

When Meteors Vanish in Political Philosophies - Thinking with Michel Serres in Times of New Climate Regime

Siavash Bakhtiar

Abstract

In memoriam of Michel Serres, this essay aims to offer a brief account of the necessity of reading his works in times of political and ecological crisis. Since his opus magnum *The Natural Contract*, Serres had developed in the last three decades a theory that investigates and rethink the relation of the moderns, since Galileo and Descartes, with what they call “nature” in order to offer a third way to the division between (post-)modern philosophers and dogmatic scientists: the first have been systematically deconstructing all the grand narratives and, the latter have often excluded from their theoretical work any type of moral reflection on the modes of production of scientific practices, and their consequences for humans and non-humans. The path initiated by Serres influenced many contemporary philosophers who have continued and enriched his investigation of the origins and consequences of a new tendency of *not* doing politics in the epoch of the Anthropocene, of a new escapism that refuses to face the ecological challenges *hic et nunc*.

Keywords: Michel Serres, natural contract, political ecology, divide of the moderns

Introduction

What I first remember when mentioning the name of Michel Serres is a voice. A warm and broken voice cadenced by his meridional accent easily identifiable by his followers. Second, comes his gaze: for those who have seen him on television or in a conference, his mischievous gaze that was full of a certain naivety, and at the same time teasing his interlocutors; but foremost, his gaze on current state of affairs that strives to understand and explain the conditions in which humans not only give meaning to the world, but also *inhabit it, compose it and are composed by it*.

It is about *humans*: that is to say that Serres’ work and philosophical life was dedicated to share his perception of the different modes of existence humans and non-humans have been capable of displaying in front of him. I put an emphasis on his gaze, because he reminds me of a painter who in an ecstatic vision brushes in complex lines and deep colours the different plis (folds) that world offers to him. Therefore, the reader should not be surprise if I use a painting to introduce this paper. It is Jan Breughel the Elder’s *The Earthly Paradise* (see appendix). It was painted in 1621, but strangely it

goes against the flow of its epoch: the era of Descartes, Hobbes and Galileo where the human individual were put at the centre, and the rest of beings and objects were outcasted at the borders of what we, moderns, call existence, society or even the world. Serres refers to this painting in *Yeux* – one of his most fascinating books where through an assemblage of texts and images, he questions the capacity of the eyes, and more specifically the eyes of the painters – and highlights that Breughel’s tour de force, in times of the emergence of modernity, is to offer a representation of paradise where human figures are relegated to the back of the scenery in favour of a bestiary that forces the viewer to “forget the [dominant] anthropocentrism: the world is back, fauna and flora before humans” (2014b: 146).

The world is back, but which world? Or said differently, does the world had a meaning before the humans? Or maybe, by the world, one has to understand the planet earth or what ecologists call “nature.” The world, the planet, nature, the globe: the ambiguity and interchangeability of these terms on condition of universalism – or globalization – is what is at stake in the geopolitical decision of human societies for the next generations. In times of incertitude, where the stability of national and international institutions is dramatical shaken by unpredictable events. It seems that it is time for political thinkers and activists, before even criticizing, to revise their conceptual toolboxes in order to have a better grasp of the bond humans have *with nature*, or rather with the entities that compose it, and are composed by it – humans included.

More than a vision of a remote past, one could see in Breughel’s painting a tragic omen; one could perceive in the disturbed sky of the painting that “a storm is blowing from Paradise,” to quote Benjamin, “[which] it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel [of history] can no longer close them” (1969: 257-258). One can almost perceive in the piling clouds of the painting a near future where the world could be composed by singled animals that presage no possibilities of a livable future beyond this last generation;¹ except maybe for a little cohort of humans that would be outcasted to the most remote – and colourless – knot of the fabric of the world, on the verge of extinction. This reversal, or should I say interruption, of the current situation, which is deluded by the promises of the myth of progress and emancipation of the grand narratives of the 18th and 19th century, is what is at the heart of Serres’ work: “the importance of an event for him is not related to the noise it makes, but to the length of the historical period that it ends” (Legros, Ortolì 2014: 10). With the current social and climate crisis, who would deny that our generation is facing one of the greatest challenges in the history of humanity? The new climate regime not only

