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## BRUNO LATOUR: NEW CHALLENGES AND INSPIRATIONS IN POLITICAL ECOLOGY

**Abstract.** Political ecology is a recent development in contemporary scholarship. Contrary to popular belief, the French philosopher Bruno Latour was not its originator. Some scholars began to recognise that nature and politics were closely connected back to the time of Montesquieu. Nonetheless, Latour's political ecology is original in that it features new or revamped concepts that lend it new content and meaning. It includes concepts such as 'mode of existence,' 'actor/network,' 'humans' and 'non-humans,' 'terrestrial' or 'Earthbound,' and offers a new interpretation of the concepts of nature and politics. These concepts are the focus of the first and second parts of the article. The final part looks at their practical application, particularly in connection with Latour's idea of creating a common world fit for life, or at least survival.

**Keywords:** Bruno Latour; political ecology; politics; nature; humans; non-humans; common world

1. Introduction. 2. Political ecology. 3. Theoretical challenges. 4. Practical challenges. 5. Conclusion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to present one of the most interesting and influential philosophical concepts of political ecology today. To begin, I would like to point out the peculiarities and the advantages of this concept (while not forgetting some weaknesses) in comparison with other, especially modernist approaches to political ecology in solving urgent theoretical and practical questions connected with climate change and the climate crisis.

Bruno Latour is renowned for his keen knowledge of science and original approach to scientific development,<sup>1</sup> but the scope of his enquiry is far broader than that, reaching from theoretical questions to practical issues associated with modern technologies; from science to, let's say, art and religion; from epistemology and metaphysics to anthropology and political philosophy. It is no wonder, then, that he refers to Alfred North Whitehead as often as he does to Thomas Hobbes or Carl Schmitt. His later work, however, increasingly focused on the ecological and climate crises, considering them in the context of a seemingly newly discovered scientific discipline – political ecology.<sup>2</sup> It is a discipline that is located at the juncture between natural science and political science. Latour approaches both critically, aiming above all to break down the barrier between them and to reconnect society with living and non-living nature from within. In so doing he introduces new concepts into the academic literature (such as 'non-humans,' 'terrestrial') or offers new definitions of old ones (such as 'nature,' 'science,' 'cosmos,' 'politics,' 'parliament,' 'constitution,' and 'collectives'), giving them new and original meanings that often differ radically from the standard ones.<sup>3</sup> We will put this to the test in this essay by analysing some of Latour's key terms.

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1 The book that has appealed most to philosophy circles is probably *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993).

2 This does not mean that he was simply jumping on the bandwagon. He had long been interested in this issue, as his work from his various creative periods demonstrates (see, for instance: Latour 2004; 2005; 2017; 2018). What has changed in his most recent work is the emphasis Latour placed on the climate issue.

3 This may be why Latour's political ecology has from the outset been perceived in academic circles as highly controversial, sometimes very critically. However, this is another, much broader issue that goes beyond both the content and focus of this article. Here, I will merely point out that the bulk of this criticism, which has been levelled among others by the Swedish philosopher Andreas Malm (Malm 2017; 2019) and the French philosopher Philippe Stamenkovic (Stamenkovic 2017; 2018), can be categorized under four themes – 'extreme' or 'anti-realist' constructivism, 'hybridism'. Hence, it is a hotchpotch of different spheres of reality, concepts, mysticism and descriptivism.

## 2. POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Political ecology, as its name indicates, expresses the close link between nature and society, especially a certain form of politics.<sup>4</sup> That also means that political ecology has no direct relationship to nature. Such relationship is mediated through science on the one hand, as indicated by the suffix ‘ology,’ and through social relationships on the other, as can be seen in the sometimes marked historical differences in attitudes to nature among different societies. Last but not least, this relationship is mediated through politics and political relationships, and to such an extent that problems that were recently considered ‘purely’ ecological (for example unexpected flash floods) have now become political as well and require political measures. Despite such general stance, there are still great differences in public attitudes to political and ecological issues. “Have you noticed that the emotions involved are not the same when you’re asked to defend nature – you yawn, you’re bored – as when you’re asked to defend your territory – now you’re wide awake, suddenly mobilized?” (Latour 2018, ch. 3, 10). Although that is no longer entirely true as Latour himself recognised when he stated in the same book: “Ecology has thus succeeded in running politics through its mill by introducing objects *that had not previously belonged* to the usual preoccupations of public life” (Latour 2018, ch. 10, 27). Does that mean that ecology has now pushed politics out of the public sphere? Of course not. On careful reading, Latour’s statements do not in fact contradict one another because they both

