LATOUR'S REVOLUTION OF GAIA

PHIL 363

Bushell, William

11319183 | PZU426

Introduction

Bruno Latour argues that climate change has transformed our planet from a passive backdrop into an active political actor, collapsing the boundaries between nature and society and ushering in what he calls the "new climate regime." At the heart of this upheaval is Gaia, a figure Latour reimagines from James Lovelock's hypothesis as neither a benevolent goddess nor a mechanistic system, but a reactive force that destabilizes our assumptions about science and politics. Far from a metaphor, Gaia compels us to rethink how we understand agency, knowledge, and responsibility in a world where Earth itself pushes back. This paper explores Latour's use of Gaia to illuminate the entangled realities of a planet in flux, showing how it demands a radical redefinition of politics and challenges us to compose new forms of collective life on an ever-reactive Earth.

I. The New Climate Regime as Conceptual Crisis

For Latour, the defining feature of the contemporary moment is not simply environmental degradation, but is a more fundamental transformation he calls the new climate regime. This term designates the collapse of the modern framework that once sharply separated nature and society. The traditional post-Galileo view cast Earth as a passive, external backdrop to human action. It was seen as something to be observed, measured and managed. But, under the pressure of climate change, this dichotomy no longer fits. The Earth has now entered the stage not as scenery, but as an actor. Latour argues that the Earth is a force that responds to human actions in unpredictable and deeply consequential ways. We no longer live in a world where politics can be confined as human. Now, we must contend with a planet that pushes back.

In *Facing Gaia*, Latour describes this shift as ontological. The new climate regime exposes the inadequacy of post-Galileo views of the Earth. Both scientific objectivity and political liberalism assumed a stable Earth, and climate change forces us to accept that these views no longer hold. Latour writes that "everything changes in the way stories are told, so much so that the political order now includes everything that previously belonged to nature" (*Facing Gaia* 3). Gaia, in this sense, is the name Latour gives to the Earth as a political agent. She is not a metaphor that represents the Earth from a distance, but a conceptual figure that forces us to engage directly with the entangled reality of earthly processes, and one that resists abstraction and demands new ways of thinking.

Latour's framing of this ontological shift does not simply mean that the climate is now a political issue, rather, it means that the Earth itself must now be treated as a political subject. Gaia is not an external object for scientific study, but an agent that interrupts and destabilizes human systems. This is why Latour resists interpreting Gaia as either a goddess or a holistic system, since she is neither sacred nor mechanistic, or even to be personified. Gaia is not to be identified with the globe, nor is she a metaphor for the environment. She is instead a name for a process of becoming visible and active, a force that refuses the artificial distinction between nature and politics.

Latour also contrasts the new climate regime with the post-Galilean view by emphasizing that we are no longer able to think of science and politics as autonomous spheres. The destabilization of the Earth systems brings with it a destabilization of knowledge systems. Latour's diagnosis of the new climate regime is echoed by Zwier and de Boer, who argue that Gaia destabilizes both traditional scientific authority and its critics. "Gaia renders both these positions untenable," they write, "yet in so doing confronts any philosophical and scientific account of the Anthropocene

with the following: as the benchmarks of modernity shrivel, the metaphysics of science and its place in the world must be thought anew" (Zwier et al 84). This affirms Latour's central insight that climate change is not just an empirical crisis, but a metaphysical one. It calls into question the framework that allowed science to function as an external authority. In the new climate regime, science cannot stand above politics, nor can it be dismissed as mere ideology. Scientific inquiry is no longer detached from political conflict, because the object of science is now in motion and reacting to human action. It is not the humans that make Gaia act, but Gaia that makes the humans act. In this sense, Gaia is exposing the limits of Enlightenment rationality, which presupposes a neutral backdrop of a world governed by timeless laws. Gaia resists being known in that way. She intrudes, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, demanding a new kind of thinking and a new form of response. What Gaia forces us to confront is that the climate crisis is not a matter of managing risk but of reimagining our place in the world. As Latour makes clear in *Facing Gaia*, the new climate regime is not merely a scientific situation, but a cosmopolitical crisis, forcing humans to locate themselves relative to the Earth. This shift is not only urgent, but is profoundly disorienting. Latour cites Fredric Jameson's remark that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (qtd. in *Facing Gaia* 108). The new climate regime calls for a redefinition of politics, one that can include nonhumans, recognize feedback, and operate on this uncertain terrain. In short, it calls for us to think with Gaia.

II. Gaia as a Figure

Gaia is originally a concept developed by James Lovelock, with key contributions from Lynn Margulis. Lovelock proposed the Gaia hypothesis in the 1970s, suggesting that the Earth functions as a self-regulating system likened to a living organism, capable of maintaining conditions favorable to life. What Latour does is reappropriate and philosophically rework Gaia.