¹ If there was still any doubt, the reader should by now realise that Breughel’s representation is far from any biblical image of Noah’s Arch.

concerns our material survival as a species, but also our symbolic survival, our *modes* of existence.¹

Concerning the Storm that is blowing over the Ruins of the Modern Constitution

I have started this essay with a painting representing what Breughel the Elder saw as paradise on Earth, but the real object should be *war*. From the first pages of *The Natural Contract*, Serres warns us that “war and violence” is what is waiting for humans if there is not a significant change in our relationship with the world.² Far from Breughel’s enchanted vision, Serres refers here to a gloomy representation that is about to come:

“The global change now underway not only brings history to the world but also makes the power of the world precarious, infinitely fragile. Once victorious, the Earth is now a victim. *What painter will depict the deserts vitrified by our war games? What visionary poet will lament vile, bloody-fingered dawn? But people are dying of hunger in the deserts just as they are suffocating in the slimy quicksand or drowning in the rising rivers. Conquered, the world is finally conquering us. Its weakness forces strength to exhaust itself and thus our own strength to become gentler*” (1995: 11-12)

But war against whom, or rather against *what*? Well, Serres first reminds us that war has always been an important part of the foundation of modern human societies: there should be an emphasis on the qualifying adjective modern because we are not dealing with the pre-moderns, for whom human (society) was still only a small part of absolute φύσις;³ here, the question of war and society falls on those, from Hobbes to Rousseau and beyond, who consider that “[t]he social contract that gave birth to us is perhaps born with war, which presupposes a prior agreement that merges with the social contract” (1995: 13). The acceptance of the premise that war can be channeled but cannot be totally avoided. It can only be restricted and framed with some rules through a contract. Serres however argues that today we are facing something utterly

¹ Modes is written in plural to make clear that humans have through history offered different world visions, but again, the term is in itself ambiguous, since it comes with a deep connotation that refers to a long European philosophical tradition that goes from Spinoza to Deleuze, Souriau and Latour. See Delchambre, Marquis 2013; Le Bot 2014.

² Serres is certainly one of the first philosophers that has put forward idea that the situation we are facing in the near future is a state of general war. He has been followed by other thinkers such as James Lovelock and Bruno Latour. See Lovelock 2006 and Latour 2017.

³ There is no space in this essay to explain further the pre-modern world vision, but the reader can find a beautiful image of this perceptible in what Serres calls “peasant philosophy”: “Immersed in being-in-the-world, indissolubly bound with-one-another, their ploughing tools at hand, their feet plunged unto death into the immemorial soil, below the horizon, they-are-there, piously hearkening to the language of being and time, when the angel passes, the hourly bearer of the word. There’s nothing more or less in our peasant or forest philosophies than in nostalgic and conventional paintings. A frail bent reed, man thinks, knowing that he will die of this universe that, for its part, does not know that it is slaying him; he is more noble, therefore, more dignified than his conqueror because he understands this” (1995: 17).

new in the battle situation, which is not restricted to humans anymore, but has to accept the presence of a third belligerent. From now on, nature acts as a rebellious agent which holds humanity countable for its destructive behaviour:

“We so-called developed nations are no longer fighting among ourselves; together we are all turning against the world. Literally a world war, and doubly so, since the whole world, meaning all men, imposes losses on the world, meaning things. *We shall thus seek to conclude a peace treaty*” (1995: 32)

A peace treaty, really? I can imagine the reader smiling at this proposition, and thinking to herself: “wait a minute, are we talking about trees, tornados, rivers, grasshoppers and bacteria taking a pen and signing an official document?” No, of course not. This treaty is a symbolic gesture, a recognition that we humans are not the only important beings in the world. Just as Rousseau’s social contract opened a transcendental condition to the co-existence of different categories of humans, Serres seems to extend this right to exist to potential non-human social actants, and while thinking of it, he reminds his most skeptical readers, whenever he has the opportunity, that *no one has never materially signed Rousseau’s contract* (see 2008: 5, 2014a: 236).

