

In Parliament with Things

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As we seek to find ways of governing the planet according to interests that are not limited by human greed..., some have suggested a parliament that includes non-human voices.... At first it is difficult to see beyond the medieval comedy of endangered Amazonian forests tapping microphones to be heard above the bellowing megafauna. Yet, such a mind change is necessary if the planet is not to be speedily consumed by the interests of short-term capital.

Kevin Murray¹

Are you ready, and at the price of what sacrifice, to live the good life together? That this highest of moral and political questions could have been raised, for so many centuries, by so many bright minds, *for human only* without the nonhumans that make them up, will soon appear, I have no doubt, as extravagant as when the Founding Fathers denied slaves and women the vote.

Bruno Latour²Nonhuman Participants

My aim in this paper is to contribute to a model of democracy that acknowledges the participation of nonhumans. I want to bring to the foreground a form of political engagement that is already practiced by nonhumans but, because of its relative neglect in theorizations of democracy, is less carefully integrated into human aims and democratic ideals than it might be. I include in the category “nonhumans” entities and forces that are natural (for example, anthrax spores, daisies, wind currents, bird or whale songs), as well as those understood to be technological (for example, cellular telephones, SCUD missiles, genetically modified seed corn, the roar of jet engines). Contemporary Euro-American societies are very good at making refined and complex, sometimes beautiful, things. But social theorists have lagged behind in acknowledging the political participation of these things. My contention is that both natural forces and cultural commodities possess powers — such as agency, drive, efficacy — that have significant affinities to powers possessed by human body-selves. I see humans as themselves materialities inextricably enmeshed with nonhuman materialities: the groupings thus formed vary from place to place and even from moment to moment, but humans can operate only if accompanied by a bevy of nonhumans (from foodstuffs to intestinal bacteria to the metal/plastic/silicon of tools). It might even be said that humans need

¹Kevin Murray, “The Cabinet of Helmut Lueckenhausen,” *Craft Victoria*, 1999, 17-19.

²Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard, 1999, p. 297.

nonhumans to function more than nonhumans need humans, for many nonhumans -- from a can rusting at the bottom of a landfill to a colony of spores in Antarctica -- fester or live beyond the proximity of humans.

If human life is inextricably enmeshed with that of nonhumans, and if the powers of the co-participants to some degree overlap, then the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor a group of humans but what Gilles Deleuze calls an “assemblage” or what Bruno Latour terms a “collective.”³ These are networks of humans and nonhumans; of persons, places, and things; of animals, vegetables, and minerals. A collective, says Latour, is an ensemble enclosed by a porous membrane, and so is a relatively open system. A collective is functioning whole that is continually disrupted by, and periodically reforming in response to, the entrance and exit of new participants or “actants.” Unlike the word “actor,” an actant can be either human or nonhuman: it is that which has sufficient coherence to perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations. Sometimes, says Latour, as in laboratory experiments, a proto-actant emerges that does not yet have a stabilized identity and is describable only as a list of effects or performances. Here the term “name of action” is more appropriate than actant, for “only later does one deduce from these performances a competence,” that is, an entity congealed enough to engage to make a difference in the situation.⁴

My claim that materialities of all kinds -- human and nonhuman -- are vital actants is part of a larger ontological imaginary. This onto-story, which I have elsewhere described as an “enchanted materialism,” pictures the world as a web of lively and mobile matter-forms of varying degrees of complexity.⁵ It figures “agency” as the (differentially distributed) capacity to make a difference in the world without knowing quite what one is doing. It projects multiple sites of agency, including the “intentions” of human and nonhuman animals, the “temperament” of a brain’s chemistry, the “momentum” of a social movement, the “mood” of an architectural form, the “propensity” of a family, the “style” of a corporation, the “drive” of a sound-field, and the “decisions” of molecules at far-from-equilibrium states.⁶ In developing this materialism, I have drawn upon Henry Thoreau’s notion of the Wild;

³Unlike the term society, collective “refers to the associations of humans and nonhumans. While a division between nature and society renders invisible the political process by which the cosmos is collected in one livable whole, the word ‘collective’ makes this process central.” (*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 304)

⁴*Pandora’s Hope*, pp. 303 and 308.

⁵See Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁶For good discussions of the last see Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of*

Lucretius's idea of a swerve (*clinamen*) or directionally unpredictable motility intrinsic to matter; a non-Newtonian picture of nature as matter-flow, as developed in the work of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*; a complexity theory account of the auto-poetic capacities of some physical systems; and the Spinozist idea that bodies have a natural propensity to form collectivities. I have been working on a notion of materiality that provides an alternative to the historical materialism of Marx, to conceptions of matter as mechanistic or inert, and to the anthropocentrism of some feminist theories of embodiment. How is it that material things have the power to provoke and alter humans actions? How does one give theoretical expression to the moments of recalcitrance and vitality possessed by nonhumans?

