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# WAR AND PEACE IN AN AGE OF ECOLOGICAL CONFLICTS

Bruno Latour

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## WAR AND PEACE IN AN AGE OF ECOLOGICAL CONFLICTS \*

Par Bruno LATOUR

Sciences Po, Paris

**Summary** *While politics has always been linked to geography, the Earth itself has largely been seen as playing a backstage role, the mere window-dressing for human intention and interest. With the advent of the epoch known as the 'Anthropocene', the Earth is no longer in the background, but very much in the foreground, in constant rivalry with human intentionality. In the meantime, human action has taken on a dimension that matches that of nature itself, and consequently the definition of geo-politics has been transformed. Appeals to nature, therefore, do not seem to have the same pacifying and unifying effect that they did in earlier ecological movements. By drawing on anthropological and philosophical literature, this lecture will discuss this new geo-political framework and show how the extension of politics into nature must modify our views on war and peace in the future.*

**Keywords:** *climate disruption, anthropocene, geopolitics.*

**Résumé** **Guerre et paix dans une ère de conflits écologiques.** Tandis que la politique a toujours un lien avec la géographie, la Terre elle-même a surtout été considérée comme une toile de fond, une simple vitrine pour le projet et l'intérêt humains. Avec l'avènement de la période dite « anthropocène », la Terre n'est plus seulement en arrière plan mais bien davantage en première ligne, en rivalité constante avec le projet humain. Pendant ce temps, l'action humaine a pris une dimension qui égale celle de la nature, d'où la transformation du géopolitique. Les appels à la nature ne semblent donc plus avoir l'effet apaisant et unificateur qu'ils avaient dans les anciens mouvements écologiques. En s'appuyant sur des études anthropologiques et philosophiques, cette étude discutera ce nouveau cadre géopolitique et montrera comment l'expansion du politique dans la nature doit modifier pour l'avenir notre vision de la guerre et de la paix.

**Mots clés :** bouleversement climatique, anthropocène, géopolitique.

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Let me start with the notion of “conflicts”. I think it is fair to say that on all the questions I will deal with tonight, we are divided<sup>1</sup>. Not only are we divided among different parties, different factions, religions, ideologies; but also, and maybe more deeply, each of us is divided inside ourselves. I certainly feel such division. Indeed, it is to this place of internal conflict that I look for the courage to address you tonight.

What I am going to do is attempt to trace with you some of the many lines of dissent that today constitute the warring parties whose disputes require new forms of political attitudes. Or rather new forms of *geo-political* attitudes, provided you take the prefix “geo” by its etymological meaning of “Earth”. As we will see, geo-politics is not about human politics overlaid on the Earth’s static frame, but politics concerning contradictory portions, visions, aspects of the Earth and its contending humans. Such is the novel situation for which we don’t seem to be intellectually equipped.

Let me start by drawing the first front line. Consider the key issue: that of the facts about the anthropic - that is the human - origin of the quickened pace of global climate variations. Such a fact is not a divisive topic among climate scientists<sup>2</sup>. That is, among those who really work to assemble data on the matter - since, as you know, there is not much remaining controversy on the general picture (and the soon to be released “fifth I.P.C.C. assessment report” will confirm the existence of this consensus among experts). Yet there exist two immensely troubling dividing lines that have recently come to define the entire world-view of many people, and not only in the developed world.

In spite of the consensus of the I.P.C.C. experts, some scientists (I have to tread carefully here: some scientists say “many scientists”...), most often not themselves specialists in the fields (that is, not publishing in the same journals as those summarized in the I.P.C.C. report), wage against their colleagues a vigorous (some say a vicious) attack in the name of Science — capital S — and Reason — capital R<sup>3</sup>. They argue that this consensus is a sham that shows only the opinion (not the facts) of a powerful politico-scientific “lobby” (this is their word) addicted, at least this is the main claim, to computer modeling that has only an uncertain relation to empirical facts. And those dissenting voices argue that to take action based upon such a premature opinion would be an irrational *decision*. (Mark the word “decision,” the meaning of which will play a big role in this lecture.)