He draws from Lovelock, but he radically shifts the meaning of the concept. For Lovelock, Gaia was often framed in terms of scientific systems thinking, and an idea of planetary homeostasis. For Latour, Gaia is no longer an organism or system, it is a political and ontological figure. It is one that resists both personification, and systemization. He explicitly distances himself from Gaia as a stable, regulative mechanism, and instead portrays Gaia as an agent of disruption; she is a figure that reveals the collapse of modern distinctions like nature/society, subject/object, and fact/value. Latour writes that "the paradox of the figure that we are attempting to confront is that the name of a proteiform, monstrous, shameless, primitive goddess has been given to what is probably the least religious entity produced by Western science" (*Facing Gaia* 87).

Latour's Gaia is not a metaphor, nor a mythological goddess, nor a scientific system. She is a philosophical figure, a concept designed to disrupt and reconfigure how we think about the Earth and agency in the wake of ecological crisis. Latour's move is not to revive ancient cosmologies, but to name something more disturbing: the ungraspable agency of a planet that reacts. The figure of Gaia refuses categorisation. She is not a being, god, organism, system, or globe. She is what we are forced to reckon with. Lovelock later revised his vision, describing Gaia in increasingly volatile and reactive terms, no longer a benevolent system but a force that could render Earth uninhabitable for humans. Yet Latour goes further, framing Gaia not as a scientific entity but as a philosophical figure that disrupts our conceptual ground.

Latour is not alone in positioning Gaia as a disruptive figure. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers offers a closely aligned yet distinct interpretation. In *In Catastrophic Times,* she emphasizes that Gaia is not a comforting or stabilizing presence, but can be likened to an "intruder." This Gaia does not respond to human hopes or ethics, she instead interrupts. Stengers emphasizes that Gaia is not a benevolent mother or a stable system, but an intruder who modifies what is possible.

Stengers writes “it is a matter here of thinking *intrusion, not belonging*” (*In Catastrophic Times* 44). Gaia is not a home to return to, nor a stable ground for identity. She is a presence that “asks nothing of us, not even a response to the question she imposes” (46). This refusal to be reconciled or soothed, aligns with Latour’s view of Gaia as a figure that undoes the frameworks we have relied on to distinguish knowledge and control. Gaia demands nothing, yet she unsettles everything.

The radical nature of Gaia’s agency is further elaborated in Latour’s collaboration with earth system scientist Timothy Lenton. In their essay “Extending the Domain of Freedom,” they argue that Gaia forces us to rethink agency itself as a process of co-regulation. Latour and Lenton describe Gaia not as a subject of intentionality, but as a planetary condition that “opens the possibility of extending the domain of freedom by sharing it more widely on both sides” (*Latour and Lenton* 680). This redefinition moves beyond traditional human-centered notions of autonomy and situates freedom within the entangled co-regulation of life systems and Earth processes. What unites these approaches is their refusal to treat Gaia as an object of knowledge or control. Instead, she becomes a name for the breakdown of those epistemic and political structures.

This relational understanding of agency means that Gaia cannot be localized or commanded. She does not rule from above, nor does she operate as a unified system. She manifests in the interplay of feedback loops and responses that exceed any single actor’s control. Latour’s Gaia is not a single being, but a figure of entanglement, one that challenges the fantasy of human sovereignty while also refusing to collapse into pure determinism. She is active without being personified, and political without being institutional. Gaia is not to be identified with the globe, nor with nature in the modern sense, but with a becoming visible and active of a force that renders the old

divisions between science and politics unstable. To think Gaia, then, is to accept that no single point of view can master her. She demands a plural, situated form of attention, one that acknowledges our implication in Earth systems without pretending to stand above them. Gaia is not a foundation, but a disturbance. In this sense, Gaia is not what we come to understand once we clarify our concepts, but what appears when they begin to break down.

III. Political Implications of Gaia

If Gaia is not a system to be known or managed, but is a force that destabilizes thought and demands response, then the challenge she presents is not just epistemological, it is political. Latour insists that Gaia cannot be integrated into existing political structures without transforming those structures from the ground up. The figure of Gaia calls for a redefinition of politics, one that includes nonhuman actors and resists that illusion of global management. These politics should operate within the fragile, reactive spaces of what he calls the critical zone. Politics within Gaia are no longer about governing a stable globe from above, but composing a livable world from within.

Latour frames this shift as a move from modern sovereignty to earthbound composition. “It is by making themselves capable of response, by endowing themselves with a new sensitivity, that Humans in Nature become Earthbound with and against Gaia” (*Facing Gaia* 283). Becoming earthbound means abandoning the modern illusion that political life can be conducted from above or from nowhere. Instead, Latour calls for a politics that begins from where we are, in the thin layer of the Earth’s surface where life happens, where climate reacts, and where feedback loops operate. This is the critical zone, a fragile space that replaces the abstract concept of the globe with a materially situated territory. In this zone, politics cannot proceed by reference to

universal reason and disembodied norms. It must instead become a compositional practice, a process of assembling provisional attachments between humans and nonhumans who share a common dependence on the same livable conditions.

