



**L'impersonale**  
*Si pensa, si sente, si crea*

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# L'impersonale

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## Demons of the Anthropocene. Facing Bruno Latour's Gaia Federico Luisetti

As proposed in 2012 by the 3th International Geological Congress, the Anthropocene is the geological epoch of the Quaternary Period following the Holocene, the age that accounts for the transformation of humans into a force shaping the Earth, and of human actions into a geological phenomenon. Current debates on the Anthropocene are introducing new figures of impersonality, modes of political agency that are shaking the certainties of modern political philosophy. A key protagonist of this epistemic turn is Gaia, the Earth, the Greek Mother of most Western gods. Borrowing from James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis and addressing the Earth beyond the organisms/environments, humans/nonhumans divide, Bruno Latour has turned Lovelock's planetary vitalism into the cornerstone of a new state of nature. Latour's Gaia is a philosophical demon replacing Hobbes's Leviathan and introducing a new political theology of nature. As in Roberto Esposito's biopolitical naturalism, Gaia's archaic relations with things and bodies suggest a return of animist and totemist paradigms and confront political philosophy with unprecedented questions.

LATOUR  
GAIA

ANIMISM  
ESPOSITO

POLITICS  
ANTHROPOCENE



The Festival of the Supreme Being,  
by Pierre-Antoine Demarchy (1794)

I survived the savageness of civilization

Rosa Chávez (K'iche'/Kaqchikel Maya)

The current debates on the Anthropocene are introducing new figures of impersonality, modes of political agency that are shaking the certainties of modern political philosophy. <sup>1</sup> A significant example is the collective desire to replace Hobbes's Leviathan with other political myths, thus introducing new states of nature and society, other configurations of subjectivity detached from the dualism of natural impersonality and human intentionality. As noted by Donna Haraway, the Anthropocene, as well as the Capitalocene, and Haraway's own demonological term Chthulucene, are attempts to name planetary phenomena, emerging states of nature and society populated by ferocious gods, by "promising and non-innocent monsters" (Haraway, 1990, p. 14).

A key protagonist of this epistemic turn is Gaia, a poetical form of *Gē*, the primal Earth goddess, the Greek Mother of most Western gods. Departing from the original 1970s formulations of Gaia theory by British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock and American evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis, who introduced Gaia as the figure of our "living planet", a description of the Earth as a vital, self-regulating cybernetic system with homeostatic tendencies, two significant, although divergent philosophical cults of Gaia have emerged in recent years: one introduced by Isabelle Stengers, the other promoted by Bruno Latour in several essays and most notably in his 2013 *Gifford Lectures* on the political theology of nature. <sup>2</sup> The 2014 Rio de Janeiro conference *The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth*, organized by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Bruno Latour, has then institutionalized the convergence of Gaia paradigms and the Anthropocenic vocabulary, popularizing an influential lexicon of vitalist impersonalism and political animism. <sup>3</sup>

### Animism Revisited

Having invented them four centuries ago, Western intellectuals know what to do with the "savages" and their "fetishes" (Landucci, 2014). So it's no surprise that they can balance their fear and fascination, synthesize their colonial impulses and decolonial conscience, dialecticize anthropological abhorrence and religious guilt, retool them thorough mechanisms of inclusive exclusion, and project the primitivistic conceptual fantasies that have dominated the cultural vocabulary of Western modernity, from Hobbes and Rousseau to Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze-Guattari and Latour: the state of nature of social contract theory, avant-garde barbarism, savage mind anthropology, poststructuralist nomadology, and nowadays Gaia political epistemologies. <sup>4</sup>

Latour's cult of Gaia and appeal to the "fanciful gods" (Latour, 2010) is a temperate form of primitivism, a rationalistic neopagan mythology predicated upon his diagnosis of the repressed, nonpersonal features of Western modernity. <sup>5</sup> Contemporary geopolitics requires according to Latour a new geophi-