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<sup>1</sup> I kept voluntarily the oral character of the lecture. The setting is Vancouver, Canada, September 2013, a few days before the first IPCC report, in front of a large audience of ecologically-minded people.

<sup>2</sup> For an admirable introduction to the history of those sciences, see Edwards, Paul N. *A Vast Machine. Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.



Now this in itself is not new. Scientific controversies - and controversies about ecology and technology - are as old as science and industry. What is new is the extent and intensity of the dispute where a segment of the “scientific community” (two words to bracket), acting in the name of “skepticism” (itself one of the two highest virtues of science) debunks what other colleagues call “objective certainty” (the second highest virtue of science). While, in return, those colleagues accuse that such a form of skepticism is nothing more than a veil under which “pseudo scientists”, in order to protect industrial interests, hide the “denial” — or worse, the “negation” — of what is probably the best-established fact in the whole of natural history. (Since Vancouver is the site of the remarkable desmoblog.com, I don’t need to belabor the issue.)<sup>4</sup>

Where this controversy matters is that, whatever the verdict, there is one thing that I, as a citizen, and probably most of you here tonight, cannot take for granted any more: we cannot hide behind the verdict of the “scientific community” taken as a whole. The novelty is that we have to choose, *inside* the disciplines, *among* the specialties, which segment of the population we will trust more than the other and behind whom we will thrust our weight in the future. This means that we have to get used to a strange type of geo-politics - that is, the geo-politics of science in action - by learning to navigate the various maps of conflicting disciplines, paradigms, instruments, theories and reports. (In effect, if you look at the maps visualizing the I.P.C.C. expert network you see something like a small “parliament” of climate experts - not a lobby but indeed a parliament.)<sup>5</sup>

The important point here is to realize that the decision about the facts of the matter cannot be delegated to a higher unified authority that would have chosen *in our stead*. Controversies - no matter how spurious they might be - are no excuse to delay the *decision* about which side represents our world *better*. In effect, we have to deal with those conflicts, *horresco referens*, much like we used to in the past with “political” parties. We don’t have to believe nor to trust them, but, as Walter Lippmann said, we have to *align* ourselves behind those who appear *less partisan than the others*<sup>6</sup>.

This is where I draw the first dividing line: one side of me sees this destruction of the authority of a final verdict upon the laws of nature as a catastrophe (who will, from now on, be the *arbiter* of our conflicts?). Another side of me, however, considers this situation as a great advance: we cannot any longer hide behind anyone else’s decision to decide whom we should follow. We have finally grown up, as far as taking our destiny in our own hands is concerned. On one side of the border, it is the end

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4 Hoggan, James. *Climate Cover-Up. The Crusade to Deny Global Warming*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009.

5 <http://www.medialab.sciences-po.fr/ipcc/>

6 Lippmann, Walter. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1925 [1993].

of the rationalist dream, on the other it is an extension of the great quest for a more rational — or at least a more reasonable — kind of politics: decision about the world in which we live cannot be outsourced.

But then there is a second reason why we are so deeply divided on the question of the anthropic origin of “climate change” (a polemical expression introduced, as you might know, by the infamous Mr. Frank Luntz to replace “global warming” in Republican Party talking points)<sup>7</sup>. The reason is that, even once we have thrown our trust behind the I.P.C.C.’s last report, we still *don’t do much* about it; or, if we do something, we remain fully aware that our endeavors are not at the relevant scale or at the relevant level for effective action. In that sense, even if most of you follow the report (I assume that this is the case in the “Green City” of Vancouver and with what is probably a largely “liberal” audience), you are nonetheless all climatoseptics since this knowledge, even if widely shared, does not trigger as much action as is necessary. As the Chinese proverb says: “To know and not to act, is not to know.” What does a reader of a review article on the link between smoking and lung cancer really *know* about this fact if he is reading it while smoking a cigar? Is it not fair to say that he knows this connection only vaguely? In a similar way, there is a form of *practical* climatosepticism very different from the cognitive one.

