

How to turn politics around: things, the earth, ecology

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*In this article, I give a personal view of Bruno Latour's work on the politics of ecology going back to his work during the early 2000s on the politics of things. Based on my exchanges with Latour over the years, from the time that I became his student in the late 1990s, I show how he developed his understanding of the politics of ecology through a critical engagement with early 20th century theories of a "politics of things," notably the one developed by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. I propose that Latour, who was greatly inspired by Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems*, came to realise through his work on climate change that the ecological crisis poses a profound challenge to the pragmatist vision of material politics. This challenge led Latour to undertake a radical re-construction of the very idea of ecological politics and envision what he calls a politics of the earth. I conclude this text by highlighting a related but different possibility for the re-construction of ecological politics, one that I believe Latour saw clearly, but did not pursue. If we are to succeed in turning politics around ecology, we will need to engage much more deeply with a body of thought which Bruno Latour valued but only rarely - in my view too rarely - invoked in his last writings on ecology, that of feminist politics. Part reflection, part criticism, part homage, this piece then argues that we should turn our attention to feminist politics of ecology, if we want to find ways to continue Bruno Latour's work for a politics of the earth.*

1. Introduction

"Turning around politics" is the clever phrase that Bruno Latour (2007) came with in his paper on the politics of objects, and one of the many puns that he made up over the years and so enjoyed. In the 2007 article, Latour articulates the double meaning of this phrase, which invokes 1) a politics that now has objects - the built environment, nature, stuff - at its centre, and no longer the subject - with its will, its will to power, and investment in self-determination; and 2) the act, the interventions required, to turn politics around, the hard but necessary realization that in order to "make change" in the world, we will need to actively change how politics is done, valued and understood. When Latour wrote his paper, it was easy to locate instances of material politics in the media, and in the world, even if they were

rarely called that at the time: it was the time of protest and controversy around genetically modified foods, animal rights, the building of airport runways and new cycling infrastructure. Latour was refreshingly, and stubbornly, heterodox in the intellectual sources he drew on to interpret and demonstrate the significance of these political movements, and to give formulation to his vision of a politics turning around things. In his writing on politics over the years, he variously invoked Heidegger's *Ding* - a thing that is lively and entangled and completely different from the Dead Object of mechanistic reason (Latour, 2005); Alfred North Whitehead's *bifurcation of nature* (Latour, 2008); Carl Schmitt's concept of *political space* (Harman 2014), and certainly not least, the pragmatist conception of the public articulated by John Dewey (1927).

Latour no doubt thought it was necessary to mobilize intellectuals from across the political spectrum and including from the conservative right, if he was to stand a chance at loosening the tight grip that liberal thought had kept for so long on our understanding of the politics of things. As in his earlier work in the sociology of science, he fought against the engrained tendency to envision a politics that revolves around matter as *a cold politics*, as indicating a technical way of engaging with the world, a politics dominated by experts and managers, invested in the expulsion of passions from debate, and the disavowal of the role of power in interaction.¹ However, in the work that I did with Bruno Latour in the early 2000s, while I was his PhD student, on what I called "issue publics" and he referred to as *Ding Politik*, we turned without fail to the writings of John Dewey, in order to activate the proposition of the "object turn" in politics and explore its rationale and consequences for democracy.² And to those of the journalist Walter Lippmann, Dewey's interlocutor in a public debate about the fate of democracy in a technological society, and whom I was then determined to identify as

¹ That is, Latour called on the avowed critics of liberal modernity, Heidegger and Schmitt to help break the equivalence between a politics of objects and "evidence-based politics," one where it is solely the facts that are being debated. The liberal version of the "object turn" reduces public politics to a "theatre of proof" (Ezrahi, 1999), it makes politics turn around things as a way to exclude - in theory - interests from the political realm, but in practice it often ends up disavowing - and thereby precisely consolidating - the role of interests and power in politics. A form of post-politics in other words, or the evacuation of politics from democracy as we used to call it. ("Politics has left the building!": no longer such a threat today). The liberal politics of dead objects was what we were up in arms against in the 2000s, it was our intellectual opponent of choice, and looking back today, it appears as such *luxury*, to be able to concentrate on distinguishing between different types of object politics, rather than having to address the brutal power politics that is hollowing out democracy, and the world, today.

² In 1998-1999 I studied with Latour at the London School of Economics where he taught a course on *The Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004). Later he became the co-supervisor of my PhD thesis, together with the Dutch philosopher Gerard the Vries. My PhD thesis, "No issue, no Public" (Marres, 2005) was an genealogy of sorts of the turn to issues in the politics of technological societies, and constructed a lineage for this 20th century movement of ideas, from the pragmatist political philosophy of Dewey and Lippmann that puts issue entanglement at the heart of political democracy, to the discovery of the politics of issue formation in post-war American political science, and finally, the material politics as theorised in Science and Technology Studies and the sociology of Ulrich Beck.