The *natural contract* Serres is calling for has to be understood as metaphysical agreement to control our “mastery” over other things and beings, “[b]ecause, unregulated, exceeding its purpose, counterproductive, pure mastery is turning back on itself”; but also as a recognition of their right to exist: “[o]nce again, we must rule in the case of the losers, by drafting the rights of beings who have none.” (ibid: 34,35).

The natural contract is about finding a balance between humans (and their activities) and natural entities, which we are used to call objects, that are already more and more acting like powerful social agents:

“Objects themselves are legal subjects and no longer mere material for appropriation, even collective appropriation. Law tries to limit abusive parasitism among men but does not speak of this same action on things. If objects themselves become legal subjects, then all scales will tend toward an *equilibrium*” (ibid: 37).

An equilibrium that comes to compensate the excess of *our* selfish – Serres uses the term “parasitic” – hegemonic behaviour and culture for the almost four hundred years.¹ When I say, I should certainly be more specific by saying: *we, Europeans!* – or rather, *we, Moderns!* Without getting into an exhaustive historical study, it would be difficult to argue that Western nations – with their share of colonial and industrial domination and cultural hegemony – have a bigger material and moral responsibility in the current state of affairs than for instance the Guaraní people.

¹ On the concept of the “parasite,” see Serres eponymous book, *The Parasite* (1982). See also Burton, Tam 2015.

The contract is about recreating a tacit bond between the object and the subject, the natural and the cultural, the world and the city; a bond that has been severely damaged by what social anthropologist Philippe Descola call “the Great Divide” in the 17th century:

“What now came into existence was a notion of *Nature* as an autonomous ontological domain, a field of inquiry and scientific experimentation, an object to be exploited and improved; and very few thought to question this. (...) [And] the notion of *culture*, by which it defines the proper field of its inquiries and by which it concisely expresses all that which, in humans and their achievements, is distinct from nature and imposes meaning upon it” (2013: 69, 72)

The origins of this division goes as far as the emergence of Western thought, in the times of Zeno d’Elea, Anaxagoras and Socrates,¹ but has taken a decisive turn with the increasing influence of thinkers such as Hobbes and Galileo – to mention only the best known examples – which coincides with the trial of the latter and the debate that is still going on between scientists and social theorists:

“The contemporary debate that opposes, sometimes violently, these two authorities – science and law, rational reason and prudent judgment – has deeply moved our flesh and our word since the beginning of our history. The history of our knowledge follows the temporal trajectory set in motion by this trial, still vigorous today, an originary source and a perpetual motor” (Serres 1995: 61)

In Galileo’s time the law was represented by the Church, but once it will be liberated from the religious doxa – thanks to the noteworthy influence of the Enlightenment thinkers – it will be fully endorsed by the moral guarantors of the modern society: jurists, politics and philosophers.² Now, as Serres points out, if there is a certain practical logic for the two first categories to hold a moral position within the paradigm of modern societies, the acting of philosophers as moralists is not as obvious as it looks:

“How few philosophers, indeed, in the last half-century, haven't seized and enjoyed the role of state’s attorney, prosecutor, accuser; they've denounced abuses, crimes, errors, hypocrisies, as if they were journalists: this is their rightful place. No, our

¹ On the Greek origins of the division between nature and culture, Bruno Latour offers an extensive argument about the allegory of the Cave in *Politics of Nature*, see 2004: 10-49.

² As a philosopher of science, Serres writes extensively about the crucial role of Galileo’s trial in the division between scientists and philosophers but does not dwell on Hobbes and the evolution of modern political philosophy. However, one can find an extensive and original study of the role Hobbes played in the division between science and (political) philosophy in Bruno Latour’s work, especially *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). It is worth noting that Serres is not a systemic thinker and does not have any followers, but one can consider Bruno Latour as one of the few “compagnons de route” that have been influenced by Serres, offering exegesis of his work, trying genuinely to *think with him*. I have mentioned the relationship between Latour and Serres’ respective theories in a previous paper, see Bakhtiar 2018.

philosophy shouldn't be called that of suspicion, but that of denunciation. But by what right does it give itself this job?" (ibid.: 69).

