

Gatekeepers and Gated Communities

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Gatekeepers and Gated Communities:

The Role of Technology in Our Shifting Reciprocities

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Abstract: In his essay *Down to Earth* (2018), the French philosopher Bruno Latour proposes a hypothesis that connects a number of contemporary issues, ranging from climate denialism to deregulation and growing inequality. While his hypothesis, that the elites act as if they live in another world and are leaving the rest of the world behind, might seem like a conspiracy theory, I will argue that there is a way to make sense of this hypothesis. To do so, I will turn to two other authors, Timothy Mitchell and Shoshana Zuboff, to highlight the kind of logic that Latour seems to have in mind. In the final section, I will propose to capture the commonalities of these authors through the concept of *shifting reciprocities* and will return to Latour's political plea to define one's territories, reinterpreted as reciprocities.

Keywords: Bruno Latour, Timothy Mitchell, Shoshana Zuboff, reciprocity

“It is not a matter of learning how to repair cognitive deficiencies, but rather of how to live in the same world, share the same culture, face up to the same stakes, perceive a landscape that can be explored in concert. Here we find the habitual vice of epistemology, which consists in attributing to intellectual deficits something that is quite simply a deficit in shared practice.”
(Latour 2018: 25)

1. Introduction

Our contemporary society is faced with numerous novel political struggles, ranging from climate change, post-truth, to increasing inequality. Though seemingly independent from one another, the aim of this article is to reveal some connections between these issues by stressing the role that novel technologies play in their constitution. The general claim is that what these issues have in common is a technologically-mediated destruction of traditional reciprocities, replacing them at best with new ones. To deal with these issues, it is therefore meaningful to conceptualize political struggle in terms of constructing reciprocities.

To highlight the logic behind this shift, I will invoke three perspectives, all stressing the role of technologies in shifting reciprocities. First of all, I will discuss Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011) in which the author argues that in order to understand 20th-century shifts in democratic struggles, one has to take the technological shift from coal to oil into account, and the accompanying loss of reciprocity. Secondly, I will explore Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) in which she sketches a recent shift in the regime of capitalism, again characterised by how novel technological means resulted in a fundamental shift in reciprocities. Whereas there used to be a certain reciprocity between producer and consumer, for companies such as Facebook or Google we are consumers nor products, but only the raw material from which future behaviour markets are constructed. We are thus faced with

new gatekeepers of information, who are not linked with its audience through the same reciprocities as traditional news media.

To connect these seemingly separate diagnoses, I will thirdly draw on one of Latour's recent essay, *Down to Earth* (2018), in which he launches the hypothesis that we must link the current rise of post-truth, the increasing deregulation and the increasing inequality with the fundamental problem of climate change. Once again, Latour stresses the shift away from reciprocities: whereas the elites used to cultivate an idea of a shared common and modern world, this has changed radically in recent decades according to Latour. The elites, exemplified by Donald Trump, no longer live in the same world as the rest of us, but are mobilizing their resources to create gated communities lacking any reciprocity with the rest of the world.

To understand our current condition the concept of reciprocity must thus be put in the centre. New technologies have made fundamental shifts in the reciprocities between different societal groups possible, or are being mobilized to do so, be it on the level of democracy, surveillance or climate change. To argue for this, I will explore in the first section Latour's central hypothesis in *Down to Earth* (2018) and how it draws on his earlier work (section 2). While at first sight his hypothesis, that the elites act as if they live in another world and are leaving the rest of the world behind, might seem like a conspiracy theory, I will argue that there is a way to make sense of this hypothesis. To do so, I will turn in the next two sections to the two other authors, Timothy Mitchell and Shoshana Zuboff, to highlight the kind of logic that Latour seems to have in mind (section 3). In the final section, I will propose to capture the commonalities of these authors through the concept of reciprocity and will then return to Latour's political plea to define one's territories, reinterpreted as reciprocities (section 4).

