

The new free university
Bruno Latour
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24th September 2022
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Introducing Bruno Latour speech

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues and students,
Dear Professor, Dear Bruno,

Thank you so much, Bruno, for doing us the honour and friendship of giving this lecture about the New Free University. And for telling us what it means 150 years after the creation of Sciences Po.

You are an eminent professor and researcher, a key figure in the modernization of Sciences Po, a man of conviction and action and I would add a man of imagination.

I have to say that before becoming president of Sciences Po I had read many books from Bruno. I was an admirer but after nine months in Sciences Po I am definitely a “fan”.

You had the intuition that one of my excellent predecessors, Richard Descoings, would allow you to accomplish the ambitious goal you set for the institution as scientific director: to renew social sciences and humanities research... Nothing less...

This meeting between you and Sciences Po was one of those true miracles that deeply shapes our institution.

I can say that there are elective affinities between you and this very special university that is Sciences Po, and a profound community of soul.

As if you were made for each other.

Sciences Po can only be very grateful for everything that you brought since you joined us in 2006:

To name but a few of your creations:

- The medialab: a research center that connects the social sciences with new digital tools.
- The Forccast program which rethinks the standards of pedagogy to explore contemporary controversies
- SPEAP: a unique training program which combines artistic practices with scientific methods to understand social issues with one objective: political decision-making. You had the intuition that the new frontier of social sciences has to do with art, fiction.

Those examples show the broadness of your areas of interest and contributions for research and our pedagogical programs. But to limit the mark you left at Sciences Po to them would be a shortness of view. They are the incarnation of the energy, the vision, the force of conviction and boldness you poured into our institution.

Dear Bruno, everyone knows that you are a great intellectual, a philosopher, sociologist, anthropologist, internationally recognised and even, from now on, celebrated in your own country - which has been a little slow to join the worldwide concert singing your praises.

No one is unaware that your work and your writings make up "*une grande oeuvre*", praised, commented on, copied and disputed, as are all great works.

But few know that you are more than a great intellectual, more than an eminent professor...

You are an enchanter, a bourguignon wizard who never stops experimenting, investigating, inventing, crushing, shaking up, in short, renewing the ways of thinking and expressing social sciences.

An alchemist who transforms into gold the lead of too narrow, cautious, conventional and lacklustre thinking.

To do this, you rely on the ordinary tools of professors and researchers, research, books and courses, but you also explore other ways of accessing knowledge, reflection and understanding of the world: exhibitions, plays, workshops in French villages...

Dear Bruno, you are a river that constantly overflows its bed, that irrigates, fertilises and enriches all that surrounds it.

As I said, you are also a man of conviction and action, using your knowledge and impact for the common good, in particular in regard to the environmental crisis that is already shaping the world of tomorrow.

For instance, with the Latour fund which has allowed us to raise more than 2 million euros, we are able to recruit post-doctoral researchers to contribute to finding new solutions. For that too we thank you.

I cannot tell you how happy we are to hear your words. They are like a compass to navigate in our divided and entropic world.

And now I let you the floor, to inspire us and to show us where we need to land in the next 150 years.

Mathias Vicherat

I-

Ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour and a great responsibility to have been asked to address such an eminent assembly. I have long been retired, but I have never regretted my decision, in 2006, to join this School, directed at the time by Richard Descoings. My attachment to it has constantly grown since. And being able to give such a talk in this new campus is of course a great source of pride and joy.

We are assembled this afternoon to celebrate the 150th anniversary of this school founded against all odds by Emile Boutmy. As you can read in the beautiful volume that has been written and compiled for this occasion by the School historian Marie Scot, like all his French compatriots, Boutmy had been deeply traumatised by the catastrophic conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, and most probably even more by the short-lived Commune in 1871, as if a social defeat had been added to a military one. Also Boutmy, like many of his friends in the media sphere of the time, was very impressed by the massive German investment in science, laboratories and universities, which for most of the French elite was seen as the main cause of Prussia's crushing power. Louis Pasteur had been arguing the same thing before and after the war, as for instance in many of his pleas to the government: "Out of their laboratories, physicists and chemists are like soldiers on the battlefield without weapons" he wrote to the then emperor. And after the war he published a pamphlet that Boutmy had certainly read: "Why France did not find great men in time of crisis?".

