

NATURPHILOSOPHIE REDIVIVUS: ON BRUNO LATOUR'S 'POLITICAL ECOLOGY'

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ABSTRACT: Bruno Latour's work, today becoming increasingly influential in philosophical circles, represents a clear challenge to prevailing philosophical accounts of the relation between human subjectivity and the natural world. The 'political ecology' which Latour sets out in works such as *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) and more extensively in *The Politics of Nature* (1999) is a call to arms to rethink concepts of nature taken for granted ever since the time of Kant. Yet despite its apparent novelty, and despite its apparent break with post-Kantian continental philosophy, Latour's thinking often unwittingly reworks philosophical moves made within that tradition, even during Kant's lifetime, specifically in the movement known as *Naturphilosophie*. Bringing to light the elective affinities between Latour's ideas and those of *Naturphilosophie*, this article suggests that the former unconsciously rehearses key tenets of the latter, in particular the claims made by Schelling against Kant. Moreover, Latour will be seen to succumb to the problems which a subsequent developer of *Naturphilosophie*—Hegel—would identify in Schelling's own conception of nature. Finally, whilst Latour offers an apparently compelling alternative to notions of subject and object, free-will and mechanism, along with the conceptual separation of humans from the natural world, his thought often fails to achieve the genuine *critique* that would be adequate to comprehending these oppositions, and to explaining the ecological crisis in which both humans and nonhumans are caught up.

KEYWORDS: Latour, Naturphilosophie, Romanticism, Schelling, Hegel, Marx

HEGEL IN KYOTO

In the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right* Hegel famously urges against those who see philosophy's task as giving instruction as to how the world ought to be that, on the contrary, philosophy 'always comes on the scene too late to give it.' Hegel's equally famous image of the owl of Minerva which takes flight only at dusk was to capture the idea of a wisdom which is belated, but perhaps no less valuable for all that. As symbol it would describe well the predicament of environmental philosophy today, in an age in which, if the increasing number of scientific reports are true, humans may have effected their natural habitat in ways that have now run destructively out of human control. In such a situation philosophy would be both necessary—perhaps a Pascalian wager

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 11-12.

on its own remedial influence—but also necessarily modest in its aim to change what Hegel termed, with some irony, ‘the world’s course’. Such a view of philosophy is worth bearing in mind when reading Bruno Latour’s 2001 work *Politiques de la Nature*, a book which can with some justification be seen as the most radical contribution yet to that growing genre of philosophy which tries to comprehend and respond critically to the present ecological crisis. What is significant in Latour’s book, beyond the challenge it throws down to undertake a ‘destruction of the idea of nature’² to rival the great attempts at philosophical ‘destruction’ of the twentieth century, is how far it embodies, despite its explicit rejection of the dialectical tradition Hegel launched, something of the Hegelian picture of philosophy as the retrospective grasping of historical actuality in thought. This is visible not least in the philosophical weight Latour gives to events which are seen—not in so many words—as *world-historical*, in particular the event which took place in Kyoto in 1997 when scientists, politicians and political activists came together to discuss the state of the planet in ways which, if Latour is right, unwittingly invalidated a millennia-old opposition between society and nature. This ‘event’, which looms large at many points in Latour’s writing, forces on us, so he argues, a radical rethinking of previous assumptions about the separateness of nature from society, of the distinction between scientific truth and public *doxa*, and lends credence to the idea that matters of fact should be replaced by ‘matters of concern’, that nonhuman nature be recognized just like humans as actor and agent, and that a new ‘collective’ be ‘convoked’ to replace an age-old dualistic metaphysics. If the world-spirit was not quite marching through the Kyoto conference halls, the event was for Latour no less momentous.

Latour, of course, would reject any explicit association with the Hegelian ideas just set out. His writing sits consciously within a post-war French philosophical tradition which has long abandoned a dialectical approach and sought instead a different vocabulary in which to express its concerns. Yet Latour also breaks stylistically with much post-war French thought, borrowing the rigour of analytic philosophy to treat familiar themes, particularly the questioning of Western conceptual dualisms, with unfamiliar clarity. *Politics of Nature*, continuing the work of his earlier *We Have Never Been Modern*, is also admirably interdisciplinary, informed not only by philosophy but by Latour’s own research in the social study of natural science and by his personal involvement in the ecology movement. Yet Latour is also a virulent critic of existing ecological politics, a politics he feels has been waylaid by erroneous philosophical assumptions about society and nature, and it is against these assumptions that the book is primarily directed. It is true that as a work of philosophy, noticeably few philosophers or their texts are dealt with by name, but one should not overlook the clear philosophical ramifications of a work whose groundbreaking character a growing number of readers of Latour—notably adherents of so-called ‘object-oriented philosophy’,³ even when they take his work in a direction other than his intentions—have recognized.

2. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA & London, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 25 (henceforth cited as PN).

