Review of “Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy”

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My first encounter with the anthropology of science was reading Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar’s 1979 classic, Laboratory Life. Its value for me was less in the specific detail of life in the lab than in the implications of their statements about the nature of Science as a socially and culturally constructed activity.

Twenty-five years later, Latour’s Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy for me has a similar effect. Its value lies less in the abstruse theorizing about “the collective” and its apprehension of Nature and Society than in Latour’s articulation of the problems involved in associating politics and ecology.

Whereas Laboratory Life launched his readers into the social construction of Science, Politics of Nature launches his readers into the social construction of Politics and of Nature. While Latour’s correctives range from the obscurely profound to the profoundly obscure, his attempt to interpret the shadows of Politics and Nature dancing on the walls of the Cave is more than worth the price of the book, and encourages further dialogue on a troubling relation among the reified Capital Letters dominant in our culture.

Where we tend to discuss Science, Latour urges its replacement with “the sciences”; where we freely use the terms Nature and Politics or Society, he urges a similar awareness of how the activities associated with each term constructs its practical – as opposed to its abstract or theoretical – identity. When it comes to “Political Ecology,” Latour requires his reader to accept that it should be a new entity, outside the bounds established by interjecting politics into an equally constructed representation of the natural world.

While stating that “nothing” is to be done with political ecology, Latour asserts that what needs to be done is political ecology.

His elaboration of this response, however, in terms of “the collective” and an array of Platonic suppositions about democracy, is a foray into abstract ideas ungrounded in the reality outside the Cave he attempts to describe.

Unfortunately, Latour sets off into space searching for a collective than does not – and cannot – exist in our world, present or future – outside the wish dreams of a social philosopher. Resistance may be futile,
but I remain unconvinced that the collective he depicts could ever be as collective as what he desires. While agreeing whole-heartedly with the analysis Latour presents of the need for a sea change in the perception of Nature and Society – and accepting his definition of a “new” political ecology – the image of the collective that appeals to me is more of pot luck meal than a parliament of houses. Everyone brings something to the table, and everyone leaves having been fed, but the construction of individual contributions and individual meals remains unique.

What is to be done? Political ecology, to be sure, but for me it would be grounded less in politics than in the apprehension of knowledge and its application. Latour’s political ecology lends itself to an exercise in applied epistemology, as it were, where what needs to be done is represented first in terms of what needs to be known. Both those “needs” are inextricable from the social constructions we embody and design.

The dichotomous “either/or” language so much a part of the Cartesian foundations of western epistemology and western culture has exhausted its usefulness in assessing everything from chaos theory to chaotic social relations. The split between Nature and Nurture, or Nature and Culture, in more current perspective requires us to consider how something – or someone – can be “both/and” instead of “either/or,” accepting ambiguity as a sign of wisdom in system operations and not a lack of clarity.

Least persuasive of all are Latour’s sections on how his new “political ecology” is to be done. Following the twists and whorls of his thinking (a fault with the original, and not its translation) requires comprehension and acceptance of an array of Latourean pronouncements that would leave most readers (as opposed to followers) bewildered.

Having told us to deny the Cave, and see the world through other eyes than the Scientist, Latour rather perversely assumes the role of chief shadow interpreter, leaving aside the ploddal logic of the tortoise he claims to prefer for the linguistic skitterings of the hare. (As an aside, the six page summary “for the reader in a hurry” is ill-advised, given his disparaging comments on hares at the beginning, his self-identification as a tortoise, and the fact this summary does little justice to the intricacies of the book.)

There is no refuge from the demands of social construction, whether of Science or of Nature. The sociology (and anthropology) of knowledge escapes the Scylla of naïve realism and the Charybdis of idealism by bracketing the question of the existence of ultimates – ideals or reals – and focusing instead on what we do as social creatures.

Latour is right when he urges us to conceive of political ecology as something other than the intersection of Politics and Ecology, for we live in a world where the old “isms” and “ologies” threaten, in their death throes, a sustainable future for the global community – a community at least as defined by organic relationships as by social ones.

Refusing to privilege a position from which what we do can be observed and interpreted, we need new tools to apprehend the relationships humans weave and into which humans are woven.

Yet it is precisely at this point Latour’s book is the weakest. The absence of “technology” in his discussion, as the tools by which we in western culture have come to know and manipulate both the Nature and the Society we have constructed, is puzzling (“technology” merits neither definition nor index entry). By not acknowledging the Technology whose capitalization entails problems similar to those
found in the reification of Nature, Politics, Science and Society, Latour avoids considering the instrumental lens through which our knowledge of the Cave, inside and out, is viewed.

That political ideas and ecological realities need to be merged in some new and more ultimately useful fashion is indisputable. To do so outside of the realm of social construction, or to ignore the epistemic underpinnings of the technological world – human and non-human – that characterizes our interactions with the planet and each other, is counter-productive.

Yet for all of his interpretations of the cave shadows of Democracy, in reminding his readers that reified problems (ecological or political) are at once abstract and insoluble, Latour challenges his reader to see past the capitalizations of Politics and Ecology – and of Political Ecology, for that matter – to the plurality of relations whose clarification is critical at this juncture in planetary history.

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