

# Bruno Latour Encounters International Relations: An Interview

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## Abstract

Philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour's work on actor-network theory (ANT), science and technology studies (STS), and the politics of nature, has made a substantial impact upon the social sciences, and more recently, International Relations (IR). This interview records Latour's first direct 'encounter' with IR, and explores concepts and topics as varied as sovereignty, the State of Nature, globality and spheres, the thought of Carl Schmitt, war and universalism, Gaia and climate politics, and the creation of publics, secrecy, and politics as a mode of existence. It provides new insight into Latour's thinking and philosophy, while opening new avenues of research for IR scholars to pursue in the future.

## Keywords

Latour, Interview, IR

**WW [to BL]:** <sup>1</sup>In your writing around the mid-2000s you're working with the figure of parliament – a parliament of *things*. It's not a 'parliament' as political science or publics

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1. This interview was conducted by William Walters [WW] and Mark B. Salter [MS], with contributions from Iver B. Neumann [IBN]. The discussion was moderated by Scott Hamilton [SH]. It was convened by the Editors of *Millennium*, volume 44, in conjunction with their 2015 *Millennium* conference on 'Failure and Denial in World Politics' held at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) on 17 October, 2015. The discussion has been lightly edited and amended.

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might understand the term, but a parliament that includes things as well as the devices necessary to transport people and things into a given place for assembly. But in your more recent work, as Philip Conway has observed,<sup>2</sup> politics is discussed less in the figure of parliament than as what Edkins and Zehfuss call a 'generalised international'.<sup>3</sup> We think this comes across especially in your *Facing Gaia* lectures,<sup>4</sup> where we encounter Carl Schmitt, his talk of friends and enemies, of frontlines, of territory, of geopolitics, diplomacy, war, and so on. And so, our first question would be: have you in a certain sense gone 'international', as it were?

**BL:** [Laughs] Ah, like Monsieur Jourdain, in Molière, while doing prose.<sup>5</sup> That is, without knowing!

I don't know – I've always been interested in the question of the 'globe' as a sort of wrong way of approaching the question of nature. In fact, I've always been interested in nature as a political entity and a hidden parliament, so to speak. Or, a type of hidden authority which was always *behind* the back, and was made, very explicitly, to weaken the assemblage of politics. So in that sense, I was always interested in the same questions. But now, through reading *The Nomos of the Earth*,<sup>6</sup> I was struck – and I will talk a little about the *Politics of Nature* project<sup>7</sup> – I was struck by the coming back of the *territory* – and the land, and even of the soil. It is very impressive, how many people now are even working on the *soil*! The soil, including grass, and earthworms, and all sorts of things.

Even the Pope mentions it in his Encyclical.<sup>8</sup> There are now dozens of art projects around land and territory, which makes sense because it is a question of going *back* to Earth. Earth matters; as an abstract concept, but as a very localised, and re-localised, and re-territorialised, site.

I don't know what a 'nation' is, or 'international'. I'm not sure what they mean. I am working now with scientists who study 'critical zones', which are sort of water

2. Philip Conway, 'Back Down to Earth: Reassembling Latour's Anthropocenic Geopolitics', *Global Discourse* (2015): 1–20. doi: 10.1080/23269995.2015.1004247.

3. Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 'Generalising the International', *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 451–71. doi: 10.1017/S0260210505006583.

4. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature*, Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh, February 28, 2013.

5. Latour is referring to the comedic play written in 1670 by Molière, *Le bourgeois gentil-homme*, or *The Would-Be Noble*. The play's title is oxymoronic because it would have been an impossibility to be both bourgeois and a noble, at this time in France.

6. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2003).

7. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

8. Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home, Encyclical Letter Laudato, Si' of the Holy Father Francis*. This line is drawn from St. Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Sun*. Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). Last accessed October 20, 2015.

catchments, basically<sup>9</sup> – spread around the world, and equipped with lots of instruments, trying to compare what happens to waters and chemicals. A Mendeleev table of elements, so to speak, and what the humans are doing in it. Basically, these scientists re-territorialise all soil, in some sense. Lots of sciences which were there before – like geography, geology, paleontology – now possess an urgency which is, of course, new. And all of this is predicated by the irruption of what I call Gaia, but which is really the Anthropocene. In it, there is an urgency in foreshadowing, or foregrounding – *foregrounding!* [Laughs] – territory, which is I think new, and which I try to register. I am now talking to a lot of geophysical geographers, geologists, geomorphologists, and we are all excited by this turn to the Anthropocene, or the ‘Anthropocene turn’. Even theologians! They call it the ‘geocentric theology’, and there’s a pastor writing on this, Michael Northcott<sup>10</sup> in Edinburgh, and a number of other geocentric theologians, which is very odd – because they have been used to looking *up!* And now – they look *down*. [Laughter] And so, now we are back to very old questions; the pre-Hobbesian questions about what the State is, really. That’s what I’m interested in in the book I just published, *Facing Gaia*, which is a Gifford [Lecture series], but in French.

**WW:** That resonates with something I’ve thought about in studying migration in the last ten years. That trend also seems to be there, where I’ve been struck for a long time at how much the Earth in various manifestations is part of migration. You know, these questions of people crossing mountains, or crossing deserts, or crossing seas – there’s something very ‘geo’ about migration in its representation and its governance.

**BL:** Right. That is what is so amazing in the *The Nomos of the Earth*; that the Hobbesian State is extraordinarily *abstract*, in a way. I mean, it can be *anywhere*. It doesn’t have to be any ‘where’. It has no ‘Earth’, or ground. And then suddenly, people hearing this say ‘Oh no no! The State can’t be anywhere! It’s highly specific!’, which is also what geography always did. There is the very strange way in which geography had been split, between human and physical geography, and then became again an ‘offshore’ in some sort of sense, or abstract. Which is very odd, because it is the ‘great discipline’. Now, *Gaia*-graphy is back, so to speak!

But I don’t know – how does it resonate in your discipline? Previously, I went to learn about politics and International Relations, and it was a disaster. Apart from Didier Bigo (who I’m sure you might know), the reaction was ‘*Oh no no no we are not interested in what you can say!*’ [Laughter] Now it would be nice to be able to have people to talk to! So, I am sorry of my ignorance in International Relations. But, I would like to know at some point: what *is* the nation-state?

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9. See Bruno Latour, ‘Some Advantages of the Notion of “Critical Zone” for Geopolitics’, *Procedia: Earth and Planetary Science* (2014): 1–4. A water catchment is similar to a drainage basin, or a space of land that collects water, eventually forming a larger body of water.
  10. Michael S. Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change* (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

**MS:** Yes, well, I think we all would.

**BL:** Or, what is the *remnant* of it?

**IBN:** One wonders what the world has come to if Parisians have to take up intellectual exile in London! I mean, that's a new one, that's a total inversion of everything.

