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Human Agency and Environmental Crisis: The Autonomy of Politics between Hybridism and Dualism

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to discuss the issue of political agency in the context of the climate crisis. In this regard, the article reports and analyzes the outlines of the debate on the relationship between human beings and the non-human world, and takes Bruno Latour's theoretical proposal and some criticisms of it as a reference. For the most part, this debate revolves around ontological questions concerning the status of human beings in the world. Such questions provide arguments for better understanding whether politics represents an autonomous dimension in which human agency possesses a peculiar meaning or not.

Keywords: Political ecology, ontology, Anthropocene, scale critique, Bruno Latour

ARTICLE

1.

For several decades political theory has discussed which units of analysis and conceptual circumscriptions it should rely on. This was not a problem for much of modernity, in which the question was resolved by the importance of the state. Starting at least from Hobbes and contractualism, the state was understood in the West as the fundamental whole where politics emerges, manifests, and is institutionalized. Since at least the 1980s, the traditional relationship between space and politics has been challenged by supranational legal institutions, by processes of (economic and cultural) globalization, and by the environmental crisis.

In the context of modernity the democratic nation-state is established as a dimension in which the

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political agency of the citizen emerges and materializes. Procedural criteria, institutional mechanisms, and the rule of law in principle would like to ensure that a citizen of a certain state is able to realize his or her democratic self-determination within the territorial sphere in which the state operates. It is clear that only a minority of states have fulfilled these criteria in the last century. However, the issue here discussed concerns not only the reality of contemporary democracy, but also the very *ideal* of democratic agency linked to the nation-state. Democratic agency means that there is a possibility for individuals or groups belonging to a state to respond to conflicts, problems, and moments of crisis in a given political system: for example, the problem of wages and redistribution can be addressed in Italy by those social partners who demand different treatment, putting pressure (through elections, strikes, collecting signatures, public debate) on the institutions that regulate that aspect of public life. Similarly, choices can be made about the treatment of waste, pollution thresholds, and the preservation of ecosystems. The climate crisis, given its planetary scope, undermines the possibility of relying on the modern category of democratic agency.

Hence the climate crisis cannot be enclosed within the dimension of states. Like other issues, it transcends the boundaries of the civic-political space in which modern democratic agency can act. The environmental crisis calls for a rethinking of political categories in a similar way to what has happened in the past. For example, in *The Nomos of the Earth* (2003) Carl Schmitt discussed how international law could only come into being as a result of the exploration voyages of the sixteenth century, when the West – as Fernand Braudel (2012) also reports – was able to develop a unified perception of the globe. Environmental problems lead us Westerners to a further recognition: the globe does not consist of a unity given by the totality of human beings, but of a much larger whole that includes non-human species and non-living elements. The problem for political theory thus becomes deeper.

The space that pertains to politics is to be found in a set of relations that goes far beyond the dimension of the human. The movement is twofold. On the one hand, politics needs to address ecological visions – understood as perspectives that include the infinitesimal relationships between the organisms and non-organisms that populate the planet. On the other hand, ecology must include, in the complex system it claims to account for, humanity understood not only in a biological sense, but also in a social, ethical, and political sense. This is a relevant issue not only because of its theoretical importance, but also because environmental problems demand action, and we need to be aware of what we can do. The effort to understand the scope of human action within this broadly understood ecological dimension is decisive for the preservation of the conditions necessary for human life.

2.

Contrary to some early readings on globalization, states have not become obsolete in the twenty-first century. They still represent the fundamental dimension in which human life takes on a political

configuration, in the sense of active and passive involvement in a power structure. Nevertheless, the broad debate on globalization that arose around the 1980s posed a challenge to this traditional view. Global integration appeared in the eyes of several authors to be a process that called for a rethinking of those definitions of society, state and politics that until then had been prioritized in the social sciences and political theory (GIDDENS 1973; SASSEN 2001; BECK & SZNAIDER 2006). Ulrich Beck was one of the most assiduous promoters of the epistemological renewal of the social sciences to be implemented, according to him, through the adoption of a "methodological cosmopolitanism".

