



SYMBIOSIS AS A NATURAL CONTRACT

Michel Serres and the representative claim

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introduction

Those who first encounter the work of Michel Serres often do so through *The Natural Contract*. In this book, Serres infamously proposed extending the social contract to nature in the face of the current ecological crisis:

[W]e must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favour of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect [...] An armistice contract in the objective war, a contract of symbiosis, for a symbiote recognises the host's rights, whereas a parasite – which is what we are now – condemns to death the one he pillages and inhabits, not realising that in the long run he is condemning himself to death too. (*Natural Contract* 38)

Faced with this proposal, the question is often raised as to how it would be possible to enter into a contract with nature. What would it mean to speak with or for nature? The French philosopher Luc Ferry, for example, was not impressed by Serres's book: "One may object, and not without reason, that this is a metaphorical fable more than a rigorous argument. It seems rather difficult, indeed, to confer literal meaning on the contract proposed by Serres ('Hello Mother Nature, let's be friends')" (Ferry 72).

We find similar criticisms of Bruno Latour's proposal, inspired by Serres, to represent non-

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humans through a "parliament of things" (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern; Politics of Nature*; Simons, "Parliament of Things"). Steven Vogel, for example, expressed the following skepticism:

They claim to be *speaking for* the things, but in fact they may be nothing other than ventriloquists. What's astonishing to me is that Latour understands this crucial point and yet still insists that things should speak, and should even be members of a parliament named after them, even though he has just

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shown what the dangers of such a parliament – which could be nothing other than a parliament of ventriloquists – would inevitably bring. It's not nature that produces these dangers, it's nature's silence. (190)

In fact, this criticism often takes two forms: a natural contract is impossible for either ontological or epistemological reasons. On the one hand, it seems impossible because nature has no interests (ontology). On the other hand, it seems impossible because, even if nature did have interests, we are incapable of knowing those interests (epistemology).

The purpose of this article is to respond to these criticisms. But it is important to be clear about my ambitions. Typically, three concerns are conflated. First, a natural contract is seen as *inconceivable*. Second, even if it were conceivable, such a contract is seen as *undesirable*. Finally, even if desirable, it may be seen as *impractical* to realize. My aim is not to propose the detailed mechanisms of a natural contract in practical terms, nor to argue for its desirability. Rather, it is more fundamental and modest, to show that the natural contract is at least conceivable. I will do this mainly by reconsidering two central concepts. It is claimed that we cannot *represent* nature's interests and therefore cannot come to an *agreement*, and thus a contract, with nature. However, I will suggest a way out by reinterpreting representation and agreement. Both concepts play a central role in our common understanding of a contract. A contract is often defined as a legally enforceable agreement between represented parties. But nature can neither agree (ontologically) nor be represented (epistemologically).

In order to address this dual concern, I start with the problem of representation: nature cannot be represented. Specifically, I will present two counterarguments. The first argument is that political representation is always difficult, even in the case of human beings. Representing nature only seems more difficult because we have forgotten the difficulties associated with politically representing humans. The second argument aims to rethink representation. Representing nature only seems so hard because we tend to follow

a cognitive understanding of representation, as if representation is about adequately copying and representing the ideas of the represented party. Instead, following Michael Saward, I propose an alternative understanding of representation as a *game of representative claims and counterclaims*: political representation is about claiming to speak on behalf of a referent and then allowing that referent to respond to that claim.¹

Then I turn to the problem of agreement. A natural contract seems difficult because it is hard to imagine what it would mean for nature to agree to a particular proposal. To counter this, I turn to the notion of symbiosis, found in the work of Serres.² A natural contract, I will argue, need not be a contract of consensus or synthesis. The alternative is a contract of symbiosis, which does not require all parties to have a common understanding of the situation. Instead, it allows for an agreement in which all parties have their own interests and definition of the situation. In this sense, a natural contract can make sense if it is understood as a contract in which symbiosis is achieved through political representation based on a game of claims and counterclaims.

the problem of representation

The first problem with a natural contract is the problem of representation: how can nature be represented politically in a meaningful way? Nature does not speak, but is always represented by humans who speak on its behalf. In this sense, there are two problems: (1) nature does not have a voice and (2) therefore it will always be humans who speak on its behalf, being ventriloquists rather than spokespeople. To counter this, I think we can find two arguments in the work of Serres, Latour, and others: (1) representation is always difficult, in the sense that also human beings do not have a natural *political* voice; (2) it is possible to make room for a political voice for nature if we abandon an overly cognitive notion of representation.

