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**Federica Giardini** teaches Political Philosophy at the University “Roma Tre”. She is the director of the Master program “Gender Studies and Policies” and has cofounded the Master program and the recent Minor Degree in “Environmental Humanities”. As the General coordinator of the IAPh Italia Research Center, she is supervising the EcoPol/Political Economics-Ecology Program. She has been working on the relational body confronting feminist difference thought, Husserlian phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis (*Relazioni. Differenza sessuale e fenomenologia*, 2004); on feminist genealogies; on commons; on social reproduction. Lately her research has been focusing on “cosmo-politics”, the transitional space blurring the boundaries between nature and politics ((*Cosmopolitiche. Ripensare la politica a partire dal kosmos*, 2013; *I nomi della crisi. Antropologia e politica*, Kluwer, 2017). She has coedited the Italian reader *Environmental Humanities. Scienze sociali, politica, ecologia*, 2021.

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# COSMOPOLITICS. IN CONVERSATION WITH ISABELLE STENGERS

Federica Giardini  
*Università Roma Tre*

# COSMOPOLÍTICA. EN CONVERSACIÓN CON ISABELLE STENGERS

## Abstract

The collaboration, the exchange, the convergences and divergences, between Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers stretched over the decades, settling in different textual forms. While in De Vries' text dedicated to Latour's work this collaboration appears only in passing; Philippe Pignarre's recent volume is entirely dedicated to it. This text intends to focus on the concept of cosmopolitics, in the use that both Stengers and Latour make of it. The issue is interesting, namely because it constitutes a point of access to Latour's thinking, enriching it with the exchanges that oriented him, but above all because it allows us to clarify in a differential way what can be understood by politics, in the perspective of the socio-environmental crisis.

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## **Keywords**

Bruno Latour; Isabelle Stengers; cosmopolitics; political ecology; situated knowledge.

## **Resumen**

La colaboración, el intercambio, las convergencias y divergencias, entre Bruno Latour e Isabelle Stengers se prolongó durante décadas, asentándose en diferentes formas textuales. Mientras que en el texto de De Vries dedicado a la obra de Latour esta colaboración sólo aparece de pasada; el reciente volumen de Philippe Pignarre está enteramente dedicado a ella. Este texto pretende centrarse en el concepto de cosmopolítica, en el uso que hacen de él tanto Stengers como Latour. La cuestión es interesante, sobre todo porque constituye un punto de acceso al pensamiento de Latour, enriqueciéndolo con los intercambios que le orientaron, pero sobre todo porque permite aclarar de manera diferencial lo que puede entenderse por política, en la perspectiva de la crisis socioambiental.

## **Palabras clave**

Bruno Latour; Isabelle Stengers; cosmopolítica; ecología política; conocimiento situado.

The collaboration, the exchange, the convergences and divergences, between Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers stretched over the decades, settling in different textual forms. From dedications “For Félix Guattari and Bruno Latour, in memory of a meeting that never took place” (Stengers, 1993) and acknowledgments: “[His] fine and demanding reading is part of a process which, for more than twenty years, has shown that agreements between sometimes divergent paths are created thanks to divergence and not in spite of it” (Stengers, 2013, 5); while Latour mixes dedication and acknowledgment in *Politics of nature*, “I shamelessly looted Stengers’ *Cosmopolitics*” (Latour 2004b: v, viii). From forewords, such as Latour’s *Stengers’ Shibolletth* (1997); up to texts written jointly, such as *Le Spynx de l’œuvre*, an introduction to the work of Etienne Souriau (2009), without forgetting the intertextual conversation through the countless footnote references.

Some perplexity therefore arises from De Vries’ text dedicated to Latour’s work (De Vries, 2016), where this collaboration appears only in passing; an omission amended by Philippe Pignarre’s recent volume, *Un double vol enchevêtré* (Pignarre, 2023), which is specifically dedicated to the relationship between the two. This relationship is formulated in terms of “a philosophical friendship”, a relationship with someone with whom “you don’t have to explain too much”, with whom “an ‘exchange’ could be possible, like a double entangled flight” (Stengers, 2006, 161), “a space of practices that is perfectly distinct from the space of scientific practices” (Stengers, 2000, 63).

