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How to Turn Politics Around: Things, the Earth, Ecology

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Abstract

In this article, I give a personal view of Bruno Latour's work on the politics of ecology going back to his work during the early 2000s on the politics of things. Based on my exchanges with Latour over the years, from the time that I became his student in the late 1990s, I show how he developed his understanding of the politics of ecology through a critical engagement with early twentieth-century theories of a "politics of things," notably the one developed by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. I propose that Latour, who was greatly inspired by Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems*, through his more recent work on climate change demonstrated that *the ecological crisis poses a profound challenge to the pragmatist vision of material politics*. This challenge led Latour to undertake a radical reconstruction of the very idea of ecological politics and envision what he calls a politics of the earth. In a second section of this essay, I articulate a related but different possibility for the reconstruction of ecological politics, one that I believe Latour saw clearly, but did not pursue. If we are to succeed in turning politics around ecology, we will need to engage much more deeply with feminist understandings of politics, which affirm materiality, embodiment, and connectedness as unavoidable political realities. This in turn enables us

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to appreciate the wider relevance for understanding the ecological crisis of the feminist critique of the *bifurcation of politics,* which Carole Pateman identifies as the underlying schema of modern democracy. I argue that it remains one of the main blocks on our ability to reenvision politics in ecological terms today. Part reflection, part criticism, and part homage, this article then argues that we should look for orientation in feminist politics of ecology, if we want to take further the work of Latour and many others for a politics of the earth.

Keywords
academic disciplines and traditions, engagement, intervention, environmental practices, epistemology, genders, justice, inequality, protest

Introduction

"Turning around politics" is the clever phrase that Latour (2007) came up with in his paper on the politics of things, and one of the many puns that he made up over the years and so enjoyed. In the 2007 article, Latour articulates the double meaning of this phrase, which invokes both (1) a politics that now has objects—the built environment, nature, stuff—at its center, and no longer the subject—with its will, its will to power, and investment in self-determination; and (2) the act, the interventions required, to turn politics around, the hard but necessary realization that in order to "make change" in the world, we will need to actively change how politics is done, valued, and understood. When Latour wrote this paper, it was easy to locate instances of material politics in the media, and in the world, even if they were rarely called that at the time: it was the time of protest and controversy around genetically modified foods, animal rights, the building of airport runways, and new oil pipelines. He was refreshingly, stubbornly heterodox in the intellectual sources he drew on to interpret and demonstrate the significance of these political movements and to give formulation to his vision of a politics turning around things. In his writing on politics over the years, Latour variously invoked Heidegger's concept of the *Ding*—a material assembly that is lively and entangled and completely different from the Dead Object of mechanistic reason (Latour 2005); Alfred North Whitehead's *bifurcation of nature* (Latour 2008); Carl Schmitt's notion of *political space* (Harman 2014); and certainly not least, the pragmatist conception of the public articulated by Dewey ([1927] 1991).

Latour no doubt thought it was necessary to mobilize intellectuals from across the political spectrum and including from the conservative right, if he was to stand a chance at loosening the tight grip that liberal thought has long had on our understanding of the politics of things. As in his earlier work in the sociology of science, he fought against the engrained tendency to envision a politics that revolves around material causes as *a cold politics*. This version of material politics prioritizes a technical way of engaging with the world and validates a politics dominated by experts and managers, invested in the expulsion of passions from debate, and the disavowal of the role of power in interaction, all of which Latour worked hard to undo.[1] However, in the work that I did with Bruno Latour in the early 2000s, while I was his PhD student, on what I called "issue publics" and he referred to as Ding Politik (Latour 2005), we turned without fail to the writings of John Dewey, and in particular his book *The Public and Its Problems* ([1927] 1991) in order to activate the proposition of the "object turn" in politics and explore its rationales and consequences for democracy.[2]

There are innumerable quotes from Dewey's work that I could offer to illustrate the Deweyan approach to turning politics around things that had captured our intellectual attention during that period. But this one can do: "When interests are examined in their concrete makeup in relation to their place in some situation, it is plain that everything depends on the objects involved in them" (Dewey [1927] 1991, 18). In this article, I would like to return to this respecification of politics by the American pragmatists once more. I would like to show why the pragmatist respecification of politics mattered to Bruno Latour and to me and quite a few others, in the 2000s, and also, to reflect on the limitations of the pragmatist understanding of politics, and to discuss efforts underway today to take us beyond it, to reorient the pragmatist idea, and perhaps indeed to turn it around.

In the last years of his life, Latour wrote extensively about the ecological crisis and what he called the politics of the earth, and during this time, he referred to Dewey less. I believe something important can be learned from the challenge that the ecological crisis poses to the pragmatist conception of a politics of things, a challenge which Bruno Latour saw and worked hard to address. A challenge which also brings into stark relief the need for a further reconstruction of the politics of things, nature, and ecology, and for a deeper engagement with a body of thought which Bruno valued but only rarely invoked in his writings on ecology, that of feminist politics. Unlike Latour, feminist political theory understands materiality, connectedness, and embodiment as *unavoidable* political realities, and this opens up a path beyond pragmatism that I believe Latour glimpsed but did not pursue.

A Pragmatist Politics of Things: Retour à la Situation

In "Turning around Politics," Latour proposes that what is most distinctive about the pragmatist conception of a politics of things is that it involves defining politics "as a type of situation." To quote Latour (2007, 815): "The radical departure pragmatism is proposing is that 'political' is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what qualifies a type of situation." John Dewey was certainly not the only one to define politics as a situation in the early twentieth century and several of his contemporaries did the same, not least the sociologist Karl Mannheim.[3] But what is distinctive about Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* is that it characterizes political situations in material terms. In this book, Dewey powerfully describes how a new class of public problems arose in the wake of industrialization during the nineteenth century, as the consequences of industrial modes of production and industrial ways of life harm people in new ways. These problems require urgent intervention, yet neither the state nor any other established organization in society appears to be adequately equipped for the task.

