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

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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] 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. 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).

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 undermining scholarship with feminist, anti-racist, post- and de-colonial commitments. Building on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2011, 2016) sympathetic, but critical, engagement with Latour's previous work, this paper elucidates the danger of Latour's specific 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.

This argument is approached in three parts. Firstly we outline existing debates that have emerged in the wake of post-truth, drawing on an example of an online disinformation campaign that elucidates these tensions. We then, secondly, discuss how Latour's recent work is framed (by Latour himself and others) as a productive middle ground, which offers a path through existing debates. The paper culminates by elucidating two particular problems with Latour's approach: the political implications of his critique of critique in the contemporary moment, and the way that any negative consequences of this critique are treated as inevitable and unavoidable. When the Earth itself necessitates existing strands of critical thought to be swept aside, any concerns about this move are rendered not only undesirable but out of touch with material reality.

Post truth and "epistemic relativism"

In September 2016 a disinformation campaign against Hillary Clinton grew to prominence, which circulated rumours about the presidential candidate's health that were difficult to dispel, even after releasing medical information that should have debunked them. Though an evocative case in itself, this example is also informative for mapping out key points of tension between thinkers who are committed to particular traditions of critical thought and those who see critique as itself constituting the problem.

In the weeks before the presidential election a series of memes emerged about Clinton after she left the 9/11 memorial service at Ground Zero early. A video captured Clinton's aides helping her into a car as she appeared to stumble, with a screenshot of this moment then circulating accompanied by speculation about Clinton's health. The Clinton campaign responded rapidly, disclosing that she was suffering from "walking pneumonia" and emphasising the comparative mildness of the condition (Fox, 2016). Attempts to dispel

rumours about Clinton's health, however, did not prevent the further proliferation of stories that were leveraged in support of a broader narrative portraying her as unable to fulfil the role of president. Prior to the memorial service Trump supporters had already seized on a coughing fit Clinton had experienced during an interview as evidence of her "frailty" and pro-Trump websites cited photos of Clinton tripping upstairs, taken six months before the memorial, as evidence of long-term health problems. These disparate stories eventually converged as a series of memes under the umbrella "Weekend at Hillary's," and #Hillaryshealth started to trend on Twitter. The #Hillaryshealth narrative provided a backdrop to Trump's own criticism of Clinton's strength, articulated in the first presidential debate: "I don't believe she has the stamina, to be president of this country you need tremendous stamina" (in Blake, 2016).

A superficial reading of these memes could interpret them as reflecting a crisis of expertise, bearing out the argument that in order to combat disinformation it is vital to reinstate faith in facts. The circulation and proliferation of rumours about Clinton's health resonates with concern that scientific knowledges are becoming treated as just another discourse amongst many, without any privileged claim upon truth. Fact-checking website Snopes, for instance, worked to contest rumours about Clinton's health by picking apart evidence offered by "armchair" diagnoses and reasserting counter-evidence offered by medical professionals (Snopes, ND). Clinton's team adopted similar tactics, releasing her medical records in order to debunk claims made about her health, which included a list of medications such as Warfarin, Clarinex for allergies, and vitamin B-12, and a thyroid hormone to control her underactive gland (Altman, 2016). Even though most of these medications were routine, rather than shutting down debate the release of this information caused rumours about Clinton's health to intensify, with online stories such as "Hillary Clinton taking 'risky rat poison' medication for blood clotting woes" (Torres, 2016). Appeals to evidence on the part of the Clinton campaign, Snopes, and other fact-checking sites can be contrasted with the tactics adopted by the Trump campaign, which released a doctor's letter (subsequently revealed as a fabrication) that described results from a recent medical examination as "astonishingly excellent," labelled his "strength and physical stamina" as "extraordinary," and concluded by stating that Trump "will be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency" (in Barnes, 2018).

#Hillaryshealth thus appears to fit neatly with narratives that have been propagated by a number of popular science commentators, wherein the difficulty of dispelling disinformation

by appealing to factual evidence speaks to the culmination of issues that came to light during the 1990s science wars, with "epistemic relativism" or "postmodernism" argued to have laid the groundwork for public suspicion of facts (cf Fitzgerald, 2017). Columnist Ben Goldacre (2016) puts things in especially hyperbolic terms, positing that: "20 years after the Sokal hoax […] the left created the post truth virus whose apocalypse we inhabit."[2] A similar line of argument is taken by a think-piece by Daniel Dennett: "I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts. You'd have people going around saying: 'Well, you're part of that crowd who still believe in facts'" (Dennett, 2017). Kenan Malik offers a more nuanced analysis, but nonetheless argues that:

