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After Humanism: Politics of Nature and Parliament of Things in Bruno Latour[1]

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I. Introduction

The expressions "politics of nature" and "parliament of things" have been popularized by Bruno Latour, principally in his works *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (*We Have Never Been Modern,* 1991) and *Politiques de la nature: Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie* (*Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy,* 1999). In these last years of the twentieth century, which appears to him as a true turning-point in the history of humanity and its relations to its "environment," Latour's goal was to prolong and develop a critical reading of "modernity," understood as a great separation, a great divide, a great "division," of man and nature, and to put an end to this division, or to this divorce. In this way, the projects of "politics of nature" and "parliament of things" ought to be understood in a somewhat prophetic or apocalyptic fashion, as the planetary reconciliation of man and nature, and thus as the end of "humanism," which had installed or provoked this separation. "Politics of nature" and "parliament of things" are therefore the principal elements of this project to "pass from humanism to post-humanism" which characterizes the philosophy of Latour and which inscribes itself quite naturally into the framework of the debates and discussion of the Beyond Humanism Conference series held for some years now at the Ewha Institute for the Humanities.

Although Latour has for many years been an internationally read, recognized, and cited author, the expressions of "politics of nature" and "parliament of things" maintain their mysterious and provocative aspect. We are all, more or less, to varying degrees, favorable to the reconciliation of man and nature, but it remains very difficult, conceptually, to make sense of

1. The English translation of this text is by Jack Stetter, Assistant Professor at the University of Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis, to whom I express all of my gratitude.

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such reconciliation in a "symmetrical" way, to borrow one of Latour's most important terms.[2] It is more difficult to move beyond humanism, or to stop being a humanist, that one might believe. It is very difficult, for example, to see in nature a partner, or an interlocutor, with which we might make deals and agree to contracts on equal terms. Deep down, for most of us, humans are the only "actors" on the planetary stage, and when we speak of a "reconciliation" of man and nature,[3] we are designating a change in the behavior of *mankind alone*: more moderate, less predatory, less polluting, and so on. In any case, whatever our goodwill and intentions might be, the dominant conceptual schema remains one of a duality or division between an active humanity and a passive nature. And the more we "do for" nature, the more we "care" for her, that much more becomes manifest this separation between a humankind which acts and a nature which is acted upon—the eternal problem of "helping" or "assisting" which at the same time brings together and pulls apart the receiver and the giver.

Undoubtedly, there is a provocation on the part of Latour in his use of the expressions "politics of nature" and especially "parliament of things": things, by definition, do not "speak," so it would seem completely impossible and unreasonable to propose a "parliament of things." One can even have the impression (this has indeed happened) that Latour, with these expressions, prolongs a French style that consists of, whether in philosophy or haute couture, promoting and imposing the most unrealistic things, as long as they are chic and shocking. And it is true that Latour is often difficult to understand. However, it seems to me that one cannot sincerely doubt the seriousness of the propositions and their coherence with respect to his entire philosophy and the vision of the world he offers. I propose therefore here to make clear, as much as possible, the arguments which legitimize in Latour's eyes, the notions of "post-humanism," "politics of nature," and "parliament of things," and which lend their coherence and plausibility. The plausibility of the theories seems to me to be an especially important question, and ever the more so for the philosophies of nature or ecologies in general. In effect, man is as difficult to

2. Refer to the subtitle (of the original French edition) of the work *We Have Never Been Modern: An Essay in Symmetrical Anthropology.* This subtitle was not translated for the English version (see the Works Cited page at the end of the present article), but it is nevertheless one of the central concepts of the book.
3. This is the central theme of *Facing Gaia*, soon to be released in English. Cf. Latour, Bruno. *Face à Gaia: Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*. Paris: La Découverte, 2015.

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define and understand as nature. We cannot therefore hope that humanity interests itself in these questions, or significantly modifies its behavior, if we propose only implausible philosophies. The plausibility of arguments is in general the condition of possibility for their discussion, recognition, and finally, reconciliation. It is thus necessarily implied in the project of "reconciliation" designed by the notions of "politics of nature" and "parliament of things" in Latour's philosophy.