My recent focus has been upon describing these moments of nonhuman agency, or what I have called "thing-power." Thing-power is the curious ability of "inanimate" things to animate humans: to surprise us, impinge upon us, push/pull us against our will, and to propel us to engage in movements, moods or utterances that we otherwise would not have. Relevant here are the "autopoetic" processes of nonhuman physical systems -- instances where one rather than another chemical path is chosen, an outcome that could not have been predicted and cannot be explained through the notion of an automatic functioning or regulative natural process, but is better described through terms like "decision" and "spontaneous choice."⁷ This paper is an attempt to think about the implications of such a lively materialism for *democratic theory*. In so doing, I focus less on the power of things themselves, a power not quite reducible to our projections and conceptualizations of it, and more upon the intra-action⁸ between humans and nonhumans.

The contention that a theory of radical democracy ought not to restrict its purview to humans alone may strike some as "exotic," as Lars Tonder delicately put the point in response to my proposal for this panel. But the aura of exoticism fades, I think, once it can be shown how much a theory of democracy (i.e., an account of what

Nature, Free Press, 1997; Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*, Bantam Books, 1984; and Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History*, Swerve Editions, 2000.

⁷I've developed this argument in "Thing-Power: Toward an Ecological Materialism," forthcoming, *Political Theory*.

⁸I borrow the term "intra-action" from Karen Barad, who coins it "to signify the inseparability of 'objects' and 'agencies of observation' (in contrast to 'interaction,' which reinscribes the contested [subject-object] dichotomy)." See Karen Barad, "Scientific Literacy ---> Agential Literacy," in *Feminist Science Studies*, ed. Maralee Mayberry, Banu Subramaniam, Lisa H. Weasel, Routledge, 2001, p. 232.

counts as meaningful democratic participation, and of who or what constitutes the *demos*) is animated by an implicit set of ontological figurations, distinctions, and rankings. Democratic theory today rests to a great extent upon an onto-story wherein humans are radically distinguished from other entities, upon a scenography of subjects vs. objects, of matter (It) that receives form (I or Mind). In this world picture, *human* forms of communication (especially language), *human* forms of intelligence, and *human* forms of creativity or organization, are given such pride of place that the centrality of humanity appears not as an interesting choice fraught with implications but as an inevitability, as, say, an irrevocable fact of consciousness or perception. Such anthropocentrism helps to shape the range of ethical and policy concerns taken up by theories of democracy. It has, invaluable, focused attention on issues of participatory inequality among human groups, especially economic and racialized classes. But to me it also lacks thick descriptive power, for its image of political life as one where active (or potentially active but currently disempowered) human subjects confront passive (or in the case of technology dangerously autonomous) nonhuman objects does not ring true to the high-tech, commodity-laden, germ-infused world in which we are exquisitely enmeshed.

The two panels organized by Lasse Thomassen and Lars Tonder for this conference are structured around the distinction between an “ontology of lack” and an “ontology of abundance.” Representative of the former is the work of Ernesto Laclau, which Thomassen and Tonder present as focused around the idea that political exclusion is constitutive of inclusion, that is, of the creation of an inside. The heterogeneous remainder - in Hegelian terms, the existence exceeding the concept - corresponds to the lack between universal and particular. The universal can only be represented by a particular, and there will be an exclusion of heterogeneity because the particular representing the whole is never adequate to its task. The expression of the remainder is the gaps in the social order or in the conceptual distinctions of a theory...⁹

By contrast, the focus for theories of abundance, as exemplified by the work of William Connolly, is the idea that “politics is always in the process of becoming otherwise. This means that political formations like the State are never stable or fixed, but always face the challenge of a network from which creative intensities are flowing.”¹⁰

⁹Lasse Thomassen and Lars Tonder, “Negotiating Inclusion Between Lack and Abundance,” unpublished paper, p. 2.

¹⁰Thomassen and Tonder, p. 3.