3. See Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne, Re.Press, 2009.

If the world is indeed set on a self-destructive course then we can perhaps understand Latour's defining stylistic characteristic in *Politiques de la Nature*—an impatience with a tradition of philosophical concepts which bar the way to a more searching conception than 'nature' allowed, one that would do justice to the co-implication of humans and nonhumans in the crisis and in any necessary response to it. Specifically, Latour's targets—and here the argument of *We Have Never Been Modern* is applied and updated—are all those philosophies which assumed a clear boundary between politics or society and nature or science; these now figure as obstacles to grasping processes which already cut across those boundaries, both the destructive processes registered as ecological crisis and in remedial actions which—as in Kyoto—aim to avert the worst. The destruction of the 'idea' of nature is to remedy nature's actual destruction, a set of threats which can no longer be said to come from some putative 'outside'. A Platonic myth of the cave, for instance, to name one of Latour's recurrent targets, is said to lie behind an enduring assumption that we can contrast the *doxa* of values with the truth of science, or divide those who 'debate endlessly' (politicians) from those who 'let the facts speak for themselves' (scientists). Such assumptions are invalidated by the events of which Kyoto is emblematic. There, where science became unavoidably politicized, subject to public opinion and to vested interests, for the very reason that the political—the realm of human values and opinions—began to concern itself with the nonhuman and to mobilize 'matters of fact' in a contest of values, we are forced, so Latour argues, to rethink both our conception of the natural world and the natural science by whose methods it was hitherto predominantly known.

The view of politics as an exclusively human affair, Latour suggests, 'leaves nature to the scientists', in a world where that very nature is now of universal political concern and where expertise must no longer be the sole preserve of specialists or an elite. However, Latour is at pains to distinguish his argument from one previous attempt to overcome the divide between science and politics, namely the sociological theory of 'the social construction of nature' (PN 32). Whilst 'constructivists' captured their object's historical and geographical variability they forbade anything substantial being said about external reality. As Latour puts it, we were thereby restricted to the Cave, to the 'prison of society'. On the contrary, he argues, science is still a highly valid pursuit, because it operates at a level of proximity to the natural world which is unrealistic for the non-specialist. The scientist will always remain a highly useful 'representative' of the nonhuman realm, particularly today, but we can and should, Latour suggests, subject science's claim to a faithful representation of nature to the same criticism historically leveled at our political representatives.

Latour's conscious aim is not just to breach the boundary between the social and the natural-scientific with occasional 'forays' across the lines that essentially 'leave the boundary intact' but, as he puts it, to blur the distinction between nature and society *durably*, so that 'we shall never have to go back to two distinct sets, with nature on one side and the representations that humans make of it on the other.' (PN 36) Once we do this, once we 'take nature away', we then 'have no more 'others,' no more 'us'... Once we have exited from the great diorama of 'nature in general,' we are left with the banality of multiple associations of humans and nonhumans waiting for their unity to be pro-

vided by work carried out by the collective' (PN 46), a collective whose membership is not predetermined but is deliberately left open to new claimants.

For the moment, 'nature' still has the resonance that 'man' had twenty or forty years ago, as the unchallengeable, blinding, universal category against the background of which 'culture' stands out clearly and distinctly, eternally particular. 'Nature' is thus an unmarked category, while 'culture' is marked. Now, however, through a movement just as vast in scope, political ecology proposes to do for nature what feminism undertook to do and is still doing for man: wipe out the ancient self-evidence with which it was taken a bit too hastily as if it were all there is (PN 49).

Membership of this new 'marked' collective is based on capacities which cut across the former two 'houses', firstly an expanded notion of speech—for Latour even non-humans and inanimate things can be said to *speak* (though they, like humans, typically do so through representatives—scientists—who are their 'speech prostheses' [PN 67]), and secondly by replacing a prejudice that only humans count as actors or agents with a focus on that capacity non-humans and humans share to *have effects*. What has effects Latour names an 'actant', a term now increasingly taken up by the social sciences and, germinally, by philosophers. The word, chosen to avoid 'any traces of anthropomorphism' names anything or anyone which 'modifies' other actors, a modification which itself can be measured 'by some experimental protocol' (PN 75). Like membership of the new collective, who or what might count as actant is to be decided tentatively, experimentally, since their 'potential is still unknown' (PN 82).

Where a glacier or a rainforest, a microbe or a hurricane is just as much an actor as is a human, the readiness of this philosophy to encounter the current crisis is clearly a virtue, allowing a useful suspension of judgment on who or what may now be a 'matter of concern'. Those 'hybrid' entities which will now concern us are precisely those which under the previous 'constitution' could not be adequately taken into account, and which threaten perpetually to return, like the Freudian repressed, until such time as they are given due consideration.

