

---

## **On Political Ecology Questioning Globalization: A Reflection Starting from Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola**

**Francesco Carpanini\***

---



\*Independent scholar

Carpanini, F. (2017). 13 (2): 25-39

DOI: 10.14456/jssnu.2017.15

Copyright © 2017 by Journal of Social Sciences, Naresuan University: JSSNU

All rights reserved

## Abstract

This paper develops a reflection about political ecology starting from Bruno Latour's and Descola's research. I explore the work of these two present-day scholars in order to delve into their ideas that are useful to rethink political ecology in relation to globalization. I combine and supplement Latour's reflection on the modern, political ecology, and politics of nature, with Descola's work about the ways in which humans are associated with nonhumans. I identify two key concepts, representativeness and composition, that can be employed to cross their research in order to figure out how political ecology can question the supposed universality of the modern idea of nature that is spread by globalization across the world. Being relevant for the growing interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities and social sciences, especially the debate about the idea of Anthropocene, this paper can be a point of reference to mould alternative perspectives on ecological issues by broadening the horizon of political ecology in a way that it can question globalization without indirectly facilitating any kind of isolationism.

**Keywords:** Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, political ecology, globalization, modern naturalism, representativeness, composition, environmental humanities and social sciences

## **I**ntroduction

The understanding of the ecological crisis is usually associated with the so-called natural sciences. If at first glance this association might be obvious, actually it is more and more evident that it is not possible to get a solid grasp of the breadth and depth of the ecological crisis without considering its social and political dimension. This changing of perspective on the ecological problems represents an attempt to broaden the horizon of their possible solutions. In order to approach the impact of the ecological crisis on a global scale and to clarify the alarming aspects of ecological issues, a number of cross-disciplinary terms have been employed and debated.<sup>1</sup>

As I will mention more extensively later, the term "environmental humanities and social sciences" denotes a growing interdisciplinary area of study and research outside the natural sciences. It concerns the environmental problems and our change of vision towards them. On the other hand, this interdisciplinary field pays an increasing attention to the non-human world, animals and non-human beings in general, and ends up rethinking how we figure out the relationships between humans and nonhumans. By opening the space for new debates on the social and political aspects of the ecological crisis, the environmental humanities and social sciences can somehow represent the background of this work in which I approach political ecology through two present-day scholars and clarify the complex dimension of environmental issues as being at the interface between ecological concerns and political ones.

In this paper, the expression “political ecology” primarily represents a way to give shape to alternative perspectives and tools to rethink the ecological crisis. I am not going to trace the history of the expression “political ecology.” Even though it has been employed to denote an academic area of study and research, I take its general connotation characterized by the fact that politics and ecology should no longer be kept apart. In doing so, this paper develops a reflection on what we tend to take for granted about ecological issues. More precisely, by addressing the research of two present-day scholars, Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola, I attempt to combine and supplement their ideas that are relevant for political ecology. My major concern is to shed light on how political ecology can question globalization in relation to ecological issues. My exploration of political ecology and globalization delves into modern naturalism as a global issue through Latour's and Descola's research. Here the meaning of the term globalization turns out to be primarily related to another word that is often employed jointly, that is to say, modernization. As it will be clearer in the next sections, my exploration of political ecology through Latour's and Descola's research results in a problematization of modern naturalism and modernization as complementary aspects of globalization.

This paper focuses on the ways in which Latour's and Descola's research turns out to challenge the supposed universality of modern naturalism and its dichotomous distinction between nature and culture. I do not intend to elucidate and evaluate how the trajectories of their research overlap or diverge. But rather, my exploration of their research horizon turns out to be more selective and constructive than exhaustive and interpretive, because my key concern is to open the space for a larger reflection on the global dimension of modern naturalism and the ecological issues by using their ideas. I identify the concepts of representativeness and composition as useful tools to approach Latour's and Descola's research with reference to the specific topic of this paper. In the last paragraphs I probably end up distancing from the trajectory of their works towards more theoretical concerns related to political ecology and globalization. In doing so, I cross and delve into a set of issues, such as the reason why it is possible to talk about political ecology in relation to globalization, the intersection between globalization, modernization, and modern naturalism, and how we can try to think the ecological issues beyond the modern idea of nature. By structuring an ecopolitical discourse, my paper unfolds a dynamic path of reflection that can be useful for scholars in the humanities and social sciences working at the intersection between ecological and political issues.



