

BEING, A HOUSEHOLD WORLD

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Being, a Household Word; Being a Household World

Did the Deuteronomist say, I have set before you plutocracy and democracy, therefore choose democracy? Or, I have set before you capitalism and socialism, therefore choose socialism? Or, I have set before you economics and ecology, therefore choose ecology? Or, I have set before you Earth System science or Gaia, therefore choose Gaia? Or, I have set before you acidifying oceans and fresh air, therefore choose fresh air? No, the Deuteronomist said none of those things. Instead, they said something both more compelling and more enigmatic: I have set before you life and death, therefore choose life.

What is at stake in choosing life is the subject I take up today. At the outset, it is important to mention that choosing life raises the problem: what kind of life am I to choose? The answer is always already there: choose life-affirming life! Yet, how can we choose life that affirms life? In the affirmation of life, should we include the life of whales, dolphins, manatees, jaguars, jackals, and jackdaws? I am persuaded by Bruno Latour that we should be looking for a place to land, which is to say we should be looking for how to take up life-affirming politics and land-affirming ways of living. Certainly, Latour does not mean a politics that blindly affirms life as we know it. Nor a politics that affirms the life of the would-be extraterrestrial plutocrats who have no self-restraint and who deny the terrestrial condition in their skyscrapers, yachts, and jets. Rather, it must be the politics of the earthy, of the terrestrial beings. It must be a politics of all species who love life on earth and who don't want to be conquerors

of other worlds, much less conquerors of this one. Can we learn to be content to live where we are, among those we have been given?

Being Responsible

Such a politics, of course, by Latour's own admission, must call into question the modern project from which almost all of us have gained a great deal. This politics of being, as I might call it (although we could call it the politics of terrestrial friendship), means breaking new ground on the earth, seeking out new models for organizing our public and private lives. These new models must be less dependent on the system of production and more dependent on a system of engendering connections between terrestrials, fostering ties that bind them to one another and to the earth.¹ For Latour, this means starting from the value of dependency, which I would argue is the value of learning how to share the earth.²

Learning how to share the earth is no easy thing to do. It is the substance of every political and economic treatise since the dawn of time, to say nothing of every spiritual treatise that has sought to work out a way for us to love one another. In our contradictory, fallen world, where every terrestrial must kill to eat and where every death means another's food, it is well to remember at the outset our inability to solve every puzzle or to address every enigma. Still, finding ways to live together, which is always what we are talking about when we talk of the *oikos*—the household, whether of economy or ecology—is a real challenge. It is a challenge that constantly requires that we look at ourselves and that we look for ways to shoulder the burdens of our communities, human or animal. Of course, ironies abound, as my cohabitation with spiders and wasps has never gone especially well for them. And yet we might

1. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 82.

2. I borrow the phrase "sharing the earth" from Tarla Rai Peterson, *Sharing the Earth: The Rhetoric of Sustainable Development* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

hope for something better. Moreover, it isn't clear to me that I can live without wasps or spiders. I rather think that the opposite is true. And, therefore, we do well to reject any total solution to the challenges of sharing the earth, solutions that lead to eradications and extinctions, solutions that foreclose the need to share the earth in the first place. Totalizing solutions are, after all, too much like life as we know it in the modern world. Not to mention that totalizing approaches gesture too easily to the madness of mutually assured destruction. Rather the spirit of negotiation, of rhetoric, of working out zones of habitation, and of finding common ground for coexistence must be the name of the game.

The mutuality of shared existence is a big part of the point. Life begets life, and this seems true for the planet as much as it is for humans. “[S]ome studies suggest an Earth that had never had life would have undergone the runaway greenhouse fate of Venus by now; that is, it would have left what astrophysicists describe as the ‘habitable zone’ around the sun, where liquid water is present.”³ Over millions of years, the atmosphere has learned to adjust to the living beings that dwell on the earth and vice versa. That seems to be the substance of the problem we face now in the new climatic regime in which, as Latour notes, the earth has become an actor on the political scene, and we have to decide if we are for or against it. The irony is that the habitable zone has always only ever been habitable at a cost to humans. We need clothes and shelter, even amidst the earth's hospitality. Yet our ways of householding, at least the predominant current forms, damage the earth's house-ability. How can we then come to grips with the sins of a carbon-fueled existence in the face of the Earth earthing? And yet again, how can we return to theology by employing the language of sin in the very moment when it seems God has forsaken the world? To dwell in a sphere that skews against dwelling seems a permanent crisis of Being. In the face of that problem, we have to keep returning to the thorny matter of what kind

3. Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton, “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 13.

of beings we want to be. This also points to the matter of what kind of beings we are and what kind of world we are making.