Boutmy and Pasteur, together with many of their contemporaries, knew they could not count on a French university system which was functioning in a way that could match Bismarckian Germany. So, when he said that he wanted a "free university" you should not now read this proposition as if it had been advanced in Britain, Germany, Italy or the United States where the word "free" would have been nothing but a nuance among many other flavours. In France at the time, to associate "free" with "university" was really radical. Don't forget the following: the French revolution had destroyed the University altogether in 1793; Napoleon somewhat reinstated it, but he mostly multiplied what remains a peculiarity of the French knowledge economy, namely the creation of small scale, highly selective, technical, practical and scientific schools such as Polytechnique and Écoles Normales. The Restoration destroyed the University yet again; at no point before 1896

did the faculties escape the heavy hand of the administration. And, of course Napoleon the third never considered that a university was a place for freedom!

So the word “free” in the free university meant that Boutmy decided not to be subservient to the limited and corseted system that had survived the 19th century. Planning for a free university was really a decision to begin from scratch an adventure that continues today. What is so puzzling is that our founder was not at all a scientist. He was a journalist, a person of influence, a *publiciste* as we say in French. He had no credentials of any sort to tackle this new adventure. Nor was he wealthy. But free? Indeed, *that he was*, free to make his own choices. He could name as teachers whoever he found interesting without having to look at degrees and ranks and without asking permission from anyone, not from the government and not from any committee. (I sense in some of you a great feeling of envy!)

But what was the *topic* around which Boutmy and his friends wanted to build their new school, a topic whose absence was, according to them, the main cause of the catastrophic conclusion of a whole century of failed experiments in government? It was the absence of any regular, complete, systematic, academic training in matters of governing. They were shocked to realize that in the whole apparatus of the French state there was no other training than that occurring on the spot—and haphazardly at that. Of course, you could get courses in administrative law here, in geography there, in history somewhere else, but nowhere could you find them in the same place and systematically taught for a single goal. For Boutmy such a situation was just as shocking as if you had no medical school to train physicians or no labs to train physicists. So “L’École libre des sciences politiques” was a deliberate attempt to create from scratch a curriculum for a discipline which had to be invented —political sciences, in the plural— to provide the basic training needed by the new *fonctionnaires* that the Third Republic was heavily recruiting.

The great irony is that 150 years later most of the high level personnel and quite a few ministers and former and actual presidents have come from this free university that Boutmy had devised against the weight of government in academic matters! It is difficult today in the “grand corps” of the administration, in journalism, and among the assistants of members of parliament, to find people who are *not* former students of Sciences Po! The idea of equipping the Third Republic with a large cadre of mid- to high-level personnel has been fully accomplished. In a way, one could say that Boutmy succeeded too well! One of the reasons for such resounding success is that his idea was, from the beginning, to multiply the links with the apparatus of

the State by asking practitioners to teach in the school, selecting them at will and giving them equal footing with the academic. And he selected some great minds of the time—Elie Halévy, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Gabriel Tarde (one of my intellectual ancestors). Initially his idea was that basic science training had to have equal weight with the practical skills taught by the practitioners he had the liberty to hand pick. In this he did not succeed as well as he had in his efforts to monopolise the training of fonctionnaires. It is only in the last quarter of this century that the development of basic research transformed Sciences Po into a research university, this time in the normal, global meaning of the word “university”.

But on the whole, through the many tribulations narrated so well in the celebratory book for the Centennial, the original project has been maintained and developed by each generation of administrators. So well indeed that this is what brings us all here today in this new campus in the middle of Paris, only a few metres from the original building, the famous “rue Saint Guillaume”. (Because the School never insists very much on another of its extraordinary innovations, I have to publicize that everything of interest in Science Po is not only in Paris, in spite of the accusation of “parisianisme”. This is why I take the liberty to honour the six campuses that had been created of late in Nancy, Dijon, Poitiers, Le Havre, Reims and Menton. Each of these six is what would be called an undergraduate liberal college; each is a jewel of care and intelligence, and above all each is specialised in one language and one geopolitical area. So when you visit them you have this incredible experience of seeing 17- and 18-year old kids having all their classes in three languages —French and English of course, plus Chinese if they are in Le Havre, Arabic if in Menton, or German if in Nancy and so on. I am not sure you can find any equivalent elsewhere. But maybe I am boasting—which is perfectly alright in a time of celebration!)