In our conversations during my PhD supervision sessions, Latour and I tried out different formulations to describe the Deweyan move of putting harmful, antagonizing, socio-material consequences of industrial change at the center of political democracy and attempting to capture the *drama* of this type of political situation. We spoke of the ways in which people's *joint entanglement* in the world becomes the source of conflict, pitching social groups against one another, as their attachments to the world pose a mutual challenge to their respective ways of living. Think of the construction of nuclear power plants in a community, the migrant camp near Calais, the polluting nitrogen identified by the EU in the Dutch soil that will require a radical restructuring of agriculture to be addressed, think of the premature deaths from air pollution among children living along busy London roads: these political *and politicizing* situations all involve physical and material threats to a world held in common (sickening and sometimes deadly pollution, destruction of habitats, and infrastructures of control dismantling social fabrics). The situations highlight shared dependencies (on atmospheres, built environments, and lands), bringing into relief *societal divisions* conflicts of interest between social groupings harmfully affected by techno-scientific interventions in divergent, antagonizing ways. In the above cases, the interests of energy users, residents, farmers, asylum seekers, drivers, nature lovers, job seekers, children, and so on are likely to be opposed, even if issue entanglement may also give rise to new alliances and

groupings. The key point being that this antagonism is **not** abstract: it arises from concrete, socio-material interdependencies, from the joint but antagonistic implication of social actors in what is undeniably, and in many of the above cases miserably, a shared world.

Importantly, in the pragmatist theory of political democracy, the grounding of politics in materiality comes into view through a focus on situations. By focusing attention on concrete circumstances, it becomes clear that affects that are usually defined as attributes of political *subjects*—grievance, will to power, commitments, resistance, struggle—can equally be understood as emanating from material entanglement in the world. Far from belonging to some abstract realm separate from everyday reality, the values at stake in politics and morality *derive from the world*. As Dewey put it: "valuation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing existing conditions" (Dewey [1908] 1955, 34). Dewey's work invites us to conceptualize what is at stake in politics—conflict, pain, harm, and resistance—*not* in first instance in general terms—as only gaining legitimacy through the appeal to universal values—but as presenting first and foremost *distributed* realities: what is at stake in politics *derives from people's attachments to and in the environments and arrangements within which their lives unfold.* Politics arises from a world that is itself troubled, conflicted, and conflict*ing* and from a world that is the source of harm and fundamentally at stake ("trouble to be done away with . . . a lack to be made good . . . a conflict of tendencies," p. 34). Dewey offers *situationalism* as a form of awareness that is critical to addressing this at-stake-ness of the world politically. According to Dewey, we must turn our attention to critical moments, events, and environments to understand how the world animates political conflicts and struggles. That is also to say, it is not just about taking seriously the role of materiality in political conflict. To adopt a situational perspective is to realize that we can only appreciate the politics of things if we contextualize politics in relation to *social life* in one and the same go.

An abundance of propositions, and problems, are opened up by this proposal to turn around the classic modern conception of politics, and of political democracy, which in its Lockean version was all about securing the rights of subjects over the world and the realization of *his* will to self-determination.

First and foremost, as I already suggested, it points toward a "becoming environmental" of politics itself—its re-embedding in the world. As long as

we understand politics as a process that only starts once people leave behind their living environments, and step outside the private realm with its constraints and burdens of the reproduction of life—as classic conceptions of representative democracy have it—we will not understand political contestation (Marres 2007). Seen from where I live in Europe, recent conflicts have made this a lot clearer than it was twenty years ago. A recently published Atlas of France includes a spread of "les espaces de la contestation," which details an array of settings in which politics has erupted over the last decade or so in France: power plants, airports, motorways, and roundabouts (Cécile 2020). In these settings, politics is rendered environmental in more senses than one, as they are at once (1) a source of political grievance (2) at stake in public disputes (3) mobilized in the dramatization of these disputes (see also Barry 2013). As such, recent situated interventions into environmental politics can also serve as a general reminder of the growing inadequacy to our present time of the delocalized habits of so much previous thinking about politics: as if the where and what are merely occasions for what really matters, the who and the why. In the twenty-first century, this no longer holds, if it ever did.

Second, once we understand politics as turning around things, we are confronted with the limitations of existing political arrangements, which now look clearly unrealistic. Think, for example, of deliberative procedures for organizing public opinion (debate) and of finding consensus through a review of the evidence (consultation). Such methods don't really address the most important question: how a space for intervention can be configured, or how agreement can be translated into effective actions. Ideals of deliberative politics can easily lead us to presume that the space of political action is already configured. (Which is also to say, it is not only our leaders who go blah blah blah, as Greta Thunberg points out,[4] it is the ideal of deliberative politics itself which makes that sound: it does not offer much conceptual guidance on how discursive consensus can be translated into action in the world.)

Third, and finally, a pragmatist politics of things points toward a different vision of the role of the public in politics. In Dewey's political theory, citizens are not only defined by their opinions and passions but as much through their actions, habits, and efforts. To quote Dewey once more: "The measure of a value a person attaches to a thing is not what he *says* about its preciousness, but the care he devotes to obtaining and using the means without which it cannot be attained" (Dewey [1908] 1955). However, this particular way of turning politics around things through care also raises tough questions for pragmatist politics itself, not least to what kinds of

interventions does joint and antagonistic entanglement in a world-at-stake oblige those implicated in it? Does it *compel* them to care for it? Is the Deweyian notion that actors express value through acts of care limited and undermined through the false presumption that it requires a secure positionality?