Dewey's *fellow pragmatist*, the under-appreciated source of inspiration behind Dewey's innovative political theory of the issue public.

Latour often referred to John Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems* (1991 (1927)), in his writings on politics, and there are innumerable quotes from Dewey's work that I could offer to give you a sense of the Deweyan way of turning politics around things that had captured our intellectual attention during that period. But this one can do: "When interests are examined in their concrete makeup in relation to their place in some situation, it is plain that everything depends on the objects involved in them." (Dewey, 1991 (1927), p. 18). In this article, I would like to discuss the significance of this Deweyan idea for politics once more. I would not only like to show why it mattered to Bruno Latour, and to me and many others at the time, but also to reflect on its limitations. In the last years of his life Latour wrote extensively about the ecological crisis and what he called the politics of the earth, and during this time he referred to Dewey less. I believe something important can be learned from the challenge that the ecological crisis poses to the pragmatist conception of a politics of things, a challenge which Bruno Latour saw clearly and worked hard to address. A challenge also, which brings into view the need for a further re-construction of the politics of things, nature, and ecology, and for a deeper engagement with a body of thought which Bruno valued but only rarely - in my view too rarely - invoked in his last writings on ecology, that of feminist politics.

2. A pragmatist politics of things: *retour a la situation*.

In "Turning around politics," Latour argues that what is most distinctive about the pragmatist conception of a politics of things is that it involves defining politics "as a type of situation." To quote Latour (2007, p. 815): "The radical departure pragmatism is proposing is that 'political' is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what qualifies a type of situation." John Dewey was certainly not only to define politics as a situation in the early 20th century and several of his contemporaries did the same.³ But what is distinctive about Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* is that it characterises political situations in material terms, as Dewey powerfully describes how a new class of public problems has arisen in the wake of the industrialisation of society during the 19th century. As he put it, the consequences of industrial modes of production and ways of life harm people in new ways, which requires urgent intervention, but neither the state nor any other established organisation in society is equipped to perform it.

In our conversations during my PhD supervision sessions, Latour and I tried out

³ Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* described political situations in some detail, and in the work of Karl Mannheim, we find a similar focus on what Mannheim calls the life situation of men and how this informs how they "act with and against each other in diversely organised groups" (Mannheim, 2015, p. 3).

different formulations in order to capture the *drama* of this Deweyan type of political situations. We spoke of the ways in which people's *joint entanglement* in the world becomes the source of conflict, pitching social groups against one another, as their attachments to the world pose a mutual challenge to their respective ways of living.⁴ Think of the installation of 5G masts in a community, the migrant camp near Calais, the polluting nitrogen identified by the EU in the Dutch soil as what must force a radical restructuring of agriculture to address it, the premature deaths from air pollution among children living along busy London roads: these political, *and politicising*, situations all involve material threats to a world held in common (pollution, construction of new builds, policing infrastructure), they highlight shared dependencies (on the built environment, atmospheres, lands), while at the same bringing into relief *societal divisions*, conflicts of interest between social groupings. In the above cases, the interests of mobile phone users, residents, farmers, asylum seekers, drivers, nature lovers, children, and so on, are opposed. And the key point: this antagonism is not abstract, but arises from concrete, socio-material interdependencies, from our joint but antagonistic implication in what is undeniably, and in many of the above cases miserably, a shared world.

If we follow John Dewey in focusing on situations to understand politics, then, it becomes clear that affects that are usually defined as attributes of political *subjects* - grievance, will to power, commitments, resistance - can equally be understood as aspects of objective situations. Here is one more quote from Dewey that sums this up, this time taken from his *Theory of Valuation* (1908), which shows how the values at stake in politics and morality, far from belonging to some abstract realm separate from everyday reality, *derive from the world*. As Dewey put it: "Valuation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing existing conditions."⁵ Dewey's work then invites us to understand what is at stake in politics - conflict, pain, resistance - *not as processes that play out between people, but as deriving from our entanglement with the world, from our attachments to and in the environments and arrangements within which our lives unfold*.⁶ One of the key features of this pragmatist way of turning politics around things, for me, is how *the world here becomes problematic*. Politics arises from a world that is itself troubling, conflicted, and *conflicting*, the source of harm, and at-stake ("trouble to be done away with, a lack to be made good, a conflict of tendencies.."). Furthermore, Dewey offers us *situationalism* as a way of addressing this at-stake-ness of the world in politics: according to Dewey, it is to situations we must turn to understand how the world animates politics, it is not

⁴ And also, at times, giving rise to new groupings, who find, in the situation, that they share interests.

⁵ John Dewey (1998 (1908), *Theory of Valuation*, p. 34

⁶ Two more quotes: values first and foremost connote 'an active relation to the environment' (Dewey 1939, 16); they must be stated 'in terms of the objects and events that give rise to [them]' (16); This is the work of political inquiry.

just about taking seriously the role of matter in political conflict. Rather, to appreciate the politics of things it is necessary to contextualise, to situate politics in relation to social life.