II-

To celebrate 150 years of struggle, creativity and accomplishment is a great and necessary moment in the history of any institution. However, it would be a very miserable way to honour the memory of our founders and of their successors if we were to simply bask in their achievements. Allow me now to follow the founders’ path by insisting on what I see as a striking *parallel* between the situation Boutmy tried to solve by the project of a free university and the situation which we are in today. The trauma of the Franco-Prussian war was indeed terrible, but it is of a small magnitude nonetheless when compared to the traumatic experience of living through the *fifty-year war* of failed attempts to deal with what I call the new climatic

regime. We have been roundly defeated, and defeated again. And this time the defeat is world wide. The sudden inclusion of the Ukraine war adds an insuperable weight to the whole experience of being an adult today in charge of educating the youth.

If Boutmy was aghast at seeing the lack of training and the absence of basic knowledge in the governmental apparatus of his time, how should we react when we realize that from the President to the humblest agent of administration, very few, I insist very few, have even a smattering of earth science, neither a vague idea of the feedback loops of the planet within which he or she operates nor an inkling of how other cultures, other people even more impacted by the planetary mutations than we are here, are coping with the changes. Yes, Boutmy was right at the time to diagnose the lack of systematic training in political science as the reason why governments had failed or “why France did not find great men at the time of perils” to recall Pasteur’s essay title once more. But I am asking you, ladies and gentlemen, am I not right to attribute the repeated defeat of our governments —and this time all governments— to the complete absence of vast cadres of agents, fonctionnaires, and administrators. They might be well-trained in political sciences but not at all in what could be called the “terrestrial sciences”. Yes, indeed we have now political sciences aplenty, but note how incredibly slowly sociology, economics, law, history, politics, and administration have absorbed the new mutation. They still take it as a topic among others when what requires is a revision of all topics.

I don’t know how it is in your various universities, but our experience here in Sciences Po is that our students are way ahead of their professors and mentors in the depth of their anxiety. However, and this is especially troubling, the anxiety, panic, depression, and trauma of those youth are *not* met with a complete, lengthy, systematic training in what would help them to act efficiently on the new mutation, and even less thereby to equip the state apparatus with a large cadre of efficient, motivated, well-trained fonctionnaires. (Actually in France the bad situation is compounded by the sad reality that hundreds of agents in charge of what is officially called “the ecological transition” have actually been laid off in forestry, meteorology, energy, and biodiversity. All those low level but highly specialised fonctionnaires have been made redundant). The fifty-year war of denial, indifference, hesitation and incompetence continues and thus we have ended up with a State that is mostly disarmed in the face of this new and immense threat. Because of the terrible year we have been through, everyone at last talks of political ecology, but what knowledge they have

absorbed is frighteningly superficial. It is not true that catastrophes are enough by themselves to focus the mind; you need people like Boutmy to turn a crisis into an occasion for radical changes. It is clear to me we are at such a juncture.

I am in no position to devise a curriculum equivalent to that drawn up by Boutmy, this time designed to equip the women and men involved in governing for our own time of crisis amidst the new climate wars. Terrestrial sciences are somewhat more difficult to teach practically and academically than are political sciences. Or at least this is how we feel before having tried! One of the key features is of course the link between social and natural sciences, not the whole of them but the branches that deal directly with the loops inside which modern industrial humans are involved and where the tipping points must be faced head on — which means large chunks of biochemistry, atmospheric physics and what used to be called physical geography, selections necessary for those who later will be in the daily practice of governing.