Pignarre’s volume, dedicated to the complex reconnaissance of a commonality between the work of the two, indeed traces recurrences of issues as well as interlocutors; both started their research on sciences in a dialogue with Michel Serres, shared the references to American pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey, and to Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Donna Haraway – and yet, in Pignarre’s work clear divergences emerge.

For its part, this text intends to focus on the concept of cosmopolitics, on the use that both Stengers and Latour make of it. This issue is interesting, namely because it constitutes a point of access to Latour’s thinking, enriching it with the exchanges that oriented him, but above all because it allows us to clarify in a differential way what can be understood by politics, in the perspective of the socio-environmental crisis.

## Cosmopolitanism and Cosmopolitics

The term appears in texts by Latour and Stengers between the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1996-1997, Stengers published the seven volumes collected under the title *Cosmopolitics* (Stengers, 2010, 2011); Latour's earliest uses of the term occur both in conversation with Stengers (Latour, 2004) and in the field outlined by Ulrich Beck's proposal to re-actualize Kantian cosmopolitanism (Latour, 2003, 2004a). Stengers herself joined the debate at the 2003 Cerisy-La Salle Colloque - dedicated to "The emergence of cosmopolitics and the refoundation of planning thought" and to Beck's proposal - which led her to publish an article in which she also clarifies the relationship between the different concepts of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitics (Stengers 2007).

As is well known, the German sociologist Beck announces that modern, industrial society has entered a new phase (1992). In the same period of the Colloque of Cerisy-La Salle, Beck reiterates the thesis of the end of modern politics, based on the State-Nation and State-Society couples, and focuses on the question regarding which new collectives are at stake:

To discuss these questions properly, it is essential to appreciate that in world history the mingling of boundaries and cultures is not the exception but the rule. The separate worlds or spaces claimed by territorial nationalism and ethnicism are historically unreal. (...) The question for all minorities, then, is whether to assert their difference and strengthen it both internally and externally in the form of transnational networks and identities. (Beck, 2004, 447-448)

This double questioning – on history and on collectives - will be stressed by Latour's conception of cosmopolitics and affects the meaning of what he conceives as politics. On the one hand, he joins the debate on globalization, in continuity with part of his previous theses, especially the ones exposed in *We have never been Modern* (1993) - Latour then discusses cosmopolitanism in its specific aspect of a discontinuity in history. It is the Latour practicing a sort of reversed philosophy of history, which enacts an epistemological periodization of the Modern and assumes the present as a different historical time from which to deconstruct modernity itself. On the other hand, appraising Beck's social theory as "one of the most lively, creative and politically relevant forms of sociology developed in recent years" (Latour, 2003, 20), Latour specifies:

I am not debating the usefulness of a cosmopolitan social science that, beyond the boundaries of nation-states, would try to look at global phenomena using new types of statistics and inquiries. (...) for me, society has never been the equivalent of nation-state. For two reasons: the first is that the scientific networks that I have spent some time describing have never been limited to national boundaries anyway: global is largely, like the globe itself, an invention of science. The second reason is that, as disciples of Gabriel Tarde know very well, society has always meant association and has never been limited to humans. So, I have always been perfectly happy to speak, like Alphonse de Candolle, of “plant sociology” or, like Alfred North Whitehead, of “stellar societies” (Latour, 2004a, 450).

Latour sums up cosmopolitanism, in its specific philosophical-historical and sociological declination, in a series of axioms and procedures; a sort of cosmopolitical Constitution.

*The subjects of Cosmopolitics.* Abandoning the modern partitions between subject and object, and especially between Nature and Society, implies acknowledging that there is only one collective, an “association”, a gathering of associations, of both humans and non-humans. (Latour, 2004b, 41)

*Event, inclusion, and recognition.* New entities knock on the door of the existing collective, asking or pressing to become included. The appellant may be a virus, a new technology, immigrants, a threatened species. Whatever it is, the collective sees itself confronted with a multifaceted process of recognition and inclusion (Latour 2004: 102–109). These processes must be oriented by *perplexity*, that is the disposition to reconsider already existing knowledge; *consultation*, that is inclusive debate; *hierarchization*, that is a decision taking into account and selecting the multiple interests of all the actants involved; and *institution*, that is the inclusion of the new actants involved in the event, once and for all (cf. De Vries, 2016, 140). Moreover, the effect of these procedures will provide the collective with some self-image, a “scenerization of the totality” (Latour, 2004b, 137-138), that provisionally defines what is inside and outside the collective. Thus, the image provided by the modern Constitution, the image of a Society surrounded by Nature, is replaced by a distinction between what is internalized and what has been externalized.

