

What's the body of the Body Politic? —Sovereignty, Identity, Ecology—

A San Giorgio Dialog at the invitation of the Cini Foundation
12th-15th of September 2017
(Bruno Latour & Simon Schaffer)



Wenceslaus Hollar, *The Belly and the Members* (1668)

Position of the problem

Do you remember the Aesopian Fable of the Belly and the Members, or the letter of Paul to the Corinthians about the Body and the Church, of *The Fable of the Bees* by Mandeville, or the somewhat dangerous association of pests and foreigners, or the more recent attempts to think of the Earth as a giant organism? None of these stories stops shifting metaphors between one domain —that of the body— and another —that of politics. The result has been the creation of that most important concept of Western philosophy, *corpus politicum*, the Body Politic. One interesting aspect of this most famous topic is that every domain borrows from each other the certainty associated with the other's authority, so that political science ends up borrowing from biology what biologists borrow from political theory! This constant commerce of concepts and metaphors, unfortunately, has never guaranteed the quality of what has been ceaselessly transported from one domain to another. The result is that we remain deprived of a coherent definition of collective bodies. Hence the idea of attempting to re-open the question in this Dialog by bringing the different domains together and examine what each has really to offer to the others that is genuinely proper to the phenomena it studies.

A new political situation

Just at the moment when the idea of sovereignty has become obsolete through the intensification of globalization, planetary changes and migrations, the new political mood is to withdraw behind the borders that Nation States invented in previous centuries. In spite of the vast transformations that the new climatic regime requires, it is today a politics of identity, nationalism and borders that seems the most attractive to voters. Everywhere the choice is either to prolong the extension of globalization or else return to the older ideas of strictly enforced sovereignty. There seems to be no other alternative.

In this Dialog we wish to open the way for another political orientation, one that relies neither on the idea of globalization nor on those of sovereignty, identity and individuality. Our assumption is that most of the ideas about the Body Politic come from ideas about the biological body, *and vice versa*. There has always been a two-way stream of exchanges between biology, law, religion and social theory to the point that it is very difficult when people talk about ecosystems, identity, genetics, organism or globalization to decide if they speak about human or non-human entities. Biologists don't seem to worry that they import social theory to talk about organs and tissues, sociologists don't hesitate to use a legal conception coming from Church history to define the individual, while economists happily mobilize what they take as a "naturalistic" notion of competition to render the optimum calculable, while organization theorists borrow offhandedly the DNA metaphor of cell organization, and so on. *Metaphors travel freely, transporting the same unexamined perplexities from field to field.*

This confusion has become even more complete, at the time of the Anthropocene, when politics has to be expanded to the former objects of nature. The solution is certainly not to add to the confusion by treating humans and non-humans as if they were the same, either by treating all of them as being equally "social", or all of them as equally "natural". When selfish genes look suspiciously like Wall Street executives, when the planet Earth is treated as a goddess, when organism themselves are treated like corporations, when anthills are treated as macro-organisms, cells as if they were cybernetic machines, States as if they had natural boundaries, it is extremely difficult to specify the differences between collective forms. It is at this point that we wish to intervene. The newly emerging Body Politic requires a careful examination of what is meant by body, organism, individual, identity and collective.

Position of the problem

Immense advances have been made in the study of collective behavior at many different scales — markets, cells, social animals, nation states, corporate bodies, human interactions as well as ecosystems. And yet a difficulty remains that scholars and scientists tend simultaneously to solve practically and to dismiss intellectually: the notion of an individual agent that *then* enters into some sort of *relations* within a *collective* is not a notion that seems to work. First, because every time a study is carefully made, the individual does not seem to have clear-cut *boundaries*; and second, because the collective of which it is supposed to be a part does not seem to be really

more than its components. The difficulty is constantly papered over by vague concepts such as organism, emerging properties, systems, totalities.

This conundrum is well known. Everyone recognizes that the two notions of individual and collectives are fraught and then tries to find some way to avoid the difficulty. This creates a strange situation for ethics, law and politics as well as for science: the most important features of our orientation in the world — who are we as individuals? what is the shape of the larger ensemble inside which we are supposed to live? what are the boundaries that define our collective existence? — are based on a series of concepts *wholly unfit to capture the nature of individuality and of collective*.

Strangely enough, even though scholars, scientists, educators and moralists all recognize the fragility of this model, there has been no systematic way to find an alternative model to redefine part/whole relations and rework the odd notion of organism that is then used as a blueprint for our ideas of sovereignty. Social theory and biology seem to go their own ways even though they keep exchanging concepts and metaphors without examining carefully what is thus exchanged.