In order that a "politics of nature" and a "parliament of things" become plausible, or acceptable, it is necessary to combat two spontaneous prejudices: first, that things would be "passive"; and second, that things would be "mute." As a consequence, we must show in what way things can "act," and "talk," in such a manner that a man might entertain symmetrical relations with them in the framework of a new type of political body. And this is precisely what Latour does, by redefining the notions of "action" and "speech."

Ⅱ. After the Modern Era, After Humanism

Considered in a very general manner, Latour's philosophy is first and foremost a critical description of modernity and humanism.[4] According to Latour, modern thought (let us say, starting in the seventeenth century, with René Descartes, the great adversary of Latour as well as of many a contemporary ecologist) consisted in constructing total oppositions between a certain number of realities or notions, creating in this fashion insurmountable, paralyzing separations in a man's thought, as well as in a man's relations with another man. And Latour's most general goal is to put an end to such separations, and to allow for the reconciliation of man, not only with his fellow man, but with nature and things as well. This is the reason for which Latour's "political ecology" develops in a somewhat prophetic and apocalyptic fashion, deliberately neglecting certain divisions seen as decisive in other political theories such as the divisions founded or revealed by the "class struggle" between "the bourgeoisie" and "the proletariat."

Due to Descartes and the mechanist philosophies of the seventeenth century, man has become a sort of incomprehensible monster, ripped asunder,

4. This is the principal objective of *We Have Never Been Modern*. Latour further pursues this enterprise with the majority of his works.

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having an extended body and an extensionless soul among which no conceivable junction was possible. This inner division was accompanied by an external one: man and nature have become mutually estranged from one another, and the modern man, in the famous formulation of Descartes, now has as his sole project to become the "master and possessor of nature," in which animals would be nothing but mere "machines." Man, gifted with infinite freedom, have since brought to the extreme the separation of the "subject" and the "object," of the "active" and the "passive," of "nature" and "society," and of "science" and "belief"; and thus did modern Western humankind separate itself from all other civilizations, by representing itself capable of "science" and "rationality," whereas other cultures remained attached to their mere "beliefs." In Latour's formulation, the modern man is "he who believes that the others believe" (*Sur le Culte* 20).

Modernity and humanism,[5] therefore, prodigiously developed the sciences and the technological forces but were in the inside of a conceptual framework totally at odds with such a development. It is in effect quite paradoxical, and this paradox is at the heart of Latour's analyses that the modern man began interacting with natural things with such an incredible efficacy at the very moment when all of their conceptual frameworks banned such an interaction. Latour's goal, in proposing a "politics of nature" and a "parliament of things," is thus to realign modern practices with their conceptual frameworks.

Ⅲ. Things that "Act"

In order to reconcile man and things, it is necessary to attenuate the conceptual oppositions that divide them, foremost among which is the opposition between the "subject" and the "object," or the "active" and the "passive." Latour's conceptual strategy will be to show that there do not exist any "subjects" who are only "subjects," or "objects" which are only "objects," but that there exist only "quasi-subjects" and "quasi-objects." In this way, the

5. It is not the humanism of the sixteenth century, which was upheld by the "humanities" in opposition to theology, but the humanism starting in the seventeenth century that oriented itself towards the "rights of man," that is to say, towards the idea that man had a unique place and singular destiny in nature, which authorized him to dominate animals and every natural thing without any reserve whatsoever.

