

Latour, Bruno, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*¹

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Published originally in French as *Où suis-je? Leçons du confinement à l'usage des terrestres*, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* is Bruno Latour's latest translated book which, as the English title suggests, provides musings on the experience of metamorphosis during the pandemic, suggesting our own metamorphosis after an experience of confinement. Both French and English publications came in the same year, however, if one juxtaposes this book with other works on the pandemic such as Žižek's *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* and *PANDEMIC! 2 Chronicles of Time Lost* or, rather disappointing, Ben Bramble's *Pandemic Ethics: 8 Big Questions of COVID-19*,² one would notice what makes Latour's work of particular interest. Žižek offers a philosophic reflection of the current situation by raising the question "What is wrong with our system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?" while Bramble raises this query in a more simplistic sense of "what to do, how to feel, and who to be."³ Latour writes from a different perspective evident in the French title, *Where am I?*, and offers a "philosophical fable"⁴ in 14 chapters on the theme of his writings on Gaia politics and the Critical Zone but from the standpoint of confinement. The English title of this book is a play on a metamorphosis ideally realized *after* lockdown, signifying two things: (1) a direct reference to Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and (2) an inquiry into our own conversion during the lockdown. Whereas there was a flurry in revisiting Camus or Foucault during the pandemic, Latour provides a rereading of Kafka's novel to challenge our normative assumptions of where we are and how we got here; as Latour wishes to provide a different reading

¹ Trans. by Julie Rose, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021, 248pp., EPUB.

² See Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020); Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! 2 Chronicles of Time Lost* (New York and London: OR Books, 2020); and Ben Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics: 8 Big Questions of COVID-19* (Bartleby Books, 2020).

³ Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, 4 and Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics*, 3.

⁴ See Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, trans. by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), XIV, EPUB.

of Gregor's Kafkaesque world, we are left to reckon with this pandemic's Kafkaesque experience that ought to weigh on all of us either as readers or writers.

Latour extols Gregor as our pandemic figure, confined to the solitary life of having been transformed. However, the folly is not his but his family's for failing to experience a metamorphosis in opting to relate to Gregor simply from their human perspective. Gregor's ludicrous metamorphosis only seems such to his relatives who have not metamorphosized themselves. It is not just them becoming inhumane in treating their relative but resisting a rejuvenated approach to life that Gregor's metamorphosis ought to have offered.⁵ The conflict in the Samsa family is due to the difference of the world that they live in—Gregor, an insect, while his relatives, human. This difference uncovers to us a dissimilarity in vistas, which Latour tries to let his readers peer through by numerous changes in tone and perspective: the inhabitant and the city, the cell and the body, the ant and the anthill, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the creature and the whole of the 'environment.' This constant transformation of perspectives is deliberate to challenge our sense of security. This constant change signifies for Latour a realization of the world's artificiality since nothing is naturally independent of anything else just as "termites couldn't live for a moment outside the termite mound, which is to their survival what the city is to city-dwellers."⁶ We are who we are because of our world; Gregor's relatives are who they are because it is clear to them what and where they are not—Gregor's metamorphosized world.

Before pondering on where we are *vis-à-vis* the perspective from where we are not, the first realization under lockdown is freedom. This takes two forms according to Latour: "On the one hand, freedom is frustrated by lockdown, on the other, we finally free ourselves of the infinite."⁷ He argues that the lockdown serves as a metamorphosis stage, (a) impeding the typical way we understand freedom while (b) releasing us from the identity of what the neoliberal enterprise has set. Concerning (a), we see politics' inability to hinder the virus's transmission especially abroad since no amount of isolation totally thwarted the spread from country to country. This shows a lack in our current grammar of expression; politics, Latour maintains, ought to be not just a focus on the human agenda but a realization of our interconnection, the effect we have on other life forms and vice versa. Concerning (b), Latour warns that the pain of our current lockdown presents us with the "growing uncertainty about the notion of a limit."⁸ The dire situation of the pandemic

⁵ *Ibid.*, IX.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III and see *Ibid.*, XIII.