## Taking the Environmental Turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences Seriously

Environmental issues are more and more at the centre of works in research fields that do not fall traditionally within the study of natural phenomena. Hence, concepts like nature, ecology, and environment are increasingly employed and rethought by scholars working outside the so-called natural sciences. It seems to be progressively evident that a kind of environmental or ecological turn has taken place in the humanities and social sciences. The attention to environmental issues across different disciplines is not recent. Some fields in the humanities and social sciences have started addressing the environment, or it is better to say “the non-human world,” since the 1960s (Rose et al., 2012: 1). But the present-day scholarship working in this direction is increasingly characterized by a specific concern, as a significant part of the recent debate has been developed around the suggested term Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> Those who advocate the term Anthropocene aim at reframing the understanding of the current geological era in order to acknowledge the contemporary predominant role that is played by the effects of human activity on Earth. Hence Anthropocene should highlight the fact that the current geological era is marked by human activity and its consequences on the environment rather than by non-human factors. As it has been pointed out:

“While the insight that humans have become one of the dominant factors in shaping the globe is not new, the Anthropocene concept is one of the latest and most influential concepts attempting to capture this insight.” (Palsson et al., 2013: 4)

Once recognized the anthropogenic effects as a key feature of the current geological era, understanding ecological issues become an even more complex task involving diverse concepts, knowledge, and practices from different disciplinary fields.

Human activity is marking the environment across the globe in a way that life itself could no longer be possible in the future. The level of pollution and contamination of a place can reach a point where the existence of life is excluded. As I will explore more extensively in the next sections, a series of dichotomies that characterizes the natural sciences and modern thought (such as nature and culture, and facts and values) keeps the ways in which we think environmental issues within a limited framework. Environmental issues have actually a clear heterogeneous feature, as they involve a wide range of issues, such as “human ways of being in the world” and “broader questions of politics and social justice” (Rose et al., 2012: 1). The understanding of environmental issues requires alternative perspectives and tools that do not traditionally belong to the natural sciences. Therefore, it is no longer possible to think the environment as something that can be naturally given or artificially built by humans. In other words, the key point is to avoid facing environmental issues without recognizing that

“what currently counts as ‘environmental’ is also social” (Palsson et al., 2013: 3). As a result, it should be obvious that the ways in which we frame the environment affect how we look for solutions to the environmental problems.

The expression “political ecology” combines two apparently distinct spheres, politics and ecology. This paper does not aim at illustrating and evaluating political ecology as an interdisciplinary research domain and does not evaluate how much it can contribute to environmental activism, but rather my reflection pays a special attention to political ecology as a way to challenge the line of demarcation between nature and culture. Being about the relationships involving organisms and their environment, ecology turns out to be a science related to the realm of nature. While politics refers to human choices and values, being the science or arts concerning the governance. However, the combination of ecology and politics in the expression “political ecology” keeps together two apparently opposite realms. The realm of the natural necessity seems to be governed by natural laws in opposition to the realm of human possibility that is marked by human choices. As I will delve into in this paper, Latour's research, such as the books *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1993) and *Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004), represents a vivid attempt to question the separation of facts and values<sup>3</sup> that marks the modern understanding of science and politics. If conceived in a proper way, political ecology can be useful to uncover and clarify the intersections between issues that are not easy to face together, such as ecological and social inequalities (Larrère et al. 2013: 32). It seems to me that the growing importance of political ecology can be better understood on the background of what could be called a kind of environmental turn in the humanities and social sciences. In this expanding horizon, moving beyond the traditional categories and dichotomies should be a fundamental task to really attempt to think new ways of facing ecological issues.



