

# PROTECTIVE MEASURES

An Exercise

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*Bruno Latour*

Introduced and translated by Stephen Muecke

## *Translator's Introduction*

In late March 2020 Bruno Latour asked me to translate this piece, at the same time as letting me know that he was in hospital with COVID-19. This was distressing news, but he pulled through and hasn't paused to reflect on the experience in writing, as far as I know, keeping busy with the exhibition and book, *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth*, which was published later in the year with MIT Press.

This article, for which the literal translation of the title is "What Protective Measures Can You Think of So We Don't Go Back to the Precrisis Production Model?" (Latour 2020d), has been quite successful; twelve other translations listed on Latour's site is a good indication.<sup>1</sup> Such success may be attributable to the practical way that it responds to the acute COVID-19 crisis, which it rightly points out is but a symptom of the more chronic global heating catastrophe. The article proposes a practical task, "taking advantage of the forced suspension of most activities to take stock of those we would like to see discontinued and those, on the contrary, that we would like to see developed." This kind of exercise derives from the "ledgers of complaints" that Latour proposed in his 2018 *Down to Earth* (2018: 90–99) book and afterward developed with the consortium *Où Atterrir*.

Latour's pragmatism is itself a product of what I think is the most vital and interesting school of thought currently in

the French-speaking world, one I would like to call the new French pragmatism. Latour has many intellectual companions and friends who may or may not agree to be identified with such a label, but many publish with the French series of books with the witty name of *Les empêcheurs de penser en rond* (in Paris's La Découverte publishing house), a series of books that will "stop readers from thinking in circles." The title is attributed to Isabelle Stengers, Latour's Belgian colleague and friend, often cited in his work. In Brussels, Stengers, Viviane Despret, and Didier Debaise work together reviving and rereading American pragmatism, especially the work of Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, and William James, picking up on earlier interest that Gilles Deleuze had for the pragmatists.

What does it mean to have a pragmatic line of thought, and, in particular, what does a pragmatic approach to planet-sized problems mean? It means both being "radically empirical" (James) and "irreductionist" (Latour), that is, thought will not allow itself to stay within the circle of one discipline or one culture, allowing these perspectives to open onto ontological and disciplinary pluralism: sociology or psychology will never solve (and has never solved) a problem on its own, and thought that is happily confined to one culture is probably "turning in circles." A new postcolonial "diplomacy" is called for, another concept Latour promotes for negotiation in that middle space between entrenched positions. This pragmatism is dedicated to close observation of situations from the midst of things (avoiding explanations that go from cause to effect in a linear telos) and avoiding larger transcendent categories, like "society." Description comes first, without shortcuts to explanation; only then might theory be

brought in as the description is elaborated, and only then if you need it. Description as an ever-expanding strategy for researching and writing is replicated in the gathering of allies willing to carry out this practical task that forces thought on them.

I tried it myself, with a COVID-19-related Zoom meeting group that was convened by anthropologist Michael Taussig. The participants were happy to carry out the exercise and kept referring to it in subsequent meetings. This did not mean at all that they saw themselves as becoming Latourian, far from it. The whole point of a practical task is that it avoids the potential reductiveness and divisiveness of "isms." Or as Wendy Brown (2020) puts it in a recent interview, "The occasion to rethink our order, to ask what it means to be more preoccupied with the health of the economy than the survival of the planet and all forms of life on it" has to be "articulated and pursued as an active organizing principle." She doesn't spell out what that principle is, but it could well be what is expressed by her epithet: *active organizing*. This is one of the things Latour's piece does: it gives a wide range of publics the occasion to think and to act with others.

### ***Protective Measures***

Perhaps it is a little inappropriate to project oneself into the postcrisis, just when the health workers are, as they say, "on the front line," while millions of people lose their jobs and while many grieving families are not even able to bury their dead. And yet, right now we have to fight so that once the crisis has passed and the economy recovers, we don't have a return to the former climatic regime against which we were battling, until now somewhat in vain. In actuality, the health crisis is not embedded in a crisis (because they are always transitory) but in an ongoing,

irreversible ecological mutation. If we are lucky enough to “come out of” the first, there is no chance we will “come out of” the second. The two situations are not on the same scale, but it is very enlightening to articulate the one with the other. In any case, it would be a pity not to use the health crisis to discover other means of entering the ecological mutation without a blindfold on.