2. Down to Earth

While Bruno Latour's earlier work concerned an anthropological study of scientific practices (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987), followed by a number of more philosophical and

speculative books on the problem of climate change (Latour 2004; Latour 2017), his most recent books have been of a different format: short pamphlets concerning contemporary political issues, such as the presidency of Donald Trump (Latour 2018) and, more recently, COVID19 (Latour 2021).

Here I want to focus mainly on his essay on Donald Trump, *Down to Earth* (2018) in which Latour proposes a challenging and interesting hypothesis, that aims to connect three seemingly separate issues. First of all, there is the issue of deregulation, where forms of solidarity and legal protection of vulnerable groups are slowly being dismantled, often in the name of cutting costs. Secondly, there is a rise of inequalities, which becomes a growing concern, perhaps best exemplified by Thomas Piketty's bestseller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). Finally, there is the issue of climate change and, what is especially significant according to Latour, the accompanying new trend of climate denialism: the systematic attempt to downplay or even deny the existence of climate change.

Latour's aim in his essay is to connect these issues (deregulation, rising inequality and climate denialism) and argue that they are different sides of the same problem:

This essay proposes to take these three phenomena as symptoms of a single historical situation: it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes [...] had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else. Consequently, they decided that it was pointless to act as though history were going to continue to move toward a common horizon, toward a world in which all humans could prosper equally. From the 1980s on, the ruling classes stopped purporting to lead and began instead to shelter themselves from the world. (Latour 2018: 1-2)

What these issues thus have in common, according to Latour, is a general abandonment of any notion of solidarity between the different groups in society, or in short: "if they wanted to

survive in comfort, *they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world.*” (Latour 2018: 19) Or to quote Latour more fully:

the elites have been so thoroughly convinced that there would be no future life for everyone that they have decided *to get rid of all the burdens of solidarity as fast as possible* – hence deregulation; they have decided that a sort of gilded fortress would have| to be built for those (a small percentage) who would be able to make it through – hence the explosion of inequalities; and they have decided that, to conceal the crass selfishness of such a flight out of the shared world, they would have to reject absolutely the threat at the origin of this headlong flight – hence the denial of climate change. (Latour 2018: 18-19)

The symbol for this disappearance of solidarity is the *gated community*: either in the literal sense of elites building shelters where they can survive any future apocalypse and be separated from the poor masses; or figurately in the form of nationalism and populism, where one group bars the way for any fugitive or migrant of other groups to enter their world. This immediately highlights that it is not just a consequence of the actions of an elite, but also of the response of the masses as well. It is in this sense that Latour interprets contemporary events such as the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the election of Donald Trump in 2017. “Two of the greatest countries of the old ‘free world’ are saying to the others: ‘Our history will no longer have anything to do with yours; you can go to hell!’” (Latour 2018: 4) For Latour, these populist events were responses to the dismantling of forms of solidarity by the elite. “The reactions on one side led to reactions on the other – both sides *reacting to another much more radical reaction, that of the Earth*, which had stopped absorbing blows and was striking back with increasing violence.” (Latour 2018: 20)

Latour’s alternative to this new escapism is not the old dream of a modern, shared world, nor the antimodern sentiment of returning to a world before modernity ruined it. Instead, Latour

provocatively proposes to acknowledge that no one cannot survive without a ‘territory’, and that we should therefore be reflexive and explicit about this. Instead of either blindly ignoring this need for territory or selfishly taking as much territory for oneself as possible, we should open explicit negotiations of which territories we need and want, and whether and how they are compatible building bricks of a perhaps, future common world to live in. Hence, we end again with Latour’s famous notion of a ‘parliament of things’ (see Latour 2004; Simons 2017). He ends the essay with a plea for his own territory, the ‘Old Continent’, Europe.