When a member of the old Constitution looked outside, she was looking upon a nature made up of objects indifferent to her passions, to which she had to submit or from which she had to tear herself away. When [today] we look outside, we see a whole still to be composed, made up of excluded entities (humans and nonhumans) in whom we have...[previously] decided not to be interested, and of appellants (humans and nonhumans) who [now] demand more or less noisily to be part of our Republic. There is nothing left of the old metaphysics of nature, nothing left of the old allegory of the Cave, although everything that matters to public life remains: reality—the nonhumans and their cohorts; externality—produced according to the rules and no longer surreptitiously; unity—the progressive unity of the collective in the process of exploration (PN 127).

As this quote suggests, within Latour's wider wholistic and collectivizing project special criticism is reserved for the way the concepts of subject and object became aligned with the human and nonhuman respectively to form a philosophical dualism which exceeded philosophy itself, becoming an assumption of political life and an obstacle

to understanding our current predicament (PN 90). Particular ire is reserved in this connection for the writings of French philosopher Luc Ferry, whose 1995 work *The New Ecological Order* had defended the differences between human and nonhuman, subject and object against attempts to deconstruct them. For Latour, Ferry overlooks the very circularity of the definitions of subject and object, the one defined as self-causing freedom, as resistance to mere thinghood, the other as any thing caused and acted upon, lacking free will. The counterposed but mutually reinforcing concepts of subject and object ensured, so Latour argues, the integrity of the human, moral realm at the cost of cutting us off conceptually from our animality and from the world itself.

Latour admits there were attempts to *overcome* rather than merely recapitulate the philosophical dualism of subject and object, most notably in ‘dialectics’, but the dialectical tradition too comes in for strong criticism in this, as in previous books. Those philosophies, he says, which spoke of subject and object’s possible ‘reconciliation’ ‘[t]hreatened public life with a promise of salvation worse than the evil against which it offers protection’ (PN 40). Hegel’s philosophy in particular, when it took the contradictions of Kantian thought to express a discordant actuality, amounted to ‘extending the artifacts of modernist thought to the world itself. No anthropomorphism is more complete than the one that makes the universe share in the category errors of a few philosophers of the sciences’ (PN 263n.23). Political ecology, in stark contrast, is said to resist the anthropomorphism of dialectics by prying apart ‘multiplicity and what collects multiplicity in a single unified whole’. It aims through unprejudiced ‘articulation’ of ‘propositions’, that is, consideration of claims to membership of the collective, to establish a more inclusive cosmos than the concepts of subject and object allowed, grounded as they are in confrontational and hierarchical assumptions.

There is, then, a path other than idealism that we can follow to leave nature behind, a path other than subjects that we can take to leave objects behind, a path other than dialectics that was supposed to enable us to ‘get beyond’ the contradiction between subject and object. (PN 40)

THE NEW INDIFFERENZ

The path which Latour wants to take is one he emphasizes will be different to that taken by modernity in its philosophical self-understanding. Modern philosophy, or ‘modernism’, is said to be responsible for the dualistic, humanistic ‘constitution’ which is a barrier to political ecology;⁴ it is a tradition Latour aims avowedly to ‘disinvent’ (PN 193). Backtracking slightly from this claim in a recent speech, Latour seems briefly to recognize how difficult it would be to disentangle oneself from a tradition whose mark has been left even on its harshest critics, how unlikely is the project of writing philosophy *de novo*. He now notes the influence on his own thinking of Alfred North Whitehead and William James, neglected luminaries of an ‘unmodern’ counter-tradition.⁵

4. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, ch. 2.

5. Latour, ‘Coming Out as a Philosopher’ (Acceptance speech for the Siegfried Unseld Prize, 28.9.08),

Yet here, in Latour's lingering opposition to modern philosophy and in his attempt to write outside of its thematics, to revive 'unmodern' philosophies, we begin to see a blind spot in his thinking. Latour has overlooked how far that same modern tradition even at its inception, was itself something of a 'hybrid', incorporating many of the insights of the 'unmoderns'. In particular Latour overlooks how far during the late 1700s Spinoza's highly unmodern monism was re-worked within modern philosophy in ways which actually anticipate his own concerns. To be more specific, Latour's repeated questioning of the duality of man and nature as exemplified in the opposition of subject and object, along with his attempt to find a wholistic and integral metaphysics beyond these dualities, moves along paths already well-trodden by the early German Romantics (*Frühromantiker*) of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Precedents for Latour's line of thought are particularly apparent in the arguments of the young Schelling, who used Spinoza to critique the dualisms left by Kantian philosophy. It is not difficult to detect, though Latour and his followers have yet to explore them, the many parallels between his work and that of the Schelling of the period 1797-1806. What can be seen as Latour's unavowed repetition of Schellingian ideas will prove crucial because it impacts on the plausibility of some of his key arguments, arguments which reflect the great appeal but also the key weaknesses of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, and it is to these we must now turn.

