

[Michael Mason](#)

The life and death of environmental subjects

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Mason, Michael (2006) The life and death of environmental subjects. *Environmental politics*, 15 (1). pp. 115-120.

DOI: [10.1080/09644010500418837](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644010500418837)

© 2006 [Taylor & Francis](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/3698/>

Available in LSE Research Online: March 2008

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Review Essay: The Life and Death of Environmental Subjects

Michael Mason (London School of Economics and Political Science)

[*Environmental Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 115 – 120, February 2006]

Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects by Arun Agrawal. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi & 325; index. £60.00 (hardback); £14.95 (paperback). ISBN 0 8 223 3480 1 and 0 8223 3492 5

Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy by Bruno Latour, translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. x & 307; index. £39.95 (hardback); £16.95 (paperback). ISBN 0 674 01289 5 and 0 674 01347 6

In the environmental politics field, it is not unusual to encounter books declaring a new approach to the study of ecological relationships. Were we to be as ruthlessly candid about the genesis of academic texts as a sociology of intellectual life would demand, then those of us involved in this strange profession would have to acknowledge the competitive (dare I say marketbased?) motives that drive us to profess novelty when our insights are not unique, to discount our peers when we stand on their shoulders. Coming across two books so attuned to the fine-grained social practices by which scientific discourse and political identities are constructed, it is a paradox that they do not make space for the social conditioning of their own knowledge claims. Why can we not be as reflexive in print about the rules of the academic game as we are in conversation in staff common rooms and those welcome coffee breaks between sessions at conferences?

Both Arun Agrawal and Bruno Latour develop perspectives on environmental politics that claim to break away from mainstream scholarship, although with different degrees of separation. For Agrawal, Michel Foucault's suggestive work on governmentality sets up an 'analytical optic' with which to map out the evolution of regulatory forms and ecological knowledges in Kumaon, northern India over the past 150 years. Following the transition from colonial rule to independence, he examines the intricate ways in which new technologies of government shaped human subjectivities concerning the environment. Whereas Agrawal's argument is that Foucault's post-structuralism is a necessary tool for researching 'environmentality' (that is, environmental governmentality), Latour's ambitions are of a more audacious order – nothing less than the total reconfiguration of science, nature and politics in order to herald a true 'political ecology'. With the type of rhetorical flamboyance that irritates and entertains in equal measure, Latour bids farewell to the 'ruinous anthropomorphism' (p.54) of a modernist dichotomy that casts 'Science' – authoritative gatekeeper to the objective domain of external nature – in strict opposition to 'Society' – the exclusively human realm of political action and organisation. Only a 'new constitutional settlement', open to the free association of human and non-humans, can facilitate the collective exploration of common futures already evident, he claims, in the political practice of ecological movements.

The (largely unacknowledged) philosophical backdrop to both these books is a French intellectual critique of modernity that stretches from Sartre to Derrida, and is inspired above all by the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In Heidegger's assault on Western metaphysics we already encounter the questioning of modern subjectivities and reason that provoked Foucault's 'genealogy of the modern subject', which Agrawal draws on to show how (human) environmental subject positions are created and transformed in response to resource struggles, new institutions, and changing notions of the self. It is to Agrawal's credit that he takes up Foucault's ideas critically and concretely (Foucault the happy empiricist would surely have approved), delving into an impressive array of archival and interview-based sources to substantiate his claims. Latour, by contrast, feels that the field studies on which his book is based would get in the way of the accessibility of the argument (p.7), although the obverse is probably true, such is the torrent of unsupported generalisations. Despite Heidegger's disinterest in scientific endeavours, Latour's affinity to the German philosopher is closer than he lets on, and not just in an uncompromising attack on the 'subject' as the epicenter of a European-modern understanding of nature. Heidegger's notion of nature as *physis* – whereby things become present as events for human experience – and his description of science as resting on a priori methodological decisions (including arbitrary divisions of primary and secondary qualities), both resonate with Latour's notion of 'experimental metaphysics'.

