

DECOLONIZING GAIA
OR, WHY THE SAVAGES SHALL FEAR
BRUNO LATOUR'S POLITICAL ANIMISM

I survived the savageness of civilization.
Rosa Chávez (K'iche'/Kaqchikel Maya)

1. *Argentina: The Warrior and the Captive Maiden.*

In *Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden*, Jorge Luis Borges cross-stiches two tales separated by «thirteen hundred years and an ocean»: that of an English maiden from Yorkshire, kidnapped by the Indians in Argentina, who chooses this «savage and uncouth life» and refuses to return to «civilization»; and that of Droctulft, «the barbarian who embraced the cause of Ravenna», the Longobard warrior who, in the mid-sixth century, during the siege of Ravenna, «deserted his own army and died defending the city he had been attacking», because he was fascinated by the city's «statues, temples, gardens, rooms, tiered seats, amphorae, capitals and pediments» of the city¹. Borges overlaps the two stories, suggesting that underneath the apparent heterogeneity between a «European woman who chose the wilderness» and a 'barbarian' struck by the design of a Christian capital, a «secret impulse», an «impulse deeper than reason», makes these two narratives «one and the same story», two sides of the same coin².

This «secret impulse» is nothing else than the state of nature of Western modernity³. Emerging in its modern configuration in Thomas Hobbes's

¹ J. L. Borges, *Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden*, in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, London, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 473.

² *Ibidem*, p. 479.

³ In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes provides a stunning description of this imaginary background, which informs all subsequent discourses on the state of nature, including Borges's story: «In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may

political philosophy and then reprised and transformed by John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, the conceptual apparatus of the state of nature/state of society has allowed for the multiple compositions and reversible transformations of the civilized and the savage, the socialized and the naturalized, the actual and the archaic⁴. Hobbes's state of nature codifies a dialectical opposition between savagery and civilization that, with Locke, Rousseau, Hegel and their followers will produce endless conceptual variations, such as the pairs of agonal freedom and the State, civil society and objective reason, the wild strength of economics and the lawful order of politics⁵. In Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, savagery sustains the civilizational narrative that shapes the architecture of private property and state sovereignty. Whether it is Hobbes's «war of every man against every man», or Locke's common access to the resources of the Earth and lack of private property, the state of nature is the conjectural ethnographic positivity and conceptual degree zero out of which the humanity of «those who are counted the Civiliz'd part of Mankind» is designed⁶.

Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth* points to the colonial context that gave birth to the modern state of nature⁷. Schmitt concentrates on what he

be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (...). It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all, and live at this day in that brutish manner»; T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 78. On the state of nature as a template of 'conjectural history', see F. Palmeri, *State of Nature, Stages of Society: Enlightenment Conjectural History and Modern Social Discourse*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016.

⁴ See Jean Baudrillard's definition of America as the «primitive society of the future»: http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2009_fall_2010_winter/14_baudrillard.html

⁵ Also K. Marx's theory of 'commodity fetishism' is based on his extensive readings of anthropological literature and accounts of 'primitive societies'; see K. Marx, *Quaderni antropologici. Appunti da L. H. Morgan e da H. S. Maine*, Milano, Unicopli, 2009.

⁶ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, New York, Mentor Books, 1988; chapter V, §§ 25.

⁷ C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen, New York, Telos Press, 2003. For a decolonial reading of Carl Schmitt's account of the *nomoi* of Western modernity see *The Anomie of the Earth. Philosophy, Politics, and Autonomy in Europe and the Americas*, edited by F. Luisetti – J. Pickles – W. Kaiser, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2015, and W. D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011.

calls, from an unrepentant Eurocentric perspective, the 'second *nomos*' of the Earth, the spatial and political organization of land and sea imposed by the sixteenth-century colonial conquest of the New World and seventeenth-century development of the European territorial nation states. This *nomos* of Western modernity replaced the «essentially terrestrial» *nomos* of antiquity and the medieval age, carving a Eurocentric global order «based on a particular relation between the spatial order of firm land and the spatial order of free sea»⁸. The second *nomos* marked what was considered by Europeans the area of 'civilization', Europe and its international law, separating it – through «amity lines» running south along the equator or the Tropic of Cancer and west through the Canary Islands or the Azores – from what came to represent the state of nature of primitive people and savage lands, where no lawful truce was respected and predation ruled. In Schmitt's view, this Eurocentric *nomos* lasted until World War I, when the United States took over the «maritime existence» of the British empire and began to impose a third *nomos* that prolonged the Western planetary hegemony into a global «total war».