### Developing a Reflection Starting From Bruno Latour's and Philippe Descola's Research

My reflection combines and supplements Latour's and Descola's ideas through a constructive approach. Their research can offer important tools to move beyond the modern understanding of ecological issues and question the supposed universality of modern naturalism. In this paper, the clarification of the historical contingency of modern naturalism is adopted to open the space for ways of thinking the ecological crisis without keeping the politics and ecology apart. In particular, a dichotomy like nature and culture seems to be obvious just because it characterizes modern naturalism. However, as Descola (2013a) argues, modern naturalism is far from being universally shared in the world. Hence I suggest that thinking beyond modern naturalism should be the main task of any political ecology that is able to question extensively globalization in relation to ecological issues.

In this paragraph I introduce very briefly the trajectories of Latour's and Descola's research. My exploration is far from being exhaustive, as my aim is to place some of their ideas in the context of this paper topic. Latour's work involves different disciplinary domains, from philosophy to anthropology and sociology, and represents a fundamental point of reference in the so-called science studies/science and technology studies. His contributions (Latour, 2005) to the Actor-Network Theory are also very well-known. He has published extensively about a wide range of topics, but here I pay a special attention to his reflection about the moderns and the "politics of nature." In Latour's work (Latour, 1993; 2004), the moderns are those who cover the combination of nature and culture, facts and values, by describing modern societies as places in which nature and culture, facts and values, are completely separated poles. In this paper, I address Latour's work on the moderns together with Descola's perspective on modern naturalism in a way that I tend to combine and supplement each other with respect to political ecology and globalization. Descola's (2013a) anthropological reflection about modern naturalism as one of the possible ontologies is especially relevant for the topic of this paper. His famous ethnographic research that regards the Achuar in the Amazon (Descola and Charbonnier, 2014: 129-194) and his further comparative works (Descola, 2013a; 2013b) are the main starting points of his attempt to describe the four possible ontologies that characterize how humans conceive their world and their associations with nonhumans. The book *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Descola, 2013a) elucidates extensively his anthropological comparative framework describing naturalism as a particular ontology along with three other ontologies, namely animism, totemism, and analogism. He uses the expression "mode of identification" [mode d'identification] in order to designate the delineation of continuity and/or discontinuity between humans and nonhumans characterizing any given ontology (Descola and Charbonnier, 2014: 236).

In crossing the research of these two scholars, my main concern is to figure out how to question any naïve universality of modern naturalism that prevents whatever discourse from merging politics and ecology in an effective way. In doing so, I address globalization as a key issue for political ecology in the sense that globalization is silently bringing modern naturalism around the world as a universal and necessary fact. In my view, problematizing this tendency should be a major concern for political ecology, as it results in a reduction of the possible ways in which humans live together with the non-human world. Thus, the spread of globalization ends up standardizing any alternative way of thinking ecological issues that distances itself from modern naturalism. It goes without saying that in this paper the meanings of globalization and also modernization assume a very theoretical dimension that does not touch directly aspects like economy, finance, and international relations. As I will go through in the next section, a combination of concepts and distinctions frames the

way in which ecological issues are commonly understood and faced within the modern perspective.

### Approaching the Divide Between Nature and Culture

Here I try to clarify the modern dichotomous distinction between nature and culture starting from Latour's and Descola's work. In order to approach nature and culture, it is useful to figure out how this dichotomy echoes in some way, or can be related to, a series of pairs of opposite elements. The pole of nature can be associated with the idea of necessity in contrast with the pole of culture belonging to possibility. Hence, it seems that a dichotomous distinction that mirrors somehow the nature-culture dichotomy refers to the realm of necessity and the realm of possibility. Necessity has to do with the universal in the sense that nature and its laws are everywhere, while possibility refers to what is relative insofar as culture has a social dimension. For the same reason, nature and culture pertain to two different kinds of history, the natural one and the human one. Descola (2013b: 76-77) illustrates clearly how the pair universalism and relativism moulds the nature-culture distinction, and how it also interferes with the possibility of understanding the diverse relationships existing between humans and between humans and nonhumans around the world. In his own words, universalism and relativism are:

“[...] mechanisms of epistemological decantation that transcribe the opposition between nature and culture into incompatible creeds: to matters and life, universal laws; to institutions, relative norms.” (Descola, 2013b: 76)