Of course, French philosophical critiques of modernity are thankfully more than a simple rehashing of Heidegger and the more recent intellectual context for the studies of both Agrawal and Latour is post-structuralism and semiotics – in particular, theories of language in which meaning is not anchored in internal consciousness but the external play of discourses or sign systems. So, in the fascinating first part of his book (Chapters 2 and 3), Agrawal runs with a Foucauldian notion of discursive practices to delineate the 'representational economy of forests' (p.33); that is, the 'construction' of forests via colonial knowledges which, through their performative force, defined property entitlements and management regimes. Obsessive quantification and statistical abstraction lent an objective sheen to the profoundly political enterprise of 'scientific forestry' – one that, in the name of conservation, restricted or prohibited the traditional forest usages by peasants. Agrawal shows vividly that colonial environmental knowledges shaped forms of environmental subjectivity as much by erasure as incorporation: an ensemble of humans and non-humans was more than just physically disrupted and displaced, it was literally written out of history (p.63). While, as in the claim above, Agrawal sometimes gestures towards relational subjectivities in which associations of humans and non-humans combine, his preoccupation is with the making of human environmental subjects.

For Latour such a focus is unacceptable, even as a methodological choice within a post-structuralist perspective: it smuggles in a disastrous metaphysics of nature in which non-humans are denied social representation. His project, after all, is to admit them alongside humans to the joint articulation of collective political goals. However, readers expecting some form of prosopopeia along the lines of Dr Dolittle will be disappointed: in a neat inversion reminiscent of Derrida's critique of the modernist priority accorded to speech

over writing ('phonocentrism'), Latour argues that it is not speech itself but the difficulties one has in speaking and the multiple devices necessary for articulation that render 'speech impedimenta' (p.63) the common affliction of both humans and nonhumans. This manoeuvre is designed to problematise the authority and transparency of the 'spokesperson' (whether for humans or non-humans). However, it leaves undeveloped the means by which associations of humans and non-humans actually communicate with each other. Latour inherits from semiotics (notably the work of Algirdas Greimas) the idea of the 'actant' – a human or non-human entity that can modify another entity – and, in his chosen field of science studies, has worked up all sorts of interesting takes on how laboratory practices define new actants. This semiotic perspective discovers purposive agency in the exterior properties of apparatuses, instruments and institutions, through the practical traces revealed in experiments that become inscribed by scientists as more or less coherent 'performances' in their reports and papers. To set this up as a model for all ecological communication, however, is inadequate as long as it is silent on how meaning is negotiated and understanding is reached within functioning speech communities.

It is the constitution of political authority that takes up the bulk of analysis in the books of both Agrawal and Latour. The second part (Chapters 4–6) of Agrawal's volume examines how in the 1930s, in response to widespread protests from Kumaon's residents to centralised control, the colonial state introduced a 'new technology of environmental government' to meet its political and economic objectives. At the heart of this deployment of power was the dispersal of forest regulation to village forest councils. A more diffused system of rule-making and enforcement was designed at least in part to blunt the possibilities of rebellion, but also turned out to be more efficient and effective, such that India maintained this decentralised institutional model in its comprehensive revision of forest councils in 1976. Agrawal's contention is that the new regulatory communities created new alliances and divisions between governmental representatives and local residents, advancing a regulation as 'productive' (p.132) as it was coercive. Its generative accomplishment was to pull villagers as willing participants into its power formation, redefining their needs as consistent with the interests of the state. While this goal was not always achieved, the potency of dispersed regulation is evident from the extensive take up of environmental subject positions by so many of Kumaon's residents. In an exemplary investigation of subject creation in Chapter 6, Agrawal shuttles between archival records and hundreds of his own interviews to explore historical and geographical variations in environmental subjectivity. The absorption of environmental orientations by villagers is positively connected to the channelling of regulatory ends through their own networks of sociality and authority, most obviously in practices of monitoring and enforcement.