<sup>1</sup> Since the publication of Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay (Chakrabarty, 2009), the geological term Anthropocene has captured the attention of a large community of scholars, promoting a widespread debate that is reconfiguring the distribution of human, technological, and natural agencies. For a recent assessment of these debates see Moore (2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Stengers (2015) and Latour (2015). The English text is available only as an unpublished draft on Latour's website (<http://www.bruno-latour.fr/>): *Facing Gaia: Six lectures on the political theology of nature. Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*. Edinburgh, 18th-28th of February 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://thethousandnamesofgaia.wordpress.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Neopaganisms, new age occultisms, Wicca practices, anarcho-primitivisms, and rewilding movements can also be seen as grassroots expressions of the discontent with the state of nature of Western modernity. On the contemporary discourse of



losophy, a description of «the world as we now see it through nonmodern eyes» (Latour, 1993, p. 7). Latour is aware that «the West (Europe, at least, unquestionably) is finally in a situation of relative weakness» and that «Occidentals will have to be made present in a completely different way, first to themselves, and then to the others» (Latour, 2013b, pp. 15-16). Not only decolonization has offered a glimpse of what ontological pluralism may entail; most significantly, the weapons of “universalization, globalization, and modernizations” used by the West in its planetary war of conquest against traditions and superstitions, are now in the hands of the East and the South, ready to be mobilized against their former masters (ivi, p. 485).

Latour portrays himself (and) as the High Commissioner of Western Epistemology, a sorcerer-diplomat dedicated to reversing the decline of Western universalism and introducing a new constituent lingua franca, «in preparation for the times when we shall no longer be in a position of strength and when the others will be the ones purporting to “modernize” – but in the old way and, as it were, without us» (ivi, p.16). Latour’s “recalling of modernity” is not the acceleration of the demise of the West but, on the contrary, an extension of its modernizing impulse (ivi, p. 15). Revisiting the founding categories of the ‘modern adventure’, preparing a realistic “inventory of the Moderns’ legacy”, and mobilizing comparative anthropology in order to undertake an “anthropology of the Moderns” are necessary steps that will allow to redesign the postnatural state of nature of the Earth (ivi, pp. 14-17). For Latour, the only hope remained to the West for “facing Gaia” and sitting at the table negotiations with the world powers of the future, is to accept its nonmodernity.

Since the confluence of the lexicon of savagery and naturalness has allowed the state of nature conceptuality to achieve its paradigmatic dominance in Western philosophical discourse, it is important to understand how this constellation has built its hidden articulation, subtle pervasiveness, and all-encompassing efficacy. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latours characterizes the epistemic separation of humans and nonhumans as the fundamental Great Divide of Western modernity: on the one side, the transcendence of an indifferent, a-human, in-human or extra-human nature, the impersonal matter and mysterious energy of a segregated nonhuman life; on the other side, the cultural sphere, historicity, and social interactions (Latour, 1993, pp. 10-12). Subjected to an endless play of transcendence and immanence, the nature of the moderns is defined by spontaneity or causal determinism, while the human dimension is perceived as a locus of freedom or social necessity, will or fate. And yet, for all their dialectic reversals, these series are always heterogeneous, mutually exclusive.

Latour argues that, although the institutional organization of knowledge reflects the split between nonhumans and humans, the conceptual chasm between two hermetically sealed ontological regions is constantly overcome by technical and scientific activity, by the proliferation of hybrids that are neither natural nor human: unthinkable in-betweens such as the communication technologies and the biopolitical regimes of contemporary capitalism. <sup>6</sup> Western modernity’s dualistic constitution multiplies semi-technical objects, nature-culture assemblages, while simultaneously concealing its presuppositions. The radical separa-

barbarism see Boletsi (2013).

<sup>5</sup> On the resurgence of animism see Franke (2010), Lazzarato (2012) and Chen (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Among the quasi-objects mentioned by Latour are also «frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks,

tion of nonhumans and humans is the “unconscious of the moderns”, what is masked although it simultaneously presides over the production of uncategorizable nature-culture mixtures: «Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and network, but this space does not exist, it has no place» (ivi, p. 37). Nature, which is theoretically a thing-in-itself and a dehumanized field of forces and events, is continuously mobilized by technosciences and biotechnologies, manipulated and exploited, constructed and reshaped while remaining unthinkable and inaccessible.