The cosmopolitan turn proposed by Beck rests on the idea that cosmopolitanism, as a concrete dimension of existence, is increasingly present in the contemporary world. For Beck two aspects are relevant. On the one hand, thanks to communication and transport technologies individuals can create networks of relationships, interests, and affiliation that transcend the space around them. On the other hand, interdependence between different regions of the world has grown, fueled both by economic integration and by shared risk factors. Among these risk factors, according to Beck, are environmental problems, which are not geographically reducible to specific regions of the world, but are structurally intertwined with 'external' processes and influences (2013). The purpose of methodological cosmopolitanism is thus to extend the scope of social and political theory beyond conventional circumscriptions to include (among other things) the environmental question. This inclusion should be achieved without breaking up the problem into many different national issues, but by developing a socio-political gaze that can observe it on its global scale. With the notion of scale, Beck intends to distinguish a dimension of human action that is no longer confined to the closed society but extends to the global. The global is for Beck still understood as a humanly intelligible scale. That is, as something that can be analyzed and understood and in which people can act.

However, as Woods (2014) observes, the notion of scale needs critical analysis. Through a survey of the media and academic recurrence of the term "Anthropocene", Woods notes how widespread the assumption has become that the human species is the subject of the Anthropocene. According to him, this is a misleading interpretation that can be challenged through a critique of scale. In this regard, one must start with the concept of "scale variance". In the concept of linear scalarity, a system exhibits recurring properties regardless of the scale at which it is observed. Woods takes the short film *Powers of Ten* (2010) as an example. The purpose of the film is to show the power of the number ten as an exponential. The film starts with an image of two people in a park. Initially the camera is positioned one meter above their heads. In the first part, this measure is recurrently multiplied by ten (10^1, 10^2, 10^3...) so the camera moves away and a journey in the universe begins. We see cities, nations, and the whole earth disappear into an infinitesimal point of the universe. In the second part we take the reverse path: returning to the starting point given by the couple in the park, we go further descending into the microscopic

world one negative exponent at a time (10^{-1}, 10^{-2}, 10^{-3}…). In doing so, we enter the skin of the hand, the nuclei of cells, the atomic structure of DNA.

Throughout this trip there is a fixed human element: the voice of the narrator who describes every step we take in the infinite universe as well as in the microscopic world. Human centrality is also made evident by the fact that the start for both the ascent and descent is given by two human subjects who constitute the neutral point. According to Woods, this is an example of fixed scalarity that creates the effect of a Matryoshka or Mandelbrot set. Each scale is brought back to an intelligible dimension made up of analogies and correspondences with other scales. The transition between scales is achieved through a zoom out/in procedure, which produces a completely linear effect.

In opposition to this, Woods states that we should think of scales in terms of variance. Each scale has its own properties and is subject to specific criteria. This is observable in the biological sphere, where the anatomical structures of species comply with different criteria. As also observed by Levin (1992), scale variance is not merely an epistemological notion - it does not only concern "our" observational possibilities - but determines a concrete discontinuity. In other words, it refers to "thresholds" that belie the possibility of moving from one scale to another with the linearity that the zoom effect wants to make plausible. Thresholds divide biological scales, but they also determine the ontological dimension of the social and of the set of technological artefacts. The latter falls into the category that Timothy Morton (2013) has called "hyperobjects" to refer to phenomena that cannot be directly grasped by human experience, but must be reconstructed from singular observations, measurements, and partial perceptions.

Who is the subject of the Anthropocene then? The answer contradicts the term itself, for as Woods states, it is not the human being (the *anthropos*), nor is it another species. Rather, Woods continues, we should look for it in theories of assemblages: "Understanding the subject of the Anthropocene means tracing the distribution of agency across scale domains in nonsmooth, nonrepresentational ways" (WOODS 2014, 137). In Michael DeLanda's definition, assemblages can be understood as "social totalities" that encompass the interaction between humans, other life forms, technical systems, and the environment in a broad sense (DELANDA 2016). This means that we should abandon the assumption that humans or some other species are the subject of the Anthropocene for an explanation that takes into account the complex relationship between multiple phenomena and elements.

3.

In an attempt to reformulate the problem of the subject of Anthropocene, Donna Haraway asks the following:

> The constant question when considering systemic phenomena has to be, when do changes in degree become changes in kind, and what are the effects of bioculturally, biotechnically,

> biopolitically, historically situated people (not Man) relative to, and combined with, the effects of other species assemblages and other biotic/abiotic forces? (HARAWAY 2015, 159).

The complexity that this question tries to summarize is enormous. Such a framework makes dealing with the problem of how to act in the face of the environmental crisis a major undertaking. In searching for more appropriate names to replace the term Anthropocene, Haraway reminds us that "all the thousand names are too big and too small". Instead of finding a definitive name, the aim is to identify one that, however extensive, is able to maintain its elastic boundaries in order to include new connections where necessary. Haraway then draws on James Clifford (2013) to argue that the difficulty of dealing with the anthropo-capital-chtulu-cene moment is also an issue of narrative. In this sense, the climate crisis seems to re-enact the post-modern idea of the impossibility of a macronarrative: there is a crisis, but it is difficult to understand precisely who has generated it and who is called upon to resolve it.