Borges's *Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden* suggests also a topology of nonhumans and humans, broader than the colonial relation of savagery and civilization. What the barbarian Droctulft experiences is the contrast between his «gloomy geography of swamps and forests» and the tamed space of Ravenna: «Wars bring him to Ravenna, and there he sees something he has never seen before, or never fully seen. He sees daylight and cypresses and marble. He sees an aggregate that is multiple yet without disorder»⁹. Droctulft's conversion to the order of the city is made possible by the structural articulation of the wild and the domesticated, of spaces where life unfolds independently of human actions and the socialized world. Since the Neolithic revolution in the Near East, the forest and the garden, hunters and herdsman, wilderness and cities, constitute the polarities that shape the Eurasian languages and cultural formations. The moderns' construction of the epistemic dualism of nature and society belongs also to this larger horizon, to an anthropological assemblage of humans and nonhu-

⁸ Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 49. The second *nomos* was mainly structured along colonial and Atlantic lines and relations of power, and was «a completely different spatial order» that «arose with the centralized, spatially self-contained, continental European state (...): unlimited free space for overseas land-appropriation was open to all such states. The new legal titles characteristic of this new, state-centered international law (...) were *discovery* and *occupation*». Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, p. 66.

⁹ Borges, *Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden*, p. 473.

mans that is now reshaped by global capitalism, communication networks, and techno-sciences. The story of the English maiden, «carried off by the Indians» and then choosing a «savage and uncouth life» – «tents of horsehide, fires fueled by dung, celebrations in which the people feasted on meat singed over the fire or on raw viscera, stealthy marches at dawn»¹⁰ – reveals the lack of stability of the state of society, its historical variations and irreducible exposure to nonhuman forces.

2. *Paris: The Festival of the Supreme Being.*

Having invented them four centuries ago, Western intellectuals know what to do with the 'savages' and their «fetishes»¹¹. Bruno Latour's philosophical cult of Gaia, his appeal to the «factish gods»¹², is a temperate form of primitivism predicated upon his diagnosis of the repressed archaic features of the specter of «Western modernity». Building on the original 1970s formulations of Gaia theory by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who introduced Gaia as the figure of our self-regulating «living planet» surrounded by the cold deadliness of cosmic space, Latour has conflated a cybernetic and Earth system vision of Gaia with the Leviathanic imagery of European political philosophy¹³. Lovelock's and Margulis's Gaia is the «largest living creature on Earth», a self-regulating «entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil»¹⁴. Gaia is the Earth considered as a living existent, in which biological life extends its influence and models to its advantage the physical and chemical conditions of the surface of the planet. The atmosphere, according to Lovelock, is an extension of the biosphere, the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 477.

¹¹ See S. Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014, new edition.

¹² See Bruno Latour's French edition of his Gifford Lectures: *Face à Gaïa. Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2015. The English text of these lectures, *Facing Gaia: Six lectures on the political theology of nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, is available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/>. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *Facing Gaia*. On the term 'factish' see B. Latour, *On the Cult of the Factish Gods*, in Id., *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (eds.), Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010.

¹³ See I. Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, London, Open Humanities Press, 2015.

¹⁴ See J. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000 (3rd ed., pp. 1, 11).

needs and endowed with faculties and powers that far beyond those of its constituent parts¹⁵.

Latour takes up Michel Serres's ambition to rewrite the social contract as a «natural contract»¹⁶, overlapping this return to Hobbes with the Earth system science's Gaia. Gaia discloses «a new state of nature» that is nothing else than a generalized state of war: «a war of all against all, in which the protagonists may now be not only wolf and sheep, but also tuna fish as well as CO₂, sea levels, plant nodules or algae, in addition to the many different factions of fighting humans»¹⁷. This state of nature is conceived by Latour as a primitive state of war, which requires a «civilizational» gesture that restores the legal framework provided by the social contract: «we realize that we can not obtain a civilized collective without composing it (...) thus searching for a new Leviathan that would come to grasp with Gaia»¹⁸. Like Behemoth, the Biblical monster that frames Hobbes's history of the English civil war, Gaia, the goddess of a terrifying state of nature, must be tamed by a new Leviathan.