It seems to me that either of these two ontologies could be organized around an anthropocentric focus, though this choice is harder to sustain within an ontology of abundance. There, all entities are pictured as participating in various states of becoming and thus tend to over-reach their current form, periodically fomenting what Latour calls the “slight surprise of action.” This focus on process, on becoming, makes it less salient to distinguish sharply between distinct types of parties to the action, between, that is, human and nonhuman participants.¹¹ In an ontology of becoming, it is *action* that acts as much as an individual *agent*. As Latour puts the point, “whenever we make something *we* are not in command, we are slightly overtaken by the action: every builder knows that,” and the nonhuman forces and materialities that slightly overtake our intentions are in turn slightly overtaken by us, by “our agency, [by]... the *clinamen* of our action.”¹² Henri Bergson makes a related point when he suggests that we substitute this grammatical formulation: “The child becomes the man” with this one: “There is becoming from the child to the man.”¹³

Perhaps I can intimate the connection between a democratic theory and an ontological imaginary by looking briefly at the concept of “democratic association” in Mark Warren’s recent important book, *Democracy and Association*. Warren affirms Tocqueville’s judgment that voluntary associations (neighborhood groups, religious congregations, bowling leagues) are crucial to a vibrant democratic culture. “The concept of association,” he writes, “evokes the possibilities of collective action, but in a way that retains social (as opposed to legal/bureaucratic or market) modes of mediation among people, through language, norms, shared purposes and agreements.”¹⁴ I share Warren’s interest in non-state and non-electoral practices of self-governance, and I agree that “even today democracy might be re-thought and even radicalized within the vast array of participatory spaces that large-scale,

¹¹William Connolly suggests something close to this in chapter 3 of *Neuropolitics*, Minnesota, 2002. Though he does not consider what a democracy of things and humans might look like, he draws upon Nietzsche and Ilya Prigogine to “complicate” the nature-culture divide.

¹²*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 281.

¹³“In the second proposition, ‘becoming’ is a subject. It comes to the front. It is the reality itself; childhood and manhood are then only possible stops, mere view of the mind; we now have to do with the objective movement itself and no longer with its cinematographical imitation. But the first manner of expression is alone conformable to our habits of language.” (Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Dover, 1998, 313.)

¹⁴Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Association*, Princeton 2001, p. 8.

complex and differentiated societies now offer...”¹⁵ But I am also struck by the way Warren’s account discounts the part played by nonhuman entities (e.g., a building, a crucifix, an inch of rainfall) in political associations. This exclusion of a whole set of operatives is normal within an ontology that assigns political agency to only one side of a human-nonhuman divide. For example, Warren’s model of communication, of what counts as communication rather than noise, is restricted to the (orchestrated) sounds emerging from the mouths of humans:

In contrast to markets and bureaucracies, association is the form of social organization that thrives on talk, normative agreement, cultural similarity, and shared ambitions -- that is, forms of communication that are rooted in speech, gesture, self-presentation...¹⁶

“Speech, gesture, self-presentation:” while there is no necessity that these be conceived as exclusively human activities, they are imagined by Warren within the frame of a communicative rationality unique to human language users/use.¹⁷

In what follows, I will try to show how a notion like democratic association or participation might meaningfully be extended to include nonhumans once such terms are located within an ontology that reduces the salience of the distinction between humans and nonhumans. In this onto-tale, the matter of any materiality (be it the assemblage that is a lump of iron, a human body, or a household) is a vital and dynamic force: there is no instance of it that can be described as passive or inert. As Latour puts it, nonhumans “deserve better” than to be treated as mere “things,” “they deserve to be housed in our intellectual culture as full-fledged social actors.”¹⁸ My strategy will be to re-work two concepts central to democratic theory. First, the notion of *demos*, of who/what constitutes the agents who/that participate in self-governance: Who qualifies for the *demos*? What can the *demos* do? -- can it act only to disrupt and expose a wrong, or is it capable of more positive achievements? Second, the idea of “participation” itself, of the nature, or better, the *rhythm*, of the activity called participation, a rhythm-flow that both gives

¹⁵Warren, p. 13.

¹⁶Warren, p. 39.

¹⁷For accounts of nonhuman animal speech and self-presentation, see, for example, Frans DeWaal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*, Harvard, 1996 and Theodore Barber, *The Human Nature of Birds*, Penguin, 1993.

¹⁸*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 214.

“participation” the effectivity proper to it and limits its powers. How ought we to understand the workings of “participation”? What does this act entail, how do its outcomes emerge, and what relationship do its effects bear to human aims and intentions?

To help address these questions, I consider two democratic theories. The first comes from Jacques Ranciere, for whom the essence of democracy (and politics per se) is the eruption of those who protest their exclusion, an exclusion that is constitutive of the order. Here the democratic act par excellence is when “the part of those who have no part” expose the contingency of the “partition of the sensible” or the ontological frame that renders some groups and acts visible and locates others below the threshold of note. The essence of the *demos* is, for Ranciere, its capacity to barge in, to reject the order’s claim to have accounted for all parties. This is, I claim, a capacity that nonhumans too possess. The second theory of democracy I consider is that of Bruno Latour, for whom the *demos* is a productive and creative force with an inherent capacity to negotiate settlements, or build a “cosmos,” a settlement that is never fully predictable or perfectly just. Latour insists that nonhumans and humans together function as the vital actants of, the active participants in, the project of democracy. I appreciate the role of disruption and interruption that Ranciere emphasizes as the key to democracy. But I side with Latour in extending the capacity for disruption to nonhumans, and in adding a dimension of positive action to the democratic agenda.

