Bruno Latour

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Reassembling the Political

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Introduction
Truth Politics and Power Politics

When Pluto Press asked for advice on who should write a book on Bruno Latour's political philosophy, I insisted on doing the job myself. This was not because I imagined myself an expert on the topic. Despite having spent fascinated years with the works of Latour, and despite having written an entire book reconstructing his metaphysics,[1] I still had no clear sense of Latour's political philosophy. Sometimes his political ideas were scattered like seed throughout his writings, though rarely in concentrated form; at other times, his politics seemed to coincide with reality as a whole, identified with the struggle of actants coupling and uncoupling from networks. In both of these cases it seemed doubtful whether a coherent political philosophy could be reassembled from Latour's works. Yet by the conclusion of this project, all doubts were removed, and I had become convinced of the following three points. First, Latour's work is thoroughly political from the beginning of his career all the way to the present. Second, the usual critiques of Latour's political philosophy (which normally come from the Left) have failed to engage him on any but the most peripheral issues. And third, however much practical detail may be missing from Latour's politics, he is closer to the future of political philosophy than much of the better-known work conducted under that heading.

Despite my initial perplexity, the research for this book did not begin in utter darkness. In *Prince of Networks* I argued for Latour's historic importance as a philosopher, and this importance was reason enough to suspect that his magic box of innovations might lead us (explicitly or not) to a new model of the political landscape. It had long seemed to me that our basic political spectrum of Left vs. Right was hopelessly entangled with a modern ontology that Latour effectively destroyed in his 1991 classic *We Have Never Been Modern*, even if most philosophers and activists are still guided by this Left/Right schema. As Latour sees it, modernity is grounded in a taxonomical rift between a mechanistic nature on one side and an arbitrarily constructed society on the other. Ontology has consequences, and the effect of this modern ontology is that the dualism

of nature and culture suggests a scheme in which politics is based either on a knowledge of the true nature of human things, or on the conviction that knowledge does not exist and must therefore be replaced by a struggle for dominance. As a temporary placeholder for these two options we might speak not of "Left" and "Right" politics, but of "Down" and "Up" politics, in the same whimsical spirit as the classification of quarks in particle physics. But it should already by clear that the division between Down and Up does not coincide with the distinction between Left and Right, since the latter orientations can and do exist under both models of politics.

Down politics sees itself as a political philosophy of knowledge as opposed to ignorance. It comes in both Left and Right forms. On the Left, it consists in the revolutionary view that humans are equal as thinking things and as bearers of inalienable rights. If humans do not currently enjoy such rights, if they fall prey to enduring inequality, it is because they are blocked by some ulterior force: the accidental accretions of history, the self-serving ideologies of privileged groups, and perhaps even their own ignorance, such that they may need an educated vanguard to liberate them from darkness. Under this model the key political act is *opposition*, since the existing state of power will almost never coincide with truth, and must therefore be confronted and replaced. The weak are generally more right than the strong: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," as the Bible puts it.[2] The West, still the seat of economic and military power, must subject itself to masochistic self-condemnation as a historical site of monstrous crimes and vested interests that prevent our rebuilding the world in the image of egalitarian truth. Protest, sarcasm towards authority and tradition, refusal to participate, and "speaking the truth to power" become the tokens of a genuinely political attitude. Over the past decade, this form of Leftism has been resurgent in the continental philosophy subfield in which I work. Radical hard Left positions have largely replaced the social constructionist liberal-Leftism of the 1990s, now widely dismissed as the sophistry of suburban language games. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, both of them revolutionary firebrands, have become the emblematic continental thinkers of our time.

But Down politics also comes in a Right version, if less frequently so. Here the supposed political knowledge leads us not to universal human equality, but to the evident superiority of philosophers over the masses. These beleaguered heroes must somehow exist amidst a multitude of inferiors who are blinded by facile commitment to national flags and permissive lifestyles, and even to religion, "considered by the people as

equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful."[3] The central political question becomes how to prevent the masses from discovering how dangerous philosophers really are, so that philosophers will not be ostracized or even poisoned. This requires shrewd public rhetoric joined with coded esoteric writing, and sometimes outright political deception. This view of things can be found in Plato's *Republic* (though only if taken literally), and is also found today among numerous disciples of Leo Strauss, whose influence on recent American policy has been considerable.