Agrawal's observations on the manufacture and recasting of subjectivities represent a substantial, original contribution to scholarship on the environment (and development). While research inspired by notions of governmentality is not unknown in environmental studies (Timothy Luke first coined the term 'environmentality' a decade ago) and increasingly common in postcolonial studies, I recognise Agrawal's claim that this work has tended to dwell on techniques of state control and domination, neglecting the

'positive' side of power present in Foucault's historical excavations of modern governmental apparatuses and forms of knowledge. In fact, Agrawal maintains that even Foucault himself (or at least the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*) failed to develop this insight fully, and sketches out his own 'probabilistic' (p.163) explanation of the relationship between regulatory rules and subject positions: it may be the calculated goal of the modern form of power to make individuals and groups the willing accomplices of its execution, but the effects nevertheless might be to trigger unintended gains in individuality and autonomy. Whether these gains are realised, Agrawal continues, cannot be read off deterministically from the application of institutionalised rules; they depend on the uncertain interplay between these rules and the social practices of target communities or populations.

Latour's political philosophy is strongly normative, partly in response to the 'fundamentalism in the realm of reason' (p.252) that allows proponents of Science to banish values from the self-description of their activities. The contention that scientific facts are theory-dependent and value-laden is of course not novel (Thomas Kuhn was arguing this over 40 years ago): what Latour sets out to do, more radically, is to dispense altogether with the 'old bicameralism' of facts and values (including their exclusive residence in, respectively, Nature and Society) in his own conceptual architecture for (re)presenting questions about the common world of humans and nonhumans (Chapter 3). This 'new bicameralism' (p.115) retains both the 'power to take into account' the constative function of fact-stating discourse ('what is'), and 'the power to arrange in rank order' the normative root of value based expressions ('what ought to be'). Yet Latour claims that it actually describes more accurately the ways in which our articulations about the world fuse together descriptive and moral elements. So the power to take into account thus includes a descriptive openness to external reality ('perplexity') at the same time as the moral imperative of 'consultation'; and the power to arrange in rank order conjoins the imperative legitimately to assign new propositions ('hierarchization') with the fact-creating reality of closure ('institution'). I suspect many readers, like myself, may struggle with what is in effect a private vocabulary (what Latour terms 'technical') designed to identify public practices of disclosing and ordering the world. Some assistance is provided by Latour setting out in Chapter 4 how various professions – scientists, politicians, economists and moralists – can contribute more honestly and effectively than ever before to the functioning of the 'new Constitution' of political ecology.

The dynamics of this new constitution come down to the operation of the two powers of representation according to due process – 'offering the production of the common world the state of law' (p.240), but where those entities left outside what has been instituted into collective life may one day be invited in. It is significant – and somewhat contradictory given its genesis in a European-modern political tradition – that Latour consistently draws on terms associated with western democracy, although these are sometimes stretched and twisted beyond recognition (fortunately for Latour there is no Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Metaphors): his encapsulation of political ecology – 'that the question of democracy be extended to nonhumans' (p.223) – is a call to action that will be familiar to readers of *Environmental Politics* from debates in political theory and

environmental ethics. Not surprisingly, Latour regards most of this literature as nonsense (summarily dispensing with both deep ecology and social ecology in Chapter 1), wanting to break the mould of ecological thinking. Yet in Chapter 5, which I found the most stimulating in the book, we encounter familiar (American) pragmatist ideas on collective experimentation and learning. Having myself employed John Dewey's relational notion of the public to investigate modes of environmental responsibility, it was a pleasant surprise to see him pop up here as a constitutional father of actant democracy. Needless to say, Latour would claim to be radicalising pragmatist insights through the optic of science studies [and in a recent edited collection with Peter Weibel (2005) he has pursued these questions further]. But true, perhaps, to the diplomatic stance he embraces at the end of Chapter 5, I think that he has opened up ground here for more civil exchanges with environmental politics scholars.

Given his provocative positioning, much commentary will be directed at Latour's book: it is an essential read and will no doubt garner a diverse audience. Its claim to originality is nevertheless overstated and its peremptory tone often grates. An appreciation of its broader intellectual context – as the latest in a series of French philosophical bids to kill off the subject that always overreach themselves, but still serve as healthy correctives to complacent thinking – may actually make more sceptical readers less predisposed to dismiss it out of hand. Arun Agrawal is less inclined in his book to make theatrical gestures of radical originality: his clear, considered prose builds his arguments on environmental subjectivity solidly and convincingly. It is an outstanding volume that deserves to be read and discussed at least as widely as *Politics of Nature*.

Reference

Latour, B. and P. Weibel, (2005) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).