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GRAHAM HARMAN

Bruno Latour and the Politics of Nature

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Introduction

Bruno Latour describes his *Politics of Nature* as a work of political ecology. Its subtitle, "How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy," suggests a specific and limited topic, albeit an interesting one. Yet what this book really offers is a full system of metaphysics, perhaps the first original system of the new millennium. Latour declares these large ambitions openly. In so doing, he is fully aware of the stones that might be showered upon his parade: he warns us jokingly of "a dreadful specter ... the obligation to engage in metaphysics, that is to define in turn how the pluriverse is furnished and with what properties [its members] must be endowed."¹ Here already we see what separates Latour from some of the better-known French thinkers of the preceding generation: Derrida, Foucault, Lacan. Like these other figures, Latour is usually pigeonholed as a "postmodernist"; unlike these others, no legitimate case can be made that Latour deserves this label. Owing much to Whitehead and nothing to Heidegger, Latour belongs to an invisible but effective tradition in contemporary philosophy that might be called "School X," for lack of a better name. School X has nothing to do with either the analytic or continental schools, which are often taken to exhaust the field of possible contemporary philosophies. The endless duels and reconciliations of the analytics and the continentals, like those of Pepsi and Coke or Doritos and Tostitos, only distract us from their overarching shared features. Both schools remain too loyal to Kant's Copernican Revolution. Both continue to loiter in that narrow strip of philosophy that deals with the conditions of *human access* to the world rather than the world itself – for the simple reason that they assume from the start that philosophy has no legitimate right to do otherwise.

The most obvious exception to this trend among recent philosophers was the mighty Whitehead, who brazenly called for a return to pre-Kantian metaphysics in the manner of Leibniz and Locke. Without identifying the other

members of this rebellion by name, it is clear that Bruno Latour belongs among their ranks. After all, Latour declares it necessary "to define a metaphysics common to humans and nonhumans,"² which has happened only rarely since the days of Leibniz. Allow me, then, to begin my remarks as bluntly as possible: anyone who thinks of Bruno Latour as a "French postmodernist" or "social constructionist" is missing the point completely. Any injustice that such misconceptions do to Professor Latour personally are of less importance than their distortion of the predicament faced by contemporary philosophy. While both analytic and continental philosophy mangle and dither in their endless reflections on the human experience of the world, Latour already inhabits an ecosystem made up of whales, monkeys, spotted owls, monorail systems, drug addicts, trout hatcheries, roses, police headquarters, the White House, John Locke, nuclear waste dumps, tuberculosis, and other metaphysical actors. Instead of seeing the everyday objects around us as mournful pieces of rubbish and stockpiled cinder blocks of sheer presence (as Heidegger and his heirs would brainwash us into doing), the works of Latour bring the prestige of philosophy into the actions of every human, every machine, every laboratory, every vineyard and railyard, and ultimately every rock, mountain, cactus, and reptile. Bruno Latour is a metaphysician of objects. The following essay will briefly develop this conception of his works, which is usually overshadowed by the strange misconception that he is just another relativist doing sociology.

"Nature" and "Culture" Are Inadequate

One of the most tiresome features of contemporary philosophers is their ceaseless claim to have overcome the subject/object dualism. Everyone joins hands and chants aloud that they no longer believe in a naked Cartesian cogito reaching out of its shell and leaping across the void to come into contact with objective reality. To what extent should we believe this insistence?

Instead of a bare idealist subject sitting in its inner chamber and viewing representations of an external world, we are invited to consider human beings as already involved in the world from the start. Human beings are immersed in practical activities such as hammering, engineering, fishing, or manufacturing. Humans belong to a symbolic universe structured by language and other webs of signifiers. They do not observe the world in the manner of neutral spectators, but interpret the world on the basis of cultural horizons, enwrapped in the ambiguous play of explicit perceptions and their shadowy background conditions. This purported revolution in philosophy aims to replace the so-called philosophy of consciousness with a new alternative, whether it be called pragmatism, hermeneutics, or the linguistic turn. All of these parallel shifts aim at a richer conception of human being, and in some ways they do achieve a richer conception. But in all such cases, objects occupy an impoverished

position in philosophy – and deliberately so. For just as we are asked to renounce a naked and sterile Cartesian consciousness, so too are we expected to reject the idea of objects as real things sitting around independently outside of human reality. That which remains when both the neutral subject and neutral object are abandoned is supposed to be the lively middle ground of social and linguistic life, which has the structure of *interpretation* rather than representation.

