



COMMENTARY

Praise Be to You, Earth-Beings

BRONISLAW SZERSZYNSKI

Sociology, Lancaster University, UK

Latin American politics have been invaded by strange actors. As Marisol de la Cadena and others have reported, Inti Yaya (Father Sun), Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), and mountain deities such as Ausangate and Quilish are increasingly being invoked, not only in relation to local ecological conflicts involving indigenous groups but even during the inauguration of presidents and in the wording of laws and constitutions.¹ Quoting Jacques Rancière’s analysis of the ontogenesis of the political moment, de la Cadena describes this arrival on the political stage of what she calls “earth-beings” as the introduction of “contentious objects whose mode of presentation is not homogenous with the ordinary mode of existence of the objects thereby identified.”² For up until now there has been no place for such earth-beings in what Bruno Latour calls the “modern constitution” of Western culture, with its fundamental distinction between humans and nature, the realms of politics and science respectively.³ According to this tacit constitution, only humans engage in politics, and only through the natural sciences can we understand nonhuman nature; all other ways of interpreting natural forces—for example, as agents with which we can have social interactions—are at best poetic and at worst irrational and to be consigned to history. However, the rise of indigenous politics in Latin America and elsewhere seems to undermine this triumphalist and monochrome narrative by *provincializing* Western ontology—positioning it simply as one ontology among many and thereby opening the possibility of a radical new politics of the earth in which multiple realities and multiple more-than-human agencies are at play.⁴

1. de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes.”

2. *Ibid.*, quoting Rancière, *Disagreement*, 99.

3. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

4. de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes,” 31.

And now Francis, our first Latin American pope, could also be seen as introducing contentious objects and subjects to Catholicism and to global ecological politics alike, through his encyclical letter on ecology and climate change, *Laudato si'*.⁵ The former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose Francis as his papal name in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi, who preached to animals and plants as well as humans; and the title for this, his second encyclical, is taken from the *Canticle of the Sun* (also known as the *Canticle of the Creatures*), composed by Saint Francis in his native Umbrian tongue in 1274. The encyclical opens:

“Laudato si’, mi’ Signore”—“Praise be to you, my Lord.” In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.” (§1)

Pope Francis goes on to lament the way that the earth and the poor who are so close to the earth are being systematically burdened and laid waste. He insists that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both *the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (§49). New or freshly reconfigured entities thus enter the formal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, courtesy of the intellectual and political traditions of Latin America: the poor as subjects of systematic oppression and potential liberation; markets and institutions as manifestations of structural sin in their brutal reproduction of historical global inequalities; and the agency and subjectivity of the nonhuman world as worthy of our respect. But at the same time, in its placing of eco-theological themes on the world political stage, we might also see the encyclical as an attempt to introduce new and contentious entities into wider environmental politics. Francis “addresses” and “enters into dialogue with” not just every member of the Catholic Church but “every person living on this planet” (§3), and his message is not just the widely recognized need, in the words of the subtitle, to “care for our common home” but also that this must involve a spiritual conversion. While maintaining that characteristic of his papacy of being open to dialogue with people of other faiths and of none—he ends the encyclical with two prayers, a nondenominational “Prayer for our earth” followed by “A Christian prayer in union with creation”—Francis argues in the encyclical that ecological politics needs to draw on religion as well as science (§§62–63, 199–201), that secular, technological instrumentalism has failed us (§§102–5), and that we should see the world not as a storehouse or a set of problems but as a shining mystery (§12). In effect, he is proposing a new “geo-spiritual formation.”

5. Francis, *Laudato si'*, (hereafter cited by section number in the text).

In my usage, a geo-spiritual formation is a particular gathering of the Earth that achieves some kind of coherence between what are normally considered as three quite separate domains: the dynamics and metabolics of matter, energy, and form on a far-from-equilibrium planet; the ordering of political and social relations between interdependent living beings; and the action of nonhuman spiritual agencies, whether materialized in physical entities and processes or otherwise.⁶ Spiritual realities are not simply a sociocultural projection of meanings onto meaningless matter; as more complex forms and semiotic relations emerge out of the active self-organization of matter through key moments of bifurcation and immanence breaking, there is always a remainder that exceeds representation within the terms of the new system, an excess partially captured in terms such as “the political” or “the spiritual.” Geo-spiritual formations consist of representational elements such as images and narratives, but they also involve nonrepresentational practices, affects, and assemblages, as a particular organization of socio-metabolic relations between humans and the wider earth comes into correspondence with a particular “ordering of the sacred.”⁷ Because the complexity of a planet like the Earth will always exceed any one given mode of ordering, such formations are historically contingent and typically multiple. Helpful here is the analysis by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari of the way that in any particular ordering the productive processes of the earth may be organized into a particular “socius,” a “clothed, full body” to which is attributed all powers of production: in some formations, production is *territorialized* onto Earth and its spirit denizens; in others it is *reterritorialized* synecdochically onto the body of a monarch or emperor; and in yet others it is *detrterritorialized* onto abstract capital or cybernetic networks.⁸

So what are the characteristics of the particular geo-spiritual formation that Francis is trying to summon into being in the encyclical? Above and beyond his general arguments for a postsecular ecological politics, what is the specific mode in which he is trying to “congregate” the earth? In trying to read the encyclical in this way, I will also draw on Saint Francis’s *Canticle of the Sun*, upon which Pope Francis draws for inspiration.