Something Missing

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

In my own work, I turned to feminist political theory to address this question and found my answer in the concept of the "bifurcation of politics"

(Pateman 1989). This concept was put forward by the feminist political theorist Carole Pateman as part of her critique of the invention of modern representative democracy, which split the world in two domains—one public, the other private; one dedicated to government, the other to subsistence. Pateman takes us back to seventeenth century and John Locke, exploring how the invention of a modern politics of representation required the political world to be cut in two halves. On the one hand, there was the world of consequence that of public politics where lords of the realm—who were at the same time the chosen representatives of the people—fulfill their destiny as citizens who together govern the land in the interest of all. On the other hand, there is now the everyday world of life and labor in which most people reside, where people are busy caring, too busy—according to the Lockean schema—with the material reproduction of life and don't really have time to care for the general interest, except possibly, Pateman adds, by voting from time to time. As Pateman powerfully shows, it was this bifurcation *of politics* (and not only the bifurcation of nature, as Latour tended to emphasize) which, in one and the same go, cut the world of democratic politics off from the world of embodied engagement and material entanglement with nature and technology (Marres 2012). If I were to speculate, I would say that, for Latour as for many men and others comfortable assuming that subject position, the bifurcation of politics is not a problem, because they are at ease, naturally, in both domains. They can don their identity as representatives of the people, endowed to govern the land, and go back home in the weekend to a world of subsistence, which within the Lockean schema is not really of consequence politically.

The feminist debate about the bifurcation of politics was not something Bruno Latour took much interest in. When it came to envisioning politics, he kept other company. He was fond of the term "Copernican revolution" to invoke Kant's commitment to make the world revolve around the knowing subject, with the effect of reducing things to a shadow of their former (Aristotelian) selves, a mere *Ding an sich*, inaccessible to us. Was Bruno's thinking that we should not be similarly monomaniac as the Kantians in turning politics around things? Was he determined not to make the same type of mistake that modern idealist philosophy had made by making everything revolve around subjects—by prioritizing things as a political force *at the expense of subjects*?

Whatever Latour's thinking was on this precise point, he was well aware of the limitations of Dewey's pragmatist politics of things within a bifurcated political world, which at the end of the day—or, as per above, at the end of the weekend—values representation over participation. Indeed,

Dewey himself eventually dropped the idea of a democratic politics of things in favor of a vision of the restoration of social community in the postindustrial age (Marres 2005a). But there is also something else at work in Latour's gradual move away from the Deweyian conception of material politics: I believe that it was *the magnitude of the ecological crisis* that ultimately convinced Latour of the limitations of Dewey's pragmatist politics of things. I will discuss below what I think this challenge of the ecological crisis to the politics of things consists of and how Latour's latest work took up this challenge. And I will reflect on the ways in which, in dealing with the ecological predicament, Latour treated the material turning around politics as optional in a way that could never be for pragmatist feminists, like Carole Pateman and Dorothy Smith. That is, I will offer a second explanation than that of the magnitude of the ecological crisis for Latour's ultimately rather loose commitment to a politics of things: that there was something missing in his political ecology itself.

A Different Kind of Turnaround: Ecological Crisis, the World at Stake

In his more recent writings about the politics of the earth, Latour didn't refer to the pragmatists as often as before, although he still invoked Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* as a primary source of inspiration for Sciences Po Écoles des Arts politiques, the interdisciplinary school of political arts that he founded at Sciences Po in 2010 (Aït-Touati et al. 2022). Furthermore, he remained committed to what I call political situationalism: Latour insisted on the importance of describing situations as the way to break the spell of the politics of opinion—the politics of impatient subjects, engrossed by their own power of expression. He made this so beautifully clear during a recent debate at Sciences Po:

> One should not simplify, neither through a pedagogical nor a moralistic procedure . . . . We have a problem of description, a problem with the representation of the situation. As long as we do not have a representation of the situation, it is simply unthinkable to practice politics. If you can't represent [your situation], you don't know what your interests are. This lady who said to me, "but those are the arguments of ecologists!" People do not know what their interests are. We don't have a precise vision of what our attachments consist of."

Note how the description of the world is necessary for people to understand their interests: situations help to make clear the inexorable

connection between the objective and subjective dimensions of politics. I should also note that Latour here presents—and it is the same in his most recent text on the Ecological Class (Latour and Schultz 2022)—the description of situations *as a method*, not as a theory and not as a way of conceptualizing politics.

One way to make sense of reframing of political situationalism as a method is to consider how the ecological crisis puts the world at stake. I think Latour lost trust—perhaps interest is more accurate—in the politics of things as a theory, because he realized that a profound radicalization of this kind of approach is necessary in the face of fundamental threats to earthly existence in the Anthropocene. As I noted above, to make a pragmatist turn to things in politics is to recognize the conflictual nature of our entanglement with the world. The world of Dewey's political philosophy is *profoundly troubling—it is lacking, testing, conflictual, and harmful—it is a world that puts our ways of living at stake:* people's joint entanglement in the world—with forests, land, air, and energy—is what gives rise to profound divisions and conflicts between social groups. In this pragmatist world, the habitual ways of living of some people do damage to the lives and livelihoods of others and put their world at stake. I believe this affirmation of how political conflict plays out in and through living environments, as what animates and must be addressed through political democracy remains one of the key lessons of pragmatism for environmentalism. But ecological crises profoundly radicalize this situation in ways to which Indigenous and postcolonial scholars have long called attention (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018). Now relatively privileged populations in the North are experiencing threats to their worlds' very existence, which they used to assume were mostly reserved for others living elsewhere (Chardonnier 2021). Today, modern ways of living are challenging and harming not just other modes of living: they are testing the planet, the very viability of the earth's ecosystems, to the point of *destroying the conditions for their own endurance* (Stengers 2015).