Latour can be seen, like Schelling and his early Romantic contemporaries, to lament a philosophy of 'reflection' which separates phenomena from their underlying unity, ordering and hierarchically categorizing them. For Schelling, no 'rift' should be established between anthropos and cosmos; 'contact and reciprocal action must be possible between the two'.⁶ To overcome this rift it would be necessary, Schelling argued, to find a position which was neither idealist nor realist but would challenge the twin doxas of nature as real external object and as merely spun out of the subject's representations. For Schelling, so is it for Latour, for whom the belief that there are only two such philosophical positions 'is in effect the essential source of the power that is symbolized by the myth of the Cave and that political ecology must now secularize' (PN 34).⁷ The discipline of *Naturphilosophie* proposed by Schelling aimed not simply to apply philosophy to natural science but instead urged philosophy to move from 'intelligence' to 'nature', just as natural science must move from 'nature to intelligence' and the two meet in the middle,⁸ an idea also endorsed by Latour. For neither thinker would the new philosophy thereby created invalidate science *per se*. Crucially, Latour shares Schelling's belief that the opposition of subject and object, and thereby of humans to nature, is to be overcome through a fundamental *shift of perspective* from which one becomes able, as it were, to see the boundary between humans and cosmos from either side, recognize the constitution of that boundary, and so overcome it. To this end the early Schelling thought

<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/114-unseld-preis.pdf>, p. 6.

6. F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. E. Harris and P. Heath, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 10-11.

7. For this reason I find the direction Harman takes Latour's work, into unabashed realism, to be somewhat one-sided.

8. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. P. Heath, University of Virginia Press, 1978, p. 6.

a new kind of intuition necessary, one that dissolves rather than refutes the dichotomies left by Kantian idealism, particularly subject and object.⁹ Though nothing as systematic as the attempt to work out a Schellingian ‘intellectual intuition’ to ground this idea is to be found in Latour, the two nevertheless unite in the object of their criticism and the means of overcoming it.

For Schelling, as for the other *Frühromantiker*, the relationship of subject to object in consciousness was grounded at a deeper level in a whole of which subject and object were mere parts.¹⁰ At the time of their early collaboration, this idea was shared by Schelling and Hegel, the latter also under the sway of Romanticism. Both developed a concept of ‘life’ (*das Leben*), which would mediate between the subjective and objective, subject and object now construed as merely different degrees of complexity of a single vital force, by turns internalised and externalised.¹¹ Nature for Schelling is an ‘immature intelligence’ or what Hegel calls a ‘petrified intelligence’,¹² on a continuum rather than across a divide from the human mind (*Geist*), a mind now interpreted as life sufficiently evolved to become an object to itself. The antinomies of Kantian thought are reunited through the thought of a single substance in which, as Schelling puts it, ‘spirit is invisible nature, and nature is visible spirit’.¹³

Two more of the many parallels between Latour and Schelling can be mentioned, since both thinkers attempt to sidestep the (Kantian) dualism of free will versus mechanism, in Latour’s case via the notion of ‘actants’ who exhibit ‘a range of uncertainties going from necessity to freedom’ (PN 82), in Schelling’s case via an account of nature as a ‘productivity’ of which humans and nature embody only different levels of organization. Activity—a recent translator of Schelling’s *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* even renders *Aktion* as ‘actants’—becomes for both thinkers definitive of all beings. Finally, both thinkers see their accounts of this monistically conceived cosmos as constitutionally incomplete, reliant on ‘experiment’ for validation, an experimentation itself understood to be an infinite task.¹⁴

What can be taken from these undoubted similarities? Not simply that Latour with the best of intentions seems to be making philosophical moves that have been made before. This would be an interesting oversight but not necessarily a flaw, were it not that moving within the orbit of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* ignores the subsequent fate of that discipline, particularly in the hands of Hegel, who broke with his one-time collaborator, Schelling, and developed a more self-critical version of the philosophy of nature.

9. Schelling, ‘Philosophical letters on dogmatism and criticism’, in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-96)*, trans. F. Marti, London, Associated University Presses, 1980, p. 175.

10. Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zabert, Albany, SUNY Press, 2004, pp. 116-117; Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Cambridge, MA & London, Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 138-9.

11. Beiser, ‘Hegel and Naturphilosophie’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 34, no. 1, 2003, p. 141.

12. Alison Stone, *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel’s Philosophy*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005.

13. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, p. 42

14. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. K.R. Peterson, Albany, SUNY Press, 2004, p. 199; Latour, PN 196.

When this later development and self-critique of *Naturphilosophie* in Hegel's work is fleshed out it will become clearer why Latour's broadly Schellingian approach may not have solved the problems it addresses in the way he thinks it has, and that this has ramifications for the remedial programme Latour sets out as 'political ecology'.

