

## Issues with Engendering

‘Troubles dans l’engendrement’, Bruno Latour interviewed by Carolina Miranda. *Revue du crieur* N° 14, La Découverte/Mediapart, 2019. Carolina Miranda could be a Chilean ethnologist and documentary filmmaker. They might have met on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2019 in Chatelperron. The form of the spoken language has been retained as much as possible. Translated by Stephen Muecke.

### THE RIGHT TO TALK POLITICS

CM — This time I’d like to talk to you about politics, rather than about your philosophy or anthropology. You will appreciate the importance of this, for me, coming from Latin America, especially after the publication of *Down to Earth*. We are all bursting with questions.

BL—How do you mean, ‘we’?

CM —Lots of people were surprised by this, your first really political book, very committed even, even left wing, and I’m acting as a go-between for a fair number of political groups, activists, not just academics. A lot of people back home are reading you in Spanish.

BL —And yet *The Politics of Nature* came out in 1999, and politics plays an essential role in *Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*. And if you type ‘politics’ into my webpage, it is the most common word after ‘science.’ Are your friends just finding out that I’m interested in politics? For thirty years I have been worried about the danger of it disappearing as a fundamental practice, and as a unique mode of expression.

CM — I know, I know. I hope we will have time to talk about it. But still, you wrote *Down to Earth* differently and for a different audience. And isn’t it the first time you have drawn connections in such a clear way with classical leftist ideas?

BL — They are just more explicit, and yes, in another style.

CM — You even went so far as to cut paragraphs that anyone who’d been to a thesis-writing workshop would have considered sacrosanct...

BL —Yes, it is a little terse.

CM —I’d say almost enraged. One of my trusted friends thinks it is because you have come across enemies for the first time, real enemies whom you find shocking, like climate sceptics. But until now injustices didn’t upset you quite as much. Would you agree? Is it this crisis that has really affected you?

BL —Maybe there is something in that, the horror of climate sceptics. It is better to say ‘climate deniers’. It’s true, they have shocked me to the core. Here I was

seeing something so terrifying, so new and so cosmically unjust... I don't know how to put it, I emerged from a kind of ...

CM — You were radicalised?

BL — I hate the term, but yes, if you like, maybe more committed, but I don't like that word any better.

CM — About time at the age of 70-odd!

BL — Ah, Carolina, you are always making fun of me. I have been through plenty of battles before this one. A 'radical' is someone who digs down to the roots. By that account I have had to do a lot of digging before getting here.

CM — The most surprising thing is that you are not an activist, nor a political analyst, nor a politician, and yet you imagine you can guide people, give them a kind of map they should have to orient them. This is the French intellectual's role, but I know you don't like that kind of role, yet in fact you are playing it, right?

BL — What gives me the right to talk politics? I don't ask myself that question, I use all the available means, I try to grasp positions that seem new to me, that the political arguments have not yet registered. But I thought that we were going to talk about the contents of *Dónde atterizar*?

CM — But what is the empirical basis for your intuition?

BL — It seems to me that my 'intuition,' as you call it, has served me well. The book is two years old. In it I said that from now on all political positions would depend on how one was situated in relation to the climate question, broadly speaking, and that the *terrestrial attractor* was organising all the affects. Well? Does anyone disagree with that now? I pointed out that the issue with the new climatic regime was an ecological one, but at the same time had to do with the explosion of inequalities after deregulation and with the migration issue. This is common sense now! The whole idea of soil and people...even the "ledgers of complaints" process (before the yellow vests) was not a bad idea.

CM — Wait a minute, we will come back to soil and people, quite surprising ideas for many of us, but first tell me about intuition.

BL — What more can I say? *Down to Earth* is a book in the same vein as *We Have Never Been Modern*; not exactly the same arguments, no proofs either, but myriad events that suddenly crystallise in a form and one gets the impression that a descriptive tool is in the offing that captures something of the *zeitgeist* and that it might be useful for some people. No more, no less; I have no other pretention. Isn't this one of the ways philosophy is supposed to work?