This new role, this *modern* role for the thinker is the result of a tacit agreement between scientists and (political) theorists. This argument, called the "modern Constitution" by Bruno Latour, implies that: "the representation of nonhumans belongs to science, but science is not allowed to appeal to politics; the representation of citizens belongs to politics, but politics is not allowed to have any relation to the nonhumans produced and mobilized by science and technology" (1993: 28). However, this does not mean that there would not be any intrusion: as I have said, a contract implies a confrontation of viewpoints, a situation of *ideological war* between two powerful corpuses of knowledge, looking at each other scornfully from their respective "artificial" general headquarters:

"Freed from religious bondage, the [modern scientists] could criticize the obscurantism of the old powers by revealing the material causality that those powers dissimulated - even as they invented those very phenomena in the *artificial enclosure of the laboratory*. (...) But the modern critique did not simply turn to Nature in order to destroy human prejudices. *It soon began to move in the other direction*, turning to the newly founded social sciences in order to destroy the excesses of naturalization. This was the second Enlightenment, that of the nineteenth century (ibid.: 35).

The confrontation between two camps: on the one side, the religious and secular texts for the philosophers, and other other, the scientists' private and autonomous property: the laboratories, those "places outside law, without politics or kings" (Serres 1995: 67). In a nutshell, it is this modern division – acknowledged by scientists and philosophers – that Serres' natural contract is trying to fix. Both factions have lived in relatively good terms, putting aside a few skirmishes, for three hundred years, but the events – from Hiroshima to the ecological crisis – of the last seventy years have made a huge impression on the minds, and the bodies.

Science has lost its innocence;¹ and the direct consequence is that philosophers have assumed with even more fervour their self-assigned role of moralists with an *esprit de sérieux* that was incarnated to perfection by the constant folding and unfolding that compose contemporary Western thought, from the defenders of the modern grand narratives to their critical heirs: the so-called post-moderns of the next generation.²

¹ Serres repeated in different occasions that it is the use of the atomic bomb on civilians – and the implication of world class scientists in its making – that pushed him to leave the study of sciences for humanities: "Since the atomic bomb, it had become urgent to rethink scientific optimism. I ask my readers to hear the explosion of this problem in every page of my books. Hiroshima remains the sole object of my philosophy" (Serres, Latour 1995: 15). see also Serres 2014a: 36.

² Latour describes Serres' philosophy as fundamentally "acritical": "[his] ignorance introduces us to what I see as one of the first important feature of Michel Serres' philosophy. He is not part of the 'Critique' philosophical movement. He does not see philosophy as the discipline in charge of founding knowledge, debunking beliefs, adjudicating territories, ruling opinions. (...) The Critique work is that of a reduction of the world into two packs, a little one that is sure and certain, the immense rest which is

About these two sides of the same coin – call it “critique” or “philosophies of suspicion” – Serres says that they are engaged into a strange game of playing policemen and robbers:

“As a result, philosophy becomes like a police state; in fact, every police force requires another police force to police it. When a policing body is looking over a person's shoulder, assessing his heart and innermost workings, are we to suppose that this policing body has neither a shoulder of its own, nor heart, nor innermost workings? This launches us into a *'detective' logic*. And the best detective is the one who is never interrogated, who places himself in a position beyond suspicion” (Serres, Latour 1995: 133)

The aim then is to be beyond suspicion, as detectives that look for the best trench-coat to disguise themselves, the critique philosopher proceeds with their faces masked by putting (constructing) or taking off (deconstructing) layers of texts in a game of light and shadow that eventually tends to forget, as Latour points out, a fundamental truth, even more today than yesterday: “*necessity decamps from the objective world and moves toward people*” (ibid: 176).

This is what makes Breughel's *Paradise* look like hell on earth. “L'enfer, c'est les autres,” writes Sartre,¹ a catchphrases that represents magnificent example of the “philosophy of suspicion” that shines by its quality to become a police of the “others” the common people's behaviour and thought, which are never good enough for the philosopher erected as a model of virtue:

“Sartre demanded conformity to the political so as to seem a philosopher. In the age of my fathers and their successors, the sages had taken (and still hold) the place of public prosecutor, demanding condemnation in the name of the city's dominant forces” (Serres 1995: 67).

