

Book Review

Review of *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* by Bruno Latour

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In June of 2017, the American Library Association issued a “Statement on Global Climate Change” in direct response to the Trump administration’s dismissal of the efforts of climatologists to assess the anthropogenic nature of climate change and to forecast its devastating effects.¹ The ALA’s response to the attempted sealing off and sometimes erasure of scientific data by the current administration mobilized the expertise of one institution—librarianship—to bolster the faith we should have in another—science—that is likely best equipped to tell us what is happening to our planet. The ALA document cites agencies, committees, panels, academies, and societies to make its point, signaling the solidity of the scientific basis of our understanding of climate change as validated by numerous institutional actors. This sort of “assembly of experts” to ground the “fact”² of climate change is one of many threads pursued in Bruno Latour’s *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, a rich, moving, sometimes confounding call to action that directs our attention to and comes to the defense of the practice of scientists so that we might “come back down to Earth” and properly face the crisis we find ourselves mired in.³

Facing Gaia reworks Latour’s 2013 Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh. The subject of the Gifford Lectures, which began in 1890, is “natural religion,”

¹ ALA Council, American Library Association, “An American Library Association Statement on Global Climate Change and a Call for Support for Libraries and Librarians,” June 25, 2017, http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2017_annual/cd_41_global_climate%20change%20statement_62517_FINAL.pdf

² Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017), 33.

³ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 87.

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and though Latour takes issue with this hybrid concept, its appeal is obvious. Like much his work over four decades, Latour is here interested in the “intermingling” of the many domains of knowledge and practice that are offered as distinct disciplines.⁴ He follows the intermediaries that allow for communication across these boundaries, seeking to understand and clarify the “distinct virtues” offered by science, politics, religion (and more) we can cling to in our effort to understand our current moment.⁵ Beginning in science studies—where he performed an “ethnography of the laboratory”⁶ and revealed to scientists the means by which they constructed facts, thereby becoming a *persona non grata* in the scientific community during the so-called “science wars”⁷—Latour has since expanded the scope of his work to philosophy, politics, anthropology, sociology, religion, and law. What Latour wishes to make clear is that the West’s inherited intellectual tools, its epistemologies, even its metaphysics, have not prepared us to contend with Gaia, the entity we must now face.

There are many avenues into *Facing Gaia* that a librarian may take: as an introduction to Latour’s key concepts, as an intellectual primer for action, as a crash course in contemporary climate science. Additionally, Latour’s methods could be seen to mirror the work of librarians. Many will recognize the litany of steps he outlines in the production of scientific information. Although *Facing Gaia* provides a useful challenge to conventional ways in which our field treats knowledge production and information sharing, this book’s pivotal intervention is the role of politics in the climate debate. To oversimplify Latour’s point (and to adopt his exclamatory style), the problem is not that scientific information has become politicized but rather that scientists are not political enough! Science with a capital “S”, Latour argues, left Earth a long time ago (in pursuit of a “view from nowhere”⁸), which is why “scientists [are] as morally naïve as they are politically impotent.”⁹ *Facing Gaia* is his attempt at a more “earthbound” approach to his subject.¹⁰

Adopting a “hybrid style for a hybrid subject,” Latour ranges across many domains to arrive at the proper intellectual framework for confronting the present situation.¹¹ The opening lectures outline the key concepts of his project. For those unfamiliar with

⁴ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 50.

⁵ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 177.

⁶ See Bruno Latour, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 277-279.

⁷ Jop de Vrieze, “Bruno Latour, Veteran of the ‘Science Wars,’ Has a New Mission,” *Science*, October 10, 2017, <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/10/bruno-latour-veteran-science-wars-has-new-mission>.

⁸ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 77.

⁹ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 215.

¹⁰ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 4.

¹¹ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 4.

Latour's work, these lectures provide essential background for understanding his method of analysis while also offering a cursory tour of germane work in science studies, Latour's own bibliography, and recent work in climatology. In these lectures, he moves breezily through pivotal philosophical and critical debates in his off-handed style, which, for the uninitiated, can be challenging to keep pace with. Revisiting his own *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) as well as the work of feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, Latour outlines the fabricated divide between "nature" and "culture" that provided foundation to Western thought for three centuries. Latour calls this breakdown "the Old Regime"¹² which produces the "distribution of agency"¹³ that assigns agency to humans only ("culture"), leaving the rest of the material world ("nature") to consist of objects governed by mechanical laws.

The key player in Latour's drama is Gaia, which draws on the figure developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. In Latour's hands, the concept of Gaia remains elusive, which is precisely Latour's point. Most confoundingly, Gaia is neither a collection of objects that can be understood independently of one another nor a whole system ("superorganism") that we can think of as regulating itself.¹⁴ The conventional image Latour wishes to dispel is that of the self-regulating thermostat that we humans have broken. Thinking the Earth as a whole in this way misunderstands the activities and adjustments and recalibrations that are always at work among actants, thereby "deanimating" the Earth and the objects that inhabit it.¹⁵

The figure of Gaia "circumvents"¹⁶ the "Old Regime" and allows us to consider the "diversity of ways of occupying the Earth" can be recognized and then mobilized to address climate change.¹⁷ The book's latter half concerns the "diplomatic assembly" of these diverse forms of earthly occupation.¹⁸ This means conferring "diplomatic" status upon all the objects of Gaia, a process Latour (with the help of Philippe Quesne and Frédérique Ait-Touati) staged as "Gaia Global Circus," a political performance piece that included "delegations" of humans and nonhumans that represented "Forests," "France," "Indigenous Peoples," "Atmosphere," and more.¹⁹ Latour calls upon this sort of "parliament of things" in order that we might show better care, understand more clearly, and respect the differences of the many objects that occupy the planet.²⁰ The path forward then, according to Latour, is not more critique; rather, the path forward is

¹² Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 36.

¹³ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 99.

¹⁴ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 95.

¹⁵ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 40.

¹⁶ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 36.

¹⁷ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 182.

¹⁸ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 235.

¹⁹ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 255-258.

²⁰ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 262.

through “composition,” a mode of attention to one’s surrounding that does not derive its explanatory power from a pre-ordained transcendent cause, be it God, Nature, or the Market.²¹ For Latour, the *practice* of science—which tracks, validates, and stabilizes “very complex assemblages” in its “network of practices”—offers one mode of attention that may clear the way to properly address the challenge of climate change.²²

Facing Gaia is an illuminating, challenging, and sometimes frustrating work. Readers may find the book overly long, repetitive, and needlessly digressive. It is dense, and allusive and carves out little introductory space for those new to Latour’s philosophy. That said, it can be a joyful and invigorating read, both for Latour’s exuberant style and for the urgency and intellectual heft of his call to arms. The work will appeal to librarians of many stripes. Those who wish to understand how institutionally validated knowledge can promote the wellbeing of humanity and the planet alike; those who are looking for a radically interdisciplinary approach to climate change; those who believe our old intellectual models have run their course and must be recomposed to face up to that which threatens our planet: each will find something useful, surprising, or insightful in *Facing Gaia*.

²¹ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 37.

²² Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 164.

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