More broadly, many of the ideas proposed in this essay of Latour are already at work in his earlier texts. His claim that we must give up the modern dream of emancipating subjects completely from any kind of dependency on objects or the world, was already the central concern of his famous essay *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Similarly there, he pleads for a recognition of how our subjectivity and our society depends on how it is related to the things surrounding it; and warns that, if we keep ignoring this, the world around us will hit back with a vengeance, for instance in the form of climate change. In *Facing Gaia* (2017), Latour will reframe this point under the banner of ‘territory’: “The territory of an agent is the series of other agents with which it has to come to terms and that it cannot get along without if they are to survive in the long run.” (Latour 2017: 252)

In *Down to Earth* Latour mobilizes these earlier insights to capture what is going on in contemporary events. And though his claims are provocative and interesting, they also risk being unconvincing, because seem to ascribe a lot of intentions and malintent to an ill-defined ‘elite’ group who denies that climate change is real, while simultaneously making their escape. This is something Latour himself also recognizes: “The hypothesis appears implausible: the idea of negation looks too much like a psychoanalytic interpretation, too much like a conspiracy theory.” (Latour 2018: 21)

And though, conspiracy theories have a bad reputation, I want to propose a possible reading of Latour's claims that make this particular one more plausible. I want to do so in the line of a suggestion of Singh Grewal (2016), who interprets conspiracy theories as explicitly counterfactual epistemic devices: can it help us to predict phenomena and anticipate consequences if we act *as if* it was a product of an intentional design? In a networked world that has become immensely complex, such 'as-if' reasoning could help us to make some sense of it, without the need to understand all the underlying mechanisms in detail: "The deliberate distance from descriptive veracity is the advantage of this style of reasoning, since it allows one to bracket the internal characteristics of a phenomenon and focus on the utility of making predictions *as if* a particular assumption were true." (Singh Gerwal 2016: 35)

In that sense, we must read Latour's claim not so much as the exposition of a mechanism that explains what is actually happening, but as a proposed simplification that might help us nevertheless to see what is happening and prepare us for the consequences. The actual mechanism leading from climate change to deregulation and increased inequality remains 'black-boxed' (Latour 1987). It is simply portrayed *as if* it was the case that an elite abandoned the common world for their own in an intentional and well-designed way. What I want to add, now, in this article, is an attempt to open that black box, if only partially: what are some of the mechanisms that result in a situation *as if* we are the object of a conspiracy of the elites? I will do so, by relating Latour's claims to two other authors, namely Timothy Mitchel and Shoshana Zuboff, who both sketch a very similar story, though related to (seemingly) other societal issues. In the final part, I will try to capture on a more theoretical level what these stories have in common, through the notion of reciprocity.

3. Shifting Reciprocities

As said, in this second part of this article I want to delve deeper into some of the mechanisms of why the processes that Latour describes are occurring. In short, the answer is: shifting

reciprocities, linked with technological transformations. Whereas a common world, or at least its promise, was held together due to social and economic reciprocities, in the 20th century we have witnessed some technological shifts that have questioned or transformed these reciprocities. What I precisely mean by this, I will first explore through a number of case studies, to then subsequently focus on it on a more theoretical level (section 4).

More specifically, I will focus on two examples: Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2013) which deals with the role of coal and fuel in the history of democratic struggle; and Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), which focuses on how the new business model of social media companies such as Facebook or Google is transforming our social relations. In both cases, we will see how certain technological systems (be it coal industry or social media platforms) mediate the political sphere due to their shifting reciprocities: either by creating new dependencies and forms of power and resistance, or by dismantling existing forms of reciprocities, thereby cutting certain groups out of the loop of political and social influence.

Though I will focus on these examples, there are potentially other cases to give. For instance, one could refer to T. H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* (2004) as well, which argues that the American colonists' shared experience as consumers afforded them a set of cultural resources that allowed them to develop a radical new strategy of political protest: the consumer boycott. A specific technological and economic constellation, leading to economic reciprocities, thus offered these colonists political leverage. Or, one can also think of Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions* (2014), which argues that contemporary socioeconomic and environmental dislocations are to be understood as a type of expulsion, where individuals or groups are brutally expelled from their jobs, their houses or their lands. She mainly has examples in mind where foreign firms or government agencies cause mass-displacements of whole villages by land-acquisition. Again, it has to do with reciprocities, or better of the lack thereof: these local

villages are politically and socially discarded because they have no leverage to counterpose, again due to the specific technical and socio-economic system of which these land-acquisitions are part, that does not ask anything of these villagers, except that they should make way. Hence, the story of reciprocities is not limited to the examples I discuss below, but can be seen at work in many other instances as well.