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4 Here I will merely note in passing that the academic discipline dubbed ecology, “consists, by and large, of the construction of models of the interaction of living systems with their environment (including other living systems)” (*Ecology* 2005). Relatedly, the French philosopher and ecological activist Jean Zin defines political ecology as awareness “of our environment and our interdependencies, of our belonging to ecosystems that we must not destroy and of our environmental footprint as well as a desire not only to safeguard our living conditions but to improve our quality of life – none of which are given and all of which require a political debate” (Zin 2010).

talk about ecology and politics separately and in isolation. However, if we take the issue that Latour is mainly concerned about – global ecology and the climate crisis – then ecology and politics become closely connected. That, together with the fact that it is an emotionally charged issue, immediately makes the connection more appealing and interesting. Other issues that are more or less connected to ecology and politics include the migration of people from different parts of the world and the associated relationship between the Global and the Local, which is also strongly emotionally charged. This aptly illustrates that in politics the ‘form and weight of the *world*’ is far more important than the attitudes to it (Latour 2018, ch. 11, 30). That is because of ecology and the urgency of the problems it is trying to flag up in the public’s attention. In turn, that has helped politics because it has been released from its overly circumscribed space in societal life. “In this sense, political ecology has fully succeeded in changing what is at stake in the public sphere” (Latour 2018, ch. 10, 27). That is both a commitment and a challenge for political ecology – and for contemporary theory and practice more generally.

It is worth remembering that, although political ecology is a relatively young academic discipline<sup>5</sup> its roots stretch back at least to Charles Montesquieu, a leading figure of the French Enlightenment, whose spirit of the nation combined, among other things, political and social factors (such as the level of the civilisation, its laws or government ‘principles’) with nature and the climate (Montesquieu 2001, 322). Latour acknowledges Montesquieu’s role, but he has no wish to draw on the legacy of classical political philosophy with its characteristic divisions between nature and society, science and nature, and science and politics. He believes that they are the reason why nature and politics have thus far been seen as two entirely different realms, which is reflected in the strict distinction between the political and

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5 We need only note here that the term was coined in 1972 by the well-known anthropologist Eric Wolf (Roberts 2020).

the environmental movements, which focus exclusively on social issues and what we might call naked survival, respectively. According to Latour, to join them together we need to reassess the concepts of nature and politics and how they interrelate.

The concept of nature can be universalist (typical of mononaturalism, which is based on the premise of one universal nature) or constructivist, as in multinaturalism, with existence as its main premise, or more precisely the possibility of creating multiple diverse natures. Latour makes no secret of the fact that he favours the constructivist approach, in relation to society as well as nature, while avoiding non-committal assertions of the asymmetrical ‘not only’ Nature ‘but also’ Society type (merely to avoid accusations of relativism. See Latour 1993, 94–96).<sup>6</sup> For it is usually the other way round: “One society – and it is always the Western one – defines the general framework of Nature with respect to which the others are situated” (Latour 1993, 105).

Yet, according to Latour, the fact that nature is a construct in no way devalues its essence. Instead, it enables us to better understand it and ask vital questions – how is nature constructed, created? Has it been created properly? Here Latour emphasises that it is only because of the constructivist conception of nature that we can think about political ecology at all. While discussion and negotiation are key to the functioning of politics, one cannot debate the universalist, naturalist conception of nature. Moreover, the constructivist notion of nature, he argues, is based on its enabling everyone to be involved in its creation, which is key to Latour’s ‘composition’ of a common world (Latour 2016, 201).