Bruno Latour (2014) likewise asks, in the opening of an essay entitled "The Agency at the Time of Anthropocene", how we should narrate the Anthropocene. He wonders, for example, how we should react to the news that CO_2 emissions in a certain part of the world have exceeded permissible limits. In his view, there are no conditions in the contemporary world for an observer who becomes aware of this event to treat it as a simple objective fact. Objectivity presupposes a distance that is no longer attainable: "there is no distant place anymore". This is because the phenomena that are part of the Anthropocene event are to some extent determined by human intervention, so that humans are not only observers but also creators of the facts.

According to Latour, to grasp the condition of interconnectedness that binds humans to the earth, it is necessary to reverse the path that Galileo took when he made his own scientific revolution. In order to move the earth from the center of the universe to its periphery, Galileo had to reduce the planet to a simple physical body like a sphere moving through the universe. The climatic and ecological characteristics of our planet were irrelevant to his model of the solar system. Today, however, the environmental crisis demands that we return to earth by going from the "infinite universe" to the "closed world". In the earthly dimension of the closed world, we must then seek out those forms of agency that modernity has, in a sense, neglected. Picking up on Michel Serres (1995), Latour observes that nature has been a fundamental reference for modernity, especially for science and law: "Since the scientific revolution, the objectivity of a world without humans had offered a solid ground for a sort of undisputed jus naturalism - if not for religion and morality, at least for science and law" (LATOUR 2014, 5). The concept of "law" – which on the one hand applies to law as an objective norm regulating human relations, and on the other hand applies to science as a description of nature – was grounded on the idea of nature as stable foundation for action. The notions of scientific law and natural law (*ius naturale*) are based on the fact that nature has no subject and the only acting subject in the world is the human being who, as such, can

both establish and identify objective laws. The political repercussions are obvious: in a Kantian sense, for example, the realm of morality is a properly human realm because it depends on man's possibility to act without natural constraints, while nature, being bound by objective laws, is the realm of necessity.

But this objectivity can no longer be sustained. Placing himself on the level of semiotic analysis, Latour quotes excerpts from four texts - Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, John McPhee's *The Control of Nature*, Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, and research on proteins by the Salk Institute - to point out how human narratives attribute a similar agency to characters as diverse as an army general, the Mississippi River, and proteins. This way of producing meaning on the basis of action is not just a narrative strategy, according to Latour, but is made possible by the very ontological structure of the world. As he sees it, entities grounded on some substance that precedes, defines, and determines them do not exist; rather, there are "things that act" (or "actants"):

> For all agents, acting means having their existence, their subsistence, come from the future to the present, they act as long as they run the risk of bridging the gap of existence—or else they disappear altogether. In other words, existence and meaning are synonymous. As long as they act, agents have meaning. This is why such meaning may be continued, pursued, captured, translated, morphed into speech—which does not mean that "everything in the world is a matter of discourse," but rather that any possibility for discourse is due to the presence of agents in search of their existence (LATOUR 2014, 12).

Thus, the difficulties that arise when humans try to deal with the climate crisis can be traced to a "scientific worldview" that has "de-animated" nature. While Newton could still speculate that there was a role for angels to play in gravity, later developments in science favored mechanistic explanations that excluded a priori the possibility of forces animating phenomena. But the earth is "neither nature nor machine", says Latour, embracing the heuristic value of James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1989). Thinking of the earth as a living organism does not imply falling back into animism any more than it implies believing that there is a will of nature's own. The misunderstanding stems from the fact that only the human being as a rational subject has been considered an agent, and thus agency has been tied to rationality and will. Latour's suggestion is to recognize that the world is composed of a multitude of agents and that it is not appropriate to de-animate the world to the point of placing the human subject as the sole actor within an inert and passive stage.

4.

In response to Latour's "Pandora's Hope" (1999), Kerry Whiteside (2013) reflected on the significance of the politics of representation that the French scholar proposed in order to include non-humans in political decisions. Whiteside notes that Latour's claim on the need to overcome the dualisms between nature and humanity, science and politics, and facts and norms, stands on the recognition of the mutual

dependence of human and non-human. Since the contemporary world is full of *hybrids* that transcend these distinctions, science cannot justify its own autonomy by arguing that nature is something objective. Therefore, Latour's concept of representation aims at producing a public deliberation in which we also speak on behalf of non-humans without the privilege of science, within a "parliament of things".

