**Post-Truths, Common Worlds, and Critical Politics: Critiquing Bruno Latour's Renewed Critique of Critique**

Eva Haifa Giraud and Sarah-Nicole Aghassi-Isfahani

**Abstract:** The emergence of so-called post-truth politics saw popular calls to return to the ‘facts’ clash with humanities and social science work which maintains a commitment to situated knowledge: as crystallised by prominent attacks upon gender studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist science and technology studies. This paper intervenes in debates that arose in response to these developments, with a focus on the promising “third path” proposed in Bruno Latour’s recent work. The paper argues that although Latour’s examination of the relationship between populism and environmental politics is critically important, the renewed “critique of critique” that accompanies his call to reclaim common worlds is dangerous. In particular, this re-articulated critique runs the risk of consecrating the marginalization of precisely the perspectives that are most under attack in the contemporary political moment.

**Keywords:** post-truth, Bruno Latour, populism, critique, feminist science studies

In the wake of broader questions about how to overcome the (alleged) destabilization of truth within political life, a number of commentators have questioned the position of critical thought. What has emerged is effectively a re-articulation of the 1990s science wars, where critique in general, work from a poststructuralist tradition in particular, and – more specifically still – theoretical perspectives concerned with gender and racial inequality, have been seen as contributing to a relativization of facts and expert knowledge.[[1]](#endnote-1) Particular concern has been raised about the place of Science and Technology Studies (STS), a field central to the previous iteration of the science wars, which has been dedicated to critically interrogating the construction of knowledge. As a result, a range of articles and think-pieces have emerged, with the aim of defending contemporary STS against allegations that it has contributed to an erosion of public faith in facts (e.g. Collins and Evans 2017; Jasanoff and Simmet 2017; Lynch 2017; Sismondo 2017).

The backdrop to these events is the series of cultural developments frequently referred to as “post-truth,” wherein “the relationship between emotion and politics has become front and center” (Boler and Davis 2018: 78) and “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Living Dictionaries 2017). As indicated by the OED’s definition of post-truth (which was much-cited after becoming their 2016 word of the year), despite widespread wariness of the value of the label, it became a defining catchword of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign and subsequently the current presidency. Thus, though a number of texts have hinted at the broader history of the term or pointed out that the propagation of disinformation by elite political groups is far from novel (Stenmark, Fuller and Zackariasson 2018; Fuller 2019), post-truth is nonetheless commonly perceived as a contemporary phenomenon associated with “accusations of recurrent lies and false promises in the Trump and Brexit campaigns” (Lynch 2017: 594).

Although “post-truth” has become less of a buzzword over recent months, debates about the role of facts in public life have persisted and the consequences of these developments for critical thought remain significant. Some particularly provocative issues have emerged from a small – but increasingly prominent – body of work, which has argued that public faith in expert knowledge can only be regained not through reasserting the authority of facts but by rediscovering ways of knowing-in-common (Raman 2017; Jasanoff and Simmet 2017; Marres 2018). Sujatha Raman, for instance, troubles the assumption it has ever been possible to translate truth-claims straight-forwardly into policy, as this assumption ignores the complexity of knowledge and the necessary role of value-judgement in determining how any given piece of information is acted upon. As she succinctly puts it:

…fact-checking only works within a narrow framework in which the issue at stake is what science can tell us about *this* or *that* hazardous chemical substance, and what this means for regulation. It does not address long-standing challenges such as the capacity to assess chemical mixtures in the real world, where the threshold of exposure to hazard should be set, on whom the epistemic burden of evidence of hazard should be placed, or assumptions about behaviour embedded in regulatory standards which are difficult to meet in practice. (2017: NP)

What is needed, for Raman, is to recognize the way that social and cultural values necessarily shape the implementation of knowledge. Post-truth, in other words, is not a problem that can be dealt with by reasserting the primacy of “facts” over “emotion,” instead it is important to develop “connective truths” (Raman, 2017) that are grounded in “a more inclusive culture of deliberation” (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017: 763) and create space to ask “whose definition of risk or benefit should frame the public discourse” (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017: 761). Noortje Marres foregrounds the importance of moving away from reductive narratives about the need to reclaim facts, when pointing to the limitations of “technofixes” currently being proposed by social media companies in order to parse fact from fiction. As Marres points out, these strategies could prove dangerous in consecrating “stereotypical oppositions between those who are trained to be discerning and those who are not” in a manner that “maps onto a polarity that defines today’s political force fields, namely the opposition between educated progressives and, on balance, less educated supporters of populist and nationalist causes” (2018: 430).