As a result, universalism shapes any laws about the physical sphere and the biological one, while relativism marks anything that depends on human choices in a given society, namely its institutional and normative features. The problematic point is that this dichotomous definition of the nature-culture prevents us from understanding what Descola (Descola and Charbonnier, 2014: 236) calls different modes of identification characterizing the four possible ontologies. Descola's long ethnographic fieldwork in the Amazon has played a key role in the development of his wider anthropological elaboration, as it clarifies that naturalism is not the ontology of the Achuar (Descola and Charbonnier, 2014: 129-194). Naturalism is the ontology that has been conceived in modern Europe and that defines a continuity between the human exteriority - physicality - and the nonhuman one, and also marks the discontinuity between the human interiority and the nonhuman one<sup>4</sup>. I am not going to illustrate further the four ontologies but, later in this paper, I also consider his framework of four ontologies in order to develop my reflection about political ecology. In particular, I will think about the possible trajectory of a political ecology that does not frame modern naturalism as a universal ontology.

Before turning my attention to Descola's research and his conception of different ontologies, I move on to Latour's work. Whereas Descola looks outside modern naturalism towards other ontologies, Latour focuses on modern societies and gives shape to an innovative understanding of how science works. I think that it is possible to say that the former questions the supposed universality of modern naturalism by pointing to other ontologies, while the latter inquires the modern idea of universal nature by putting into question the modern account of scientific research. Latour's (1993) perspective on science is fundamental to approach his work. Latour moves beyond the idea that scientific work regards the study of facts through the two activities of collecting data and developing theories. He puts into question the philosophy of science that aims at describing the elaboration of scientific theories addressing pure facts. In doing so, he questions the modern<sup>5</sup> scientific description of nature and its use of the Cartesian *res extensa*. The scientific understanding of nature does not stem from any archetypical - and therefore universal - rationality that is able to touch and describe nature as if it were in a sphere of pure facts. The *a priori* distinction between the real world and the ideal one should not belong to any account of scientific activity. In a lecture Latour (2011: 78-79) explains naturalism as a non-realist description of science activity because it represents a "prematured unification of scientific laboratory practices" which ends up considering the scientific results as pure objects that are placed in the Cartesian *res extensa*. In Latour's view, this prematurely act that unifies nature is called naturalism and characterizes the modern description of science. As I will address more extensively later with reference to political ecology and globalization, his book *Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004) can be framed as an attempt to rethink political ecology without this unification brought by naturalism.

Latour's (1993) argument results in a problematization of the distinction between facts and values<sup>6</sup> - and therefore nature and culture - as a misleading aspect of the modern account of science (facts) and politics (values), which affects philosophy of science and also any other traditional disciplines studying science. Latour (1993) offers a different understanding of science, which is a key reference in science studies/science and technology studies. He moves away from the modern perspective without ending up postmodernity in a way that scientific research is described as a kind of socialization activity bringing facts and values together. Or, it is probably better to say, he (Latour, 2004) reframes the conceptual background from which to figure out science, politics, and political ecology; in particular, once rejected the modern perspective, nature should be rethought beyond the image of science as a completely theoretical endeavour pointing to an isolated world of objects. It is in this horizon without a world of objects out there<sup>7</sup> that Latour (2004) thinks about a political ecology which is no longer grounded in the modern framework where politics regards human values and ecology refers to natural facts.

Rather than studying a monolithic nature and the ways in which cultures represent it differently, both Descola and Latour take a completely diverse point of view. Descola's (2013a) research moves away from nature and culture, by shedding light on the possible ontologies representing the collectives of humans and nonhumans. In a similar way, Latour's (1993) work looks at the very core of the modern societies - namely science and technology - by uncovering its networks of humans and nonhumans. In doing so, Latour (2004) questions the modern description of science and technology that affects the development of an efficient political ecology, as it defines an unrealistic and misleading separation between facts and values, nature and culture, starting from which ecology and politics are conceived. According to Latour (2004: 61), rather than being a simple combination of politics and ecology, political ecology should be reframed by pointing to the collectives of humans and nonhumans. Thanks to the works of Latour and Descola that inquiry and question the universal validity of a series of distinctions, such as nature and culture, it is possible to reflect upon the ecological crisis in reference to globalization without remaining within the limiting modern perspective.