This fundamental at-stakeness of *the world itself* is what the climate crisis, in particular, forces those of us who previously felt secure in their modern commitment to self-assertion—secure at least in that if not in other respects!—to recognize. As such the climate crisis confronts us with a condition that is starkly different from that invoked by the pragmatist vision of a politics of things. In the Deweyian version of material politics, it is our attachments to and in the world that are at stake, not the world itself. Now the ecological crisis tells us that it may not only be damaging, but *impossible*, for those of us attached to modern ways of life to continue living "in

the usual way." This destabilization of the world is also at odds with the situational politics of things advocated by pragmatists in another way. A distinguishing feature of situations, and thereby an enabling condition for politics conceived pragmatistically, is that *they are inherently open-ended, they are deeply contingent*: alliances may shift, new social groups form, and open up unexpected sources of political strength, surprising new entities may prove critical to the resolution of the situation—a new way of creating tunnels, a shift in transport habits, the reformulation of a law, or a seemingly technical or trivial intervention may shift the balance of force and enable the redistribution of political agency. But such a dynamic and contingent politics of the environment *does not sum up the world* in the way that becomes necessary when we say politics of *the earth*. It does not invoke the world qua world, as a totality, one that requires a commitment to a diagnosis. Should we conclude the valuation of contingency as an enabling condition for democratic politics belongs to a modern world, one in which the endurance of the world itself was assumed to be secure?

One can try, of course, to describe situations of existential endangerment in the language of a pragmatist theory of politics. Today, it is clear to many more of us, including in Europe and the North, that it is not just *our attachments* to our ways of living that are being challenged through our joint and antagonistic entanglement with the world and with others. And it is *not just our ideas* about democratic politics that are being put to the test, such as the ideal of the sovereign citizen, whose quest for self-realization is deemed by some to be legitimate above all else. Dewey (and many others after him) defined situations as moments in which it is no longer possible for the actors involved "to go on in the usual way" (see Boltanksi and Thevenot 1999). But if the world itself is at stake, then nothing—not the world itself, no-thing, and no-body—will be able to continue "in the usual way." Notions like that of "problematic entanglement" with the world, which was central to discussions about the politics of things in the early 2000s, are too thin, oddly abstract and too vague in the face of the calamities so many more of us are facing in the endangered worlds of ecological crises. They fail to capture the utterly *destructive* dimension of the problematization of our world by ongoing, profound ecological harm; by the multiplication of crises across economy, society, culture, and democracy; and they fail to recognize the fundamental polarization between social groups arising out of today's poly-crises.

Should we conclude that something crucial has changed not only since Dewey wrote his *Public and Its Problems* in the early twentieth century, but since Bruno Latour, I and other colleagues discussed the politics of things in

the 2000s? To speak with Feyerabend (1975), I think this question should be answered with a firm yes and no. First, it is certainly **not** the case that we have only recently realized that the ecological crisis presents us with what we could call following Mannheim ([1936] 2015) *a total situation*. Back in the 1990s, when I began working on issue politics in a study of climate change, "*global* warming" and "*global* climate change" were the most commonly used names for the climate predicament. The common, the most cliché slogan at the time was that we had to "save the planet." The "totalization" of environmental problematics—the framing of ecological crisis in terms of the endangerment of our planet—has been the default gesture for many decades. It is more appropriate to say that our relationship with this logic, with the logic of totalization, that has changed. At the turn of our century, influential voices in the social sciences and humanities, and in Science and Technology Studies (STS), were critical of the *global* definitions of climate change in scientific and policy discourse (Shackley and Wynne 1995; Scoones et al. 2007). These critics warned against the determination of environmental futures through global climate models—the now famous hockey stick graph and similar curves that project a steep and inexorable rise in global temperatures. These ways of viewing climate change posited the problem on the aggregate level, in the abstract space of projected average temperatures, which ignored the immense variability in climate change situations as they unfold on the ground (see also Edwards 2013). To posit the climate problem on the scale of global temperatures is to establish a hierarchy of scale, one that suggests that only that which can be posited on the aggregate scale really matters. But, of course, adopting a logic of aggregation is not the only way to reach the conclusion that the ecological crisis puts the world itself at stake. There are many paths through which we may come to realize this, through experience, description, through ritual. However, the question for all those who have been gripped by the climate predicament remains: what politics of scale *do* we adopt, then, when we posit that the ecological crisis puts earth systems in danger? Are we at risk of suggesting, once again, that the varied situations in which people find themselves don't really matter, that they are *no match* for what is about to befall them, for what is already happening, indeed has already happened, to many?