These thinkers are not alone in working to move beyond bifurcations between facts and value, truth and emotion, and here we focus on a figure who has taken this line of argument in a very particular direction: Bruno Latour. Latour, similarly, argues that addressing the problem of post-truth is less “a matter of learning how to repair cognitive deficiencies” (on the part of those who believe disinformation) but of instead rediscovering “how to live in the same world” (2018: 25). His arguments, however, depart from aforementioned work that has called for a renewed emphasis on connective truths. Latour’s work instead needs to be situated as part of a longer series of arguments *against* other theoretical perspectives – not just within STS but cultural theory more broadly – which have offered critical appraisals of knowledge-production.

In light of Latour’s longstanding critique of critique we argue here that, while his push to find alternative orientations for politics is important, other aspects of his arguments for reclaiming common worlds can perpetuate broader attacks on marginalized perspectives. More specifically, this renewed critique of critique is in danger of inadvertently undermining scholarship with feminist, anti-racist, post- and de-colonial commitments, despite aiming to do the opposite. Building on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2011, 2016) sympathetic, but critical, engagement with Latour, and concerns we have previously raised specifically in relation to 2018’s *Down to Earth* (e.g. Giraud 2019), this paper elucidates the danger of Latour’s emphasis on reclaiming a common world that can sustain facts if this emphasis reinforces the exclusion of critical perspectives that are necessary in offering divergent visions of this world. The stakes of this argument have been heightened by recent political developments: Given that racial, gender, and sexual inequalities are precisely what are being reinscribed by the populist right, it is important that contemporary theoretical work does not inadvertently compound these inequalities.

**From post-truth to common worlds**

For Latour the types of debate commonly associated with post-truth are misguided in being overly preoccupied with the symptoms of much broader developments, developments that are not just political but climatic. His stance has gained visibility not just through his recent academic work in this area (such as *Down to Earth*) but within the popular media. The *LA Review of Books* for instance states that “no one has thought more compellingly than Latour about the problem of how to retool the authority of the sciences to fight the new Information Wars, or about how to move people to passionate engagement with ecological questions” (Delbourgo 2018). The by-line of a *New York Times Magazine* profile of Latour, similarly, labels him the “post-truth philosopher” who “spent decades deconstructing the ways that scientists claim their authority” but could help them “regain that authority today” (Kofman 2018).

Latour’s work, therefore, is explicitly situated in relation to concerns (as articulated by popular science commentators) about the place of theoretical and social scientific work that has emphasised the situatedness of knowledge. As Latour (Latour in Kofman 2018) himself puts it:

I think we were so happy to develop all this critique because we were so *sure* of the authority of science … [a]nd that the authority of science would be shared because there was a common world … Now we have people who no longer share the idea that there is a common world. And that of course changes everything.

The subsequent thumbnail sketch of Latour’s work, which is offered by the *NYT Magazine*, fleshes out this apparent shift in his conceptual emphasis. Simply put, Latour is described as moving away from an examination of how facts are constructed, to offering sociological explanations for why they are not taken up and how they can regain authority. What is hinted at here is thus a gradual departure from commitments of texts such as *Science in Action* (1987) with its focus on how techniques such as graphs and statistics work to “black-box” research in order to lend it authority; or actor-network theory’s redistribution of agency (e.g. Latour, 2005) wherein the properties even of entities that seem objective – from microbes (1993) to speed bumps (1994) – are product of co-constitutive relations between the social and the technical.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of how Latour’s recent work has been framed, however, is an apparent epistemological move away from *We Have Never Been Modern*’s (1993) unpicking of Enlightenment narratives of rationality. His recent work is presented as departing from this form of critique, instead charting how the rise of populism is bound up with a crisis in Enlightenment progress, with the aim of offering tools for *negotiating* this crisis. As Latour suggests: “There is no longer a shared horizon” from which to orient political decision-making (2018: 32) and an alternative horizon now needs to be “mapped out anew” in order to reclaim ways of knowing-in-common (2018: 33).