*Flat ontology, immanence, and a reversed philosophy of history.* Latour’s argument on these new collectives leads to the empirical evidence that cosmopolitics is already

practiced, although unwarily. Going back to the Roman civilization, the example is drawn from the sewage:

The word [‘collective’] should remind us of sewage systems where networks of small, medium, and large ‘collectors’ make it possible to evacuate wastewater as well as to absorb the rain on a large city. This metaphor of the *cloaca maxima* [ancient Rome’s sewage system] suits our needs perfectly, along with all the paraphernalia of adduction, sizing, purifying stations, observation points, and manholes necessary to its upkeep. The more we associate materialities, institutions, technologies, skills, procedures, and slowdowns with the word ‘collective’ the better its use will be: the hard labor necessary for the progressive and public composition of the future unity will be all the more visible. (Latour, 2004b, 59).

*The role of sciences.* Latour assigns a specific role to the sciences in progressively composing a collective. In fact, he states that nature becomes knowable through the intermediary of the sciences; and sciences themselves are formed through networks of instruments, interventions of professions, disciplines, and protocols, are distributed via data bases, are provided with arguments through the intermediary of learned societies (Latour 2004b, 4). Moreover, without sciences – such as geology, ethology, or climatology – we would be powerless to face what, on her part, Stengers would have called the “intrusion of Gaia” (Pignarre, 2023, 157).

Latour himself extends this assumption to a political issue that he shares with Stengers, that is “to imagine a political order is always directly predicated on a certain definition of science”, as well as the criticism towards the “legal and humanitarian forms of cosmopolitanism [that] forget entirely the theory of science that has been surreptitiously used to assemble the cosmos in a peaceful manner but without due process”. (Latour, 2004a, 455)

But we could stress that, on the contrary, some different perspectives and questions about sciences arise between the two. In Latour, sciences appear as a set of knowledges and actants that are already transnational; for both Stengers and Latour it is a set of practices confronted with other practices, which are not carried out in the laboratory, in the strict sense of the term. But, while sometimes Latour gives a broad meaning to the notion of laboratory, extending it to other associations and assemblages, Stengers stresses the problematic attribution of a privilege to Science, with a capital S, with respect to knowledge of facts and truth and deals with the problem of how to prevent it from cannibalizing all knowledge, all practices.

## Cosmopolitics

In his second confrontation with Beck's cosmopolitical proposal, Latour explicitly refers to Stengers' conception and traces the differences between the two. It is an opportunity to appreciate another difference, the one between Latour and Stengers; in fact, while Latour stress in his own terms what is at stake, we can consider further aspects. First, there is an issue about identity: while the Stoic or Kantian cosmopolitanism concerns the "citizen of the cosmos" and not of a particular state, adhering to a particular religion, a particular guild, profession, or family, Stengers intends to alter the meaning of "to belong" or "to pertain" (Latour, 2004a, 454). In Latour's words, on the one hand, it seems that for Stengers the question is disidentifying politics as a solely human concern or capability – "The presence of cosmos in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take in an exclusive human club" (*ibidem*). This is precisely what, in her turn, Stengers recognizes as the task Latour is confronting (Stengers, 2007, 48); but, on the contrary, for Stengers the main and starting question is not about (dis)identification, as we will see, rather it is about situating knowledges. On the other hand, "The presence of politics in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of cosmos to mean a finite list of entities that must be taken into account" (Latour, 2004a, 454), that is, politics is associated to the liberal conception of inclusive procedures, while, as we will see, for Stengers politics entails materializing any encounter and even any conception of the issues at stake.