3.1. CARBON DEMOCRACY

The central question of Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* is fairly simple: why were democratic movements so successful in the 20th century? The common answer to that question typically refers to the rise of a certain set of new ideas, morals or perhaps institutions. However, Mitchell's suggestion is different. According to him, it at least also has to do with new opportunities created by new technologies, and in the case he wants to focus on: carbon fuels. Or, in our terminology: carbon fuels such as coal or oil created or dismantled certain reciprocities between those in power and those groups who wanted more political representation or had social demands. To understand why such political demands were successful in the 20th century, and why they are under threat now, we also have to understand 20th-century history of technology. "Fossil fuels helped create both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits." (Mitchell 2013: 1) Or, put differently:

Political possibilities were opened up or narrowed down by different ways of organising the flow and concentration of energy, and these possibilities were enhanced or limited by arrangements of people, finance, expertise and violence that were assembled in relationship to the distribution and control of energy. (Mitchell 2013: 8)

To make his point, Mitchell focuses on the contrast between the coal industry and the oil industry. According to Mitchell, the specific technical and socio-economic arrangement of the coal industry enabled certain democratic demands because it resulted in a concentration of certain powers in the hands of coal workers:

Great volumes of energy now flowed along narrow, purpose-built channels. Specialised bodies of workers were concentrated at the end-points and main junctions of these conduits, operating the cutting equipment, lifting machinery, switches, locomotives and other devices that allowed stores of energy to move along them. Their position and concentration gave them opportunities, at certain moments, to forge a new kind of political power. (Mitchell 2013: 19)

Thus, what this specific arrangement made possible was that political demands, that were perhaps also raised before, could now force a place at the table. “The flow and concentration of energy made it possible to connect the demands of miners to those of others, and to give their arguments a technical force that could not be easily be ignored.” (Mitchell 2013: 21)

More specifically, it allowed coal miners to develop a set of political techniques that they could use to make their voices heard. The most well-known technique is that of a (general) strike. But there were other options as well, for instance when there were strike-breakers, one could work as slowly and clumsily as these unskilled men brought in to replace you. Work was then not stopped, but significantly disrupted, still leading to a significant economic impact. Similarly, there was the technique of sabotage, to which the coal industry was very vulnerable. The word itself, in fact, got its modern meaning from the struggles of this time period, as a technique to gain political leverage in labour disputes, and was soon theoretically explored by anarchists such as Émile Pouget (1860-1931). Due to these reciprocities between the elites and coal workers, who were dependent on each other, the coal workers successfully made a number of popular democratic demands:

Weakened by this novel power, governments in the West conceded demands to give votes to all citizens, impose new taxes on the rich, and provide healthcare, insurance against industrial injury and unemployment, retirement pensions, and other basic improvements to

human welfare. Democratic claims for a more egalitarian collective life were advanced through the flow and interruption of supplies of coal. (Mitchell 2013: 236)

In contrast, the oil industry is organized in a rather different way, and the shift from coal to oil thus also transformed these reciprocities and the success rate of democratic demands. Instead of a localized, national industry that heavily relied on coal workers and railroads, we get an international industry with smaller and visible workforces, where secret underground meetings – a common practice among coal workers - become impossible. Moreover, railways are replaced by pipelines, which are not as susceptible to strikes; the material itself, oil, is light and fluid, and ‘boxed’ (Levinson 2006), instead of hard and heavy, like coal, making the product easier to ship by sea. Again, this makes blocking the transportation of fuel harder, since “oil tankers could be quickly rerouted to supply oil from alternative sites.” (Mitchell 2013: 38) More generally, Mitchell stresses how the shift from coal to oil also implied a reorganization of the distribution network:

whereas the movement of coal tended to follow dendritic networks, with branches at each end but a single main channel, creating potential choke points at several junctures, oil flowed along networks that often had the properties of a grid, like an electricity network, where there is more than one possible path and the flow of energy can switch to avoid blockages or overcome breakdowns. (Mitchell 2013: 38)