The trajectory presented by these recent depictions of Latour’s work is, despite appearances, not novel or reflective of a shift in his approach in response to *this* political moment. Latour’s much-cited 2004 essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” for instance, offers a similar sense that he is reconciling with the scientific community and renouncing particular forms of critique. Like his more recent sentiments, this earlier essay seems to offer a reflexive criticism of Latour’s own position in a context where the relativization of knowledge has been mobilized by climate change sceptics. The approach Latour offers as an alternative is again framed as a middle ground: a constructivism that respects the work involved in rendering facts durable and aims to “add” rather than “subtract” reality to these concerns (Latour 2004: 232).

While Latour presents the essay as a *departure* from his existing approach, it is important to recognize that it is more of a *reframing*. In “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” the approach he ultimately advocates is an ongoing emphasis on the messy “web of associations” (Latour 2004: 237) that create particular realities in order “to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence” (2004: 246). This approach, in other words, holds much in common with Latour’s previous work, with its emphasis on describing the relations between human and nonhuman actors that constitute a given phenomenon. Yet, while – despite superficial appearances – Latour is not recuperating an empiricism that reinstates expert authority and undeniable facts, his approach is nonetheless framed in a way that is palatable for those who do have these commitments.

This re-articulation of Latour’s approach in order to create the impression of a middle ground is not necessarily problematic in itself. Indeed his arguments promise a means of moving beyond (often circular) debates between work from a poststructuralist lineage and those advocating a return to the “facts.” The issue is that Latour’s re-framing (and impression of compromise) relies on setting his stance against other forms of cultural theory. As with Latour’s previous work, his recent approach is explicitly set against so-called “critical” thought, relying on a: “fundamental distinction between an additive and enriching acritical position and a subtractive, desiccating negative position” (Noys 2010: 90). This opposition leads to him constructing a picture of theoretical work that has become engaged in “critical barbarity” (Latour 2004: 242), mired in language games, and debunks for the sake of debunking. It is by drawing this contrast with “other” forms of theoretical criticism that Latour is able to present his own approach as more conciliatory with those committed to reinstating the authority of expert knowledge through aiming: “no longer […] to debunk but to protect and to care” for facts (2004: 232).

Making this argument does not only, as Noys (2010) argues, homogenize critique. As Puig de la Bellacasa suggests in a more sympathetic series of criticisms, Latour’s emphasis on “adding” rather than “subtracting” reality can also: “become arguments to moderate a critical standpoint. The kind of standpoint that tends to produce divergences and oppositional knowledges based on attachments to par­ticular visions” (2011: 91). For Puig de la Bellacasa, crucially, the call for moderation that is central to Latour’s work “also exhibits mistrust regarding minoritarian and radical ways of politicizing things that tend to focus on exposing rela­tions of power and exclusion” (2011: 91). Revisiting these criticisms of Latour’s “critique of critique” is important when considering his more recent attempts to craft a moderate third path.

Unlike “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” *Down to Earth* has as its target not a particular knowledge politics within cultural theory, but contemporary politics more broadly (2018: 2), and it is this that has given the text such currency. The broadened scope and appeal of the seemingly moderate path offered by Latour, however, is what makes the ongoing, deliberate distancing of “critique” in his call to reclaim common worlds so concerning, in light of the way that this stance could inadvertently segue with popular commentaries that have – under the umbrella of postmodernism – criticised commitments to situated knowledges.