Even though I decided to align myself behind the I.P.C.C. report (not the same thing as “believing” in it), I feel very much that I am a skeptic since I don’t know what to do about it, apart from a few pathetic gestures like sorting my rubbish and limiting my carbon footprint (and feeling guilty about it). I *act* as a climatoseptic, or rather, because of this state of relative indecision, I share with those people an attitude that represents most of the developed world right now (including Canada, to the great disappointment of Europeans...), and one that could be called *climato-quietism* (quietism in theology being a laid-back attitude that somehow, without doing anything much, God will take care of our salvation).

This first dividing line on the anthropic origin of climate change (a division exploited with great skill by all sort of pretty disreputable lobbies), could have been easier to stitch back together but for another source of dispute, this time even more troubling, about what we may expect from science and from its complex institutional machinery of fact-making. This is a tricky point that, in my experience, always triggers fierce passions.

The usual solution when a group of people encounters a new and dangerous issue — an epidemic, a pollution, a depression, a startling piece of news such as, for instance, a dictator who attacks his population with poison gas — is to try to get the facts right *first* and only *then* to formulate a policy about it. If the facts of the matter cannot be readily checked, some research programs have to be launched, and the

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<sup>7</sup> In a 2002 memo to President George W. Bush titled «The Environment: A Cleaner, Safer, Healthier America», obtained by the Environmental Working Group (wikipedia page on Luntz).



group mobilized by the issue must wait for the results; if there is a controversy about the data, then they wait for closure of the dispute.

This is sheer common sense: first, an *agreement* about the facts which *by nature*, if they are objective, are one (this is why facts compel all reasonable, unbiased minds to agree); second, many *disagreements* about policies since those are, also *by nature*, based on multiple and irreconcilable values. In such a common sense view, facts divide only the experts and only for the time it takes to complete the research. So what is expected is unity and final closure about facts, followed by discord and then attempts at closure about policy (either by consensus, compromise or vote). Facts do not divide, except provisionally; policies and values always do, but only for a time, provided an institution has taken charge of the closure. The first closure is objective and final; the second is somewhat makeshift. More importantly, the first closure is based on the nature of things themselves; only the second may rightly be called a “decision”. If the word “decision” is applied to the first closure, that of facts, then it is considered illegitimate and arbitrary; that is, as an intrusion of politics into Science.

I have tried to summarize as clearly as I can the rationalist ideal of a division of labor between science and politics. But the fascinating paradox is that if such a view of rationalism had been applied to our topic, then *there should be no climate controversy*. Since, in our case, the consensus of the “scientific community” would indeed have been reached long ago, and we should by now have entered a normal discord about policies. Today, the emphasis should entirely be on reaching some compromise about how to deal with the issue, among dissenting parties having legitimate dissenting interests. We would have progressed as quickly as possible from step one — fact closure — toward step two — policy closure.

Yet we have witnessed exactly the opposite move; that is, a constant *regression* from the urge to quick action to inaction, from urgency to delay, from climate certainty to climate-quietism, from declaration of a state of emergency to a call for appeasement. Every year, while the facts have accumulated at an ever-expanding speed, the general doubt about the urgency and nature of acting on the basis of them has constantly *decreased*. The unanimity that seemed possible at the time of Reagan, Bush I or Clinton seems impossible at the time of Copenhagen 2009 or, probably, Paris 2015.

What has happened? Many things for sure, but one conceptual one concerns us here tonight: the rationalist theory of action. It becomes a fantasy when applied to a *live connection* between your own action and what you are talking about or trying to know. Let me show you how we may handle this difficult point.