The first lesson the coronavirus has taught us is also the most astounding: we have actually proven that it is possible, in a few weeks, to put an economic system on hold everywhere in the world and at the same time, a system that we were told it was impossible to slow down or redirect. To every ecologist’s argument about changing our ways of life, there was always the opposing argument about the irreversible force of the “train of progress” that nothing could derail “because of globalization,” they would say. And yet it is precisely its globalized character that makes this infamous development so fragile, so likely to do the opposite and come to a screeching halt.

It is not just the multinationals, or the trade partnerships, or the internet, or the tour operators that globalize the planet. Every entity on this same planet has its own unique way of hooking up, the one with the other, plus all the other elements that compose the collective at a given moment. This is true for the carbon dioxide that is warming the atmosphere globally by spreading through the air, and for migrating birds carrying new kinds of flu; but it is also true for—we are learning at our peril once again—the coronavirus, which has the capacity to link all humans by passing through our apparently inoffensive droplets as we cough. Germs are super globalizers: when it is a matter of resocializing billions of people, the germs make short work of it!

Hence the incredible discovery: already in the world economic system there was, hidden from us all, a bright red alarm with a nice big stainless-steel handle that the heads of state could pull, one after the other, to instantly stop the “train of progress” with all the brakes squealing. If in January the demand to make a ninety-degree turn to land on the Earth<sup>2</sup> seemed like a gentle illusion, now it becomes much more realistic: every car driver knows that to have any chance of making a sudden turn of the wheel to get out of trouble (without heading into the landscape), it is better to have slowed down a bit first . . .

Unfortunately, it is not only the ecologists who see, in this sudden pause in the globalized system of production, a great opportunity to move ahead with their program for landing on Earth. There are also the globalizers, who since the middle of the twentieth century invented the idea of escaping our planetary limits. They too see here a great opportunity to break even more radically with the remaining obstacles in the way of their escape from Earth. A wonderful prospect for them: extract themselves from the rest of the welfare state, from the safety net for the poorest, from what remains of regulations against pollution, and, even more cynically, get rid of all these supernumeraries cluttering up the planet.<sup>3</sup>

But let’s not forget the hypothesis that these globalizers are conscious of the ecological mutation, and all their efforts for the past fifty years consist of denying the importance of climate change and also avoiding its consequences by building fortified bastions of privilege, which are necessarily inaccessible to all those who will be left in the lurch. They are not so naive as to believe the great modernist dream of the universal distribution of the “fruits of progress,” but what is new is their willingness

to not even give the impression of believing in it (Latour 2020c). These are the ones proclaiming every day on *Fox News* and who govern all the climate-skeptical states on the planet, from Moscow to Brasilia, and New Delhi to Washington via London.

What makes the current situation so dangerous is not just the dead piling up every day at an increasing rate; it is the universal suspension of an economic system that gives those who want to go much further in the flight away from the planetary world a marvelous occasion to put all the cards on the table. One must not forget that what makes these globalizers so dangerous is that they have to know they have lost, that the denial of ecological mutation cannot go on forever, that there is no chance of reconciling their “development” with the various planetary envelopes in which one way or another the economy has to be inserted. This is what makes them ready to try anything to secure, one last time, the conditions that are going to allow them to last a little bit longer and to shelter them along with their children. This putting on of the brakes, this stopping of the world, this unexpected pause, gives them an opportunity to flee more quickly and farther than they could ever have imagined (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2016). At the moment, they are the revolutionaries.

It is at this point that we have to act. If opportunities are arising for them, the same is true for us. If everything has stopped, and all cards can be put on the table, opportunities can be turned, selected, triaged, rejected forever or, indeed, accelerated forward. Now is the time for the annual taking of stock. When commonsense asks us to start production up again as quickly as possible, we have to shout back, “Absolutely not!” The last

thing to do is repeat the same thing we were doing before.

For example, a Dutch florist was on television the other day, weeping because he had to trash tons of tulips that were ready for shipping. Without customers, he couldn’t airfreight them around the world. Of course, we cannot but feel for him; and it is right he is recompensed. But then the camera tracked back on to the tulips that he was growing without soil under artificial light before sending them off from Schiphol Airport on airfreighters with kerosene raining down, which makes one wonder: Is it really useful to prolong this way of producing and selling these types of flowers?