Whiteside's critique is directed precisely at the idea that one could establish a bridge between science and politics on the basis of an "ecological" notion of representation that could cover both humans and non-humans. According to Whiteside, there is a semantic overlap in this proposal: representing scientifically is not the same as representing politically. In the first case, science represents the existence of phenomena in order to understand them, and to highlight their characteristics and properties. In the second case, political representation concerns the sphere of values and interests. This difference arises on a practical level: science concerns the world as it is while politics concern the world as it could and should be.

This distinction is reiterated by Jacques Pollini (2013), in an essay where he advances definitions of nature and environment in contrast to Latour:

> Knowledge about nature can only tell us whether a decision will lead to the expected outcomes, while morality, tells us what kind of outcomes we should be looking for (POLLINI 2013, 37).

Pollini's argument is that if we do not distinguish nature as reality from nature as social representation, conceptual difficulties arise. Let us suppose that a scientist identifies a currently unknown element. What would happen? Most likely, it would be analyzed and scrutinized by the scientific community, that is, by a social group educated for and specialized in doing a certain kind of work. This group, even if only in part, is structurally isolated from groups performing other, not directly relevant, social functions. Its task will be to provide the most correct analysis possible of the unknown element. Furthermore, these scientists would agree that their analysis would yield results that can be falsified.

It is precisely the understanding of nature as a world that exists beyond our knowledge that, according to Pollini, guarantees that the "new" will be treated with extreme caution and that this attitude will spread to any political decisions that must find their reason of being in a dimension other than that of the existence of the element itself. The point is to distinguish between the representation of nature as knowledge or human discourse on nature, and nature as a dimension of the unknown. In other words, it could be said that Pollini attributes to Latour the mistake of turning an epistemological perspective into an ontological statement.

Pollini then suggests that the nature-culture contraposition should be brought back to a binarism construed not as a sharp contraposition, but as a spectrum in which different degrees of co-presence can be recognized. Nature should also be understood not as a "thing" or a "set of things", but as a dimension:

> Nature exists to a larger or lesser degree in all things. The lumber used to build a house still contains some nature, but less than the tree that has been cut to make it. A frozen fish stick contains some nature, but less than the fish caught to make it. Even a highway or a nuclear power plant contains some nature, in the structure of the sand and rocks that have been used to build them. These examples show that as soon as humans put some culture into things, they reduce their natural content and increase their cultural content. Nature can then be defined as the dimension of the world that is not the outcome of human agency, while culture, inversely, is the dimension of the world that is the outcome of human agency (POLLINI 2013, 37).

The relationship between science and politics is thus restored in the modern meaning of a division of labor: nothing moral can be deduced from statements about nature. This perspective recalls a concept of human agency that, even being inseparable from nature and not presenting itself in isolation, is marked by a specific human character. From this, the Latourian model of the "parliament of things", where both humans and non-humans should be represented, becomes untenable. Following Pollini, the space of political deliberation and decision-making is strictly entrusted to human beings and concerns a moral dimension that, although it may not be entirely autonomous from nature, is nevertheless a human dimension.

Andreas Malm (2019) makes a similar argument to distinguish between nature and society/culture. Malm argues there is an unjustified leap in Latour's notion of "hybridism". In light of the recognition of the existence of hybrids between the natural and the human, Latour believes we should abandon the terms, and claims that the distinction between nature and culture is erroneous. Malm reflects on other cases of hybridity and invites us to think about someone who is carrying out a study on religious syncretism. If this person studies Druze doctrine, which is composed of Platonic instances and principles of Shia Islam, and sees that it constitutes a hybrid, should they conclude that the distinction between Platonism and Islam must be overcome? If a linguist studies the Spanish language, they will notice that Spanish is a hybrid in which Latin and Arabic converge. Does, for this reason, the existence of the hybrid language imply the obsolescence of the starting languages?

These examples may appear misleading, as indeed they are. Malm's intention is to demonstrate that the problem of religious and linguistic hybrids does not arise in the same way as Latour's problem of non-human hybrids. In the former we are referring to the same order of things (mixtures of religions, mixtures of languages), and the fact that these elements are mixed does not require us to revise our methodological or epistemological assumptions. In the latter, Latour's contradiction is revealed:

> Only by postulating nature and society as categories located a universe apart does their combination warrant their collapse (MALM 2019, 161).

