

Thoughts Out of Season

Occasional Reviews and Notes
Of Mutual Interest
Compiled by Tim Froward



Bruno Latour (1947-2022)

Bruno Latour, Philosopher on the Social Basis of Scientific Facts, Dies at 75

He became an unexpected ally of the science establishment in the face of attacks by climate deniers and conspiracy theorists. Bruno Latour, a French philosopher whose once-controversial theories about the social construction of science and the interconnectedness of people, things and ideas have proved prescient in an era of global climate change, conspiracy theories and “alternative facts,” died on Sunday at his home in Paris. He was 75.

Libération, a French newspaper, said he had died of pancreatic cancer.

Dr. Latour was one of the leading philosophers of the postwar era and one of the few known outside the academic world, especially in Europe, where his name was frequently mentioned alongside those of Jürgen Habermas¹ and Slavoj Žižek.² He received the Holberg Prize in 2013 and the Kyoto Prize in 2021, each

¹ Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) A German philosopher and sociologist in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. His work addresses communicative rationality and the public sphere.

² Slavoj Žižek (born 1949) A Slovenian philosopher, cultural theorist and public intellectual. He primarily works on continental philosophy (particularly Hegelianism, psychoanalysis and Marxism) and political theory, as well as film criticism and theology.

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considered the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in the humanities and social sciences.

His 50-year career spanned disparate disciplines like theology, sociology, art and anthropology, in turn influencing fields as far apart as business management and literary theory. But a single thread ran through all of his work: the notion that facts do not exist outside of society, but rather are generated and advanced within dense networks of people, ideas and objects.

Dr. Latour leaped onto the French intellectual scene in 1979 with his book “Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts,” written with the British sociologist Steve Woolgar. The book resulted from two years spent at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego, where they treated groups of scientists to the same sort of ethnographic observation typically reserved for remote villages.

“Whereas we now have fairly detailed knowledge of the myths and circumcision rituals of exotic tribes,” they wrote, “we remain relatively ignorant of the details of equivalent activity among tribes of scientists.”

Scientific facts, they concluded, do not spring fully formed from the skulls of researchers. Rather, they said, they emerge out of the push-and-pull of lengthy laboratory debates and incomplete results, and become established — or don’t — amid particular social and political ecosystems.

Dr. Latour extended that approach in “Les Microbes: Guerre et Paix” (1984), published in English in 1993 as “The Pasteurization of France,” which contributed to an emerging framework called actor-network theory. In it he argued that the microbiologist Louis Pasteur was not successful because his facts about germs and disease were truer than those they superseded, but because they were embedded within stronger networks.

Many people interpreted Dr. Latour’s position as relativist — as asserting that there was no such thing as objective truth. At times his statements came across to some as comical, like his remark in a 1988 essay that the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis because the bacteria was only discovered in 1882.

“Some of the critique was indeed ridiculous,” he said in an interview with Science magazine in 2017. “I certainly was not anti-science, although I must admit it felt good to put scientists down a little. There was some juvenile enthusiasm in my style.”

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Dr. Latour was a prime target during the so-called science wars of the 1990s, which pitted traditional, positivist thinkers against social constructionists like himself. Alan Sokal, a mathematician at New York University and a leading positivist, once dared Dr. Latour to leap from Dr. Sokal's 21st-floor apartment to test whether gravity was real or just a social construct.

Dr. Latour declined, but also insisted that Dr. Sokal and others were missing his point. In fact, he said, he was very much pro-science, and felt that he was doing it a favor by demystifying its means of intellectual production — the better to demonstrate to skeptics the extensive work that goes into it. "I think we were so happy to develop all this critique because we were so sure of the authority of science," Dr. Latour told *The New York Times Magazine* in a profile of him in 2018. "And that the authority of science would be shared because there was a common world."

To the surprise of many of his erstwhile combatants, during the last 20 years, Dr. Latour became an ally and defender of the research establishment in the face of anti-science attacks from corporate and conservative interests.

Beginning with a 2004 article in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, he raised the concern that the critical methods and perspectives that he and other philosophers had applied to truth claims in the 1980s and '90s had been hijacked and perverted by climate change deniers and conspiracy theorists.