An abundance of propositions, and problems, are opened up by this turning-around of our conception of politics, and perhaps especially democracy, which in its modern version was all about the subject and the realization of his wish for self-determination. First and foremost, as I just suggested, it points towards a "becoming environmental" of politics itself - its re-embedding in the world. As long as we understand politics as a process that only starts once people leave behind the environments in which they live, by joining a public consultation, or participating in parliamentary debate, we will not understand political contestation. I recently found a French Atlas which shows "les espaces de la contestation," which details the particular settings in which politics has erupted over the last decade or so in France: powerplants, airports, motorways and roundabouts. These places are at once 1) a source of political grievance 2) at stake in public disputes 3) mobilized in their dramatisation.⁷ It reminds us of the de-localized nature of so much thinking about politics: as if the where and what are merely occasions for what really matters, the who and the why.

Second, once we understand politics as turning around things, we are confronted with the limitations of existing political arrangements, which begin to look unrealistic. Think of deliberative procedures for organising public opinion (debate), of finding consensus through a review of the evidence (consultation), such methods don't really address the most important question, that of how the space of action can be configured, how agreement can be translated into action. Deliberative politics seem to presume that the space of political action is already configured. (Which is also to say, it is not just our leaders who go blablabla, as Greta Turnberg points out, it is the ideal of deliberative politics itself which makes that sound: it does not offer much conceptual guidance at all on how discursive consensus can be translated into action.) Third, a pragmatist politics of things points towards a different vision of the role of the public in politics. In Dewey's political theory, a citizen is not defined only by their opinions and passions, but as much through their actions, habits and efforts. To quote him once more: "The measure of a value a person attaches to a thing is not what he *says* about its preciousness, but the care he devotes to obtaining and using the means without which it cannot be attained." (Dewey, 1908 (1939)). However, this way of turning politics around things through care also raises tough questions for pragmatist politics itself, not least the following: to what kind of action does our joint and antagonistic entanglement with a world-at-stake oblige us then?⁸

⁷ Gintrac, Cecile (2020) "Les espaces de la contestation. La France: Atlas Geographique et geopolitique, Beucher, S and F. Smits (Dir.), Paris: Autrement, p. 118-119,

⁸ It is one thing to say that to realise a politics that is adequate to our contemporary world, we must stop the overreliance on the sovereign subject as the solution to politics. This is the move of the neo-fascists, this is now

3. Something missing

Over the years, many people have shared with me their criticisms of the pragmatist politics of things. Most of them go something like this: to turn politics around things is a nice starting point, but it is not enough. It does not offer a fully-fledged theory of politics, it does not outline the political institutions that we need, and leaves too much unresolved. I think Bruno Latour shared this view that there was something important missing in the pragmatist politics of things, that he too believed that placing things at the centre won't get us there, if we really want to turn politics around.⁹ Alongside his work on the politics of things, Latour developed a very different contribution to political theory at more or less the same time, namely a theory of political representation which he referred to as the "politics of the circle." (Latour, 2003). This is the politics of group formation, the process by which a spokesperson, by articulating the concerns and demands of a collective, becomes its representative. A politics of subject formation if ever there was one. In his later philosophical work, *The Modes of Existence* (2013), Latour briefly discusses the turn to things, but the circle of representation takes pride of place as his theory of politics ("Mode Pol"). What is more, he does not really address the question there - or anywhere else, I believe - how we should understand the relation between the politics of things and the politics of the circle. How can we have both? How can we have a politics that revolves entirely around subjects, around the capacity of certain actors to represent other actors, and at the same time, strive for a politics that turns around things, that is all about making room *for the world* in politics, of stepping back from the wish for a heroic subject at the heart of political democracy? Why? Why did Latour not feel obliged to address this?

I've asked him this question several times, but I don't think I have ever received a precise answer. Or perhaps it is rather the case that I was not able to parse, to piece together his answer, could not make it cohere. Was it because of his commitment to the intellectual principle of "symmetry," the commitment that politics must be adequate not only to its objects, but equally to its subjects?¹⁰ Was he determined not to make the same mistake that modern idealist philosophy made, by making everything revolve around subjects? Bruno was fond of the term "Copernican revolution" to invoke the Kantian commitment to make the world revolve around the knowing subject, with the effect of reducing things to a shadow of their former (Aristotelian) selves, a mere Ding an sich, inaccessible to us. Was Bruno's

the enemy that we must fight. But to what does politics oblige us once it is the world and not only our freedom and well-being that is at stake in it?

⁹ Of course, this same abandonment of the politics of things can be detected in the work of John Dewey, and Walter Lippmann, who turn to the great community, and the rule of experts, respectively, to make up for the shortcomings of a public politics of things.