Hence the capacity to strike, and the reliance on workers for extraction and distribution, is radically changed – and moreover, as Mitchell also emphasizes, the struggle is outsourced to the Middle East, where the oil is extracted. According to Mitchell, this was no accident. Since one of the reason why, for instance, US-funded initiatives converted Europe’s energy system from one based on coal to one dependent on oil, “was to permanently weaken the coal miners, whose ability to interrupt the flow of energy had given organised labour the power to demand the improvements to collective life that had democratised Europe.” (Mitchell 2013: 29)

Based on this study of the transition from coal to oil, Mitchell concludes that one should “think of democracy not in terms of the history of an idea or the emergence of a social movement, but as the assembling of machines.” (Mitchell 2013: 109) Democratisation was made possible in the 20th century, in part because of the specific way in which technological networks, such as that of coal, were organized and created a number of reciprocities between the workers and the elite. Hence, also the current difficulties to create democratic governments in the Middle East and elsewhere, where society and industry heavily depend on oil:

Democratic government, as we know, depends on the power to interrupt critical flows, whether of energy or of revenue. The difficulty for the citizens of oil states is how to build that power when the state’s revenue comes not from the productive life of the general population, but almost entirely from a single source: the revenues from the export of oil. (Mitchell 2013: 226)

To understand thus how future political demands are met and collectives are formed, we have to understand the specific reciprocities shaped by the technological systems central to the society in question. “Carbon democracy involves understanding and working upon relations of dependence, and the vulnerabilities to which they give rise.” (Mitchell 2013: 256)

3.2. SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

Though both works have not been related as far I am aware, a structurally similar story is found in Shoshana Zuboff’s recent book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). This time, it does not concern carbon fuels, but social media and the distribution of information. In general, her book centers around the claim that we are witnessing the rise of a new form of capitalism, which Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism. As the term already suggests, this new form of capitalism is related to new digital technologies used for the surveillance of its users.

There are different ways to capture the specificity of this new form of capitalism, but one way to do so is again in terms of reciprocities: “surveillance capitalists abandon the organic

reciprocities with people that have long been a mark of capitalism's endurance and adaptability." (Zuboff 2019: 467) In her own narrative, Zuboff contrasts surveillance capitalism with earlier forms of capitalism, exemplified by Henry Ford's assemblage line. Fordism was characterized by a clear set of reciprocities, where employers and employees were dependent on one another: workers sold their labor to the factory, and the factory sold their cars to the workers. The condition, of course, was that workers could afford such a car. Hence, due to these reciprocities, the workers had some leverage, namely as consumers:

Although the market form and its bosses had many failings and produced many violent facts, its populations of newly modernizing individuals were valued as the necessary sources of customers and employees. It depended upon its communities in ways that would eventually lead to a range of institutionalized reciprocities. (Zuboff 2019: 37)

Zuboff contrasts this with the business model of companies such as Google or Facebook. Initially, they were (or at least seemed) characterized by a certain reciprocity: they offered us their services (such as a search engine or a social media profile page) and we offered them our data of how we interacted with these platforms, so that they could improve their algorithms (e.g. to make search results more relevant). However, this is misleading for two reasons. First of all, we are not consumers of Google or Facebook in the same sense as of Fordist industry. We don't buy anything from these companies. This immediately brings us to the second reason. In the history of companies such as Google or Facebook, we already see a shift early on away from using our data simply to improve their algorithms for their customer services. Instead, what we see is what Zuboff calls the 'discovery of the behavioral surplus': our interaction with these platforms left datapoints behind that could not only be used to improve their services, but also serve as the raw material to predict and even nudge future behavior.