The first argument, that representation is always difficult, is found in *The Natural Contract* itself, for example, when Serres states:

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What language do the things of the world speak, that we might come to an understanding with them, contractually? But, after all, the old social contract, too, was unspoken and unwritten: no one has ever read the original, or even a copy. (39)

The difficulty of a natural contract is therefore not a strong argument, because the social contract presented similar difficulties: what does it mean to give a voice to the “people” of a country? In what sense are the interests of an individual really represented by a ballot paper or a member of parliament? Christopher Stone makes a similar point when he argues for the legal status of nature:

I am sure that I can judge with more certainty and meaningfulness whether my lawn needs water, than the Attorney General can judge whether and when the United States wants (needs) to take an appeal from an adverse judgement by the lower court. (24)

Political representation of humans is thus equally hard and strange, but we found acceptable means to accomplish it. There is no fundamental reason to believe that something similar is not possible for nature.

A natural contract only seems difficult if we start from a false asymmetry: human beings speak for themselves, nature needs a spokesperson. This is incorrect, not because nature does not need a spokesperson, but because humans also need spokespersons. The mistake is to confuse the ability to speak with the ability to speak *politically*. This is also Latour’s claim when he speaks of a parliament of things:

I do not claim that things speak “on their own,” since no beings, not even humans, speak on their own, but always *through something or someone else*. I have not required human subjects to share the right of speech of which they are so justly proud with galaxies, neurons, cells, viruses, plants, and glaciers. (*Politics of Nature* 68)

Humans do not have the natural capacity to speak politically, and neither does nature, but that is not the problem. It is a matter of creating

the appropriate institutions and practices to represent nature in politics. This is exactly what the natural contract seeks to do.

A possible objection is that an asymmetry remains: although it is difficult to represent humans, they have needs, whereas nature does not. Nature does not know what it wants, whereas in the case of humans it is possible to ask. Such an objection, however, relies on an overly cognitive understanding of political representation. It assumes that representation is about the thinking behind the signed contract: those represented have self-identified needs, and they are successfully represented if their spokesperson adequately summarizes, articulates, and defends them. When Serres and Latour speak of the political representation of nature, they have a different understanding of representation in mind. In a famous passage, for example, Serres proposes the following grounds for a natural contract: “In fact, the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that’s enough to make a contract” (*Natural Contract* 39).

One way to understand this alternative is to invoke Michael Saward’s proposal to rethink political representation in terms of *representative claims*. Representation here is understood as a game of claim and counterclaim: the representative makes a claim about what the interests of those represented are, and they in turn can respond and show their (dis)agreement: they can rebel, complain, vote for the other candidate, and so on. The crucial point is that representation here is not a game of ideas, but of actions – of forces, ties, and interactions.

Saward describes his own perspective in opposition to a traditional understanding of representation, which he attributes to Hanna Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation*. There are at least five differences between these two perspectives. For Pitkin, representing someone is a *descriptive activity*: representation aims to describe the needs of the represented party. Secondly, representation is therefore a *unidirectional activity*, going from the represented party to the spokesperson. Thirdly, this spokesperson is judged on the extent to which they succeed in representing

the *fixed set of interests* that already existed. Fourthly, representation is therefore understood as a *transfer of information*: the needs of the represented party are transferred through the representation. Finally, the evaluation of representation is an *evaluation of the qualities of the spokesperson*: how reliably do they transfer the information?

Saward presents an alternative picture that focuses on claim-making in representation. Firstly, representation is a *performative activity*: the needs of the represented party are not described but constructed. Therefore, secondly, representation becomes *multidirectional*: representation becomes a game of negotiation between the representative and the represented, through a game of claim and counterclaim. Thirdly, *the interests* of the represented are *not fixed*. They are not the starting point of the representative's claim, but its product: the representative constructs the interests of the represented and the latter show their agreement in their subsequent response. This leads to the fourth element, namely that representation here is more than a transmission of information. It is about *creating identities*. The identity of the representative is a product of the game of representative claims. Finally, therefore, the success of representation depends not only on the qualities of the representative, but also those of the represented. It depends on their mutual game of representative claims and counterclaims.