**The stakes of a renewed critique of critique**

The first tension that emerges from Latour’s recent work is simply an extension of longstanding criticisms of Latour that have been articulated by sympathetic commentators such as Puig de la Bellacasa, which have been given new resonance. The issue, as she puts it, is that the additive approach to describing issues put forward by Latour can become: “a tool to oppose descriptions and explanatory strategies that support minoritarian critical stand­points and visions on power dynamics in technoscience. Those that become identified, for instance, to an ‘eulogy of margins’ obsessed with the power of ‘the centre’ or, worst, associated to humanistic technophobia” (2011: 91). This form of marginalization is explicit, for example in the context of Latour’s figure of the “angry environmental activist,” which he uses to illustrate the sort of subtractive critique he condemns.

As Puig de la Bellacasa elucidates, instead of being critical of polluting technologies (for instance) Latour asserts that it is important to *care* about them and better understand the networks of entangled concerns, values, materials, and all manner of other actors that bring these technologies into being. For Latour: “it is not a technology that is unethical if it fails or becomes a monster, but rather to stop caring about it, to abandon it as Dr Frankenstein abandoned his creation … we must take care of things in order to remain responsible for their becomings” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011: 90). A corollary of this argument, Puig de la Bellacasa (2011: 90) points out, is Latour’s suggestion that it is equally important to resist condemning those who produce damaging technologies, as: “if we really want to affect their use we must also engage with the concerns that animate those who support them.” Though broadly sympathetic to Latour’s additive approach, Puig de la Bellacasa (2011: 91) is nonetheless intensely critical of the way it excludes “minoritarian and radical ways of politicizing things that tend to focus on exposing rela­tions of power and exclusion.” Indeed, it is in order to redress the foreclosure of critical voices in Latour’s approach that she develops her own influential re-working of “matters of concern” – “matters of care” – that pay attention to “those who can be harmed by an assemblage but whose voices are less valued” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011: 192).

Puig de la Bellacasa’s arguments gain heightened significance in relation to *Down to Earth*’s renewed critique of critique. Here too, perspectives that attend to other forms of inequality are in danger of being foreclosed due to the particular knowledge politics Latour is advocating. Again the project he advocates is a descriptive one, but this time one that calls for further attention to the environmental and geological conditions that enable particular (human and non-human) entities to survive on a planet that is undergoing a period of environmental crisis. For Latour (2018: 96) it is this project of, firstly, identifying these conditions for survival and, secondly, cultivating these conditions, which can offer a new horizon to orient contemporary politics, “pursuing an exhaustive search for everything that makes subsistence possible.” To undertake this descriptive task, however, it is necessary to move beyond not both existing theoretical categories of analysis, such as concern with political economy, but existing political categories such as the “affect-laden terms” of “‘Right’ and ‘Left,’ ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’” (Latour 2018: 49) in order to find ways of working together.

What is notable in the contemporary political context is this framing of critique as a destructive distraction from the “real” issues has been echoed in popular science commentaries. In such contexts, however, it is not the angry environmentalist, but the well-worn trope of the angry feminist or indeed angry feminist of colour (see Ahmed 2017), who is a pervasive target of criticism. Here feminist and postcolonial scholarship, which has sought to identify structural bias within particular institutional or socio-technical arrangements, has *itself* been framed as a product of bias that distorts or undermines seemingly self-evident facts. The most well-known example of this framing of critical thought, the aforementioned Sokal Squared attack on humanities and social science research, for instance, specifically targeted what the hoaxers describe as “grievance studies”: an umbrella term for “(feminist) gender studies, masculinities studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, psychoanalysis, critical race theory, critical whiteness theory, fat studies, sociology, and educational philosophy” that (allegedly) reflect “radically skeptical and standpoint epistemologies rooted in postmodernism, feminist and critical race epistemology” (Lindsay, Boghossian and Pluckrose 2018). Though Sokal Squared might be the most prominent instance of such a framing, similar tendencies exist in broader popular commentaries about post-truth. Kenan Malik’s (2017) more nuanced discussion of post-truth, for instance, directly targets what he describes as the “epistemic relativism” created by “postmodernism,” arguing that it speaks to:

…a hostility to the Enlightenment project of creating a universal outlook from fragmented experiences, of giving coherence to our observations of the social and natural world. Since no human possesses a ‘God’s eye’ view, postmodernists argue, so every human can speak only from within a particular perspective, a perspective informed by specific experience, culture and identity. ‘Truth’ is necessarily local, and specific to particular communities or cultures.