¹⁰ I take this notion of object and subject adequacy from N. Elias (2009; 1971). With thanks to Dominique Linhardt from bringing this essay to my attention.

thinking that we should not be similarly monomaniac? That we should not make the reverse mistake, by prioritizing things as a political force *at the expense of subjects*? Whatever Latour's thinking was on this precise point, I have no doubt that it was *the magnitude of the ecological crisis* that made clear to him the limitations of Dewey's pragmatist politics of things. I will discuss below what I think this challenge of the ecological crisis to the politics of things consists of, and how Latour's latest work took up this challenge. But I will also consider a different explanation for Bruno's ultimately loose commitment to a pragmatist politics of things: that there was something missing in Bruno's political ecology itself. To state this dramatically: it lacks the understanding of materiality, embodiment and connectedness as *unavoidable political realities*, in the ways that they are for others. For Latour, a material turn around of politics was optional in a way that it could never be for, for example, pragmatist feminists, like Dorothy Smith, and Carole Pateman. I have often found this difficult to accept, partly because Latour had sought and found guidance from feminist philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists in so much of his other work.

4. A different kind of turn-around: ecological crisis, the world at stake

In his more recent writings about Gaia, Latour didn't refer to the pragmatists as often as before, although he still invoked Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* as a primary source of inspiration for SPEAP, the interdisciplinary school of political arts that he founded at Sciences Po (Aït-Touati et al, 2022). What is more, he always remained committed to what I above called political situationalism. Latour continued to insist on the importance of describing situations as the way to break the spell of the politics of opinion - the politics of impatient subjects, engrossed by their own power of expression. As he made this so beautifully clear during a recent debate at Sciences Po:

[0.30] "on ne doit pas simplifier, soit par une procedure pedagogique, soit par une procedure moraliste ...Il y a un problème de description, un problème de représentation de la situation. Tant qu'on a pas de representation de la situation, it est impensable de faire de la politique. Vous ne pouvez pas représenter, vous ne savez pas que sont les interets. Cette dame qui me disait, mais ce sont les arguments des ecologistes.. les gents ne savent pas quel est leur interets. On n'a pas un vision precise de ce sond nos attachments."¹¹

Note how the description of the world is necessary in order for people to understand their interests: situations help to make clear the inexorable connection between the objective and subjective dimensions of politics. However, it should also be noted that Latour here offers -

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/sciencespo/status/1168948799282327555>

and it is the same in his latest text on the Ecological Class (Latour and Schultz, 2022)- the description of situations *as a method*, not as a theory, not as a way of understanding politics.

One way to make sense of this is to consider the manner in which the ecological crisis puts the world at stake. I think Latour realized that a radical expansion of the turn to things was necessary, because of the fundamental ways in which earthly existence is threatened in the age of the Anthropocene. As I noted above, to make a pragmatist turn to things in politics is already to recognize the "problematicity" of our entanglement with the world. The world of Dewey's political philosophy is *profoundly problematic - inherently troubling, lacking, conflictual and harmful - it is a world that puts our ways of living at stake*: people's joint entanglement in the world - with forests, with land, with air, with energy - is what gives rise to profound divisions and conflicts between social groups. In this pragmatist world, our habitual ways of living challenge the lives of others and put their world at stake. I believe that this affirmation of "problematicness" of our world, as what animates and must be addressed through politics remains one of the key lessons of pragmatism for environmentalism.¹²) But the ecological crisis radically dramatises this situation: our habitual ways of living, it turns out, do not just threaten other people's ways of living, they have the effect of threatening our worlds very existence. Our ways of living are challenging and harming not just other modes of living, they are testing the planet, the very viability of the earth eco-system, to the point of *destruction*.

This fundamental at-stakeness of *the world itself* is what the climate crisis, in particular, forces us to recognise and it confronts us with a condition that is starkly different from that invoked by the pragmatist vision of a politics of things. In the material politics as I described above, it is our attachments to and in the world that are at stake, not the world itself. Now the climate crisis tells us that it may not only be damaging, but *impossible*, for us to continue living "in the usual way." This fundamental de-stabilisation of the world, this earth at-stake, is at odds with the situational politics of things advocated by pragmatists, also in another way. A distinguishing feature of situations, and enabling condition for politics, is that *they are inherently open-ended, they are deeply contingent*: alliances may shift and open up new sources of political strength, new entities may prove critical to the resolution of the situation - a new way of creating tunnels, a shift in transport habits, the reformulation of a law... it may shift the balance of force and the distribution of political agency. But such a dynamic, contingent politics of the environment *does not sum up the world* for us in the way that happens when we say politics of *the earth*, it does not invoke the world qua world, as a

¹² It can be contrasted with an activation of nature in the ethical mode, which is sought, and found, in ecological teachings, as in the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer.

totality. Should we conclude in retrospect: for the contingency of material politics to become apparent, we must already be on our way to finding a settlement? Which today we aren't.