We think that there is an opportunity to advance the search for a critical examination of such commerce by using *to our benefit* the very fact that it travels freely through so many domains at once. The problem of defining organism and identity has exactly *the same form* if you study cell development, the behavior of ant colony, of a baboon group, the growth of geopolitical coalitions, corporate bodies, ecosystems, markets or human interactions in societies. Naturally, the empirical material differs, but *not the concepts* in which such material is then formatted. It is this very problem that could offer the best opportunity to solve it.

Procedure to advance the question

Our idea is very simple: to compare and exchange the solutions each of us in our own discipline had to develop to renew our definition of collectives and individuals. Since the same conundrum is impeding all our various disciplines, let's render the *common problem* visible by assembling around one table — the marvelous and by now mythical table of San Giorgio refectory!— several specialists who have, each in their own way, courageously raised the same question against the paradigms of their own disciplines. We will not solve the problem in three or four days; but the two-way commerce between biology, politics and social theory will be at least clear to all.

Although we will speak about totally different entities — bacteria, cells, ants, corporations, clans or bands —, we will force ourselves to be uniquely attentive to the origin, nature, quality, impact, undertone of the metaphors and concepts we borrow from other disciplines when we frame the problem of what is a collective in our own disciplines. It is risky, but every one of us has had to develop some aspect of such an enterprise against the powerful paradigms we had to dispute. It would be heartening to feel that we are not isolated, but much more important, we might come up with a much better way to phrase the problem. Political ecology is clearly and urgently paralyzed by the inability to develop a clear conception of what could compose a Body Politic.

Whom to assemble?

How best can we proceed to create for four days such a spirit of collaboration among scholars keen on sharing an alternative version of the part/whole relation?

Since biology and animal behavior is a major hub of the import and export of these part/whole metaphors, it is essential to hear the lessons learned by some of the biologists who have been fighting against the usual dogma:

Deborah Gordon's work on ant colonies offers an excellent ground to start drawing an alternative model.¹

So is **Shirley Strum's** work on baboon social and ecological behavior. Both had to fight for decades with an alternative social theory that could not account for their data.²

Scott Gilbert has more than anyone else accumulated examples in evolutionary biology to show the limits of the notion of bounded individuals.³

Since many conceptual resources are offered by the philosophy of Leibniz — inventor of the key notion of monad — and the philosophy of Whitehead — who criticized the very notion of individual entity —, **Didier Debaise** would be indispensable to help us navigate the comparative method.⁴

Sociology, especially social theory, is just as much as biology a hub for the import-export of part-whole metaphors. In fact, it is fair to say that the very notion of “society” has been influential on any definition of the individual and sovereignty used in other fields. A good topos for exploring this question is the Tarde-Durkheim debate that has been studied at length. The resurrection by **Bruno Latour** of the notion of monads proposed by Tarde and the operationalizing of this notion thanks to digital tools could be an important resource to show that it is possible to visualize collection and composition of relations in a radically different way.⁵

Very few sociologists have worked in a line that was not immediately pre-empted by the traditional part/whole paradigm. Among those ethnomethodology stands out. **Mike Lynch** is certainly the most erudite and able to bring to our conversation the view of this alternative line of work in social theory.⁶

¹ Gordon, Deborah M. *Ant Encounters: Interaction Networks and Colony Behavior* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. Bruno Latour has entered in a regular conversation with Deborah.

² Shirley Strum has come to one San Giorgio meeting and is already in conversation with Deborah. It will also be her 70th birthday!

³ Gilbert, Scott F., and David Epel. *Ecological Developmental Biology. The Environmental Regulation of Development, Health and Evolution*. Sunderland, Mass: Sinauer Associates, Inc, 2015. (and "We have never been individuals...")

⁴ Debaise is the best philosopher on those questions, a student of Stengers and he has himself initiated such a meeting in Berlin at the Mac Planck a few years back. Debaise, Didier. *L'appât des possibles. Reprise de Whitehead*. Dijon: Presses du Réel, 2015. Debaise, Didier, and Isabelle Stengers. *Gestes spéculatifs*. Dijon: Presses du Réel, 2015.

⁵ It is the core discovery of Actor Network Theory. Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. And more directly on monads: Latour, Bruno, et al. "'The Whole is Always Smaller Than Its Parts' A Digital Test of Gabriel Tarde's Monads" *British Journal of Sociology* 63.4 (2012): 591-615.

⁶ He has not worked on animal behavior but is one of the most eminent practitioners of science studies and a very important ethnomethodologist: Lynch, Michael, and Wes Sharrock, eds. *Ethnomethodology*, Vol. 3. *Sage Benchmarks in Social Research Methods*. London: Sage, 2011. Lynch, Mike, and Steve Woolgar, eds. *Representation in Scientific Practice*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990.