Latour’s political ecology also differs from *Naturphilosophie*, which treats nature directly from the outside looking in,<sup>7</sup> whereas he

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<sup>6</sup> Latour clearly explains his position on relativism in *We Have Never Been Modern*, particularly in chapter 4: *Absolute Relativism and Relativist Relativism* (Latour 1993, 111–115).

<sup>7</sup> Equally, Latour thinks ecological movements commit the same error in talking about protecting nature, despite us being organically part of nature.

approaches it both indirectly and from within: nature is fundamental to us and is almost inseparable from humans and non-humans. It is also related both socially and politically not just to humans but to non-humans as well, and analogically to all living and non-living things on earth.

This adjustment enables us quite rightly to say that the ecological is also the political and conversely that the political is also ecological. This is no mere turn of phrase: we are evidently more aware of their interrelations than ever before as we increasingly come to recognise the problems associated with the ecological and climate crisis, along with our dependency on the institutions and level of democracy as we attempt to tackle them. The deepening ecological and climate crisis is highlighting the direct effect they have on the economic, social and political spheres, such as the deepening social inequalities and injustices that are especially prevalent in 'developing' countries. It is no accident that it is precisely such countries that the first climate refugees are fleeing to. Last but not least, a more ecological way of doing politics means showing greater solidarity, justice and responsibility to both nature (Zin 2010) and people.

Although Latour considers the relationship between politics and ecology to be equal, he appears to place greater priority on the political,<sup>8</sup> for he is convinced that only a new body politic

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8 Things are not that straightforward, however, as Latour notices. For instance, political struggle is geologically dependent and social issues are geopolitically dependent (Latour 2018, chs. 13, 35). Also, what makes ecology political are not the policies themselves, but the fact that nature has been organically incorporated into the political sphere and thereby internalised (Latour, Milstein, Marrero-Guillamón, Rodríguez-Giralt 2018). One can conclude that the redefinition of politics, which Latour thinks has shifted away from people's values and attitudes and onto material objects, bodies, countries, territories, places, would never have happened had it not been for the development of political ecology, specifically its object- and territory-oriented politics (Latour 2018, chs. 11, 30), about which I will say something later. In short, we still have to see politics as being internally intertwined with ecology. If we don't, we run the risk of ecological issues being not just neglected and ignored, but actually covered up and engulfed by politics.

(inclusive of non-humans) and a new geosocial politics will open up the possibility of sustaining life on our severely damaged planet (Latour, Milstein, Marrero-Guillamón, Rodríguez-Giralt 2018). For this to happen we need a new synthesis between politics, science and nature because half of our politics takes place in science and technology and half of nature in society. The two must be joined together – for it is there that the new politics will begin (Latour 1993, 144), and a new political ecology as well (at least in Latour’s thinking), which also combines nature, science and politics, both theoretically and in practice.

Latour also draws attention to some substantial differences in the theory and practice of modern and contemporary political ecology,<sup>9</sup> which he proceeds to criticise. Latour’s theoretical and practical approach to political ecology has evolved precisely against the backdrop of such criticism. In what follows, I will attempt to answer some of the issues raised by Latour.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

Latour took every opportunity to stress the need to reassess the modernist framework that led to the ecological crisis, among other things, and hampered the ability of social and political movements to influence the situation (Latour, Milstein, Marrero-Guillamón, Rodríguez-Giralt 2018). What exactly does he have in mind here?

As Latour points out, the adjective ‘modern’ has several meanings. One concerns the conflicts and battles in which there are both winners and losers (Latour 1993, 10). “To be modern, by definition, is to project onto the others at every turn the conflict between the Local

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9 Following Latour, I use the terms ‘modern,’ ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ synonymously (Latour 1993, 10).