For me, the path toward addressing these questions goes through feminist thinking. Postcolonial and queer theorists have made the same point as forcefully (Puwar 2004; Ahmed 2020), but as a white female student of the politics of science, technology, and nature living in Europe, I first learned from the work of feminist theorists like Dorothy Smith and Carole Pateman

that it was possible to assert, as a political theorist, that *there is simply no other way of passing into politics than via materiality, embodiment, and connectedness with and in the world*. In *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987), pragmatist sociologist Dorothy Smith recounts beautifully why, as a single mother, she simply could not bracket her problematic entanglement with the world when asked what is science, what is politics? How to get to work, how to be there for her kid, where (not) to write, when to protest? Bracketing *these* questions of how to relate, how to engage, and how to embody "science" or "politics" was not an option, they are vital questions that refused to be contained in the box "preconditions" for science, for politics—as required by the aforementioned bifurcation of politics. As long as the personal is considered to have no political consequence, as long as the material reproduction of everyday life is framed as a mere condition of possibility for politics, practices of subsistence are deemed a matter of endurance and condition for others to thrive. It is this modern bifurcation of *politics* which—in the moment of the modern invention of representative democracy—divided the world in two, between a half-world dedicated to government of the realm through public representation and another half-world of everyday participation in the material reproduction of life. It is this bifurcation that it becomes all important to contest, if we are to recover an understanding of subsistence as political in nature, as denoting a set of practices and arrangements that are of consequence.

Where was Bruno Latour in relation to all this? In much of his work in the sociology of science, he found inspiration in feminism, and it has always puzzled and sometimes upset me that he did not extend this orientation to feminist political theory. In *The Ecological Class* (2022), Latour and Schultz posit that the ecological crisis requires from us that we realize our dependence on nature. They write, "We have to learn how to be dependent" (Latour and Schultz 2022, 33). This makes me laugh but it is a painful laugh: are they really saying that we have to *learn* this? *He* is telling *us* that *we* have to learn how to depend on others? Do these gentlemen not realize that most of us grew up in a world where it was *always* expected from us, as a matter of course naturally, that we would live as dependents of a husband, of children, and, more recently, of an employer? Of course, Latour and Schultz do not mean dependent *in that way*—to depend on a forest, on air, on the land, and on the seas is something rather different from your kin and the people around you expecting you to live your life as a wife. But the implication of Latour and Schutz's call, it can easily seem, is that *they* apparently know what it is to be independent, that is their default way of being their starting point, thereby excluding many (and indeed most)

others from this intellectual standpoint. It feels oddly detached, for a white male intellectual, the offspring of landowners, to tell us that we, his readers, don't know what it is to be dependent. I remember an exchange, where Bruno proposed Hobbes's theory of sovereignty as the model for understanding the authority of Gaia, the Earth goddess. I dared a semi-joke: Mmm, I'm not sure about that, I said, I will have to consult with my colleagues in feminist techno-science studies. Bruno retorted, "that's a cheap argument." I don't think it was, and I certainly meant it.

A Cahier Des Charges for Turning Politics around Ecology

Bruno Latour liked making lists, he liked creating an overview of the steps that need to be taken of the unresolved problems that had to be addressed if we were to make any progress at all. He called some of these lists "cahier des charges," spec books in English.[6] I will here offer a list of my own as a way of remembering Latour, of honoring his work, of celebrating the immense "lift of spirit" that he was able to bring to the hardest problems, to the work he did with us his students, and his utter and total refusal to be ground down by skeptics, who would latch onto this or that minor inconsistency without expecting very much at all, not from themselves; not from science, scholarship, and philosophy; not from all of us as a collective, and who failed to recognize, time and again, how **necessary** it has become to renew our the categories of political theory, to try out new modes of inquiry, and to learn how to think differently.

Feminist Ecology Provides a Path toward the Rescaling of the World That We Need

One of the important effects of turning politics around through feminist thinking is that it puts everyday living back into the picture. In the summer of 2022, Bruno hosted an afternoon of discussion with Geneviève Pruvost who had just published *Politique Quotidien* (2021), an extended inquiry into the subsistence practices of small farmers, and "neo-rurales," across different communities in France. Pruvost shows how a varied set of mundane material practices—making bread, tending sheep, building a house, and weaving cloth—make the world of subsistence and become, in a sense, the whole world. Pruvost's work reminds me of the essay by Berger's (1980) *The Field*, in which he recounts how a meadow somewhere in rural France springs to life: how with the crackle of the cock one early morning, a

field comes alive, through call-and-response, between cock, meadow, insects, wind, and trees. Here something clicks, the activation of the world. And with the creation of this field, we can inhabit the world as a space of awareness. Importantly, the field Berger describes is a whole world, a total situation. But it also is and remains one field among many others. Does this kind of activation of the world through grounded activity—listening in a field, weaving cloth—offer a rescaling of ecological politics? The "politics of things" is so easy to misunderstand as a politics of little practices,[7] but from the standpoint of a reactivated world, a politics of things is a politics of knowing *what is enough*. In Pruvost's account, practitioners of subsistence show that rescaling life—to become a baker of bread, a herder of sheep, and a weaver of cloth—is not necessarily a scaling down. It only looks like that from the standpoint of the fixed belief in scaling up, the false belief that the only way to change the world is by intervening on the aggregate level. Of course, it is precisely this belief in scaling up and up which has done so much damage to the world and which has rendered so many worlds impossible.