But this is disingenuous. If all these revolutions claim to overcome the opposition of subject and object, they do not judge impartially when it comes to humans and nonhumans. For they leave inanimate objects with little role except to appear to humans, or at best to be interpreted or used by them. If we ask what properties are left to objects aside from their relation to humans, this is regarded as the very “naïve realism” that all of these revolutions seek to overcome. If we ask what happens when inanimate objects come into contact apart from all presence of humans on the scene, this question is either referred to the Department of Physics, or met by a rhetorical question: “what difference does it make?” Like most rhetorical questions, this one has an answer. For the difference it makes is enormous: a great deal hinges on whether philosophy intends to aim at reality itself, or only at the way that reality appears to *just one* kind of reality: human being.

The question “what difference does it make?” takes an agnostic attitude to the question of reality. Reversing a more familiar insult, we should term this attitude “naïve idealism.” While the number of overt followers of Berkeley’s idealism is probably quite small these days, the agnostics essentially mimic Berkeley’s metaphysical position. While few academics today have the courage to openly declare that *esse est percipi*, all the attacks on so-called “naïve realism” mean to insinuate that *any* realism is naïve. *Any* theory of reality apart from its effects on humans is viewed as a kind of naïveté. The only alternative to gullible metaphysics is supposed to be that *esse est relatio*: being is relation, and inevitably a relation to human language, action, or interpretation. Agnosticism fails in its neutral stance, and immediately slides toward a form of atheism with respect to independent objects. Philosophy’s sole homeland is now said to be the dynamic middle ground where isolated subjects and isolated objects give way to a diverse tapestry of interactions without individual components. Instead of naïve idealism, perhaps it would be more accurate to call it “naïve relationalism,” since this position is fully committed to a metaphysical theory in which nothing has any reality apart from its relation to human beings. The effects of this attitude are enormous, since it causes philosophy to abandon all claims to the sphere of inanimate causation, which is tossed to the sciences with as much condescension as stale cereal is thrown to ducks in the park. In short, all of the triumphant overcomings of the subject-object dualism leave subjects more in command than ever. The object is absorbed

into the subject either as some sort of effect on humans, or at best as a hidden ideal principle that governs a *sequence* of effects on humans.

Bruno Latour's radical step is to reverse and undercut this cliché. Instead of overcoming the dualism by reducing objects to their effect on subjects, he dissolves the schism by showing that subjects are actually objects, and that all objects (both human and nonhuman) are *actors* or *actants*. To offer another formula, *esse est actio*. By empowering inanimate objects and placing them back on the center stage of philosophy, Latour avoids the hidden naive idealism of mainstream contemporary thought. At the same time, by referring to objects as actants, he escapes the materialism that treats objects only as chemicals or as chains of atoms, and invokes a renewed metaphysics of objects.

We could say that Latour's object-oriented philosophy has two instinctive opponents, which are precisely the two poles of modernity. One pole belongs to inert slabs of physical matter, acting with robotic and machine-like determinism – a.k.a. incorrigible destiny with its iron fist, smashing all fuzzy perspectives and arbitrary decisions with the sheer force of physical law, a.k.a. the object. Another pole belongs to human subjectivity or power, acting via arbitrary opinion – historicist freedom and cultural variation, with no opinion objectively better than any other, a.k.a. the subject. If philosophy is to advance any further, it is necessary that both of these poles be mercilessly annihilated. To undertake this destruction, it is not enough to reduce subjects to objects (hardcore materialism), or objects to subjects (hardcore relativism), or to claim that the whole problem is a pseudo-problem because the very difference between subject and object makes sense only from the standpoint of human beings in the first place (mainstream analytic and continental philosophy). Instead, it is important to introduce the notion of what Latour, following Michel Serres calls *quasi-objects*:

The case of asbestos can serve as a model, since it is probably one of the last objects that was called modernist. It was a perfect substance ... at once inert, effective, and profitable. It took decades before the health consequences of its diffusion were finally attributed to it, before asbestos and its inventors, manufacturers, proponents, and inspectors were called into question... Once an ideal inert material, it became a nightmarish imbroglio of law, hygiene, and risk. ... Yet like weeds in a French garden, other objects with more extravagant forms are beginning to blur the landscape by superimposing their own branchings on those of modernist objects ... [Quasi-objects] have no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and their environment. It is because of this feature that they take on the aspect of tangled beings, forming rhizomes and networks ... They have numerous connections, ten-

