

Isabelle Stengers
We Are Divided

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We are divided, writes Bruno Latour, and in such a way that it seems impossible for us to “sit down at the same table” and reach any kind of agreement. An agreement, in any case, that effectively obligates all involved parties, and not only rhetorically as in the Conferences of the Parties (COP) at the UN Climate Change Conferences that have taken place for the past twenty-five years now. Must we blame the diplomats – that is, denounce the illusions of diplomacy? We would first have to agree on what we mean when we say “diplomacy.” I propose we extend the notion of the diplomatic art to all situations in which the parties consider themselves as logically “obligated” to war – either that, or we will betray what makes us what we are.¹ “*Obrigada*” means “thank you” in Portuguese, “obliged” indicates gratitude in English. To be obligated is to know one is indebted to something other than oneself for what one is. The diplomatic art is the ability to express these obligations in a slightly different way that allows – not generally, but in this particular circumstance – for the possibility of peace without betrayal. In my book *Cosmopolitics* I have proposed to call “obligation” that which one must respect in order to belong to a collective of participants, and “requirement” that which this collective demands of its environment in order to be maintained.² Obligations are not norms because what they imply can make each member, as well as the collective as a whole, hesitate. The art of the diplomat requires hesitation.

This proposition is restrictive. When a belligerent party engages in predatory war, for example, which is to say defines the opposing party as its prey, there is no room for diplomacy. It would be easy to reduce diplomacy to an art of appearances, and repeat the critique that identifies all relationships as predatory and refuses to recognize affiliations founded in obligation, but only in the interest of conquest and domination. This critique may well suggest that diplomacy is a non-modern art. I would indeed claim that the human who presents herself as free of all obligation is a child of modernity.³ It goes without saying that if this critique is on point, we can bid farewell not only to diplomacy but also, I am convinced, to the possibility that humans can, on this earth, safeguard any future worthy of the name.

This is why, confronted by the powerlessness of the diplomats active at every COP, I would like to look into the felicitous/infelicitous conditions of the diplomatic exercise. In this case, it must be stressed that this exercise cannot be reduced to the achievement of an agreement between diplomats. Each one gathered around the table

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fully understands that she will have to return to the powers that appointed her, and that it is up to those powers to ratify the agreement or reject it. Let's not talk about the Trumpist rejection of COP21, nor about the parliamentary ratifications that occur in other countries. Let's talk about the mode of hesitation that the "return of the diplomat" should bring about. Under felicitous conditions, the commitment implied by the acceptance of a treaty must be the object of collective consultation, as those to whom the diplomat returns understand they must hesitate and wonder about what obligates them, which also means: to consult in the presence of what they risk betraying. It's important to stress that obligations and the risk of their betrayal are not intended as a nostalgic reference to so-called traditional peoples. The idea that diplomats today could help us articulate what divides us should not be abandoned. But it needs to be resituated in a new environment.

Right now, the environment in which diplomacy is no longer operative leaves us exposed, beyond the state, to capitalism. Of the latter, in effect, one can say it is completely unconcerned by the meaning of obligation and the experience of hesitation. Capitalism demands all sorts of freedom from its legal and political environment, but it isn't obligated by anything – it makes others responsible for its consequences. Of course, a boss may hesitate, but for general reasons, out of human decency. And as Marx clearly saw, too much hesitation will get him swept aside by his competitors – which is to say, by an operational logic under which to hesitate means to become prey to other predators.

We must be careful, however, to avoid the trap of converting this logic into a totalizing, or systemic, explanation. Because such an explanation paints as ridiculous the very possibility of even imagining being able to thwart it.⁴ I will propose to characterize capitalism in a way abstract enough to accept the cry of contemporary activists: "We don't defend nature. We are nature defending itself." The activists' cry affirms the will to resist a ruination that concerns people and nature inseparably. It is certain that the innumerable species doomed to extinction today will not be revived. But what must be defended is what the capitalist redefinition of the world has continued not only to claim and exploit, but also to unravel and destroy. Capitalism, as I will attempt to characterize it, redefines human and nonhuman worlds in a way that unravels relationships of interdependence and institutes the most inextricable network possible of chains of dependence.

"We are divided" should first be understood,

then, in an active sense, pointing to what divides us, that is, to what has destroyed the feeling of interdependence as an operative political affect. This doesn't mean that without this division we would necessarily stand undivided in solidarity, or concern ourselves with the common interest. The difference between dependence and interdependence isn't a moral one. Dependence is, first and foremost, a fact. We depend on the inhabitability of the earth, and the idea of liberating ourselves from this dependence belongs to the realm of imagination. To dream of going to Mars is to dream of living in a way dependent on an entanglement of highly sophisticated technologies. Likewise, industrially produced seeds can produce plants without a need for soil; but their life becomes dependent on fertilizers and pesticides produced by the agrochemical industry. Since Lynn Margulis, however, biologists have become increasingly aware that if the earth is not only inhabitable but teeming with life, if arid rocks have become fertile lands, this is owed to the creation of relationships of interdependence. Relationships that do not arouse the imagination of liberation because the beings who participate in them become – thanks to, alongside, and at the risk of others – capable of what they are not capable of by themselves. Such are the relationships that, across the globe, human communities have celebrated, translated, and cultivated in terms of obligations to what has made them who they are.