One thing leads to another, and if we all began on a personal basis to ask such questions on all aspects of our production system, we would become efficient globalization interrupters, just as effective, in our millions, as the infamous coronavirus as it goes about globalizing the planet in its own way. What the virus gets from banal droplets going from one mouth to another through coughing—the halting of the world economy—we can also begin to imagine via our little insignificant gestures put end to end, that is, the halting of the system of production. As we ask these kinds of questions, each of us is engaged in the task of thinking up protective measures, not just against the virus but against every element of the mode of production that we don’t want to see coming back.

So, it is no longer a matter of a system of production picking up again or being curbed, but one of getting away from production as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world (Kazic 2019). More than revolution, this is dissolution, pixel by pixel. Pierre Charbonnier (2020) demonstrated it: after a hundred years of socialism limited just to the redistribution

of the benefits of the economy, it might now be more a matter of inventing a socialism that contests production itself. Injustice is not just about the redistribution of the fruits of progress but also about the very manner in which the planet is made fruitful. This does not mean degrowth or living off love alone or fresh water. It means learning to select each segment of this so-called irreversible system, putting a question mark over each of its supposed indispensable connections, and then testing in more and more detail what is desirable and what has ceased to be so.

Hence the primary importance for using this time of imposed isolation to describe, initially one by one, then as a group, what we are attached to; what we are ready to give up; the chains we are ready to reconstruct and those that, in our behavior, we have decided to interrupt.<sup>4</sup> As for the globalizers, they seem to have a very clear idea what they want to see coming back postcrisis: the same but worse, fossil fuel industries, and giant cruise ships as a bonus. It is up to us to confront them with a counter-inventory. If, in a month or two, millions of humans are capable of learning how to social distance at the blow of a whistle, to space themselves for greater solidarity, to stay home so as not to overload the hospitals, then it is easy to imagine the power of transformation that these new protective measures have against bringing back business as usual or, worse, against another battering from those who want to escape from terrestrial attraction forever.

Because I am always obsessed with wanting to link an argument to practical exercises, I would like to invite readers to try to answer a little auto-descriptive questionnaire. It will be all the more useful if it can relate to actually lived personal experience. It is not a matter of expressing an opinion, but of describing and

researching. Only afterward, if we tabulate the responses and compose the landscape created by their intersections, will we be able to discover some form of political expression—but this time one that is embodied and situated in a real world.

Let's take advantage of the enforced suspension of most activities to set out an inventory of those we would like to see not coming back, and those, on the other hand, that we would like to see develop. Reply first individually, then collectively, to the following questions:

Question 1: What are some suspended activities that you would like to see *not* coming back?

Question 2: Describe why this activity seems to you to be noxious/superfluous/dangerous/incoherent and how its disappearance/putting on hold/substitution might render other activities that you prefer easier/more coherent. (Write a separate paragraph for each of the activities listed under question 1.)

Question 3: What kinds of measures do you advocate so that workers/employees/agents/entrepreneurs, who can no longer continue in the activities that you have eliminated, are able to facilitate the transition to other activities?

Question 4: What are the activities, now suspended, that you hope might develop/begin again, or even be created from scratch?

Question 5: Describe how this activity appears to be positive to you, and how it makes other activities easier/more harmonious/coherent that you prefer and can fight against those that you judge to be inappropriate. (Write a separate paragraph for each of the activities listed under question 4).

Question 6: What kinds of measures do you advocate to help workers/employees/agents/entrepreneurs acquire capacities/means/finances/instruments allowing for

restarting/development/creation of this activity?

Now find a way to compare your description with that of other participants. By tabling and then superimposing the answers, you should start to build up a picture composed of conflicting lines, alliances, controversies, and oppositions.

### Notes

1. This article, “Imaginer les gestes-barrières contre le retour à la production d’avant-crise,” appeared in *Analyse Opinion Critique* (Latour 2020a).
2. See Latour 2018 for his model of terrestrial Earth as a “third attractor,” between the now impossible poles of “traditional life” and globalization.—Trans.
3. See Stoller 2020 on the “frenzied” lobbyists in the United States.
4. This autodescription picks up on the procedure in the new “ledgers of complaints” suggested in Latour 2018 and 2020b.

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