

Bringing Europe Down to Earth

Article by Bruno Latour

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Environmental politics did not get us anywhere, we need politics full stop. The climate and the environment shape material interests as much as wages and only forces that represent these interests will stand on firm ground in the years ahead. This simple recommendation by Bruno Latour, drawn from his analysis of the new climate regime, has major implications for geopolitics and the European Union. In this interview, Le Grand Continent presses the French philosopher further in a discussion that spans borders, belonging, and Brexit.

Le Grand Continent: What is Europe for you?

Bruno Latour: I'm not a specialist on Europe, but I try to distinguish between Brussels-Europe, i.e. the post-war apparatus connecting European states – which I think represents 98 per cent of what is reported in the media and public opinion about Europe – and the Europe that interests me. This other Europe could be the Europe of Renan for France or the Europe of *Heimat* for Germany, in the proper sense of the term. [1] Here I mean a Europe that is metaphysical, anthropological, a shared space and shared culture. I probably wouldn't have made this distinction 10 years ago. But today, in the current geopolitical situation, with Europe surrounded by enemies, it is all the more important to be critical of Brussels-Europe and to have a passion (not necessarily a love, but a passion), for *Heimat* Europe.

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In the last part of your recent book, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, you reach a conclusion that is close to a panegyric on Europe, praising its “incredible coming together” to create an “overlap” of national interests. Are you talking about the European Union as an institution here?

Yes, because I'm interested in Europe as an environmental problem. Because the questions that we face are questions that cross borders and levels, and we need to ask ourselves: what framework are we going to tackle them in? It turns out that only Europe, this time European Union Europe, has come up with measures – measures which are cobbled together and flawed but important nonetheless – that overlap with formerly national interests.

Do you think that the European Union has managed to overcome this contradiction between the local and the global that you talk about in your book?

No, absolutely not. I've written a [long article on this question](#) in a geopolitical journal. Of course, Europe invented the idea of global. There is a Chinese global and as many other 'globals' as there are histories of conquest. But what's interesting is that Europe invented a model of global that has in some ways been turned against it in the

form of world wars and decolonisation, then decolonial thought and the provincialisation of Europe, and the issue of immigration today.

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So, if there is a place where every problem, confusion between every level – local and global – arises, it is Europe. Having invented this strange idea, a vision that it tried to impose on everybody, Europe's historical responsibility is now to 'uninvent' it, to find other ways to leave behind this sort of *imperium mundi* which does not exist, but which originates in Europe. Peter Sloterdijk wrote a really nice book, *If Europe Awakes*, which asks the question: what can we really do with Europe now? Faced with the magnitude of the challenges Europe cannot be or think small, that's the real problem. Europe has been somewhat dwarfed by the global system it once contributed to uphold, but it cannot remain so because this global system is now being rocked by the environmental crisis. So, there is a genuine philosophical problem of redefining not a European mission, which would not make sense, but a European responsibility.

Today, the issue of Europe is virtually inseparable from the issue of borders. Are you for the end of borders?

No, I'm for the proliferation of borders. Imagining a Europe that would supersede nations is an illusion. It's not that there are no borders. Rather, in addition to national borders, there are overlaps due to immigration pressure and the environmental crisis. We must distinguish between border as identity and border as attachment. Identity means putting up barriers on the assumption that we can manage alone; in other words, what's happening in Italy at the moment, the invention of a world that we know perfectly well doesn't exist. Attachments, on the contrary, acknowledge our interdependencies: if Italy were to describe its attachments, they would never stay within the confines of the country. That doesn't mean that we cross borders, but that we think of ourselves as attached, intertwined, which is not the same thing at all.

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The problem is that this Europe machinery, the EU-Europe, has been understood and explained by political scientists as either a construct of nation-states, a superstructure, or an empire model. But there's an entirely different way of defining borders: it's to recognise our attachments, the things to which you are attached. And these things to which you're attached do not create an isolate surrounded by walls. There are thousands of tensions and intertwinements between them. And that's the very challenge of this shift: moving from this European-invented space to the tangible space that I called "dwelling place".

However, putting these connections into strict categories of thought and representation might seem necessary for any form of governance...

The question isn't about the ideal organisation of European Union-Europe. I'm interested in defining the existential belonging, in a *Heimat* or homeland style. Which doesn't give any guidance for the practical organisation of institutions. There isn't a solution to this problem at the moment because we are in the middle of a conservative revolution. It's not an institutional crisis, it's an existential crisis. Europe is threatened existentially

from within and without. Faced with an existential threat, we must think about priorities: what does it mean to make each of us understand Europe as our land, our home? What really surprises me when it comes to questions about Europe is that when we talk about Europe, it's only about Brussels. Yet we live in a Europe that has another reality.

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But can the European Union really co-exist with this “*Heimat* Europe” of belonging? Isn't the European space as you envisage it threatened by Brussels and its governance model?

