

Interview Ulrich Beck & Bruno Latour

In the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 15th May 2014

Sabine Selchow: What is global warming all about? Why is it so important? Am I right, both of you agree on two points: the catastrophic implications of global warming are the best documented facts in history, but despite of this politically nothing much has happened or is happening. We are faced with global problems but we don't have the publics and politics that go with them.

Bruno Latour: One of the reasons why we feel so powerless when asked to be concerned by ecological crisis is because of the total disconnect between the range, nature, and scale of the phenomenon and the set of emotions, habits of thoughts, and feelings that would be necessary to handle those crises – not even to act in response to them, but simply to give them more than a passing ear. Is there a way to bridge the distance between the scale of the phenomenon we hear about and the tiny *Umwelt* inside which we witness, as if we were a fish inside its bowl, an ocean of catastrophes that are supposed to unfold? How are we to behave sensibly when there is no ground control station anywhere to which we could send the help message, “Houston, we have a problem”? Especially because there is no Houston anymore just as in the film *Gravity*!

Ulrich Beck: I agree. But I would like to turn the question upside down asking ‘what can global warming do for us?’ Rather than what can we do to ‘solve’ global warming? Then we realize that global warming is already transforming the world dramatically. For example: there is no longer such a thing as a purely natural weather event. Equally, no weather event can truly be described as artificial, that is human induced. By changing so substantially the composition of the world's atmosphere, humans have not simply brought a new category of weather into being – ‘human weather’, for example, as distinct from ‘natural weather’. Rather, the planetary system which yields distinct weather at distinct times in distinct places is now a both-and-system – it is a hybrid system yielding hybrid weather. Whatever the weather outside this window today – whether storm or calm, whether heat wave or cold wave – it is a result of this new coproduced natural-societal system. I introduce the word ‘Risikogesellschaft’ just for that reason – arguing that at the end of the 20th century we live in a both/and-composition of nature/society – nowadays named ‘anthropocene’. You, Bruno, call this

coproduced climate, this different paradigm of 'human naturalness' 'Gaia'. But whatever we call it we cannot return to living with a simply natural climate. Even 'climate change' thus becomes a zombie concept. Its invocation because of hurricane Katrina will forever be ambiguous to us. We must view climate in its clothing, a consequence of new human agency and a demonstration of the embeddedness of humanity in nature. We have become an actor in the story of climate, alongside the personal gods of the heavens and the impersonal dynamics of the oceans. It is as irrelevant as it is impossible to find the invisible fault line between natural and artificial climate. On the other hand it matters how we respond to the changing climatic risks and opportunities yielded by such hybridity.

SS: Interestingly enough, this is exactly what leads the climate-deniers to their denials: they find this knowledge too indirect, too far from immediate access. If there is supposed to be a bridge between global warming and global politics there has to be a way to imagine the 'we' that humans are supposed to feel part of undertaking responsibility for the anthropocene. But who is the 'we' of climate politics?

BL: For those who wish to bridge the gap and fathom the new disconnect, it is time for politics. It is useless for the ecologically motivated activist to try shaming the ordinary citizens for not thinking globally enough, for not having a feel for the earth as such. No one sees the earth globally and no one sees an ecological system from nowhere, the scientist not more than the citizen, the farmer or the ecologist – or, the earthworm. Nature is no longer what is embraced from a far away point of viewing where the observer could ideally jump to see things 'as a whole', but the assemblage of contradictory entities that have to be composed together. If we take politics seriously, then we have to talk about war and peace, revolution and revelation (the etymology, as you know, of the word 'apocalypse'). But if it might be too flippant to brandish the theme of the end of the world, it would be even more bizarre not to take the theme of living in apocalyptic time seriously, because so many things are pointing to, of not the end, at least to a radical change of horizon. Those who don't feel in their bones that they might lose the world, must have difficulty feeling alive.

UB: Does global warming really raise the question of war and peace? Yes, I agree we live in the anticipation of the end of civilization. And therefore we live in the end of the end of politics. But then the question is: how does the transformative power of global risk transform politics? Global risk, to me, is

a state of affair that comes as a threat and brings hope. To be clear: global risk is not global catastrophe. It is the anticipation of catastrophe in the present in order to prevent it from happening. The global perception of global risk therefore is a huge mobilizing force, creating global publics even if conferences fail. Global risk implies the message that it is high time for us to act! Drag people out of their routine, drag the politicians out of the 'constraints' that allegedly surround them. Risk is both the everyday insecurity that is no longer accepted and the catastrophe that has not yet occurred. Global risk opens our eyes and also raises our hopes of a positive outcome. That is the paradox of the encouragement we derive from global risks. To that extent Weltrisikogesellschaft is always a political category, since it creates new kinds and lines of conflict and liberates politics from existing rules and institutional shackles. In this sense there is a certain affinity between the theory of Risikogesellschaft and Ernst Bloch's principle of hope.