**BL:** Well, it's my fault. But now I am also very interested in asking *you* about what I mention in tonight's keynote lecture<sup>11</sup> about the visualisation of the State. There's a big issue, it seems to me, in – I've never used the word 'international' – but in 'overlapping' States. The former Westphalian states, *now overlapping* on one another. So, to find out how to *draw* them; how do you draw this overlapping? This is one of the things we attempted with Scott Hamilton in May, in our COP21 simulation.<sup>12</sup> And it's very difficult, because we came across this difficulty immediately: how do you *show* – and of course, as you know, Foucault has shown this many times – to directly show the connection between the visualisation of the maps, *and the state itself*? What is the next version of an inter-mingling of overlapping States? It is very difficult to think of how it is going to be drawn. There's a real cartographic point here, which is extremely interesting.

**MS:** Can I push that point forward? The article that you sent us, the *Onus Orbis Terrarum*, was very fascinating, and spoke to some of the questions of sovereignty and geopolitics much more directly than others.<sup>13</sup> You say that the moment you start speaking of an object that *then* has relations, you've made a mistake, in that once you describe boundaries then you have already described its relations, and then it's a kind of a methodological error to then say 'There's this thing that has "relations".' This thing is always constructed *in-relation*. So, how do you conceptualise the state in that way? Is there no such thing for you as a state, separate from the nation-state? Is there no such thing as the state or as the sovereign?

**BL:** I am not sure I have a 'theory' of the State. First, on that question of localisation, it's an argument where I took Whitehead, and brought it to a completely different audience. The argument is that it's not so much that a 'relation' is first (and that's an argument

11. See Bruno Latour, 'International Relations in the Time of Gaia-Politics?' (Keynote Address presented at the *Millennium* conference on 'Failure and Denial in World Politics', London, 17 October 2015). Available at: [mil.sagepub.com/site/Videos/Videos.xhtml](http://mil.sagepub.com/site/Videos/Videos.xhtml).

12. Paris Climat 2015 'Make It Work!', 29–31 May, 2015. This simulation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) included non-state entities such as soil, the oceans, the atmosphere, forests, etc., and ascribed to them the legal status of sovereign states so as to grant them a voice and equal participation and influence in policy deliberations. A film on the simulation is available in both English and French at: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/climat>.

13. See in this issue, Bruno Latour, 'Onus Orbis Terrarum: About a Possible Shift in the Definition of Sovereignty', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016).

with my friend of many years, Graham Harman<sup>14</sup>). It's the idea of localising and *then* having relations. This latter relation is not the same relation as the one you had before localising. If you take migration: the migrants are *in* a territory, in some way, *before* – and then, when you draw the boundaries, *then* you add the relation, but now it's not the same relation.

The point is to retrieve the relation before the localisation has been produced, which is in technical terms, the principle of monads, and of my great hero Gabriel Tarde – and which of course, is a principle of actor-network theory.<sup>15</sup> And this is very interesting for International Relations, because it means that when you draw, you have overlapping relations of entities. Things are overlapped, and only later do you get isolated 'atoms' and individuals. Then it is the *work* of producing the boundary that is of course what we should study. But, you also do that yourself: the State has to be studied as what *marks and enforces* boundaries. Borders – and I am very interested in borders and how to maintain them, how to keep them closed and open, and how to make fences; because this is what the State is very good at doing! There is no State in addition to this boundary work.

The State is constantly producing this work of 'boundary', knowing fully well that it holds only one little tiny part of what is overlapping in its own space. I don't think that – apart from Otto von Bismarck at a point in time, and maybe Vladimir Putin now – anyone has the idea that, actually, the State fully controls this space. But the fact of being able to actually maintain the boundaries – and enforce them – would be my very weak first approximation of what the State is.

Now, the other question of 'where' the State is – and that is in direct relation with the first question – is the question of sovereignty coming from the arbiter. But, there *is* an arbiter. Which, in the view developed in *Politics of Nature*,<sup>16</sup> has never really been the state, but has been a certain definition of nature, which is above the state and always was above the state; a rationality of some sort. Now it would be economics, but before, it was some sort of fanciful idea that there was – above politics – something else! It was based on Plato, and is an old idea. So, a secular definition of the State is not yet possible... I don't think we have it. Which is why I am so interested also in the second part of Schmitt's *Nomos*, where he tries to imagine, at the time of American hegemony, what would be the equivalent *now* – (I mean, for him it was the '50s but it's even more important now) – what would be the equivalent of the very small attempt of nation-states in the 17th century and the 18th century to have a *jus communis* [a common law], so to speak. Which was very minimal; so now, it's not the sovereign state, it's not an empire, it's something which is very weak, and which is not nature as the 'state of nature'. This 'State-and-Nature' – with two capital letters – is always in the back of our mind, it seems to me, when we study the question of the nation-state; we imagine a world-order of some sort,

14. See Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdelyi, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (London: Zero Books, 2011).

15. See Bruno Latour, Pablo Jensen, Tommaso Venturini, et al., 'The Whole is Always Smaller than Its Parts' – a Digital Test of Gabriel Tarde's Monads', *The British Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 4 (2012): 590–615.

16. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

in some sort of *fantasy* of rationality, finally making people come to their senses! So, it's a very difficult and complicated question, for which I have no answer at all! [Laughs]

But, the state is highly layered. Something we tried in the simulation that I will mention today<sup>17</sup> (and which is also in a good Hobbesian sense), is the possibility of giving a voice – a human voice – to speak in the name of a territory, or of overlapping entities. These voices have no reason to be limited to nation-states, by the way! What I think is indispensable in the Hobbesian notion of a person is that you need someone to incarnate. This was great in the simulation in May. We heard the complete common sense voice of the soil, of someone speaking in the name of soil. It means that sovereignty is absolutely not limited to the Westphalian state. It can also be used for *interlocking*, *overlapping*, *sovereign-ties*! And I think we are already in this overlapping. This is probably the best, most commonsensical idea in international relations, but we don't yet have any idea how to *draw* it. And so we have no idea what the successor to the state of nature is, to the S-of-N. There is no *jus communis* – it is not there, because we still hesitate between: 'Is it the hegemon? Or is it a world order that will be the United Nations plus an army? Or, will it finally be people coming to their senses and becoming rational? Or, the war of all against all?' I mean, there's not that many ways of answering this question. All of these are puzzles that I have.

**MS:** International Relations as a unique discipline, separate from politics and separate from International Law, is based on the premise – I'm afraid of saying it in this space – but is based on the premise that sovereignty is a different call to authority than domestic politics, or global politics, or the appeal to the world. Schmitt, when he writes *The Nomos of the Earth*, seems to articulate a tension between the sovereign relationship – which is he who decides the exception – and that political-theological transposition of the word of God into the word of sovereign. And the *nomos* of the Earth, which is kind of a 'loose alliance' between sovereigns... How do you understand this idea of sovereignty which seems to be so fundamental to Schmitt? In your own work, if I understand it correctly, you do not proceed from large, pre-given scales of analysis, like the sovereign, but rather are interested in the trials of strength, and the particular assemblages, and the individual instances, rather than the big ideas.<sup>18</sup>