10 It is worth noticing that sometimes Latour refers to contemporaneity as ‘second modern,’ ‘postmodern,’ ‘non-modern’ (Latour 2004, 357).

and the Global, between the archaic past and the future – a future with which the non-moderns, it goes without saying, have nothing to do” (Latour 2018, chs. 7, 19). The conflict between modernist and conservative ‘archaic’ views of the world is carried through into a terminological ‘battle’: rationality, effectivity, competence, development, growth, progress represent a kind of quasi modernism to be contrasted with ‘regressive’ conservatism. Generally speaking, for Latour the terms modern and modernism do not refer to a specific historical era, but are a means of interpreting the world through the use of strict dividing lines and polarising terminology. In other words, as Latour states modernism is characterised by the ‘Great Divide’ (Latour 1993, 39), a contrast struggle between subject and object, nature and culture, naturalism and anthropocentrism, progress and regression. Its adherents were internally persuaded that this would safeguard against ‘destructive’ relativism. However, while they were seemingly justifiably accusing all pre-modernists of creating a hotchpotch of concepts and things, things and people, objects and subjects, nature and society, they themselves became the ‘victims’ of the greatest hotchpotch of things and concepts, or things and people. In Latour’s words, “the less the moderns think they are blended, the more they blend” (Latour 1993, 43): in other words, behind these seemingly irreconcilable opposites there was always a mediating, simplifying factor – a ‘Hegelian’ synthesis – be it God, nature, laws, or morality. For example, the modernists could not stop searching for the meaning of existence, despite continually coming up against the fact that “the world of meaning and the world of being are one and the same world, that of translation, substitution, delegation, passing” (Latour 1993, 129). Hence, Latour concludes, the modernist world “ceased to be modern when we replaced all essences with the mediators, delegates and translators that gave them meaning” (Latour 1993, 129).

This was even clearer in practice: “for its own good, the modern world can no longer extend itself without becoming once again what



it has never ceased to be in practice – that is, a nonmodern world like all the others” (Latour 1993, 135). The modernists were guided by two apparently contradictory sets of practices. The first created a new hybrid mix of the various entities that make up the network of relationships. The second appeared to do the opposite – ‘purifying’ them of their hybrids and through the ‘Great Divide’ separating the world into two completely different entities. In fact, however, one set of practices could not, and cannot, exist without the other: purification without prior hybridisation and hybridisation without purification. Thus, instead of a systematic separation and polarisation of concepts (along with their constructs and approaches to reality), Latour attempts to correct and specify, and where necessary propose, new concepts that ultimately connect them.

Here I shall mention just a few concepts which I think are fundamental to Latour’s theory of political ecology. These include ‘modes of existence,’ ‘actor/network,’ ‘humans’ and ‘non-humans,’ ‘terrestrial’ or ‘Earthbound’ and ‘Gaia.’

He defends his theory by looking for potential (traditionally unthinkable) ways in which entities can exist in the world, which he calls ‘modes of existence,’ and transcend the narrow boundaries (‘domains’) of subject and object.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most important of these, in Latour’s view, are the concepts of ‘human’ (‘les humains’) and ‘non-human’ (‘non-humains’), which like the other modes of existence interact, overlap and complement one another.<sup>12</sup> However, one can still encounter simplistic, one-sided interpretations.

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11 As Latour reminds us, the term ‘subject’ has not always been used in human discourse. Rather, it was introduced in a particular historical period to emphasise man’s superior status in the world. Confronted with the Gaia hypothesis and a new reality and concepts, this meaning has now aged (Latour 2016, 177).

12 Here Latour appears to be making a direct reference to Roy Rappaport and his ‘new ecology,’ which holds that the population is one element of the ecosystem, or more precisely the ‘human-ecological system.’ This enabled him to study human, plant and (non-human) animal populations as commensurable units within the same research framework (Roberts 2020).

We very often naturalise non-humans,<sup>13</sup> thereby depriving them of what is arguably most important (especially in practice) and most interesting about them – their affinity and association. Sometimes we even integrate them with humans, as is the case with Latour’s new terms like ‘politics of things,’ ‘parliament of things’ or ‘democracy of objects.’<sup>14</sup> Some commentators consider this approach pointless or even a nonsensical hybridisation: the conflation of terms and different forms and spheres of reality (Malm 2017; 2019; Stamenkovic 2017; 2018). Others in contrast judge it to be a ‘new understanding of the complexity’ of the world (Latour 2016, 172).