Hegel's philosophy can be seen to undertake an immanent criticism of romantic *Naturphilosophie* which exposes the inadequate treatment of the Kantian dualisms in Schelling's attempt to reunite *anthropos* and *cosmos*. For Hegel, Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* still contained an incomplete, one-sided account of the relation between humans and the nonhuman world, and he began searching for a more sophisticated explanation of what separates humans from nature. This search is to be found not only in Hegel's 1830 work *The Philosophy of Nature* (a work which, incidentally, shows Hegel in no way 'left nature to the scientists'), but already in his so-called *Systementwürfe* of 1803-6 where 'media' (*Mittel*) such as language, labour and the tool are analyzed as *bridges* between subject and object, mind and world (an analysis which, incidentally, also undermines Latour's charge that modern philosophy always assumed a 'prison-house' model of society).¹⁵ At the same time, Hegel saw something his colleague Schelling had not, that these 'media' were themselves mediated by historical actualities which alter their character and complicate the simple picture of a harmoniously bridged divide. Our relation to the object via media such as work has, with the rise of societies premised on an advanced division of labour, become mechanical, machine-like and the subject has become alienated from the object he or she works upon in the same movement as that object becomes deadened, living nature become lifeless 'thing'. Labour and the use of tools become what Hegel in the 1803/4 *Systementwurf* calls 'the putting of the [object] to death, ripping it out of its living context', a subjugation of the natural world for which humans pay a high price: 'what [man] gains from nature, the more he subdues it, the lower he sinks himself'.¹⁶

This analysis would be deepened a few years later in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the development of human alienation from nature is explained via an account of *intra-human* hierarchy. The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a work which, amongst its many philosophical, social and political concerns, shows Hegel further distancing himself from the Schellingian outlook, takes aim in particular at Schelling's version of the critique of subject and object in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*: there the story was told of an Absolute I reconstructing the history of its coming to self-consciousness, a growth said by Schelling to begin in nature, out of which man evolves. In Hegel's *Phenomenology* this account of self-consciousness's origin is transplanted from the sphere of natural history into the realm of human history, with implications it is hard to overestimate.

Hegel places the birth of human self-consciousness not simply within natural history but at the singular moment of the first socio-historical act, the curious but deeply resonant story of a fight to the death between two not-yet-human beings, a fight which

15. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H.S. Harris & T.M. Knox, Albany, SUNY Press, 1979, pp. 222-31.

16. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life*, p. 247.

becomes inadvertently a struggle in which the categories of subjectivity and freedom are born. Hegel transforms *Naturphilosophie* in the *Phenomenology* by entertaining the idea that the Schellingian self-consciousness which has emerged out of natural existence does so as *self-divided*, as scarred by human social hierarchy, a hierarchy which in turn will structure humans' interaction with nature. In the famous 'master-slave dialectic', the slave, the one who has submitted in the fight to the death, is put to work on nature in order to produce 'things' for the master, and in doing so, Hegel tells us, relates differently to nature than does the one who has subjugated him.¹⁷ Hegel suggests that the way nature becomes mere 'thing' cannot be understood outside of a relation of mastery and servitude which now mediates humanity's typical contact with nature. At the same time as they become historical and not just natural actors, Hegel says, neither the newborn master nor slave can forget their embodied, animal side, present to them most clearly in the reality of death glimpsed in their struggle.¹⁸ Humans, the animal for whom freedom and subjectivity have become issues (and in this movement distinguished themselves from other animals), are both natural and unnatural: they never lose their natural finitude and embodiment but this natural element is transformed by the very society born in the moment of humans' recognition of the value of their natural life. Hegel is telling us that earthly 'nature' cannot be understood in abstraction from its apparent antithesis, 'history', which mediates the former but also separates itself from it in actuality as well as in thought. The *difference* as well as the *identity* between subject and object, nature and society, human '*independence*' as well as '*dependence*' (to give the correct title of the master-slave dialectic) must be thought together if they are to be understood. One cannot understand humanity's relation to, and alienation from, the natural world without an account of human inequality and the alienation of humans from each other, a situation which, the *Phenomenology* will go on to show, has characterized our entire history hitherto.¹⁹

Recognizing Hegel's critique of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in these early works also sheds light on the later *Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature* where Hegel laments a tendency amongst his contemporaries to posit an almost prelapsarian vision of innocence wherein Spirit and Nature are theoretically conjoined, a unity we are to perceive through an 'intuition' (*Anschauung*). On the contrary, argues Hegel, 'this unity of intelligence and intuition, of the inwardness of Spirit and its relation to externality, must be not the beginning, but the goal, not an immediate, but a resultant unity'.²⁰ Man, Hegel says, 'must have gone through the labour and activity of thought in order to become what he is, having overcome this separation between himself and Nature. The immediate unity is thus

17. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 115-16.

18. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 115.

19. The tradition which developed out of Hegelian philosophy would on rare but intriguing occasions appreciate this insight, recognizing that humans' exploitative relation to nature needs to be explained in terms of intra-human hierarchies and socio-economic imperatives, an insight visible in the work of Engels, Max Horkheimer and in the last essays written by Marcuse. Cf. Adrian Wilding, 'Ideas for a Critical Theory of Nature', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, vol. 19 no. 4, 2008.

20. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences: Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 7-8.

only an abstract, implicit truth, not the actual truth.²¹ The unity of humans with nature, or better, a richer unity understood as ‘reconciliation’ (*Versöhnung*), having learned from, become educated by, the real experience of diremption, having ‘made good again the loss’,²² is a task to be achieved rather than a first principle. To see it as a first principle, as an existent unity capable of being intuited, is to preempt the unprecedented.

In this light it can now be seen how Latour has succumbed to a problem Hegel already saw in Schelling, namely the positing of a principle of *indifference* between nature and humanity. For Hegel indifference tells only half the story: whilst it is undeniable that many human activities bridge the apparent divide between us and the rest of nature, it is equally undeniable that a separation or alienation from the rest of nature has developed in tandem with the sophistication of those activities. Squaring both of these insights suggests a richer conception is needed, a conception of the unity-in-difference (a real historical difference, an alienation) of nature and human *Geist*, and it was to this that Hegel turned his attention. His findings had one further important implication. If the real historical separation of humans from the rest of nature is to be mitigated (and Hegel clearly thought mitigation rather than annulment of this divide was our best hope) it will require more than simply a changed worldview. Not least because, as the *Phenomenology* and later *Philosophy of Right* would flesh out, subject and object have become sedimented and actualized in history, the subject by positive law’s production of the ‘person’, the object by abstract labour which made it into a lifeless, insignificant thing. No simple intellectual intuition, no simple different way of thinking is enough to overcome such actualities. Instead an unfolding of how this divided history has come to be, and come to structure our thinking, would be needed to make clear the preconditions for its practical overcoming.

For Hegel both object and subject are no mere fictions for which we could substitute a Latourian concept of ‘hybrids’; they are actual products of modern societies and determinants of the individual under modern conditions of production and exchange. Under the heading of *Rechtsphilosophie* Hegel would analyze the way law comes to mediate the boundary between humans and nature and create in modern societies a supposition of free will via the notion of human legal culpability.²³ Subjectivity is not just an erroneous way of thinking about humans, a category mistake, as Latour implies, but what modern law has made of the individual, ‘persons’ legally and by implication morally responsible for their actions, capable of reflection, and of giving reasons for those actions. Law comes to determine the modern bourgeois subject through the attribution of free will, even when that freedom remains merely formal, contradicted by a wider social unfreedom to which it acts as court of appeal. Put another way, the subject is both real and ideal, it names a condition of self-determination in relation to a world of objects and other subjects which is only contradictorily and not-yet adequately realized in modern societies. In dialectical terms, the subject does not go into its concept without

21. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 9

22. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, p. 444.

23. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 75-84.

remainder, a remainder that serves a critical function in relation to existing hierarchies and unfreedoms even when it is stamped by that same hierarchical, unfree society.

On the side of the object too, Latour's abstract negation of the subject-object dualism will overlook the unavoidable representation present in that very scientific knowledge he wants to hold on to. The object (*Gegenstand*), as conceived classically in German Idealism, intended nothing more than that phenomena already appear to us synthesised by our ideas and forms of understanding yet as something different from ourselves, standing outside or 'over against' us. For Hegel the object's apparent otherness is seen to be exacerbated by the abstract labour which becomes generalized in modern societies and through which so many natural phenomena become mere artifice; we become distanced in reality not just in thought from the natural stuff laboured upon. At the same time, for the tradition which invented the language of subject and object there was never the simple dualism ascribed to it today; the post-Kantians, Hegel particularly, always emphasised subject and object's mutual mediation; they also acknowledged that *humans* could be both subject and object at different times and in different respects. Yet Hegel also recognized how far human social relations decisively mediated our relation to nature, altered and distorted the bridges or 'media' which exist between the two. For Latour 'mediation' is just a gloss on a still entrenched dualism,²⁴ but without this very concept of mediation we are unable to think identity, difference and relation in any complex, interdependent way, the very interdependence ecology requires.

Latour's attempt to bring together the human and nonhuman in 'assemblages' overlooks this very real difficulty that humans are both separated from nature through the division of labour, and that human subjectivity implies a freedom and self-determination that is not exhausted by the bare 'having effects' that defines actants, even when their freedom exists in contradicted form. Yet in the shift away from the will and rationality onto mere effects, the autonomy contradicted in modernity is ignored rather than rescued from its perverted forms, and social heteronomy is left unchallenged and unchallengeable. The *differences* between humans and nonhumans which are reproduced every day in modern societies' interactions with nature, and which are of no less importance to philosophy and to politics than the homologies, become invisible, the proverbial night in which all cats look grey.

