



Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy

By Bruno Latour

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A major work by one of the more innovative thinkers of our time, *Politics of Nature* does nothing less than establish the conceptual context for political ecology--transplanting the terms of ecology into more fertile philosophical soil than its proponents have thus far envisioned. Bruno Latour announces his project dramatically: "Political ecology has nothing whatsoever to do with nature, this jumble of Greek philosophy, French Cartesianism and American parks." Nature, he asserts, far from being an obvious domain of reality, is a way of assembling political order without due process. Thus, his book proposes an end to the old dichotomy between nature and society--and the constitution, in its place, of a collective, a community incorporating humans and nonhumans and building on the experiences of the sciences as they are actually practiced.

In a critique of the distinction between fact and value, Latour suggests a redescription of the type of political philosophy implicated in such a "commonsense" division--which here reveals itself as distinctly uncommonsensical and in fact fatal to democracy and to a healthy development of the sciences. Moving beyond the modernist institutions of "mononaturalism" and "multiculturalism," Latour develops the idea of "multinaturalism," a complex collectivity determined not by outside experts claiming absolute reason but by "diplomats" who are flexible and open to experimentation.

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Editorial Review

Review

This is much more than a reworking of politics. It is a sketch of a resolution of the perennial questions of what we know and what exists...Latour...can be infuriating. But he is never boring. *Politics of Nature* must be difficult because it challenges assumptions that are built into our languages, such as the hallowed distinction between 'facts' and 'values'...It is worth reading--twice. (Mike Holderness *New Scientist* 2004-04-24)

Politics of Nature constitutes a major contribution to contemporary thought and discourse...I anticipate that it will increase recognition that we can make our institutions and policies more responsive to our concerns by taking a deliberative, critical approach to the metaphysical foundations of our attitudes toward nature, science and politics. (Yaron Ezrahi *American Scientist* 2005-01-01)

Despite all our concern, our pressure groups, non-governmental organisations and ministers for the environment, [Latour] maintains that political ecology is paralysed by established categories of thought. Only a radical rethink will enable us to grasp the import of ecology and launch a new approach to the maintenance of a tolerable life...Through all his work on science, technology and society, Latour has developed a style of writing that is an unusual and often startling combination of remarkably acute observation and analysis of science in action (to quote an earlier title), of metaphorical flights and rhetorical flourishes, of aperçus, of exhortations to relinquish familiar concepts, categories and meanings and of what, as a non-philosopher, I take to be breathtaking philosophical presumption...[An] often intriguing and occasionally infuriating book. (Jon Turney *Times Higher Education Supplement* 2005-04-08)

Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy by French author Bruno Latour, brings a fascinating and bold new twist to contemporary discussions about the nature of "nature." Latour proposes a radical shift in current conceptions of "political ecology," arguing that mainstream environmental movements are doomed to fail so long as they envision political ecology as inextricably tied to the protection and management of nature through political methodologies and policies...Latour does not reject the sciences, only hegemonic science. His book is a warning of sorts, that in our rush to separate human from nonhuman, interests from nature, and politics from ecology, we have jeopardized the foundation of democracy: informed public deliberation about the common good. Nature is not to be conquered, controlled, or even protected. Rather, our conceptions of natural fact and reality must be re-examined in order to make room for other members of the political-ecological collective. Scholars in environmental studies will find this book useful, While Latour's project is far-reaching and admittedly idealistic, it raises interesting questions and seeks to engender public deliberation about ecological issues, including how the environmental movement should proceed in the coming critical decades. Rhetorical scholars interested in linguistic representations of nature, the discursive construction of reality and culture, and the interplay of the technical and public spheres also will find this book useful. It is well-written, extensively researched, positive in tone, and enjoyable to read. (Matthew G. Gerber *Argumentation and Advocacy*)

Since political ecology does not yet exist conceptually, Latour's project is best understood as the act of its production...Multiculturalism and, more recently, multinaturalism make it possible for politics and the sciences to work together today to articulate the common world in radically new ways. His argument is motivated by a concern that humanity might miss the current moment, might refuse to slow down enough to reflect on its possible futures, and might instead rush from twentieth-century totalitarianism to twenty-first-

century globalization. According to Latour, both phenomena involve similar processes of exclusion; they create collectives that prematurely juxtapose a universal humanity to an external nature...Latour's argument is as complex as it is creative. In addition to Plato and Aristotle, he alludes to Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Lenin, Jürgen Habermas, and, among the most intriguing, Charles Fourier. (Nancy S. Love *Perspectives on Politics* 2006-09-01)

Latour's politics is procedural and fluid, not driven by a desire to establish domains. If for no other reason than this, *Politics of Nature* is important for environmental philosophy. Environmentalism is in crisis partly because of its unexamined attachment to a declensionist narrative about humans and nonhumans.

Philosophers too often fall into this trap as well. As we struggle with the question, "What is to be done...," many of us expand this question to include the phrase "...in a world at the tipping point of environmental disaster?" We could do worse than allow Latour to remind us that we need to try to not start with what has been lost, but what can be gained. He urges us to make associations, work toward a more universal collective, create a genuinely progressive future, and build the attendant skills to assemble our demos into something better and more interesting than it is now. Isn't this what always must be done? (Randall Honold *Environmental Philosophy* 2007-01-01)

From the Back Cover

From the book: What is to be done with political ecology? Nothing. What is to be done? Political ecology! All those who have hoped that the politics of nature would bring about a renewal of public life have asked the first question, while noting the stagnation of the so-called "green" movements. They would like very much to know why so promising an endeavor has so often come to naught. Appearances notwithstanding, everyone is bound to answer the second question the same way. We have no choice: politics does not fall neatly on one side of a divide and nature on the other. From the time the term "politics" was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature, whose every feature, property, and function depends on the polemical will to limit, reform, establish, short-circuit, or enlighten public life. As a result, we cannot choose whether to engage in it surreptitiously, by distinguishing between questions of nature and questions of politics, or explicitly, by treating those two sets of questions as a single issue that arises for all collectives. While the ecology movements tell us that nature is rapidly invading politics, we shall have to imagine - most often aligning ourselves with these movements but sometimes against them - what a politics finally freed from the sword of Damocles we call nature might be like.

About the Author

Bruno Latour is Professor at Sciences Po, Paris, and the 2013 winner of the Ludvig Holberg International Memorial Prize.

Users Review

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