The same can be said of Latour’s conception of a wide, yet dense, network of various, distinctly non-hierarchical influences and dependencies, that fall into the aforementioned concept of an actor/network.<sup>15</sup> As the name suggests, unlike the modernist concept of a ‘system,’ this one does not artificially juxtapose the real ‘objective’ network against the activities of the subjects – actors, for they are all connected in a single organic, but nonetheless multifaceted, whole. In this network the emphasis is on the diverse types or modes of existence. It goes beyond the boundedness of things, relationships, areas – which Latour calls ‘domains.’<sup>16</sup> The network therefore conveys the abilities of things, relationships, areas to transcend the boundaries of the domains and connect heterogenous elements

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13 Non-humans tend to be associated with nature or the natural environment. They are juxtaposed to society or the political sphere.

14 I will return to this and similar terms in the practical part of this paper. Here I shall merely note that Latour considered this amalgamation entirely natural and pointed out that the Latin term ‘*res-publica*,’ meaning quite literally ‘public things,’ has been a point of public interest since politics began (Latour, Milstein, Marrero-Guillamón, Rodríguez-Giralt 2018).

15 This conception is reminiscent of the network theory introduced by the American scientist John Naisbitt in his ‘cult’ book *Megatrends* (1982), whose list of the most important global trends of the last few decades included the creation of various types of global and local network cooperation that preclude hierarchical structures (Naisbitt 1982, 211-231).

16 Let’s not forget that the term ‘domain’ is derived from the verb ‘dominate,’ which denotes the opposite of a network.

within a continuous chain of relationships, such as the chemistry of the stratosphere, the interests of heads of state or ecological movements (Latour 2016, 149).

Here Latour returns to his critique of mononaturalism, which is focused on a particular autonomous mode of existence that he feels is somewhat imprecisely referred to as nature, or the material world, exteriority or object (Latour 2016, 142). It is linked to, as he somewhat expressively puts it, ‘an unheard of transcendence’: nature is understood as it is, as “ahuman, sometimes inhuman, always extrahuman” (Latour 1993, 131).<sup>17</sup> However, Latour does not think that one-sided anthropomorphism – anthropocentrism – is the solution, for it is based on the notion that humans represent the centre (or rather, there are two centres – humans and nature – and we have to choose one) of all that exists on earth at least. Thus, it cannot regard the social world on equal terms as a totality with overlapping human and non-human elements and actors. Lastly, he is not entirely satisfied with the more moderate term anthropomorphism, which still has human/people at its core, preferring Terrestrial/Earthbound instead (Latour 2018, chs. 18, 45).<sup>18</sup> The word terrestrial means *other world*, so it is distinct from nature, the Cosmos, society and all that is called ‘human’ (Latour 2018, chs. 17, 42). We therefore need to stop talking about people and start talking about ‘Earthbounds.’ However, that does not mean that the word terrestrial isn’t sensitive to human problems and concerns. Quite the opposite: it is empathetic; it considers them from

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17 This is probably why Latour uses the term ‘non-humans’ instead of the more common specialist term ‘extrahuman.’ On the one hand, the word extrahuman conjures up the modernist, anthropocentric division of the world into human and non-human entities; on the other hand, it is semantically associated with the external world, external reality, external nature. In short, it characterises a world that (like extrahuman civilisations) exists beyond the reach of people and that rules out the potential for overlap and direct mutual human and non-human influence.

18 He is well aware that this is not an easy task, as we have to grapple with one of the key issues of our epoch: “how could we avoid the traps of anthropomorphism, if it is true that we are living from now on in the era of the Anthropocene!” (Latour 2017, 110).

within and responds to changes in their behaviour. This fundamental change of perspective in how the world is perceived must inevitably be reflected in political strategies under the new core slogan: “Toward the Terrestrial!” (Latour 2018, chs. 12, 33).