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difference between man and things would cease to be unbridgeable. The most common spontaneous conception of action consists in posing first of all a free subject, then a goal or intentionality, and lastly a technological means by which the author of the action (the actor) achieves his goal. Latour refuses this schema, and he proposes another one, in which the subject and the object are in much more symmetrical positions. His thesis, founded on observation and experience, is that "actors" are always, as he says, "slightly surpassed" by that which they do (*Sur le Culte* 52). The object with which one serves oneself is not neutral: sometimes it favors action, sometimes it is an obstacle to action: in short, it participates itself in the act. The object itself is thus also an "actor" in a way. Latour often takes as an example the puppet master (129–32).[6] One cannot say, according to Latour, that the puppet master is an "active subject" whereas the puppet is itself a "passive object." In reality, for Latour, the puppet master adapts his story, his show, according to the puppet's size, weight, shape, habit, expression, and its relative ease to move in one direction or another. His puppet often inspires him, as if it were an "actor" or "actress," as if it guided his hand, as if it dictated to him the story he tells. The philosophy of action that Latour proposes consists in generalizing this example: Each of us is, in his or her own way, a puppet master, often guided by his or her puppet (in other words, the subject is often guided by the object). Furthermore, each of us is without a doubt the puppet of another man, of society, or of an ideology. Nevertheless, none of us is totally enslaved to another man, society, or an ideology. If we are the puppets of forces greater than us, we obey them, but sometimes we also inspire them and guide them. Thus, according to Latour, there are no such things that are purely subjective or objective positions, purely active or passive ones, but only mixtures of objectivity and subjectivity, or activity and passivity. Every man, like everything, is at the same time a subject and an object, and a master and a slave.

But Latour goes even further. Inspired by French philosopher Étienne Souriau's theory of "instauration,"[7] he argues that the subject is not at the source of the action, but is its result. From this point of view, there is not

6. Cf. Ch. 2. Latour, Bruno. "Deuxième source d'incertitude: débordés par l'action." *Changer de société: refaire de la sociologie*. Trans. Nicolas Guillot. Paris: La Découverte, 2006. 86–87.
7. Cf. Souriau, Étienne. *Les Différents Modes d'Existence*. 1943. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009.

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only "symmetry," but also even a "reversibility" of the subject and the object. The model here is that of artistic creation: according to this conception, every action, even the simplest and the most banal, is in reality a partly unforeseeable act of "creation." In fact, according to Souriau and Latour, a sculptor does not exist before he makes his sculpture, just as a painter does not exist before he makes his painting, and so forth. On the contrary, the created object, or the artwork, retroactively creates its own creator. So long as I have not created the artwork, I am not yet a creator; this much is logical. There is therefore no anteriority of the creator with respect to the creature or creation, no more than there is an anteriority of the actor with respect to his action or act. Neither one precedes the other. It is therefore just as plausible to say, "The action is the origin of the subject," as, "The subject is the origin of the action." Take an even more banal and familiar example, though it has an evidently theological dimension (like everything that has to do with creation). The father engenders the son, but inversely the son engenders the father, since one is not a father until he has had a son. The son (or daughter) is thus the father of the father (or the mother of the mother). These images and comparisons allow us to understand how Latour does away with the dissymmetry of the "subject" and the "object," or of the "creator" and the "creature," or of the "active" and the "passive." In effect, in his theory of action (a theory whose plausibility I now hope the reader recognizes), the subject is always at the same time the object, and the object is always at the same time the subject, the creator is always at the same time created, and so on. This theory of action therefore puts man and things on an equal footing and into a symmetrical relation that neatly corresponds to the *continuum* within which we live every day. Our telephones speak to us like man, give us orders, and machines obey and command on a case-by-case basis; we do not experience (on the contrary) a neat division between man and things. All of these reasons allow us to understand why Latour can, in a plausible manner speak of a "politics of nature," a politics which puts into continuity (in the manner of Baruch Spinoza) man and nature (and not into discontinuity, in the manner of Descartes).

Ⅳ. Things that "Speak"

Of course, in these interactions, in these negotiations between man and nature, "strictly speaking" things do not "speak." Who would pretend to argue