First, then, Pope Francis resolutely abjures the notion of the abstract human being as the “end,” or telos, of nature.⁹ This figure of a quasi-divine “anthropos” belongs to a completely other kind of geo-spiritual formation, one in which it is the human that gives the universe meaning; such is the canonical narrative of the Anthropocene, in which human beings have the destiny of becoming the masters of planetary processes.¹⁰ Against such conceits, Francis insists that “we are not God” (§67). One mode within the text in which this rejection is performed is political: any prematurely unified global anthropos as a subject of blame or praise is disaggregated by the discourse of

6. Szerszynski, “Gods of the Anthropocene.”

7. Szerszynski, *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred*.

8. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

9. Bronislaw Szerszynski, “End of the End of Nature.”

10. Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill, “Anthropocene.”

climate justice into the beneficiaries and victims of combined and uneven global development (§51–52); furthermore, powerful groups within society distort facts and due process in order to ensure that their economic interests prevail (§54). But there is also a more metaphysical dimension to this profanation of the anthropos: Francis rejects the modern notion of the human's creating of its own meaning through species self-assertion in a meaningless universe¹¹ or even simple pragmatic instrumentalism, which Francis terms "practical relativism" and insists is "even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism" because of the way it reduces the value of things and other people to their capacity to advance one's own narrowly conceived interests (§§122–23).

Second, by dethroning the human being as the lord of creation, Francis shifts our attention to nonhuman nature as a bearer of value. Here he holds up the life of his saintly namesake as exemplary: "Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, just as if they were endowed with reason" (§11).

And Pope Francis similarly insists that each creature has its own existence value and mode of goodness that must be respected (§69). The *Canticle* famously lists various creatures as suitable vehicles for praising God. These are, in order, Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Brother Wind and Sister Water, Brother Fire and Sister Earth, and finally, in verses that the saint added later, people who forgive even as they suffer persecution or sickness and Sister Death. However, although the words *Brother* and *Sister* signify fraternal and sororal affinity with and affection for nonhuman nature, they also (unlike the "Yaya" and "Mama" applied to de la Cadena's earth-beings) emphasize the created status of nonhuman entities; like humans, all creatures have a common father in God, so are brothers and sisters. Furthermore, in the *Canticle*, the forces of nature are not objects of religious praise themselves. There is an ambiguity about the prepositions *per* and *cum* used by Saint Francis in relation to the creatures he lists.¹² Is God being praised *for* the creatures, *by* the creatures, or (more ambiguously) *through* the creatures? The intended meaning is probably a complex and interesting mixture of all three—and there are hints, not least in verse 1 of the *Canticle*, that Saint Francis thought that humanity is so fallen that praise is better coming from nonhuman creatures anyway.¹³ But this is not a territorialization of generativeness on the body of the earth, as if this were the ultimate ground of value. Indeed, although the earth is accorded the traditional epithet Mother, she is "Sister" first and "Mother" only second (§1). She is also listed as one of the four elements and, like the other female creatures of moon and water, is presented as virtuous and sustaining, in contrast to the masculine, powerful, and active sun, air, and fire, in a way that further weakens any status as an autonomous earth-being.¹⁴

11. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

12. For example, see Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*; and Moloney, *Canticle Reassessed*.

13. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

14. Marovich, "When Death Became a Creature," 104.

Thus third, although praise should not be given to the anthropos, neither does it really belong to the other creatures but only to God. Saint Francis opened the *Canticle* by declaring to his God, “Tue so le laude, la gloria e l’honore et onne benediction”—“To you belong all praise, glory, honor, and blessing.” The Bishop of Rome puts it in a very similar way in the encyclical: “The Father is the ultimate source of everything, the loving and self-communicating foundation of all that exists” (§238). This is a theism that shatters the conceit of a human and humanized Earth through an ultimate reterritorialization in God. In this geo-spiritual formation, the transcendent creator is the necessary guarantor for an ecologically diverse Earth not dominated by human interests. As Pope Francis puts it: “The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality” (§75).