Ultimately, this list of unifying and overlapping relationships and concepts logically leads to another all-inclusive, complex term: ‘Gaia’.<sup>19</sup> Its theoretical significance is largely conceptional. It reflects the oft-emphasised fact that together we all create a mutually interconnected network of relationships – dependencies, influence and support – that enable the network to operate as a self-regulated mechanism. To a large extent that also applies to the non-living parts of nature, such as withered dead trees with interlocking roots that help sustain the surrounding trees and even the forest itself. In one sense we can compare the ‘Earth’<sup>20</sup> as a whole to a gigantic self-regenerating organism with all its various mutually interconnecting parts that mutually support and enrich one another and sustain life (Latour 2017, 94-95).

#### 4. PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

Politics is conducted in two ways, that is either through war or peaceful means (negotiation). Both can be seen in contemporary practice, especially political ecology practice. At the moment war has the upper hand. Latour notes a curious paradox: whereas modernity’s recourse to war was only in theory, today we face the opposite situation: despite theoretical assurances that contradictions and disagreements would

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19 For more on this, see: Latour 2017, esp. ‘conferences’/chapters 3 and 8.

20 I have put the word ‘Earth’ in speech marks because, as Latour stresses, Gaia is not the same as earth or even Earth; nor is it the same as nature, surpassing it both in content and meaning (Latour 2016, 249). The term Gaia is narrower than terrestrial, for the latter includes the critical zone of our planet, that is, the delicate, thin (compared to interplanetary and global) space, where everything that is most important to us takes place (Latour 2018, chs. 17, 41).

be overcome, they are in fact being carried over into practice. That means we are losing the common world that enabled us, even during modernity, to talk of a universal humanity and universal rights. It was by appealing to these that the West sought to settle conflicts and tensions. Unlike other thinkers who see the loss of a common world as the fatal and irreversible state of contemporary society (Buden 2013), Latour is convinced that it is neither fateful nor continual, but reminiscent of some of the historical milestones in European history (1918, 1945, 1968 and 1989 among others), when it was still possible to talk of a united global humanity (Latour 2016, 190). This scenario will now have to be recreated – based on entirely different foundations and principles. In the first place through a public discussion about its character and goals, and then through adapting a new social treaty, a political treaty that will lay out a new political-ecological Constitution,<sup>21</sup> modelled on the existing natural law: an *État de droit de nature* – a common world ‘Republic’ (Latour 2004, 293, 296). However, before this treaty can be concluded we have to accept that war is a fact. And “even though it might be perilous to speak of war – when there is a state of peace – it is even more dangerous to deny that there is a war when you are under attack” (Latour 2016, 245). In such a case a premature attempt at an agreement may sound as an attempt to obscure the ongoing reality of war.

We have to admit with Latour that war is ongoing, but war against whom? Between living and non-living entities? Human beings against non-humans? Cosmopolitans (‘globalists’) against local inhabitants (‘localists’)? Rich capitalists against the rest of the world? Scientists against (sometimes quite a large section of) the public? Politicians

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21 Latour distinguishes between a legal constitution, in lower case, and the Constitution, capitalised, which relates to political ecology. Instead of setting out the rights and obligations of citizens and the state, “this Constitution ... defines humans and nonhumans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings” (Latour 1993, 15).

against scientists? Scientists against politicians? One scientist against another scientist?

Latour frequently reiterates that we have not yet completely broken free of our Hobbesian state of nature, so it is still a war that pits ‘all’ against ‘all.’ The only difference is that contemporary wars tend to be *about something* rather than *against someone*.<sup>22</sup>

Let’s try to narrow this down by asking a different question: war over what? It would probably not be wrong to say that, according to Latour it is primarily a war over territory and by that we don’t mean just any old, foreign place, but somewhere specific (be it, for example, the land ‘under our very own feet,’ as is sometimes said, or science and the scientific method, or knowledge and axioms) that we are attached to – sometimes to the extent that we are prepared to defend it. In short, it is a place that people would not be able to live without.

What is this place that people cannot live without? Is it their place of birth or where they live? The land they till? The forests they own? The other people with whom they share a common destiny (ethnic group, nation, homeland, the whole of our planet)? It probably differs depending on the person, but it is always a territory that is extremely important to us for some personal reason.