There is a traditional division in philosophy between statements about “natural” phenomena — it makes no difference to them that you know them or not — and “social” phenomena — to know them is to modify them (I put “natural” and “social” in

scare quotes for a reason that will be clear in a minute). John Searle has written a whole book about this division: a statement about the boiling point of water has no influence on water, while a statement by the right banking authority about the value of a dollar bill does define how much it is worth.<sup>8</sup> One is called a “constative” statement, the other a “performative” one.

This is why, for any action that concerns us in daily occurrences we never — I insist we never — follow the rationalist theory of action. Who, I am asking you, who among you possessed all the facts of the matter *before* deciding to marry, to have children, to invest, to move to Vancouver, to plant a garden, to vote for a party, etc.? We are all aware that acting means taking risks and making bets. This does not mean that all those decisions were arbitrary since you acted on feelings, on many subtle cues, pointers, tastes and warnings that depended on your having rendered yourselves sensitive to a multitude of unconnected events and tiny perceptions. And this does not mean that you took your decisions *without* any knowledge either. Rather, it means that they had not been made *after* a full knowledge had been obtained and consensus reached. But it is fair to say that, once a decision took effect, a lot of *new knowledge* was obtained and many rectifying steps were then taken along the way. The only point I wish to make is that, far from following the pattern: “knowledge and closure first: action second: policy closure third,” all our decisions are made without waiting for complete closure — the only closure, as Jean-Paul Sartre could have said, is when clods of earth are thrown by our friends on our coffin!

So, for all the daily decisions we take, we should say that they neither follow undisputable facts (actually, in that case no real “decision” would have to be made since action would just have been *deduced* straight out from the fact) nor are they whimsical arbitrary choices as if we had been throwing dice to decide whom we should marry or what investment to make. Those statements are entering a zone that is based on what I am tempted to call “objective, choice-triggering facts”. There exist undisputable statements that, as the name indicates, close any dispute. Period. They are called apodictic. And then there are facts that, even though they are objective, do not close all discussions, but have to be *relayed* by many disputed choices, some of them triggering more accurate and objective data. Those are not followed by a period, but, so to speak, by a colon: discussion *begins*.

To see how this somewhat innocuous distinction may throw some light on our question, we may think of an event that occupies an intermediary position between daily decisions and huge geo-political tragedies. Take for instance the Cold War nuclear build up. Lobbies today fiercely combat climate science because it is still too incomplete and inaccurate to take action. But few would have complained in the 1950s about the *lack* of quality intelligence the government had about the Soviet threat. A very limited knowledge was enough to trigger momentous choices on how to

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<sup>8</sup> Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1995.



counteract the threat. This is a perfect case where action and knowledge proceeded in parallel - and reached baroque proportions until the threat all but disappeared.<sup>9</sup>

Now, project the pattern of the present climate controversy over the Cold War nuclear build up and try to see what the rationalist theory of action would have done to handle this past situation. Imagine that think tanks of various persuasions would have asked the C.I.A. first to provide “undisputed proof” that the Soviets were to attack; then, and only then, proportionate answers could be devised. And, of course, as long as the proof was uncertain, action would have been delayed. This is the great virtue of the rationalist view: if action begins only *after* full knowledge has been acquired, then any doubt, any skepticism is enough to block policy and to delay action! That is exactly why Mr. Luntz (certainly a great rationalist!), introduced into the Republican talking points the necessity of doubting climate data when he wrote: “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the *lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue.” Another Mr. Luntz in the 1950s would have introduced quite a spoke in the wheel of the great chariot of war: “the lack of scientific certainty about the Soviet threat” would have paralyzed action. Imagine: no nuclear build up! No threat of annihilation! We would have saved billions of dollars or — this is another plausible outcome — because the U.S.A. would have been paralyzed by inaction, we would all be ruled, yes even here in Vancouver, from Mr. Putin’s office under the Red Star flag in the Kremlin...