⁷ *Ibid.*, V.

⁸ *Ibid.*, V.

made us question limits either echoing eschatological preaching or asserting constitutional freedom over stay-at-home orders.⁹ However, Latour points to the question of the limits provided by the Economy (the superstructure) over the daily interactions among people (economy). The pandemic made such a superstructure, with the sudden realization of ‘essential workers’ and the crash of stock markets, turn on its head; the *Homo oeconomicus* was freed from the Economy’s dictates.¹⁰ Unfortunately, initial efforts toward a post-lockdown landscape—currently evident in recovery packages worldwide—still emphasize our *domestic* affairs that translate to economic priority. The Economy once more will take prominence, and while we soon must grapple with the effects of climate change, the extinction of wildlife, and the loss of flora and fauna, the tendency to gauge everything based on national interest, i.e., domestic product, shows the Economy’s great reach—but should it just be like this?

To realize a metamorphosized landscape requires mapping one’s territory.¹¹ This should make us question the glamor of globalization and force us to reckon precisely with our locality.¹² Through such questioning, we become strangers to ourselves, to our places, just as how terrified we at times are at the mask-wearing stranger standing two meters from us; a spin off the title of another book of Latour: from *we have never been modern* to *we have never been home*.¹³ This means that to re-understand one’s domestic affairs requires

⁹ This may be seen through how the Pope offered prayers and instructed fasting for the end of the pandemic (See Devin Watkins, “Covid-19: Pope offers prayer to Virgin Mary for protection,” in *Vatican News* [11 March 2020], <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-prayer-our-lady-protection-coronavirus.html>> and Hannah Brockhaus, “Hope for the future: Pope Francis asks Mary to intercede for end to pandemic,” in *Catholic News Agency* [1 May 2021], <<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247494/hope-for-the-future-pope-francis-asks-mary-to-intercede-for-end-to-pandemic>>). This was also locally evident through the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines’ admonitions (See Christina Hermoso, “‘Pray, fast to end COVID-19 pandemic’ – CBCP,” in *Manila Bulletin* [15 March 2020], <<https://mb.com.ph/2020/03/15/pray-fast-to-end-covid-19-pandemic-cbcpr>> and CBCP News, “Manila clergy to lead fasting, ‘penitential walk’ for end of pandemic,” in *CBCP News* [25 May 2021], <<https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/manila-clergy-to-lead-fasting-penitential-walk-for-end-of-covid-19/>>). This may even be taken in a political sense as through the refusal of confinement of some religious groups in the United States (Cf. Jaweed Kaleem, “Megachurch pastors defy coronavirus pandemic, insisting on right to worship,” in *Los Angeles Times* [31 March 2020], <<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-31/coronavirus-megachurches-meeting-pastors>> and Matthew Gabriele, “Christian Groups That Resist Public-Health Guidelines Are Forgetting a Key Part of the Religion’s History,” in *Time* [20 April 2020], <<https://time.com/5824128/early-christian-caritas-coronavirus/>>).

¹⁰ See Latour, *After Lockdown*, VII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, VIII.

¹² See *Ibid.*

¹³ Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and *Ibid.*, VII.

one re-understand one's home, *domus*. Latour posits our penchant for a misidentification of what we really mean by home.¹⁴ Usually or perhaps ideally, we associate it with freedom whereas one is bounded by social norms outside. We ask the question, where is this home of the human species? The earth, but, Latour presents, the *Earth* is a proper noun that encompasses all the relations within. Domestic affairs should firstly redirect our attention to our territory, making us uncover the entire web of relations among various species and creatures, from migration patterns to wind directions, and how no sense of something truly "local" can be independent of anything not local. Mapping one's territory makes one redefine oneself and truly assume the role of Gregor in this oblique Earth that we cannot know completely, contrary to the Economy's simplification.¹⁵