BL: I don't follow you there. The choice is terribly clear: either you agree to tell foes from friends, and then you engage in politics – or you shy away from waging wars and having enemies, but then you *do away with* politics, which means that you are giving yourself over to the protection of an all-encompassing State of Nature that has *already* unified the world into one whole, a State that should thus be able to resolve all conflicts from its disinterested, neutral, over-arching third party view.

UB: Who is to fight whom at gunpoint in order to stop global warming? Shall we arrest climate change deniers? Shall we conquer the NSA to stop it to surveil us? Or take Fukushima: Shall we arrest social actors, including states, who set out to re-introduce nuclear power as a 'green' technology? Shall we solve the financial crises by using weapons? All these cases hold the same message: The distinction between friend and foe belongs to a different world. However, I do agree with your argument that there is a lot of resistance against climate politics.

BL: No, it is fight. I would not say it is resistance. It is an explicit fight. When I say "State of Nature" it is not a nation state – I agree with you on that –, it means that there is, in the mind of those who disagree about climate a superior referee who has already settled the matter – progress, markets, God, science or nature herself. And then, history unfolds just as the mere application of that transcendent rule. But what we discover with climate disputes is that there is no referee. This is what I mean by a state of war, it has

nothing to do with nation-states. It is a concept about what defines the time: the end of modernization is the realization there is no referee. Thus, politics is back.

SS: So do you suggest that those who call global warming climate change are usefully constructed as the enemies ...?

BL: No, no, they are not 'usefully constructed', they *are* the enemies. They are the ones who live in a different world than my world and they live in a world that is destroyed. They operate a land grab on my land. The fact that this land is not defined as a nation state does not mean it is not a land grab. To put it much too starkly: they are humans and I am Earthbound. The big question is: why are the Europeans not doing anything? What does Europe stand for?

UB: Let me just disagree with you. If 'humans' against 'Earthbounds' is the new friend-foe-distinction, doesn't this imply bridging national, ethnic and religious differences? Therefore it is not the old nation-state friend-foe distinction but a radical 'cosmopolitical' transformation of it. All the discussion about global warming up till now has been whether it is really happening and if it is, what can we do to try to stop or contain or solve it? What no one has seen is that focussing on solutions blinds you to the fact that the whole debate about global warming has already changed the world. In other words, the anticipation of catastrophe is a huge transformative power. Let me give you an idea what I mean by this. Scientists working on global warming and rising sea levels are drawing new maps of the world where the key lines are not traditional boundaries between nation-states and social classes but rather elevation above sea – a whole different way of conceptualizing the world and the chances of survival within it. Global cities are emerging as key actors of climate politics locally and globally constructing risk communities of shared fate. New forms of South-South collaborations have been built – even if the Copenhagen Conference and the following ones have been a disappointment. This way new power structures empowering the poor countries giving them a public voice have merged even when the politicians and governments play the old power games.

BL: Yes, we agree on this, there is no problem. I was not talking about nation states either. You are right to stress the point but it is not because new boundaries are being drawn that conflicts decrease. Quite the opposite. We realize that invocation of nature has no pacifying effect. That's what I mean.

SS: Let's move to a different subject. You both are engaged in creating a new language to understand the runaway world we are living in. You both defined old terms in a 'new way'. Bruno Latour is speaking of 'Gaia', Ulrich Beck is speaking about 'cosmopolitization'. What do you mean by that?

