Globalization, climate protection and the need for a cultural revolution

Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime [Où atterrir? Comment s’orienter en politique], by Bruno Latour, Paris, La Découverte, 2017, 160 pp., €12, ISBN: 9782707197009

The world-renowned Parisian sociologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour argues in provocative and powerful language that, after the victory over communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new story began, the story of globalization. Today, after nearly thirty years, Latour states that globalization has clearly been a negative trend, even if this is stubbornly denied by the media and politics.

The weakness of globalization is illustrated by two other phenomena associated with it, namely inequality and migration, which result in the migration crisis. Looking at the earth from a global perspective has not united us. The number of ‘losers’ is far too great, and migration is therefore a logical phenomenon, a solution to the problem of finding living space where people can still thrive. Modernity strives for the power to do everything that is possible, but this destroys our basis of life. The earth strikes back, and the present becomes the site of a new geo-social question.

This development is recognized very clearly by some, and, since the common horizon has disappeared, people look to retreat behind their own boundaries. The Brexit and the Trump era are mentioned by Latour as the most striking examples. The low point in his opinion is America’s withdrawal from the 2018 Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

For a journal such as Church, Communication and Culture, the questions contained in this book about the cultural relevance of an eminently political-ecological investigation and its mediatic processing are of interest. Not least interesting is confronting such questions with statements of the Catholic Church in regard to the theses put forward in the book. It is from this perspective that this review is written. It is a book that has been translated into many languages and continues to enjoy an astonishing reception. The author has often been invited to large speaking events in various countries and has filled large audience-halls with listeners.

The structure of the book is composed of twenty theses, which are explained in the twenty short chapters. The first ten theses are naturally reserved for the diagnosis: that inequality in the world and denial of the climate situation are closely linked. A sign of this is America’s denunciation of the climate agreement. Here it becomes clear where and how the new war is taking place. Latour distinguishes between ‘minus’ and ‘plus’ globalization. The former is the problem, since by it the world is ultimately viewed from only one perspective, which can be attached to mechanization and profit maximization. The explanation and deepening of this diagnosis form the content of Latour’s second set of ten chapters, which can be summed up as follows: We are de facto homeless in the world of globalization. The point is to re-ground oneself as a citizen. This is where Latour’s concept of the terrestrial comes into play: one should consider the local, the connection with the ground, without excluding the wider world. In other words, one must bind oneself to the earth, to the ground on which we live, about which we already have the feeling that it
is elusive under our feet. But it is precisely through this connection with the earth that we become world citizens.

This thesis allows us to breathe the fresh air of freedom, responsibility and the emancipation of the human being. It moves us at least to think, not to continue carelessly as we have done so far. It is not surprising that there has been no lack of sharp criticism for this book. One critic accuses Latour – perhaps rightly – of blurring the terms: ‘earth’ and ‘grounded’ can mean much – or nothing. Even the elites or politicians he denounces as responsible for the disaster of globalization, are not all the same. Quite a few of them are those who have made the Paris Climate Agreement, the EU energy standards and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN ready for signature in laborious and political fine-tuning.

Latour deals sharply with the ‘authorized commentators’, who in denial of all facts denounce people as the supporters, even causers, of the alternative facts, because they believe in an imminent climate catastrophe, which can ultimately only be explained by conspiracy theory. It is not surprising, according to Latour (cf. thesis 6), that in view of this post-truth policy and widespread network of disinformation, citizens retreat into the private sphere. By the way, this also explains the great popularity of the consumption of television series, video games, etc., which at least temporarily make us forget everything else. The grounded person has his feet on the ground, sees what is happening up close and is receptive and quick to react to people’s actions and needs. In this way, one can begin to live. Globalization, on the other hand, has developed into a perspective that no longer takes into account the needs of the real world, and thus is no longer interested in the individual human being. This perspective makes the world uninhabitable.

Provocative, imprecise or not, as one reads Latour one feels he has his finger in today’s wound and has the impression that he is taking a step in the right direction. This wake-up call could be more effective if the anthropological dimensions associated with it were deeply examined – something which Latour does not do. A look at recent statements by the last couple of popes comes to the rescue. Let us only recall here the expansion of the concept of ecology in Benedict XVI’s famous speech to the German Bundestag (22 September 2011)\(^1\) and the encyclical Laudato si’ of Pope Francis on 24 May 2015.\(^2\) In the following, a few thoughts are compiled which make this expansion of perspective possible.

Benedict XVI, in his speech to the parliamentarians of an important industrial nation, was concerned with pointing out that we are at a historic moment in which man is capable of accomplishing technical and scientific achievements previously undreamed of. That is why humanity urgently needs criteria to distinguish good from evil, knowing what the true nature of man is. Pope Benedict pleads for a true ecology of man:

‘There is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled’.

Pope Benedict emphasizes that the problem could be even greater: ‘where positivist reason considers itself the only sufficient culture and banishes all other cultural realities to the status of subcultures, it diminishes man, indeed it threatens his humanity’.

The social dimensions to which Latour refers are clearly elaborated in the encyclical Laudato si’. Pope Francis unfolds an integral view of ecology in which man and social
justice are at the center, not profit maximization. Basically, the concern for nature, man and, accordingly, justice and fidelity, form a whole:

Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and ‘the first principle of the whole ethical and social order’ (93).

The problem begins when technological development overtakes human development and leaves people far behind, because ‘a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power’ (136). He says boldly that ‘there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology’ (118).

Man needs to rethink how he deals with earthly, economic and technical resources. The rethinking, however, continues when a ‘cultural ecology’ (143) emerges, in the coexistence of man and nature. Then we can really speak of a helpful cultural revolution.

Notes

1. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Reichstag Building, Berlin, on 22 September 2011, “The Listening Heart. Reflections on the Foundations of Law”. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html
2. Encyclical Letter Laudato si’ of the Holy Father Francis “On care for our common home”. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

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