**BL:** Well, I am interested in lots of different things that have no coherence! I am not sure I agree with Schmitt's interpretation... but, it doesn't matter. The point, I think, is that 'sovereign' has one very precise meaning, which is: *a referee*. So, is there a referee or not? In my understanding of Schmitt, in the two great ideas of his – the ones on politics<sup>19</sup> and the ones in *Nomos* – there is no referee, precisely. And so, *you have to do politics*, which means you *have* to have enemies and friends. Not because of any sort of war-like attitude (even though there is some talk of that in Schmitt as well). But because, precisely, if you have no referee, then you have to *doubt*; you have to risk that the others

17. Latour, 'International Relations in the Time of Gaia-Politics?'

18. For example, see Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

19. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).



might be right, and that you might be wrong. You don't *know* your value; you are not in a police operation.<sup>20</sup> OK, so that defines the state now, because the state goes, all the way down, to a police operation. If there is a police operation and not war, then there is a State, in some ordinary sense. That is how we can understand the first hegemon of the United States, entering the First World War as a police operation, no question. The drone, now, flowing over – I know one of you works on drones<sup>21</sup> – the drone moving on top of the space of the land, is a police operation because the one who sent it has *no doubt* that he or she acts as referee. So, the first thing is to *draw* the *extent* of that hegemon. How we would do that, I don't know. Certainly, there would have been a book by Schmitt a few days after the first drone, about this new definition of the State, extending above air its police operation *everywhere*.

Now, the other question is what would be the inter-state, sort of minimum understanding? We never had it! This is very interesting in Schmitt; he has not read any history of science, but in his strange book *Land and Sea* he has understood that science is not a unifying hegemon.<sup>22</sup> Nature is not a unifying principle. And that's where a *nomos* of the Earth comes in, which is law. Schmitt says that there must be another law, which comes from the land in some sort of sense – and he is completely obscure, largely using mythical terms. Now, I think, with the 'Gaia' myth – which is also a myth of course, but one which we can work out much more precisely – there is something like a . . . like a *government* of some sort? An authority. . . Which might be the successor (and this is my reading of Schmitt now, drawing Schmitt very far from his 'Nazi' days), or which might be the equivalent of a *jus communis* or *pre ambis*, or whatever you call it. A sort of minimum, where the government, or the voice, or the *non-referee call* of the Earth, makes a difference, and forces you to some sort of minimal recognition. This is what they did in Europe according to Schmitt, because – historically, and it's not terribly exact – in Europe, Princes accepted to recognize that 'you are a Prince, and I am a Prince, and there is something above us which is minimal', but there is not actually a referee above; it is just a minimum form of restraint, a *katechon*, as Schmitt says. If there is a referee, a real arbiter, then all States would be provinces of a real overarching single State, which is not the case. I think many people such as Meier, who is a great commentator of Schmitt,<sup>23</sup> see Schmitt's argument as a great remnant of Caesaro-papism. Of course, Schmitt has no notion of ecology, but it makes a lot of sense now when nature is requested to play the role of some sort of restraint, without being a State.

Suppose we draw the state according to this principle of 'police operation'. What would be the map? You would have large bits and pieces, basically, wherever *economy* – where economics, as the undisputed referee – extends. You will have a quasi-state, right? But, how

20. For Latour, 'When you engage in a police operation, you act in the name of a higher authority that has already settled the conflict and you merely play the role of an instrument of punishment'. See Bruno Latour, 'War and Peace in an Age of Ecological Conflicts', a lecture at the Peter Wall Institute, Vancouver, Canada, 2013. Available at: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/130-VANCOUVER-RJE-14pdf.pdf>.

21. William Walters, 'Drone Strikes, *Dingpolitik* and Beyond: Furthering the Debate on Materiality and Security', *Security Dialogue* 45 (2014): 101–18.

22. Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea* (Corvallis: Plutarch Press, 1997 [1942]).

23. Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

many other states would there be? We don't even know that! Do we even know that, in International Relations? How many *entities* do you take as the international, in that overlapping sense of 'national'? Do we know that? These entities are 'boundaries', which today, have no meaning of any sort. But, where you detect the limit of the border by the extent at which the police-violence is exerted – in the sense of the police operation, and not in war – *that* is the extent, which is a great idea of Schmitt, where there is *politics*.

If not, it is just a police operation. 'To send the police.' So, you go to Iraq, but nothing *there* is actually threatening *you*. It's like you give a ticket; like you ticket the people in the streets of London!

So, how many of these overlapping entities are there? I don't know, this is your field! [Laughs] Once you have that, the second question is: what is the minimum where you recognize that their interconnection is not a world order; it's not the United Nations; it's not a common power... What is the sovereignty of these entities? Of the soil, the atmosphere, or the IPCC, for example?<sup>24</sup> It is a practical question. The IPCC, the scientists who are assembled there, *it is* a sovereign of some sort, because they have the authority to define the climate.

**WW:** Could I push you back to the question of these post-war transformations? If we think about the beginning of the European community – in what you were just saying about nature and Earth – is it a coincidence or is it significant that the European community begins as something that both brings together economics and coal and steel, specifically? It is a coal and steel community. And then we've also got Jean Monnet looking at Euratom [European Atomic Energy Community], saying 'It's such a rich field because it's a new industry, and it's not cluttered in the entanglements of the coal and steel corporations and the associations', so – does that in any way help us think about . . .

**BL:** That's a great line! It's also the line of reasoning of Timothy Mitchell, who uses actor-network theory beautifully.<sup>25</sup> We have to look – well, it's another coal, steel, atom, oil, wind... It's back to Marxism, basically! But a Marxism where you would have a very different politics. Where you would try to draw the line not by the border, but by the extent at which the Earth is being mobilized. And mobilized as a sort of authority to the extent at which the Earth *gives* order, or gives *nomos* – this is open territory. These ten sentences in Schmitt are completely mysterious; mystical, almost. The *nomos* of the Earth is supposed to give order, and we are *above* it. I will cite from the lectures of Pope Francis's Encyclical [Laughs], about the Earth – the 'Mother-Sister Earth' that governs – which is even more strange for a Catholic pope, especially!<sup>26</sup> But, he is from Latin America – another territory that was subjected to the first great *Landnahme* [land-grab], and another completely different history of what it is to occupy the land. So, I don't know. I have absolutely no answer whatsoever to your question, I am very sorry.

24. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

25. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011).

26. Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*.



But, I would really like to know how many ‘states’ there are on Earth, right now, for *you*.

**IBN:** Well, I think there are 193 official members of the United Nations, but there are something like 203 sovereign states. Then you can add all of the pretenders, so at some point, the whole thing breaks down, hmm?

**BL:** Well that’s too many! Far too many. How many have no referee on top of them? Which is: how many *do real politics*?

**IBN:** We could start with the countries with convertible currencies, I suppose!

[Pause]

**BL:** Well, I guess I *am* in International Relations.

**MS:** Great, the interview is over, thank you! That’s the point we wanted to get to. ...No, I’m joking.

**BL:** Well, it is! This is the primary way we are now thinking the politics of nature. There *was* an outside to the state, which was called, in Hobbes, the state of nature – small ‘s’, small ‘n’ – out of which we were grown to build the law. Now we are back in exactly the same situation, except the State of Nature is in the *future*, now with capital ‘S’ and ‘N’ – which is what *will* happen, when all those states are without water, and without oil.

