

# The New Climate

By [Bruno Latour](#)

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*By Bruno Latour, from The Great Regression, a collection of essays edited by Heinrich Geiselberger that will be published next month by Polity. Latour is a philosopher and the author, most recently, of An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. Translated from the French by Andrew Brown.*

**E**ver since the American elections of November 2016 things have become clearer. Europe is being dismembered: it counts less than a hazelnut in a nutcracker. And this time around, it can no longer rely on the United States to fix anything.

Perhaps this is the time to reconstruct a United Europe. Not the same one that was dreamed up after the war, a Europe based on iron, coal, and steel, or the one more recently built on the deluded hope of escaping from history via standardization and the single currency. No — if Europe must reunite, it is because of the grave threats it is facing: the decline of its states that invented globalization; climate change; and the need to shelter millions of migrants and refugees.

By far the most significant event is not Brexit or the election of Donald Trump but the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, where on December 12, 2015, delegates finally came to an agreement. The significant thing is not what the delegates decided; it is not even that this agreement will take effect. (The climate-change deniers in the White House and the Senate will do everything they can to hamstring it.) No, the significant thing is that all the countries that signed the accord realized that if they were to go ahead and follow their individual modernization plans, this planet simply would not be big enough.

If there is no planet, no earth, no soil, no territory for the globalization to which all countries at COP21 claim to be heading, what should we do? Either we deny the existence of the problem or we seek to come down to earth. This choice is what now divides people, much more than being politically on the right or the left.

The United States had two options after the election. It could recognize the extent of the change in global circumstances, and the enormity of its responsibility, and finally become realistic, leading the free world out of the abyss; or it could sink into denial. Trump seems to have decided to

let America dream on for a few more years, and to drag other countries into the abyss along the way.

**W**e Europeans cannot allow ourselves to dream. Even as we are becoming aware of many different threats, we will need to take into our continent millions of people — people who, thanks to the combined impact of war, the failure of globalization, and climate change, will be thrown (like us, against us, or with us) into the search for a land where they and their children can live. We are going to have to live together with people who have not hitherto shared our traditions, our way of life, or our ideals, who are close to us and foreign to us — terribly close and terribly foreign.

The thing we share with these migrating peoples is that we are all deprived of land. We, the old Europeans, are deprived because there is no planet for globalization and we must now change the entire way we live; they, the future Europeans, are deprived because they have had to leave their old, devastated lands and will need to learn to change the entire way they live.

This is the new universe. The only alternative is to pretend that nothing has changed, to withdraw behind a wall, and to continue to promote, with eyes wide open, the dream of the “American way of life,” all the while knowing that billions of human beings will never benefit from it.

Most of our fellow citizens deny what is happening to the earth but understand perfectly well that the immigrant question will put all their desires for identity to the test. For now, encouraged by the so-called populist parties, they have grasped only one aspect of the reality of ecological change: it is sending huge numbers of unwanted people across their borders. Hence their response: “We must erect firm borders so we won’t be swamped.”

But there is another aspect of this same change, which they haven’t properly realized: for a long time, the new climate has been sweeping away all borders, exposing us to every storm. Against such an invasion, we can build no walls. Migration and climate are one and the same threat.

If we wish to defend our identities, we are also going to have to identify those shapeless, stateless migrants known as erosion, pollution, resource depletion, and habitat destruction. You may seal your borders against human refugees, but you will never be able to stop the others getting by.

This is where we need to introduce a plausible fiction.

**T**he enlightened elites — they do exist — realized, after the 1990s, that the dangers summed up in the word “climate” were increasing. Until then, human relationships with the earth had been quite stable. It was possible to grab a piece of land, secure property rights over it, work it, use it, and abuse it. The land itself kept more or less quiet.

The enlightened elites soon started to pile up evidence suggesting that this state of affairs wasn’t going to last. But even once elites understood that the warning was accurate, they did not deduce from this undeniable truth that they would have to pay dearly.

Instead they drew two conclusions, both of which have now led to the election of a lord of misrule to the White House: Yes, this catastrophe needs to be paid for at a high price, but it's the others who will pay, not us; we will continue to deny this undeniable truth.