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traces, and pseudopods that link them in many different ways to beings as ill assured as themselves.³

With this observation, Latour identifies a *fourth* way of falsely evading the central problem of philosophy – one that forms the central target of most of his books, including *Politics of Nature*. Alongside the materialism that reduces all objects to mechanistic atoms, alongside the perspectivism that says there is nothing outside the constructivist ruses of society and power, alongside the false agnosticism of contemporary philosophy that claims to overcome subject and object even while reducing objects to the practical or linguistic experiences of subjects, there is the more pluralistic but equally erroneous maneuver that encompasses all of these mistakes at once. For only the rarest extremists truly assign everything to objects or to subjects alone. Far more often, we swing back and forth wildly between the two poles. Liberal activist movements claim one moment that the high crime rates of minorities are socially constructed (culture), then that homosexuality is not a choice (nature), then that the President of Harvard is wrong about the reasons for the lack of women in scientific careers (culture), then that there is something essential and irreplaceable about ancient redwoods (nature), then that humans are to blame for global warming (culture), and then that the U.S. military should not intervene in Balkan struggles that have gone on for centuries (nature). The Right simply mirrors and counters each of these claims with equally vehement and equally hypocritical countermoves. It is reminiscent of the vaudeville spectacle of watching the blue clown fight the yellow clown, one with a sword and the other with a musket, until they exchange weapons and fight one another again with the opposite weapons endlessly. Nature and culture become permanent armaments to be used in the most opportunistic fashion, with the debates merely focused on what percentage of nature and what percentage of culture to ascribe to each entity. The more this process dominates, the more tedious our intellectual debates become. Bruno Latour is an antidote to the tedium: he is the champion of hybrids or quasi-objects. He is the anti-asbestos, abandoning all old-style subjects and objects, all nature and culture, in favor of a generalized anthropology of human and inhuman actants.

In place of a politics that views the world as a series of arbitrary powerplays, instead of a deep ecology that asserts the rights of nature against all human manipulation, Latour's book suggests a "political ecology" that abandons altogether the modernist view of nature and culture as two fixed and immovable poles:

We understand now why political ecology has to let go of nature: if "nature" is what makes it possible to recapitulate the hierarchy of beings in a single ordered series, political ecology is always manifested, in practice,

by the destruction of the idea of nature. A snail can block a dam; the Gulf Stream can turn up missing; a slag heap can become a biological preserve; an earthworm can transform the land in the Amazon region into concrete. Nothing can line up beings any longer by order of importance. When the most frenetic of the ecologists cry out, quaking: "Nature is going to die," they do not know how right they are. Thank God, nature is going to die. Yes, the great Pan is dead.⁴

But if we abolish this "mononaturalism" of deep and pristine nature unsullied by any arbitrary human construction, we must also jettison the more familiar "multiculturalism" of arbitrary perspectival or cultural power-zones, each of them incommunicable with the rest. Hence, it is an absurd gesture to draft Latour into the science wars in the role of a constructivist relativist, a mistake made by his friends almost as often as by his enemies. For, "the belief that there are only two positions, realism and idealism, nature and society, is in effect the essential source of the power that is symbolized by [Plato's] myth of the Cave and that political ecology must secularize."⁵ Unfortunately, even some of Latour's admirers seem to like him for the same misguided reason that the Alan Sokals of the world condemn him. Richard Rorty, for instance, makes precisely this mistake in an otherwise stimulating introductory chapter to a recent book: "We can say, with Foucault, that both human rights and homosexuality are recent social constructions, *but only if we say, with Bruno Latour, that quarks are too.*"⁶ This reading of Latour is a poor match for anything that he actually says. For as he states bluntly, in *We Have Never Been Modern*:

With the postmoderns, the abandonment of the modern project is consummated. I have not found words ugly enough to designate this intellectual movement – or rather this intellectual immobility through which humans and nonhumans are left to drift ... When we are dealing with science and technology, it is hard to imagine for long that we are a text that is writing itself, a discourse that is speaking all by itself, a play of signifiers without signifieds. It is hard to reduce the entire cosmos to a grand narrative, the physics of subatomic particles to a text, subway systems to rhetorical devices, all social structures to discourse ... If [nature, society, and discourse] are kept distinct ... the image of the modern world they give is indeed terrifying: a nature and technology that are absolutely sleek; a society made up solely of false consciousness, simulacra and illusions; a discourse consisting only in meaning effects detached from everything; and this whole world of appearances keeps afloat other disconnected elements of networks that can be combined haphazardly by collage from all places and all times. Enough, indeed, to make one

contemplate jumping off a cliff. Here is the cause of the postmoderns' flippant despair ...⁷

Another way of describing the problem is that modern thought (and its post-modern variants) attempts a *purifying* gesture – one in which subjects and objects are each quarantined in separate spheres while every effort is made not to let them taint one another. If pure physical fact is to be sterilized, and isolated from all political considerations, perspectives, and power-plays, the converse is also true: society is now viewed merely as the site of arbitrary standpoints, each equally worthy amidst the colorful diversity of all. Here again, we see how a sterile multiculturalism always accompanies an equally sterile mononaturalism. For from avoiding metaphysics, the moderns operate on the basis of a vehement metaphysical dualism of hard reality and harsh power.

But as already seen in the case of asbestos, modernism is undermined by its own near-hysterical production of what Latour calls *hybrids*, otherwise known as “quasi-objects.” Hybrids undercut any possibility of carving the world up into objective objects, social subjects, and linguistic discourse. Latour shows this in devastating fashion in the opening pages of the same classic 1991 work that we have been citing. “Science studies,” one of the earlier and more deceptively innocuous aliases for Latour’s metaphysics of objects, invites three highly predictable misconceptions among its critics. Science studies “does not deal with nature or knowledge, with things-in-themselves, but with the way all these things are tied to our collectives and to subjects... it becomes impossible to understand brain peptides without hooking them up with a scientific community, instruments, practices ...”⁸ This seems to invite, by the same stroke, the praise of Rorty as well as the condemnation of Sokal – both of which Latour anticipates and rejects:

But then surely you’re talking about politics? You’re simply reducing scientific truth to mere political interests, and technical efficiency to mere strategical maneuvers? Here is the second misunderstanding ... Science studies are talking not about the social contexts and interests of power, but about their involvement with collectives and objects. The Navy’s organization is profoundly modified by the way its offices are allied with its bombs; EDF and Renault take on a completely different look depending on whether they invest in fuel cells or the internal combustion engine; America before electricity and America after are two different places; the social context of the nineteenth century is altered according to whether it is made up of wretched souls or poor people infected with microbes ... None of our studies can reutilize what the sociologists, the psychologists or the economists tell us about the social context or about the subject in order to apply them to the hard sciences ... *The human sciences cannot*

*be expected to recognize the power games of their militant adolescence in these collectives full of things we are lining up.*⁹

As a *coup de grâce*, Latour also makes short work of the hallowed linguistic turn in philosophy, abolishing it in a matter of sentences:

But if you are not talking about things-in-themselves or about humans-among themselves, they you must be talking about discourse, representation, language, texts, rhetorics.' This is the third misunderstanding. It is true that those who bracket off the external referent ... can talk only about meaning-effects and language games. Yet when [Donald] MacKenzie examines the evolution of inertial guidance systems, he is talking about arrangements that can kill us all ... When I describe Pasteur's domestication of microbes, I am mobilizing nineteenth-century society, not just the semiotics of a great man's texts; when I describe the invention-discovery of brain peptides, I am really talking about the peptides themselves, not simply their representation in Professor Guillemin's laboratory ...

Our intellectual life is out of kilter ... In the eyes of our critics the ozone hole above our head, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may each be of interest, but only separately. That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law – this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly.¹⁰

An entirely new philosophy lies hidden in these remarks, and in the next section I will sketch it in my own words. For Latour, if we have never been modern, this is because there have never been separate and purified domains of reality, society, and language. There has never been an unbridgeable gap between nature and culture or object and subject, precisely because there is nothing but quasi-objects or hybrids. This is not merely some crafty new approach to the social sciences, as Latour's strange multidisciplinary niche (invented largely through his own hard work) might suggest. More than this, Latour gives us *philosophy in the grand style*. It is a metaphysics that quietly redefines the very nature of objects and traces the effects of this shift throughout all the major and minor disciplines Latour so easily masters: the biography of Pasteur, the death of a subway system, the price of apricots in Paris, the methods of police surveillance, the course of judicial decisions.