Of course, that would have us interested in the sea. We didn’t talk about Europe and Schmitt, but in the book *Land and Sea* he talked about what you do with the field, what you do with the land, what you do with the fish. Which is *geography*, in some sort of strange way. What happened to geography is that they organise things by *layers*, which Schmitt does not do by the way, in a precise reading of Nomos. If you’re organised by layers, at the bottom you have a ‘basemap’ and then you add layers on top of it, which is sort of a ‘defacto’ of what many call geopolitics. Geographers take the basemap and then superimpose on it other things which are sort of social or human, political or economic. Schmitt does not! Because the basemap – the land, the sea, steel, oil, etc., which we would add – these are not the ‘base’ on which we’re put! There’s a book on Schmitt’s Nomos by two geographers, Minca and Rowan.<sup>27</sup> And they misunderstand Schmitt, because they transform it, *nomos*, as a layer. They take it as a Foucauldian argument; about the fact that the borders are artificially made by states. But this is not what Schmitt said! It’s that there are *no layers*! You cannot layer the physical part, and then add the economic layer, and then the political – *there is no layer*. Every technique – and he is very explicit about how every new technique – like the sailing of a boat, and now the flying of a drone – would build a different *distribution* between the physical

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27. Claudio Minca and Rory Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

and the social. This is why I insist that the *nomos* is before the fact-value distinction – and that’s why Schmitt’s always going wild into the etymological arguments in *Nomos*, where he defines everything etymologically – because it’s precisely *not* a term of social construction, but it’s not natural law either. It’s before! *Nomos* is *antecedent* to the difference of fact and value, and he’s very specific about that. Which means *there are no layers*. You cannot define a sort of physical world, and then worlds on top of it. And this is, of course, what is visible in the Anthropocene. This is what the definition of the Anthropocene is.

The Earth is not the framework, or the basemap on which you can add the border-maps, and then you can then have the human enter into it. It is now that the layers are all, not only mingled, but... You cannot order layers as if they were a cake, a ‘millefeuilles’ as we say in French. And I think that is really interesting.

**WW:** Isn’t a part of *Nomos* appropriation, though? Where does appropriation fit into that? He’s talking about something that comes before some kind of fact-value dissociation. Is appropriation that moment? It’s a moment of force.

**BL:** Yes, but appropriation by what? The book *The Nomos of the Earth* is, in the ambiguous term, ‘pre-ecology’. But now, it sounds different fifty years later. The appropriation *by* the Earth is in part there. We are *appropriated-by* the Earth. So, the *Landnahme* – and I agree that it’s not in Schmitt exactly, because he’s an old, conservative German – he sees the *Landnahme* as ‘occupying’ the land, and he talks about the land which has been occupied and emptied, which is of course Latin America and North America. But, he also says – and that’s why it now resonates differently with ecology – what happens if it is the Earth that is appropriating *us*, in some sort of sense? That’s what the *nomos* is. Now, that fits with this very strange idea about property rights; very strange things about the theory of the commons; but it also fits with endless numbers of discussions in and amongst ecologists. It’s not nature, because that would be back to a sort of natural law argument, which would be ridiculous! No, it’s a new one, a new entity – and that’s why I call it Gaia. It *deserves* a special word [Laughs], because it is not the Earth that we have known; it is not the Globe, anyway, that’s the key thing... It is something else.

**IBN:** What you’re doing now is that you appropriate Carl Schmitt for a flat ontology, right?

**BL:** Yes, right.

**IBN:** And would you go so far as to say that Carl Schmitt *himself* has a flat ontology? Or, what is the argument that you are reading him in light of your theory?

**BL:** I just... I pilfer him! But, he wrote *Nomos*, which he thought was his most important book, at a time when he thought that there would be no more land appropriation. It was just before, actually (and it fits very well with Mitchell’s argument<sup>28</sup>), the new land appropriation, of the *oil* under the ground. You remember that, in the foreword to *Nomos*,

Schmitt says that ‘Only in fantastic parallels can one imagine a modern reoccurrence, such as men on their way to the moon discovering a new and hitherto unknown planet that could be exploited freely and utilized effectively to relieve their struggles on earth.’<sup>29</sup> Well, we did! We had oil!

If you begin to ask questions like what it is for international relations to have oil *left* in the ground, the whole distribution of power in the world is changed, and something arrives – which is the notion of voluntary limits, superimposed on a resource. So, it’s not – and this is where the *layers* are completely changed – it’s not peak oil, something which has been very important since the Club of Rome, basically. People were saying ‘Now we are going to run out of oil!’ But now we have plenty of oil. We have centuries of oil, and people seriously begin to talk about *limit*. Indeed, in Paris,<sup>30</sup> that limit will be questioned. If it’s a 2 degrees Celsius limit,<sup>31</sup> the head of the Bank of England has written to the head of the big investment firms, and he says ‘Please, please check, what will happen to all these big investments if the Paris meeting gets to 2 degrees, because those investments will be worth nothing.’ And in the simulation, we had one delegation representing this position.<sup>32</sup> They were amazing, because they were completely modifying the distribution of power. This is where the *nomos* arrives, because it’s a matter of legal terms and concepts, arriving on to a physical resource which is plenty, and limited not by its objective limits – because we *have* oil – but by something which represents this future – I don’t know how to say it – *jus communis*. It’s very odd, this idea. And Norway, actually – a pension fund in Norway, I am told – is actually discussing about stopping pumping the oil out of the ground. They are filthy rich of course, and so they can afford it.

**IBN:** Absolutely, and that’s why we have to work in London. [Laughter]

**BL:** But still, I mean it’s amazing right? It’s a serious decision.

**IBN:** Yeah. It’s not going to happen, but it is being discussed.

**BL:** They are talking about it, and the simple fact that they talk about it, that’s the basis on which everybody else now has to talk about it. They suddenly realise that Saudi Arabia suddenly could become plain *sand* again. That’s what the core of *The Nomos of the Earth* is about. I suppose Schmitt never would have predicted ecology, but... Pope Francis reuses this Canticle of St. Francis<sup>33</sup> (which I thought was a bit flat) to say, ‘Praise

28. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 39.

29. Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*, 39.

30. Referring to the 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP21) convened under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), taking place 30 November–11 December 2015, Paris, France.

31. This limit refers to global temperature rise caused by greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) released through the burning of oil and other fossil fuels.

32. This delegation or entity was ‘Stranded Oil Assets’.

be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.<sup>34</sup> And suddenly, the way that he recommends it becomes intense.

**WW:** Related to this question of the Earth, we would like to ask a question about spheres. Amongst a growing number of International Relations scholars, your name would be synonymous with networks and with actor-network theory. But, in your short essay *Some Experiments in Arts and Politics*<sup>35</sup> and in the *Modes of Existence*<sup>36</sup> book, you engage with the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, bringing in this contrasting figure of the sphere. Could we ask you to expand on why you turn to the sphere, or why this involvement of the sphere?

**BL:** [Laughs] The 'sphere' is *his* word. Well, the sphere is a great argument of Sloterdijk precisely because the present situation is that there is no 'outside'. So, literally – because there is no 'environment' anymore which is not internalised into a politics – this means that there is no outside, *we are inside!* It's a very simple argument that he made in *Spheres*;<sup>37</sup> you never move outside of it. We are inside it. And I think it is very, very powerful.