Serres's Hobbesian jargon and unapologetic Eurocentrism cast a long shadow on Latour's Gaia. The ingredients are the same: a state of war of every man against every man, as a primitive condition to be overcome by the civilizational pact, and violence as an immemorial state of nature that threatens the stability of the commonwealth. Latour pushes Serres's endeavor even further, casting himself as the demiurge of a new Leviathan, and competing with Carl Schmitt for the title of high-priest of Western political theology: «just as Hobbes needed the state of nature to get to the social contract, we might need to accept a new state of war to envision the State of peace»¹⁹. Latour is not shy about his rewesternizing impulse. Being a wild Anthropocenic goddess, Gaia can be contained only by «a new civilized collective», a contemporary Leviathan devised by European philosophers of science and jurists²⁰.

¹⁵ Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, p. 9.

¹⁶ M. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

¹⁷ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 103.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

²⁰ As officially proposed in 2012 by the Working Group on the Anthropocene of the International Union of Geological Sciences, the Anthropocene is the geological epoch of the Quaternary Period following the Holocene, the age in which human actions have become a geological phenomenon. Latour blends his Gaia rituals and the geohistorical features of the Anthropocene: the Anthropocene is «the most decisive philosophical, religious, anthropological and (...) political concept yet produced as an alternative to the very notions of 'Modern' and 'modernity'». *Ibidem*, p. 77.

The nonhuman traits of Gaia mark the end of modernity and the exhaustion of the vocabulary of spheres, globes, and wholes. Gaia is for Latour a trick for resisting «the temptation to jump to the global»²¹, the goddess of a secular philosophical religion, what comes after the deconstruction of the anthropocentric categories of the last humanists. In the play *Gaia. Global Climate Tragi-Comedy*, Bruno Latour, Frédérique Ait-Touati, and Chloé Latour stage all these techno-mythological attributes of Gaia:

The Chorus: No more hope. Beyond hope? What truth? *Hobimé, hobimé*, what's going to become of us? The fruits of the earth perish, still locked up in their buds, the herds of cattle languish, and the seeds conceived by women are no longer born. Brandishing her torch, Gaia, the most odious of goddesses, worse than the plague, has pounced on us and laid waste to the land of men (...) *Dr Lovelock*: No, Gaia is that – mindless – globe there, floating over the waters, something positive, nothing but positive. (...) *Mr Jolly*: Why don't you put up altars to her, to Gaia, while you're at it! Why not make human sacrifices to her to appease her anger, to put an end to her vengeance. (...) *The Chorus*: It's just an airconditioning system, feedback loops that we've upset a bit. If I've got this right, She has nothing against us, nothing personal anyway, I don't think sacrifices and altars²².

«From Plato to NATO», the spheres and globes of Greek philosophy, medieval theology, and 19th century epistemology of nature were able to capture an undisputable, systematic, indifferent, and de-animated Nature²³. In our age, no global thinking can describe the topology of Gaia, the interconnections and dispersion of its nonhuman body. The subjects summoned by Gaia are facing the convoluted loops of Earth phenomena, and must take responsibility for the odd geometry of the Anthropocene.

Latour portrays himself and a sorcerer-diplomat, whose mandate is to reverse the decline of Western universalism and introduce a new constituent lingua franca, «in preparation for the times when we shall no longer be in a position of strength and when the others will be the ones purporting to 'modernize' – but in the old way and, as it were, without us»²⁴. The only hope remained to the West for «facing Gaia» and sitting at the negotiating table – with the world powers of the future, is to accept its nonmodernity. Revisiting

²¹ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 174.

²² B. Latour – F. Ait-Touati – C. Latour, *Gaia. Global Climate Tragi-Comedy*, pp. 18, 31-32 (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/358>).