The Great Divide of human and nonhumans is for Latour an internal partition, a phantasmatic fissure internal to Western modernity's self-consciousness. Through an operation of epistemic purification, already at work in Hobbes's state of nature, this civilizational narration generates a hallucinatory purity divorced from all other collectives, which are reconfigured as disturbing arrangements of humans and nonhumans, sorcerers's fetishes.<sup>7</sup> The colonial fracture between political society and premodern states of nature, the Western Hemisphere and the rest, is for Latour the other side of the nature/culture divide: a fictional and yet concrete universal, which holds together the violence of colonial domination and an ethnographic museum of animisms and totemisms, idolatry and epistemic confusion. Modernity is not a *Weltgeist* but the grammar of a process of modernization perpetrated by the moderns. By charging all premodern collectives of «making a horrible mish-mash of things and humans, of objects and signs» (ivi, p. 39). Western modernity elects itself, in its multiple self-fashioned guises, as a planetary destiny: a triumph of humanism and technicity, historicism and positivism, liberal democracy and economicism.

This distribution of subjects and things, nature and culture, is questioned by Latour's posthumanistic principles. From the point of observation of quasi-objects, mixed realities of subjective and material things, nature and society occupy a symmetrical position that explain nothing and instead need to be explained as the outcome of real mediations. Once the ethnographer positions herself in this in-between territory, she suddenly witnesses the evaporation of all tenets of Western modernity: premoderns stop being opposed to moderns; the extrahuman nature of the moderns ceases to be alienated from the interiority of culture; premodern worlds, in which nature and society are confused and mismatched by totemic and animistic affinities, do not stand anymore against the rational present of scientific reason.<sup>8</sup>

In the postnatural age documented by Latour's anthropology of the Moderns, the “beings of metamorphosis” of psychotropic phenomena and the enchanted objects of contemporary technology are endowed with a threatening kind of archaic naturalness.<sup>9</sup> Things have become unsettling monsters, an assembly of preoccupations and desires, a demon that “interrupts any progression” (Latour, 2005a, p. 30). Nature, «instead of being a huge reservoir of forces and bottomless repository of waste», now ap-

psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers» (Latour, 1993, p. 49).

<sup>7</sup> «Moderns do differ from premoderns by this single trait: they refuse to conceptualize quasi-objects as such. In their eyes, hybrids present the horror that must be avoided at all costs by a ceaseless, even maniacal purification» (ivi, p. 112).

<sup>8</sup> «Real as Nature, narrated as Discourse, collective as Society, existential as Being: such are the quasi-objects that the moderns have caused to proliferate» (ivi, p. 90).

<sup>9</sup> «Since we can't live an instant without the help and menace of the being of metamorphosis, couldn't we finally recognize them in all the arrangements charged with taking them in rather than feeling obliged to insult invisible beings

pears as a pandemonium, a phantom, populated by the specter of emancipated colonial savages and enigmatic quasi-objects (ivi, p. 15).

and explore the inner depths of the ego?» (Latour, 2013b, p. 482).

In the realm of politics, traditional legal and philosophical categories are confronted by puzzling arrangements, by uncanny techno-social fetishes demanding new assemblies. Things of all kinds gather and pertain, concern and question. They are not the usual objects, a calculable matter of fact, but unstable beings, automated or catatonic, endowed with demands and needs or empty and passive. «Scientific laboratories, technical institutions, marketplaces, churches and temples, financial trading rooms, Internet forums, ecological disputes» are the quasi-subjects of a contemporary, nonmodern *Dingpolitik* (ivi, p. 22).

Latour asks that we recognize the archaic features of Western modernity, while simultaneously claiming the right to address, comparatively, the “savageness” of non-European modes of existence (Latour, 2013b, p. 11). This crucial tenet explains why, for accomplishing his «re-anthropologization» of the modern world (Latour, 2010, p. 133), Latour insistently appeals, against the decolonial critiques of ethnographic reason, to the methods of “comparative anthropology” (Latour, 2013b, p. 15). As in Félix Guattari’s “machinic animism” (Melitopoulos–Lazarato, 2012a), Latour’s political animism is both an extension of Western subjectivity beyond the dualisms of persons and things and the manifesto of an «artificial alliance between animism and materialism» 10 (Viveiros de Castro in Melitopoulos–Lazarato, 2012a, p. 242).