One can try, of course, to describe the situation - if we can call it that - of planetary destruction and de-stabilisation in the language of a pragmatist theory of politics. We might consider that we are today living through a further "problematization" of the life condition called "industrial society" (because, of course, we have not become post-industrial, not really). Today, it is clear that it is not just *our attachments* that are being challenged through our joint and antagonistic entanglement with the world and with others (Dewey's "lack to be made good", a "conflict of tendencies"). And it is *not just our ideas* about politics that are being tested, such as our ideal of the sovereign citizen, whose quest for self-realization is deemed by some to be legitimate above all else. (It is becoming harder and harder to see how a democratic idealism that promises "self-determination" to all citizens can be made to work under conditions of a fundamentally limited and increasingly fragile environment, though perhaps self-realisation is another matter.) If the world itself is at stake, then nothing, not the world of itself, and none of us, will be able to go on "in the usual way." It is not what you would wish on your enemy, but it is nevertheless happening, now. A politics of issues? An ontological turn in politics? These terms that we used before to capture the problematization and the at-stakeness of the world as an enabling condition for politics, they don't work very well anymore: such formulations are too thin, oddly abstract and too vague in the face of the ecological calamities we are facing today. They fail to capture the utterly *destructive* dimension of the problematization of our world in the ecological crisis, and neither do they recognise the fundamental polarization between social groups that is arising out of today's ecological crises.

Should we conclude that something important has changed not only since Dewey wrote his *Public and Its Problems* in the early 20th Century, but since Bruno Latour and I discussed the politics of things in the early 2000s? To speak with Feyerabend, I think this question should be answered with a firm yes and no. First, it is certainly **not** the case that the realisation that the ecological crisis presents us with what we could call following Karl Mannheim *a total situation*, is something recent. Back in the 1990s, when I began my work on issue politics, "global warming" and "global climate change" were the most commonly used name for the climate predicament, and the customary, the most cliché slogan then to was that we had to "save the planet." The "totalisation" of environmental problematics has long been the default gesture - to frame this in terms of our planet at risk, and it is more appropriate to say that it is our relationship with this logic, the logic of totalisation, that has changed. In the early 2000s, many of us were critical of the *global* definition of the problem in climate change discourse (Shackley and Wynne, 1995). The now so familiar projections generated with the aid of

global climate models, the hockey stick and other curves of global rises of temperatures: many of us had a problem with the way these posited the problem on the aggregate level, in the abstract space of global average temperatures, and ignored variability in climate change situations as they unfold on the ground. To posit the climate problem on the scale of global temperatures is to establish a hierarchy of scale, one that suggests only that which can be posited on the aggregate scale really matters. But, of course, it is **not** necessary this logic of aggregation that we adopt when we say that the ecological crisis puts the world itself at stake. Nevertheless the question must be addressed: what politics of scale do we adopt when we posit that in the ecological crisis the world itself is at risk? Are we at risk of suggesting, once again, that the situational practices of people don't really matter, that they are *no match* for what is about to befall us?

For me, the path towards addressing these questions lies in feminist thinking: feminist engagement with politics, science and nature can provide orientation like no other, to the project of turning politics around ecology. Crucially, for feminist social and political theorists like Dorothy Smith, Carole Pateman and others, *there is simply no other way* of passing into politics than via materiality, embodiment and connectedness with the world. In *The everyday world as problematic* (1987), the pragmatist sociologist Dorothy Smith recounts beautifully why, as a single mother, she simply could not bracket her problematic entanglement with the world when asked what is science, what is politics? How to get to work, how to be there for her kid, where (not) to write, when to protest? Bracketing *these* questions of how to relate, how to engage, how to embody 'science' or 'politics' was not an option, they are vital questions that refused to be contained in the box "pre-conditions." The feminist political theorist Carole Pateman (1989) offers us a powerful critique of bifurcation, of politics this time. She takes us back to 17th Century of John Locke, and the invention of a politics of representation, whereby the political world was cut in two halves. One the one hand, there was the grand, historical world of public politics, where chosen representatives of the people fulfil their destiny as citizens who together govern the commons in the interest of all. And on the other hand, there was now the everyday world of life and labour in which most people reside, and where people are too busy caring, too busy with the material reproduction of life, and don't really have time for the general interest, except by voting. As Pateman powerfully shows, this bifurcation of politics in one and the same go cut the world of democratic politics off from the world of embodied engagement and material entanglement with nature.¹³

¹³ I discuss Carole Pateman's work on the bifurcation of politics and nature in Chapter 3 of *Material Participation* (Marres, 2012).