CM — Still, not very reassuring: no argument, no proof...

BL — But Carolina, you amaze me. Am I right or wrong? *We Have Never Been Modern* was first published in 1991, just after the Berlin wall came down, at the time of ‘the end of history’ and the ‘triumph of liberal societies’. And now, nearly thirty years later, no one is still thinking that we are going to modernise the whole planet on the American model. Everyone is aware that what happened in the process called ‘modernisation’, was something quite different from what they were telling themselves, that none of the schemas used to understand it— Enlightenment, progress, rationality, emancipation, humanism, not even the negative stories either—, nothing there was ever able to grasp, in an historical or anthropological fashion, what happened over the last three centuries: the modernisation epic is over. I don’t know if that’s intuition...

CM —I wasn’t criticising you, I was trying to answer a question concerning the source of your propositions. For example the idea of returning to soil and people, which you are claiming is becoming the central political question.

BL— Becoming the central question again. Yes, these matters of soil and which peoples inhabit them is an old question for political anthropology that is making a powerful return, for the left and right and even the centre of politics. This is one of the effects of what I call the *multifaceted crisis of engendering*.

### ISSUES WITH ENGENDERING

CM — I was planning to ask you about this matter of ‘engendering procedures’ that, at the end of the book, you contrast with the ‘system of production’. What do you think is at play in this term?

BL — You will make fun of my intuitions again, but what I find extraordinary is that at the very moment that everyone is complaining about messy political positioning, parties disappearing, chaos caused by the internet, etc, the symptoms of this crisis are popping up everywhere, from the extreme right to the extreme left, and every shade in between.

CM — Who does speak about engendering?

BL — Everyone. Not always directly, but *in the form of symptoms that I find extremely telling*. Take the far right. It is obsessed by the migration issue, which is a serious problem, of course, but totally disproportionate to the toxic form it is taking, which both marks and masks the presence of another issue. Simply add the factor, happening everywhere in the world at the same time, of retreating behind the obviously imaginary borders of the Nation-State. In no way does this return expect to go back to an actually defined country, obviously, the clearest proof being that this return to the country goes hand in hand with climate denialism. Extreme right parties in Germany and Spain became sceptical about the climate at the drop of a hat. They felt some kind of obligation, and obviously, in the U.S., denialism is the order of the day. How can they say, ‘I am going to make the

country great again, but I refuse the basic material conditions in which it is situated? That's a symptom all right.

CM — Is their visceral anti-feminism part of this syndrome?

BL — Of course, in Latin America there is the fight against teaching 'gender theory'. There's a quite extraordinary symptom right there. How can countries think that they are threatened by such teaching as if it were an geopolitical threat?

CM — With the help of students we put together a whole dossier on Brazil.

BL — Afterwards you can tell me about the origins of this absurd threat, but anyway, as a symptom, it is a rather telling one: the obsession with rejecting the presence and the rights of women; the increasingly virulent fight against abortion rights, plus the issue of being grounded, plus the rejection of migrants. Isn't that all more or less a direct way of saying, 'We are in a state of panic about the engendering crisis?' Almost with the basic meaning of *gender*: 'We no longer know how to reproduce?' You must admit that you can't go better than the idea of a 'great replacement', as a symptom? Being *replaced* by others, in any case, is certainly a commonplace fear.

CM — But if this engendering is reproduction, then that takes us to a classical bio-political idea. The far right has always been obsessed with controlling reproduction.

BL — Yes, but the new thing is the association of these classical tropes with climate scepticism. Bio-politics is then extended to all living things. And what is all the more scandalous is that the issue spills over from simple normative procreation. The surprising thing is that these same questions are hidden behind and betrayed by other symptoms, producing the same anxieties, the same radical disorientation among people of quite opposite opinions.

CM — On the left as well?

BL — Yes, if we can still be aligned on a left-right axis.

