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Review: Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique. [Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime]

By Bruno Latour

Reviewed by Yves Laberge, PhD.

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Latour, Bruno. *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*. [Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime]. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2015. 398 pp. ISBN: 9782359251081, paper. €23.00. Collection: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond.

In the past forty years, French sociologist Bruno Latour has become internationally known for his influential books such as *“We Have Never Been Modern”* and many others. His awaited new book in French comprises the transcripts of the Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh on the Political Theology of Gaia. (Full recordings of some of these lectures can be seen on YouTube), “The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-I6FQN4P1c>).

The opening lecture distinguishes “nature” and “culture,” two unstable notions. The following text (“how not to make nature inanimate”) discusses some “unpleasant truths” about nature and climate change (p. 61). The third lecture presents the figure of Gaia through history and myth. Then, the fourth lecture focuses mainly on the “Anthropocene” while the fifth chapter concentrates on two opposing conceptions of nature. These topics are brought again in the next pages. The issues raised are numerous, for example “why some people are insensitive to ecological hazards?” almost acting like uninhibited individuals (p. 248). In the sixth lecture, Bruno Latour gets into a new enquiry into some kind of Natural Religion corresponding to our contemporary conception of nature; he revisits and highlights the many apocalyptic references and some current discourses (“the End is near”) related to the Earth’s uncertain future, in order to question how some persons could conceive the environmental crisis as inevitable and insoluble (p. 251). This discussion is mostly based on rigorous philosophical, religious, historical grounds, without any esoteric dimension. Nevertheless, the last pages are optimistic as Latour calls for the reunion of all progressive forces going into the same direction for a better and more balanced future (p. 368). The concept of “Anthropocene” reappears in all lectures gathered here; the definition Latour provides is “anthropology plus climatology into a violent use of the Earth” (p. 240). In other words, “Anthropocene” aims for “a reconciliation of nature and society” (p. 158).

This French version of *“Facing Gaia”* is a critique of our relationship with nature. The author raises the question: how humans and decision-makers are going to react, and on which grounds? Because of what we now know about the environmental situation, or for political reasons? (p. 62). In order to address these issues, Latour revisits many conceptions of nature as conceived by Lovelock or Pasteur, noting that not only humans, but all living bodies (including viruses), tend to transform their environment into something more useful for them (pp. 132, 136). Undoubtedly, Latour’s series of lectures are dense, impressively documented, strongly argued, and intelligently conducted into rich demonstrations. Obviously not for the undergraduate level, this vivid book *“Face à*

Gaia” will surely instruct scholars (from sociology of science to philosophy of nature) in need of a deep reflection about the human-Earth relationship through the ages and nowadays. In many occasions, I could not help thinking about French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) while I was reading these insightful pages that referred simultaneously (and sometimes unexpectedly) to science, history, mythology, social epistemology and philosophy. However, potential readers who only have a basic understanding of French should wait for a translation of this complex text.

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