What a selfish and anti-democratic act. Unlike the politicians and the judges, no one gave them the right to act as moralists of the city.² The (post-)modern philosophers have taken the Cartesian injunction to “become masters and possessors of nature” too seriously:

“Mastery and possession: these are the master words launched by Descartes at the dawn of the scientific and technological age, when our Western reason went off to conquer the universe. We dominate and appropriate it: such is the shared philosophy underlying industrial enterprise as well as so-called disinterested science, which are indistinguishable in this respect. Cartesian mastery brings science's objective

simply believed and in dire need of being criticized, founded, re-educated, straightened up (...) Do we really need a Critique to survive? Is the Critique the only vocation of philosophy? His answer is no. There exist many other ways, many less sterile vocations for philosophers” (1988: 85).

¹ “Hell is other people.”

² In *Politics of Nature*, Bruno Latour names this self-qualified moral expertise an “epistemological police,” see Latour 2004: 17.

violence into line, making it a well-controlled strategy. Our fundamental relationship with objects comes down to war and property” (Serres 1995: 32).

It might be time to rethink this role for the modern thinker, given the paradoxical and disastrous relation humans have with nature: despite what the moderns have thought since Descartes, we are far from understanding and mastering the full effect of our actions on nature, and its response. By keeping doing critique over critique and by keeping believing the promethean myth of mastery over non-human things and beings, modern philosophy has end up being just another patronizing voice – perhaps, a more sophisticated one – among the *tintamarre* (hullabaloo) of commercials, blogs and social media that makes us hear the voices of all, everywhere and all the time (Serres 2012b: 58). Perhaps, it is time to stop the moralising rhetoric for a moment, and to listen to the sound and fury of the world is in response to the *noise* we are making. According to Serres, if we could understand them, if we could rationalise those noises into words, we could hear a huge cry for help from beings on the verge of a war – here is maybe when the term “World War” takes on its full meaning – between humans and nature.

Appropriation through Filth and Noise

In *The Natural Contrat*, Serres advocates for the necessity for humans of an agreement with nature in order to avoid the eventual consequence of a war with it: the risk of being totally excluded from it. The countless tornadoes, forest fires and floods of the last three decades have proven that nature can strike back hard and take possession of the territories humans foolishly thought they were possessors of through what Serres calls in *Le mal propre*,¹ “hard” and “soft” pollution, or said different: dirt and noise. In this manner, he argues that the question of ecology is closely linked with the question of property; and that humans are not very different from animals; appropriation is not a conventional right, but a natural one: *all beings mark their territory*, from humans to tigers, and even the smallest unicellular organisms (see Serres 2012a: 21; Serres 2014a: 250).

Talking about “hard” pollution, I can already hear the attentive reader arguing that this is a very simplistic understanding of the behaviour of animals and humans. Indeed, one could bring into the debate the question of the different methods, usually more sophisticated, that humans use in their way of appropriation. But as a philosopher, Serres makes it quite clear that he is not interested in the manner, but *the reason of this material pollution*:

“[the questions about the environment], thanks to ‘hard’ sciences, as they call it, in addition of economics, they are concerned about the question *how*. I ask: *why*? Do these disasters actually happen naturally, without no one’s intention? We question

¹ There is now an English translation of this book: *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution* (2010), but all the quotes in this article are taken from the French version and are translated by myself.

our responsibility only regarding to the physical quantities. Question: what do we want, *upstream* [en amont], when we get the world dirty?" (Serres 2012a: 57).

Most living beings do it because they do not have the choice: taking possession of a territory – land, flesh or any other kind of surface – because it is a matter of survival for them. But the reasons of the humans – and therefore, their responsibility – are much more complex and numerous. Here is where the second type of pollution – the “soft” one – steps in. Serres highlights that animals mark also symbolically their territory, mainly through sounds and noise: they bark, they roar, they spread ultrasounds...but, for humans, modernity was built on symbolic and technological inventions. From the archetypical and most powerful sign – money – that have been polluting people’s mind since its invention sometime in the 5th c. B.C. to evolution and proliferation, to the “neutral” laboratories of the Galileos of the last three hundred centuries, we have been surrounded by what Serres calls “world-objects”:

“Let’s give the name world-object to artifacts that have at least one global-scale dimension (such as time, space, speed, or energy): among the world-objects we know how to build, we distinguish the military ones from other purely economic or technical ones, although they produce similar results, in circumstances as rare and frequent as wars and accidents” (1995: 16-17).