> …sections of academia and of the left have in recent decades helped create a culture in which relativised views of facts and knowledge seem untroubling, and hence made it easier for the reactionary right not just to re-appropriate but also to promote reactionary ideas. It is also that, having spent decades promoting relativism and the politics of identity, the left is in no position to challenge the identitarian right. (Malik, 2016)

As reflected most vividly by the so-called "Sokal Squared" hoax, a heterogeneous body of work has routinely been gathered together by critics under labels such as "postmodernism" or "identity politics" and depicted as contributing to a political environment where all language is seen as relative and appeals to objective facts displaced by a proliferation of individual opinions.[3]

Straight-forward cause and effect narratives that have placed responsibility for post-truth on cultural theory, however, have been criticised, in turn, by work in the social sciences and humanities, which has suggested these narratives paint a somewhat reductive picture of critical and cultural theory; as Uday Jain (2017) puts it:

> In this story, somehow simultaneously, Stuart Hall, Selma James, Silvia Federici, Robin D. G. Kelley, Judith Butler, and scores of other leading Leftists around the world nefariously invented post-modernism to fit the ideological requirements of neoliberalism and thus convinced their many students to stop fighting capital and instead take up fighting endless social media wars about culture and popular representations of identity.

Others have gone further, arguing that this homogenization and dismissal of critique is not only problematic but counter-productive, as critical perspectives provide precisely the tools that are necessary to unpick the "post-truth phenomenon" (Boler and Davis, 2018; Giraud, 2017; Marres, 2018; McPherson, 2015, 2016).[4] Noortje Marres (2018), for example, details how technical solutions, which are currently being devised to counter post-truth, rely on AI technofixes that presume the problem lies in the content of social media posts and assume solutions can be found in software that neatly parses fact from fiction. Aside from prominent work that has foregrounded the lack of neutrality of algorithms themselves (Noble, 2018) – and questioned whether this neutral parsing is even possible – Marres points out that technical solutions misdiagnose the problem by attributing it to misleading content, rather than the socio-technical processes through which his content is circulated and enabled to gain political purchase. In addition, seeing fact-checking itself as the solution:

> …risks reinforcing stereotypical oppositions between those who are trained to be discerning and those who are not, between those capable of knowledge and the others. Worryingly, the distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge roughly 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… (Marres, 2018: 429-30)

The perpetuation of these hierarchies, therefore, is not just strategically dangerous – in playing into the hands of a populist critique of experts as trying to impose their own definitions of issues and neglecting public concerns – but carries a distinct epistemic politics. Ella McPherson's (2015, 2016) work, reveals the sakes of this problem in illustrating pressures upon NGOs to create norms about what constitutes truth, in a desire to ensure the evidence they use is credible. Her work offers a reminder that what is often consecrated in fact-checking activities is not just the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge, but the institutions or individuals who are culturally held up as gatekeepers of this knowledge. The specific danger for human rights organisations is that this can lead to the exclusion of evidence that doesn't conform to particular assumptions about what reliable information "looks like," which has in practice led to the marginalization of perspectives with alternative storytelling traditions and exclusion of particular forms of testimony.[5] As McPherson describes, moreover, the desire to establish particular institutions as reliable gatekeepers has not only benefitted NGOs but mainstream media institutions that are seen as the arbiters of truth (as with the *New York Times*'s famous "Trump bump").[6]

Revisiting #Hillaryshealth underlines these arguments; in this instance, again, appeal to "facts" appears to have been insufficient in combatting disinformation and instead shored up dangerous epistemic hierarchies. In this case it was not just newspapers such as the *New York Times* that benefitted from emergent distinctions between "unreliable" social media and "established" mainstream media. News outlets that actively propagated xenophobic narratives and lent support to populism have, similarly, appealed to "fake news" in order to reinforce their own legitimacy. Right wing UK newspaper *The Daily Mail*, for example, labelled online discussion of Clinton's body double as irrational conspiracy theory on the part of "right wing websites" (Quinn, 2016). This positioning of longstanding news sources as more reliable than unverified online materials depoliticizes the role of particular strands of the mainstream media, obscuring its own role in laying the ground-work for the current political climate, through normalizing xenophobic and misogynist sentiment.

