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Book Review

Latour, Bruno, (2021). *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, trans. Julie Rose, Polity Press, 2021, 180 pages. ISBN: 9781509550029

Reviewed by Tatiana Konrad¹

It has been two years since the COVID-19 pandemic has begun. The pandemic has taught us, humans, how fragile our lives and the world that we have created are. It has reminded us about various types of inequity and racism, and further intensified these issues, as well as demonstrated how polarized humanity can be in times of a global crisis. But the global health crisis is not the only problem that humanity deals with today. The planet and its inhabitants, both humans and nonhumans, have faced environmental degradation and climate change prior to the pandemic, yet humanity has failed to sufficiently address this issue. Now, these are climate and health crises that people worldwide are trying to overcome, facing death and destruction, yet desperately trying to preserve the world that one (and especially the privileged) is used to, with all its comforts, opportunities, and pleasures. Can the COVID-19 pandemic, and the safety measures taken since 2020, teach humans how to solve the ongoing crises, adapt in the transforming world, and ultimately save the planet and its most vulnerable inhabitants? Bruno Latour's *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* juxtaposes the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis to address some of the existential questions that the planet faces today.

Drawing on Franz Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis* (1915), Latour confesses: "It's as if I, too, had undergone an actual metamorphosis in January 2020. I still remember how, before, I could move around innocently taking my body with me" (p.2). The world that the West/the Global North has been building since the Industrial Revolution, using cheap energy to create a new kind of modernity that would be characterized by *progress* and would prioritize the human (especially the privileged), has been dramatically impacted by the coronavirus and various measures that nations worldwide have introduced to protect themselves from the dangerous disease. Certainly, many of us have become empathic toward the planet and the nonhuman world before the pandemic, questioning the ways we have been using and impacting it and foregrounding the urgent need to address environmental degradation. Yet, as Latour describes it, "it's been worse since January because, on top of that, I now project in front of me – they tell me non-stop – a cloud of aerosols whose fine droplets can spread tiny viruses in the lungs capable of killing my neighbours, who would suffocate in their beds, overrunning the hospital services" (p.3).

The pandemic has constrained humanity in multiple ways as well as revealed how much we have become fixated on a specific vision of a world in which we want to live. Latour

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investigates how such issues as space, mobility, politics, economy, identity, the virus, and the environment have become entwined in a complex way since 2020, foregrounding the importance of learning from the pandemic and finding ways to stop the ongoing planetary destruction. Latour claims that “the lockdown imposed by the virus could serve as a model for familiarising us slowly with the general lockdown imposed by what is called, in a mild euphemism, the ‘environmental crisis’” (p.38). Humanity, and particularly the rich, the privileged, and those who have access to various anti-environmental activities that are better known as *comforts*, such as travelling by plane, driving a car on a daily basis, eating food that is not grown/produced locally, etc., will have to adapt and soon enter a sort of a lockdown voluntarily, before it becomes a forced necessity akin to scenarios imagined in various apocalyptic narratives. The lockdown during the pandemic is just a foretaste of a larger lockdown that might happen in the future due to a global environmental collapse. Latour notes: “At the end of the day, we’re not exactly old-fashioned ‘humans’ anymore, and that’s what makes us so uncomfortable, especially when we moan about these masks that half-suffocate us” (p.29). The pandemic and the measures that followed it to prevent the spread of the virus have made humans feel anxious and perplexed, uncomfortable and safe, paranoid and desperate, disciplined and obedient. Yet it seems that, having adapted to a new world, humanity continues to persuade itself that this is a temporal situation, and soon we will be *back to normal*. Latour describes these feelings as follows: “And so I groan, I tie myself in knots, terrified by this metamorphosis – will I finally wake from this nightmare, go back to what I was before: free, whole, mobile? An old-fashioned human being, in short!” (p.3). The ongoing pandemic, however, might be only a minor crisis compared to what could happen in the future. According to Latour, “the Covid-19 pandemic merely foreshadows a new situation from which you will never emerge” (p.47). This is so because, as Latour emphasizes, “[t]he whole planetary respiratory system is disrupted and at all levels, whether it’s a matter of the masks we’re gasping behind, the smoke from fires, police repression or the sweltering temperature imposed on us, all the way up to the Arctic” (p.110). And there is, of course, more to this than meets the eye, as one learns, uncovering the intricate nature of the current environmental crisis.

The book includes 14 short chapters. Latour begins with an analysis of what it means to be “locked” in a specific place – something that many people have experienced multiple times since the begin of the pandemic – and then develops his discussion, essentially outlining the process of emerging from such a closed space and living after having experienced a lockdown. His approach is to connect the health crisis to the climate crisis in order to instruct the reader how necessary it is to learn from the experience humanity has gained during the pandemic as well as draw connections between the life in the times of the pandemic and the life in the times of the climate crisis. The book is a philosophical exploration of the ongoing crises that includes a very helpful chapter on suggested readings, many of which are environmental humanities and political science sources. At the moment, there are very few scholarly books that combine health humanities and environmental humanities, which makes *After Lockdown* a novel and important contribution to the two fields.

After Metamorphosis vividly sums up the experiences and feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic that will be familiar to many people. But the book also investigates the complexity of the ongoing crises, one of which is the pandemic, moving beyond it and toward the issue of planetary health. *After Metamorphosis* will be of interest to not only scholars working in the fields of environmental and health humanities and cultural studies but also everyone else who



wants to understand the past two years and what other challenges humans, nonhumans, and the planet as a whole will have to face in case humanity fails to minimize the effects of the ongoing climate crisis.