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Out-of-This-Book: A Review of Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth*

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*Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*  
Bruno Latour  
Polity Press, 2018  
106 pp.

Bruno Latour's *Down to Earth* is, functionally, a call to rethink and re-describe our political reality in accordance with the changing forces that shape it. Latour lays out his argument in 20 brief sections, each deceptively quick to read. Section 14, for example, consists of 37 paragraphs, 16 of which are only one sentence long (On pages 69-70, Latour dishes out six one-sentence paragraphs in a row). Another 13 paragraphs of section 14 contain just two sentences. This style allows the reader to rapidly get the gist of Latour's tidy but complex and highly abstract arguments while leaving open the option to linger longer. In other words, though Latour brings a refreshingly rapid pace to his argumentative steps, *Down to Earth* is only a sprint if the reader chooses not to take on the rewarding but meticulous marathon of unpacking it.

However the reader proceeds, they will find Latour bringing old political categories—such as “right” and “left”, “global” and “local”—in for demolition. In Latour's view, the current understandings of these terms are obsolete in our time. Instead, Latour proposes that a new political alignment has emerged which finds its consummation in Trumpism. In Trumpism, Latour sees the results of a collective paranoia topped with an abandonment of leadership by ruling classes in the last 30 years. Among the subjects of modernity, globalization—the quintessential modern project—has become pejorative; the people and the elites each know there is no future prosperity-for-all as globalization had promised. Thus, the “obscurantist elites” have decided to lie about it while hoarding as much wealth for themselves against the coming planetary destruction as possible. This lie is climate change denial in the broadest sense: that the material conditions of wealthy lives and the perpetual growth these conditions are predicated on can proceed to grow unabated and without consequence.

### **Climate Refugees**

In the ruling class dash to collect as much wealth for their “gilded fortresses” as possible, rising inequality and mass migrations are inescapable in Latour's view. Thus, climate denial becomes one manifestation of what seems like three political problems. Specifically, climate change and denial, rising inequality, and mass migration turn out to be all one phenomena. Trumpism and related ideologies, according to Latour, answer this triple threat with a new political position: one that embraces a nationalist gilded fortress predicated on maximum profit sequestration by the chosen few. Latour writes that the Out-of-This-World represents a bi-directional “headlong rush” for security. In one direction, it rushes towards homogenizing nationalism, while in the other it rushes towards homogenizing globalization.

Latour calls this political position the “Out-of-This-World” attractor, since it operates in a post Paris Agreement world which has in virtue of that agreement recognized the impossibility of the actual globe supporting all nations' globalization projects. In this way, the Out-of-This-World's promises are not tethered to earthly reality. Latour sees in the Out-

of-This-World's paranoia a legitimate root. In his view, people need land: soil: somewhere to live. As the planet itself is plundered, there is no land left for anyone. Thus, we are all becoming climate refugees.

### Reorienting the Political Landscape

Latour's solutions are multifaceted. Most broadly, he calls for a reorientation of the political landscape to match the new contours of controversy. More fundamentally—since mobilizing for nature will not be possible as long as nature is conceived of in the abstract, says Latour—he calls for a mass project of re-description. We should describe, he says, the Earth we inhabit in terms that indicate we do inhabit it. In other words, we should rethink 'homeland' to include the physical land where one makes one's home. Additionally, we should refer to the biosphere that sustains our lives not as nature, but as the "Critical Zone." Further, we should recognize that activities relating to this zone are always political. In this way, we would come down to earth, or find a place to land. This advice, it seems to me, is critical.

Unfortunately, Latour's solutions are sometimes misguided. When seeking a model for an interconnected world that maintains the rights of both diverse self-determination and land, he looks to the EU. It may be true, as Latour says, that the EU's regulatory framework allows European nations to retain their identities but live intertwined lives. But it is not true, as Latour seems to imply, that Europe is past its colonial days. Yet nothing could be more salient to the discussion. For if European society still relies on colonial exploitation, then the EU is also making a bid for a gilded fortress (its sometimes more open posture towards migrants than the US under Trump notwithstanding). In other words, as long as the EU relies on wealth generated by colonial powers, Europeanism will require the lie that Europeans can persist in exploiting the globe and its inhabitants with whom we must all cohabitate. Problematically, this lie that Latour overlooks in the context of the EU is the same lie he expertly dismantles as it emerges from the mouth of the USA's Commander in Chief. On the other hand, Latour doesn't ask us to accept Europeanism; he asks us always to re-describe. And maybe it's true that the EU model contains the seed of an interconnected and diverse world, provided the *anthropos* to whom *Anthropocene* refers remain open to re-description.

In this insight hides possibly *Down to Earth's* greatest strength. Latour's closing self-re-description might just be the key to a radical shift in planetary futures. After all, responsibility for the complex and interwoven crises his text addresses does not lie with humans in general, but with particular agents; our impact is asymmetrical. And by setting his example of self re-description in the final pages, Latour seems to say that the real effort happens *after* the book closes; it happens Out-of-This-Book. Thus, whether one savors it slowly or takes it on the run, in the end *Down to Earth* turns out well worth the reader's effort.

Parting thought: Try pairing Latour's academic treatment of the topic with Margret Atwood's earlier fantastic and vividly horrific critique of fortress futures in her 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*.