One Person's Ecological Politics Is Another Person's Broken World

What makes up the reactivated worlds of political ecology? This brings me to what is perhaps the hardest challenge that political ecology poses for everyday publics today. They are not pleasant, these worlds. How hard it is to bear witness to the destruction of a world, trees coming down, spoilt crops, cities flooded, habitats destroyed, livelihoods destroyed, and lives destroyed? As noted, this world is not only profoundly problematic, it is utterly destructive. The entities that make up the worlds of ecological crises are not just heterogeneous—bread, sheep, power plants, border control, and so on—they are also in danger, under attack, and deeply misaligned, facing harm done and threats to their very existence. Still, in some ways, this brings us back to Dewey's understanding of what he called relational ontology and what we call today political ecology: the realization that our ways of living are mutually challenging, they put one another at risk, cause harm, and render not just other worlds but the world impossible. Take the example of the urban design concept of the fifteen-minute city: for those who can afford to live in the center of European cities, this can appear to be a defining enabling condition for an "environmentally friendly" life, to live without a car, and to cycle to the bio-coop and to the swimming pool all within fifteen minutes. But for many others living in those same cities, the fifteen-minute city is the reality of being priced out of one's own

neighborhood, to have to move out of town, as if lost to one's own world, to lose good transport connections, so that getting to work now becomes much harder to do without a car. Think of taxi drivers, who get so angry with cyclists, those who from their perspective treat the city as if it were their playground to undertake "mobility innovation," flaunting their indifference to the constraints that others must face every day, "just to do their job" (Tironi 2020). It is not just that we are problematically entangled, that the brute reality of our inter-dependencies amplifies our differences. It is that one person's ecological politics is another person's broken world (Jackson 2014), indeed, another person's disappearing world. Of course, in many ways the "fifteen-minute city" is a first world problem, but it provides a glimpse of the conflictual logics, the antagonizing and destructive nature of joint, socio-material entanglements with the world. Question: can the mode of environmental attentiveness that Geneviève Pruvost and John Berger bring to their respective fields in rural France be sustained in the face of the destructive entanglements that unfold across society under the rubric of crisis, so many crises? The conflicts, threats, harms, loss, and fundamental misalignments like those of the fifteen-minute city are a substantial part of what makes it so difficult to discover the "ecological class" (Latour and Schultz 2022). Yet coming to terms with antagonizing and destructive *inter-dependency* is an—possibly the—urgent political task to be worked through. This is pragmatism's brief for political ecology, and one that in my understanding was recently taken up by Extinction Rebellion UK, in their statement "we quit,"[8] which calls for targeted disruption of fossil-fuel-based capitalism and for environmental movements to prioritize connection and solidarity with everyday publics.

Antagonistic Entanglement Does Not "in and of Itself" Compel a Quest for Resolution

In "working through" today's political, environmental, and societal predicaments of joint and antagonistic entanglement, another challenge becomes apparent. I used to say, as a good pragmatist, that what defines a problematic situation is that it requires resolution, because in such a situation it is simply not possible to go on in the usual way. In the early twentieth century, pragmatist thinkers like John Dewey and Karl Mannheim assumed that when points of view—attachments to the world—mutually challenge one another, the resulting contradiction will somehow *oblige* the actors involved to respond, to look for a way out, for ways of resolving if not the conflict then at least the situation. This was an important aspect of the proposition to

turn politics around things too: both Latour and I thought that through joint and antagonistic entanglement in an issue, it becomes necessary for the actors involved to engage, to act out the dispute, "or else we both go down." Rereading some of the texts on pragmatist politics from fifteen years ago, it seems clear that we understood socio-material situations as *politicizing* precisely because they compelled mutual engagement between the groups involved. But I am not at all sure that this is the case today.

Today's crises—climate change, cost of living, war, right-wing extremism, COVID-19, social inequality, and techno-capitalism—seem different: there is plenty of antagonism, division, polarization, conflict, and contradiction between social groupings, but this does not seem to produce a sufficient condition for "bringing politics back," for the reactivation of political engagement between viewpoints. We face a frightening prospect of growing societal divisions without the concomitant compulsion for mutual engagement to act out conflict as disagreement. When joint and antagonistic entanglement does not compel mutual engagement, where that double bind has no power over those implicated, we enter a different political force field, one where it is all about the battle of interests, not the situational implication in problems and predicaments. Something else follows regarding the compulsion to disagree, to negotiate, and to stage contestation. Now that the staging of public disputes—in the sense of the situational explication of joint and antagonistic entanglements—has become much rarer, it has become clearer that the compulsion to stage public controversy does not only derive from socio-material entanglement itself but depends equally on the curation of settings for making things public, not least journalism but also museums, courts, universities, courts, and activism. The logic of "public controversy," according to which socio-material conflicts (such as those caused by the construction of a high-speed rail link and the attendant destruction of a forest) occasion the articulation of mutually challenging, antagonistic attachments and points of view, and compel actors to stage their disagreements: this logic is today being lost, for many it has already been lost. Yes, the ecologies of ecological politics extend into media ecologies, institutions, and organizational ecologies.

A Problem of Action, Times Thousand

Remember the days when the "problem of agency" would disappear into thin air as soon as we managed to get rid of bad ways of thinking, what Bruno Latour called bad (modern) cosmology, which pitched individualist actors against societal structures? Those were the days. They were the days

of actor-network theory, but they were also the days of John Dewey. It was the latter who suggested that relational ontology, a dynamic understanding of the world as made up of entities-in-always-changing-relations, could help us do away with the strict subject-object opposition of Kantian philosophy and would help us realize that we are *always already* entangled/connected. But of course, and this is the obvious message of ecological politics today, a change in perspective is not enough to change the world. When we adopt relational ontology as a perspective, as an orientation in the world, we realize how conflicted and conflictual our entanglement with others is. We do not only realize our connectedness, we realize how profoundly *antagonistic and antagonizing* our ways of being implicated in the world are. When we grasp—or even just glimpse—the destruction involved in all of this, destruction to the possible point of obliteration (Cadena and Blaser 2018), all this gets a lot more problematic. Or rather, the situation is so bad that it's not a problem anymore but a threat pure and simple. At whichever of these two levels we find ourselves, it is to realize our powerlessness in a new way: we are not equipped to intervene.[9]