Saward thus proposes the following definition of a representative claim: "A maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A)" (302). Saward illustrates this with some examples. Take conservatives claiming to defend family values. Here the Conservative Party makes a representative claim about the interests of the electorate. The Conservative Party (maker) offers itself (subject) as standing for the interests of "the family" (object), in relation to the people (referent), and is offered to the electorate (audience). Another example would be Karl Marx calling on the working class to take up revolutionary arms.

Here Marx (the maker) is offered to the working class (the subject) as a symbol of a revolutionary political future (the object), related to our present society (the referent), offered to the would-be members of that class (the audience).

The suggestion I want to make is that this scheme makes representing nature conceivable. For example, we can say that the natural contract is about scientists (makers) offering science (subject) as a representation of the nature of climate change (object), in relation to the present world (reference), offered to everyone in the world (audience). Of course, it does not have to be scientists who make the representative claims. It can also be NGOs (non-governmental organizations), laypeople, activists, and other groups (see Barthe et al.). The only crucial element is that there is the possibility of a counterclaim:

[T]here is no representative claim that cannot be "read back" or contested or disputed by observers or audiences. The maker of a representative claim may intend that the audience invoked by the claim sees it as he wishes, but they are always to some extent free to reinterpret the claim, to turn it back against the maker: "who are you to tell me what I want?" (Saward 304)

It seems to be this possibility of making counterclaims that Serres has in mind when he concludes that "the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and *that's enough to make a contract*" (*Natural Contract* 39; my emphasis).

Before turning to the second problem, let me make two further comments. First, both Serres and Latour stress what might be called the *materiality* of representative claims. We live in a world where we are constantly bombarded with spokespersons making representative claims about us. We rarely bother to make strong counterclaims. This is partly because these representative claims are not just articulated in language, but are institutionalized. Many of the existing institutions, technologies, and practices can be interpreted as material systems making representative claims on us.

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For example, the voting process itself, with its ballot papers, makes a representative claim about us, namely that we will correctly express our genuine interests throughout the process. Although it is possible to make counterclaims against this – by refusing to vote, and so on – these institutions are often accepted as they are. This echoes a recurrent idea in Serres, echoed by Latour (see Latour, “Pragmatogonies”; Strum and Latour), that objects stabilize collectives by slowing them down. They make the constant contestation of all representative claims more difficult, since these claims are embedded in our objects, practices, and institutions:

Our relationships, social bonds, would be airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object [...] stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions. For an unstable band of baboons, social changes are flaring up every minute. One could characterize their history as unbound, insanely so. The object, for us, makes our history slow. (Serres, *Genesis* 87)

This leads to my second point, which follows from this, what I would call the paradox of democracy. A good democracy, one might say, requires that representative claims can always be challenged by counterclaims. But, as we saw, our democratic societies consist mainly of institutions and practices that slow down such contestation, that make counterclaims more and more difficult. How to reconcile the two? Again, we can refer to a central idea of Serres's, derived from information theory (see Simons, *Michel Serres*). For Serres, one could only contest something against a background of accepted claims. For instance, in *The Natural Contract*, he gives the following example: “Suppose two speakers, determined to contradict each other. As violent as their confrontation may be, as long as they are willing to continue the discussion, they must speak a common language in order for the dialogue to take place” (7). Meaningful disagreement therefore requires a more fundamental agreement on the framework within which one can meaningfully disagree.

Disagreement in a democracy can only be productive if both parties agree to disagree according to certain rules. Of course, there must also be a way to challenge these rules, for example, if one genuinely believes that the system is rigged in favor of certain viewpoints or groups. But the crucial point is that these contestations can nor should happen all at once.³ In short, everything is contestable, but not at the same time.

