that is a matter of representation-as-accountability, the true business of politics, which is remedied by an electoral defeat not a redrafting of the constitution to ensure better representation of the constituency.

One sign that Latour has not thought through clearly the radical implications of his politics of nature is that he fails to make common cause with the one person who has actually – and often scarily – done the detailed work of marrying the political logic of representative democracy to a scientific understanding of those eligible for representation. I refer here to the philosopher of 'animal liberation', Peter Singer, who has recently identified himself as a member of the 'Darwinian Left'.<sup>vi</sup> Like Latour, only more concretely, Singer is concerned with extending representation to all sentient beings, most of which cannot participate in the conventional channels of political communication. Singer explicitly draws attention to two uncomfortable but incontrovertible facts: (1) Neo-Darwinism does not support a clear distinction, let alone the privileging, of humans vis-à-vis other animals. (2) The history of democratic politics has been marked by periodic innovations in the criteria for representation: e.g. the replacement of property ownership by 'citizenship' requirements. Singer argues that together these facts imply that self-declared progressives should work toward accommodating animals to the political system just as earlier progressives worked toward accommodating workers and women. 'Accommodation', however, is a euphemism, since in a world of scarcity, Singer is clear that some humans – unwanted and disabled – will have to yield their rights in his brave new polity to healthy and wanted non-humans. If nothing else, Singer is to be credited with upholding the courage of his convictions. In contrast, Latour appears satisfied with operating at a level of abstraction that generates a frisson in his readers without forcing them to face the hard political choices involved in designing a true parliament of things.

It is hard to tell whether Latour is simply naïve or disingenuous. He begins: 'If I have no authority of my own, I nevertheless benefit from a particular advantage: I am interested in political production no more and no less than in scientific production. Or, rather, I *admire* politicians *as much as I admire* scientists. Think about it: this twofold respect is not so common. My absence of authority offers precisely the guarantee that I will not use science to subjugate politics, or politics to subjugate science' (p. 6, italics in the original). Consider, as a point of reference, someone else who could have written Latour's words was Max Weber, the great sociologist who delivered two addresses toward the end of his life, entitled 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation'. Had Weber uttered Latour's words, he would have meant that science and politics are two separate but equal domains of social life that operate according to mutually countervailing norms: The scientist pursues the truth regardless of political consequences, whereas the politician pursues an objective even if it requires compromising or denying the truth. The former is principled like Galileo and the latter adaptive like Bismarck, both in the face of changing circumstances. Moreover, Weber's observations were made in a prescriptive, not descriptive, spirit: However much scientists and politicians ease into each other's turf, the fate of humanity rests on a managed conflict between those fixated on abstract ideals (i.e. scientists) and on concrete results (i.e. politicians). As one vocation colonises the domain of the other, civilisation is brought to the brink of chaos. Weber spoke in the aftermath of World

War I, in which the principal aggressor (and loser) had been backed by what was then the world's premier scientific community.

However, Latour conceptualises matters rather differently. His equal admiration of politicians and scientists is born of a belief that, at their best, they are doing much the same thing. It is important to stress that Latour is not talking about how politicians and scientists justify their respective activities, which are admittedly cast in divergent terms, but how they behave on the ground: Galileo may have felt that his experiments and observations provided the royal road to the truth, but he was happy to stretch his arguments beyond the limits of his evidence in order to score rhetorical points against opponents. Likewise, Bismarck may have been the ultimate 'power-politician' but his was a pursuit of power in the service of a united Germany that he genuinely believed had a world-historic role to play. Thus, Galileo turns out to be more adaptive and Bismarck more principled than they appear in Weber's account. Latour speaks of this as the 'hybrid' character of what passes in Francophone circles, *écologie politique*.<sup>vii</sup> His hybrid hero turns out to be Louis Pasteur, whose experiments triggered a revolution in the management of agriculture, industry and public health at once more effective and more peaceful than could be imagined, let alone executed, by even the greatest of French politicians.<sup>viii</sup> What is frightening in all this is that Latour seems to admire scientists mainly for their ability to change the world substantially without anyone ever holding them accountable, as the change is never subject to a decision by those potentially – let alone actually – affected by it. Yet, if we are doomed to choose between Peter Singer's scientifically informed political decisions and Bruno Latour's politically freighted scientific practices as alternative constitutions for the parliament of things, I take the former's brute candour over the latter's charming stealth any day.

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<sup>i</sup> For a metaphysically expansionist interpretation of the 'politics of nature' that extends the attribution of agency to artefacts, see B. Latour: *Pandora's Hope*; 1999, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> The image of the 'parliament of things' was first raised in B. Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*; 1993, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.

<sup>iii</sup> Here I draw on J. Elster: 'Constitutional Bootstrapping in Philadelphia and Paris', *Cardozo Law Review*, 1993, **14**, 549-575. See also S. Fuller: *The Governance of Science*; 2000, Milton Keynes UK, Open University Press, pp. 131-2.

<sup>iv</sup> The *locus classicus* of the fears that arise from using science as a blueprint for politics – starting from the precedent set by the French revolutionary assembly of 1789 – is F. Hayek: *The Counter-Revolution in Science*; 1952, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>v</sup> S. Fuller: *Social Epistemology*; 1988, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, pp. 36-45.

<sup>vi</sup> P. Singer: *A Darwinian Left*, 1999, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. I draw some larger implications for social science from the potential convergence of Latour's and Singer's interests in S. Fuller: *The New Sociological Imagination*; 2006, London, Sage.

<sup>vii</sup> K. Whiteside: *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology*; 2002, Cambridge MA, MIT Press. This book provides an excellent guide to Latour's French political context, which may not be apparent to Anglophone readers.

<sup>viii</sup> B. Latour: *The Pasteurization of France*; 1988, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.