The modern age, which began in 1455/1492 with the invention of the printing press and the European encounter with the Americas and ended five hundred years later in 1945/1968 with the dropping of atomic weapons and the invention of television and internet, had a great run. With it came the great isms of the last few centuries, including, especially, capitalism, which has surely made the world much richer than it would otherwise have been in monetary terms. At the same time, our approach to householding has created a runaway system of carbon emissions that is bringing on apocalyptic consequences. None of that was exactly intentioned, but all of it was built into the modern mindset and framework for thinking about how to dwell in the world. Our present is a function of what the modern mind was from its inception. We now live in a world where two-thirds of the population cannot and will probably never be able to afford an airline ticket and where the same two-thirds of the population is likely to suffer the greatest from catastrophic warming. Yet there will be no escaping the suffering of a climate that is in the process of becoming uninhabitable, and we are, all of us, responsible.

Being Ecological

Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological* brings Heidegger's reflections on Being to bear on the Anthro-scene. By reinventing the genre of ecological thinking and writing, most of which seems trapped in a death spiral fueled by both inertia and panic, Morton seeks to address us where we are. At the moment, global warming is a pre-traumatic stress disorder. Suffering from a trauma that is only beginning is, Morton says, like dreaming "you were anticipating the approaching car at the exact moment at which you were crashing."⁴ By drawing a distinction between individual behavior and collective action, Morton seeks to let us off the hook of our own defensiveness. After all, it is true that our individual

4. Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), xxix.

carbon footprints are statistically meaningless in the face of what is brewing. At the same time, Morton wants us to see that responding collectively is the only way to avoid catastrophe. How, then, can we reconcile individual futility with collective urgency? Repeating the mantra “free will is overrated,” Morton highlights the weakness inherent in all arguments that focus on changing individual behavior. We are always already in the midst of the Anthropocene. How, then, can we think at the level of earth systems and collective action while at the same time not getting stuck on the hook of our own individual (in)action?

There are, of course, many signs suggesting that we are already in a post-traumatic stress moment: (1) rainfall levels in Houston during Hurricane Harvey were so great that they exceeded the National Weather Service color charts; (2) since 2015’s Hurricane Patricia, with wind speeds at 215 mph, meteorologists have begun to wonder if there should be Category 6 status for hurricanes; (3) in the summer of 2018, Sodankylä, Finland registered a record-breaking 90 degrees Fahrenheit, which is astonishing because it’s fifty-nine miles north of the Arctic Circle. That same month, Japan recorded its highest temperature ever, 106 degrees Fahrenheit, and Algeria hit 124 degrees Fahrenheit, a likely record for the continent of Africa. On June 28, 2018, Oman got in on the fun with a 109-degree-Fahrenheit reading that “amazed meteorologists because that wasn’t the day’s high temperature. *That was the low.* It was the hottest low temperature ever recorded on Earth.”⁵ The list, of course, could go on and on about the terrors on the horizon of our carbon-fueled atmosphere. While it seems we cannot address problems on all these fronts, and we shudder even to think of them, it is well for us to remember that we did this. We, with our choice to pursue wealth and

5. Joel Achenbach and Angela Fritz, “Climate Change is Supercharging a Hot and Dangerous Summer,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/climate-change-is-supercharging-a-hot-and-dangerous-summer/2018/07/26/cf960ba8-905c-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html.

power, we did this. Whether we can undo it or not remains very much up in the air. However, I do wish to conclude on a note of grounding.

Being Grounded

To be earthy is to be grounded, close to the soil, with dirt on your hands and under your fingernails. To be worldly is to be cutting-edge, polished, in the mode of knowing and presenting. As upright, walking animals we are quite literally caught between earth and sky. Our elevation tempts us to put our heads in the clouds, to enter an elevated world of thought and theory. Yet our bodies are made of clay and our cultures are built on and out of the soil.⁶ Our aspirations carry us toward a better version of ourselves that often does not wish to be tied down to the earth and sees the earth as, quite literally, tying us down. Witness the pyramids and the rocket ships we build to force our way into the heavens. We long to be free from earth stains and to leave far behind us life on the farm, with its noxious smells, hard physical labor, weeds, thistles, and thorns that afflict and torment. We easily forget that culture as we know it depends on agriculture and that the earth is our home and the world our construct.

The contemporary culture of the globalized few is working overtime to obscure its origins in the ground and to deny the least thought of hunting and gathering. As our systems of agriculture become more artificial—growing food indoors and manufacturing tastes in laboratories—so, too, our cultures wish to be scrubbed free of their origins on the farm. We are of the earth, earthy, but we long to build worlds that can purify the earth and remove us from the natural, help us escape into the artificial.