### Situated knowledge. Beyond a philosophy of history

At the Colloque of Cerisy, Stengers admits:

I was unaware of Kantian usage when, in 1996, I was working on the first volume of what was to become the series of seven volumes *Cosmopolitics*, this term imposed itself on me. And when I discovered that the term "cosmopolitics" affirmed the Kantian confidence in a general progress of humanity which would find expression in the authority of a "jus cosmopoliticum", it was too late. The word had taken on, for me, its own life and necessity. (Stengers, 2007, 46)

The outrage encompassed by the historians of philosophy (cf. Zarka, 2012, 379) is precisely the occasion to stress a major difference between Latour and Stengers. At a

first glance it could appear as a question of methodology, the way in which philosophy is a work on and about concepts – should they be historical reinterpretations or the creation of neologisms. However, the question is rather about “situating”.

We have seen that Latour’s ambition is to give a sort of Rawlsian general rule for the Constitution of a new multispecies-actants collective, assuming that he is speaking as... well, we do not really know, from Latour’s exposition, from where he is speaking. But on the base of his assumptions, the cosmopolitical proposal appears to be inscribed, although critically and through his reversed philosophy of history, in the Western auto-instituted canon of Modernity. On her side, Stengers claims for a word, a concept, which emerged from within her questioning, with respect to the problems she is dealing with in the present. A first divergence could be then assumed between Latour’s philosophical-historical and Stengers’ genealogical approach - in the Foucauldian sense, power and conflict indeed define what and who can be heard -:

those who know present themselves as claiming that they know what they know, that they are capable of knowing in a mode independent of their “ecological” situation, independent of what their *oikos* imposes on them to take into account or instead allows them to ignore. [The question is to] eventually modify (in the mode of the event) not the reasons but the way in which the reasons of those who are discussing present themselves. (Stengers, 2007, 53)

Situated knowledge is far from a kind of Rawlsian multispecies and actants “overlapping consensus”; it implies not being proprietary of a word, transmitting the true signification of it, but rather showing the different questions at stake that underlie the use of a word. In fact, while Latour has no problem to consider positively some aspects of cosmopolitanism, Stengers finally states that:

I must therefore affirm that the cosmopolitical proposal as I am going to present it explicitly denies any kinship with Kant, or with ancient thought. The “cosmos”, as I will try to convey its meaning, has little to do with the world of which the ancient citizen claimed to be at home everywhere, nor with a finally unified earth, of which everyone would be a citizen. Quite the opposite. (Stengers, 2007, 46)

Another, and related, divergent convergency concerns what Latour calls “perplexity”, which in Stengers appears as an *attitude* to slowing down, a situated “mode of life”:

How can we present a proposal whose aim is not to say what is, nor to say what should be, but to make people think, and which requires no other verification than that: the way in which it will have ‘slowed down’ reasoning, created the opportunity for a slightly different sensitivity in relation to the problems and situations that mobilize us? (...) This question is all the more important since the “cosmopolitical” proposition, as I will try to characterize it, is not primarily addressed to “generalists”. It can only make sense in concrete situations, where practitioners work (Stengers, 2007, 45).

While Latour’s perplexity pertains to the discursive realm, both as the set of knowledges and theories that constitute it and as a mode of the regime of enunciation, in Stengers knowledge itself appears altogether as a material and embodied activity that affects the constituting situations.

## What is politics in cosmopolitics?

We could start examining the differential approach to politics of Latour and Stengers in a first immediate way, as Pignarre himself does:

Latour and Stengers do not do politics in the same way. They do not seek the same allies. Thus, Latour often exasperated the Marxists (...) Stengers has multiplied her contacts with activists of the most diverse causes, from the electro-sensitive to the GMO plant pullers and the zadists. She has had the neo-pagan witch Starhawk translated into French, with whom she affirms her closeness, and she has praised the work of Houria Bouteldja, one of the founders of the Indigènes de la République Party (...). Latour has more often kept his distance from any direct involvement. (Pignarre, 2023, 13)

While the direct experience of the political questions as they arise in a constituting collective is not less important, this aspect has to be intertwined with the theoretical effects it produces. Moreover, in this respect the conversation among the two appears intensified.