Hence, the specific business model of surveillance capitalists, according to Zuboff. We are not the customer nor the product of these companies. Instead we are the raw material to generate

a surplus that can then be transformed into products for a market of future behavior: bringing advertisers together with the specific public most likely to buy their product. Hence, for Zuboff, we are faced with a radically different situation than Fordism. Instead, the services of surveillance capitalists “do not establish constructive producer-consumer reciprocities. Instead, they are the ‘hooks’ that lure users into their extractive operations in which our personal experiences are scraped and packaged as the means to others’ ends.” (Zuboff 2019: 17)

In her book, Zuboff maps the slow but steady expansion of this model of surveillance capitalism, where it goes beyond simply predicting what we would buy online. In the next step, so Zuboff argues, these future behavior markets not just predict, but start changing our behavior: by tweaking the place and timing of the ad, and its surroundings, people could also be incentivized to buy products they would otherwise not buy at all. And finally, and especially through the spread of smartphones, these predictions and nudges could also slowly leave the virtual world and infiltrate the real one, for instance when Pokémon Go offered restaurants and bars the possibility to buy a hotspot status, spawning more Pokémon in their surroundings, nudging people to stay and eat in their establishments. In all these cases, the behavior of the users is manipulated in total disregard of their own needs and wishes – and they have minimal leverage, since these companies do not depend on the users in the same way Fordist companies depended on their workers. There is only a minimal requirement: the users have to keep interacting with the platform.

Similar to the story of Mitchell, we are thus faced with the disappearance of a traditional set of reciprocities, and enter a situation where one side loses most of its power to make demands to other. This is even true for the products we still buy, such as online books or a new smartphone. There is a reason why they are often so cheap, since they are mere pawns in the bigger scheme of surveillance capitalism:

Where individual consumers continue to exist in surveillance capitalist operations— purchasing Roomba vacuum cleaners, dolls that spy, smart vodka bottles, or behavior-based insurance policies, just to name a few examples— social relations are no longer founded on mutual exchange. In these and many other instances, products and services are merely hosts for surveillance capitalism’s parasitic operations. (Zuboff 2019: 467)

Soon enough, this behavioral surplus is moreover not only used for economic purposes, but also for political ones. For Zuboff, events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump again exemplify the political effects of surveillance capitalism. In these cases, embodied by companies such as Cambridge Analytica, the behavioral surplus was used not so much to make people buy certain products shown in ads, but rather the change their political behavior.

Moreover, this framework by Zuboff also offers a link to another set of issues, to which Latour also points: climate denialism, and the accompanying increase of fake news and conspiracy theories. Platforms such as Google and Facebook have become crucial in the way how people nowadays receive and digest news and information. In the words of Franklin Foer (2017), they have become the informational *gatekeepers*: there is always too much information to digest, and therefore a selection is required. We need a gatekeeper who selects what is relevant and irrelevant. And though these surveillance capitalists are slowly taken over that job from classic news media such as newspapers and TV, they again do so in a radically different way. Precisely because of the disappearance of these traditional reciprocities, social media is not interested in providing its users with a certain quality of content, as traditional media did.

Zuboff herself speaks of a *radical indifference*: the content of what you see in your Google Search results or on your Twitter feed does not matter, as long as you keep engaging with it (by clicking, responding, reacting, etc.). Or more precisely: the content does matter, but only on a formal level, to the extent that it produces more responses and reactions. Now, what has been clear is that messages that are politically extreme or contain conspiracy theories provoke more

interaction. The algorithms of these companies, due to the economic incentives of their business model, are thus inclined to put these extremist messages center stage. This differs radically from earlier gatekeepers of information, such as the journalist:

The journalist's job is to produce news and analysis that separate truth from falsehood. This rejection of equivalence defines journalism's *raison d'être* as well as its organic reciprocities with its readers. Under surveillance capitalism, though, these reciprocities are erased. (Zuboff 2019: 474)

It is important to note that this traditional rejection does not necessarily imply a kind of ideal of neutrality or objectivity. Even a convinced communist or fascist journalist rejects the equivalence and makes a distinction between truth and falsehood, regardless of how biased it might look from the outside. Surveillance capitalist platforms, however, make no attempt at all to differentiate, simply passing on whatever makes its users click and interact. Thus, the recent concern about 'post-truth' and the rise of conspiracy theories and irrationality might have less to do with falling cognitive capacities or journalistic standards, but with shifts in reciprocities related to the affordances of these new digital technologies.