We can then build on this key question by asking: What kind of country? What other organisms? What kind of land, industry, trade would we want to retain? We can then roughly outline the kind of territory we feel is worth defending or would be willing to abandon. Lastly, we can weigh up our chances of winning or losing the battle. In this regard, there are usually some features that allow one to predict who will lose a battle. For example, “capitalists

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22 That also suggests an answer to the question: whose fight, against whom? When Latour states that the [something seems to be missing here?] in politics today is largely down to the fact that “that the ground is giving way beneath everyone’s feet at once, as if we all felt attacked everywhere, in our habits and in our possessions” (Latour 2018, chs. 3, 10), he is clearly referring to the refugee crisis and conflict between migrants and cosmopolitans, on the one hand, and local inhabitants on the other.

seem to know what it is to grab, to possess and to defend a land more than their space-less adversaries who have to defend Science and its View-from-Nowhere for inhabitants of no place. At least they know to which soil they pertain better than those who keep defending themselves by an appeal to the extraterritorial authority of Science” (Latour 2016, 244). The two sides differ not just in their focus, but in the resources they use: “... In such a conflict, one side fights with all the forces at its power while the other side, the rational and reasonable climatologists, must fight with their hands tied behind their backs by the injunction that they, and they alone, should protect the sanctity of Science (capital S) against any encroachment of ideology and interest” (Latour 2016, 244).

A polar opposition does not necessarily lead to outright war. That happens, according to Latour, when the representatives of various, crucially divergent common worlds are pitted against each other.<sup>23</sup> This, however, needn't apply to Latour's political ecology of the tension between human and non-human beings. In this case one may simply substitute 'militant' objects for things<sup>24</sup> and expand our agreement to create a common world to non-human entities (Latour 2004, 288).

We must ask again: how can we enter into an agreement with non-humans? Latour's response is ambiguous. Polysemic even. First, he says: “I have not required human subjects to share the right to speech of which they are so justly proud with galaxies, neurons, cells, viruses, plants and glaciers. I have only called attention to a phenomenon

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23 It could be a shared source of income, for example. It is no secret that many scientists receive funding from various sponsors, including capitalist entrepreneurs. When that happens their interests and associated attitudes tend not to be the same and differ greatly from the attitudes of scientists who receive no such funding.

24 Latour distinguishes clearly (in discussing whether we are modern yet) between 'objects' and 'things.' He thinks the object/subject category belongs on the modernist list of highly confrontational militant concepts that systematically divide the world, whereas the etymology of things encourages us to link these worlds together, for 'res,' 'chose,' 'thing,' 'ding' are, according to Latour, one and the same thing – body, ensemble, assembly (Latour 2004, 351, 358).

that precedes the distribution of forms of speech, which is called a Constitution” (Latour 2004, 106). Under the Constitution, there is a spokesperson (*porte-parole*) who answers the question: who’s speaking? (Latour 2004, 359-360). The spokesperson is a representative, an interpreter of ‘speech’ or non-human speech. The spokesperson is potentially a peace-mediator. In this case, a peace-keeper between humans and non-humans. Later, as if he were not quite sure he had fully answered the question,<sup>25</sup> Latour claimed that between the speaking subject according to political tradition and the mute subject according to epistemological tradition, there is a third term – previously invisible in political and scientific life, yet nonetheless an undisputed form of speech in which mute things become ‘speaking facts’ and mute subjects ‘speaking subjects’ that are required to bow down before facts (Latour 2004, 106). He then attempts a more explicit explanation: “I do not claim that things speak ‘on their own,’ since no beings, not even humans, speak on their own, but always through something” (Latour 2004, 106).