What the Left and Right versions of Down politics share is the notion that politics ought to be built in the image of *truth*, and that truth faces various unfortunate obstructions that must be dealt with either through revolutionary violence or prudent aristocratic innuendo. Both versions presuppose that *someone* has access to the truth: the working class as a whole, the revolutionary avant garde, or the superior philosopher. Hence, both of these political philosophies must collapse if we discover that there is no such thing as unmediated political knowledge. And given that Latour is the mortal enemy of all forms of unmediated knowledge, it should be clear that he shares nothing in common with either of these positions. For Latour there is no transcendent truth that might be embodied in some ideal form of society. We can thus rename Down politics as "Truth Politics": not because it is true, but because it *thinks* it has the truth. Viewed from the Truth Politics of both Left and Right, Latour can only look like a sophist, since he denies all claims to direct knowledge of the truth.

This brings us to Up politics, named thus because it does not base politics on some underlying truth that governs appearance. Instead, politics becomes a power struggle without any transcendent court of appeal: a war of all against all in which seizing power for one's own standpoint becomes an end in itself. The Left version of the Up standpoint is familiar both from the identity politics of postmodernist intellectuals and from claims that desire is infinitely creative and must be subject to no sublimating social constraint. The Right version can be found in Thomas Hobbes, with his fear that transcendent appeals to religion or science will produce civil war by outflanking the somber power of the sovereign Leviathan. It can also be found in the dark German thinker Carl Schmitt, for whom politics begins when all common ground ends, when a "state of exception" is declared and politics is revealed for what it always is: a mortal struggle that separates all contenders into friends and enemies. The enemies are simply to be defeated, not annihilated as evil degenerate Satans, since any moralistic

view of the enemy would require a transcendent viewpoint on justice and goodness that does not exist according to the partisans of Up.

What the Left and Right versions of Up politics share is the sense that politics cannot appeal to a truth lying elsewhere in order to settle its disputes, since politics itself *is* ultimately the truth. All struggle is a struggle for power or survival, with the hope that our friends may win and our enemies lose; it is not a struggle for truth against falsity. Note that both versions of Up political philosophies must collapse if it is shown that *there is* some standard of right and wrong or good and bad beyond the struggle itself. Up politics can be renamed as "Power Politics," already a widely familiar term. But whereas Latour's distance from Truth Politics is so obvious that no one would ever accuse him of belonging to that group, his relations with the Power Politics camp display much more complicity and ambiguity. Indeed, for long portions of his career Latour was not only mistaken for a Power Politician, but in many respects actually *was* one. We might even read Latour's entire career as a long effort to free himself from the mere power struggle of actants in order to regain some sort of access to a reality beyond power.

We now face a modern deadlock between Truth Politics and Power Politics, both of them coming in Left and Right forms and both of them emanating from the modernist dualism that Latour devotes his career to destroying. Truth Politics favors the truth of human nature over the shallowness of human culture, while Power Politics favors the immanence of human culture over the illusory depth of human nature. Later in the book we will consider whether Latour's attempted destruction of Truth Politics and Power Politics also leads to the dissolution of the political Left and Right. In the meantime, it will not do to dismiss Latour as a "bourgeois neoliberal Catholic," or some other piece of grandstanding rhetorical fuzziness. Though it is a prominent vice of the revolutionary Left to depict nearly every alternative view as "reactionary," Latour is simply not a reactionary. The case is far subtler than this. What he tries to do is to replace the modernist dilemma of Truth Politics and Power Politics with what I shall call "Object Politics," a reference to his use of terms such as *Dingpolitik* (thing politics) and object-oriented political philosophy. Is Latour able to define an Object Politics that does not succumb to the vices of Truth or Power Politics? Is he successful in establishing a pragmatist lineage for Object Politics by running it through John Dewey? Does the coming era of ecological troubles really entail Object Politics in the way Latour suggests? More generally, is Object Politics a viable program with

concrete political consequences rather than just broad metaphysical ones? These are some of the questions that guided the writing of this book.

Yet I have also suggested that Latour is not an entirely neutral broker with respect to the four political positions outlined above (Left and Right Truth Politics, Left and Right Power Politics). When in doubt, Latour's political philosophy can be summarized roughly as follows: he is a liberally minded Hobbesian who adds inanimate entities to the political sphere. If forced at gunpoint to choose between the four positions above, he would probably choose the Hobbes/Schmitt pole of Right Power Politics, though without the remorseless dose of authoritarianism and reaction found in these authors. Having known Latour personally for fifteen years, I can safely describe him (*qua* voter, citizen, and reader of the news) as a politically benevolent French centrist with progressive tendencies, not as a sinister Machiavellian chess player. Yet Latour *qua* political philosopher is fascinated by Hobbes and Schmitt, insofar as his philosophy leaves no room for any transcendent truth that could guide political action. His science is a science of immanent networks devoid of things-in-themselves, just as his Catholicism is a borderline heretical religion of rituals and processions without a transcendent God. It would be nonsensical to call Latour a disciple of Marx, but not so ridiculous to call him a disciple of Schmitt. Yet Hobbes is an even better point of comparison. In July 2012, during a chance encounter with Latour on a sidewalk in Copacabana, we briefly discussed my plans for the present book. I asked about his earliest enthusiasm in political philosophy, and without hesitation he answered: "Hobbes." In retrospect, it was a question that hardly needed to be asked. If we take the word "King" in a figurative rather than literal sense, Latour might just as well have been speaking of himself in his 1991 summary of Hobbes:

> Civil wars will rage as long as there exist supernatural entities that citizens feel they have a right to petition when they are persecuted by the authorities of this lower world. The loyalty of the old medieval society—to God and King—is no longer possible if all people can petition God directly, or designate their own King. Hobbes wanted to wipe the slate clean of all appeals to entities higher than civil authority. He wanted to rediscover Catholic unity while at the same time closing off access to transcendence. (NBM 19)

Religion is not the only problem, since Hobbes also refuses transcendent appeals to nature by way of science. Consider his rejection of Robert

Boyle's experiment demonstrating the existence of a vacuum, as recounted by Latour:

> How can a society be made to hold together peacefully, Hobbes asks, on the pathetic foundations of matters of fact? He is particularly annoyed by the relative change in the scale of phenomena. According to Boyle, the big questions concerning matter and divine power can be subjected to experimental resolution, and this resolution will be partial and modest. Now Hobbes rejects the possibility of the vacuum for ontological and political reasons of primary philosophy, and he continues to allege the existence of an invisible ether that must be present, even when Boyle's worker is too out of breath to operate his pump. (NBM 22)

Each of the four political philosophies mentioned above runs obvious risks. There are Stalinist or Platonist dangers when the elites of Truth Politics try to rebuild society in the name of their purported truth, all consequences be damned. And Power Politics faces both Machiavellian and Relativist dangers when truth is thrown to the wind and we are left with nothing but struggles, without recourse to anything beyond struggle itself. My conception of Latour's political philosophy is that after beginning with a basically Hobbesian framework lacking transcendent courts of appeal, he gradually faces up to the drawbacks of this position. Latour's increasing insistence on our political *ignorance* is one index of his struggle to find standards that could soften the hard edge of Power Politics without recourse to a transcendent world of absolute knowledge. This leads him through Schmitt to the debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, and thus to an "object-oriented" politics in which struggles are prompted by external irritants rather than feeding solely on themselves. Yet I shall also argue that Latour's solution remains too confined within his initial Hobbesian horizon to make a full escape from Power Politics, so that he always remains more tempted by Schmitt than by Marx or Rousseau. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which Latour is closer to being right than those who swallow Truth Politics whole. And furthermore, however much the critics have scratched their heads over Latour's importation of nonhumans into the political sphere, the age of climate politics is already upon us, and Latour's Object Politics is surely a more promising route to Gaia than any of the various brands of modern political philosophy.

Chapter 1 sets the basic terms of the discussion, reviewing the problems and clues that must guide us in the search for a Latourian political philosophy. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 consider the political philosophy of what

I shall term (admittedly with some appearance of cliché) early Latour, middle Latour, and late Latour. Though most philosophers have been robotically divided into early, middle, and late phases at some point in the scholarship about them, it will be shown in Latour's case that the division is justified. Chapter 5 considers various critiques of Latour from the Left, which I shall reinterpret as critiques based on Truth Politics. These critiques are fewer in number than might be expected, since the vast literature on Latour is not yet so vast where politics is concerned. The topic of Chapter 6 is Carl Schmitt as a good right-wing exemplar of Power Politics, and here we consider how various Left and Right treatments of Schmitt differ from Latour's own. Chapter 7 turns to the debate between Lippmann and Dewey, now one of the keystones of Latour's understanding of politics. The concluding Chapter 8 ties together the various threads of this book and looks ahead to how political philosophy might change in Latour's wake.

One of my guiding principles has been not to put words into the mouth of Bruno Latour. Since he is alive and well and still very much in his intellectual prime, it is not my place to speculate how Latour *might* speak about the political philosophies of Arendt, Grotius, Jefferson, Locke, Xenophon, or others about whom he has said little or nothing. Nor will I speculate about what he *might* say in the course of a longer engagement with Marx. In practice, this means that I have spoken mostly about those political philosophers discussed by Latour himself. One of the effects of this decision is that, while Chapter 6 deals directly with Schmitt and Chapter 7 directly with Lippmann and Dewey (all of them posthumous dialogue partners with Latour), Chapter 5 is concerned with Leftist commentators critical of Latour rather than with Marx and Foucault directly (since Latour has so far dealt with these figures only in passing).