10 «If I understand Guattari, the first thing to do is to cut off the relation between the subject and the human. Thus subjectivity is not a synonym of humanity. The subject is a thing, the human is another thing. The subject is an objective function that one can find deposited on the surface of everything. [...] That is how it is for Amazonians. For them, the subject is a way to describe the behavior and attitude of things, just as for us, objectivation is a way to describe things in this sense» (Interview with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in Melitopoulos–Lazarato, 2012b, p. 4).

A premature postcolonial guilt must not, according to Latour, obstruct the ethnographic inventory of fetishes surviving in contemporary modes of existence. Western moderns too often “misunderstand idols and idolatry”, separating as differences in kind what are, instead, just differences in degree (Latour, 2013b, p. 166). The Mosaic division between fetishes and facts, idols and rationality, archaisms and science, can be overcome exclusively by rediscovering the idolatric practices of the West, not by destroying the idols and fetishes of the colonial others, and banning their sorcerers, phantasms, and metamorphoses. The problem of Western modernity is its rarefied consciousness, the denial of its occult powers and exorcising practices, the repression of its hybrid beings and nonhuman demons, the neutralization of its cosmological imagination and prelinguistic rituals.

When the Occidentals’ iconoclasm is unmasked as an immunitarian gesture against “savage thought”, 11 when the common anthropological matrix of transformations between humans and nonhumans is revealed, when sorcerers and scientists are placed in a horizontal plane of relations and mediations, then also the distinction between facts and fetishes disappears, replaced by the power and complexity of “factish” rituals and technologies: «I find more accuracy in my lactic acid ferment if I shine the light of the Condomblé divinities on it. In the common world of comparative anthropology, lights cross paths» (Latour, 2010,

11 «Beyond every question of epistemology lies another question: what to do with the idols or fetishes? This is the most striking feature of the anthropology of the Moderns: they believe that they are anti-idolators and antifetishists» (Latour, 2013b, p. 165).

p. 66). Political animism is for Latours «a revision of the critical spirit, a pause in the critique» (ivi, p. 81).

### A Political Theology of Nature

«Three centuries of total freedom up to the irruption of the world in the form of the Earth, of Gaia: a return of unanticipated consequences; the end of the modernist parenthesis» (ivi, p. 176). This Nietzschean sentence captures the latest installment of Bruno Latour's reenchantment: his "political theology of nature", his humorous preaching of a philosophical cult of Gaia, <sup>12</sup> the Mother Earth of the Greeks, the «chthonic divinity much older than Olympian gods and goddesses» (Latour, 2014, p.1). Borrowing from James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis (Lovelock, 2000) and addressing the Earth and its people beyond the organisms/environments, humans/nonhumans divide, Latour turns Lovelock's planetary vitalism into the cornerstone of a new state of nature. Lovelock's Gaia is a scientist's description of the «largest living creature on Earth», a self-regulating «entity involving the Earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil» (ivi, pp. 1, 11). In contrast to the conventional principles of natural sciences, Gaia is the Earth considered as a living assemblage, in which biological life extends its influence and models to its advantage the physical and chemical conditions of the surface of the Earth. The atmosphere, according to Lovelock, is an extension of the biosphere,

<sup>12</sup> «Since we are assembled for a sort of political, scientific, and anthropological ritual in order to re-view, utter, celebrate, list, enlarge, narrow down, pin point, conjoin or compose the Thousand Names of Gaia» (Latour, 2014, p. 1).

the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers that far beyond those of its constituent parts. (ivi, p. 9)

Latour embraces enthusiastically Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis, reformulating its straight-forward vitalism according to his posthumanistic principles. For Latour the size, nonhumanity, and yet anthropic connotations of Gaia mark the end of modernity and its categories. Gaia is a trick for resisting «the temptation to jump to the global» (Latour, 2005b, p. 174), the goddess of a secular philosophical religion, the object of an affirmative ritual, what comes after the deconstruction of the anthropocentric categories carried on by the last humanists. Compositions, assemblages, morphings of entities that were previously separated by the divide between nature and society, invocations of forgotten myths as contemporary forces: Latour's Gaia cult is the manifesto of a nonmodern political philosophy of nature.