### **The Shift from Ecology to Political Ecology as an Issue of Representativeness**

Here I explore how the shift from ecology to political ecology can bring a problematization of the idea of nature in modern naturalism. I frame this problematization as a key task of the research in the environmental humanities and social sciences, which should be able to challenge the supposed universality of the modern baseline. In doing so, my discourse crosses Latour's and Descola's research by shedding light on the issue of representativeness. As I have explored in the previous section, the very meaning of nature cannot be rethought within the modern framework from which ecology comes from. In this regard, Descola points out:

“In order to be able to speak of nature, it is necessary that the man sets back from the environment in which he is immersed, it is necessary that the man feels outside and superior to the surrounding world.” (my English translation; Descola, 2010: 32)<sup>8</sup>

Moving beyond this modern framework requires the ability to exit from this perspective where nature is conceived by means of a human gaze that is completely detached from the world<sup>9</sup>. In this way, it is possible to realize that ecological debates are far from being more and more grounded in objective facts that are verified by scientific procedures. As Latour (2011: 71) remarks, it is no longer possible to switch from political issues to issues related to “natural entities,” by thinking that we are approaching “certainty” since the latter issues are also bringing conflicting situations. A non-modern political ecology should be able to reframe these conflicts in which ecological and



political competences overlap and clash because of the modern framework marked by a series of distinction like nature and culture, facts and values, objective and subjective. That is why Latour (2004: 244; 2011: 79) suggests a change from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern.” The term “matters of fact” refers to what is supposed to be “indisputable” like the “sensory data” (Latour, 2004: 244). If we take for granted the dichotomy between facts and values, matters of fact refer to the first pole in contrast to values (and theories) that can be discussed. Latour’s suggested shift from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern” traces out a rather different horizon where nonhumans exit from the status of pure objects.

In both Latour and Descola, the baseline is the collectives of humans and nonhumans that replace the modern idea of cultural diversity coupled with a supposed monolithic nature. In order to look outside modern naturalism, they avoid considering nonhumans as bare objects. In doing so, Latour (1993: 142-145) theorizes that the shift from matters of fact to matters of concern should lead to the definition of a “parliament of things” in which nonhumans<sup>10</sup> are no longer bare objects, being represented by scientists who no longer absolutize the distinction between nature/facts/data and culture/values/theories. On the other hand, Descola’s (2013a) outlines a comparative framework of four ontologies<sup>11</sup> in order to be able to acknowledge the associations of humans and nonhumans that do not fall within the modern ontology represented by naturalism<sup>12</sup>. In the context of political ecology, Latour’s “parliament of things” should open the space for a way of dealing with ecological issues that brings a more effective problem solving. In a similar way, Descola’s wider horizon of four ontologies should be helpful as a starting point to take into account the diversity of associations between humans and nonhumans that can be approached by political ecology. It seems to me that in both perspectives the problem of representativeness is the major concern. I think that in Latour’s research representativeness could be considered as a political issue that should be faced through the implementation of the “parliament of things” which aims at representing nonhumans by removing them from the *res extensa* (Latour, 1993: 142-145). In a different way, representativeness could be employed to describe an epistemological aspect of Descola’s research. It seems to me that representativeness could be related to his comparative framework of four ontologies, as it aims at representing the four possible ontologies that can be found around the world without taking one of them (modern naturalism) as a starting point. Hence, even though his definition of ontology does not regard any idea of representation of the world, being related to the notion of “mode of identification,” his comparative framework of four ontologies seems to concern representativeness insofar as it wants to bring together all possible ontologies.

As a result, in both Latour’s and Descola’s works it is possible to figure out an issue of representativeness which can be referred to a

political ecology that pays attention to the associations between humans and nonhumans. In this regard, Larrère et al. (2013: 40) also remark clearly that political ecology should make room for the different relationships between humans and nonhumans which are “cooperative” and not “dominative.” A political ecology dealing with these associations should somehow interfere with the processes of modernization that are spreading modern naturalism in many regions across the world. Hence, in the following section I explore this possibility of problematizing globalization through political ecology.