The Eruptive Demos

For Ranciere, democracy is not one kind of social organization among others; it does not refer to a way of arranging and managing “places, powers, and functions.” He labels such activities “the police.”¹⁹ Democracy has nothing of the police about it, but is, rather, “the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies... It is the name of what comes and interrupts the smooth working of this order...”²⁰ This destructive force is

¹⁹“The essence of the police is the principle of saturation; it is a mode of the partition of the sensible that recognizes neither lack nor supplement. As conceived by ‘the police,’ society is a totality comprised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces.... The political is what disturbs this order by introducing either a supplement or a lack.” (Jacques Ranciere, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Ranciere,” with David Panagia, *diacritics* 30.2 (2000) 113-126, p. 124.)

²⁰Jacques Ranciere, *Dis-agreement*, translated by Julie Rose, Minnesota, 1999, p. 99.

not quite blind or wholly random in expression, but is a kind of theatrical act: it is the “construction” of “a polemical scene so that the ‘noises that come out of ... [the excluded individual’s] mouths could count as argumentative utterances...”²¹ What such a scene stages is a very specific confrontation: that between the order, with its hierarchical distribution of rights and privileges, and the sheer fact of “the equality of speaking beings.”²² These performances declare “the ultimate secret of any social order, the pure and simple equality of anyone and everyone: there is no natural principle of domination by one person over another.”²³

The *demos* engages in a distinctly *political* act when it bursts in and presents itself as qualified to join the group of parties to the debate. “One does not practice democracy except under the form of these *mise-en-scenes* that reconfigure the relations of the visible and the sayable.”²⁴ What distinguishes *political* exchange from other forms of inter-action, then, is not the aim of consensus but the existence of a fundamental *lack* of agreement about the number and form of those parties to count as parties to any exchange. The political or democratic event -- Ranciere equates these -- is the revelation of the existence of a “part” of the community that has been left out of the reckoning of who are the “parties” to the debate. “Politics ceases wherever ... the whole of the community is reduced to the sum of its parts with nothing left over.”²⁵ Politics is the introduction *by* the *demos*, of a new political subject now proclaimed *as* the *demos*; it is the making-visible of this actor within “the field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible.”²⁶ Politics happens when the invisible left-overs, the remainders ignored in the official count of disputants, finally make themselves apparent.

I want to look more closely at Ranciere’s *demos* in order to consider whether nonhumans might be

²¹“Dissenting Words,” p. 125.

²²*Dis-agreement*, p. 33. Democracy is the “staging of the very contradiction between police logic and political logic,” as when the feminist Jeanne Deroin presented herself, in 1849, “as a candidate for a legislative election in which she cannot run.” (41)

²³*Dis-agreement*, p. 79. Democracy happens when the incommensurability between “the order of the inegalitarian distribution of social bodies” and “the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general” becomes visible. (42)

²⁴“Dissenting Words,” p. 125.

²⁵*Dis-agreement*, p. 123.

²⁶*Dis-agreement*, p. 99.

recognized as political participants within it. Let me examine first the character of the activity proper to the *demos*. There are two sets of verbs that Ranciere uses to describe this activity. The first concern nay-saying or refusal: resistance, dissent, dissensus, objection, repudiation, rejection. The *demos*, for example, negates the existing “partition of the sensible” or the way the world is carved up and accounted for. It is reasonable, I think, to claim that this negative power is possessed by things as well as humans. In fact, a passive and non-negotiable recalcitrance or defiance (with regard to human aims) is often cited as the very essence of thinghood, as, for example, the rock of Sisyphus’s labor. The refusing-power of things is also a fundamental assumption within the scientific method: Latour, for example, describes how soil and plant samples from a research trip to Amazonia either agree or refuse to serve as “representative guarantors” or “silent witnesses” to the hypotheses of soil scientists and botanists. Latour, however, emphasizes how this confirmation/denial is *also* practiced by humans, in which case we more readily view it as an activity rather than a passive or automatic function. Counter to the prejudice of a radical qualitative divide between humans and nonhumans, Latour speaks of a symmetry between a particular soil sample and the geographer Heloisa Filizolas who, as maintainer of the field notebook “acts as a guarantor of the standardization of experimental protocols...”²⁷