BL: Maybe we have to clarify cosmopolitics first. We have two different definitions. One is the dissolution of our boundaries, i.e. beyond the national. This is what Ulrich means by 'cosmopolitization'. The other one (which is my version) is politics of cosmos which is about re-boundaries but boundaries through very different delineations than the nation-state and here the two concepts overlap. But it is not a dissolution of boundaries. On the contrary it has to redraw pretty solid boundaries between those who say, for instance, 'climate change' and those who say 'global warming'. I don't want to be inside the same boundaries as somebody who says climate change. They are my enemies. We are living in a different world and I have to resist their land grab. Even though they might be French countrymen, we are from a different land, from a different cosmos. We have different attachments. We have a different definition of earth we have a different definition of past and future. That is what cosmopolitics mean to me. It is not a dissolution of boundaries but a recomposition of boundaries. Well, I guess we don't disagree that much here. But the consequences are different in terms of public discourse because insisting on the dissolution of boundaries is what I would call 'post'. But insisting in the re-grounding of boundaries is what I call 'pre'.

UB: Risikogesellschaft is exactly about that. It is not about the dissolution of boundaries but about looking at the cosmos anew. I think the difference between how we conceptualize and analyse the metamorphoses of the world is how much we consider dualisms (and their dissolution and re-creation) other than the society-nature dualism important. In my view, the acknowledgement that we need to think beyond the nature-society dualism, which is so poignant in your work, is absolutely crucial. But it is the starting point. Because there is an enrichment of nature/society we have actually to rethink the national/international, us/them, friend/foe dualisms as well. This is what I mean by 'Verwandlung', the transformation of politics as a fact which is already happening in the horizon of anticipated catastrophes named global warming. It can be seen in the transition from the threats emanating from the logic of war to those arising from the logic of global risk. In the case of war, what we find is rearmament, resistance to enemies or their subjugation; in the case of risk we see all kinds of conflicts but also cross-

border cooperation to avert catastrophe – in other words, what I refer to ‘cosmopolitization’. Thus life and survival within the horizon of global risk follow a logic that is diametrically opposed to war. In this situation it is rational to overcome the us/them opposition and to acknowledge the other as a partner and democratic fellow player, instead of treating him as an enemy to be destroyed. The logic of risk directs its gaze at the explosion of plurality in the world, which the friend-foe gaze denies. Weltrisikogesellschaft opens up a moral space that might (though by no means necessarily will) give birth to a civil culture of responsibility that transcends frontiers and antagonisms. The two sides of global risk are, on the one hand, the traumatic experience of the vulnerability of all and, on the other, the resulting responsibility for all, including one’s own survival. Looked in this way, reminding ourselves of the ways in which the human race jeopardizes its own existence has connotations of an egotistical realism: whoever speaks of mankind is not cheating (like Proudhon put it), but wishes to save the others in order to save her- or himself. In Weltrisikogesellschaft cooperation between foes is not about self-sacrifice, but about self-interest, self-survival. It is a kind of egoistic altruism or altruistic egoism.

BL: I am not sure, if we disagree. Again, climate conflicts are very productive ways of redefining all those notions of power, inequality, and justice. Because as I have said before, it is not a renaturalization – climate is not part of nature, it is part of Gaia. And Gaia is not nature. It is a set of agencies which are doing all sorts of things. Gaia is not even unified. It is not a cybernetic system, even in the views of Lovelock it is not. The notion of nature – invented for lots of political reason in the 17th century was never very good at capturing the Earth. I mean the nature of naturalism was something that was never very good for registering natural history, evolution, biology, climatology and so on. It is good for a dead planet and dead bodies but it is not very good for what we have to live through. So, there is an older revenge so to speak of Naturphilosophie, a revenge of Humboldt so to say in many ways. I think we should not even think of speaking about overcoming dualisms. That is still so 20th century! I mean if you take the case of the new definition of our epoch as that of the Anthropocene, it is not about dualism. It is the realization that we are enmeshed, as you said, in a set of agencies going in all sorts of directions.

You and I have different obsessions. You are obsessed with overcoming the limits of the nation-state. And I am obsessed with something completely

different because I have always studied international scientists. For them national boundaries are there but not so relevant because they have always thought across legal boundaries. So I am less obsessed with overcoming boundaries of the nation-state as you are. But I am obsessed with another thing: How do we achieve geopolitics of sciences that takes the prefix “geo” more seriously, that is, as gaia-politics. You mentioned the coastline conflict before. It is a good case because coast lines are totally different types of boundaries compared to the old legal and “natural” boundaries of the old geopolitics. They depend on entirely different agencies, and here I follow you here entirely.