Where was Bruno Latour in relation to all this? In much of his work in the sociology of science he found inspiration in feminism, and it has always puzzled and sometimes upset me that he did not extend this orientation into feminist political theory. In *the Ecological Class* (2022), Latour and Schultz posit that the ecological crisis requires from us that we realise our dependence on nature. "we have to learn how to be dependent." (Latour and Schultz, 2022, p. 33). This makes me laugh but it is a painful laugh: are they really saying that we have to *learn* this? *He* is telling *us*, *we* have to learn how to depend on others? Do these gentlemen not realize that most of us grew up in a world where it was *always* expected from us, as a matter of course, naturally, that we would live as dependents, of a husband, of children, and more recently, of a boss? Of course, Latour and Schultz do not mean dependent *in that way* - to depend on a forest, on air, on the land and the seas, this is something rather different from your kin expecting you to live your life as a wife. But the implication of Latour and Schutz's call, it can easily seem, is that *they* know what it is to be independent, that that is their default position, their starting point, thereby excluding many of us from the intellectual standpoint. It feels oddly detached, for a white male intellectual, the offspring of landowners, to tell us that we don't know what it is to be dependent. I remember an exchange, where Bruno proposed Hobbes's theory of sovereignty as the model for understanding the authority of Gaia. I dared a semi-joke: Mmm, Im not sure about that, I said, I will have to consult with my colleagues in feminist techno-science studies. Bruno retorted, "that's a cheap argument." I don't think it was, and I certainly meant it.

5. A cahier des charges for turning politics around ecology

Bruno Latour liked making lists, he liked creating an overview of the steps that need to be taken, of the unresolved problems that had to be addressed if we were to make any progress at all. He called some of these lists "cahier des charges, or, in English, 'spec books.'¹⁴ I will here offer a list of my own, as a way of remembering Latour, of honouring his work, of celebrating the immense "lift of spirit" that he was able to bring to the hardest problems, to the work he did with us his students, and his utter and total refusal to be ground down by sceptics, who would latch onto this or that minor inconsistency, without expecting very much at all, not from themselves, not from science, scholarship and philosophy, not from all of us as a collective, and who failed to recognise, time and again, how *necessary* it has become for us to renew our categories, to try out new methods of inquiry, to learn how to think differently.

a. Feminist ecology provides a path towards the re-scaling of the world that we need.

¹⁴ "Les ateliers d'écriture diplomatique font la somme des protestations, révisions et addition du projet depuis trois ans afin de rédiger un 'spec book' (cahier des charges) qui sera soumis lors de la conférence d'évaluation du projet, des chargés d'affaires (les diplomates), " <http://modesofexistence.org/diplomatic-writing-workshop-ateliers-decriture-diplomatique/>

One of the key effects of turning politics around through feminist thinking is that it puts everyday living back into the picture. In the summer of 2022, Bruno hosted an afternoon of discussion with Genevieve Pruvost who had just published her *Politique Quotidien* (2021), the result of a long inquiry on the subsistence practices of small farmers, and the "neo-rurales," across different communities in France. Pruvost work shows how a varied set of mundane material practices - making bread, tending sheep, weaving cloth - make the world of subsistence, and become, in a sense, the whole world. Pruvost work reminds of the essay by John Berger (1980), *The Field*, in which he re-counts how a meadow somewhere in rural France springs to life: how with the crackle of the cock one early morning, a field comes alive, through call-and-response, between cock, meadow, insects, wind and trees, something clicks, the activation of the world, and with the creation of this field we can inhabit the world as a space of awareness. Importantly, this field of Berger is both a whole world, a total situation, but it also is and remains one field among many others. Could this kind of activation of the world offer us a re-scaling of ecological politics? The "politics of things" is so easy to mis-understand as a politics of little practices, but from the standpoint of a re-activated world, a politics of things is a politics of knowing *what is enough*. Pruvost' practitioners of subsistence show that re-scaling life - to become a baker of bread, a herder of sheep - is not necessarily a scaling down. It only looks like that from the standpoint of the fixed belief in scaling up, the false belief that the only way to change the world is through scaling up. Of course, it is precisely this belief in scaling up and up, that has done such damage to the world, that has rendered so many worlds impossible?

b. One person's ecological politics is another person's broken world

What makes up the re-activated worlds of subsistence? This brings me to what is perhaps the hardest challenge that political ecology poses for publics today. It is not pleasant, this world. How hard it is to bear witness to the destruction of a world, trees coming down, spoilt crops, cities flooded. As I noted, this world is not only profoundly problematic, it is destructive. The entities that make up the worlds of the ecological crisis are not just heterogeneous - bread, sheep, cloth - they are also mis-aligned and facing threats to their very existence. We are back at Dewey's understanding of what he called relational ontology and what we call today political ecology: the realization that our way of living are mutually challenging, they put one another at risk, cause harm and risk to render the world impossible. Take the example of the 15-minute city - for those who can afford to live in the centre of town, this is the enabling condition for an ecological life, to live without a car, to cycle to the bio-coop, and the swimming pool, all within 15 minutes reach. But for another the 15-minute city is the reality of being priced out of one's own neighbourhood, to have to move out of town, as if lost to one's own world, to loose good transport connections, so that getting to work now becomes much harder to do without a car. Think of taxi drivers, who get so angry with cyclists, those

who from their perspective treat the city as if it were their playground for "mobility innovation" (Tironi, 2020). As noted, it is not just that we are problematically entangled, that the brute reality of our inter-dependencies amplify our differences, it is that one person's ecological politics is another person's broken world, indeed, another person's disappearing world. Of course, in many ways, the 15-minute city is a first world problem, but it highlights the conflictual nature, the antagonising and *destructive* effects, of our joint, socio-material entanglements with the world. Question: Can the mode of environmental attentiveness that John Berger brings to his field in rural France, be sustained in the face of the problematic and destructive entanglements of the ecological crisis? The conflicts, threats, harms and fundamental misalignments like that of the 15-minute city are part of what makes it so hard to discover the "ecological class." Coming to terms with problematic, antagonising and destructive entanglement is our urgent political task, and what we will need to work through. This is pragmatism's brief for political ecology (and one that in my understanding was recently taken up by Extinction Rebellion, in their statement "we quit."¹⁵)

c. Antagonistic entanglement does not, "in and of itself," compel a quest for resolution