CM — Are you thinking about so-called identity politics?

BL — No, I wasn't thinking about it, but you'd better add it to the list. Closing yourself behind walls is actually the same kind of movement for left and right. But one thing I find fascinating is the name of 'extinction rebellion'. People 'rebellious against extinction'? What more direct way could there be of saying that one refuses to die? During the demonstrations of students with their Friday school strikes I was very touched to see placards that almost invariably alluded to the possibility of enduring, perpetuating oneself, and not just for humans, but all earthly things, glaciers, forests and animals of course. Even the famous emaciated polar bear on his ice floe, held on high by these kids. It's a cliché, of course, but it is

a moving thing in these demonstrations because it is a reminder of the fear of universal extinction.

CM — We see that again and again in Chile as well. I don't know if you have been listening to this young woman Greta Thunberg?

BL — Greta? Are you hearing about her where you are? She's quite a phenomenon! I am amazed by the way she has this completely unconventional way of being totally convincing. You are right; she has a way of reversing the generational order, saying that the children are the wise ones and the adults are the unaware kids. It is the clearest example of how the issue of engendering occupies all our mental space and is invested in all our affects. You are too young to remember, but not so long ago we had 'future generations' that had to be protected, and they were, precisely, *in the future*, even the distant future, that was the main problem. Now they are behind us, in the street, and even behind your generation, Carolina, and they are holding a sword to your back. Anything to do with generations, or the *order of generations* is at the heart of engendering issues.

CM — On the right, the left, what about the centre?

BL — Wait, I haven't finished my inventory. I really think it is the first time that all the symptoms have lined up like this, at the same time as the official positions are just as divided, as if mainstream politics had no way of capturing what is driving people crazy. Take the genuine panic over collapse, catastrophe, the end of the world. It is a diffuse feeling infiltrating all sectors of society, if I am to believe the success of the 'collapsologists'.

CM — But in that case it isn't a symptom, it is more of a direct recognition of the state of things.

BL — The state of things? You are going a bit too fast; I think we have to see the idea of collapse exactly like that of the white nationalist 'great replacement' theory, as different ways of registering the same anxieties, but without describing them exactly. But how can we do that? It's so new and so powerful. It is only through sickness that this whole business can be approached.

CM — I fail to understand you. You are always speaking with admiration of defenders of the Anthropocene, isn't that also a symptom? Were they not the ones who made us aware of the radical originality of the situation? At any rate, that's what you say in *Facing Gaia*.

BL — I have a huge amount of admiration for the group led by Jan Zalasiewicz, but the impact of their work would be totally inexplicable were it not in fact expressing a crisis of another order. The average person took no interest in the Precambrian or the Holocene. The fact that geology is able to have such an impact in the arts, on moralists, religious people, and even people like you and me; that's an extraordinary phenomenon. It is equally extraordinary that Gaia has taken on so much importance—it's part of the same movement I think—and bringing in

Gaia means quite clearly bringing in the very issue of what it means to engender any living thing *whatsoever*.

CM — By that account, you will end up including ecological movements as well as symptoms of the same crisis!

BL — I believe there are quite a few of us writing on this who recognise both the importance of their struggles and, at the same time, their chronic incapacity to detect what movement they are bearers of. I first showed this in *The Politics of Nature*, and I think we are on the same wavelength. You even made good use of this idea in one of your films.

CM — Yes, we spoke about that. Even our ecologists are tied up with ‘defending nature’ and survivors of first peoples are not ecologists because of that. Nature in Tierra del Fuego is *what is born* and *what makes things born*.

BL — You see? Another engendering issue. It’s better to think of all the former political positions cashing in on the same tragedy without any of them being able to define the state of things in whose name discussion should come to a halt. This is very important for the political alliances one has to go through. We are all in the same boat.

CM — What about the centre? You haven’t covered the whole spectrum.

