

A beautiful and horrible summer

Bruno Latour

Le Monde 4 sept 2016 (translated Stephen Muecke)

It's a beautiful summer, no two ways about it; everyone is tanned. But something is gnawing at me. I am not able to say, "I had a wonderful summer," because they are telling me it has been the hottest on record.

It's a new kind of problem, wouldn't you say? My father and my grandfather could retire, grow old gracefully and die in peace. The summers of their childhood were the same as those of their grandchildren. The climate would fluctuate, of course, but not keeping company with one generation growing old, that is, mine, the baby-boomer generation.

I cannot take my retirement, grow old and die, leaving my grandchildren the legacy of an August that can be singled out from the history of my generation. This damn climate is hanging onto my coat-tails. It insists on following me like a dog you meet while out walking that takes to you for no reason.

A new coupling

"Go away! Nick off! Leave me alone! Go home to your own master!" The stupid dog will not give up. And it is not just a dog, but a whole herd of animals, each one bigger than the next, that have chosen me as master, in charge of things...

What can we make of this new coupling of the months of my personal history with the months of the history of the Earth-System (the technical term for that horrible beast that has taken a liking to us)? It all looks like human history and geological history were locked into each other. What does it now mean to call oneself human now that I can no longer die in peace with the assurance that the planet can remain forever indifferent to my meagre life? What can be done if the fine month of August of human history becomes the worst August of climactic history—until the next?

The German philosopher Gunther Anders (1902-1992) put it in a similar way: what does it mean to be human under the threat of nuclear holocaust? And yet nuclear war remained an anthropocentric affair. Mass extermination would happen, but in the old-fashioned way, among humans, the Earth-System not being implicated. Once the nuclear winter was over there were always going to be Augusts, hot or rainy, indifferent to our history.

The risk of being laughed at

And it was all virtual. But with these months stuck behind us, each one hotter than the last, the event has already taken place. The Earth system is locked in, irremediably. We can no longer make the planet indifferent to our actions. We can dismantle nuclear armaments (which is

not likely, the menace remains intact, even if it is virtual), but the two histories can no longer be disengaged.

Posing such questions, as Anders found out soon enough, invites ridicule. I would sound like a bogey-man if I asked my friends returning from holidays, “Did you have a horrible August?” I can certainly feel the awkwardness when I look over my shoulder to see if the herd of animals is still following us, dogging our steps, filling up the available space. People carry on regardless, like the Dupondts in the *Blue Lotus*, “Don’t look back just yet, I have a feeling we are being followed.”

It’s not the end of the world yet, is it? No, but it is starting to look like it if we are not capable of doing something about this coupling that our carelessness has brought about. How will you manage to say to your grandchildren, “See this nice August of 2016, all in red on the climatologists’ map? Well, that’s me, my generation did that!” If your grandchildren faces turn red, it is unlikely it will be with pleasure. It will be out of shame—for you...

Now things get a little complicated, because shame is a nasty passion. It is sterile. Can I regain hope by turning around to the huge beast that has adopted me? Yes, but only on the condition of learning to live with it as a totally odd couple going through life together, the climate and us. It is a queer monster, and I acknowledge the danger of looking it in the face. It can petrify you.

The desire to land

I remember at school we used to laugh at Montesquieu and his theory of the climate. He wanted the laws of the land to be so well-regulated that they dovetailed with geographic particularities and social customs. The spirit of the Law, in his eyes, was the link between climate and peoples. Well, that has a different resonance today.

If we laughed at him it was because we imagined politics to be so abstract that it could be applied everywhere and to everyone, perfectly indifferent to times and places. As if politics only concerned humans! If we despair about politics, it is perhaps exactly because its wheels turn disengaged, trying to connect with places that exist nowhere, which are called utopias for good reason.

I have the feeling that each time politics finds a new site, a critical zone, a territory, a *terroir*, it is boosted once again with passions and solutions. Those seeking refuge behind a safe frontier are accused of populism. Perhaps they are desperately looking for a firmer ground than that of utopia. I think that behind the critique of globalisation, there lies a kind of huge yearning to land.

Don’t leap to the conclusion that these are reactionaries who are “refusing the call of the open sea”. The open sea, we shall know it well, it is the hot breath of the Climate beast on the back of our neck. The open sea, well, congratulations, you are in it. There is not a single spot on the planet that is not dependent on what is happening elsewhere. So the call to own a bit of ground no longer has anything to do with retreating to frontiers. It is

about something else: an extension of Montesquieu, the search for the spirit of planetary laws.

Yes, this is new: we live on Earth, and so politics can begin again. So now I can ask my question one more time, “Have you had a beautiful horrible summer?”

[trans. S. Muecke, Monday, September 5, 2016]