In other words, we can say that nature does not speak, but neither is it silent. It does not keep quiet about what we take from it, nor about what we give it: “*the Earth*, which had stopped absorbing blows and was striking back with increasing violence” (Latour 2018, ch. 5, 15). If, say, people unilaterally violate the treaty, then the remaining living and non-living nature can take ‘silent,’ but nonetheless forceful, revenge on us. If we were to, for example, burn forests to obtain more agricultural land, nature could ‘get back at us’ through the farmland lacking the water previously retained by the forest. In short, the war against nature is already suicide, particularly in our time. It is in that sense that we should interpret the slogan of French activists: “We are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself” (Latour 2018, chs. 14, 73).

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25 For example, he is doubtful that spokespersons always represent and translate non-human ‘interests’ (Latour, Milstein, Marrero-Guillamón, Rodríguez-Giralt 2018).



The new agreement between human and non-human entities should specifically recognise and stress this fact: that unlike traditional peace treaties this one concerns the main protagonists only. “Nobody can constitute the unity of the world for anyone else as used to be the case (in times of modernism and later post-modernism), that is, by generously offering to let the others in, on condition that they leave at the door all that is dear to them” (Latour 2016, 194-195). Consequently, it has already been noted that there should be a new *Constitution* concerning political ecology that among other things attempts to answer two fundamental questions: How many are we? Can we live together? (Latour 2004, 17), where the hidden ‘we’ has to encompass all that enables us to live, including the non-human.

Latour thus imbues his account – that some will find idealistic or even downright utopian – with a hint of realism that may sound cynical or excessively realistic to some. In reality though, he is merely attempting to respond to the fact that our planet’s resources are finite and that is already causing problems which will only multiply, especially given the ever-increasing rapid population growth.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As I noted at the outset, Latour did not ‘discover’ political ecology. The original version was considered innovative on the simple grounds that it incorporated nature into politics, without any fundamental reassessment of the two categories, which has paralysed the political side of the relationship and hampered genuinely ecological solutions. According to Latour, to inject new energy and thinking into political ecology we have to abandon the notion of one Nature, one Politics and even one Science in favour of a plurality aimed at the socialisation of non-human creatures. That also means relinquishing the form of politics, the ‘cave’ – an explicit reference to Plato’s view of the world – based on the strict delineation and juxtaposition between the Heaven of Ideas and the hell of the terrestrial social reality

(Latour 2004, 351) to embrace a politics that is a means of gradually composing a common world. Latour's conception of political ecology contains several more or less open theoretical and practical challenges, the most important of which are strikingly similar in direction. From a theoretical viewpoint, the main challenge is to break down the various dichotomies posited as irreconcilable opposites in political ecology. In practical terms, the main challenge is to try and create a common world in which human and non-human beings and entities can co-exist alongside one another. Latour's entire conception of political ecology, with its unusual way of looking at the world and uncommon approaches and stances, not to mention the original categorial apparatus,<sup>26</sup> potentially raises many questions. For instance: did Latour himself not end up being caught in his own trap with his innovative, original and sometimes radical approaches, when appealing to his contemporaries and their attitudes to modernity he claims: "Let us not add to the crime of believing that we are radically different to all the others"? (Latour 1993, 127) Or: is Latour's conception not just one big utopia? Is it even possible to create a common world with those who have never wanted and don't want such a world? And if so, then how? How can we discuss and enter into dialogue with such people? Should we really be aiming for a balance of opinions by listening to both sides, even when one side is obviously talking nonsense and telling mistruths? These and other questions and doubts could lead to Latour being accused of a particular kind of reductionism or anthropomorphism, since he applies politics and

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26 As is usually the case, none of this is completely new or original. A quick comparison reveals analogies with the main premises of deep ecology as developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and his team in the 1970s and 1980s (Naess, *Sessions* 1984). Latour was familiar with the theory and welcomed it (mainly for its stance against the metaphysical separation of the natural world and the human world, the world of man), but he was also critical of the fact that political ecology remained trapped in the traditional understanding of politics and thereby the traditional nature-politics dichotomy (Latour 2004, 43, 310-311).

political concepts to things. This is both possible and understandable. However, it is unlikely that anyone would completely disagree that his conception is novel, and perceptive readers will surely read it eagerly and be inspired at least to ask questions about things that had not previously occurred to them. And that is definitely no small thing.

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