For Latour there is no such thing as deep ecology, because there has never been any pure nature virginally distinct from relations, perspectives, power. But there is also no deep sociology, because there has never been a society of arbitrary standpoints exempt from the crushing weight of the objective universe. And finally, there is no deep grammarology" because there is always a

sense in which absolutely everything lies outside the text. In fact, there is only *deep metaphysics* – and the depth of metaphysics is really found only in all those supposed surfaces where engineers, bricklayers, poets, subways, trees, volcanoes, and donkeys put being into play. Metaphysics is always a metaphysics of objects – not of the rock-solid billiard balls that long *claimed* to be objects despite being nothing more than human ideologies. Instead, I refer to *real* objects, in the sense of hybrids or quasi-objects.

A Metaphysics of Actants

To repeat, we are dealing here not with mere representations, but with full-blown metaphysics. The theory of knowledge, with its endless lament over the mournful crevice between objects and human representations, has been replaced by a pluriverse in which the gaps multiply endlessly, separating *all* objects from one another. It is no longer just humans on one side and atoms, shapeless cookie dough, or ineffable Messianic traces on the other. Instead, the world is filled with actors (or actants), all of them on precisely the same footing without any order of metaphysical rank. Human minds, freight trains, apricots, oxygen, gypsy moths, ghosts, paparazzi, and tsunamis each seize a foothold in the world, whether it be mighty or humble. None of these objects serves as the condition of possibility for all the rest, as if it were able to denounce all the others by reducing them all to mere derivatives or refuse of some primary alpha term, whether it be material or mental. We have an absolute democracy of hybrids or quasi-objects, which I will now refer to simply as *objects*, in order to rescue this venerable term from all traces of materialist dogma. In our sense of the term, centaurs are just as much objects as bricks, dirt-clods, or the moons of Jupiter. This is metaphysics and not physics, because we are concerned with the reality and interaction even of those objects that stretch into immaterial and fictional realms. Subjects and objects are now both reduced to quasi-objects, or to objects in the metaphysical sense rather than the physical one.

An actant or object, then, is not an independent piece of material. But neither is it merely a representation in consciousness, a social construction, a rhetorical figure, or a condensation of human power-urges. For any attempt by humans to link up with objects encounters *resistance*. An actant or object partially resists us, just as it partially resists the hailstones or missiles or criminals that tamper with it from time to time. As Heidegger famously shows, hammers disintegrate in our hands, rainstorms catch us exposed in the open, bodily organs fail us, and wars break out unexpectedly. Surprise means the failure of all rhetoric and all representation, since the object holds more secrets in store than we ever imagined. For this reason, an object can never be the docile puppet or field-slave of humans. Even the easiest manipulations of riv-

ers or seed corn require a scrupulous respect for reality. Certain drill-bits are required for certain kinds of bedrock, certain wines attain full flavor only in conjunction with specific meals, and certain words of greeting are appropriate in crude conversation but not in academic symposia. Reality is not a naked stockpile for human manipulation, but a negotiating partner. And just like crafty enemy spokesmen, inanimate objects must at various times be cajoled, befriended, flattered, or utterly crushed in their stubbornness. *To deal with the world is to negotiate with it*, and this does not even require humans to be on the scene. Implicit in Latour's entire position is that metaphysics is not something that unfolds merely across some tragic gulf between humans and rocks. Instead, metaphysics is required whenever one actant deals with another in any way at all, since even flames and comets both caress and resist one another in empty space. Reality is relation, and relation is negotiation. To act means to negotiate. Actants make claims on each other, some of them accepted and others rejected: "I am fire! I am powerful. You cannot stop me from destroying you." This unspoken statement can be met with defiance: "There you are wrong, villain! For I am ocean. And as I have resisted all your forefathers for millennia, so too do I withstand your puny force, and even extinguish it with my moistness." Or perhaps it leads to a concession speech: "I am paper, and in you, oh fire, I have met my match. Woe is me!" If inanimate objects could speak at conference tables, we might hear them explain their actions in precisely these ways. Objects are diplomats, and Latour realizes as well as anyone that diplomacy often involves violence, just as kisses destroy skin cells and birthday candles incinerate wax.