Ranciere also uses a second set of verbs to describe the behavior of the *demos*. These are the more violent, and less passively resistant, actions of “eruption,” “interruption,” and “disruption.” “Politics is a specific *rupture* in the logic of *arche*. It does not simply presuppose the *rupture* of the ‘normal’ distribution of positions... It also requires a *rupture* in the idea that there are dispositions ‘proper’ to such classifications.”²⁸ Davide Panagia, in a recent interview with Ranciere, describes this rupturing as a “speaking out of turn in a cacophonous manner.”²⁹ Here again, nonhumanity too seems capable of wielding this power. Indeed, the rupture verbs draw upon an image of those sublime forces in nature (volcanos, whirlwinds, sexual drives) that overwhelm reason, speech, and comprehension.

In thinking about whether nonhumans might be recognized as participants in the *demos*, we might also look

²⁷*Pandora’s Hope*, pp. 34, 46.

²⁸Jacques Ranciere, “Ten Theses,” *theory & event* 5:3, Thesis 3, my emphasis.

²⁹Davide Panagia, “*Ceci n’est pas un argument: An Introduction to the Ten Theses*,” *theory & event*, 5:3 (2001), 5.

at what relation Ranciere's *demos* bears to the rest of the society, its social standing. The *demos* has a status below that of the reviled or abjected; the *demos* consists of those entities so disenfranchised that they are not even on the official list of disenfranchised subjects. William Connolly too made this point when he spoke of the need for an "ethos of critical responsiveness":

The responsiveness in question ... is anticipatory.... in that it responds to a movement to pluralize even before the constituency in question has become fully consolidated into a recognized, positive identity. For the positive identity is an effect at the end of a political struggle, not quite a fact or implicit concept at its beginning.... Each pluralizing movement, if and as it succeeds, migrates from an abject, abnormal, subordinate, or obscure Other *subsisting* in a nether world *under* the register of justice to a positive identity now *existing* on the register of justice/injustice.³⁰

Though Ranciere sometimes describes the activity of the *demos* as a kind of theater or activity that requires more self-consciousness than that associated with volcanos or soil samples, the *demos* does not enact a particularly subtle or refined plot. The *demos* bursts onto the stage and bluntly proclaims the equality of all speaking beings. The gruff inelegance of its utterance is a function of the fact that the *demos* must labor to be heard at all, for it is still the victim of the Platonic prejudice against it as a repellent group of noise-making animals, in contrast to men in possession of *logos*.³¹ For Ranciere, the *demos*, as a group of "floating subjects" forced to live below the threshold of political agency as defined by "the police," is in fact the *only* entity capable of political action, for politics consists precisely in the rearing up of this nether-worldly group, a rearing up which reveals sounds to be voices.³² The *demos*, as "a part of the community that identifies with the whole in the very name of the wrong that makes it

³⁰William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Minnesota, 1995, p. 184. Connolly, unlike Ranciere, treats a pluralist democracy as a politics in which interdependence and tension is maintained between existing pluralist settlements and new drives to "pluralization."

³¹"The people is the name ... of this immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order is symbolized by dooming the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing [only] pleasure or pain." *Dis-agreement*, p. 22.

³²The example Ranciere likes to give of this irruption onto the scene is the activity of the plebians of Aventine Hill, who forced the patricians to relate to them as if they had intelligence, as if they were worthy of discoursing with. The plebs erected "a sphere for the name of the people to appear," carving out "in the heart of the city [a]... place where liberty is to be exercised, ... where the power of the *demos* that brings off the part of those who have no part is to be exercised." (*Dis-agreement*, p. 66).

the *other* party,”³³ reveals that there has been a miscount (which is *fundamental* to the police function) of the number of possible or even potential parties to disputes. The *demos* is the impossible sound of the inaudible, the inexplicably presence of invisible; the *demos* is “neither the sum of the population nor the disfavored element within,” but “an excessive part --- the whole of those who are nothing, who do not have specific properties allowing them to exercise power.”³⁴ Yes. But could not this description of an “excessive part” -- which exists and exerts a force but is not yet recognized as either entity or actant -- apply to nonhumans as well as humans? It is worth noting many of the discursive interruptions Ranciere valorizes -- the outbursts of enslaved, female, or gay people -- were once themselves treated as the noises of creatures below the threshold of viable political agency.