The country where Latour is taken most seriously as a philosopher is still the Netherlands, the only place on earth where his books are usually sold together in the "Philosophy" section rather than dispersed through a confusing variety of shelves. Thus it is surely no accident that three Dutch authors have taught me more about Latour's political philosophy than anyone else: Gerard de Vries, Noortje Marres, and Peer Schouten. Since I am fortunate to know all three in person, my debt to them goes beyond those of their works cited below.

Will Viney at Pluto Press is the one who approached me about this project, and is also responsible for suggesting its catchy subtitle, a reference to Latour's own *Reassembling the Social*. His successor David Castle was unusually patient in enduring some unexpected delays in the completion of the book. Anthony Winder's remarkably alert copyediting greatly enhanced

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But my greatest debt is to my wife, Necla Demir Harman, for enduring my manic writing schedule and many other things. Commuting from Ankara to Cairo would be an impossible arrangement if not for her constant support.

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In Search of a Latourian Political Philosophy

At the time of this writing in early 2014, Bruno Latour is firmly established as one of the world's leading intellectuals. Not yet 70 years old, he has reached the point where his battles for influence have mostly been won. His work has been cited tens of thousands of times in so many disciplines that we have to regard Latour himself as personifying a new discipline. He has received Norway's lucrative Holberg Prize, that emerging Nobel of the human sciences. He has delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, thus joining the ranks of such canonized philosophers as Hannah Arendt, Henri Bergson, William James, and Alfred North Whitehead. He has ranked as the tenth most cited book author in the humanities, just ahead of the formidable quartet of Sigmund Freud, Gilles Deleuze, Immanuel Kant, and Martin Heidegger.[1] Nor has Latour gone unappreciated at his home institution, having served as Vice President for Research at Sciences Po in Paris, one of Europe's most dynamic universities.

While none of this proves Latour's ultimate historical weight as a thinker, it certainly earns him the right and the burden of comparison with the names mentioned above. The names I have chosen are mostly those of philosophers; as a philosopher myself, I am more concerned with Latour's contributions to my own discipline than with his already celebrated achievements in the social sciences. And in philosophy, I am sorry to report, results are still delayed. Here Latour's battle for influence has barely begun, and is likely to continue beyond his own natural lifespan. It is sufficient to note that the same list that ranked Latour as the tenth most cited author in the humanities described him only with the headings "sociology, anthropology," though the "philosophy" tag was awarded freely to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler (all of them dismissed by some academic philosophers as charlatans) along with Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, and Roland Barthes (all of them further from disciplinary philosophy than Latour himself). Though academic

categories are of little long-term importance, the problem is not just one of categories, since philosophers still do not seem to be reading Latour's books in significant numbers. In 2009 I published *Prince of Networks*, the first treatment of Latour as a pivotal figure in contemporary philosophy.[2] The primary aim of that book was to alert philosophically trained readers to a neglected major figure living in their midst. But so far, at least, the evidence suggests that *Prince of Networks* has served to introduce more social scientists to philosophy than philosophers to Latour. While I am delighted that *Prince of Networks* has reached such a large interdisciplinary audience, it is puzzling that Latour remains unread and sometimes even unknown in the continental branch of philosophy, where recent French authors can usually count on a warm reception and an optimistic hearing. Even so, his status in France has improved to the point where Patrice Maniglier could risk describing Latour as "the Hegel of our times" in the pages of *Le Monde* without sounding ridiculous.[3]

But since *Prince of Networks* has already made a detailed case for Latour as a philosopher, I shall not repeat the exercise here, and will behave in what follows as if Latour's recognition by philosophers were a *fait accompli*. The question guiding the present book is different: granted that Latour is a philosopher, can we find a political philosophy in his works? So far he has not written an explicit treatise on politics in the usual sense of the term, nor does he seem in any rush to do so. Yet the word "politics" can often be found in Latour's books, and not just in explicit titles such as *Politics of Nature* or "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik." His work abounds with intriguing references to such political philosophers as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Schmitt, and more recently Dewey and Lippmann. In his early period Latour shows a tendency to identify the political sphere with reality as a whole, to such an extent that he is often accused of reducing truth to politics.[4] Yet the place of politics in his work remains visibly unsettled. In his more recent writings on the "modes of existence," Latour claims to renounce his earlier ontologization of politics, reframing it as just one mode among numerous others. These changes in his conceptions of politics, along with his evident worry over the possible overuse of political metaphors in his earlier work, indicate that the nature of the political sphere remains one of Latour's central concerns.

FOUR DANGERS

Before beginning, we should be aware of four pressing dangers that threaten political philosophy in the field that I shall call, without qualification or