To illustrate this point, he cites feminist scholar Sandra Harding, particularly her argument that: “All knowledge systems, including those of modern science, are local ones.” Criticism of Harding then underpins the argument that: “The acceptance of such views has gone hand-in-hand with the rise of identity politics.” The use of this particular example could in part be explained by Malik’s disciplinary background and existing familiarity with STS, but the performative significance of holding up Harding is nonetheless significant; again, it is not just critique in general but specific strands of critique (namely those associated with feminist and postcolonial commitments) that rendered especially culpable for eroding faith in the facts.

It is this political backdrop that is so worrying in light of Latour framing his present stance as an apology, which recompenses for his prior contribution to destabilizing expert knowledge. The headlines and commentaries of *Down to Earth* referred to above speak to this point (for further discussion see Giraud 2019): the text is presented as departing from the previous “corrosive critique” of knowledge production that characterized the science wars, with Latour recast as a “veteran” shifting from the wrong to the right side in this battle by now “coming to [science’s] defense” (de Vrieze 2017). This framing effectively legitimizes the attacks on marginal standpoints that are occurring more widely in popular commentaries by positioning particular strands of work – specifically those with feminist and anti-racist commitments – as indeed being responsible for the relativistic excesses they are being accused of.

Additional stakes of a narrative where Latour is (self-)represented as shifting allegiances can be elucidated on turning to the warnings Angela Willey has levelled at new materialist work for making a parallel argument about its own conceptual commitments. New materialism, Willey argues (2016: 995), often self-narrativizes the origins of the field by telling a story of a gradual evolution: from theoretical work that is simply deconstructive and critical of scientific knowledge, to work that is reconciliatory, interdisciplinary, and actively builds on the insights of the natural sciences in developing its own conceptual stance. This story, however, relies on reasserting lineages with feminist figures who lend themselves more readily to a reconciliatory position (such as Karen Barad and later Donna Haraway) while cutting away others whose postcolonial feminist position fits less neatly with contemporary new materialist aspirations (notably Sandra Harding). The issue with this form of disciplinary storytelling, Willey asserts (2016: 995), is that it ultimately re-centres a particular way of knowing and results in a “strange reinvigoration of the nature/culture binary in the framing of ‘the material’ as an object best accessed through (scientific) disciplinary apparatuses”.

To reiterate the problem: As Willey and others have pointed out, this positioning of new materialisms as somehow overcoming the critical excesses of poststructuralism, by reconciling with recent work in the natural sciences, is a pervasive narrative. The danger of this narrative is that it valorises particular ways of knowing as being productive of “truth” in a manner that makes it difficult to open space to ask the questions about *how* these knowledges are implemented (as called for by Raman), or create space to include divergent perspectives when exploring these questions (in line with Puig de la Bellacasa), let alone recognize that alternative ways of knowing might exist (as central to Harding’s standpoint epistemology). While all of these concerns are applicable to Latour’s recent work, it is this last point about the foreclosure of divergent epistemologies that deserves further attention in relation to the structure of Latour’s arguments in *Down to Earth*, where his focus on the earth itself – what he terms “the Terrestrial” – as a new political orientation, is in danger of rendering critical perspectives as not just irrelevant but out of touch with reality.

**Centring the terrestrial, foreclosing other worlds**

The problems identified by Willey are given particular resonance in light of criticisms of the “material turn” that have been articulated by Indigenous feminist thinkers. Kim TallBear (2017: 190), for instance, argues that in new materialist thought it is often asserted that: “to really grasp the nature of and potential solutions for the world’s most critical problems, including environmental degradation, climate change, poverty, systemic violence, and warfare, nonhumans in all their myriad forms must be given their due.” In presenting the human/non-human binary as a universal that needs to be challenged, however, this body of work obscures their embeddedness in particular settler-colonialist ways of understanding the world (see also Sundberg 2014). TallBear (2017: 199) thus suggests “new materialists may take the intellectual intervention that grounds the vital-materialist creed as something new in the world. But the fundamental insights are not new for everyone.” Zoe Todd (2016: 8) underlines this point in relation to Latour specifically: “here we were celebrating and worshipping a European thinker for ‘discovering,’ or newly articulating by drawing on a European intellectual heritage, what many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told you for millennia: *the climate is a common organizing force*!”