The way in which, instead of relationships of interdependence, ever longer chains of dependence have been created over the course of our modernity does not reflect a dream of self-liberation, even if this dream has seduced those who have invented a thousand and one means of emancipating themselves from the "whims of nature." Rather, it reflects an operation of mobilization, in the military sense. The ideal of mobilization is the possibility of defining soldiers as beings whose behavior should depend solely upon the orders they receive, communicated down a chain of command: a mobilized army must not let itself be slowed down by anything. That's why mobilization is a correlate of anesthesia in relation to everything capable of disrupting discipline, everything that should not count. The substitution of relationships of interdependence with chains of dependence thus entails an entrenchment of the imagination, the dream of function without friction.

As Anna Tsing has shown, the invention of sugarcane plantations starting in the sixteenth century was the terrible success of a mobilization that produced beings rendered incapable of constructing histories or entering into "capricious" attachments.⁵ Here is the

recipe for these plantations: plant sugarcane (which reproduces identically, through cloning) in a distant land, where it encounters neither related plants nor familiar insects; beforehand, exterminate the inhabitants and eliminate the native vegetation from this land, and, to work on it, bring slaves whose cruelly short life spans necessitate constant replacement: a triple circulation chain of sugar, money, and humans.

What the Portuguese created, stresses Tsing, is a practically uprooted mode of agricultural production, inventing the ideal of “scalability” – the ability to function and extend into the most diverse locales without this production losing its identity. In doing so, she sheds a brutal light on the meaning of the activist’s cry: “We are nature defending itself.” Because the demands of scalability today determine equally industrial production standards and what will be deemed knowable, rational, or objective, as well as state population management. And in each case – though each case follows its own particular pattern – the cost is the same: the relationships of interdependence are eroded, ignored, even deliberately destroyed. Because these relationships stand in the way of general definitions, which are independent of circumstances and local, social memories.

Scalability allows the cry “we are nature defending itself” to be understood without confusing it with a “return to nature” or with an assimilation that would drown out thought and feeling in the fury of academic controversy – to dare make an analogy between the horror of slave life on the plantation and the sterile life of sugarcane! It’s not a matter of comparison but of pointing out that which renders indissociable the human and nonhuman costs of the demand for scalability. Consequently, this demand for scalability allows us to characterize the institutions that, each in its own way, make it prevail. The demand is borne out and propagated by the distinct rationalities that arm the state and the economy, but also the kind of science that Deleuze and Guattari deemed “royal.”⁶ Facing the specter of climate disorder, we have heard the scalable injunction par excellence: everyone must reduce “their own” carbon footprint.

In themselves, however, chains of dependency are fragile and often rife with conflict. They are imperatives, certainly, and demand that we neglect what they define as insignificant, yet they do not have the power to make us forget. Each chain constructs an uprooted notion of dependence, but at the door of the laboratory, the tribunal, the hospital, and every other place where it gets to determine what counts and what doesn’t, what it excludes

persists and resists. Each chain is located, can be evaluated, critiqued, or even openly contested. Such was the role John Dewey associated with the emergence of the public: this was the emergence of a protest against a power to do harm to certain protagonists neglected in the definition of the state’s concerns.

But as soon as the chains get bound to each other, they take on a power that none of them has individually, the power of creating *dependences* that take on the appearance of inescapable necessities, which cancel out the possibility of scruples and hesitation, and which silence all protest. How to care about sugar plantations when sugar, which was once a luxury good, has been turned into something we can’t imagine living without? Who can fathom the price paid by others for this abundance, and the knot of military, legal, and commercial apparatuses required to maintain this mode of production? Contrary to the interlaced interdependences that human peoples have honored, and toward which they have felt and even cultivated obligations, the binding interconnection between chains creates an uprooted network that masses together the effects of anesthesia provoked by each, constructs labyrinths where protesters get lost, and, as we have discovered today, boasts its own impunity: “You all think you can regulate oil extraction to save the planet? You’ll set off a financial cataclysm ...”

This is where my characterization of capitalism assumes its full meaning as a force that substitutes intricate networks of chains of dependence for relationships of interdependence. Capitalism is not the puppeteer pulling the strings of the state, science, or the economy. It is what never stops taking advantage of their respective modes of abstraction in order to connect the chains and render dependence irreversible. And in doing so it creates the “infernal alternatives” that, today, faced with the disasters that have already begun, leave us divided and powerless.

It should be recalled, however, that scalability requires permanent upkeep. It does not ensure stable conquest. The eradicated interdependencies never stop resurging. Such resurgences are not “inherently good” – nothing is “inherently good.” And so we will speak neither of “nature reclaiming its rights” nor of humans uniting against servitude, because these are images charged with an imaginary haunted by scalability – the dream of a great force of truth come to sweep away whatever powers would constraint it. Neither the great scenographies of heroic war, nor repentance and redemption are up for discussion, but neither is the time proper to diplomacy. In effect, what diplomacy requires – the ability of a group to ponder the way it

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formulates its obligations, its ability to make common sense of what maintains it and what it has to maintain – is precisely what has been undone by the chains of dependence, reduced to a hollow and plaintive imaginary, to an inconsistent desire, to an uprooted will. Today the diplomats are not equipped to cultivate the art of consultation they depend on.