As proposed in 2012 by the 3th International Geological Congress, the Anthropocene is the geological epoch of the Quaternary Period following the Holocene, the age that accounts for the transformation of humans into a force shaping the Earth, and of human actions into a geological phenomenon. Latour overlaps his Gaia rituals and the geohistorical features of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is «the most decisive philosophical, religious, anthropological and [...] political concept yet produced as an alternative to the very notions of "Modern" and "modernity"» (Latour, 2013a, p. 77). Since modes of existence on



the planet cannot be captured by topologies of continuous volumes, the subjects summoned by Gaia must abandon the spell of global metaphors and, instead, face the convoluted and conflictual loops of Earth phenomena, take responsibility for the fragmented spaces and tense political geometry of the Anthropocene.

### The Great Artificial Leviathan

Latour's Gaia rescues Hobbes's categories, extending and globalizing political theology through a new theology of nature, taking advantage of a planetary ecological crisis for reaffirming the hegemony of a European State philosophy. <sup>13</sup> Latour's invocation of Gaia's many epithets – 'Gaia-Enigma', 'Gaia-Thousand Folds', 'Gaia-The Recalcitrant', 'Gaia-The Incompossible', 'Gaia the Uncommon-Commons' etc. (Latour, 2014) –, with its mixture of grotesque aesthetics, politicized ontology, and ethnographic surrealism, can be seen as a *Collège de Sociologie*-like program, embracing the positivist lexicon of actor/network theory. Gaia's affirmative energy, her "mystical and mechanical", compositionist labor, may also be interpreted as a reenactment of the French philosophies of nature of Bergson, Tarde and Merleau-Ponty, as an attempt to prolong their legacy beyond the conceptual solutions of Deleuze and Serres. We could also look back to Rousseau's deism and Robespierre's Cult of the Supreme Being, recalling the festivals that celebrated this new rationalistic divinity, and approaching Latour's Gaia an a neo-Enlightenment, statist secular mythology. This genealogy would explain Latour's unapologetic return to European political theology and his proud revitalization, through his political theology of nature, of the discourse of sovereignty, in opposition to the biopolitical, post-Foucaultian philosophies of life. <sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, Stengers's Gaia, «Gaia the Intruder», a «form of transcendence» that is «indifferent to our reasons and our projects» (Stengers, 2015, p. 47) emerges from radical ecofeminisms and feminist witchcraft (Tola, 2016). Stengers's Gaia is a deconstruction of the very idea of the Human (including Latour's *anthropos*), a challenge to the Anthropocene and the political ecologies of Western humanity.

<sup>14</sup> For a biopolitical critique of political theology see Esposito (2015).

Most likely, the fascination exerted by Latour's Gaia results from the coexistence of heterogeneous motifs, unified by the overarching attempt to rethink the apparatus of our contemporary state of nature: «Since politics has always been conducted under the auspices of nature, we have never left the state of nature» (Latour, 2004, p. 235). Latour takes up Michel Serres's programmatic return to Hobbes and ambition to rewrite the social contract as a "natural contract" (Serres, 1995). Gaia sets the stage for a new political epistemology, disclosing «a new state of nature» that is nothing else than a generalized state of war: «a war of all against all, in which the protagonists may now be not only wolf and sheep, but also tuna fish as well as CO<sub>2</sub>, sea levels, plant nodules or algae, in addition to the many different factions of fighting humans» (Latour, 2013a, p. 103). As in Serres and Hobbes, the state of nature is conceived by Latour as a primitive state of war, which requires the invention of a Leviathan as the necessary «civilizational» gesture that restores the legal framework provided by the social contract: «we realize that we can not obtain a civilized collective without composing it [...] thus searching for a new Leviathan that would come to grasp with Gaia» (ivi, p. 104). Like Behemoth, the Biblical monster that frames Hobbes's history of the English civil war, Gaia must be tamed by a new Leviathan, since she is the goddess of our contemporary ecological state of nature.