In "working through" the political challenge of joint and antagonistic entanglement, however, we face a further challenge. We used to assume, as good pragmatists, that a problematic situation is one that *requires* resolution. Pragmatist theorists of politics, from John Dewey to Karl Mannheim, seemed to assume that when points of view, or attachments to the world, mutually challenge one another, that the resulting contradiction will somehow *oblige* the actors involved to respond, to act out the dispute, to look for a way of resolving it. Indeed, this was an important aspect of the proposition to turn politics around things: we thought that joint and antagonistic entanglement in an issue meant that it becomes necessary for the actors involved to engage, to act out the dispute, "or else we both go down." Re-reading some of the articles on pragmatist politics from 15 years ago, it seems clear, that we understood socio-material situations as *politicizing* precisely insofar as they compelled mutual engagement between the groups involved. But I am not sure at all that this is still the case.

Our crises seem different: there is plenty of antagonism, division, polarisation, contradiction between social groupings, but this does not seem to produce a sufficient condition for "bringing politics back," for the re-activation of political engagement between viewpoints. We face a frightening prospect: that of growing and proliferating societal divisions without the concomitant compulsion for mutual engagement. Where joint and antagonistic entanglement forces no mutual engagement, where that double bind has no force, we enter a different political forcefield, that of conflict (antagonism), where it is all about the battle of interests, not the situational implication in problems. Something else also follows as regards

¹⁵ Extinction Rebellion, We quit, December 31, 2022, <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2022/12/31/we-quit/>

the compulsion to disagree, to negotiate, to stage contestation. now that the staging of public disputes has become much rarer, it has become clearer that this compulsion does not just derive from socio-material entanglement itself, but depends equally on the curation of public-making settings, not least journalism. The logic according to which a mutual challenge, among points of view, attachments, forces actors to disagree: this is what we are at risk of losing, have perhaps already lost, and will need to work to repair today. Yes, the ecologies of ecological politics extend into media ecologies, organisational ecologies.

d. A problem of action, times thousand; living with powerlessness.

Remember the days when the "problem of agency" would disappear into thin air as soon as we managed to get rid of bad ways of thinking, what Bruno called bad (modern) cosmology, which pitched individualist actors against societal structures? Those were the days. They were the days of actor-network theory, but they were also the days of John Dewey. It was he who suggested that relational ontology, a dynamic understanding of the world as made up of entities-in-always-changing-association, could help us do away with the strict subject-object opposition of Kantian philosophy: it would help us realize that we are always already entangled/connected. But of course, and this is the obvious message of ecological politics today, a change in perspective is not enough to change the world. If we adopt relational ontology as a perspective, an orientation in the world, we realize how *problematically* entangled we all are. We do not only realize our connectedness, we realize how profoundly *antagonising* our ways of being implicated in the world are. Where we add destruction, to the possible point of obliteration, this gets a lot more problematic. Or rather, it risks getting so bad, that it's not a problem anymore, but a threat pure and simple. But at which ever of these two levels we find ourselves: it is to realize our powerlessness in a new way: we are not equipped to intervene.

Our action problem, in the face of ecological crisis, is real, material, practical and indeed existential and has been summed up effectively by Bruno: to address this crisis nothing less will do than the capture of the state (Latour and Schultz, 2022; p. 71). The days are over where we could imagine that we could get there without granting any exceptional powers to the state, that the full realisation of the distributed agency of issue-based communities is all that would be needed for us to be able to repair the damage, to "go on in a different way." And still, even as we know now that it is not enough to change perspective to solve the "problem of agency", it remains very much the case that our "action problem" is also a conceptual problem, a problem with our categories of thought, and what are today still the dominant, anti-ecological modes of thought. The politics of things is and must be a politics of ideas at the same time, indeed, it grew out of the pragmatist insight that "thought is first

and foremost a way of changing conditions." quoted in Bogusz (2022).¹⁶ For John Dewey and other pragmatists, all thought is activist, it is *always* about changing conditions.¹⁷ For some, this pragmatist trust in the activist orientation of thought - that the activation of the world must go hand in hand with the activation of ideas - is badly shaken by the ecological crisis.¹⁸ Never for Bruno Latour.

