

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BRUNO LATOUR, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 2004, x + 307 p.

In *Politics of Nature*, Latour makes his case with a continual stream of playful, bold and seemingly impossible statements that are intended to contradict all of our traditional beliefs about science and politics, and their place in society. Despite the cryptic style of delivery, an almost endless use of new jargon, and an overall lack of empirical rigor, the book nevertheless contains highly insightful, original, and compelling propositions. While difficult to pin down, the ideas offered up may prove valuable for both future sociological study and academic self-reflection, as we consider our place in the “pluriverse” of an increasingly interdependent knowledge society.

Latour begins with the seemingly dubious claim that “at no time in its short history has political ecology ever had anything to do with nature, with its defense or its protection” (p.5). He argues that nature is not a real category, but rather one side of a binary split instituted by the modern constitution. This constitution holds everything to be in one of two “houses,” such that science is separate from politics, nature from society, and facts from values. What could be more political, Latour asks, than a constitution that would leave all human opinion meaningless and fictional, and all of nature real, yet devoid of value and unable to speak? Indeed, the privilege of the select few who are granted the special power to mediate between the two houses of nature and society is evident. As such, the attempt made by philosophers to demarcate science from the humanities is not only untenable, it is a political device used to falsely strip moralists from the privilege of facts and create the illusion that scientists are free from values.

Political ecology is a useful case study for Latour’s larger agenda, as its subject matter is not easily placed in either of the two houses provided by the modern constitution. Where, for example, would one place genetically modified crops, mad cows, and environmental pollution in this two-house scheme? Latour shows that the falsely held vision of progress presented by the moderns, where subjects and objects become increasingly separated through analytic thought, is wrong. Rather, the human and nonhuman, scientific and political, are becoming more, not less interconnected in contemporary society. Latour aims to remove the arbitrary divisions that have been maintained from modernity, and envisions finally “bringing the collective together” into a common world. Here, we can focus on the myriad associations of humans and nonhumans, from which spokespersons generate admittedly uncertain propositions for consideration by the common “collective.”

Rather than rejecting all conceptual divisions outright, Latour considers the utility of a new “separation of powers.” The first power of “taking into account” considers new propositions, which are not to be dismissed until they have undergone the scrutiny of adequate consultation. If judged useful by the collective, the second power of “putting into order” is exercised, such that new propositions are sorted into the existing knowledge hierarchy and given closure. This new division of powers prevents the potential modernist pitfalls of, for example, the fact value distinction, as we can no longer accept supposed facts uncritically and dismiss value statements without adequate consideration. Instead, all propositions (scientific, political, or otherwise) must be assessed with “due process.” Latour insists that knowledge need no longer be accepted, rejected, or categorized by the traditional falsehoods of modernism, but can be made democratic through the accounting and ordering practices of the common collective.

Latour’s ideas are challenging and powerful, yet are at times convoluted and difficult to decipher, partly because he relies too much on pure armchair theorizing. A greater emphasis on specific empirical observations (as seen beautifully in his earlier work) would have made his arguments more compelling. For example, one might argue that we already have collectives to observe today in the form of interdisciplinary teams tackling heated environmental issues. What are the processes by which such teams “take into account” and “put into order” the wide assortment of political pressures, scientific facts, and public opinions they encounter? What might we learn about how to construct broader knowledge collectives from what we already know about local groups of heterogeneous specialists operating on a smaller scale? These sorts of empirical inquiries would have provided a more concrete angle for the analysis and helped ground the abstract and almost utopian ideas.

Politics of Nature is an original and thought-provoking critique of the ingrained and seemingly irrational tenets of modernism, which are shown to be inadequate for guiding the increasingly complex and overlapping environment of science and politics. While modernism is far from dead, Latour shows that many of the assumptions contained in the ethos of modernism (e.g., the obsessive need for dualisms) have been damaging rather than enabling for contemporary scholarship. This book will help social scientists question their own assumptions and practices, and as such, it is an excellent read for young scholars struggling to find their epistemological footing. For sociologists interested in the increasing heterogeneity of contemporary knowledge cultures, Latour’s latest work is ripe with ideas that beg for further empirical development. I would recommend this book to anyone in the social sciences or humanities interested in ecological theory, science and technology, or the link between knowledge and politics.

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