I'm not sure of the 'sphere' because this is a strange metaphor – I use it in the *Giffords* a lot because of another argument, which is a critique of the notion of sphere, or of a *globe*. This is something which I've always been interested in, which is: where are *you* when you look at the world as a sphere? I mean, you have either to be looking at a globe, a *real* globe, or you are in a madhouse! Do you believe you are God or something? So, there is no 'global' *view*! And if there is no global view, you are always inside, looking locally at small places inside; specific places, which is 'Actor-Network 101' so to speak! [Laughs] And this is what I like in Sloterdijk. Here, I think you refer to a paper by my friend Thomas Saraceno . . .

**WW:** Yes, that's what I was thinking.

**BL:** . . . precisely because Saraceno found a solution to this conundrum: spheres are always made out of a network.<sup>38</sup> A *dense* network. And that links now to a completely different argument around monads, and again to Tarde, and also to – I don't know if you want to go there – but it has a connection to what we are mentioning around international relations, which is the

33. The Canticum of the Sun, or 'The Praise of Creatures', by Saint Francis of Assisi.

34. Here, Pope Francis is quoting from *Canticum of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vvol. 1* (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1999): 113–114. For the full Encyclical, see Pope Francis, 'On Care for Our Common Home'.

35. Bruno Latour, 'Some Experiments in Arts and Politics', *E-Flux* 23, no. 3 (2011). Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/some-experiments-in-art-and-politics/>. Last accessed October 20, 2015.

36. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2013).

37. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I* (New York: MIT Press, 2011); Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II* (New York: MIT Press, 2014).

drawing of overlapping territories. It is a *technical* question but it is very, very interesting. How do you draw overlapping territories? In that sense, I use Sloterdijk because he is the man who relocates the out-side *in*. I criticise Sloterdijk for his ‘authority’; for the voice of authority that he claims, which is completely unsituated! I mean, *where is* Sloterdijk? He is somewhere, with God, probably! That, I don’t like. But, the idea that there’s no outside, is extraordinary.

In architecture, in design, the global is always in small places. There is another artist doing that now, which has become a very good friend of mine, Armin Linke, who is actually documenting this. He did, together with John Palmesino, an amazing film for Berlin on the sciences of the Anthropocene; how the global is always the local.<sup>39</sup> It’s always *somewhere* on Earth, and is very different from the Globe. The Globe is a sort of a remnant of a political theology which *ruins* all of the arguments about politics. This is one big part of my interest in James Lovelock,<sup>40</sup> actually. It is that it’s not about the Globe, but about the Earth. The Earth, if you wish, is not global. It is another beast altogether.

**MS:** Can you say more about that?

**BL:** I can start, but it will be long! I mean, I have infinite numbers of arguments about it! [Laughter]

**MS:** This is a question that I have after watching the *Gifford Lectures* – that Gaia is a kind of new way of understanding the world, or the global, as a kind of new ‘frame’ or a new call to a different kind of public. Am I wrong?

**BL:** No, you are right, but the issue is that Gaia is not the globe, and it’s not an organism either. This is why I call it the first secular definition of the world order. Precisely because it’s not an organism, but everybody actually decided to misunderstand what Lovelock was saying. You have to read what Lovelock *does*. People never read very carefully in general, but Lovelock in particular. I mean, he’s a bit like Schmitt – you have to have a charitable reading, because he goes into lots of things!

The technical argument of Lovelock is that the Earth behaves as a sort of interconnected set of entities – in which each of them makes its own environment – but it’s *not a whole*. There is no ‘whole’ – which is very perturbing, because of course people always use the global view ‘as a whole.’ It’s very difficult to talk about connectedness without the *holism*. And I think this is actually what Lovelock sort of sneaks in-between, which is that the Earth is connected. Every element of the entities is building its own environment, but there is no ‘organizer’. There is no God, basically.

Now, I doubted that my interpretation was right, but after the *Gifford Lectures* I read a book by Toby Tyrrell (who is a scientist from Southampton) called *On Gaia*, which is

38. For further commentary on spheres and globalisation, and to view the work of Tomas Saraceno, see Bruno Latour, *Some Experiments in Arts and Politics*. Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/some-experiments-in-art-and-politics/>. Last accessed October 20, 2015.

39. For the films of Linke and Palmesino, see the *Anthropocene Observatory*. Available online at: <https://vimeo.com/user21491455>. Last accessed December 10, 2015.

40. For example, see James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), or James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

according to him a fierce criticism of the global<sup>41</sup> – and he is completely wrong! It's a book that is wrong from the first line to the last one! Not in its science – which is very good, and it is interesting and entertaining – but he attributes to Lovelock the idea that life is on the *top* of Gaia, and is 'good for the creature'. Which is amazing, to imagine that life is something *more* than living entities. He adds a holism, and then of course has no trouble showing that Lovelock's interpretation looks ridiculous. This argument is a bit like people in the time of Leibniz: you have to prove that God is good to save Him from the accusation of being responsible for evil. Tyrrell asks questions like, 'If there is so much nitrogen in the atmosphere, and so little for the creatures, does it mean that Gaia is not benevolent?' Who can imagine that Gaia is 'benevolent'?! So, now I have very good proof of why people misunderstand Lovelock. They add this sort of overarching idea – the Globe, Life, God – and of course in social theory you have the same idea with Society.

Biologists are no more immune to that sociological argument than sociologists or economists, so they transform connectedness into holism. As long as they talk about an organism – like a body – it's not visible. But when they talk about the Earth, it's pretty ridiculous! I mean, how can you imagine that there's an Earth *beyond* the Earth, which would allocate resources to entities and be benevolent to them? I think Lovelock is an amazingly interesting guy. He is criticised for the wrong reasons.

**WW:** I want to bring in another element, which is to ask about publics, and to pick up on your point about society and the problem of society. It seems to us that, in a lot of critical thought, publics are being rediscovered and rehabilitated – and this is a move which you've helped very much to catalyse and to shape. So, your rejection of society and the sociology of the social as a ground for analysis is well known. Can we say, for you, that the public is a much more helpful and useful notion than society for thinking about politics? You haven't said much about publics so far with us, so we'd just like to know more about where publics fit.

**BL:** [Laughs] Well, I've done this show, and this catalogue, *Making Things Public*.<sup>42</sup> I just commented on John Dewey,<sup>43</sup> on the subject, on publics as a form... So, I am commenting on Dewey and Noortje Marres, and all of these people now.<sup>44</sup>

It has become sort of common sense: that you need a public around specific issues, and then you rebuild the political, *pixel-by-pixel*, instead of adding all sorts of general views into politics that go nowhere. I add politics as a 'mode of existence' (which is my line). I *add* to Dewey and to Marres, and to others, only this argument about politics as a mode of existence, which might disappear as a mode. It seems to me that we are witnessing the transformation of politics into *standpoint* politics: an extreme moralisation of politics. So, on the public, I've done my job with *Making Things Public*. I think now it's common sense, so I've moved to something else, which is the territory! But excellent

41. Toby Tyrrell, *On Gaia: A Critical Investigation of the Relationship Between Life and Earth* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2013).