Of course, we could say that in the case of the Cold War, the rationalist scheme is clearly inapplicable because, first, we deal here with Americans and Russians and not with facts of nature (we are thus dealing with “performative” and not “constative” statements); second, because in the case of the Soviets we were *at war* with them. And as we all know: “The first casualty of war is truth.” Well, this is precisely why I choose this example. First, it could well happen that the real nature of ecological conflicts implies performative statements; and, second, we might very well be in a situation of war.

This is the really tricky part of my lecture: it happens that what is in dispute - the “anthropic origin of the quicker pace of global climate variation” - sits exactly *between* the two types of statements that I mentioned earlier. It is a constative statement of fact about sets of action for which those who speak are also the main agents - not to say the culprits. This is the heart of the dispute and why the issue is so divisive. If we were talking about a fact of the matter in the traditional sense, that is, bearing on agents that are *indifferent* to our knowledge and action about them, then the rationalist theory of action could say: “Let us wait for closure and *then* we will define policies at our leisure.” But if we are dealing with a fact that is more like the Cold War

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<sup>9</sup> Even though it is still very much there, but not with the same strident geopolitical urgency.

nuclear build up, that is about agents that are *far from indifferent* to our action and that react quickly to what we do, what we have done, what we will do, then to apply the rationalist scheme to such a situation is just as silly, not to say criminal, as to wait for the Soviets to have crossed the Bering straight before taking action.

To make myself completely clear, let me take one of those trivial examples beloved by analytic philosophy: you are on a bus and you see that a rather corpulent, distracted man is going to choose a seat where a little cat in a pink basket is going to be squeezed flat if the man carries out his action. It would be ludicrous to wait for the meowing little kitty before telling the man. However, if you state: "There is a cat in a basket on the seat," *is it a constative or a performative statement?* (Note that the argument does not depend on the *tone* in which you utter such a statement, whether you scream or articulate it matter-of-factly.) The answer is not that easy.

On the one hand such a statement is certainly as accurate and objective as one wishes it to be: it describes a state of affairs: "the cat is on the seat." But it is just as clearly a warning directed at shifting a course of action. Thus it happily mixes objective accuracy and an urgent call (in addition it carries a value preference: grown ups should not be in the habit of squashing little cats with their rear-ends). But, more interestingly, it will also be heard by the man in the same mixed register, being understood at once as a call for attention, for information and for remedial action. Even if you had stated in the utmost matter-of-fact tone, it will be taken by him as a pointer directing attention toward a whole set of successive actions. Here we are clearly dealing with a case of "choice-triggering facts" crossing the fact/value distinction, that is, with what I have called elsewhere "matters of concern" to render more vivid the contrast with "matters of fact".

The point here is that the classical distinction between facts and values is overlaid upon a distinction between "natural" entities (those about which we may speak from afar and in a dispassionate tone) and "social" situations (those inside which we are thoroughly embedded because we are part of the feedback mechanism we attempt to describe while acting upon it at the same time). As you know this division itself is what was supposed to distinguish "natural sciences" from "social" ones — the latter without real objectivity because of the involvement of scientists in their subject matter. Now, here is the new conundrum: you may speak in a disengaged and dispassionate way of the boiling point of water, but can you speak in a disengaged and dispassionate way of the objective measurement that industrial civilization passed 400ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere in the Spring of 2013? Is this statement more like "water boils at 100°" or like "there is a cat on the seat" or like "the Reds are threatening us with nuclear holocaust"?

This is where the whole distinction between fact and value is falling apart and this is also why those who are most worried and passionate about the objective facts of climate change are precisely those very scientists who are supposed to talk dispas-



sionately about them!<sup>10</sup> It seems that they behave vis-à-vis those facts just as the bus passenger in my trivial example of the man and the cat. It is not the tone that counts, it is the shift in the very character of the statement: not one uttered by an indifferent and disinterested voice speaking about something distant and indifferent, but it is the voice of someone fully engaged in a feedback loop with other agencies which themselves show a distinct “sensitivity” about what we do to them. It is not that those climatologists are not objective (even though this is just what the other party accuses them of being since they are *too* passionate and *too* interested!), it is that they are talking about events of which they (and all of you) are parts and parcels, just as was the case for so called “social” situations in the recent past.