Considering this unravels the tensions between where we are and where we are not. This makes us untangle the dialectics projected onto this Earth—here/there, material/spiritual, below/above, secular/religious, artificial/natural—and realize what is left is a plurality of spheres that envelop our existence, something neither of the two extremes but "*formed with other bodies*" that impel us "*to live at home but in a different way.*"¹⁶ This plural reality of Earth metamorphosizes the human person from the master of nature to an insect surrounded by these great bodies of nature. As Latour puts it "The issue is not whether the 'world of tomorrow' will replace the 'world of before', but whether the surface world couldn't finally give up its seat for the world of ordinary depth."¹⁷ Taking this step forward, he offers not simply an elaboration of political or ethical conflicts but rather a cosmological conflict in that we are in a state of constant oscillation between the worlds we inhabit, not just in a neoliberal sense but with due reference to the Critical Zone in which all of life thrives.¹⁸

Latour though mentions how "*it's high time we delved further down, by becoming more realistic, more pragmatic, more materialistic.*"¹⁹ Such observation is something that can be said of the book, especially amidst the pandemic's social impact upon millions who lost their jobs and, ultimately, lives. While this book points to the Earth's incalculability, it, unfortunately, gives the impression that the death of millions, which could have been averted, was just part of a metamorphosis. Such an admission, if deliberate, reaffirms the position that we are fortunate enough not to have succumbed to the natural eugenic cleansing as being merely onlookers to this

¹⁴ See Latour, *After Lockdown*, VI.

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, VIII and IX.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VII.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, XIII.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, VII.

phenomenon.²⁰ My use of eugenics is intentional to raise a serious alarm about how complacent such a language can become, especially from people fortunate enough to work from home, have essentials delivered, and experience “dead time”²¹ to revitalize ourselves, whereas inadequate political measures—evidenced by the throngs of corruption charges now raised against government officials tasked with the pandemic response—have hastened the demise of people. What we have seen is a survival of the fittest, of the richest, and at times also of the bravest; a recognition of a cosmological crisis definitely does not give a full account of any metamorphosis that the pandemic provides for we must remember, and Latour rightly observes, that “The antonym for ‘body’ is not ‘soul, or ‘mind’, or ‘consciousness’, or ‘thought’; it is ‘death[.]’”²² I affirm his point concerning this that lived experience should be understood not just as a subjective element contrasted with an objective account, but rather its transvaluation to account for the totality; one’s lived experience reflects the tensions that arise in everyday life, not just socially but also biologically. Precisely for this first point, this critical observation is raised.

Another criticism, albeit to a lesser degree, that may be raised especially by practitioners of philosophy is Latour’s narrative, which he admits takes the form of a philosophical fable rather than a scholarly discourse. This, however, reflects the fact that no amount of academic experience is really able to prepare one to fully confront the pandemic. On the other hand, those who found such a style enjoyable, especially the themes this book raised, may wish to consider Latour’s other works, notably *Down to Earth* and *We Have Never Been Modern*.²³

Overall, this book provides a mix of the pandemic experience and a renewed consciousness of what it means to live in this place we have grown accustomed to calling both ‘home’ and ‘earth’. Perhaps the pandemic is just a foretaste of more tragic things to come especially if we continue to live ignorant of the decentered role the human species has on Earth.²⁴ What we ultimately get from Latour’s musings is a re-questioning of our place not as one in charge of this territory but in the middle of things. Better said, what he does is to remind us how we are fundamentally *just* in the middle of a vast network happening simultaneously, a reterritorialization not simply with respect to an epistemic reference but a biological one. We are Gregors, insects to a foreign environment, with the opportunity to see life anew and to be

²⁰ See Bramble, *Pandemic Ethics*, 114.

²¹ Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*, 57.

²² *Ibid*, IX.

²³ See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018) and Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

²⁴ See *Ibid*, XII.

sensitive to the movement of nature—although without committing the same error of understanding “nature” as a homogenized whole. This book provides an introduction to Gaia politics and a different take on cosmology, grounded not on a distant analysis but rather on a lived experience of envelopment.²⁵ With such a perspective, after lockdown to be metamorphosed or not to be is *not* the question; to remain ignorant of the metamorphosis or not is.

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²⁵ See Latour, *After Lockdown*, XIII.

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