4. From Territories to Reciprocities

In the previous section we have attempted to translate Latour's political fiction into a more concrete story of how the disappearance of certain reciprocities, linked with technological shifts, can cause a situation *as if* an elite is leaving the rest of the world behind: the reciprocities, which in the past kept the different groups dependent on one another are disappearing, thereby eroding the political power of workers and consumers to make demands. Both Mitchell and Zuboff illustrate this point: either in the sense of a shift from coal to oil, or from Fordism to surveillance capitalism. Hence, issues related to gatekeepers and gated communities are not so much epistemological problems – of people having the wrong ideas or conceptions – but rather

socio-economic problems: the lack of the proper reciprocities that force different groups to work with one another.

Therefore, let us end by attempting to translate Latour's talk about territories in terms of reciprocities. As we saw, territories refer to those relations and entities on which one is reliant, and for which one is willing to fight (and even to die for). But from the point of view of reciprocities, the next important question becomes: how do territories overlap and rely on one another? In what sense do others need your territories, are dependent on them, and vice versa? Or in other words: what reciprocities between territories are present? And finally, the question then becomes: how are these reciprocities used? Which demands are made based on these reciprocities? Thus, when Latour is claiming that the political struggles of the 21st century will be in terms of territories, we can interpret this as a struggle for reciprocities as well. Linking both concepts can help us to conceptualize on what basis a negotiation concerning territories might take place.

But let me focus a bit more on the 'reciprocity' itself. What do I mean by it? The main reason why I opt for the term is that it is a rich notion, with a number of interesting connotations, depending on the domain one is working from. But, like any multifaceted term, it also has a number of less interesting connotations. Let us briefly go over these. When I speak of reciprocities, I do not intend to refer to the sphere of ethics and principles such as the Golden Rule: one should treat others as one wants to be treated oneself. Similarly, reciprocity should not be understood in terms of a social-psychological norm, referring to how individuals are inclined to reward positive action with a reciprocal positive action. The reason why these connotations should be avoided, is that they typically connote (a) an element of willingness and freedom (one *decides* to return the favor, but could equally not have done so); and (b) a shared set of (ethical or cultural) norms and values. The main reason why I want to avoid these

connotations is that they needlessly restrict the notion of reciprocity, which can often exist when this freedom is not there or when norms are not shared.

We find this, for example, in the sphere of law and international relations, where reciprocities are associated with the notion of *quid pro quo*: if you scratch my back, I will scratch yours. Importantly, such a *quid pro quo* does not imply that both parties share a set of common goals, values or traditions, only that some kind of collaboration is (temporarily) acceptable for both parties. Moreover, it does not imply the freedom of choice: sometimes one is simply forced to return the favor, regardless of whether one wants to do so – simply to retain peace or balance. A similar connotation is found in anthropology, where reciprocities refer to non-market exchanges, typically known as a ‘gift economy’: I give you something, but in the clear expectation you will return the favor in the future. We find that dimension of reciprocities, and how they fundamentally order society, in the work of anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss (1970), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) or Marshall Sahlins (1972). Lévi-Strauss, for instance, famously distinguished three types of reciprocities: an exchange of words (language), of women (kinship) and of goods (economics). Again, these types of reciprocities can exist without an element of choice or a shared culture (e.g. between different tribes).

Finally, this broader notion of reciprocity is also found in biology and game theory, under the banner of *tit for tat*: after an initial act of cooperation, one side is willing to cooperate with the other, if the other has been cooperative in the past. In game theory, it is typically seen as a rational strategy in the (iterated) prisoner's dilemma. In evolutionary biology, *tit for tat* is seen as a successful way to explain the existence of altruism (typically called reciprocal altruism, in opposition to other forms such as kin altruism). Again, there have to be no shared values or goals, and both parties can profit in different ways from this exchange.