42. See Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public' in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 14–41.

43. See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Swallow Press, 1954).

44. See Noortje Marres, 'Issues Spark a Public into Being: A Key but Often Forgotten Point of the Lippmann-Dewey Debate' in Latour and Weibel, *Making Things Public*, 208–17.



work is done on the commons, and on all these questions and issues, for if there is no issue, there is no politics. I am now much more worried by the possibility that the very ways of doing politics, or of creating the public, will be lost! To talk politically, authentically... It is a mode that is fragile.

**WW:** But you give us, then, the figure of the Circle.<sup>45</sup>

**BL:** Right. The Circle will be interrupted, and for me it's terrifying. The most terrifying thing.

**WW:** Can you say some more about the figure of the Circle? Because one could compare it to the line, the straight line, or maybe the 'developmental' line. At one level, the circle sounds very *confining*. Like the figure of the merry-go-round, we just go round and round in circles.

**BL:** Right! [Laughs] I mean, the metaphor is not ideal. Yes, it's very hard to maintain the Circle. It's very hard, because you have to do it again, and again, and again. You have to talk in a way which makes the Circle possible, which is completely *different* from information production, from authenticity, and which is completely different from everything else. There is this amazing, beautiful moment in *Gorgias* where there is the idea – the last time! – where sophists defined politics seriously.<sup>46</sup> Then it is replaced by information-transfers. So, the Circle says something, and it is intriguing what you say. It does also *build* the identity, and of course, it can be smaller and smaller and smaller, and larger and larger and larger – but it has to be a way of not speaking in these straight lines. This is why I was intrigued by Andreas Aagaard Nohr's thesis; because 'authenticity', for me, is the idea of 'speaking straight', and this for me is the absolute enemy of politics. I was very struck by this long paper in *The New York Times* last week (I think), which shows that we cannot do politics *politically* anymore, because there is just nobody there. You cannot go into the Circle anymore, because everybody says 'Well they're *my* values, and so I'll stop here and I will not make a compromise, and I will never talk in a way where my values can be compromised!' There's no politics there.

**MS:** Can I ask then: how do we then differentiate between better and worse politics? I mean, Schmitt is a good example. How do we identify more or less dangerous politics from this evaluation of the Circle? Is that a fair question?

**BL:** A great part of my interest in the *Modes of Existence* project has been to give an answer to this question. Well, firstly, it's true of every mode: the same with religion. If you want to define what the difference is between speaking well or badly of religion [Laughs], it's a huge problem! I have always insisted that Walter Lippman's *The Phantom Public* is fairly precise when considering what the difference is between good and bad

45. Bruno Latour, 'What If We *Talked* Politics a Little?', *Contemporary Political Theory* 2 (2003): 143–64.

46. See Plato, *Gorgias* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987).

political talk, and without any illusions about transparency and everything else; it's just very good.<sup>47</sup> So, what sort of community is able to maintain the possibility of detecting the signs of self-interest? The problem is that politics does not interest many people, and especially not in political science! Which is a great difficulty that I have. It's very difficult to talk about *politics* with political scientists, because they talk about something else, which is institutional politics. They're interested in the 'domain' of politics. But, what it is to hear that someone is speaking politically, and to stop speaking politically in terms of moral statements – we have very few descriptions. In the sights of the *Modes of Existence* project we began to gather lots of cases, because this is crucial; it is a crucial form. It's very hard to interest anybody toward this research.

**IBN:** There is a sense in which 1965 is the *annus horribilis* of political science because David Easton laid down the law in the US that one just shouldn't discuss the things that you're interested in – that *we* are interested in.<sup>48</sup> One should only discuss what happened inside a certain polity, given that the state was already there. I think that was the death knell, and that was sort of what created all of this *very* boring political science that you are referring to. That they are taking all these things for granted, and then simply looking at the exchanges between the different institutional players! I find this despairing, you know?

**BL:** The sentence you use is very dramatic, which is 'taken for granted'. Suddenly, now, people realise that it's not taken for granted, but that we are going to have people that are never going to be able to articulate – *politically* – their position. And that's dramatic.

**IBN:** Exactly. Some of the irony is that Easton was not alone in doing it, but there were other people doing it at the same time: J. David Singer, and Morton Kaplan, for example. Their argument was that so much was at stake in the nuclear age, that one couldn't afford fooling around with these kinds of problems, right? One had to look at the specific institutional logics. Well, one could have said immediately that that would prove to lead to a dead-end, but there is something very American, very 'problem-solving', very hands-on and very 'can-do!' about all this.

**BL:** Probably because people thought they could always have this 'stock' or reservoir of politically articulate citizens. It is very striking that, suddenly, Americans realise that 'No! You need a polity to do that. You need a very complex system and polity to articulate it.' I always said that politics would disappear like religion as a mode of existence, and I mean, not just as a domain. Unfortunately, it is actually what I'm witnessing, and I'm just terrified. Because whatever you do with things, and publics, and all that – if you cannot have people able to talk *politically* – that is, *doing* the Circle, and I mean speaking as if the Circle was possible – then there is no phantom public; the public becomes a

47. Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, 1927).

48. See David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1953). For Easton's two books published in 1965, see David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965) and David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

phantom for good! There is no more public. It is extraordinarily difficult to *do* the phantom, to build the phantom, to make it visible and bring it into existence. But, to state your position ‘authentically’ – to say, ‘This is what I believe! I will never deviate or move about from it!’ – is extraordinarily simple. And it is extraordinarily deadly for the polity, and for the commons...

I don’t know how we came to that. Anyway, you are the ones asking the questions! Am I the only one to believe that *The Phantom Public* by Lippman is a great book?

**MS:** William has written on that specifically, yes?

**SH:** In *Millennium*, 44.1.<sup>49</sup>

**BL:** On Phantom Publics? That’s good! Because I published on it in France, and then the publisher went bankrupt!

[Laughter]

**WW:** I want to ask you about *The Phantom Public*, actually. I read it after you and Noortje Marres had written about it<sup>50</sup> – and when I read Lippman, what I was struck by was how his argument was haunted by this fear of civil war. He talks about elections and ballots as being a sort of substitute for bullets, and this feeling that – because ultimately, we don’t have this ‘sovereign’ that can resolve this dispute – therefore you’re going to *need* the public as some kind of ‘quasi-sovereign’. There is this sense that there’s danger lurking below the surface; that violent struggle is quite capable of breaking out. But I didn’t see that when you, and especially when Noortje, were talking about the public. It didn’t feel haunted by violence. So, I just want to hear more about where you see violence in the book.