### **Political Ecology Pointing to Composition As a Way of Questioning Globalization**

As I have illustrated in the previous paragraphs, once moved beyond the supposed universality of modern naturalism, political ecology can uncover and shed light on the associations between humans and nonhumans that are not visible from within the modern horizon. Thus political ecology can face the global dimension of modern naturalism that affects the global-scale impact of ecological issues. I just want to point out again that here globalization is not primarily considered in its business, economic, or financial aspects. In this paper, globalization is mainly the spread of modern naturalism around the world as a universal framework. This spread of modern naturalism across the globe can be understood as a process of modernization in the sense that it brings the modern way of associating humans and nonhumans together. This global tendency implying an alignment with modern naturalism could also be inquired as a kind of implicit process of colonization<sup>13</sup> of thought. Here I do not explore this aspect thoroughly, but rather I continue focusing on how Latour's and Descola's research can be the starting point to question the universality of the modern framework and can make room for a broader horizon for political ecology. As I have previously discussed through their works, from the modern and Cartesian point of view, cultures are the result of the contingent production of human mind, which is completely detached from nature that is conceived as a universal domain of pure objects. Globalization is spreading this modern idea of nature as a monolithic entity out there which can be transformed freely by human activities. This idea can make sense because in the modern account the human perspective turns out to be outside the world and, therefore, outside any ecological issues. But actually humans are within the world and ecological issues, such as pollution, affect humans as well. Modernization is therefore polarizing the world, by putting in place a Cartesian scheme where non-human beings are equated to the *res extensa* and therefore they deserve less and less consideration, while humans conceive themselves more and more as beings outside the real world and within the *res cogita*. Latour (2011: 75) also points out that “[i]t is fair to say that modernization has not prepared us especially well to the impact of the ecological crisis.” Unfortunately, naturalism and its modern idea of nature is spread by modernization in more and more



areas across the world. As Latour (2015: 51) clearly states, the world is made “unlivable” [inhabitable] by this idea of nature.

The difficult task of political ecology in front of globalization concerns the possibility of questioning the modern framework. In order to face the issue of modern naturalism on a global scale, Latour (2011: 73, 78-79) suggests the task of “composition” that should represent an alternative to modernization; by involving both humans and nonhumans, composition aims at creating associations between them in a way that it can reject the a priori modern universality of nature in order to define gradually a “plural but common world” (Latour, 2003; Latour, 2004: 239). Latour’s reflection on composition is useful to think an alternative to globalization at a political level where all beings, both humans and nonhumans, are taken into account in the same way. Composition in Descola’s (2013a) research is conceived in a slightly different horizon related to his comparative research about the four possible ontologies across the globe. He has developed a comparative approach to the ways in which peoples in different areas and time periods compose their world by associating with the other beings, namely the nonhumans. In his comparative work, naturalism is just one of the four possible ways of composing the human and nonhuman world. By showing that naturalism is not the only possible ontology, he gives us the opportunity to reflect upon its historical and geographical contingency. His work can also be framed as an attempt to detach ourselves from modern naturalism in contrast to the process of globalization that is absolutising its validity. As a result, it can be useful to give shape to a political ecology that is able to foster our understanding of composition beyond modern naturalism.

In my view, the idea of composition in both Latour’s and Descola’s works can be adopted to question the global spread of the modern conception of nature from two diverse but complementary non-modern angles. Latour opens the space for a compositional activity that can put in place an inclusive perspective on nonhumans in political ecology, as he suggests the idea of “the parliament of things” that should be able to represent nonhumans by taking them away from the *res extensa*. While Descola’s comparative research can be a starting point to open up political ecology to the diverse compositions of humans and nonhumans beyond modern naturalism. His comparative work is an attempt to shed light on the diversity of human and nonhuman collectives that turns out to be a way of challenging the spread of modern naturalism across the globe as a unique and universal ontology. In other words, if we can figure out diverse ontologies, we always have a solid point of reference to contrast the supposed universality of the modern conception of nature. I think that political ecology should also make an effort to envisage new ways of composing human and nonhuman worlds. In doing so, it should be possible to encourage any composition of humans and nonhumans that does not establish conflicting and deteriorating worlds. I am convinced that we can really rethink the ecological crisis only if we manage to challenge the

modern understanding of ecological issues and, at the same time, we are able to envisage and put in place alternative relationships with nonhumans.