Serres's Hobbesian imaginary casts a long shadow also on the Gaia myth, which reenacts almost literally its unapologetic Eurocentrism and colonial lexicon: the state of war of every man against every man as a primitive condition to be overcome by the civilizational pact, violence as an immemorial state of nature that can reemerge and threaten the stability of the commonwealth. <sup>15</sup> Latour pushes Serres's endeavor even further, casting himself as the new Hobbes, the rescuer of Western political theology, the demiurge of a new Leviathan. Latour competes with Carl Schmitt for the title of high-priest of Western political theology, updating Schmitt's political millenarism with his "prophylactic" use of the Apocalypse (ivi, p. 111), the brutes of Hobbes with the savage naturalism and posthuman archaisms of science-studies. <sup>16</sup> Gaia «commands, orders, binds» as the secular religion of «a non-existing people» (ivi, pp. 136, 142). She does not (yet) possess the «legal quality of the *res publica*, of the State, of the great artificial Leviathan of Hobbes's invention» (ivi, p. 136) but her neutralizing function is the same: «just as Hobbes needed the state of nature to get to the social contract, we might need to accept a new state of war to envision the State of peace» (ivi, p. 114).

What I find troubling in Latour's Gaia is the rewesternizing impulse. Political animism is not, as such, a regressive neocolonial movement, a statist secular religion. <sup>17</sup> Several indigenous and decolonial thinkers are recovering nonmodern categories and ethnographic tools (see for instance Nandy, 2004 and Tuhiwai Smith, 2015). Only those who have overstated the hegemony and coherence of Western categories may believe that politics requires only a self-fashioned rationalism. The revision of the society/nature, contemporary/archaic, civilized/savages oppositions imposed by techno-scientific networks and dewesternizing movements is revealing a lifeworld in which political ecologies and indigenous knowledges cohabit, disclosing alliances between decolonial movements and internal critiques of Western modernity. <sup>18</sup> The danger is Latour's reaffirmation of a Eurocentric state of nature, with the Anthropocenic goddess of nature Gaia replacing Hobbes's savages and "a new civilized collective" – the institutions assembled for administering the cult of Gaia and addressing the new wars of the Anthropocene – prolonging Hobbes's Leviathanic thinking and artificial commonwealth.

### States of Nature

The nonmodern traits captured by Latour's Gaia show a deep affinity with the naturalistic orientation of Roberto Esposito's biopolitics (Luisetti, 2016). In

<sup>15</sup> «Suddenly we are returning to the most ancient times, whose memory has been preserved only in and through the ideas of philosophers who theorize the law, times when our cultures, saved by a contract, invented our history, which is defined by forgetting the state that preceded it» (Serres, 1995, p. 14).

<sup>16</sup> «To understand why this state of war has been generalized, it is best to turn to the writer who has defined this situation as being one, as he calls it, of exception: the toxic and unavoidable Carl Schmitt, the main expositor of "political theology"» (Latour, 2013a, p. 101).

<sup>17</sup> Latour distances himself with great emphasis from all the irrationalistic forms of paganism and ethnographic primitivism. The «reactionary movements of the twentieth century» praising paganism are «horribly mistaken about what they adore and what they abhor». Their depiction of the life of «the savages» is based on «the most prosaic exoticism» and hate of reason. Latour considers instead his political animism as a form of hyper-rationalism, and his European/universal reason as «the most civilized, most refined, most socialized, most localized, and most collective form of life there is» (Latour, 2010, p. 133).

<sup>18</sup> On decolonial relations to nature see Escobar (2009, pp. 111-155).

*Persons and Things*, Esposito highlights the procedures of purification carried out by the axiological opposition of persons and things, arguing that the body, in its manifold individual and collective occurrences, presides over a vertiginous multiplication of splittings and hierarchizations. Persons and things are the juridical and theological operators of an anthropotechnical device of exclusion and subordination; they reproduce the *summa divisio* of Roman law's *res/persona* and Christian theology's flesh/spirit.