Could a tree or a viral epidemic or a subtle change in climate burst onto the political scene to protest the “partition of the sensible” (in particular, the partition dividing those capable of politics from those for whom the category simply does not apply)? Can things raise objections to a wrong? Ranciere’s answer is no. In part because *the* wrong which the *demos* proclaims is the unequal treatment of *equals*. His identification of the *demos* (and politics itself) with the principle of *equality*, specifically, the equal possession of the power of speech, rather than, say, a functional similarity in modes of communication, restricts the *demos* to humans. Nonhumans are not *equal* to humans in their capacity for (human) speech, though in my view this lack of equivalence does not justify the exclusion of nonhumans from the possibility of political participation. The judgment of whether or not to count nonhumans as political participants is partly shaped by the ontological imaginary at work: like Warren’s “association,” Ranciere’s *demos* is shaped by the image of a radical divide between, on the one hand, humans, who are always worthy (but not always bestowed with) the status of subjects and, on the other hand, nonhumans, which are objects rightly subordinated to subjects. A more “radical” theory of democracy might soften this distinction and see it as much less *politically* relevant, obviating the need to exclude nonhumans from those “contentious objects whose mode of presentation is not homogeneous with the ordinary mode of existence of the objects thereby identified.”³⁵ The *demos* protests its exclusion from the political scenography. Ranciere bars nonhumans from the

³³*Dis-agreement*, p. 62, my emphasis.

³⁴“Dissenting Words,” p. 124.

³⁵*Dis-agreement*, p. 104.

demos and thus from the political per se by restricting the *form* that protest may take: noises must be shown to be “argumentative utterances.”³⁶ The wrong done is the unequal treatment of beings who equally possess the power of (human) *speech*. Politics happens when the *demos* is suddenly appears as “beings engaged in a collective destiny through words.”³⁷

In defining the *demos* as a linguistically competent, though currently unrecognized practitioner of human language, Ranciere both demeans the non-linguistic elements of human feeling and action and excludes nonhumans from political participation. When he says that “politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account,”³⁸ his formulation leaves room for the possibility that nonhumans might be included in the *demos*, that nonhumans too have the power to stage some scene to get themselves heard. But Ranciere then forbids this particular re-partitioning of the sensible when he restricts what it takes to stage that scene to demonstrations of one’s possession of *logos* or rational speech. Though he challenges the Habermasian model of communicative action because it “presupposes the partners in communicative exchange to be pre- constituted” whereas “the particular feature of political dissensus is that the partners are no more constituted than is the object or the very scene of discussion,”³⁹ Ranciere shares with Habermas an anthropocentric prejudice. They share a model of participation that restricts itself to the range of powers made possible by a distinctly human kind of embodiment — indeed their understanding of what participation entails is formed on the basis of a model of linguistic competence. And this when language-use is but one of the many modes of *human* communication.

The Self-Brewing Demos

In a double contrast to Ranciere’s view, Bruno Latour defines democracy not only as the (negative) power of disruption or the violent because long-ignored accusation of a miscount, but also as the (productive) activity of

³⁶“Dissenting Words,” p. 125, my emphases.

³⁷*Dis-agreement*, p. 25, my emphasis.

³⁸*Dis-agreement*, p. 27.

³⁹“Ten Theses,” thesis 8, paragraph 24.

forming a working whole or “cosmos” -- a cosmos that is an assemblage of human *and* nonhuman actants. This cosmos is a construction, but not merely a *social* construction; not, that is, something made by and of humans only. Rather, “humans, for millions of years, have extended their social relations to other actants with which, with whom, they have swapped many properties, and with which, with whom, they form collectives.”⁴⁰ The *demos* is one such collective.

Latour agrees with Ranciere that democratic theory must contend with the “demotic hatred” espoused by Plato. This is an aesthetic distaste for that which is large in volume, prevalent, or common, for things that form only large groups, only come in the jumbo-size. The opposite of this gross quantity is the singular and rarified quality of that which is above-the-fray and thereby deemed both beautiful and true, e.g., Reason, the *logos*, or natural law. Also like Ranciere, Latour defends the disorder of democratic politics, an activity understood not as the application of fixed and abstract principles but as the trials and errors of “clothed and living bodies assembled in the agora.” Unlike Ranciere, however, the key activity proper to the *demos* is not resistance or rupture but the courageous attempt “to decide, on the spot, in real time, what to do next,”⁴¹ the willingness to see “policies through to the finish without losing ... nerve.”⁴²

Latour’s *demos* acts “in the dark... without the benefit of proof, of hindsight, of foresight, of repetitive experiment,”⁴³ under the “harsh conditions of urgency,”⁴⁴ but it is guided nonetheless by a rough morality intrinsic to all large social groups. Like any group of animals, it possesses a “basic morality that sociability has imposed for millions of year,” a morality of self-restraint so that others will be willing to co-operate with you when you need it:

Everyone is *relatively* bound by the Golden Rule... [Even] Socrates candidly confesses the basic ethological nature of the morality he, like every slave, child, or, for that matter, chimpanzee..., relies on: ‘We shouldn’t refuse to restrain our desires, because that *condemns us to a life of endlessly trying* to satisfy them. And

⁴⁰*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 198.