Such is the completely unexpected situation that has been captured in the beautifully disputed term of *anthropocene*, a new label that designates the confusion of geology and human action. For any course of action it has become highly uncertain whether we are considering a human or a non-human agency at work. It is just as impossible to decide on which side you are as when you follow the path of a Mobius strip with your finger. Which means that, on Earth at least, the old distinction (well not so old in the end) between “natural” and “social” factors has become moot.

But of course this is just the point where lies the most intense dispute and what characterizes, for every one of us, the defining moment: are we or are we not living at the time of the anthropocene? *Hic est Rhodus, hic est saltus*. There is no way to decide this question on “objective grounds” since it is precisely the very nature of what “objective ground” is that has to be decided. I insist: “objective” and “ground” are at stake here. The fight is a radical one pitting two sides against one another. On the one hand there are those who say: “Of course not, we should behave like normal humans inside a natural frame that might react a bit more surprisingly than expected, but to which the normal rationalist theory of action fully applies: the agents with which we are dealing are so distant and unconcerned by our actions that we should first get the facts of the matter as dispassionately as we can and then it will be time to argue about policy.” On the other hand are those who say: “Too late, we are talking objectively and *thus* passionately about matters which are so little distant from us, and so little indifferent to what we do that we are engaged in a frightening and somewhat frenetic feedback loop while remaining in deep ignorance about the exact mechanisms of their reactions as well about policies.” To sum up: business as usual on one side, total subversion on the other. Or, as I have sketched the scene elsewhere: on one side “Humans” and on the other “Earthbound”.<sup>11</sup> Don’t rush to take your side. There is more to come.

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<sup>10</sup> On the weakness of the fact/value distinction, see Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (translated by Catherine Porter). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> See Latour, Bruno. *Facing Gaia. Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*. ([http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/GIFFORD-SIX-LECTURES\\_1.pdf](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/GIFFORD-SIX-LECTURES_1.pdf)). 2013.

The reason to delay your choice of camp is that we have to understand what is implied by the very notion of “decision” that I have used a lot so far. This will lead us to the third and final dividing line I have chosen to draw tonight, the one that is the most damning of all since it literally means war or peace.

It is traditional in political philosophy to contrast *war* with what could be called *policing* or peace-making *operations*. If a burglar is breaking into your neighbor’s house, there is no controversy over values and procedures. You call the police. It might be difficult to get the culprit but nobody discusses the legitimate grounds of the police to act. The overall situation has been settled by a referee, an arbiter, in this case the State. Things are entirely different in the case of war — for instance civil war. Then the decision on *who* is the legitimate authority is precisely what is to be tried out through some decisive encounter. In this case, there is no arbiter, no referee, nor preliminary verdict. This argument should not be misunderstood for a gory version of history: war does not mean necessarily blood and weapons, but it does mean the absence of a referee to settle the matter. Conversely, as Carl Schmitt has shown, police interventions, even peace operations, may lead to extermination since an irrational moron (*inimicus* to use his language) never triggers the same respect as a real enemy (*hostis*)<sup>12</sup>.

The point I want to introduce here is that when people turn to nature or speak about nature or invoke natural laws, they are never really “at war” with anybody — whatever crimes they may commit. Of course they meet people who disagree, but those are not technically — legally — their *enemies*, they are simply more or less irrational people, more or less enlightened persons, more or less educated parties, more or less archaic or backward members of exotic cultures. And this “peaceful” attitude is as common to those who say: “Of course we live at the period of the anthropocene, it is proven, only reactionary nitwits may still doubt it” as those who say: “Of course anthropocene is a fantasy pushed by misguided fanatics, Cassandra scientists and apocalyptic sects.” In both cases they might be able to fight fiercely but still they are not *at war* since the overall question has been *decided elsewhere*, above the parties, by Science, by Reason, by God, by Providence, by the Tribunal of History, by the movement of Modernity, it does not matter which. If you believe this, then, at heart, no matter how combative you feel, you are a peace-maker engaged in the task of merely *disciplining* the remaining morons.