This also answers the question of where the game of claim and counterclaim begins. Here, too, a paradox seems to be at work, since democratic claims and counterclaims presuppose existing institutions whose origin cannot be democratic – since democracy presupposes them. This paradox is reflected in the common criticism that this framework presupposes that counterclaims *can* be made – whereas in reality counterclaims are often suppressed or dismissed as staged. From the perspective of Serres, there are two possible replies. Firstly, one could argue that it is representative claims all the way down. We are always already at work with claims that are being made, and we can at best recursively contest and improve these representative claims. Important for this argument, as others have suggested, such representative claims are not restricted to human interactions. Serres tends to read nature itself as consisting of similar contracts, in the form of natural laws, ecosystems, and so on (see Johnson 9–11). These systems, in Serres's words, are also held together by bonds and “contracts.” Our contracts are not fundamentally different, but build on the patterns found in nature.

Secondly, even if counterclaims are locally made impossible, they will show themselves elsewhere. This is how Serres diagnoses the problem of climate change: it is a problem of ignoring counterclaims by nature until they are too big to ignore. Whereas we tend to ignore the role of nature, only focusing on the conflict between human actors, this has recently changed.

[B]ecause of a threshold effect, the sharing of destruction and the increase in its means produce an astonishing reversal: suddenly, the two enemies find themselves in the same camp, and, far from giving battle to

one another, they struggle together against a common third competitor. (Serres, *Natural Contract* 7)

Similarly, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour describes how “the proliferation of [unrepresented] hybrids has saturated the constitutional framework of the moderns” (51). These excluded hybrids end “up being too numerous to feel that it is faithfully represented either by the order of objects or by the order of subjects” (49). It is a point repeated in *Politics of Nature*, where the need for a Parliament of Things is justified because we can no longer ignore the counterclaims of these hybrids. We are faced with “*generalized revolts of the means*: no entity – whale, river, climate, earthworm, tree, calf, cow, pig, brood – agrees any longer to be treated ‘simply as a means’ but insists on being treated ‘always also as an end’” (Latour, *Politics of Nature* 155–56).

the problem of agreement

Let us now turn to the second problem, that of the possibility of agreement. Whereas the problem of representation was primarily concerned with the question of what the mechanism would be for arriving at a natural contract, the problem of agreement is concerned with the contours of the end result: even if nature can be represented, what will the contract look like? The main concern here is one of anthropocentrism: are we not ultimately doomed to impose human values, a human-made consensus, on nature? How can nature ever be represented on its own terms?

I believe that one way of defusing this tension is to return to Serres’s text and to take very seriously what he himself proposes:

[W]e must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favour of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect [...] An armistice contract in the objective war, a contract of symbiosis, for a symbiote recognises the host’s rights, whereas a parasite – which is

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what we are now – condemns to death the one he pillages and inhabits, not realising that in the long run he is condemning himself to death too. (*Natural Contract* 39)

A recurring term in many of Serres’s descriptions of the natural contract is that of *symbiosis*. I propose to take up this concept, instead of dismissing it as a simple metaphor. I will argue that symbiosis constitutes Serres’s proposal for what a contract with nature will look like. Most critiques of the natural contract tend to demand that such an agreement would imply some strong form of shared values or understanding of the world. I will argue against this and show why symbiosis demands less, but is sufficient. I want to explore the value of symbiosis as a concept through five of its dimensions, highlighting what a symbiotic relationship does and does not entail: unequal benefits, emergent properties, interdependence, context dependency, and reciprocal capture. These dimensions will portray symbiosis as a specific type of agreement that is both achievable and sufficient.

The first characteristic of symbiosis lies in its capacity to yield *unequal benefits*. Take the symbiotic bond between clownfish and sea anemones. Clownfish are known to take refuge in the tentacles of sea anemones, where the stinging ability of the anemone’s tentacles protects them from predators. In return, the clownfish provide the anemone with food in the form of small prey that they catch. In this symbiotic partnership, the clownfish benefits more than the sea anemone: while the shelter is vital for the clownfish, the amount of food provided by the clownfish is often not as significant. This principle shows that there is no need for parity of benefits in symbiotic interactions. It is perfectly reasonable for one group, such as humans, to receive a greater share of the benefits compared to other parts of the ecosystem, as long as all involved entities experience some form of benefit or remain neutral. Concerns that the human species will be the predominant beneficiary of the natural contract may therefore be misplaced, as equal benefits do not define the nature of symbiosis.