BL — There are climate quietists, extractivists, and all those worried about resources running out, defenders of sustainable development, defenders of a ‘return to growth’, ecomodernists ...

CM — The last being your friends, they tell me back home.

BL — True, I often find myself in sympathy with them, especially after getting depressed by two articles on the Anthropocene and another on imminent collapse. They make me wonder, but I don’t believe a thing about their reassuring solutions. But the ones I find most intriguing are the hyper-neo-modernists, the ones getting ready to escape to Mars...

CM — Or to New Zealand, as you wrote!

BL — Exactly, in case things go badly. But what I find typical of the crisis is that they have no intention of bringing the multitudes with them to Mars, or into their bunkers. That is definitely an end to the modernisation project. For them, the billions of humans left in the lurch are simply *supernumerary*. When you are a *supernumerary*, that is really asking you in the harshest possible way about the impossibility of you engendering yourself, isn’t it?

CM — So, as far as you are concerned there is unanimity, or at least an alignment of symptoms?

BL — Alignment, yes, of course. But we can go further. I am thunderstruck by the speed with which, particularly in biology, questions to do with the superposition of cells, entanglement, the return of halobionts, symbiosis (especially that of Lyn Margulis) are causing a rethink of a whole range of accepted positions on the philosophy of life.<sup>1</sup>

CM — In that case, we should add our friends, your friends who specialise in interspecies interactions, starting with Donna Haraway and her dog...

BL — Yes, or Anna Tsing and her mushroom ... You know this literature as well as me. She has deeply modified all the elements making up former subjectivities. One could add the return of witches, there's a great symptom for you.

CM — So, let me sum up: the fear of being pushed aside by the 'great replacement', the terrifying idea of collapse, the irruption of Gaia, the rebellion against extinction, the ecological battle, the escape from the world, the popularisation of the Anthropocene, the transformation of biology, plus waiting for 'recovery' as if it were some kind of cargo cult?

BL — 'They didn't all die, but all of them were hit.'<sup>2</sup> Yes, it's the new universality.

CM — What you call 'the wicked universality'?

BL — Yes, a 'bad' or 'perverse' universality, just at the moment where people are complaining about an extreme division, a war of the worlds. But still, universality. You can surely see the engendering issue is on nearly everyone's minds. It is a profound doubt that goes to the heart of all generations as they wonder what on Earth engendering means.

CM — And before that?

BL — Before that, the big question, the only question for the Moderns, was *how to produce* stuff. And then *how best to distribute* it.

CM — But around the system of production and distribution there was the formation of a social, or even socialist, question. Where, in the engendering

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<sup>1</sup> Bapteste, Eric. *Tous entrelacés*. Paris: Belin, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ils ne mouraient pas tous mais tous étaient frappés*, a 2005 film by Marc-Antoine Roudil and Sophie Bruneau. AlterEgo films has an English version: *They didn't all die, but all of them were hit*.

system, is the equivalent of big political question? Even if you are right in your intuition, it doesn't draw out a politics, or in any case, it isn't recognisable as such.

### DESCRIBING ENGENDERING PROCEDURES

BL — In order to try to answer you, I want to begin with one of Pierre Charbonnier's ideas.

CM — I haven't read it yet, but as I came through Madrid, I was told you were waiting for a major book from him.

BL — It's an essential work, I think. The book hasn't come out yet, and you will be happy because it doesn't depend simply on intuition...

CM — You are teasing me... Friends told me that reading it turned you into a Marxist?

BL — Not too much of an exaggeration ... [laughs]. But I would put it rather that what he is saying we should do for our current epoch is something like what Marx and the socialists did at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the description of the system of production. At the time that meant describing the industrial system in which the ins and outs were just as mysterious as life is today under the planetary climatic crisis. The surprise and the ignorance are the same; the stakes are much higher.

CM — But in what way does the question of engendering differ from that of production?

BL — Production begins with a given world made up of resources. But when we speak about engendering we locate ourselves at an earlier level, and, above all, at an *earlier stage*: what is it that allows these resources, and these people who live off them, and these worlds in which they are born, to continue to exist?