Do you feel the difference? When you engage in a police operation, you act in the name of a higher authority that has *already* settled the conflict and you merely play the role of an instrument of punishment. But when you are at war, it is only through the throes of the encounters that the authority you have or don’t have will be decided *depending whether you win or lose*.

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<sup>12</sup> Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Trans. George Schwab. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1976 [1963].



Now, I am going to ask you the toughest question of all, the really divisive one: do you consider that those who are on the opposite sides of the ecological issues in which you are engaged directly or indirectly are irrational beings that should be resisted, disciplined, maybe punished, or at least enlightened and reeducated? That is, do you believe that your commitment is to carry out a police- or a peace-making operation of some sort in the name of a higher authority? Or do you consider that *they are your enemies* that have to be won over through a trial the outcome of which is unknown *as long as you have not succeeded?* That is, that neither you nor them can *delegate* to some superior and prior instance the task of refereeing the dispute?

Many of you might not see this as a divisive question, but maybe for the wrong reason! You might have been blinded to it by the habit of believing, when dealing with issues involving nature (especially nature known through science) that whenever you invoke it and its laws, agreement will necessarily ensue. To the point that they are not seen as conflicts since every side considers that once nature has spoken the case has been closed. It is just a question of policing the remaining dissenters. There is a sort of jus-naturalism that is implicit in all sides of ecological disputes. The same people who would deride the papacy for invoking “natural law” to give its decrees a solid foundation will not hesitate a minute to use “what science tells us” to decide anything, from the “absurdity” of a cap and trade bill to the “urgent necessity” of de-carbonizing the industry, from “saving the biodiversity of the planet” to defunding the instruments that monitor sea level. The problem with such a belief is that it means that there are no politics involved in ecological conflicts, only policing. Everything unfolds as if there existed somewhere *some instance with the capacity and authority of a quasi State* — what could be called a State of Nature! — to settle the disputes. Strangely enough, as I have shown in *Politics of Nature*, ecology has always suffered from a lack and not from an excess of politicization. Only those who have enemies do politics. Only those who are not treating their adversaries as irrational or mad or archaic may begin to equip themselves to win in a battle.

“Why insist so much on declaring a state of war, as if we did not have enough sources of conflict?” you might object. “What is to be gained in losing the great arbiter of the laws of nature (of natural law), this final referee who has protected us against the vagaries of politics and internal strives? Has not the appeal to nature known by science been the only protection against generalized conflicts? We might disagree on anything but at least the boiling point of water is not in dispute. Period.” Yes, I know and I am myself divided on this question, but it is exactly this common sense solution that seems to have run out of steam when dealing with climate issues. The objective statement “industrial civilization passed the 400ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> threshold in Spring 2013” directs toward either action or inaction which is fully *political* not only in the sense of being practical or of mobilizing heads of state, but in that this action or inaction amounts to a kind of - there is no other word for it - *civil war*. Sides have to be taken. Decisions have to be made. Police or politics, you have to choose.