Our predicament in the face of ecological crisis is real, material, practical, and indeed existential. It has been summed up effectively by Latour and Schultz (2022, 17): to address this crisis, nothing less will do than the capture of the state. The days are over where we could imagine that we could get there without granting any exceptional powers to the state; that the new capacities required to address public problems could be realized through the collective mobilization of jointly and antagonistically entangled publics; and that the distributed agency of issue-based communities is all that would be needed for us to empower institutions to repair the damage, so that it becomes possible for all of us to "go on in a different way." We now know, it is impossible to not know that the "problem of agency" cannot be solved simply by changing perspective. But it remains very much the case that the "action problem" is also an intellectual problem, a problem with our categories of thought, and what are today still the dominant, anti-ecological modes of thought. The politics of things is and must be a politics of ideas at the same time, indeed, the very understanding of politics as situational, which is indispensable to ecological politics, grew out of the pragmatist insight that "thought is first and foremost a way of changing conditions" (Dewey quoted in Bogusz 2022). For John Dewey and other pragmatists, all thought is activist, it is *always* about changing conditions.[10] For some, this pragmatist trust in the activist orientation of thought—that the activation of

the world must, can only, go hand in hand with the activation of ideas—is badly shaken by the ecological crisis.[11] Never for Bruno Latour.

Conclusion

So, what happened then, with the turn to a politics of things? There is a technical point that needs to be made: there are as many "material turns" as there are political philosophies. Alongside the turn to things proposed by the American pragmatists, I have referred to the liberal—Popperian—version of the postpolitical theatre of proof, the materialist turn to a politics of class struggle, and feminist understandings of a political ecology of subsistence, and there are many more. Differently put, the turn to things is an *under-determined* proposition, one that belongs to the earlier stages of discovery and the stage of perplexity. And perplexity, whether or not it is enough, in the end, is definitely something we could do with more of.

It's important to recognize something else: that in Latour's work the politics of the earth opens up the path of a profound reconstruction of pragmatism which remains unfinished. I think Bruno Latour knew this, he could not but leave it unfinished, so that others could take it up and translate it into their own varied questions, problematics, and struggles. As Hennion (2022) reminds us, for Latour, we are here to make people think, not to think for others. But also, for politics to turn around—pragmatist-style—the world needs to change, it badly does. So many more of us will need to understand that it is simply not possible "to go on in the usual way." Turning politics around ecology involves profound predicaments to the world, to solidarity, and to thought at one and the same time as well as to what it means to be an intellectual, so much of which Bruno Latour grasped and so much of which he was capable like so few others to articulate.

What comes after Latour, what pathways and futures are enabled by Latour's work? This is the question Timothy Neale and the other editors of *Science, Technology, & Human Values* ask in the introduction to this thematic collection. My instinctive answer is "a re-construction of pragmatism that may not need to be called that." Feminist political ecology offers a crucial reorientation of the pragmatist project, one that proceeds by suspending not one but two bifurcations: that of nature *and* that of politics. Feminist pragmatists have been coming to terms and indeed realizing for many decades the consequences of the insight Latour formulated in 2022 that the world we live off is the world we live in (Latour and Schultz 2022, 23). This feminist orientation is now more necessary than ever. Not because

it wasn't necessary before—as noted, for many of us, the passage via embodiment, materiality, and connection has always been the only viable way into politics—but because it should by now also be clear, more generally speaking, that a politics that operates primarily through representation, a politics in which representation trumps participation as a matter of course, is simply not equipped, not powerful enough, to activate the existential proposition of the world-at-stake. Articulating this proposition in its existential dimension requires the dismantling of the bifurcation of politics. Pragmatism was a philosophy invented for a world in full expansion,[9] and our world is not that. It is as Tsing (2015, 2) says: "In contrast to the mid-20th century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged in by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end."

A second answer might be that what is next is the social study of the entanglements of science, technology, nature, and politics in trying times, for times of trouble. Isn't that what we are doing already? Yes, many of us are, but are we capable of working through the implications of political ecology in the situationalist mode that I foreground in this essay? It is worth remembering that STS is a field that is also a continuation of a movement of sorts: the social study of science was born from early twentieth-century political situationism—"thought is always about changing conditions"—and grew up among the science and society movements of the 1970s, which across continents mobilized knowledge practices to empower citizens and yes, institutions as well, to articulate what it would mean to survive collectively, and to secure conditions for this, in a world that was at stake than too, one that included nuclear power, agroindustry, the military complex, the legacies, and ongoing realities of colonial oppression. As a field, STS is also a movement of sorts, a field that is not a discipline but an interdisciplinary intersection, it is a precious thing and only by continuing to reinvent it will it stay vibrant. The concepts from STS that we today invoke as inspiration—socio-technical assemblages, inscription, ontological politics, nature culture, and trouble—only came about insofar as questions, problems, and predicaments raised by the mutual imbrication of science, technology, society, nature, and politics sparked debate and sparked ideas.