The dangers that are pointed to here – that calls to reject bifurcations between nature and culture inadvertently re-centralize Anglo-European traditions of thought, even as they claim to do the opposite – are compounded by Latour’s argument that it is the material world itself that has given rise to epistemic upheaval in this particular moment (a point reinscribed by his still more recent call for a physical sociology).[[2]](#endnote-2) In *Down to Earth* Latour (2018: 44) argues that environmental crises play a constitutive role in the contemporary political situation, with Trumpism marking the culmination of a politics that emerged in the 1980s wherein the actions of the wealthy are oriented not toward preserving the conditions that can sustain planetary life in general, but giving up on this possibility by retreating into enclaves (see Giraud 2019). In order to signify both the urgency of the situation and need to move beyond existing critical frameworks, Latour (2018: 44) names the contemporary political situation as “unprecedented”. More specifically, he labels that *vacuity* of this situation as unprecedented because Trumpism has constructed a new political horizon, one “of people who no longer belong to an earth that would react to their actions” (2018: 34-5). He describes this horizon as a “New Climatic Regime” that is marked by a “*headlong rush* to maximum profit” by continuing to expand industry, exploit ecological resources, and contribute to carbon emissions (2018: 35).

What masks the attendant inequalities associated with this regime is that this push to relentlessly expand global networks of capital is coupled with calls to halt the global movement of people in a simultaneous “*headlong rush backward* of an entire people toward the return of national and ethnic categories” (Latour 2018: 35). Here xenophobia that has been seen as a hallmark of Trumpism (Kellner 2016) is portrayed as the product of material conditions that have been fostered not by economic relations but by the Earth itself. As a result, these relations cannot be analysed through the lens of political economy and conventional ideology critique is inadequate. Due to framing racialized anti-migration rhetoric as masking economic conditions, Latour (2018: 64) argues that such approaches miss the ecological constitution of the crisis (hence his suggestion that historical materialists need to “try a little harder” to engage with materiality itself). Instead he argues that the rush to profit relies on masking the material *climatic* conditions that are unleashed by profit-making activities; capitalist expansion in the contemporary moment is “based on the systematic denial that climate change exists” (2018: 34). This insistence on the geological as the driving force behind Trumpism is why: “It is quite useless to become outraged on the pretext that Trump voters ‘don’t believe in facts.’ They are not stupid: it is because the overall geopolitical situation has to be denied that indifference to the facts becomes so essential” (2018: 37). Post-truth, from this perspective, is not about simple disinformation or even symptom of a broader decline in faith in expert knowledge, but “the end of a politics oriented around an identifiable goal. Trumpian politics is not ‘post-truth,’ it is post-politics – that is, literally, a politics *with no object*, since it rejects the world that it claims to inhabit” (2018: 38).

Latour’s concern, then, is with how the Terrestrial itself has been denied in contemporary politics. His call to come “down to earth” is both a diagnosis of this problem and an argument that renewed engagement with the Terrestrial offers an orientation for politics that can navigate environmental and political crises alike. Claims that the contemporary environmental crises are “unprecedented,” however, carry a fraught politics and need to be set against broader debates about the labelling of the contemporary moment as the sixth great extinction. As Kathryn Yusoff (2018: xiii) argues in the opening pages of *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*:

The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence. The Anthropocene as a politically infused geology and scientific/popular discourse is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of its modernity and freedom.