All I'm trying to do is place the Brussels government within the context of a greater whole, which is existential to it. Criticism of Brussels Europe leads to reflection on institutional reforms that are incomprehensible to the general public. Regardless of questions about reforming the Union, there is an existential Europe that is attacked by the United States, discarded by Brexit, and abandoned from within by countries who are themselves inventing nation-states that have never existed: re-imagined nation-states. What explains the brutalisation of public life is that people know that this doesn't exist. What is Italy alone, separated from the European Union? It doesn't exist. And, in any case, in an environmental crisis, no nation-state can exist alone. However, we need its protection and therein lies the huge contradiction. We need to emphasise – and this is the conclusion of my book – those forms of belonging that are based not on identity but on attachments. In other words, on what allows us to live.

You talk about a “third attractor” [2] to solve this riddle. Could you explain exactly what this is?

The third attractor, if I were able to properly describe it, would attract many. It has been much considered by environmentalists. It consists of life forms. It isn't simply a space in the geographic sense; it is leveraged by new legal frameworks, by people working on the commons, on alternatives to property rights; it is contemplated by every activist under the sun. It is densely populated but has no political orientation. In short, everyone knows we are heading towards another way of belonging.

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How can we mobilise and move towards the this new basis for representation that breaks the Right/Left, conservative/progressive mould, which you say is no longer fit for tackling the environmental crisis?

Like everyone, I'm somewhat at a loss when it comes to the mechanism. Taking political positions is very complicated because interests are impossible to define as people don't vote for their interests since they don't know what their interests are.

The main problem, I think, is the abstraction of the description of living conditions, because we tend to forget the environmental crisis that is redefining all belonging and certainties. Questions like how many are we? Where are we? With whom? With what livelihood? These are fundamental questions, questions of underlying geopolitics, on which we re-project the only two models that we have: either that of globalisation which says we no longer have borders, or the idea that we should again become the nation-states that didn't actually exist previously. Orbán's empire is a new invention which has never in fact existed, and is not the 'eternal Hungary'. We thus have two complete fictions: either peoples without lands who are looking for one, or lands without peoples.

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Can the environment really be depoliticised? Should it become an epistemological question or an ethical and moral one?

We need to do away with the environment: we've made the environment a part of politics and it has led nowhere. We need to talk about politics, full stop. In politics, there are living beings who are intertwined, who have converging or diverging interests, but that's what we must describe: the politics of living beings. We could have political parties if we were to radically re-describe the interests and positions of individuals. At such point, we would have aggregated grievances and have political parties with programmes and platforms, as we did before. We had them before because, apart from some questions about redistribution, we shared the idea of modernisation. Once there is no longer a shared world, parties no longer exist. They will re-form when we return to a degree of pixelation on political issues that is almost at the scale of each individual.

Your book cite the example of the lists of grievances drawn up in the French Revolution.

It is a situation of great interest to me because it created the French people, who understood themselves by describing their attachments and injustices. That's what interests me about the second Europe: if we describe the Europe of attachments, there isn't a single person in France who isn't European, who is unattached. It's clear that we are not globalised but that we have been made more *worldly*, literally speaking [*mondialisés*]. Everyone has a description of their attachments in a network and these clearly cross borders. But we also need – as the notion of attachment more or less implies – security and protection. However, borders don't bring security and protection. Borders are like the Great Wall of China: they have never kept anyone out. For there to be parties, there must be grievances; for there to be grievances, there must be interests; and for there to be interests, there must be a describable world.

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The programme of the anti-capitalist Left seems unthinkable at a time when so many are voting for conservatives or the far right. If we are unable to say to those voting for the likes of Front National: "Yes, you're right to want security and protection, and you're right to want attachment and belonging. So, describe your attachment and belonging and we'll see what that looks like," then all parties are just as anti-European (failing the very idea of Europe). Everyone is inventing nations – like Orbán's Hungary – which, without a livelihood, don't exist economically either. That is today's tragedy: the brutalisation of politics means that people know that the models being offered them are impossible, while at the same time they sense that globalisation is coming to an end.

Does the 'global' make the world impossible to describe?

The 'global' is leading us astray. Once we shift to the global, we are lost because it lumps everything together and we no longer see any way of getting a grip on it. Politics is about exactly that, getting a grip. But to do so you have to be able to describe things practically. As soon as you ask people to describe situations, possibilities open up for acting and redefining bonds: that's what politics is. But if we are in the abstract of a return to the nation-state that doesn't exist or the global that doesn't exist either, making people talk just drives them to despair. When the Left tells people they should be anti-capitalist, what can they do with that? It's the denial of the climate situation that sets up this whole political situation. Today, we tell people both that the goal of globalisation has become impossible due to the environmental crisis and that we should therefore retreat inside the nation-state, while

knowing full well that it's impossible.

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My question is: what can we say to people today who, for good reason, demand the protection of a nation-state when this state doesn't exist as far as their real interests and attachments are concerned? Can we say anything other than: "You are populists, you are neofascists who want to turn back the clock, and the best you can hope for is that economic growth continues"?

[1] The German word *Heimat* refers to a feeling of belonging to the homeland, to the place where we feel at home. The reference to Renan underpins the French understanding of what makes a nation: the explicit show of will to live together as a community.

[2] Attractors in Bruno Latour's book are polarising concepts, pointing to a direction like the magnetic north 'attracts' the needle of a compass.

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