In that sense, one can also link the notion of reciprocity with that of symbiosis, since the latter does not commit us to say that we all are or should be the same. This point has been

stressed by Isabelle Stengers, who highlights how symbiosis differs from consensus. Consensus implies that all parties agree on the goal and the means to get there. Symbiosis, in contrast, entails simply that all parties are interested in success, though they can define their motivations and even success differently. Symbionts have references to one another, in opposition to parasites who ignore their hosts, but these references can differ radically from one another. Stengers (2011: 379) refers to Deleuze and Guattari's (1980: 11) example of the wasp and the orchid: though both engage in a clear form of symbiosis, they do not share a common goal or definition of each other's motivations. Symbiosis thus entails the "stability of a relation without reference to an interest that would transcend its terms." (Stengers 2010: 36) The above examples of reciprocities are similar: coal workers and factory owners do not need to share a transcendent interest; they merely need to gain from the stability of a certain arrangement.

A final point concerns a more metaphysical footnote, namely that reciprocities might suggest that the parties between which a reciprocity exists, must pre-exist the reciprocity. This does not have to be the case, and is often not true. To return to the example of workers using their power to strike to make democratic demands: one could argue that they did not pre-exist as a group before the strike, but rather became conscious that they form a group precisely *through* these collective actions. Hence, the question: if we accept that there are reciprocities, between 'what' do these reciprocities make connections?

The simple answer I want to suggest is inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as advocated by Latour (2005), but also by Michel Callon and John Law: *it is reciprocities all the way down*. In other words: the entities between which reciprocities are created, are themselves the product of earlier constitutions of reciprocities. ANT scholars will speak of punctualization: as long as all elements of a network work together, they punctualize to one actor (hence actor-networks). But there is always the (future) possibility that these punctualizations will fall apart, if certain elements of the network revolt or are contested:

Punctualization is always precarious, it faces resistance, and may degenerate into a failing network. On the other hand, punctualized resources offer a way of drawing quickly on the networks of the social without having to deal with endless complexity (Law 1992: 385)

To again take up the same example: to create a reciprocity between workers and factory owners, both parties themselves first have to be constituted as groups. This happens in a very similar way, namely by reciprocities between the different individuals or groups constituting them. Logically, this process can go on without end; in practice, there are always already collectives that have been produced by reciprocities in the past, who can serve as building blocks for new reciprocities, as long as they themselves remain uncontested.

Similarly, it offers a reply to another point: does the practice *quid pro quo* or non-market exchanges not also presuppose certain shared rules, laws or values to make them work, similar to the Golden Rule or social norms? This is of course true, and my claim is not that reciprocity only refers to case where no such elements are shared, only that *they do not have to be shared*. In this case, one could again use the concept of punctualization: there are often certain principles, laws or values shared, which are however the products of other reciprocities. As long as these reciprocities stand, these shared elements can be presupposed. But there is always the possibility that punctualized reciprocities become topics of contestation as well. Hence, reciprocities are not dependent on specific pre-punctualized shared values, but can come in many forms.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to make sense of the political fiction proposed by Latour in his essay *Down to Earth* (2018), which started from a quasi-conspiracy theory that an elite was leaving the rest of earth behind to form their own gated communities. I suggested translating this hypothesis in terms of a history of reciprocities: to understand the history of democratic

struggles, and contemporary issues such as deregulation, surveillance capitalism, post-truth or climate change denialism, we have to look at how reciprocities have shifted throughout the 20th century, often related to technological shifts. Through the cases of Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* and Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, I explored how these issues arise when old systems of reciprocities, that served as political levers, fall apart and are replaced with new ones, that redistribute political power.

The relevance of Latour's plea to rephrase political struggles in terms of defining and contesting territories therefore also become clear: we have to define the elements of our networks that we want to preserve and fight for, and subsequently map how they are defined by reciprocities with other groups: how are my territories related to those of others, and how can we struggle to create the required reciprocities to give everyone a spot at the negotiation table?

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