These world-objects are powerful technologies – the Internet, the Atomic fusion, satellites...– that have made homo sapiens the most dominant being globally: “globalized, the current pollution is the result of the struggle to possess space in its totality” (Serres 2012a: 94). Non-human beings have a physiological need of local appropriation; humans, *they went global and even beyond*.

The modern delusion of grandeur has pushed us so far into the myth of progress and domination promoted by the grand narratives of the last two centuries that we have forgotten the true the contingent and material condition of our existence: we do not master nature, nature masters us since we need air to breath, water and earth to feed ourselves. We, moderns, have forgotten about this truth since the modern division between “nature” and “culture,” presenting humans as the central and superior being, superior to all other natural beings thanks its consciousness, its intellect, its *culture*:

“By separating nature and cultures, have we made an error in judgment that lead to a lethal crime against ourselves and the living and non-living world? Indeed, we lonely know to deal with pollution in physical, quantitative terms; in other words, through hard sciences. Well, it is mainly about our intentions, our decisions, our conventions. In short, it is about our cultures” (ibid.: 85-86).

We are now paying the consequence of this misjudgment. From Descartes to Sartre, and beyond, modern philosophers with their self-assigned role as moral keeper, have been too busy with the critique of everyone in the πόλις, and have forgotten about the world. This intellectual irresponsibility results in the apocalyptic vision represented in Breughel’s painting, which might soon become a reality.

High in the ivory towers, living on a global scale, many moderns – especially Europeans – have forgotten the disastrous condition of the rest of the people: those who have to face the tornados, the floods, the wars...these are the direct consequences of the misjudgment the moderns, divided into “neutral” scientists and “moral” philosophers, between objective and subjective sciences, each of them camping in their own field – scientists with nature, philosophers with the social – without any hope for a dialogue. The result of this *laissez-faire* type of management is that, each side blames the other, while a *natura furiosa* strikes back harder everyday:

“[O]bjectivity in the legal sense, as in the scientific sense, emanated from a space without man, which did not depend on us and on which we depended *de jure* and *de facto*. Yet henceforth it depends so much on us that it is shaking and that we too are worried by this deviation from expected equilibria. *We are disturbing the Earth and making it quake! Now it has a subject once again.* (...) Science won all the rights three centuries ago now, by appealing to the Earth, which responded by moving. So the prophet became king. *In our turn, we are appealing to an absent authority*, when we cry, like Galileo, but before the court of his successors, former prophets turned kings: ‘the Earth is moved.’ The immemorial, fixed Earth, which provided the conditions and foundations of our lives, is moving, *the fundamental Earth is trembling*” (Serres 1993: 86).

Modern philosophers have left the study of nature to “apolitical” scientists,¹ and now they are desperate by the material pollution, and even more desperate by the symbolic one: especially the populist leaders who respond to the crisis in a very “malfeasant” way, to use the Serrian terminology.

Towards a “Down to Earth” Politics

I am always amazed by academics that are surprised to see the rise of radical politics in times of crisis. The historical events of the 20th century have shown us that the combination of technology, deregulated capitalism and passive governments brings emancipation only to a small few, and despair for the rest. People, pushed to the extreme, respond with violence to the symbolic and material oppressions they suffer;

¹ This misunderstanding between scientists and philosophers has led to what has been called the “Science Wars.” This was a series of exchanges that took place in the 1990s (mainly in the US) between postmodern thinkers and scientists: on the one side, the first are saying that science is a “theory” like any other narrative, it is a social construct (see Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962). On the other side, the scientists argue that postmodernists have rejected scientific objectivity, and therefore are not only incomprehensible, but also anti-intellectual and dangerous for academia (and society) (see Levitt and Gross's *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*, 1994). The conflict peaked with the famous “Sokal affair.” Several thinkers, especially Isabelle Stengers, tried to bring the two sides to peace, by highlighting that the point is not to argue that scientific objects are “socially constructed” rather than “objectively true,” but precisely to get away from this binarism. See Stengers 1997, 2000.

in regimes based on representative democracy, they support for the option that incarnated their anger and frustration.