Latour tries to walk a path 'beyond subject and object other than by dialectics' (PN 40) but this path, as can now be seen, easily becomes an impasse. Had he not so hastily discarded the moderns—and the dialectical tradition in particular—he might have found ways round the many problems political ecology encounters. Far from being the unhelpful relic Latour makes it out to be, a dialectical way of thinking arguably sheds much light on the paradox of our contemporary societies—at odds with nature even when they rest upon natural foundations, societies which, as one famous dialectician put it, produce a disastrous 'rift' between humans and nature which threatens the 'metabolic' balance of both.²⁵ It is perhaps only a dialectical imagination which allows one to comprehend the

24. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 57.

25. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. D. Fernbach, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p. 949; John Bellamy

mediation of social subject and environment at the same time as their destructive alienation from one another—their identity *and* their difference. Such an imagination can moreover recognize the internal ‘complication’ of *both* terms of the opposition society-nature that results from their mediation, when Latour concerns himself with only one such complication—the internal multiplication of nature into an infinite number of singular actants—forgetting the parallel need to disaggregate the abstractions ‘man’ or ‘society’ today taken uncritically as the cause of the ecological crisis.²⁶ To this extent the dialectical concept of mediation is precisely the opposite of the ‘purification’ Latour takes it to be, and which he sees as modernism’s goal²⁷; instead it tells us that nothing in subjects or objects is ever anything other than complex, contradictory and mutually interdependent. Indeed one could fruitfully explore ways the dialectical notion of mediation takes account of the insights of Latour’s ‘actor-network theory’—that the actions of individuals make no sense in abstraction from a *milieu* of things, objects and institutions in which they are always already involved and which are in turn transformed by them—whilst avoiding that theory’s weakness—its refusal to go beyond the appearance of acting ‘things’ to ask, as Marx did of the personified commodity or of the phenomenon of money, what alienated human practices might be concealed therein. Latour’s antipathy to any attempted ‘*reductio ad humanum*’, to any ‘humanist’ privileging of one term of the ‘old constitution’, pays the high price of abandoning critique and remaining trapped at the level of social appearances.²⁸

What it seems is timely to recall from the dialectical tradition is that the subject-object division cannot and should not simply be re-described out of existence: the separation of these terms is both real and illusory. Contra Latour, subject and object, concepts but also actual phenomena, in which are registered the interdependence but also diremption of humans and the nonhuman may be our best bet of gaining critical purchase on the destructive effects of that diremption, and creating a politics that might remedy it.

MODERNITY AND/OR ECOLOGY?

Latour is the first to acknowledge that he has no commitment to the project of philosophical modernity in which the foregoing philosophical debates took place, seeing that project rather as a ‘parenthesis’ which, when it didn’t misunderstand itself,

Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 156.

26. Cf. Wilding, ‘Ideas for a Critical Theory of Nature’.

27. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 66.

28. When Latour is not putting his faith in politicians, economists and moralists to implement his political ecology (PN 143-161) he is attacking those social sciences which claim to expose powers operating beneath society’s surface, a ‘dualism of primary and secondary qualities’ which he says mirrors that at work in the natural scientific view of nature. But the recognition by the dialectical tradition of the power and imperatives structuring capitalism was always in the far subtler language of a mutually mediating ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’, concepts of which Latour seems unaware. Latour’s admittedly provocative statement that ‘like God, capitalism does not exist’ (*The Pasteurization of France*, trans. A. Sheridan and J. Law, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 173) is at least consistent with this critique of primary qualities, but is no more politically astute for all that. Without a theory of capitalism, to take just one pertinent example, one will persist in the Latourian belief that Kyoto changed everything when it has actually changed almost nothing.

set out on false paths, paths from which we are now to free ourselves. Yet a careful reconstruction of some of these exchanges shows that hasty rejection of philosophical modernity may itself be a mistake, and that the critical self-reflection of modernity we find particularly in Hegel's writings may anticipate many of the same concerns Latour wishes addressed. From the above it is also possible to see ways Hegel takes us further than can Latourian thinking, revealing the cost of rejecting modernity and its philosophical 'bicameralism' in the inadvertent recreation of pre-critical, pre-Enlightenment worldviews, even when Latour believes himself to have moved beyond modernity, or to have side-stepped history's arrow altogether (PN 188-194). In Latour's holistic cosmos the unity, the indifference, recalls a time when bourgeois society had yet to separate us radically from nature, a time when, he is correct, nonhumans did not suffer from their lack of 'subjectivity'. Unfortunately, the price of legal equality was that these same nonhumans were routinely put on trial.²⁹ If we balk at the prospect of recreating such a *lex continui* it is not solely because we recognize the naivety of the animist worldview. Nor is it solely because we see the dialectical irony that punishing nonrational, nonmoral animals is precisely to treat differently, indeed cruelly, what we hoped to treat equally and fairly. No, it is also because we realize that reinstating some formal equality of human and nonhuman entities would do little to halt the destructive course of our capitalist societies. These societies, which persist today despite attempts to think oneself, Munchhausen-like, out of their constraints, seem—dialectically—bent on destroying the very nature which make them possible. Resigned towards or incognizant of the determinants of this real separation and destruction, Latourian philosophy tries to reunify the cosmos through mere *bricolage*, whilst modernity and the capitalism upon which it was built persist regardless.