Thinking through Nietzsche and Benjamin, Mauss and Latour, Simondon and Sloterdijk, *Persons and Things* thematizes the «archaic and postmodern encounter of persons that are not persons anymore with things that are not things anymore» (Esposito, 2014, p. 102, my English translations). The transindividual territory of the body guarantees the spatial condition of possibility for a new alliance between things and persons, nature and history, science and politics; it also offers an alternative temporal vector, the contemporaneity of a premodern connection of subjects and things: «this is a sagittal relation between origin and completion, the archaic and the actual [...] that forces the historian, and even more the philosopher, to look beyond the most visible threshold of discontinuity» (ivi, p. 99).

Esposito's "sagittal relation" between chronological strata of history cuts through the fictional linearity of history, linking apparently unrelated phenomena that belong to non-contemporaneous times. Esposito's genealogical method, which projects the premodern onto the contemporary, functions as a non-historicist description of cultural history. It corresponds to Latour's generalized "principle of symmetry", to a bracketing off of nature and society and programmatic centering of philosophical investigation on the "Middle Kingdom" of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects that proliferate through bodies and technological artifacts. As in Latour, the nonmodern plane of immanence of things reappears according to Esposito when the ontological dualisms of modernity dissipate, when the mythography of Nature and Society is replaced by a materialistic look on the plethora of sociotechnological networks.

Esposito exposes Western philosophical tradition to the same "Copernican counter-revolution" called for by Latour's "symmetrical anthropology" (Latour, 1993, p. 91), unleashing the nonmodernity of modern times and restituting subjectivity and intentionality to the silent realm of things: «in Brahmanic culture, the thing speak in first person [...] the place where the power of the thing is exercised, and before that it is metamorphosed into a person, is the body of individuals and communities, of which it becomes an internal component» (Esposito, 2014, p. 97). For both Latour and Esposito the asymmetry between nature and culture is thus a phantasmagoria that must be dispelled by a critique of Western epistemology. When the bodily mixtures of things regain their protagonism, dissolving the nature/society divide, the historical relation of past and present gives way to a non-historicist composition of archaism and actuality, of animated things and impersonal subjects. <sup>19</sup>

Latour's Gaia and Esposito's biopolitical naturalism, their embrace of archaic relations with things, bodies, and subjects, suggest a return within Western thought of animist and totemist paradigms. In order to recognize the implications of this epistemic shift, we need to carefully distinguish the generalization of mental properties, "souls", and internal psychic states attempted

<sup>19</sup> From these premises, Latour draws the conclusion that a new kind of political imagination, a Dingpolitik accompanying his Gaia cult and destituting the Realpolitik of modern political philosophy must be introduced (Latour, 2005a).

by neo-animistic perspectives from the interspecies continuity of both physicalities and interiorities presupposed by vitalist and totemic epistemologies. <sup>20</sup> The animist extension of subjective qualities to natural objects and the flattening of the «distinction between humans and other kinds of beings, as well as those between selves and objects» (Kohn, 2013, p. 7) diverges profoundly from the political mobilization of totemic lifelessness and the inert (Povinelli, 2016). As a figure of the emerging states of nature, Latour's Gaia confronts political philosophy with unprecedented questions.

<sup>20</sup> On animism as a political category for decolonial thought and poststructuralist philosophy see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's «cannibal metaphysics» (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). On the epistemology of animism and totemism see Descola (2013). On the convergence between totemic thought and the transindividual, see Karsenti (2014). Analytic philosophy has tried as well to extend "mental properties" beyond the human, in the attempt of thematizing the animacy of nonhuman beings. Current debates on new materialisms, speculative realisms, neo-vitalist transcendentalisms, and other object-oriented ontological paradigms have thus recuperated the term 'panpsychism', suggesting the existence of a Western animistic philosophia perennis, centered on the idea that «mind is a fundamental property of matter itself» and «thinking happens everywhere» (Shavero, 2015, p. 20).



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