But the moderns keep criticising, moralizing, mocking the populist leaders like Trump, and by extension, the people who voted for them. Some intellectuals, in a desperate nostalgic effort, want to cancel the Brexit or find a way to impeach the current president of the United States. One could not only highlight the anti-democratic nature of such demands – who are they to say to millions of citizens that their vote does not count? Besides, this kind of behaviour does not solve the crisis; on the contrary, it is at the origin of the disastrous socio-climatic situation we are in. Most of journalists, intellectuals and social theorists are now obsessed by figures like Trump and Boris Johnson, as if getting rid of them would solve all the problems; but this is just reproducing a “philosophy of suspicion” that focus on mocking, attacking or fearing those individuals. However, the time they spend on these individuals, they do show in the background, like in Breughel’s painting, the misery and the menacing clouds that are about to send a deluge over our heads.

Therefore, the first step is to understand, to do a genealogical investigation of the cause of the crisis. as Arendt’s writes in the prologue to *The Human Condition*:

“The purpose of the historical analysis (...) is to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age” (1998: 6).

But what is new to the current crisis? One cannot help noting that ecological movements and political parties have been present for the last forty year. How come that they have been inaudible for such a long time?

Serres gives part of the answer by saying that there has been a conceptual misunderstanding with the notion of *environment* which has been – and still is – used by ecologists. He states that this concept is convey still an anthropocentric perspective:

“[F]orget the word *environment*, commonly used in this context. It assumes that we humans are at the center of a system of nature. This idea recalls a bygone era, when the Earth (how can one imagine that it used to represent us?), placed in the center of the world, reflected our narcissism, the humanism that makes of us the exact midpoint or excellent culmination of all things. No. The Earth existed without our unimaginable ancestors, could well exist today without us, will exist tomorrow or later still, without any of our possible descendants, whereas we cannot exist without it. Thus *we must indeed place things in the center and us at the periphery*, or better still, things all around and us within them like parasites.” (1995: 33).

Indeed, nature is at the centre, and humans at the periphery. As mentioned earlier, this is the material condition of our existence: we need more nature, than it needs us. However, this truth has been hidden or forgotten by philosophers since Descartes and the great divide of the moderns. Said differently, the concept of “environment” is like the tail of a comet, one of the last traces of a humanistic rhetoric for emancipation that is losing its political credibility a bit more every day.

Serres is also skeptical about the “Gaïa hypothesis” – the new conceptual weapon of ecological movement. He acknowledges the effort to bring some symmetry between humans and natural entities by giving a subjectivity, or rather an agency, to nature.¹ However, again, it is based on an anthropomorphic reference, but this time, a positive figure: the goddess Gaïa (2014a: 248).

Serres ambition, with his “natural contract” and “malfeasance,” is to present non-idealised concepts that refer to nature. As Latour points out, Serre’s philosophy is not about the substitution of the object for the subject, of the non-human for the human, of nature for culture – or vice versa; “[i]nstead of choosing camps and reinforcing one side of the divide, of the crisis, of the critique-all these words are one and the same – Serres sits on the fence” (Latour 1988: 93).

Thinking from the Serrian “fence” offers a symmetrical perspective of beings and things; which does not mean that humans, animals and artifacts are identical, but rather that they are capable, depending the circumstances, of acting in a similar way. As Serres argues, humans and animals use the same strategies in their appropriation of territories. His philosophy *is not a philosophy of being, but rather of capacity, of possibility.*²

Looking back at Breughel’s painting, the question is then what are the possibilities today? What are the alternatives to the crisis? According to Serres, the exclusive political ecology route – in its political party format – seems to be barren: the day political militants enter a political party, they become part of a complex political system; as Europeans, we all know how difficult it is to change from inside the mechanics of our institution, well-oiled by the free market. As Latour writes in *Politics of Nature*, where he differentiates practices of ecology and *Naturpolitik* or political ecology, “[the latter] claims to be increasing in power and to embody the political power of the future, but it is reduced everywhere to a tiny portion of electoral strap-

¹ Also known as the Gaïa theory, this principle was mainly developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. It defends the conception of the earth as a self-regulating system, which in times of major crisis, finds its way to equilibrium. See Lovelock, Margulis 1974.