But fourth, however, in this geo-spiritual formation, humans are nevertheless accorded a special status as *persons*, made in the image of God (§65). Both Francises, the saint and the pope, are anti-anthropocentric when compared with the theological mainstream against which they define themselves. Unlike the settled, monastic Cistercians, the nomadic Franciscans were not interested in the technological control of nature.¹⁵ The *Canticle* combines nature mysticism and courtly love to present a prelapsarian vision of natural harmony and mutual service, one that the saint tried to live out in an inspiring affective openness to other creatures.¹⁶ Yet Saint Francis’s encounters with animals—whether preaching to birds or taming a wolf—had more than a hint of domestication and humanization.¹⁷ Even praising God “through” the elements is also praising him “for” their meeting of the needs of humans and other creatures—in modern parlance, for the “ecosystem services” that they provide. Pope Francis too brings welcome attention to nonhumans as bearers of their own value, independent of human interests. But as the leader of a global church, the current Francis is more pragmatic and perhaps inevitably includes a chapter (chapter 5) on the capacity of human institutions, when suitably reformed, to address the challenges of sustainability. The call in chapter 6 for an ecological and spiritual conversion that embraces gratitude for existence and a sense of cosmic communion indicates something of how theologically radical that transformation would need to be in order to engender solidarity with humans and nonhumans and responsibility in the use of resources. Yet despite the introduction of theological themes such as the Sabbath rest and sacramental and Trinitarian approaches to matter, the topology of this geo-spiritual formation is one that ultimately dims the presence of non-human earth-beings, whether living or elemental, in the congregating of the earth.

15. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature*, 37.

16. Moloney, *Canticle Reassessed*, 147.

17. Marovich, “When Death Became a Creature,” 106–7.

Laudato si' has the potential to herald a new way of thinking about the earth, one that powerfully combines science, religion, and justice. In his choice of papal name, Francis reminded us of the extraordinary example of Saint Francis, who chose a life of poverty and humility and practiced generous acts of solidarity with the outcast of society and with nonhuman nature. And now Pope Francis has given us an extraordinary document, one that promises to renew the impetus of Catholic social teaching in a unified vision of social and ecological justice that draws creatively on Latin American traditions of liberation theology and ecological spirituality. Francis has proclaimed a powerful call to protect our common home and has also posed a challenge to the secularism of the wider ecological movement. Calling equally on scientific, political, and religious registers, he seeks to hail into being a new geo-spiritual formation through which new, contentious objects can enter politics. Employing strategies of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Francis, like his saintly namesake, mobilizes a theocentrism that has the effect of breaking up a prematurely unified, humanized Earth—or indeed any prematurely unified Gaian Earth—into an interdependent community or family of creatures, united in their shared relationship with their heavenly father.

Yet Francis's specific geo-spiritual formation also has its limitations. While liberating the earth from instrumental humanism and granting to matter a sacramental and Trinitarian depth, it nevertheless imposes onto the cosmos a new unity and hierarchy, one in which the relationship between the human and a particular version of the divine is accorded too much privilege. My hope is that, in the wake of *Laudato si'*, alternative geo-spiritual formations become more prominent in the public realm, ones that are more open to the multiplicity of ontologies offered by the diverse geo-spiritual formations that already flourish across the earth—and here, once again, South America can be an important source of inspiration.¹⁸ What we need are ways of congregating our planet that go beyond both utility *and* stewardship, that can accommodate the political claims of both human *and* nonhuman actors, but that are also open to the possibility of surprising and alterior futures for a planet whose extraordinary series of transformations is surely far from over. In such alternative geo-spiritual formations, the notion of an undifferentiated ground might not be safely consigned to a distant moment of cosmological origin or dissolution (whether scientific or religious) but might instead be experienced as a constant companion to finite temporal existence. In such a congregating of the earth, the relationship between different kinds of being would be one not of radical ontological difference but of the ever-present possibility of transformation, and one in which finite beings are liberated not merely to serve each other in fraternal and sororal love but also to find their own strange new destinies and meanings. In such a geo-spiritual formation we could indeed expect to see contentious new objects and subjects come forth and would truly be able to say: praise be to you, earth-beings!

18. See, e.g., Descola, *In the Society of Nature*; and Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives."

References

- Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983.
- de la Cadena, Marisol. "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond 'Politics.'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334–70.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. New York: Viking, 1977.
- Descola, Philippe. *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Pope Francis. *Laudato si'*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, May 24, 2015. w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclicalaudato-si_en.pdf.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
- Marovich, Beatrice. "When Death Became a Creature: Saint Francis and Sister Death." *Glossator* 7 (2013): 95–116.
- Moloney, Brian. *Francis of Assisi and His "Canticle of Brother Sun" Reassessed*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Sorrell, Roger D. *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Steffen, Will, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614–21.
- Szerszynski, Bronislaw. "The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human." *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 165–84.
- . "Gods of the Anthropocene: Geo-Spiritual Formations in the Earth's New Epoch." *Theory, Culture, and Society* (forthcoming).
- . *Nature, Technology, and the Sacred*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies." *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 463–84.