And again, climate science is a good case because it has redefined the so called universal as well as the so called national. The funny thing is that the IPCC is attacked by climate deniers in the name of a Science, capital S from nowhere and they are also attacked because they bring in too many national “interests” or are even considered as an international “lobby” — the lobby of model builders for instance. Actually the very system of the IPCC is actually connecting in a very interesting way national boundaries because every nation says something about the report, so there is a national dimension in it and yet it is a sort of world parliament of climate in a way without, for that reason being universal and speaking in the name of a “science from nowhere”. What is interesting is that any topic you take – forest, sea levels, fisheries, agriculture, transport, cities – totally new institutions have been invented that have reorganized all the levels and all the connections between natures and societies (what I have called for this reason “parliaments of things”). And yet we still have, I agree with you, a totally immobile definition of geopolitics as if we were at the time of the Congress of Vienna with Talleyrand and Metternich...

UB: I agree, Bruno, global warming creates fundamental conflicts. What we are only beginning to suspect is how, in the midst of peace, global risks can turn into cataclysms that overwhelm whole countries and even continents, robbing countless masses of their livelihoods. Quite without the use of tanks, helicopters and bombers, merely through the power of global risk alone, an achievement such as the European Union together with all its institutions can be brought to the verge of collapse. But why are lines of conflict which transcend national boundaries still shaped by the logic of war? In the case of global risk the opposite logic applies. What counts here is not differentiating and arming oneself, not barricading oneself behind images of the enemy and high-tech weapons systems, but cross-border

communication and cooperation, the inclusion of national, religious etc., others, the willingness to meet other people halfway – these are the things that now become mandatory parts of the historical rationality of action. It is no exaggeration to say that overcoming images of the enemy in times of global warming becomes the national *raison d'état*.

BL: I disagree on “overcoming”. Having enemies does not mean we cannot meet them half way, that means a peace settlement has been decided *after* a conflict has been waged. Having enemies means that there are not irrational, that’s all. Gaia-politics needs to be able to set different cosmos against one another. What is to be overcome, rather, is the idea that it is humans against other humans. No, its cosmos against cosmos. In an unexpected and unprecedented twist on Hobbes’s most famous concept, we have entered instead a completely new *state of nature*, this time written with a small ‘s’ and a small ‘n.’ That is, *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. The problem is that this state of nature is not situated, as with Hobbes, in the mythical past *before* the social compact: it is *coming at us*; it is *our present*. Worse: if we are not inventive enough, it might be *our future* as well. It is just that we realize that we cannot obtain a civilized collective without composing it bit by bit, agency by agency. Thus searching for a new Leviathan that would come to cope with Gaia.

SS: What is actually the essence of your dispute?

UB: What does global warming induce – a war of worlds: humans against Earthbounds or a cosmopolitan imperative: cooperate or die? The essence of our dispute then seems to be: Mars versus Venus – well, for you Mars, for me Venus is coming out ahead. But this is too simple. I argue, we are at a moment where nations or cities or geopolitical regions (like the European Union, China, the US, South America etc.) have a choice between: (a) a cosmopolitan regime so that global warming but also the financial crises, and the risk of totalitarian digital control can be countered or (b) a return to Hobbesian war of all against all in which military might replace the rule of law. But in a specific sense those alternatives – that is the point – do not exclude each other. In fact, in order to solve global problems (a) is a necessary condition, but recognition that this will be structured by (b) a new kind of deep cosmopolitical conflict, in which actors would be best off assessing were to take sides in the conflict rather than hoping for consensus, is a

necessity too. But only looking at the extremes might be a mistake, Bruno. We should not miss the entire 'middle kingdom' of climate politics: sure, there are radicals on all sides, but, for instance, most European elites agree that global warming is happening – but nothing happens. The question on the background of climate/common sense then is: who are the new enemies and the new friends?

BL: So in the end we don't disagree that much: a) the size of conflicts have to be stressed against the popular idea that nature or the natural sciences in the hands of experts would have the soothing power of bringing consensus; b) that nation states are wholly inadequate to handle the geo-politics that is requested as we have witnessed after twenty years of failure to agree on a politics of climate radical enough; c) that the new fault lines are no longer drawn between humans with conflicting interests, but with cosmos (cosmoi rather) associating different definition of the land, soil, ground, habitat – and that is what we could both call cosmopolitics; d) that Europe has a unique position in those "war of the worlds" because it has triggered, hundred years ago, a world war and that it is now, in a totally reversed position, trying to avoid other collectives, other leagues — America, Russia, China, India, Brazil— to wage a new terrifying world war.