² Serres is mainly known in the fields of STS (Science and Technology Studies) and social anthropology for the creation of the concept of “quasi-objets”: “a quasi-object, which traces or makes visible the relations that constitute the group through which it passes, like the token in a children’s game. A quasi object that nonetheless remains a useful technical object, even a high-tech one, directed toward the physical world. It often happens that the most sophisticated tools play their main role socially but without losing their objective purpose” (Serres, Latour 1995: 161). See also Serres 1982: 227-228.

hangers. Even in countries where it is a little more powerful, it contributes only a supporting force” (21). Consequently, the European institutions have been dealing with the latest major social challenges – in chronological order, the Subprime crisis, the Greek government-debt crisis, and the European migrant crisis – it is more than clear that the effort for viable alternatives will not come from Politics, in the institutional definition of the term. European liberal democrats look at leaders like Trump very scornfully, mocking and moralising them, making clear that *liberalism* is different from *populism*, when they actually play in the same elitist playground, leaving the rest of us dealing with the garbage they throw over the fence. As Bruno Latour points out in his last opus, *Down to Earth*:

“From the 1980s on, the ruling classes stopped purporting to lead and *began instead to shelter themselves from the world*. We are experiencing all the consequences of this flight, of which Donald Trump is merely a symbol, one among others. The absence of a common world we can share is driving us crazy” (2018: 1-2)

Of course, there are significant difference in theory and practice between liberal and ultra-conservative regime, but what Latour – and before him Serres – want to make clear is that with the truth that both liberals and conservatives deny, the material condition of *our* existence is changing: “*the very notion of soil is changing*. The soil of globalization’s dreams is beginning to slip away” (ibid.: 4). First for the *poorest of us*, who have a first-hand experience of hell on earth, force to move from their home and country in search for territory just to survive; for the educated middle-class – no to call it the bourgeois – who more or less know that it is next, and finally the elite, who live in their relative safe – often protected by guards, fences and barbed wire – “paradise on earth.” I say relatively safe, because it is just a matter of time, for their paradise to become hell too.

Serres expresses this “intellectual amnesia” in beautiful way when he writes: “we [modern thinkers] we keep forgetting about meteors; we’re always attributing human causality to thousands of events that are actually determined by climate. (...) *Meteors vanish in political philosophies*” (1995: 73). Reading this sentence reminds us that it is the occultation, the negation of this fact, of this material truth that we should call “post-truth” or “alternative reality” contra the classic use of this notion by liberal intellectuals and media to discredit what they call the *masses* and their political choice:

“When journalists talk about “post-truth” politics, they do so very lightly. They do not stress the reason why some have decided to keep on engaging in politics while voluntarily abandoning the link to the truth that (rightly!) terrified them. Nor do they stress the reason why ordinary people have decided – and rightly so, in their case too – not to believe in anything any longer” (ibid.: 24).

Consequently, this notion should be used to qualify those who have decided deliberately *to turn a blind eye on what is so obvious* since four hundred years: even

Brueghel knew the foolishness of the idea that mankind can master nature! *Mundus res nullius!*¹

Therefore, if the sole political (ecology) route is not enough, what should be done? Well, as mentioned previously the “natural contract” implies different clauses, or layer, if you prefer: one of them is to get political thinkers and scientists to get on the same table and think together.

In conclusion, the alternative is not to be found in institutional *politics*, but in activities that built up a common world, considering the implication of our actions for the common good. I want to add my voice to the call for the assemblage of such activities, which are *political by essence*, that we can label “down to earth” politics – in reference to Latour’s book. These actions imply making bonds, recreating connections and “contract” with other entities. On my small level, as an academic, I believe that one way to “land”, is to be more interested in what other researchers, both in humanities and sciences, are doing and promote interdisciplinary projects. Therefore, thinking with Serres and Latour, I want to conclude this article by saying as a new injunction for us, theorists and philosophers: “*when meteors vanish in political philosophies, it is about time to bring those philosophies down to heart.*”

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¹ “The world is nobody’s thing”; in the sense, that it is no one’s property.

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Appendix



Jan Breughel the Elder, *The Earthly Paradise*, 1621, The Louvre Museum.