Most of the concepts to formulate whatever empirical case one encounters, are coming from the legal field. It is thus crucial to introduce into the conversation a legal scholar who is informed by the social theory question. None is better fit than **Kyle McGee** who is a legal practitioner as well as a remarkable scholar of ANT.⁷

The constant shifts from natural to social sciences to politics of the part/whole relation and the immense difficulty of following the natural/social hybrid, has been especially worked out by historians of science. No one can better provide an overview of those import/export hubs, than **Simon Schaffer**.⁸

To establish a connection between social history, theology and law, we will need the help of **Bruno Karsenti**, by far the best philosopher of social science whose work on political theology will be exactly on target (and he also happens to be the best specialist on Durkheim and on Tarde).⁹

It is in geopolitics that the question we are considering has the most practical impact: even though everyone disputes the idea of bounded nation-states, the field of international relations remains mostly inside the part/whole paradigm, largely for lack of a plausible alternative (especially because of the lack of mapping techniques).

Timothy Mitchell is the obvious candidate and would be a formidable addition.¹⁰

More than anyone **Isabelle Stengers** has explored the questions of this meeting because she has ceaselessly tried to link philosophy of nature with political interests,¹¹ pursuing the weight of political formats within science as well as the role science has always played in what she describes as cosmopolitics.¹² She is also one of the first to have attempted to seize the scale of Gaia.

It is naturally around the biggest figure —that of the Globe— that the limits of the part/whole paradigm are more visible. The “global” and “the Earth” are immediately circumscribed inside an idea of the “whole” which has no plausibility and borrow its features from theology and politics even though it seems that we are dealing with “nature”. The figure of “Gaia” is here especially interesting to study and criticize. None have studied this question more effectively than **Timothy Lenton**¹³.

⁷ McGee, K. "The Fragile Force of Law: Mediation, Stratification, and Law's Material Life." *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2012). McGee, Kyle *The Normativity of Networks*. London: Routledge, 2013. -, and his work on Deleuze as well as on Latour.

⁸ A frequent participant and organizer of San Giorgio Dialogues and an amazing master of ceremony for highly improbable associations of people !

⁹ He has already be in one of the dialogs Karsenti, Bruno. *Politique de l'esprit : Auguste Comte et la naissance de la science sociale* Paris: Hermann, 2006. Karsenti, Bruno. *Moïse et l'idée de peuple. La vérité historique selon Freud*. Paris: Cerf, 2012.

¹⁰ Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy. Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York: Verso, 2011.

¹¹ Since the very early work Stengers, Isabelle, and Judith Schlanger. *Les Concepts Scientifiques. Invention Et Pouvoir*. Paris: La Découverte, 1989 all the way to Stengers, Isabelle. In *Catastrophic Times Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (Translated by Andrew Goffey). Open Humanities Press, 2015.

¹² Stengers, Isabelle. *Cosmopolitics I* (Translated by Robert Bononno). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 and the most important treaty: *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* (Translated by Michael Chase). Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹³ A very recent presentation for a general public in the excellent OUP collection Lenton, Timothy. *Earth System Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Finally, we will have with **David Western** the best specialist of the political and ecological imbroglios created by wild life and more generally by the continuously criticized notion of ecosystems.¹⁴

How to proceed

The Dialog will take place during the second week of September 2017 (exact days to be settled later). A letter of invitation should be sent to each proposed participant; the letter will set out the planned procedure of the Dialog; the letter will indicate who else has been invited and not yet confirmed; it will indicate that when invitees are indeed confirmed the participants will then be informed.

The custom of the Foundation (a custom dear to its often overworked guests!) is that there is *no need* to write a paper before the workshop. This custom is especially important for this year's topic since the idea is for each of us to examine, as far as we can, the validity of the concepts used by the other participants! So we suggest the following:

- First, we each submit **one or two of our already written papers** that deal with the chosen topic. The selection of speakers has been made precisely for the reason that we have written such pieces. This set of papers (in a Dropbox of some sort) will help each other being *acquainted* with each other work and provide **a shared corpus of reference**.

- Then *before* the end of August 2017, using this reference corpus, we will be asked to write **a short piece (between 1000 and 1500 words: no more than a long abstract)** addressing the ways in which we propose to engage with each other's choice of concepts and metaphors;

- during* the seminar **we will each have 30mn** to address the issue of the meeting. Each of us talk on one, two or several of the other participants' use of concepts and metaphors. We then have **one hour to discuss together** after each intervention;

- After the* meeting, we will be asked to write **a short text (around 3000 words)** which expands the original abstract and uses what we learnt from the interations and discussion;

- since every exchange is recorded and transcribed, *in addition* to these texts we will also publish **carefully edited selections of the discussion** to make a coherent whole which will be published either as a *book* or as a *special issue* of a journal.

We think that is the best way to proceed to profit at the maximum of the discussions on the site, and to make sure that each discipline intersects with the others.

Needless to say that this miraculous place generates miracles in body and spirit.

¹⁴ Western, David. *In the Dust of Kilimandjaro* . New York: Shearwater/Island Press, 1997.