To reactivate the sense of interdependence, we can look not to diplomats but to John Dewey's figure of the inquirer. Dewey's inquirers don't produce a neutral knowledge, a knowledge that would explain division and powerlessness. They are experimenters, actively intervening like all who perform experiments, but not in a laboratory, not in order to learn how to obtain reliable knowledge from what they deal with. The aim of today's inquirers should be to learn how to transform the relationship between those who experience and *what they experience*, in such a way that it reactivates the feeling of interdependence.

Feeling interdependence does not derive from knowledge. It is above all an act of "letting oneself be touched" and involves a form of gratitude that is neither subjective nor objective, since its truth lies in its generativity. If this feeling needs to be cultivated, it is because it is vulnerable. As humans, we know only too well that we may get dragged into ingratitude, entrenching ourselves against the feeling that we are who we are thanks to others. However derisory, interstitial, and fragile interdependence may seem, the task of the inquirer is to make it exist as part of a practical and political imagination, to be reactivated bit by bit and step by step. Many activists have dubbed this reactivation "reclaiming," and they know that it is not only a question of regenerating but of fighting as well. Because such regeneration takes place in hostile or dangerous environments, likely to capture and enchain any initiative of simple goodwill.

The reactivation of practices that both reclaim and presuppose interdependence calls for a culture whose seeds can be sown by inquirers, but which must be nourished by the soil in order to grow. Which means that such practices will have to resist the demands of scalability and create their own soil, a mode of making sense in common we could call vernacular, because its words and phrasings set down their roots in this soil. Which means also that a reclaiming struggle should resist a scalable definition of what it stands for, allowing itself to be obligated by the entanglement of modes of sensitivity that they weave and are woven by.

And where the feeling of obligation takes on meaning again, the figure of the diplomat can

reassert its relevance. Because the resurgence of cultures of interdependence is clearly not the solution to, but the beginning of growing together, learning to face problems of vicinity, of overlaps, of relationships yet to be established, of trusts to be risked, of griefs to be transformed into generative memories. The "we" called on to participate in "we are nature defending itself" will indeed include minorities⁷ obligated in various ways – peasants, but also others who will also learn to reclaim the meanings of their obligations, against the imperatives of scalability, and to dismantle their entrenchment against what they had rejected as illusory, anecdotal, or irrational: researchers, scientists, doctors, technicians, legal practitioners, nurses, people of faith, and of course descendants of colonized people.

Diplomats find here their felicitous conditions because they will intervene between parties with divergent obligations – who have nonetheless rendered themselves capable of interrogating how they formulate their obligations, and of hesitating together, which is to say of resisting the majoritarian dream that turns difference into opposition. Diplomatic agreements would then have the character of partial connections, like all communication between vernacular languages. They would not guarantee the persistence of an original purity, but if successful they would generate tales and accounts of what has been learned, of what has made the involved parties grow, each in their own, now correlated, ways. And this would be what diplomats would convey – not models or arguments but activators of the imagination, incentives to expand the scope of the possible reinvention of new ways to formulate problems, freed from the scalable, state-imposed imperative.

Can we imagine a state capable of accepting that its position and responsibilities are legitimate only by default, and thus provisionally, given that novel approaches to reinventing a problem have not been experimented with? A state aware that it alone cannot undo the network of chains of dependence that paralyzes it, but which could give a chance to those who, link by link, learn to disassemble it? A state that knows how to give space while our worlds and our imaginations regenerate? And what if we were to venture the hypothesis of a state tired of pretending, panicked in the face of its own powerlessness, its only conviction being that if it lets go, chaos will ensue? Maybe, then, we should invent healers who address those who believe themselves the ramparts of public order and teach them to appreciate new inventions and to understand that what is done without their help

isn't necessarily done against them, if they prove themselves worthy of our trust.

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Translated from the French by Kit Schluter.

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1
This is introduced in my
Cosmopolitics II, published in
2011.

2
Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics
I*, trans. Robert Bononno
(University of Minnesota Press,
2010).

3
For an example of the crucial
role played by treaties and
obligations in the lives of non-
modern peoples, I recommend
Michael Asch's beautiful book *On
Being Here to Stay: Treaties and
Aboriginal Rights in Canada*
(University of Toronto Press,
2014).

4
See Philippe Pignarre and
Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist
Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*,
trans. Andrew Goffey (Palgrave
Macmillan, 2011).

5
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The
Mushroom at the End of the
World* (Princeton University
Press, 2015).

6
Gilles Deleuze and Félix
Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus:
Capitalism and Schizophrenia*,
trans. Brian Massumi (Athlone
Press, 1988), 372–74.

7
Minorities here must be
understood in the sense
developed by Deleuze and
Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus*,
291), as a process of becoming
that makes them diverge from
the anonymous norm of the
majority.

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