You all have experiences in those linkages, I am sure, but Sciences Po has been extremely innovative thanks once more to Richard Descoings (who, by the way, can rightly be named the re-founder of this School). For fifteen years we have offered double majors as well as double masters in association with the best scientific universities of Paris—at the end of which those students courageous enough to swallow two complete curricula may choose to go on in geoscience, biology, physics, mathematics or, in economics, social theory or law. Indeed we have begun creating, as I was mentioning before, this cadre of professionals with dual training. I am pleased to say that they have now begun to occupy many jobs necessary for taking on the many challenges of the climate mutation.

But this is just one of a series of necessary steps toward a full curriculum. As Boutmy had seen so vividly and with such prescience, you cannot have any idea about a good government without a feel for the whole range of humanities. However, today the word “humanities” has become somewhat of a misnomer; we should really call them “humanities in distress”. What has happened to all the human sciences is that they have all been violently impacted by the urgent necessity of acknowledging and addressing the non-human agents knocking at their doors. Let’s make a quick list:

The new curriculum should include a social theory capable of vastly expanding the range of agents composing the social world.

Law is a major site of renewal because it is being challenged by the many activists who realize how limited are the definitions of what owns what and

why. Legal scholars are working hard to tackle the many cases where property rights, corporate laws, and the theory of commons are entangled.

What would it mean to teach geopolitics and the theory of States when none of the issues our students have to handle sit inside the borders of one State.

History, so important for Boutmy, has been deeply renewed by environmental history and it now makes no sense to teach it as if history was that of humans occupying a stable landscape. How could you teach political philosophy when the very idea of free autonomous agents voting as part of representative governments appears everywhere to be abandoned for want of alternatives? As for inventing the alternatives? That's quite a task.

As you see, there is not one discipline that is not in need of being reassembled, retooled so as to be rendered usable for our students. Students who, we should not forget, will in twenty years bear the full weight of our incapacity to teach them *today* the skills that would prepare them for what is coming. Herein lies the key difference that ends the parallel with the time of Boutmy. He wanted to prepare students for modernising the State —and that we still do! But now that the problem has shifted to the task of preparing them to ecologize a whole civilisation —this we *don't do*. For Boutmy, the war was behind him (he could not imagine the Great War); the current war is behind, around *and* in front of us.

What is so interesting for scholars in all disciplines is that their skills could become relevant again, if only they invested massively in coping with the new challenges. Geography was for Boutmy one of the great disciplines, but geography has split into human and natural geographies just at the time when they should have been rejoined. Still, geography should in a way be the backbone of the new curriculum, together with anthropology, the latter having become so central to exploring the enormous diversity of ways to handle the multiplicity of non-human agents that compose the world of most of the other people — those we used to call “others” before realizing how close they were to us and often ahead of us in living through catastrophes we had triggered for them.

Allow me to insist on the importance of what is called elsewhere performance sciences, design, or simply the liberal arts. Do you seriously imagine it is possible to handle the new civilisational mutation with 20th century ideas about what is a novel, a play, a film, an installation? Without the arts fully renewed, you cannot handle the traumatic experience of the 50-year war of denial, indifference and incompetence. You have no way to metabolise the affects associated with the trauma. You become mad. The arts should be part of the curriculum as well.

Given that this is not always advertised, I need to point out that every student of Sciences Po is required to spend two complete semesters practicing an art under the guidance of a master. This work is evaluated and graded. And it is compulsory! Every year the School asks about a two hundred “masters” in their art to teach their practice to our students — from cinema to typography, from radio to dance! Am I boasting again? But where else do you see such an innovation?

You also might not know that we created, again with Richard Descoing, a school of political arts (SPEAP) that every year equips 20 or 25 young professionals, architects, artists, physicians, and activists with the range of skills necessary to inquire about the new civilisational mutation, *inquiry* being the centre of the curriculum inspired of course by John Dewey’s pragmatist tradition. Inquiry is what takes students away from the terrible habit of believing in problem-solving whereas redefining what the problem could be is the central task of the inquirer, and exactly what basic science should help them to do once students are in the field. Education is not problem solving, but finding what the problem is. And here we are not far from the central intuition of Boutmy to never divorce basic research from practitioners.