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Notes

1. That is, Latour called on two avowed critics of liberal modernity, Heidegger and Schmitt, to help break the equivalence between a politics of objects and "evidence-based politics," a politics where it is solely the facts that are debated. The latter, liberal version of the "object turn" reduces public politics to a "theatre of proof" (Ezrahi 1990). It makes politics turn around things as a means of excluding—in theory at least—interests from the political realm. However, in practice, this approach often ends up disavowing—and thereby precisely consolidating—the role of interests and power in politics. In other words, this politics constitutes a form of postpolitics, precipitating the evacuation of politics from democracy as we used to say. ("Politics has left the building!" we used to joke at the time: no longer such a threat today.) The liberal politics of dead objects was what we were up in arms against in the 2000s; it was our intellectual opponent of choice, and looking back today, it appears as such *luxury* to be able to concentrate on distinguishing between different types of object-oriented politics, rather than having to address the brutal power of an anti-objective, hyper-subjective politics that is hollowing out democracy, and the world, today.
2. During the academic year 1998-99, I studied with Latour at the London School of Economics, where he taught a course on *The Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004). Later, he became my PhD supervisor, alongside the Dutch philosopher Gerard the Vries. My PhD thesis, "No Issue, No Public" (Marres 2005b), was a genealogy of sorts of the turn to issues in the democratic politics of technological societies over the course of the twentieth century and constructed a conceptual lineage for the resulting respecification of

democratic politics and its publics as emergent from ontological processes of issue articulation.

3. Karl Mannheim, the founder of the sociology of knowledge, defined the task of this field as "to comprehend thought in the concrete setting of the historico-social situation" (Mannheim [1936] 2015, 3). This intellectual program, like Dewey's, sets forth a "political situationalism" insofar as Mannheim ([1936] 2015, 3) identified as a key component of the sociology of knowledge understanding how men change their "patterns of thought . . . in order to deal more adequately with new challenges which have arisen out of the shifts and changes in [their] situation," as well as how their "life situation" informs how they "act with and against each other in diversely organised groups."
4. Carrington, D. 2021. "'Blah, blah, blah': Greta Thunberg Lambasts Leaders over Climate Crisis. *The Guardian*, September 21. Accessed 25 July 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/28/blah-greta-thunberg-leaders-climate-crisis-co2-emissions.
5. My translation of a fragment of a video of the debate posted on Twitter by Sciences Po on September 3, 2019: "ne doit pas simplifier, soit par une procédure pédagogique, soit par une procédure moraliste . . . Il y a un problème de description, un problème de représentation de la situation. Tant qu'on n'a pas de représentation de la situation, il est impensable de faire de la politique. Vous ne pouvez pas représenter, vous ne savez pas ce que sont les intéreêts. Cette dame qui me disait « mais ce sont les arguments des écologistes ! » . . . Les gens ne savent pas quel est leur intéreêt. On n'a pas une vision précise de ce que sont nos attachements," [0.30] https://twitter.com/sciencespo/status/1168948799282327555.
6. "Les ateliers d'écriture diplomatique font la somme des protestations, révisions et addition du projet depuis trois ans afin de rédiger un 'spec book' (cahier des charges) qui sera soumis lors de la conférence d'évaluation du projet, des chargés d'affaires (les diplomates)." Bruno Latour (2014), Diplomatic Writing Workshop, July 21, 2014, Modes of Existence website. Accessed April 16, 2023. http://modesofexistence.org/diplomatic-writing-workshop-ateliers-decriture-diplomatique/.
7. As happens when people say "becoming a vegetarian, riding a bicycle" with a smirk to underscore what they regard as the triviality and insufficiency of what gets defined as "environmental action" today. To be sure, there is much to critique in prevailing formulas of sustainable living that prioritize the continuation of easy consumerism. Yet the trivialization of the everyday that often goes along with this critique is a mistake. Pruvost speaks not of little practices but of a politics of minor gestures, which signals a rescaling of the practices that matter, but by no means "lack of effort." Remember Dorothy Smith's everyday world as

problematic: to frame its accomplishment as easy is to disregard an immensity of activity of work, investment, determination, and labor. Consider also Verges's (2019) question: who cleans the world? To accomplish shifts in habit, to achieve change in what used to be regarded as "normal" ways of doing (driving, eating meat, not cleaning up after yourself) is a feat of the highest order.

8. Extinction Rebellion. 2022, December 31. "We Quit". Accessed 25 July 2023. https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2022/12/31/we-quit/.
9. In this regard, the crucial difference, the difference that counts, may not be between problems that are solvable and those that are not, but rather has to do with our ability to have confidence, to trust, that the new capacities—the new forms of agency—required to address our public problems can be realized through collective mobilization. Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* exudes precisely confidence, that the public will be able to create for itself, and for society, the new capacities for action that are needed to address public problems, to force institutional transformation through collective mobilization. Today, it may seem that it was only possible to have that confidence in a world that is "in full expansion," as Antoine Hennion helpfully defined the early twentieth-century context in which the Pragmatists wrote—a world on its way to better things, a modern world. Today's ecological predicament indicates a different world, where the creation of new capacities—new forms of agency—remains the objective, but these capacities now prominently include the capacity of "living with," to exist alongside what is happening: not only a different path toward addressing public problems but a different way of living with public problems, which in all likelihood will not be solved for a good long while (Hine 2023).
10. Or as Mannheim put it in *Ideology and Utopia* ([1936] 2015, 4): "knowledge is not contemplative but emerges from and alongside the imperative to act in the world."
11. There is an irony to this that would be funny if it wasn't a source of serious difficulty (so, a Bruno kind of joke): those (pragmatists) who say knowledge is not contemplative, that thought is fundamentally worldly, that it always seeks to intervene, they are the ones not capable of acting decisively on their problems. Pragmatist ecologists know we are powerless in the face of the earth's crisis. Whereas the scientists operating in the default modern experimental mode are changing the world, not just through their famed performativity but through the sheer audacity of experimental intervention like geo-engineering. The experimentalists who know how to keep their blinders on, those who know how to block out the damage that their way of knowing the world is doing to the world, they are the ones who have found a way around the action problem.

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