⁴¹*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 227.

⁴²*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 239.

⁴³*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 242.

⁴⁴*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 241.

this is the life of a predatory outlaw, in the sense that *anyone who lives like that will never be on good terms with anyone else* — ... since he's *incapable of co-operation...*⁴⁵

Though the *demos* doesn't always exercise its practical endowment, and though different participants have differential abilities to enact the restraint advised by self-preservation, "the *demos* is endowed with all the morality and all the reflexive knowledge it needs in order to behave itself"⁴⁶ *Pandora's Hope*, p. 255.⁴⁷ *Pandora's Hope*, p. 255.⁴⁸ and needs no supplement of a natural law or divine reason. That the idea of a morality intrinsic to the *demos* may sound strange is the legacy of Plato's distaste for big numbers, an agoraphobia that he translated into the natural *immorality* of the mob.

How does the *demos* come to a decision? Latour describes this process as a kind of brewing or fermentation. The *demos* engages in

a completely ad hoc sort of activity that is neither transcendent nor immanent but more closely resembles a fermentation through which the people brews itself toward a decision — never exactly in accordance with itself, and never... commended or directed from above...⁴⁹ *Pandora's Hope*, p. 255.⁵⁰

Latour here begins to articulate a model of action that does not rely on an anthropocentric onto-tale, with its fundamental distinction between human subjects capable of making decisions in accordance with criteria set out in advance, and nonhuman objects manipulated in the service of implementing these decisions. Rather, democratic action entails a long and convoluted series "negotiations," "mediations," and "translations" involving a rich mix of actants. There is no other way for these negotiations to proceed except through impure means: "rumors, condensations, displacements, accumulations, simplifications, detours, transformations -- a highly complex chemistry that makes *one* stand for the *whole...*"⁵¹ What it means to participate in a democracy, then, is to engage in

⁴⁵*Pandora's Hope*, p. 255.

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⁴⁷*Pandora's Hope*, p. 256.

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⁵⁰*Pandora's Hope*, p. 247.

⁵¹*Pandora's Hope*, p. 250.

a process akin to the “kneading of a dough — except that the *demos* is at once the flour, the water, the bakers, the leavening ferment, and the very act of kneading.” Democratic decision-making is a kind of *autophuouos*, “the power to ‘grow by themselves’ into what all the others are doing and willing.”⁵²

The relationship between human and nonhuman members of the *demos* is close, for each human is continuously enmeshed with a set of other humans, other groupings of microbes, with plants, climatic forces, handicrafts and technologies. Each is a participant in a collective, though not all collectives are equally worthy of moral or political endorsement. Some collectives are more richly “vascularized” than others, more carefully and democratically interwoven. A democratic collective is one “which brings together starts, prions, cows, heavens, and people... into a ‘cosmos’ instead of an ‘unruly shambles.’”⁵³ Latour insists that cosmos-making is not a process that we could ever fully master, for there will always be a “slight surprise of action” or the unpredictable element contributed by the action itself, an event-quality irreducible to any intention or propensity of any of the actants:

there is no object, no subject... But there are events. I never *act*; I am always slightly surprised by what I do. That which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change, and to bifurcate, the chance that I and the circumstances surrounding me offer to that which has been invited, recovered, welcomed.”⁵⁴

It is here, in this “slight overtaking,” this ability to inflect direction or veer off the beaten path, that we discover a not-restricted-to-human form of political agency. There is a term in evolutionary biology for something like this: Stephen J. Gould speaks of the existence of “spandrels” or characteristics of an organism that arose as adaptations for a function no longer exercised by the organism or arose for no purpose at all, but which nevertheless render the organism more fit for its current environment.⁵⁵ It seems that if we are to re-think democracy in order to

⁵²*Pandora's Hope*, pp. 251-52.

⁵³*Pandora's Hope*, p. 261. “We have always been involved in *cosmopolitics* (Stengers 1996). It is only through an extraordinary shrinking of the meaning of politics that it has been restricted to the values, interests, opinions, and social forces of isolated, naked humans.” (290) Politics is cosmopolitics, i.e. “the management, diplomacy, combination, and negotiation of human and nonhuman agencies.” (290)

⁵⁴*Pandora's Hope*, p. 281.