Devising the curriculum of the new free university for terrestrial sciences, with the aim of training the new cadre of administrators for the State as well as for the corporate and media sphere, will of course be fraught with controversies. But I am convinced that failing to do so is not an option. What would it mean to claim to have a department of “affaires publiques” where those new questions would not be massively taught? They *are* the “affaires publiques”.

III-

Ladies and gentlemen, let me now bring this celebratory lecture to a close by insisting on one of the main planks of Emile Boutmy’s original project and the one to which this School has been most faithful: namely the presence of practitioners or scholars exterior to the School in greater numbers than tenured professors inside it — 4.000 of them today! This fact has been a source of quite a lot of condescension from the other institutions in Paris. I have to confess that I myself could not take seriously, before I arrived, a university where full time professors were a minority. But now I think the presence of practitioners should be cherished, vastly developed but also radically rearranged. Let me explain.

As all educators unfortunately know, everywhere in the world the trickle-down model of universities is in crisis. Either students no longer want to pay for a training they find more and more empty, or scholars and scientists are complaining that this model is no longer sustainable. What I call the trickle-down model of the university is the one invented in Germany by Wilhem von Humboldt —the brother of Alexander— at the beginning of the 19th century and which has since spread everywhere. You endow chairs and laboratories for scientists to freely pursue their quest for knowledge — which is good, but you do so in the hope that many years down the road those chunks of knowledge will have reached the masses of people through textbooks, museums, entertainment and such (you don't have to care about the precise mechanism) and that in the end those masses will be now fully enlightened. What you do have to care about is the judgment of your peers. We should not be fooled; “autonomy” of research most of the time means being fully *dependent* on the evaluations of peers and funding agencies. The theory of trickle-down knowledge is as outdated as that of trickle-down economics... I knew this, but I was struck when learning that the city of Cambridge had overwhelmingly voted Remain in the fateful Brexit referendum but that the shire of Cambridge had just as massively voted Leave. Obviously the fountain of knowledge of Cambridge colleges had not inundated the shire! This is a great simile for what could be called the complete irrelevance of universities based on the trickle-down model of knowledge production when dealing with the climate mutation.

You will ask: are there alternatives? Are we not stuck forever in this model? I hope not and this is where the experience of this School could serve as a template for real innovations. Ever since Isabelle Stengers wrote her brilliant essay “Another science is possible” and introduced the slogan “slow science”, thousands of experiments had been attempted to let researchers meet those who need their science, but also —and this is the main point— so that the people most impacted by the climate mutation are able to suggest, propose, impose, accompany and even participate in the research. The mot d'ordre here is the shift from university to *pluriversity*. I regret not having the time to talk about all of those attempts, but I will just stress the case of “The Nouveaux Commanditaires Science” which helps connecting people in need of science with scientists in need of original topics through the intermediation of a specialised professional. This is no longer trickle-down. And it is not a belittling of basic science either. Quite the opposite. Not only should the basic research front be expanded, but its place should continue to be shifted to the back of those who are in close contact with the practitioners, providing them with the most advanced tools to help them deal with the

crisis. Basic research is no longer an avant garde but more like a back office in need of a full reorganization so as to effectively support the real research front.. Of course, the word practitioners changes its meaning as well. It does not only designate members of the Conseil d'Etat or journalists or politicians, but also those to whom the whole research is now devoted and who, in a small but decisive part, are leading it. They should be inside the walls of Sciences Po or Sciences Po should go to them. The details of this radical shift in the organisation of the universities are still obscure, but I am sure that it is the way to go and that Sciences Po, once again, is at an advantage in exploring it because of its long experimentation in weaving academics and practitioners.

Ladies and gentlemen, I first reminded you of Emile Boutmy project; I then sketched, alas very superficially, the new curriculum necessary to fulfill our duties as educators in the New Climatic Regime; and I concluded, again much too briefly, on the big turnaround that will shift the research university out of a model so ill-adapted for a situation it could not anticipate. I apologise that I have not found a better way to entertain you during the celebration of our School which more than ever deserves a Latin motto: "*primus sine paribus*". Thank you for your patience.

English kindly polished by Michael Flower