The reason why it is so important to answer my question - "do you fight against enemies or simply against irrational people?" - is that the capacity of natural laws to unify is entirely gone. You might still invoke Science capital S as "one and indivisible," but the sad truth is that they are multiple and, it seems, indefinitely divisible. Nature used to be one when we were dealing with a highly simplified version of its components — Galilean objects, not Darwinian organisms. Today any look at the multiplicity of agencies mobilized in any scientific paper will show that the unity of science has always been wishful thinking.<sup>13</sup> The sheer difficulty of modeling the Earth's climate on a computer will show that the *objectivity* of science cannot be confused with the *unity* of its decrees. The former domain of "nature" is neither harmonious nor unified. Nor is it "outside". And the situation is even worse on the side of the formal "social domain". There is no unity to be expected in invoking the "human race". The sheer diversity of interests and situations, the vertiginous differences in wealth and power, the multiplicity of cultures and ways of relating to the soil, all forbid that any appeal to a "universal human interest" will trigger any assent<sup>14</sup>.

Contrary to a superficial reading, the term anthropocene does not mean the great superior fusion of unified "nature" and unified "human" (as if the two could somehow live harmoniously with one another), but the mind-boggling shattering and dissemination of its components. What use to be "human" and what use to be "natural" are so mixed up that to get back a sense of order one has to do politics all over again — politics understood, that is, as the progressive composition of a common world. And if the world is not common yet, it has to be composed bit-by-bit, issue-by-issue, and for that there is no overall master plan — because there is no master. This is why geo-politics take another dimension altogether; it is not politics inside a stable frame that could be appealed to and relied upon in case of emergency, but it is, so to speak, politics all the way down, including the very components of what the old "Gè" or "Gaia" are made of.

Let me conclude. I have attempted to trace in front of you (or maybe to draw inside yourself!) three lines of dissent that, in my view, make up an important part of political ecology but are not often underlined enough, so strong is the idea — the nostalgia rather — that when nature enters the scene a whole set of global, unified, totalizing, even spherical images immediately come to mind<sup>15</sup>. To counteract this attitude, I have asked you to see both sides of the three following geo-political struggles:

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**13** Stengers, Isabelle. *Au temps des catastrophes. Résister à la barbarie qui vient*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs, 2009.

**14** Bonneuil, Christophe, and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz. *L'événement anthropocène : La Terre, l'histoire et nous*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2013.

**15** See the volume II of Sloterdijk, Peter. *Globes. Sphères II (traduit par Olivier Mannoni)*. Paris: Libella Maren Sell, 2010.



First: when dealing with climate controversies do you expect the “scientific community” to come to a final agreement, or have you taken upon yourself to decide which kinds of disciplines and which scientists you have to align behind? Or to put it in other words: are you for Science, capital S, or for *scientists* and their fact-making institution? This is a dividing line.

Second: are the statements about ecological conflicts more like “the boiling point of water” or more like “the Cold War threat”? In other words, are we dealing with a world made of distant matters of fact or a world composed of highly reactive matters of concern? This, too, divides sharply since those on both sides of the border, literally, do not inhabit the same world. To put it too starkly: some are readying themselves to live as Earthbound in the Anthropocene; others decided to remain as Humans in the Holocene.

Third: do you act as the legitimate instrument of a higher authority that has already settled the issue, or do you have enemies who could win if you fail to fight them during an encounter for which there is no higher arbiter. Is there some Tribunal of History to decide the issue or not? In other words: are we at war with one another, or just in the usual normal disagreement that can be settled by appealing to some sort of Universal State?

I wish I was wrong in drawing these lines, in insisting on division and war. Can you imagine how marvelous life would be if we were to learn from the I.P.C.C. report that they had been mistaken all along and that the temperature would not increase as much as they had expected; how relaxing it would be to learn that geo-engineering will take care of the remaining problems and engulf the planet in a safer state of control; how delightful it would be to believe in the progress of Science and Reason, in the prolongation of the Frontier spirit, all the way to the fully modernized Earth and beyond to the Moon and to Mars, maybe further to the stars; how charming it would be to believe again in the endless progress of modernization and Terra Forming; in the globe of Reason encircling the blue planet. I could retire happily nursing the same dreams we shared when I was a little kid, eyes upward trying to detect the blinking sign of Sputnik! Modern again; human again; eyes wide shut, far away from planet Earth, in the hypnotic utopia of the past.