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the contrary? However, if we think over it carefully, as Latour remarks, in our societies men themselves are not so very talkative. Latour means to say that men, like things, are more often than not "represented," and that they only speak or express themselves at the level of the City via their intermediaries, their "spokesmen." In the same way, scientists are the "spokesmen" of things, just as politicians are the "spokesmen" of their fellow citizens. This might seem absurd to a degree that, precisely, things themselves "do not speak," and thus to a degree that we do not see how one could be the "spokesperson" for things which do not "speak" at all. But, in reality, responds Latour, the relations between "spokesmen" and those they represent quite vary according to the case and to the circumstance. A spokesman never says "exactly" what is said by those he represents: first, because they do not all say the same thing; second, because his job as a spokesman is to "put into shape," to make clear, coherent, comprehensible, and worthy of discussion the confused, angry, and sometimes contradictory speech of his constituents. If he were to repeat exactly what his constituents say, he would be useless, for they could as well say it themselves (*Politiques* 99–109). There are even contemporary theoreticians (who one can agree or disagree with, but this is not my question here) who think that the oppressed (oppressed men, not things) have a need for "spokespeople" precisely because they are so oppressed that they do not have any access to their own speech (due to their lack of education, their lack of access to means of diffusing their speech, and so on).[8] Therefore, the notion of a "spokesperson that speaks for those who do not speak" is not so absurd in the world of human affairs. Why would it then be absurd with respect to "things"? Such is at the very least Latour's thesis: researchers, those who live and work in the laboratories, are exactly, according to him, the "spokesmen" of things which do not speak for themselves, just like certain politicians are the "spokesmen" of those who do not have access to speech themselves. Finally, things and men could in this way speak together, via the intermediary of their respective spokespeople.

Latour thus proposes to renounce the terms of "subject" and "object" in the new "associations" which constitute the "politics of nature" and to replace these terms (according to him empty of any meaning) with the term of "proposition." Each association (each "singular thing," as Spinoza might have said) does not do any "actions," but it makes "propositions" to a "collective"

8. Cf. Renault, Emmanuel. *L'expérience de l'injustice. Reconnaissance et Clinique de l'injustice*. Paris: La Découverte, 2004.

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or to another "association": Do you want to make use of me? Do you want to associate me with your collective? Do you accept me?: "A river, a troop of elephants, a climate, El Niño, a mayor, a commune, a park, present to collectives propositions" (Latour, *Politiques* 124). This term of "proposition," as one can see, "appertains to the domain of language now shared between humans and non-humans" (124). Essentially, as I would say in my fashion, every singular thing, by its very existence, always formulates a "proposition," even if this is only in the form of a "demand to exist," that is to say, to "ally itself with a collective" (Ramond 176). Every existence is the demand for an alliance, this to say basically a demand to exist. There is therefore an intrinsically propositional dimension to existence.

The principal object of the "politics of nature" and of the "parliament of things" is therefore, according to Latour, the constant redefinition of the limit of collectives, or of associations. Latour proposes to conserve an "upper house" and a "lower house," the essential functions of which would consist in a constant discussion concerning the limits of the collective and its definition: Who does one admit, who do we not admit, and for what reasons? It is a given that a demand for admission can always come back and be re-examined. For example, do we admit, into the collective that we form with things, the thousands of yearly deaths in order to maintain the automobile's use? For the moment, yes, but maybe someday or other, the answer will be no. Inversely, we refuse to admit most deaths by food poisoning: during the "mad cow disease" crisis, or more recently during other meat-related food crises, thousands of cows and other animals were killed based on the simple suspicion that consumption of them might be dangerous for man. Thus, according to Latour, the politics of nature, or the parliament of things, consists in posing and reposing without ceasing the question of the limits of this collective that we share with every object, without ever holding that the given responses are definitively acquired.

It is impossible here to go over in detail the institutional construction that Latour proposes, and that besides which is quite difficult to concretely understand. Many questions could be posed: Who would compose the upper and lower houses? How do we avoid any conflict of interest? One of the weaknesses of this project, from my point of view, would be that Latour projects onto humanity his own curiosity, abundant energy, and goodwill. He underestimates in my opinion human laziness (without a doubt the principal engine of humanity), which makes it that in politics we look above all for simple and efficacious solutions, and which explains the mechanical reign of

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quantity and the constant extension of democracy across the planet over the course of the previous centuries. On the contrary, discussions concerning the "limits of a collective" are generally the source of sharp and violent conflict, as for example when we determine who has the right to vote in a given election. Discussing without an end a collective's limits, putting them without an end into question, it seems to me that this means taking risk to profoundly destabilize political bodies, as well potentially depriving ourselves of the simple and efficacious solution, that of the vote, or the law of the number, by which we arrive most often at solutions and reconciliations.