In this sense, Latour's clearest predecessor in the twentieth century is Alfred North Whitehead, a great metaphysician too often monopolized by Protestant theologians. After his colleague Isabelle Stengers, it is perhaps Latour who has done the most to channel Whitehead's full impact into Francophone philosophy. Like Whitehead, Latour rejects all claims of vacuous material objects lying around in isolation from their relations. A thing attains reality only *through* these relations, which Whitehead terms "prehensions" rather than negotiations. For Whitehead, an object (or "actual entity") is defined by its prehensions of the entire universe, even if some of these prehensions are purely negative suppressions or statements of irrelevance ("You, planet Mercury, do not affect me. For I am Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, and your gravity is of no importance.") Borrowing another key term from Whitehead, Latour utilizes his outstanding glossary at the end of *Politics and Nature* to celebrate Whitehead's expanded sense of the term "proposition":

In its ordinary sense in philosophy, the term ["proposition"] designates a statement that may be true or false: [but] it is used here in a metaphysical sense to designate not a being of the world or a linguistic form but an

association of humans and nonhumans before it becomes a full-fledged member of the collective, an instituted essence. Rather than being true or false, a proposition in this sense may be well or badly articulated. Unlike statements, propositions insist on the dynamics of the collective in search of good articulation, the good cosmos. *To avoid repetition, I sometimes say "entities" or "things."*¹¹

As shown by the final sentence, proposition loses its narrowly linguistic sense, and becomes a term for an entity in its relations or negotiations with others. The "collective" referred to here is not a narrow social collective of human imposing their perspectives on a nonexistent objective reality, but rather the collective of all human and inhuman entities, a metaphysics of society in the broadest possible sense. Another term for objects, entities, things, or propositions, is "matters of concern." Objects are not sterile, isolated points of crystalline factuality, but are defined precisely by their duels with one another, by their concern for or contention with one another. As an earlier glossary entry put it: "Matters of concern: An expression invented to contrast with matters of fact and to recall that ecological crises have no bearing on a [particular and limited] type of beings (for example, nature or ecosystems) but on *the way all beings are manufactured* ..."¹²

And the way all beings are manufactured is through transformation, through a metaphysical alchemy by which one object translates its most intimate energies into terms understandable by the others. Instead of the former privileged gap between thinking humans and an infinitely withdrawn and perhaps inaccessible universe, there is only a pluriverse in which each object is both a kernel or nucleus of autonomous resistance and also a friend and neighbor sharing its treasures with whatever entities prove capable of unlocking it. The world is not a monarchy in which certain special entities are described as substances, while others are dismissed as accidents or aggregates that merely shimmer on the surface. Instead of a permanent underlying matter that becomes encrusted with varying superficial forms, we enter a cosmos filled only with objects, each of them capable of serving the roles of both matter and form at different times. As Latour puts it near the end of a brilliant chapter in *Pandora's Hope*:

As I have said, each stage is matter for what follows and form for what precedes it, each separated from the other by a gap as wide as the distance between that which counts as words and that which counts as things ... Constructing a phenomenon in successive layers renders it more and more real within a network traced by the displacements ... of researchers, samples, graphics, specimens, maps, reports, and funding requests ... Let us rejoice in this long chain of transformations, this potentially endless sequence of mediators, instead of begging for the poor

pleasures of *adaequatio* and for the rather dangerous *salto mortale* that [William] James so nicely ridiculed. I can never verify the resemblance between my mind and the world, but I can, if I pay the price, *extend* the chain of transformations wherever verified reference circulates through constant substitutions.¹³

The world is nothing but such a chain of transformations, for Latour and for Whitehead. If any question must be posed to both of these radical metaphysicians, it is whether the resistance of objects in these transformations is granted sufficient autonomy from their link to one another in the chain. By attacking the notion of objects as independent slabs of physical mass lying outside all negotiations or beyond all appeal, process philosophy or political ecology seem to hold that the independent reality of things could mean *nothing but* such a dreary existence of present-at-hand slabs (using Heidegger's terminology for a moment). In other words, aside from relations, Whitehead seems to think there is no actuality that is not *vacuous* actuality, in the fully pejorative sense of this term. But this can be left as one of the open questions of the ongoing politics of nature that Latour extends beyond Whitehead's initial steps. With the birth of political ecology, *metaphysics* returns to the heart of contemporary thought.

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