## Conclusions

This paper has constructively developed a reflection starting from Latour's and Descola's research regarding a specific topic, namely political ecology in front of globalization. In line with the increasing attention to ecological issues in the humanities and social sciences, I have approached Latour's and Descola's works by focusing on their relevance to political ecology. I have delved into the way in which the modern idea of nature is spread everywhere by globalization, turning out to be a source of ecological concerns. I have adopted two terms, representativeness and composition, in order to explore Latour's and Descola's research with respect to the topic of this paper. I have elucidated the way in which these terms can be employed to identify in their works how to start challenging the supposed universality of the modern idea of nature. Far from being universal, modern naturalism is only a possible way of bringing humans and nonhumans together. Opening up political ecology to non-modern ways of associating humans and non-humans turns out to be a key point in the problematization of the spread of modern naturalism on a global scale that narrows down political and ecological thought. Even though my aim is not to clarify the possibility to combine Latour's research trajectory with Descola's one, it seems to me that their theoretical backgrounds partially overlap. I think that Latour's perspective on science, which uncovers its socializing dimension that combines facts and values, nature and culture, opens the space for a symmetrical approach to the diverse ways in which humans and nonhumans are associated around the world, which represents a key point in Descola's research.

In the Anthropocene era, the diffusion of the modern universality of nature can only foster the proliferation of ecological issues on a global scale. It seems to me that the only way to prevent and contrast that should be to put this standardizing conception of nature into perspective as much as possible. That is why, in developing a reflection about Latour's and Descola's research, my paper also represents a starting point to conceive political ecology as a larger endeavour without a rigid framework that is able to inspire alternative approaches to ecological issues, as well as new forms of ecological thought and practice against the domination of the modern idea of nature. I am therefore close to Larrère et al. (2013) when they clarify that political ecology takes shape in a dynamic way:

“If there is a body of doctrine, it is put in place little by little. Political ecology is not certainly the application of a pre-existing doctrine.” (my English translation; Larrère et al., 2013: 23)<sup>14</sup>



Given the fact that I stress the importance of providing political ecology with a fluid connotation, I think that we should also attempt to enlarge Latour's and Descola's research in order to glimpse a broader horizon where it should be possible to stimulate the emergence of new ecological ideas and practices. A fundamental step would be to continue problematizing any system that becomes a static reference. In this regard, it should be useful to ask, for example, if Descola's comparative framework of four ontologies is really exhaustive in representing all possible ontologies. Hence I think that we should always attempt to figure out a wider diversity outside any given framework in order to face ecological issues in a more constructive way by questioning any form of standardization. This would make a difference in putting in place a dynamic political ecology that is really able to problematize the global diffusion of any standardizing idea like the modern conception of nature without supporting intellectual and geopolitical isolationisms.

---

## Acknowledgements

This paper stems from a lecture at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Naresuan University. I would like to express once again my gratitude for all questions and comments that I received during the lecture. I thank especially Dr Watcharabon Buddharaksa and Dr Wasinrat Nuansiri for making this possible. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for the suggestions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thus, for example, regarding the term “geohistory” [géohistoire] Latour (2015: 98) argues that it does not refer to a pacifying Nature that is finally and successfully placed in the conflicting (human) history, but rather it should be intended as a “generalized/widespread state of war” [état de guerre généralisé]. In this regards, Keucheyan (2014) frames nature as a “battleground” [champ de bataille].

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the suggestion of the term Anthropocene as a geological epoch, see Crutzen and Stoermer (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Regarding a clear reflection upon facts and values, see Latour (2004: 95-102). In this section of his book, he explicitly states that “[...] facts define the work of the sciences as poorly as values define the task of morality” Latour (2004: 100).

<sup>4</sup> In an interview, he clarifies how his comparative work has taken shape (Descola and Charbonnier, 2014: 195-278).