The global few have constructed what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk refers to as the Great Installation, what one-third of the earth's seven billion people think of when they think of the "world." The Great

6. For more on our unique position between earth and sky, see John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Installation constitutes hardly one-tenth of the total mainland area of the earth's surface and even less of its marine surface. This prefabricated, climate-controlled world, "a dynamized and comfort-animated artificial continent in the ocean of poverty . . . a 'lifeworld' shell for the faction of humanity with spending power" belongs to the 2.5 billion people on earth who can buy far more than they need and who emit carbon with abandon.⁷ "Built on stabilized luxury and chronic overabundance," the Great Installation "is an artificial construct that challenges probability."⁸ While seemingly of vast proportions, the Great Installation does "inspire a certain cosmopolitan romanticism, whose most characteristic media include the in-flight magazines of the major airlines," but its true tenuousness and improbability are always obscured.⁹ At the same time, this worldly construct also obscures the earthy.

While some have and still seek adventure in the wilderness, many more are content with life indoors. The wilderness adventurers are, nowadays anyway, as often feeding a new kind of consumption with their synthetic suits and highly engineered "gear" intended more to "conquer" the elements than to make their wearers into wanderers and prospectors of this world of ours, out to find what only the earth can teach them. Whether we venture far from the confines of the Great Installation or we stay confined at home and work within climate-controlled artificial atmospheres, the worldview of worlding, of being impressed with and impressed by the artificial lifeworld we have constructed for ourselves, is hard to shake off. It is part of the taken-for-granted assumptions we have about the world in which we now live, that it is a new world and that we can put off the trappings (and curses) of the old world—especially the curse of sin and the trap of death.

7. Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, translated by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 196.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

Whether we have any intention of addressing this traumatic stress disorder or preparing ourselves or the earth for it remains to be seen, but early indications suggest that we may simply remain inactive, content with the status quo. Yet, simultaneously the cracks in the carbon-fueled social order of modernity are becoming ever more apparent. Can I really expect to have natural gas flowing, uninterrupted, to my hot water heater for the rest of my life? Or for the lives of my children and grandchildren? Will the logic of capitalism preserve for workers a steady stream of income? Or is there some kind of fundamental change, infrastructural change, both in terms of my mindset and my way of life that is necessary for any future at all for my children and grandchildren? And what about the future for the lives of all those dwelling on the earth? If I can't expect these systems of agriculture, infrastructure, and politics to last forever, and history certainly teaches me that I should not, what should I do? If I even begin to doubt my reliance on such systems, what am I to do about it?

Collective harmony with the earth and with earth systems means acquainting ourselves thoroughly with those systems, as Clive Hamilton has argued in *Defiant Earth*, and remembering the autonomy of objects to act in their own sphere. Becoming more acquainted with Earth System science means learning that warmer air holds more water, which means, paradoxically, both less groundwater and more rain. Becoming acquainted with Earth System science means remembering that the oceans will acidify as they work to pull carbon out of the air and into the water in a manner they have been doing for millions of years as part of what the earth does to regulate our atmosphere. Earth System science teaches us that the earth “is certainly not *one* system.”¹⁰ That, in fact, the earth is large and contains many systems of interlocking agents acting in their own sphere and that we understand nothing if we cannot learn to see it all as a domain of freedom. Our task is to learn to inhabit the domain of freedom and of necessity at the same time.

10. Latour and Lenton, “Extending the Domain,” 13.

Conclusion

If, finally, ecology is the politics of life agents: what is agency and what is life? And how can we exercise our agency to choose life? And not only to choose life for ourselves, but also to choose life for the generations as yet unborn of dolphins, whales, manatees, and children, dogs, cats, and cows who will never be if we don't change what we're doing and what we are about? Is it possible that our sins of appetite and will are blinding us to earth's finitude? Is there any value in holding the acknowledgement of sin at the forefront of consciousness? Being is *always already* face-to-face with Non-Being, face-to-face with the catastrophe of everyone and everything not Being. How can we choose life in the face of the contradictory fall of every terrestrial? If "alreadiness" and attunement to "nowness" are the order of the day, that order begins in facing what we are doing. As James Baldwin once wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."¹¹ Our facing up to the domain of freedom and of necessity is the same thing as facing up to how all living things are intertwined with one another, dependent on one another, and in need of support from one and all. We terrestrials must accept our lot as earthbound stewards of a glorious creation and work to foster life in every conceivable domain. Amity among the living is that for which human being must strive.

11. James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 14, 1962, 38, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/01/14/archives/as-much-truth-as-one-can-bear-to-speak-out-about-the-world-as-it-is.html>.

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