What Latour calls 'the gigantic gap between what the moderns say they are and what they have done and do'³⁰ is not a reason to reject the project of modernity, a project whose greatest minds already recognized the high cost of nature's subjugation, but a reason to reengage with the *aporias* into which modernity fell when its ideals were not matched by actuality, indeed when analysed actuality contradicted

29. Jean-Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk, University of Chicago Press, 1995, Preface. Latour at one point (PN 155-6) chastises Kant for having included in the Kingdom of Ends only humans and not animals as well. He wishes it widened (with a nod to 'uncertainty') to the animal kingdom, indeed to all entities. But if he intends that humans treat nonhuman as ends in themselves he will struggle to avoid the charge of merely charitably (that is, anthropomorphically and anthropocentrically) dispensing human morality, re-inscribing rather than challenging the human/nonhuman boundary. This problem is visible in his endorsement of Christopher Stone's proposal to extend the law of guardianship to things and not just humans—guardianship precisely presupposes the power, principles and charity of the guardian, i.e. the human. If on the other hand the extension of morality is not mere charity but is to apply generally and reciprocally to the new collective he runs into another problem: there hardly exists in the nonhuman world the reciprocity essential to Kantian morality. One is reminded of Hegel's joke that animals are cleverer than humans because they don't waste time idealistically doubting the reality of their food. Pace Latour, one can hardly imagine the food chain being broken by predators pausing to consider the categorical imperative. Latour's thinking, despite its protests at dialectics, exhibits a highly dialectical reversal of its attempts to avoid anthropomorphism into their opposite.

30. Latour, 'Coming Out as a Philosopher', p. 7.

itself. At modernity's origins, as capitalism spread from Britain to the continent, there developed a field of study, *Naturphilosophie*, which recognized the newfound separation of humanity from nature, both in thought and actuality, and puts its best efforts into a critical understanding of this development. Rather than trying to create a *tabula rasa* from which modernity has been erased, as Latour's political ecology attempts, we should reopen the debates launched within the modern tradition, specifically by the early German Romantics, the *Naturphilosophen* and their critics (particularly those concerning human subject and natural object) and deepen rather than disinvent them. The foregoing has suggested the productiveness of that very *bête noir* tradition of dialectics which Latour abandons, a tradition which did justice to the complex interrelation of subject and object yet also showed how their difference is sedimented in a history whose reconciliation is not the work of philosophy alone, as Hegel's image of the owl of Minerva was to show. In this light a theory which posits a unified cosmos may amount to the mere 'abstract, implicit truth' Hegel already criticised. It will moreover find itself impotent in the face of actually existing diremptions, its expanded politics, its broader metaphysics undermined by—more than simply 'short-circuited' by—an economy still speeding towards ecological self-destruct. This is to suggest that a more productive approach to nature than Latour's experimental metaphysics may be a *critical theory* which holds on to key insights of the dialectical tradition, insights which moreover would enable the very political ecology that in its Latourian form is rendered powerless, directed as it is at the wrong target. Latour says that 'between modernity and ecology, we have to choose'.³¹ From the above it can be seen this is not necessarily the case, and that dwelling on philosophical modernity's problematics, aporias and yes, ideals (just those Hegel in his dispute with Schelling was trying to tease out) may be the secret to achieving just that sophisticated ecological politics Latour calls for.

Not that the dialectical tradition survives unscathed from all the criticisms to which it has been subjected in recent years, and to which Latour aims to add the final nail in the coffin. In defending something of this tradition's hope for human subject and natural object's reconciliation against growing calls for their disinvention it must be admitted that this hope may prove belated, mere Minervan wisdom, if we have already entered an endgame where the offending environmental dynamic—ironically born at the same moment as *Naturphilosophie*—has moved beyond 'tipping point'. If such an endgame means that the Hegelian struggle for recognized freedom and for an end to both mastery and slavery reverts to a fight to the death, to a fight for mere animal survival, then indeed we would unfortunately have come full circle. But if the two battles are inseparable, and the former may still be the *sine qua non* of the latter, then Hegel may still have a say, as avoiding not merely barbarism but extinction is seen as a choice which affects all subjects, and these subjects thereby recognize that the historical (hierarchical) form of their interaction, which reacts back destructively upon natural existence, is both unstable and unsustainable. That fear of the 'abso-

31. Latour, 'Coming Out as a Philosopher', p. 8.

lute Lord' which Hegel called 'death' might then be—in an admittedly grave but not hopeless scenario—the beginning of a wisdom which is not belated, which for once does not arrive after it can be put to good use.

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