What is brought to the fore in Yusoff’s arguments is the question “unprecedented for whom?” This concern has been echoed in prominent debates about the naming of the current moment as the Anthropocene, with alternative labels – capitalocene (Moore 2017), plantationocene (Tsing 2015) – put forward to reflect the way that it is not people in general who are responsible, but particular ways of living. This is not just a debate over nomenclature but holds significance both because of the uneven distribution of responsibility for contemporary environmental crisis and the uneven distribution of vulnerability to this crisis – where colonial histories have created legacies of environmental toxicity, which are in turn imbricated in contemporary inequalities – what Yusoff (2018) points to as the colour line of the Anthropocene. In suggesting that the climate is the organizing force in *this* moment, which necessitates political differences being put aside, Latour’s appeals to the Terrestrial are in danger not only of overshadowing these colonial histories but make it difficult to attend to their ongoing legacies.

**Conclusion**

The often fractious debates surrounding post truth have recently broadened into wider concern about the politics of critical thought. In popular and academic commentaries diverse strands of critique have been homogenised, classified as epistemic relativism, and held responsible for destabilizing public faith in facts and expert knowledge. This framing has, in turn, been criticised by those who argue that – far from being culpable for post truth – the strands of thought that are routinely condemned (particularly feminist and postcolonial perspectives) offer valuable tools for negotiating the problem. In light of the sometimes circular – or at least antagonistic – dynamics of these debates, Latour’s recent work seems to offer a promising third path: framing the issue as a more fundamental denial of the materiality of the Terrestrial, which needs to be redressed in order to craft not only a shared political vocabulary but new ways of sharing the Earth itself.

In foregrounding continuities between this recent stance and Latour’s previous critique of critique, however, we have pointed to particular tensions associated with his approach. Although Latour offers an important intervention in elucidating populism’s entanglement with environmental degradation, it is vital – to reiterate Puig de la Bellacasa (2011: 91) – to recognize that: “To promote care in our world we cannot throw out critical standpoints with the bathwater of corrosive critique.” This argument is not just an epistemological claim about how the inclusion of diverse perspectives can enrich understanding of a given phenomenon, but an ethical argument for the importance of engaging with perspectives of those who might be harmed by the phenomenon in question.

While racial and gender inequalities are not wholly neglected by Latour, they *are* framed as the consequences of the New Climatic Regime he identifies rather than constitutive of it. Thus although he positions his arguments as holding potential to open space for a multitude of voices that have been foreclosed by calls to modernize, in rooting appeals to reclaim a common world in a particular conception of the Terrestrial he is in danger of undercutting these potentials. If the Earth itself is framed as necessitating a move beyond critique, voices that seek to draw attention to ongoing inequalities run the risk of being portrayed as a “distorting lens” (as Sara Ahmed puts it in relation accusations levelled at her own critique of appeals to pure ontology; 2017: 156-7). More, concern with ongoing racial inequalities and xenophobia run the risk of being positioned as epiphenomenon of broader shifts in climate, which need to be moved past in the project of developing new horizons. In a context where perspective cast as the most “critical” are also precisely those who are most vulnerable to populism’s nationalist “rush backwards,” it is vital to ensure that a critique of critique does not naturalize its own exclusions by presenting this approach as the necessary response to provocations offered by the Earth itself.

**References:**

Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Boler, Megan and Davis, Elizabeth. 2018. “The Affective Politics of the “Post-Truth” Era: Feeling rules and networked subjectivity.” *Emotion, Space and Society*, 27: 75-85.

Collins, Harry, Evans, Robert and Weinel, Martin. 2017. “STS as Science or Politics?” *Social Studies of Science* 47(4): 580-586.

Delbourgo, James. 2018. “No More Easyjet: On Bruno Latour’s ‘Où Atterrir.” *LA Review of Books*, 6th September. Available from: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/no-more-easyjet-on-bruno-latours-ou-atterrir/#

Dennett, Daniel. 2017. Interview with Carol Cadwalladr. “Daniel Dennett: I begrudge every hour I spend worrying about politics.” *The Observer*, Sunday 12th February.

Fitzgerald, Des. 2017. “The Biopolitics of Post-Truth”. *Discover Society* 49. Available from: <https://discoversociety.org/2017/10/04/focus-the-biopolitics-of-post-truth/> Retrieved 7th November 2017.

Fuller, Steve. 2019. *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*. London: Anthem Press.