<sup>5</sup> In Latour's account, “modern” is not a “period but a form of the passage of time” associated with the use of a series of distinctions, such as “facts and values,” and “Science and society” (Latour, 2004: 244).

<sup>6</sup> For an elucidation of this issue see Latour (2004: 95)

<sup>7</sup> The expression “out there” should be fully understood if coupled with “in here.” This distinction between “in here” and “out there” can be a way to echo the Cartesian dualism that separates mind and body, *res cogita* and *res extensa*.

<sup>8</sup> The original quote is as follows: “Pour que l'on puisse parler de nature, il faut que l'homme soit en retrait par rapport à l'environnement dans lequel il est plongé, il faut que l'homme se sente extérieur et supérieur au monde qui l'entoure” (Descola, 2010: 32).

<sup>9</sup> Larrère and Larrère (2015: 160) remark that the Cartesian dichotomy separates humans from nature.

<sup>10</sup> For a more complete view on Latour's discourse about humans and nonhumans, see chapter two of Latour (2004).

<sup>11</sup> I do not go through an exhaustive definition of “ontology” and related terms, such as “worlding,” in Descola's work. For a useful clarification about that, see Descola (2014).

<sup>12</sup> In Descola's (2013a) comparative work, the other ontologies are “analogism,”

“totemism,” and “animism.”

<sup>13</sup> Descola clarifies in a concise and clear way his research as a decolonization of thought in Descola and Ingold (2014: 56-57).

<sup>14</sup> The original quote is as follows: “Si corps de doctrine il y a, il se met en place peu à peu. L’écologie politique n’est certainement pas l’application d’une doctrine préexistante” (Larrère et al., 2013: 23).

## References

Crutzen, P.J. & Stoermer, E.F. (2000). The “Anthropocene”. *Global Change Newsletter*, 41: 17-18.

Descola, P. (2010). *Diversité des Natures, Diversité des Cultures*. Paris: Bayard.

Descola, P. (2013a). *Beyond Nature and Culture*. (J. Lloyd, trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Descola, P. (2013b). *The Ecology of Others: Anthropology and the Question of Nature*. (G. Godbout & B. P. Luley, trans.). Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Descola, P. (2014). *Modes of being and forms of predication*. HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 4 (1): 271-280.

Descola, P. and Charbonnier, P. (2014). *La Composition des Mondes: Entretiens avec Pierre Charbonnier*. Paris: Flammarion.

Descola, P. and Ingold, T. (2014). *Être au Monde: Quelle Expérience Commune? Débat présenté par Michel Lussault*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon.

Keucheyan, R. (2014). *La Nature Est un Champ de Bataille: Essai d’Écologie Politique*. Paris: Zones (Editions la Découverte).

Larrère, C., & Larrère, R. (2015). *Penser et Agir Avec la Nature: Une Enquête Philosophique*. Paris: La Découverte.

Larrère, C., Schmid, L., & Fressard, O. (2013). *L’Écologie est Politique*. Paris: Les Petits Matins.

Latour, B. (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. (C. Porter, trans.). Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (2003). *Un Monde Pluriel Mais Commun (Entretiens avec F. Ewald)*. La Tour d’Aigues: Editions de l’Aube.

Latour, B. (2004). Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy. (C. Porter, trans.). Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Latour, B. (2011). Politics of Nature: East and West Perspectives. *Ethics & Global Politics*, 4 (1): 71-80.

Latour, B. (2015). *Fax à Gaïa: Huit Conférences sur le Nouveau Régime Climatique*. Paris: Editions La Découverte.

Palsson, G., Szerszynski, B., Sörlin, S., Marks, J., Avril, B., Crumley, C., Hackmann, H., Holm, P., Ingram, J., Kirman A., Pardo Buendía, M., & Wee huizen, R. (2013). Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the social sciences and humanities in global environmental change research. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 28: 3-13.

Rose, D. B., van Dooren, T., Chrulew, M., Cooke, S., Kearnes, M., & O’Gorman, E. (2012). Thinking through the environment, unsettling the humanities. *Environmental Humanities*, 1:1-5