In this sense, Latour's seems to attempt to solve the problem of Cartesian dualism through the concept of hybrid. The hybrid is composed of something that precedes it, and Latour's strategy would argue that dualism is invalidated by the fact that the hybrid constitutes the rule and not the exception. In this way, according to Malm, Latour does no more than confirm the substantial gap between nature and culture.

To avoid risking the same accusation of dualism, Malm advocates a perspective that affirms "substance monism" and "property dualism". There is no distinction between "thinking substance" (*res cogitans*) and "extended substance" (*res extensa*) as Descartes believed; rather, there is a single natural world, but in it there is also human society that is characterized by specific properties. This distinction not only has theoretical value, Malm argues, but also practical relevance:

> Maximising the prospects for avoiding total destabilisation of the climate system presupposes that we become more alert than ever to the dichotomy between what people create through and through and what is not their doing. That does not mean, of course, that a warming planet can be literally cut into two halves - if that were possible, it wouldn't have been a troublesome predicament - but the analysis of it must execute a similar operation. ExxonMobil in one corner, vulnerable permafrost in another: and then swing into action (MALM 2019, 173).

The gap between human and natural, in his view, must also be maintained in order to give due weight to the differences that mark the human world. This opens the field to a more specific investigation of the actual human dynamics that contribute to the climate crisis. The pollution and exploitation of resources for which humanity is responsible occurs unevenly. Some pollute more, benefit more from resource exploitation, and are less exposed to negative consequences than others. In short, the field of politics emerges as a space for conflict, discussion, and action.

Speaking from a Marxist standpoint, Malm refutes the concept of Capitalocene as described by the important work of James Moore (2016) to embrace another approach from Marxist ecology – the "theory of metabolic rift" developed by John Bellamy Foster and his colleagues (2011). For Malm, the main difference between the two positions is the following: Moore conceives the capitalistic relation between humans and nature as a monodimensional sphere, where the capitalistic reproduction is part of a metabolic whole given by the planet earth. The theory of metabolic rift, instead, keeps alive the distinction between capitalist activity as human product and nature as something partly independent from humans. According to Malm, the latter gives a better standpoint for determining where and how much disharmony has been generated by industrial society since its genesis. In his opinion, a theory that recognizes some degree of distinction between human and nature gives us better tools to address the climate crisis, as it guarantees a dimension of human agency that does not collapse in an ontological wholeness.

5.

In this article, I started from the assumption that in the context of the climate crisis, political theory cannot rely solely on the conceptual tools that have marked its development in modernity. The ecological conditions that make life on earth possible require a gaze that extends beyond the human. However, the problem of dealing with the present problems calls for reflection on the sphere of human agency, which can neither be understood trivially as an independent sphere somehow superordinate to nature, nor can be dismissed as irrelevant. The first option takes us back to the paternalism and will to supremacy that humans have too often manifested towards nature; the second option leads us to a defeatist attitude.

I have likewise attempted to present a portion of the debate on the autonomy of human political agency. As could be observed, much of the debate concerns questions of an ontological nature. In my opinion these are important, but they are not decisive – what matters is whether or not an autonomous political dimension can be thought of. I argue, moreover, that the ontological debate is not determinative for the reason that, as discussed in both decolonial theory and political ecology based on indigenous cosmovisions, we cannot reduce the relationship of humans to the world to a single ontological mode (ESCOBAR 2015). Therefore, whatever the position one wishes to take toward the debate between hybridism and dualism reported here, we cannot universalize the conclusions and expect them to apply to all human cultures and collectivities.

Rather, I suggest that the key question is this: can we inhabitants of the Western world think of a space of human interaction that is not reducible to physical, chemical, or biological processes, and that manifests itself as a sphere of conflict between different interests and values? We do not need a dualist ontology to argue that the space of political conflict is intertwined with, but at the same time has some autonomy from, the world of the non-human. The point is that the area of environmental crisis is a political area, and as such is marked by power relations, conflicting interests, injustices, and disagreements. Even the position in favor of hybridity, according to which the non-human and the human are inseparable, exists within a political conflict that stands on values and interests. Therefore, it exists as a human problem. To return to the issues discussed at the beginning of the article, it would appear that we need to reconceptualize politics on an ecological scale. But from this does not necessarily follow the denial of a human affairs dimension. Just as we cannot escape from our planet, can we escape from our humanity.

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