**BL:** Well, you know, they [Dewey and Lippman] were working on books in the middle of a terrible time, just after the First World War. That time was important, with the settlement of the Versailles Treaty. Lippman was not suddenly euphemizing violence, but he was still believing in the possibility of society, where publics may be treated with just this minimal and small definition of a ‘phantom public’, but not of course with this illusion of a democratic body. He is accused of being at the foundation of liberalism, but I always mix the two – Lippman and Dewey’s books – together, and I learned from Noortje that they are part of one moment in the history of political philosophy where the public is a problem – *made* a problem. And that, I can tell you, still in France – every time I mention Lippman and Dewey – is complete news! ‘The public, a problem?! No, we *know* what it is; the public is what is carried by the *State*!’ And I have to retort: ‘Oh no no no, the public

49. See William Walters and Anne-Marie D’Aoust, ‘Bringing Publics into Critical Security Studies: Notes for a Research Strategy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 1 (2015): 45–68.

50. Noortje Marres, ‘The Issues Deserve More Credit: Pragmatist Contributions to the Study of Public Involvement in Controversy’, *Social Studies of Science* 37, no. 5 (2007): 759–80.

is the problem which has to be brought into being as the object of an *enquiry*!’ So, yes, maybe, violence is everywhere, so it is hard to bring the public into being. The key point is that *you don’t know* what the public interest is, and so you have to do an *enquiry*. Then, you build the scene where the enquiry has instituted the public, so that it does not seem to be a complete phantom. But, I’m glad that you like *The Phantom Public*.

**MS:** When your work has been taken up into International Relations and political sociology, especially the actor-network theory parts, it has sometimes become allied with a technocratic view of governance. Networks are followed, agencies delegated, and the issues of violence and conflict seem remote. But when you discuss politics in *The Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, there’s a keen sense that turmoil is not far off. There’s also a reliance on the language of diplomacy.

**BL:** Right.

**MS:** Is violence or diplomacy more central to your thinking about politics now than it was during the actor-network period? Or, maybe ‘period’ is not the right word...

**BL:** [Laughs] Yes, well probably... But times are more tense, also. Diplomacy and violence are the same thing, which is: diplomacy is what happens when you recognise that there is no referee. So, governance is the idea that there *is* a referee, which is some sort of strange idea about reason, or rationality, or something. But when there is no referee, then you need other tools, such as diplomacy, because violence might lurk everywhere... It is true that I am not interested in violence *per se*, because we have plenty of it, and most of it is actually understood as a police operation. I am more interested in asking, ‘OK, what *is* this fight? What *are* the lines of conflict?’ Looking, as if there was no referee, so that we can begin to have a diplomatic encounter. In other words: there is no diplomacy before the war is declared. So – don’t talk about rationality – talk about *war*.<sup>51</sup> And *then* we can begin to discuss! I don’t want to have to be fighting with people who are putting me down by saying ‘You are irrational!’ I want to say, ‘OK, well what is *your* world? What is your *territory*?’ I am very influenced by the fight against the climato-skeptics, because climato-skepticism is the first case where you have a major issue where you see the complete implausibility of the referee in science.

This is because, now, you cannot *appeal* to the science. They [scientists] appeal to the science, and they fail! Because these other people [climato-skeptics] just say ‘*No no no no!*’ These climato-skeptics – oil-interests, plus some physicists, plus some mathematicians, plus some statisticians, plus some other people, partly in positions of authority – disagree with the science. And the scientists (for the first time, it seems to me) are

51. For this meaning of ‘war’, see Latour, ‘War and Peace in An Age of Ecological Conflicts’. Rather than the legitimacy of police authority, ‘Things are entirely different in the case of war – for instance civil war. Then the decision on *who* is the legitimate authority is precisely what is to be tried out through some decisive encounter. In this case, there is no arbiter, no referee, nor preliminary verdict... [W]ar does not mean necessarily blood and weapons, but it does mean the absence of a referee to settle the matter’ (2013: 60).

incensed! Suddenly, they realise that they – *that we* – are no longer in this position of arbiter, which somehow existed before, in some sort of sense.

There have always been disputes among scientists, but they were not realising that they were one party amongst others. They were never accused of being a lobby. Now, they *are* accused of being a lobby, by another lobby! So now, it's lobby against lobby. They are terrified, my friends in climatology, but I say: it's great! Finally, you have to do politics *seriously*, which is: *answer back!* When these people say that 'you have your politics', then answer back: 'What is *your* politics? What is the world *you* want to be in?' That's what I mean by 'fight'. I mean, violence is already awful, but violence in the name of rationality; this is perverse. So, at least let's have a state of war. Let's define a state of war. Then we begin to see the dividing lines, which divide the territories – the sort of fighting territories, so to speak – and then, maybe, we'll begin to talk about peace.

**MS:** I think that's very striking for an International Relations audience, because we have two perspectives: One, that war is bad and we want to avoid it, and so International Relations as a discipline is engineered to avoid or minimise war. Or, we say that war is inevitable, but still sub-optimal, and so we want to minimise it, manage it, and control it. When you say 'Bring on the war', that seems very striking to us – it seems striking to me – as something that is a radical challenge to International Relations.

**BL:** If you are right, it means that these people who say 'war is bad' or 'war should be minimised' speak under the plausible authority of the State of Nature – capital 'S', capital 'N' – which is that rationality is guiding the world, in some sort of sense. 'There *is* a referee'.

**WW:** Well, they're appealing to a future in which we have stronger and stronger institutions of global governance, that are underpinned by a growing kind of integration of various functions, sections, and I suppose some idea of a greater consciousness of that integration and interdependence.

**BL:** And that is interesting to me. Because, this is what 'nature doing politics' means. That is, you have a horizon that is supposed to limit politics to some sort of provisional conflict. But, the horizon is that of agreement. If we were all 'natural' in some sort of sense, then we all agree. Which is the basic view that has emasculated politics from, I mean, Plato onwards. It is very difficult to resist this argument that above politics there is something else, which is... Reason.

**IBN:** But why should it follow, the idea that politics is necessarily agonistic? That war has to happen?

**BL:** No, it's not very agonistic at all. This is Mouffe's mistake.<sup>52</sup> It's just that there is no referee. Then you have to define what your territory is, what your cosmos is, and answer: on what *ground* do you want to live? In which world do you want to live? This is very striking in the climate skepticism question, because there is no 'common world' between the climato-skeptics and the climatologists (let's just say, to simplify it). It's not

necessarily agonistic – it doesn't *need* to be a fight – but it means that there is no referee. It's not a police operation, so I cannot accuse you of being 'irrational', because now such an accusation would make no difference! To be without a referee means that you yourself are ready to accept that, in a deep sense, you don't know exactly whether or not you are right.

**IBN:** This is a very Schmittian reading again.

**BL:** It is Schmittian, completely Schmittian.

**IBN:** I'm asking you as a theologian, because if my memory serves me correctly, you started off doing a PhD in theology, and you are now infatuated with political-theological thinking. Schmitt is talking about the *Landnahme* right? Well, as a Norwegian I grew up with the *Landnahme*, and that's the story of Vikings going overseas, and going 'boom' [gestures of planting a flag]. There is one thing that Schmitt doesn't play up, which is that every time an old Germanic tribe took land, they would plant a particular kind of pole, or the *nidstang*, in the soil,<sup>53</sup> because they knew that there were Gods *already there*. So, they would bring their own Gods. They were conscious of the soil already being somebody's soil. I don't think the early Germanic tribes thought there was any 'big referee' (Wothan, maybe. Odin...). But I want to ask you as a Catholic thinker – because I think you're a very Catholic thinker, now very interested in Schmitt – where do you place universalism in this? Have you just read out universalism? Do you think that all there is, are different claims to different pieces of territory by different groups? Or, do you think there is a logic in which *the fight itself* structures this kind of stuff? (This is a very IR question, I know!)