If this plausible fiction is correct, it enables us to grasp the “deregulation” and the “dismantling of the welfare state” of the 1980s, the “climate change denial” of the 2000s, and, above all, the dizzying increase in inequality over the past forty years. All these things are part of the same phenomenon: the elites were so thoroughly enlightened that they realized there would be no future for the world and that they needed to get rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible (hence, deregulation); to construct a kind of golden fortress for the tiny percent of people who would manage to get on in life (leading us to soaring inequality); and, to hide the crass selfishness of this flight from the common world, to completely deny the existence of the threat (i.e., deny climate change). Without this plausible fiction, we can't explain the inequality, the skepticism about climate change, or the raging deregulation.

Let's draw on the threadbare metaphor of the *Titanic*: enlightened people see the prow heading straight for the iceberg, know that shipwreck is inevitable, grab the lifeboats, and ask the orchestra to play lullabies so that they can make a clean getaway before the alarm alerts the other classes.

From the ship's rails, the lower classes — who are now wide awake — can see the lifeboats bobbing off into the distance. The orchestra continues to play “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” but the music is no longer enough to cover the howls of rage.

And “rage” is indeed the word to describe the disbelief and bafflement that such a betrayal arouses.

When political analysts try to grasp the current situation, they use the term “populism.” They accuse “ordinary people” of indulging in a narrow-minded vision, criticizing their fears, their naïve mistrust of elites, their bad taste in culture, and above all their passion for identity, folklore, archaism, and boundaries. These people lack generosity, open-mindedness, rationality; they have no taste for risk. (Ah, that taste for risk, preached by those who are safe wherever their air miles permit them to fly!)

This is to forget that “ordinary folk” have been callously betrayed by the elites, who abandoned the idea of modernizing the planet for everyone because they knew, before everyone else, better than everyone else, that this modernization was impossible.

**T**rump's originality lies in the way he brings together, in a single movement, a mad dash for maximum profit (the new members of his team are billionaires), a whole nation's mad dash backward to ethnic divisions, and, finally, an explicit denial of the geologic and climatic situation.

Just as fascism managed to combine extremes, to the surprise of the politicians and commentators of the time, Trumpism combines extremes and deceives the world with its trumpery. Instead of

contrasting the two movements — forward toward globalization and back toward the old national terrain — Trump acts as if they can be fused. This fusion is of course possible only if the very existence of a conflict between modernization on the one hand and material realities on the other is denied. Hence the role of climate change skepticism, which cannot be understood without this denial. And it is easy to see why: the total lack of realism in the combination — billionaires encouraging millions of members of the so-called middle classes to return to protecting the past! — is blindingly self-evident. For now, it's nothing more than a matter of remaining completely indifferent to the geopolitical situation.

For the first time, a whole political movement is no longer claiming that it can seriously confront geopolitical realities and is instead placing itself outside any constraint, offshore, as it were. What counts most of all is that they should not have to share with the masses a world that they know will never again be held in common.

It is remarkable that this innovation comes from a real estate developer who is forever in debt, going from one bankruptcy to another, who became a celebrity thanks to reality TV (another form of escapism). The complete indifference to facts that marked the campaign is simply a consequence of claiming you can live without being grounded in reality. When you've promised those who think they're heading back to a country they once knew that they will indeed rediscover their past there (and are actually dragging them toward a place that has no real existence), then you can't be too picky about empirical evidence.

It's pointless to get angry that Trump's electors don't believe the facts: they're not stupid. The situation is quite the opposite: it's because the overall geopolitical situation has to be denied that an indifference to facts becomes so essential. If they had to realize the huge contradiction, they'd have to start coming down to earth. In this sense, Trumpism defines (albeit negatively, by taking up the opposite position) the first ecological government.

And it goes without saying that "ordinary folk" shouldn't have too many illusions about how the venture is going to turn out. You don't need to be very bright to foresee that the whole thing will end in a terrible conflagration. This is the only real parallel with the different fascisms.

The challenge to be met is tailor-made for Europe, since it is Europe that invented the strange story of globalization and then became one of its victims. History will belong to those who can be the first to come to earth, to land on an earth that can be inhabited — unless the others, the dreamers of old-style realpolitik, have finally made that earth vanish for good.