²³ Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 93.

²⁴ B. Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, trans. Cathy Porter, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 16.

the «modern adventure», preparing a realistic «inventory of the Moderns' legacy», and mobilizing comparative anthropology in order to undertake an «anthropology of the Moderns» are necessary steps that will allow to reaffirm the state of nature of the Earth from a Western perspective²⁵.

Contemporary geopolitics requires a new geophilosophy, a description of «the world as we now see it through nonmodern eyes»²⁶. Latour is aware that «the West (Europe, at least, unquestionably) is finally in a situation of relative weakness» and that «Occidentals will have to be made present in a completely different way, first to themselves, and then to the others»²⁷. Not only decolonization has offered a glimpse of what ontological pluralism may entail; most significantly, the weapons of «universalization, globalization, and modernizations» used by the West in its planetary war of conquest against traditions and superstitions, are now in the hands of the East and the South, ready to be mobilized against their former masters²⁸.

In the postcolonial and postnatural age documented by Latour's anthropology, the «beings of metamorphosis» of psychotropic phenomena and the enchanted objects of contemporary technology are endowed with a threatening archaic naturalness. Things have become unsettling monsters, an assembly of preoccupations and desires²⁹. Nature, «instead of being a huge reservoir of forces and bottomless repository of waste», now appears as a pandemonium populated by the specter of emancipated colonial savages and enigmatic quasi-objects³⁰. Traditional legal and philosophical categories are confronted by uncanny assemblages of techno-social fetishes. Things of all kinds gather and pertain, concern and question. They are not the usual objects, a calculable matter of fact but automated or catatonic beings: «Scientific laboratories, technical institutions, marketplaces, churches and temples, financial trading rooms, Internet forums, ecological disputes»³¹.

Latour insistently appeals, against all decolonial critiques of ethnographic reason, to the methods of comparative anthropology³². As in Félix

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 14-17.

²⁶ B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 103.

²⁷ Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, pp. 15-16.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 485.

²⁹ B. Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik – An Introduction to Making Things Public*, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, catalogue of the show at ZKM, edited by B. Latour & P. Weibel, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2005, p. 30.

³⁰ Latour, *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik*, 15.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

³² Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, p. 15.

Guattari's «machinic animism» and its contemporary repetitions³³, Latour's political animism is both an extension of Western subjectivity beyond the dualisms of persons and things and the manifesto of an «artificial alliance between animism and materialism»³⁴. A premature postcolonial guilt must not repress the archaic traits emerging in contemporary images, technologies, and modes of existence. Western moderns too often «misunderstand idols and idolatry», separating as differences in kind what are, instead, just differences in degree³⁵. The Mosaic division between fetishes and facts will be overcome by rediscovering the idolatric practices of the West, not by destroying the idols and fetishes of the colonial others, and banning their sorcerers, phantasms, and metamorphoses³⁶. The problem of Western modernity is its rarefied consciousness, the denial of its hybrid beings.

When the Occidentals' iconoclasm is unmasked as an immunitarian gesture against «savage thought»³⁷, when the common anthropological matrix of transformations between humans and nonhumans is revealed, when sorcerers and scientists are placed in a horizontal plane, then also the distinction between facts and fetishes disappears, replaced by factish rituals and technologies: «I find more accuracy in my lactic acid ferment if I shine the light of the Condoblé divinities on it. In the common world of comparative anthropology, lights cross paths»³⁸. Political animism is for Latours «a revision of the critical spirit, a pause in the critique» that rediscovers the anthropotechnical impulse of scientific and social imagination³⁹.

Latour's invocation of the many epithets of Gaia – «Gaia-Enigma», «Gaia-Thousand Folds», «Gaia-The Recalcitrant», «Gaia-The Incompossible», «Gaia the Uncommon-Commons», etc.⁴⁰ –, with its mixture of grotesque aesthetics, politicized ontology, and ethnographic surrealism is a *Collège de Sociologie*-like program, an epistemology moving away from Nietzschean motifs and the sac-

³³ See A. Melitopoulos – M. Lazzarato, *Machinic Animism*, *Deleuze Studies* 6.2, 2012 and E. Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

³⁴ E. Viveiros de Castro in Melitopoulos – Lazzarato, *Machinic Animism*, p. 242.