In Lecture 8 of *Facing Gaia*, Latour pushes this idea further by questioning who or what constitutes people. In the context of Gaia, a person can no longer be assumed to consist of autonomous individuals capable of rational deliberation in isolation from the world. Rather, it must include all those beings who co-produce the conditions of political life, including soil, climate, rivers, and species. Latour writes that "the Earth is no longer 'objective,' in the sense that it can no longer be kept at a distance, considered from the point of view of Sirius and as though it has been emptied of all its humans" (*Facing Gaia* 62). This collapse of distance between humans and Earth displaces the fantasy of a detached viewpoint from which the planet might be surveyed. Political life can no longer be oriented around external control, as it must arise within the very conditions it seeks to address. To be earthbound is to recognize that there is no escape from entanglement with Gaia. Latour's redefinition of politics does not begin with universal subjects, but with situated collectives, composed in and through the uncertainties of the critical zone. This is a politics of attachment and negotiation, not of mastery.

Such a politics demands new institutions, ones that can respond to the actions of beings who do not reason in human terms, but nonetheless participate in shaping the shared conditions of existence. Latour's point is not that we should treat rivers as people, but that we must compose a collective that accounts for their agency. The political task becomes one of learning to respond appropriately to Gaia's demands without pretending to command them. What emerges from this view is a political landscape defined not by consensus, but by interdependence and an acknowledgement of the asymmetry of agency. Latour calls for compositional politics: a

continuous effort to build livable arrangements in response to an Earth that reacts. In this way, Gaia disrupts not only modern notions of nature and politics, but the very form of the political subject itself. To act politically under Gaia is not to assert dominance, but to enter into ongoing and precarious relations of exchange and limitation between agents. As Latour suggests, it is to find ourselves no longer modern, and to begin composing a world accordingly.

IV. Gaia Beyond Nature

Latour's Gaia is not a return to nature in the romantic sense. She is not a call to wilderness, purity, or a separation from human influence. Instead, Gaia includes everything entangled in the Earth's reactive systems, from ancient forests to global shipping lanes. In *Thinking Like a Mall,* Steven Vogel argues that even the most artificial environments are part of the ecological field and should be thought of as such. The idea that nature lies outside the human built world is one of the modern illusions Gaia forces us to abandon. As Vogel puts it, "the environment itself is an artifact that we make through our practices, and hence one for which we are responsible and about which we ought to care" (Vogel 164). This aligns with Latour's Gaia by insisting that cities, malls, and other infrastructure are not separate from nature but are part of the material assemblage that now constitutes the critical zone. If Gaia appears wherever there is feedback, then it becomes impossible to draw a clean line between the natural and artificial. Gaia therefore does not rescue is from the artificial, but places us more deeply within it. She reminds us that the Earth we live on is already shaped by our actions and that the task ahead is not to retreat from that entanglement but to take responsibility for it.

This reframing has important consequences for how we understand ecological responsibility. The idea that nature exists only in pristine forests obscures the fact that the most pressing planetary

processes are unfolding in industrial zones. Latour's politics of composition demands that we acknowledge this entanglement not as a problem to be purified, but as a condition to be negotiated.

Vogel's account reinforces this idea by refusing to distinguish between human built environments and the ecological processes they participate in. The mail, in his reading, is not outside of nature, but an example of what nature has become. As such, the mall is a concrete manifestation of Gaia's reach. For Vogel, attending to these constructed environments is not a retreat from environmental concern but is an expansion of it. This mirrors Latour's insistence that Gaia is not separate from humanity, but is insisting in and through our own arrangements of life.

Both thinkers reject any nostalgia for nature as separation. What matters is not returning to nature, but cultivating a form of political attention that begins with where we are: entangled within altered, inhabited zones. To think with Gaia, under these conditions, is to take seriously the ecological force of what we have built and what continues to act through us.

Conclusion

Latour's reimagined Gaia meets the new climate regime head-on by collapsing the boundaries between nature and society and drawing Earth into the realm of political agency. Rather than a distant backdrop or a stable system in need of control, Gaia appears as a disruptive presence that demands we rethink science and politics. In insisting on the inseparability of human and nonhuman forces, Gaia dissolves the modern illusion of a neutral vantage point above the fray and compels us to acknowledge our entanglement with Earth's feedback loops. Far from being a nostalgic return to nature, this perspective highlights urban infrastructures as inseparable components of the planet's reactive processes. What follows is a need for politics that is not

about sovereignty but is about carefully composing livable arrangements within the fragile critical zone we share with countless other agents. In short, Latour's Gaia helps us address the challenges of the new climate regime by shifting the focus from controlling an inert environment to collaborating with a living and responsive Earth, and pushes us to envision a form of collective agency that is accountable, situated, and open to what Gaia demands.

Works Cited

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Polity Press, 2017.

Latour, Bruno, and Timothy M. Lenton. "Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2022, pp. 671–700. *University of Chicago Press*, https://doi.org/10.1086/719556.

Stengers, Isabelle. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Translated by Andrew Goffey, Open Humanities Press, 2015.

Vogel, Steven. *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. MIT Press, 2015.

Zwier, Jeroen, and Bas de Boer. "Gaia, the Earth-Bound, and the Nature of Philosophy." *Environmental Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2021, pp. 72–91. *Philosophy Documentation Center*, https://doi.org/10.5840/envirophil202181548.