**BL:** I don't know... Universalism, in the question of ecology, doesn't work. We have one beautiful case: we have the most certain series of scientific facts about the effects of humans on the climate, and it makes *absolutely no difference* in terms of unanimity in politics. I mean, almost none, right? So we have a good case here, but breaking – and I have to be careful here – breaking the 'unanimity' of the human race, so to speak, might be a necessary moment. But of course, when you have Schmitt in the background, this sounds terrible!

[Laughter]

Reconstructing people with their territories might be more important right now. It is another definition of universality, but where you add the soil, the land, the Earth. Just what the Pope did in *Laudato Si'*.<sup>54</sup> The gestures that you show, saying 'I add my God to the other God!' is precisely what has been missed by the *Landnahme* Schmitt talked about, where in Latin America you have the elimination of the gods who had been there all along. We are back to the questions of political theology: who are your gods? Who are your gods, and what is your territory? Who are your people? What is your law? And let's

52. For example, see Chantal Mouffe, *Democracy, Human Rights and Cosmopolitanism: An Agonistic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

53. In the Germanic pagan tradition, a *nidstang* or Nothing pole was used to curse enemies.



begin to talk about international relations in *that* sense: of peoples, several peoples with their cosmologies, with their gods, and we'll see what it looks like. Right now, it would be more productive than to have humans in a nature, but out of politics. Because then, we would be able to talk about steel, and coal, and oil, and water, and GMOs<sup>55</sup> and all of these things, in a way which is completely, *completely* compatible with – to go back to the first question – with a parliament of things, with parliamentary politics. This is impossible now, because everything that is linked to nature is rejected as being outside of politics, and still has no representation.

My definition of unanimity – of universalism – is that universalism is to be *composed*. The universality of the human race in nature, doesn't work. Something else has to be done before we talk about the common world again. If politics is a progressive composition of the common world, we have to do some new work which looks – I agree, *provisionally* – as divisive. But, it is better to have division – *explicit* division – than to have a police operation! We have to remember that there is also a danger now, that there will be people using ecology as a new sovereign, and imposing on us. I mean, it is completely plausible to have eco-fascism as well. You might have an absolutely awful division of war and peace: climate wars. Like in Welzer's book *The Climate War*,<sup>56</sup> and it is an amazing book which is made of three parts: the war of the past, the war of the present, and [Laughs] the war of the *future*! And every one, every time, you escalate the war.

But, I want to be clear: I am still *for* universalism. Universalism is to live in a common world! But the common world is not 'made'. Neither by humans, nor by nature.

**MS:** Can I ask how this relates to your notion of trials of strength? Will not those forces able to call on greater forces necessarily determine the shape of that politics to come? To us, that's an important question, about whether or not it is simply those with strength that will be able to determine the world to come, or, whether you imagine something different.

**BL:** It doesn't play a role in the argument here. There is no difference with trials of strength. Trials of strength is a concept; it is not a thing. It is a concept to have unity where you had dualism. Usually you have strength, and then something else: reason. Trials of strength is a notion – it is a concept which is precisely to avoid understanding politics as 'half strength or violence', and half something else, which could be reason. Reason is also strength. ...or not!

Trials of strength is a concept of actor-network theory, to *clear* the discussion of the opposition between strength and 'something else', which is, by the way, a remnant of the same thing I discussed before: the idea that above politics, there is something else, some sort of 'horizon of agreement' which could come before me as irrational. Political thought is constantly infected by this idea that there will be something else other than politics, and somehow that if we are all reading the journal *Nature*, then we will all be rational!

54. Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*.

55. Genetically Modified Organisms.

56. Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed for in the 21st Century* (London: Polity Press, 2012).

'Be scientists, and we will agree!' And that's nonsense. This is the trials of strength argument, in a sense.

The question of a common world is an entirely different matter, because it has to be composed. So, in what or in which common world do we live? This is an entirely different question, in which the notion of unanimity or universalism is completely misrepresented. Now, in the new study that I am doing, it is extraordinarily difficult to talk about a piece of land in any universalist way. We know nothing about it. I mean, the equipment necessary to make land – a piece of land, maybe a kilometre square of water catchment – *known*, requires an enormous investment! It requires massive instruments. The scientists I work with are amazing, because they have absolutely no 'universalist' view about this process. Or, if they have, it is about very specific chemical reactions – but not on the rest. They say things like, 'Yes, the Amazon, or this water catchment, is just as complicated!' So, the whole argument about unanimity and universalism has been sort of skewed by a certain idea of science, which has never existed. This is why STS (science and technology studies) is still indispensable to understand politics.

**WW:** You tell us to 'follow the actors'. But a lot of science is done close to weapons research, and a lot of science involves corporate secrecy and trade secrecy. When we're thinking about publics, there are also things that we can't bring into the public domain. There are the 'absent presences'; the sorts of secrets, or the withholdings, that hover around sciences. How do you make sense of secrecy? You make sense of it in places; you speak on the anthropology of the moderns, getting moderns to share the secrets of their institutions. More generally, I'm interested in secrecy more as this methodological question; how we follow actors when they're doing things that are classified, but also, conceptually, how this relates to publics.

**BL:** I would be interested, but I have no insight! Galison did a beautiful study of people who do this type of classification, this mechanism.<sup>57</sup> In STS, we study things that are entirely secret. I mean, not *explicitly* made secret, but just denied. Things that interest nobody, and so no one pays any attention to them. I am more interested in that. People and fields which are *made* secret are, in a way, easier to reveal, because there is an operation of hiding! I am more interested in the fields which no one mentions – like technical projects – which are not especially 'secret', but are just hidden from view. I would read anything with great interest on the building of secrecy. What, one hundred thousand people in the United States were secretly classified and documented? I mean, it's amazing!

**WW:** Yes, even millions I think, with classified status of some kind.

**BL:** Right. Much larger than – infinitely larger than! – what's published. It's a great topic. And also, if you think about transparency in politics, which is another.

57. Peter Galison, 'Making Things Secret' in Latour and Weibel, *Making Things Public*. Also, see the documentary film, *Secrecy: A Film by Peter Galison and Rob Moss* (Redacted Pictures, 2008).

**MS:** Is there a question that interviewers normally ask you, that we have not asked you?

**BL:** No no, I've never talked with 'International Relations' people before, so everything is new here! [Laughs] Well, thank you very much.

**MS:** No, thank you. It was an honour.

**BL:** We went into too many things there! But it's all very interesting.

**SH:** Thank you all on behalf of *Millennium*. That was great.

[This interview was followed by Professor Latour's keynote address to the 2015 Millennium Conference]<sup>58</sup>

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58. Latour's keynote address, 'International Relations in the Time of Gaia-Politics?' is available to view at: [mil.sagepub.com/site/Videos/Videos.xhtml](http://mil.sagepub.com/site/Videos/Videos.xhtml).