³⁵ Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, p. 166.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

³⁷ «Beyond every question of epistemology lies another question: what to do with the idols or fetishes? This is the most striking feature of the anthropology of the Moderns: they believe that they are anti-idolators and antifetishists» (*ibidem*).

³⁸ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, p. 66.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ See B. Latour, *How to Make Sure Gaia is Not a God of Totality?* (<http://bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/138-THOUSAND-NAMES.pdf>), p. 1.

rificial paradigm, and embracing the positivist lexicon of actor-network theory. It is also a statist secular mythology, looking *back* at Maximilien Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being and reviving the Enlightenment festivals that celebrated, on the Champ de Mars, this deistic national religion.

What I find troubling in Latour's Gaia is not the attempt to articulate a non-ecological politics of nature, or the echoing of an avant-garde sensibility for archaisms and ethnographic motifs, but the rewesternizing impulse that is driving this project⁴¹. Several decolonial and indigenous thinkers and activists have recovered nonmodern categories and ethnographic tools⁴². The revision of the society/nature, contemporary/archaic, civilized/savages oppositions is revealing lifeworlds in which internal critiques of Western concepts and indigenous knowledges may enter into counter-hegemonic alliances⁴³. Latour's Gaia serves instead the agenda of the rewesternization of the state of nature of the Anthropocene. While decolonial and indigenous thought has focused on the colonial episteme and lexicon of savagery, tracing its genealogical connections with the myths of modernity, Latour reverses this trajectory and reanthropologizes political theory through the neoarchaisms of science and technology⁴⁴.

In the contested ecopolitical states of nature of the Anthropocene, the late liberal compositions of life and inertia are resuscitating an old colonial concept, popularized in the second half of the nineteenth century by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor: animism. As Elizabeth Povinelli and Anna Tsing have argued convincingly, the Animist is a 'governing ghost' of late liberalism, confining the 'savage slot' to its nonmodern taxon, while allowing capitalism to animate everything and extract surplus value from everything⁴⁵.

⁴¹ A similar argument is made by B. Noys in *The Discreet Charm of Bruno Latour*, in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, edited by J. Habjan – J. Whyte, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014, pp. 195-210, in which Noys denounces Latour's actor-network method as a 're-reification' of capitalism, belonging to the grammar of neo-liberalism.

⁴² See L. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London, Zed Books, 2015; H. Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, London, Zed Books, 2015; A. Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁴³ On decolonial relations with nature see A. Escobar, *Territories of Difference. Place, Movements, Life, Redes*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 111-155.

⁴⁴ Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, p. 133. On 'post-Occidental reason' see W. D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border thinking*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 91-126.

⁴⁵ E. Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Later Liberalism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016; A. Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton, CA, Princeton University Press, 2015.

At the same time, animism is also charged with critical connotations, and embraced by postcolonial thinkers, vitalist intellectuals, and the neo-avant-gardes as an instrument for disturbing the boundary between animate subjects and inanimate objects; as a provocative signpost for reclaiming pre-modern and non-Western knowledges within the contemporary networks of capitalist information⁴⁶.

Latour's Gaia is a significant illustration of contemporary political animism. It shows that the state of nature of the Anthropocene is infused by the civilizational apparatus of colonial political discourse, and that it carries within itself the return of the haunting figures of the sovereign and the beast⁴⁷.

FEDERICO LUISETTI
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill
luisetti@email.unc.edu

⁴⁶ The conference *The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth*, September 15-19, 2014, Rio de Janeiro, marks the convergence of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's 'cannibal metaphysics' and Latour's political animism: <https://thethousandnamesofgaia.wordpress.com>. On the resurgence of animism in the context of aesthetics, coloniality, and the technosciences see A. Franke, *Animism*, Berlin-New York, Sternberg Press, 2010; M. Lazzarato, *Animism: Modernity through the Looking Glass*, Köln, Walther König 2012, and D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Cbthulucene*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016. See also the *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, edited by Graham Harvey, London, Routledge, 2015.

⁴⁷ J. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.