In fact, as we have seen, Latour’s cosmopolitical issue stems from the definition of the political subject. The definition draws on his diagnosis of the end of society and the need for *Reassembling the social* (2005). Association is gathering different actants, that are no more organized along the partition opposing subjects and objects, society and

nature, and so on. Along these same lines we find a reference to Stengers' "ecology practices", that Latour presents as a different and yet equivalent theoretical proposal (2004b, 137-138). While Latour will continue to develop this proposal until the final idea of an "ecological class" (Latour & Schultz, 2022), as we will see, it is worth considering closely what is at stake for Stengers.

First, the focus is indeed different. Stengers' starting point, formulated as the ecology of practices, entails "inventing ways in which different practices, responding to divergent obligations, could learn to co-exist". (Stengers, 2007, 48)

Here the interesting point is not only that Stengers has a more concrete idea of what is heterogeneity *as a process*, but also that – as she stated in the seventh volume of *Cosmopolitics*, significantly entitled *The Curse of Tolerance (Pour en finir avec la tolerance)* – conflict has to be taken into account, firstly in its generative effects:

No unifying body of knowledge will ever demonstrate that the neutrino of physics can coexist with the multiple worlds mobilized by ethnopsychiatry. Nonetheless, such coexistence has a meaning, and it has nothing to do with tolerance or disenchanting skepticism. Such beings can be collectively affirmed in a "cosmopolitical" space where the hopes and doubts and fears and dreams they engender collide and cause them to exist. (Stengers, 2010, VII-VIII)

It is not by chance that her conversation with Beck concerns his *Pouvoir et contre-pouvoir à l'ère de la mondialisation* (Beck, 2003, quoted in Stengers, 2007, 67). In fact, the second relevant difference concerns "the political" itself. While Latour aims to include new actants in the realm of politics – thus replicating the canonical frame of a reassembled society responding to a new political constitution –, Stengers is aware that "the category of politics I was working with is part of our tradition, draws on the resources of invention specific to that tradition" (Stengers, 2007, 48). Thus "the problem of the ecology of practices can finally become worthy of the awe-inspiring word that gives its name to this series: cosmopolitics. For the word signals the path along which the question is to be constructed, that of the (re)invention of politics" (Stengers, 2011, 355-357).

Moreover, Stengers is aware that politics is about *a world*, its questions, threats, problems that, even on a planetary scale, are nonetheless expressed by human knowledges, concern facts produced by human technological apparatuses, and are associated to evaluations linked to human practices. Along the same lines, Stengers point out the

different way in which Latour formulates the question, that is not about the anthropological (dis)identification of politics, but rather about the “enunciation regimes” of the different actants, and – as we have seen – about the modes of taking them into account, thus betraying the implicit assumption that politics is resumed in its western liberal representative version (“the fetishism of representative politics”, already advanced with the ‘Parliament of things’, denounced by Guilibert & Monferrand, 2023).

In the perspective of a different realm of questions, cosmopolitics assuming a more than human reality, Stengers’ proposition avoids what instead in Latour’s flat ontology appear as a view from nowhere. Cosmopolitics is not beyond politics, “it designates our access to a question that politics cannot appropriate” (Stengers, 2011, 355-357).

## Cosmopolitics and political ecology

We could say, assuming for a moment Latour’s rhetorical style, that cosmopolitics is the immanent utopia of political ecology, which can be summed up in a final consideration ‘there has never been a political ecology’. Indeed, in *Politics of nature* the question is proposed precisely in these terms – “What is to be done with political ecology? Nothing. What is to be done? Political ecology!” is the very first line of the book (Latour, 2004b, 1). Cosmopolitics is the word naming the same set of actions and entities, once the fallacious modern partition distributing the human and the non-human collapses. We must also recall the fact that non-human – i.e. the modern concept of nature – is represented within the scientific production of knowledge and techniques, thus acquiring “ecology” in the political ecology to the scientific realm: “Ecology, as its name indicates, has no direct access to nature as such; it is a “-logy” like all the scientific disciplines” (Latour, 2004b, 4). This assumption resonates with the conclusion of the book in which Latour invites us to consider that cosmopolitics has always been practiced. It is quite interesting to compare this assumption with the episode, told by Stengers, concerning the immanence approach:

Souvenir. Here, at Cerisy, Michel Callon came to speak about ‘hybrid forums’, that emblematic figure of the transformation of a situation into a collective ‘matter of concern’. Everything he said was very accurate, very relevant, very well thought out, but this did not prevent the stampede. Everyone knew, recognized and was already practicing. A museum could be presented as a hybrid forum, an interdisciplinary conference could be presented as a hybrid forum, and even

the commissions in charge of the five-year plan. And one economist said triumphantly: “But we know this well: the hybrid forum par excellence is the market! Is the market not in fact what brings together all those concerned, all those who have an interest in a situation, all those whose contradictory interests give the situation its relief and finally, without external arbitration, bring out the solution that will bring them all together? (Stengers, 2007, 56)

This anecdote, as well as the fact that Stengers sees and recounts it as a problem, allows to pose a first order problem with respect to Latour’s assumptions – an equivocation about immanence. If the perspective at stake is the “art of concepts”, of which cosmopolitics is an example, the production of a concept has to be considered as a force among forces, modifying the situation or the assemblage where it operates. In Latour, on the contrary, some undeclared modern idea of concept as representation seems to persist – concept seems to work *within* the represented situation. Referring to the differential relation with Stengers, we could say that in Latour concept as a production of “situated knowledge” remains unnoticed.

The same problem arises with Latour and Schultz’ proposal of an “ecological class” (Latour, Schultz 2022, 59-60). In a similar quite static conception of present as immanence, the ecological class seems to designate a technocratic assemblage:

A technocratic class composed of “activists” but above all “industrials” and “inventors”, good leaders aware of their dependence on the planet’s habitability. After the “parliament of things”, we should now rely on an ecological class, i.e., an elite capable of adequately embodying the needs of the Earth and its inhabitants. The extension of this class is not clear, but it certainly includes ‘innovators dispossessed of their capacity for invention’, ‘intellectuals and scholars’ who would be ‘all [...] ready to oppose their rationality to the knowledge economy’, ‘engineers broken in their desire for innovation’. (Guillibert & Monferrand, 2023)

The reversed philosophy of history about modernity as well as the equivocation on immanence lead to the criticism of some who believe that Latour’s work avoids the critical analyses of the economic and political power and processes of production, which is capitalism, all along with their technoscientific effects and therefore ends up praising:

a moderately progressive intelligentsia that realizes how the situation calls for radical intervention but stubbornly believes that the world in which it has prospered,

and which for it therefore constitutes the best of all possible worlds, can be safeguarded in its fundamental coordinates: as if, to put it in Marxian terms, the means of production were convertible to other ends without calling into question the relations of production that forged them. (Pellizzoni, 2019, 156)

On her side, Stengers, in considering cosmopolitics as a problem of an ecology of practices deals immediately with the problem of partiality, which is one of the true effects of immanence. Moreover, partiality, or being situated, implies

an “etho-ecological” perspective affirming the inseparability of the *ethos*, the way of behaving proper to a being, and the *oikos*, the habitat of this being, the way in which this habitat satisfies or counteracts the requirements associated with such and such an *ethos*, or even offers new *ethos* the opportunity to be actualized. (Stengers, 2007, 52)

Another major divergence with Latour thus appears. In cosmopolitics it is not the flat linear network of different actants that is confronted – indeed, even if reassembled, it echoes the “society of individuals” – rather, it has the material consistency of the forms and conditions of living. At the same time this divergence allows to reintroduce the consideration of inequalities not only, as Latour puts it, in terms of actants prediscursive claims, their discursive translation, and the related processes of recognition, but also in terms of conflicting worlds, that is conflicting modes of action, organization and modes of human production.

While in Latour the liberal, utilitarian, and representative conception of politics remains unquestioned - actants could be called “stakeholders” as well -, Stengers considers politics in a dynamic materialistic perspective. Ethics itself is reconsidered from a situated perspective. The ecology of practices allows to consider that ethical evaluation has to be transformed in “the question of what counts for the mode of life” of different types of being (Stengers 2007: 38), in the dynamics and the becoming that constitute, by a plurality of encounters and conflicts, each *oikos*, each *environment*.

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