V. Conclusion

Without a doubt, Latour does not want to do away with this fundamental strength of democracy. His ambition is explicitly pro-democratic, and he conceives of the "politics of nature" and the "parliament of things" as accomplishments of democracy that, according to Latour, have been oppressed and suffocated since their origin due to the unfounded distinction between nature reserved to science and to the truth, and the cultures (or societies) reserved to politics and opinions. The "politics of nature" which Latour proposes seems to me to be fundamentally comparable to the sort of democratized version of the myth of the invention of writing, as Plato describes it in his *Phaedrus* (274b–277a). Writing, a new, revolutionary technology, is presented by its inventor to the powerful king of Egypt. It is a discovery capable of turning upside down the lives of man, but it can also improve their lives. However, the king, after having carefully thought it over, decides to refuse the "proposition" (or the "demand") made by the inventor, the spokesman of writing: in other words, the king refuses that this new thing "enters into the limits of the man-thing collective" which constitutes Egypt of which he is the sovereign. It seems to me that the "parliament of things" that Latour proposes functions somewhat in light of this scene, but in a democratic mode. If this "parliament of things" was created, the spokespeople of things (researchers) and the spokespeople of humankind (politicians, statesmen) would reunite to discuss and determine whether any given technological discovery or "thing" that makes a "proposition" or a "demand" for alliance, should or should not be admitted into the extant collective at the moment of discussion. In fact, to a certain degree this is already what happens today with respect to nuclear

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inventions, or microwave ovens, or with respect to stem-cell research. This is why Latour thinks that his "parliament of things," far from being a utopia, already in reality exists more or less, whether or not we are clearly conscious of this.

In this manner, post-humanism resembles pre-modernism. The Platonic dialogue takes place in an explicitly traditionalist society (Egypt), that is to say, a society in which (this is one of the principal theses of Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern*) one takes special care to distinguish between which things one accepts into and which things one rejects from a human collective. The modern world, that is to say humanism, has on the contrary been the period, according to Latour, during which we ceased taking such precautions. For many centuries now it has been decided that there is a total separation between the mind and the body, the East and the West, the Moderns and the Ancients, and society and nature. We did not want to look at or know about all of the "hybrids" (machines, laboratories, and experiments) that proliferate in the gaps between these abstract entities. These human-thing hybrids, therefore, are anarchically multiplied while at the same time we looked away as to not see them. Post-humanism, or the "parliament of things," consists in returning, within a democracy, to a "Egyptian-like" situation, which means it consists in accepting that we must discuss and debate the place that we will give or refuse to the things that surround us and without which we would no longer be ourselves. In this way, and even if certain traits of historical humanism are left on the side (for example, the power struggles, the struggles for domination, its predatory element as well as the taste for irresponsibility and the disdain for discussion), we can only but celebrate Latour's propositions, not only for their generous and pacifist aspects, but also for their novelty and coherence.

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Abstract

Bruno Latour has proposed the concepts of "politics of nature" and "parliament of things" to characterize the new relationship between humanity and nature "after humanism" and the modern era. We demonstrate here the consistency and plausibility of this program, beyond its provocative appearance. First, in order to reconcile men and things, men and nature, it is necessary to attenuate the conceptual oppositions that divide them, foremost among which is the opposition between the "subject" and the "object," or the "active" and the "passive." According to Latour's theory of action (inspired by French philosopher Étienne Souriau), things are not merely passive, but can also "act" in a somewhat circular intercourse with men: Men are the products of things they make as well as things are the products of men's activity. Then if, strictly speaking, things do not speak, they can nevertheless "speak" with men, through their respective "spokesmen" (scientists and politicians).

Keywords: Bruno Latour, Étienne Souriau, parliament of things, post-humanism, puppet master, spokesmen, theory of action

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