Conclusion

So, what happened then, with the turn to a politics of things ? There is a technical point that needs to be made: there as many "material turns" as there are political philosophies. To the turn to things proposed by pragmatism, we can add the liberal - Popperian - version of the post-political theatre of proof, the materialist turn to a politics of class struggle, and feminist version of a political ecology of subsistence, and many more. Differently put, the object turn is an *under-determined* proposition, one that belongs to the early stages of discovery, the stage of perplexity.¹⁹ And perplexity, whether or not it is enough, in the end, is definitely something we could do with more of. It's important to recognise something else: that Latour's work on the politics of things, the politics of the earth, the politics of ecology opens up the path of a profound re-construction of pragmatism. I think Bruno Latour knew that this project of reconstruction remains unfinished, he could not but leave it unfinished, so that others could take it up, and translate it into their own varied questions, practices, problematics, articulations. As Antoine Hennion (2022) reminds us, Bruno saw it as his job to make think ("faire penser"), and not, to think in the place of others. But also, for politics to turn around -

¹⁶ Or as Mannheim put it: "knowledge is not contemplative but emerges from and alongside the imperative to act in the world" (p, 4

¹⁷ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 26 "knowledge is from the very beginning a cooperative process of group life in which everyone unfolds their knowledge within the framework of a common fate, a common activity, and the overcoming of common difficulties."

¹⁸ There is an irony to this that would be funny if it wasn't such a source of serious difficulty (so, a Bruno kind of joke): those (pragmatists) who say knowledge is not contemplative, that thought is fundamentally worldly, that it always seeks to intervene, they are the ones not capable of acting decisively on their problems. Pragmatist ecologists know we are powerless in the face of the earth's crisis. Whereas the scientists operating in the default modern experimental mode, they are changing the world (not just through their famed performativity, but through sheer audacity of experimental intervention like geo-engineering). (One more reason to let go of symmetry, I would say.) The experimentalists who know how to keep their blinders on, those who know how to block out the damage that their way of knowing the world is doing to the world, they are the ones who have found a way round the action problem. It is exactly the other way around from what the Bruno of *The Assembly of the Social* (2005) used to say: it is the moderns who got rid of their agency deficit through the sheer force of their belief in the power of experimentation. While ecologists know that they have an action problem, they must live with the knowledge that we can't save the earth all by ourselves, and that it is all important that we try without giving up to live with this knowledge. But this does not mean that we can avoid the painful and real realisation of our powerlessness.

¹⁹ In Dewey's logic of inquiry, the engagement with a problem passes through the following stages: perplexity (perception of a problem that goes against the usual categorization of the world), problem definition, action planning, problem solving. (And this is largely mirrored in actor-networks theory cycle, that passes from problematisation to interest translation, ontological (or socio-technical) transformation and finally stabilisation. From the standpoint of this cycle perplexity is merely a first step, not that significant in and of itself. This way of coupling problems and solutions, however, does not work very well for the ecological crisis, it seems to me, and the stage of perplexity is far more important for that political project, but that's for another paper.

pragmatist-style - the world needs to change, it badly does. So many more of us will need to understand that it is simply not possible "to go on in the usual way". Turning politics around ecology involves profound challenges, to the world and to thought at one and the same time, as well as to what it means to be an intellectual, so much of which Bruno Latour grasped, and so much of which he was capable like so few others to articulate.

How to relate to Bruno Latour now that he has passed on? I smile and chuckle at this fragment I found in a letter from William James to Henri Bergson: "You will be receiving my own little 'Pragmatism' book simultaneously with this letter. How jejune and inconsiderable it seems in comparison with your great system! But it is so congruent with parts of your system, fits so well into interstices thereof, that you will easily understand why I am so enthusiastic. *I feel that at bottom we are fighting the same fight, you a commander, I in the ranks.* The position we are rescuing is 'Tychism' and a really growing world."²⁰ So many positions, and propositions, that we will need to rescue from the magnificent work of Bruno Latour, and alongside it, from feminist politics and feminist ecology. And from of the politics of experimentation, the understanding, as Agnes Heller put it, that we must open up "the norms of everyday life [...] for scrutiny, testing, re-confirmation and rejection, not only in moments of extreme tension, but continuously." (Heller, 1990, *Can Modernity Survive?* p. 58). Not because the world is our plaything, but because if we are to live a full life, if the world is to become possible again, "we must break existing forms," to quote John Dewey one last time. I think back to that afternoon last summer with Genevieve Provost, to which Bruno invited us and where we discussed a feminist politics of subsistence, what it takes to turn to ecology in thought and life, the re-scaling of the world, trying it out, putting it into practice, quietly, without fanfare.

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²⁰ The footnote reads: "(*Tychism* (Greek: τύχη "chance") is a thesis proposed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce that holds that absolute chance, or indeterminism, is a real factor operative in the universe. This doctrine forms a central part of Peirce's comprehensive evolutionary cosmology. It may be considered the direct opposite of Einstein's oft quoted dictum that: "God does not play dice with the universe")."

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