Giraud, Eva. 2019. “The Planetary is Political: Review of Stacy Alaimo’s Exposed and Bruno Latour’s Down to Earth.” *Biosocieties*, 14(3). [In press]

Giraud, Eva. 2017. “Post-Truth is a Feminist Issue.” *Discover Society*, 4th October. Available from: https://discoversociety.org/2017/10/04/post-truth-is-a-feminist-issue/

Goldacre, Ben. 2016. Twitter Status, available from: <https://twitter.com/bengoldacre/status/807013606416121858?lang=en-gb> Retrieved 7th November 2017.

Jasanoff, Sheila and Simett, Hilton R. 2017. “No Funeral Bells: Public reason in a ‘post-truth’ age”. *Social Studies of Science* 47(5): 751-770.

Kafka, Alexander C. 2018. “‘Sokal Squared: Is huge publishing hoax ‘hilarious and delightful’ or an ugly example of dishonesty and bad faith’.” Chronicle of Higher Education. October 3rd. Available from: https://www.chronicle.com/article/Sokal-Squared-Is-Huge/244714

Kellner, Douglas. 2016. *American Nightmare: Donald Trump, media spectacle, and authoritarian populism*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishing.

Kofman, Ava. 2018. “Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defence of Science.” *New York Times Magazine*, October 25th. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html

Latour, Bruno. 2018. *Down to Earth*. London: Polity.

Latour, Bruno. 2017. Interview by Jop de Vrieze. “Bruno Latour, Veteran of the Science Wars, has a New Mission.” *Science*. Tuesday 10th October. Available from: <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/10/latour-qa> Retrieved 7th November 2017.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern.” *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225-248.

Latour, Bruno. 1994. “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy.” *Common Knowledge*, 3(2): 29-64.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *The Pasteurization of France*. Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*. Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Lindsay, James A., Boghossian, Peter and Pluckrose, Helen. 2018. “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship.” *Areo*, 2nd October. Available from: <https://areomagazine.com/2018/10/02/academic-grievance-studies-and-the-corruption-of-scholarship/> Retrieved 21st June 2019.

Lynch, Michael. 2017. “STS, Symmetry and Post-Truth.” *Social Studies of Science* 47(4): 593-599.

Malik, Kenan. 2016. “Not Post-Truth as Too Many ‘Truths’.” *Pandaemonium*. Available from: <https://kenanmalik.wordpress.com/2017/02/05/not-post-truth-as-too-many-truths/> Retrieved 7th November 2017.

Marres, Noortje. 2018. “Why We Can't Have Our Facts Back.” *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, 4: 423-443.

Moore, Jason W. 2017. “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3): 594-630.

Noys, Benjamin. 2010. *Persistence of the Negative: A critique of contemporary continental theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Oxford Living Dictionaries. 2017. “Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year Is…” Oxford Living Dictionaries. Available: https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16 Retrieved 5th June 2017.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 2016. *Matters of Care*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. 2011. “Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling neglected things.” *Social Studies of Science*, 41(1): 85-106.

Raman, Sujatha. 2017. “Making Space for Connective Truths.” *Discover Society,* 49. Available from: <https://discoversociety.org/2017/10/04/making-space-for-connective-truths/> Retrieved 7th November 2017.

Sismondo, Sergio. 2017. “Post-Truth”. *Social Studies of Science*. 47(1): 3-6.

Stenmark, Mikael, Fuller, Steven and Zackariasson, Ulf. 2018. *Relativism & Post-Truth in Contemporary Society*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sundberg, J. 2014. “Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies.” *Cultural Geographies*, 21(1): 33-47.

Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Willey, A. 2016. “A World of Materialisms: Postcolonial feminist science studies and the new natural.” *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 41(6): 991-1014.

Yusoff, Kathryn. 2018. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

1. For critical summaries of this phenomenon, see the October 2017 special edition of *Discover Society* edited by Des Fitzgerald, which gathers together short commentaries about post-truth and critical thought, available from: <https://discoversociety.org/category/ds49/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Though Latour’s calls for a physical sociology are longstanding, he has renewed them in his recent work, as elucidated on his *Modes of Existence* website, see: <http://modesofexistence.org/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)