He was not apologetic; in fact, he said that he had been prescient, and that the crisis of public faith now undermining science arose precisely because scientists did not heed his advice.

That meant revealing their methods and disagreements but also, in doing so, demonstrating the rigorous procedures they use to reach their conclusions. It was the only way to prove that their claims were stronger than those offered by their anti-science opponents and thus to rebuild faith in science.

"Facts," he told *The Times Magazine*, "remain robust only when they are supported by a common culture, by institutions that can be trusted, by a more or less decent public life, by more or less reliable media."

Bruno Paul Louis Latour was born on June 22, 1947, into a storied winemaking family in Beaune, a French town in central Burgundy. His father, Louis, was the fourth-generation proprietor of *Maison Louis Latour*, where his mother, Yvonne Riboud, also worked.

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His survivors include his wife, Chantal (Drouet) Latour, whom he married in 1970; his daughter, Chloe; his son, Robinson; and three grandchildren.

Along with his seven older siblings, Bruno labored in the vineyards as a child but hated the experience. In any case, an older brother was already being prepared to take over the family business.

Bruno left home at 17 to attend an elite high school in Paris. He was a remarkable student and later received the top score in the French national exam, but he was put off by the intellectual and material snobbery he encountered.

He felt similarly about the environment at the University of Dijon, which he entered in 1966. He looked skeptically upon the heroic positivism he encountered in his science and philosophy classes there but found solace in the books of Friedrich Nietzsche.³

As an alternative to military service, he worked in Ivory Coast in a program similar to the Peace Corps. One of his tasks was to study why French companies hired so few Ivorian workers as executives. The companies said that the applicants weren't smart enough, but Mr. Latour found that they had been taught the wrong things — abstract theories, rather than the practical applications of those theories.

It was his first exposure to the way hidden mechanisms and prejudices undergird seemingly self-evident factual claims, a finding that soon led him to the Salk Institute at the invitation of Roger Guillemin, a French biologist and future Nobel laureate.

Dr. Latour earned his doctorate in theology from the University of Tours in 1975. After a series of short-term appointments at various academic institutions, in 1982 he joined the École Nationale Supérieure des Mines, an elite engineering and science university in Paris, where he remained until 2006. He then taught at Sciences Po, another leading Paris institution, until his retirement in 2017.

Rare among left-wing French intellectuals, he remained a practicing Roman Catholic. While he was often critical of the church's hierarchy, he greatly admired Pope Francis and his 2015 book "Laudato Sí," in which the pope, like Dr. Latour, espoused a new relationship with nature. His later lectures often

³ **Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche** (1844 – 1900) A German philosopher, cultural critic and philologist whose work has exerted a profound influence on modern intellectual history. Among his many writings is a collection of his meditations entitled *Thoughts out of Season*.

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incorporated elements of theater. In one, he stood in front of a projected screen so that his body seemed to disappear into the images and the text appearing on the wall behind him. He curated several art exhibits, including “Reset Modernity,” a 2016 show at a museum in Karlsruhe, Germany, and wrote a number of theatrical pieces, including “Gaia Global Circus,” which was co-directed by his daughter and performed at the Kitchen, a performance space in Manhattan, in 2014.

In his last decade of work, Dr. Latour wrote, among other books, “Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime” (2017) and “Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime” (2018). In them, he argued that the world was going through an epistemic shock as great as the one that revolutionized Western culture between the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution.

“This time, however, it is not the discovery of an infinite universe and the possibility of expanding the resources for prosperity and development,” he said in a statement on the Kyoto Prize website in 2021. “It is rather the discovery of a limited, fragile, threatened section of the Earth, what geochemists call the ‘critical zone,’ that corresponds to the tiny part that has been modified by living forms over the eons.”

In his acceptance speech for the Kyoto Prize, he discussed the tight interplay between climate change, globalization and the coronavirus pandemic, and the way that the rapid pace of epidemiological research about Covid and vaccines played out messily in real time.

“Science,” he said, “is no longer the view from nowhere.”⁴

⁴ Risen, Clay (Oct 13, 2022 Bruno Latour, Philosopher on the Social Basis of Scientific Facts, Dies at 75, *New York Times Company, Kindle Edition* © All Rights Reserved, Obituaries. This obituary is quoted in its entirety.