⁵⁵See Stephen J. Gould, “Exapting the Rich and Inevitable Spandrels of History,” in *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Harvard, 2002, pp. 1214-18.

radicalize it, i.e., in order to admit more participants in, then we need to acknowledge the existence of nonhuman actants, and, what is the same thing, to stop ignoring the slight surprise of action in our theorizations of democracy. “Action is not what people do, but is instead the *‘fait-faire,’* the making-do, accomplished along with others in an event, with the specific opportunities provided by the circumstances. These others are not ideas, or things, but nonhuman entities, or ... *propositions.*”⁵⁶ The nonhumans with which we are enmeshed *propose* to us a direction to proceed in; they suggest a general and open-ended course of action for us to pursue, should they, should we, join up with each other to form a new collective (or enrich a collective already in progress). By describing nonhumans as propositions and propositioners, Latour, it seems to me, is attempting to name the *momentum* that action itself seems to possess, a directionality irreducible both to our intentions and to our predictions about the natural tendencies of the “raw materials” with which we are engaged. Action carries with it its own kind of trajectory, pull, or vectorality. Brian Massumi speaks of something similar -- of a kind of “headingness” — when he describes the human body as a participant in a larger assemblage:

The boy’s innards are not just the stomach and intestines. As vitally as food, a life feeds on habits, memories, and tropisms. The living body’s ‘ultimate’ innards are the proprioceptive habits on a level with muscle fiber. They are the microsocial skills on a level with a single visual neuron. They are enculturated memories lying at the crossroads of sense channels coursing through the flesh. They are the pattern of preferential headings hinging on all of the above, which we somewhat grandly call our ‘personality.’⁵⁷

It seems we are already in league with things.

In Parliament with Things

_____ I will conclude this attempt to think about the political activity of things with an example of how one set of nonhumans, the worms of Amazonia, participated in the highly politicized debate about the rain forest. There is in Amazonia a visible line where the savanna ends and the forest begins. In one particular area, however, botanists note that there are several trees, of a type that usually lives only in savanna, about ten meters *into* the forest. Has the

⁵⁶*Pandora’s Hope*, p. 288, my emphasis.

⁵⁷Brian Massumi, *Parable for the Virtual*, Duke 2002, p. 205.

forest been advancing into the savanna or the reverse? Inspection of the land along the savanna-forest border reveals soil that is “more clayey than the savanna but less so than the forest. It would appear that the forest casts its own soil before it to create conditions favorable to its expansion. Unless, on the contrary, the savanna is degrading the woodland humus as it prepares to invade the forest...”⁵⁸ If an actant is defined as a “*modus operandi*, a chain of gestures and know-how,”⁵⁹ then it would seem that both forest and savanna potentially qualify, but which of these two is the more powerful or successful agent? (It is interesting to note that none of the scientists found it helpful to invoke the idea of a physical process automatically working itself out in line with natural laws.) At first the scientists saw and heard two possible actants, savanna and forest, but after additional nonhuman witnesses were heard from, a third actant appeared. It was concluded that the actant most responsible for the clay-ification of the savanna, was the earthworms, for only they were capable of providing the aluminum necessary to create clay out of the silica contained in the quartz of the sandy savanna.⁶⁰

The human population of Amazonia, and by extension all humans who are enmeshed with the climate regulated by rain forests, are unwitting and often unwilling partners with earthworms as well as with the technical means through which we come to hear them *as* speakers and see them *as* communicative partners. Indeed, we participate in collective made up of an “increasingly large number of humans ... mixed with an increasingly large number of nonhumans.”⁶¹ If we ever to cope successfully with the complexities of this collective, and with the ecological threats posed by it and by ourselves to our survival, we had better start respecting the nonhumans with which we are in league.

“We”? The prose governing the paragraph above discloses something about the limits and qualifications to be built into a parliament of things. The first imperative, I think, is to recognize ourselves as in league with a wide and changing variety of natural and technological things. The second is to acknowledge these other things as actants in the world, even if the degrees and forms of agency may vary significantly among the participants. The third

⁵⁸*Pandora's Hope*, p. 53.

⁵⁹*Pandora's Hope*, p. 192.

⁶⁰*Pandora's Hope*, p. 76.

⁶¹*Pandora's Hope*, p. 214.

injunction is to generate new ways of consulting nonhumans, new ways to listen to them and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions. For these offerings are profoundly important to the health of the world assemblage upon which we utterly rely. But even as these points are made, there seems to be something about us as a species that sets limits to the modes of participation of nonhumans and to the extent of our responsiveness. “We” probably cannot look forward to a day when nonhumans and humans participate equally in a parliament of things. The parliament of things, even as it adds new entrants, will be a stratified body. As its scope is broadened its stratification will be extended and softened, in something like the way we now seek to respect the voices of teenagers, or Founding Fathers, or divine Persons, without granting any of these full rights of citizenship.