In the case of #Hillaryshealth, for instance, the durability of health rumours in the face of expert knowledge was not just born of a sudden lack of faith in expertise that needs to be redressed. Instead these developments should be positioned in relation to the construction and composition of longstanding gendered discourses and practices of healthcare: where the medicalisation of the menopause (Bell, 1987), is entangled with constructions of feminine frailty (Russell, 2007) that are in turn perpetuated within the mainstream media (Hancock, 2016). Rather than attributing the persistence of disinformation to an epistemic relativism born of "postmodernism," it is more fruitful to reflect on how pre-existing discourses within the mainstream media give rumours an air of plausibility. Approaching #Hillarysheath from this lens illustrates how, in certain contexts, the release of factual information does not dispel norms but compounds existing inequalities. In a terrain already shaped by neoliberal discourses of health as a personal responsibility (or personal failing) the release of medical information supports overarching neoliberal narratives about health as a personal responsibility whilst naturalising the differential gendered burden of this responsibility.

What #Hillaryshealth helps to elucidate, therefore, are some of the key tensions that have characterized debates about the relationship between post-truth and critical thought. On the one hand, certain commentators conflate poststructuralism with epistemic relativism (and see it as somehow culpable for undermining faith in facts and expert knowledge). This line of argument clashes with those who, on the other hand, contend that it is a narrow insistence on reasserting the "facts" can actually obscure and compound the conditions that enable disinformation to flourish and that critical thought provides precisely the tools needed to

understand these conditions. The problem is that due to holding different commitments, coming from different disciplinary contexts, or – in some instances – due to being forced to defend themselves from attack, perspectives on different sides of this debate tend to speak past one another. It is as a means of negotiating these debates that a different approach has gained visibility as a sort of "third path," as epitomised by Latour's argument that a re-assertion of facts is doomed to fail without a shared political horizon. In the rest of this paper we sketch out the response offered by this third path before offering notes of caution about what is in danger of being foreclosed by this approach.

Reclaiming common worlds

For Latour the types of debate outlined above 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 2018's *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 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. (Latour, in Kofman, 2018)

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" (Latour, 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, 2012: 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 (2012) 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 stand-points 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 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" (2011: 90). Though broadly sympathetic to Latour's additive approach, Puig de la Bellacasa 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" (2011: 91). Indeed, it is in order to redress the foreclosure of critical voices in Latour's approach that 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" (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 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" (2018: 96). 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'" (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. Malik's critique, 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. (Malik, 2017)

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 (see also Giraud, ref): 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 currently being accused of elsewhere.

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, 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 (2016: 995). This story, however, relies on reasserting lineages with feminist figures who lend themselves more readily to a reconciliatory position (such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad) 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 argues, 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" (2016: 995).

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 epistemologies 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), 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" (2017: 190). In presenting these binaries as universals that need to be challenged, however, this body of work obscures their embeddedness in particular settler-colonialist ways of understanding the world. As TallBear argues, "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" (2017: 199). Zoe Todd 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*!" (Todd, 2016: 8; emphasis in original).

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).[7] In *Down to Earth* Latour argues that environmental crises play a constitutive role in the contemporary political situation (2018: 44), 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, ref). In order to signify both the urgency of the situation and need to move beyond existing critical framworks, Latour names the contemporary political situation as "unprecedented" (2018: 44). 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" (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 argues that such approaches miss the ecological constitution of the crisis (hence his suggestion that historical materialists need to "try a little harder" (2018: 64) 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 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. (2018: xiii)

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) describes 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 fraught debates surrounding post truth have 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 this stance. Although Latour offers an important intervention in elucidating populism's entanglement with environmental degradation, it is vital – to reiterate Puig de la Bellacasa – to recognize that: "To promote care in our world we cannot throw out critical standpoints with the bathwater of corrosive critique" (2011: 91). 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.

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[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/

[2] As the above exchanges illustrate, just as email lists fanned the flames of the original science wars, these debates have tended to unfold most prominently across blogs and twitter commentaries. Steve Fuller has written extensively about the science wars in relation to these dynamics (e.g. Fuller, 1999); for an indicative sense of the type of email discussion this generated, see: Sci-Tech-Studies Mailing List (1996) "Science Wars". Available from: https://www.math.tohoku.ac.jp/~kuroki/Sokal/vest_mail-1996.html retrieved 29th November, 2017.

[3] The hoax, dubbed "Sokal Squared" involved a group of academics attempting to replicate the Sokal hoax through submitting a series of papers based on falsified data to peer-reviewed journals (see Kafka, 2018). The fields focused on in particular were gender and queer studies, an issue discussed in more depth below.

[4] The phrase "Post-Truth Phenomenon" is taken from a teach-out of the same name at Cambridge University (15th-17th March, 2018), convened by Ella McPherson, Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra and Devika Ranjan.

[5] These observations were made by McPherson during a paper at the British Sociological Association annual conference, 24th-26th April, 2019.

[6] The phrase "Trump bump" refers to the boost in readership for news sources that were perceived as "reliable" in the wake of Trump's presidency.

[7] 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/