CM — But then we will fall back on the obsession with *reproduction*, exactly what feminists want to escape from.

BL — Engendering actually allows one to escape both production and reproduction. It displaces the moment at which the question of justice arises. It isn't found after the problem of the distribution of production goods, but *before*. It is a preliminary, antecedent question about giving birth to humans and things, and how this engendering can be carried out in an *adjusted* manner, in a *just* way.

CM — But Bruno, this is fundamental anthropology. All cultures have put the problem in these terms, what's new about that?



BL — Because the Moderns are finding out that anthropology matters to them, and not just to ‘Others’. Yes, we discussed this in 2015, I think.<sup>3</sup> They are being re-anthropologised, if I may, which also means being *earthbound*. You look shocked when I foreground matters of people and soil, but I’m not talking about nativism or identity, or evoking cemeteries where ‘our ancestors are at rest’ or about ‘integral ecology’. I’m talking about exactly what you say, basic ethnography.

CM — But Marxist or Marxian analyses have allowed people to position themselves, for nearly a hundred years, via their place in the system of production. I can’t see what allows us to do that today. What you are calling ‘geo-social classes’ is pretty vague for me.

BL — Exactly, because they haven’t yet been *described*. People are still trying to squeeze the new climatic regime into the former description in terms of the system of production, hence we get ‘green growth’ and ‘sustainable development’, all these accommodations that do not allow people to recognise their geo-social class, or specify who their enemies are and hence their potential allies. This gives us the current situation where symptoms are exchanged, all at different levels of pathological severity, and the resultant violence.

CM — How does your demand for description—and I’ve read plenty of interviews with you on the topic of the ‘yellow vests’ where you repeat this mantra endlessly—how does it permit coming ‘down to earth’?

BL — Because the Moderns are above ground, and don’t know where they live, they quite simply can’t have political positions, or articulate any kind of opinion. Pierre Charbonnier discusses the ‘ubiquity of the Moderns’, and he has a very telling image to grasp the current situation, he calls it *porte à faux*...no, really! Can you see? Like a balcony suspended in the void, cantilevered. There is the world *in which one lives*, the one that has justice, rights and obligations, the vote, citizenship; and there is the world *one lives off*, which has become a very way off, down below. One can feel it is going to crack, that it has already cracked, any minute the world we were living off without knowing it...

CM— Without wanting to know it...

BL — ... bursts out everywhere in the world where we were living until now. Hence the incomprehension concerning migration, the climate crisis, the extinction of species, ‘But what’s all this doing here, annoying us?’ ...

CM — That doesn’t answer my question. How is description a way to treat all these problems?

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<sup>3</sup> “A dialog about a new meaning of symmetric anthropology” <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/673>

BL — Taking into account the scale and the degree of seriousness, it is exactly the same trauma that the 19<sup>th</sup> century, carbonised, industrial society inflicted on a society that learned to defend itself (as Karl Polyani said, a hero for both me and Charbonnier). Today's society has not learned to defend itself. It thought ecology was exterior to it; it didn't know how to metabolise its conditions of existence; the transfer from socialist traditions didn't happen; we lost fifty years, and now the engendering crisis is affecting everything: all institutions, all peoples. The *engendering hiatus* has opened wide: oil, climate, insects, States, languages, children, etc.

CM — But by this account, 'capitalism' is also, all of it, linked to the notion of production, so how does the parallel with Marx help us?

BL — He gives us the *scale* of the work to be done. He defines the ambition. But in truth the old Marxist mole has to dig deeper, unearth some more roots, reveal other attachments.

CM — That's still your obsession for descent and burying ...

BL — Admit that the tendency for reterrestrialisation is massive.

CM — Actually, I wanted to know more about your exhibition on Critical Zones and your new passion for geochemists.

BL — It opens in May 2020. Next time you come by you can interview me again.