Secondly, the concept of symbiosis encompasses *the emergence of novel properties*.

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When two distinct species engage in a symbiotic partnership, the resultant outcome often transcends the mere union of two preexisting species. It is not just the same, but better. Frequently, this symbiosis creates novel behaviors or traits that would not manifest independently of the symbiotic interaction. An example is the relationship between mycorrhizal fungi and plants. Mycorrhizal fungi form symbiotic associations with plant roots, facilitating a mutually beneficial exchange. The fungi extend their intricate network into the soil, enhancing the plant's ability to absorb water and nutrients. In turn, the plant provides the fungi with sugars produced through photosynthesis. But the result of this relationship is not just that the plant and fungus work together to do the same thing, but to do it better. This partnership gives the plant an expanded capability to thrive in nutrient-poor soils, while the fungi gain access to a process – photosynthesis – that they would not normally be able to perform. They gain capabilities that they would not otherwise have.

This is a theme close to the hearts of both Serres and Latour: how a network of actors can do new and different things that they cannot accomplish alone. Take Latour's reinterpretation of the infamous slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Latour, following Serres, argues that it is wrong to analyze this as if the actors involved have fixed essences: guns are guns and people are people. For Latour, their essences are defined through their relations: "You are different with a gun in hand; the gun is different with you holding it" ("On Technical Mediation" 33). The hybrid object "human with a gun" gains properties that neither had on their own. We can apply the same reasoning to the natural contract: such a contract would not be a contract between preexisting entities. The entities, after signing the contract, will have novel characteristics. Serres also speaks of "exo-Darwinism" in relation to technology. Humans use technology not as an extension of themselves, but rather as a form of "setting sail" (*appareillage*): technology externalizes certain functions, leaving the original organ (e.g., the

hand) to take on new roles. These externalized technologies, moreover, will then evolve on their own and, in turn, shape our own bodies. As Serres puts it, "what we shape and think we master departs to seek its fortune in the world, being born to a life of its own" (*Branches* 102). We adapt to the world by creating an artificial environment to which our body must adapt.

This brings us to the third distinctive characteristic of symbiosis: *interdependence*. Symbiotic partners frequently rely on one another for their very survival. To illustrate this, we can think of how humans relate to the myriad of bacteria residing within their intestines. It is quite clear how these bacteria rely on our body to survive, but the reverse is true as well. These intestinal bacteria play a pivotal, though often still unknown role in digesting nutrients and supporting various aspects of human health. We simply could not nourish ourselves without these bacteria. Thinking about a natural contract can thus imply similar strong terms, a point stressed by Serres: "Each of the partners in symbiosis thus owes, by rights, life to the other, on pain of death" (*Natural Contract* 39).

The fourth characteristic is *context dependency*. There is a danger of thinking about symbiosis in absolute terms: either collaboration works everywhere or it does not work at all. In reality, symbiosis only makes sense within specific environments. Take, for example, the partnership between nitrogen-fixing bacteria and soybeans. These bacteria live in specialized nodules on the roots of the plants and convert atmospheric nitrogen into a form that the plants can use for growth. In return, the plants provide the bacteria with essential nutrients. However, this symbiotic relationship depends on an adequate supply of nitrogen. If the soil already contains sufficient nitrogen, the plants may not need to form a symbiotic partnership with the bacteria.

We see this context dependency also at work in the effects of climate change. For example, by altering average temperatures, climate change can cause a mismatch between pollinator activity and flowering, disrupting their

symbiotic relationship. This illustrates how the success of a symbiosis is closely linked to its environmental context. The mere presence of symbiotic partners is not enough; it is the compatibility of these partners with their environment that matters. Outside these parameters, symbiosis does not really make sense. So when we think about a natural contract, it is important not to think about it in too absolutist terms, as if it is always better. Sometimes symbiosis does not pay off. In the case of a natural contract, this may have been the case in the past, and it may also be in the future. Therefore, wishing that there had always been a symbiotic natural contract ignores the question of the context in which symbiosis makes sense. To speak of a natural contract is to speak of it locally: here and now. At the very least, this means that a natural contract should never be seen as permanent or self-evident. It remains open to renegotiation as circumstances change.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the characteristic of *reciprocal capture*. I take this term from Isabelle Stengers, who derives it from Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of the interaction between the wasp and the orchid, seeing their symbiosis as the embodiment of a rhizome:

The orchid deterritorialises by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorialises on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialised, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorialises the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. (Deleuze and Guattari 11)

This example illustrates many of the features already mentioned: the wasp and the orchid gain something from this new relationship, but perhaps in unequal ways. What is clear is that this symbiosis has allowed properties to emerge in the form of different behaviors and patterns. The result is a highly context-dependent form of interdependence.

However, Stengers's main point is that the wasp and the orchid do not enter into this symbiotic arrangement because they share some

common understanding or goal, but because of their own, radically different motives. In this sense, a reciprocal capture, where both partners entrap each other in their own schemes, refers to situations where "a *dual* process of identity construction is produced: regardless of the manner, and usually in ways that are completely different, identities that coinvent one another each integrate a reference to the other for their own benefit" (Stengers 36). Hence, symbiosis refers to a situation where "every protagonist is interested in the success of the other for its own reasons" (35). It is in that sense that symbiosis is different from consensus, convergence, or synthesis. There is no ultimate framework accepted and understood by the different parties. Instead, we are confronted with the "stability of a relation without reference to an interest that would transcend its terms" (36). The different parties enter the contract for their own, heterogeneous reasons. We therefore do not need to share an understanding with nature to engage in a natural contract. We simply have to find an acceptable form of symbiosis.

One might object that by redefining a contract in terms of symbiosis, one should no longer speak of "contract." There are several answers to this. First, symbiosis is not meant as a replacement for the notion of contract, but as a reinterpretation of what the element of "agreement" implies in a contract, which we defined as a legally enforceable agreement between represented parties. If we accept this definition, and if symbiosis is a plausible interpretation of agreement, then it seems legitimate to still call it a contract. The only requirement is that we dispense with a cognitive interpretation of agreement, which would imply a set of shared ideas or values. Instead, agreement is understood here as the absence of significant counterclaims.

Second, one could respond by reiterating Serres's emphasis on the etymology of the word contract, which comes close to symbiosis:

The term *contract* originally means the tract or trait or draft that tightens and pulls: a set of cords assures, without language, the subtle system of constraints and freedoms through which each linked element receives

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information about every other and about the system, and draws security from all. (*Natural Contract* 103)

A contract is thus understood as a set of communicating forces that exchange information, of which language is only one particular type. It is only a rather modern and narrow understanding of contracts that prevents us from linking them to the notion of symbiosis.

conclusion

In this article I have tried to argue for the conceivability of a natural contract, and thereby to defend it against some common criticisms. This was done by reinterpreting two notions. The representation of nature within the contract became more plausible by rereading representation as a game of representative claims and counterclaims. The ultimate agreement that we can reach with nature was in turn made more concrete by reconceptualizing agreement as symbiosis.

Although the aim was to make such a natural contract more conceivable, I do not claim to be the first to reconceptualize it in this way. Rather, the argument is that figures such as Serres and Latour were already thinking along these lines, but that this was not always clear to outsiders. Similar lines of thought are present in Stengers's thinking when she tries to conceptualize her proposal of cosmopolitics in terms of symbiosis. In the same way, one could also refer to terms such as "sympoiesis" (Haraway), "symbiopolitics" (Helmreich), or "encounter" (Tsing).

But it could have also been conceptualized in different terms than symbiosis, which nonetheless similarly stresses that a complete common understanding is unwarranted. One example is the concept of "trading zones," popularized by Peter Galison in the context of the history of twentieth-century physics, and picked up by many other authors (see Gorman; Kasavin). Galison introduces it to describe the

social, material, and intellectual mortar binding together the disunified traditions of experimenting, theorizing, and instrument building [...] Anthropologists are familiar with different cultures encountering

one another through trade, even when the significance of the objects traded – and of the trade itself – may be utterly different for the two sides. (803)

Trading is thus made possible, but without the need for a consensus on what the value and meaning of the trade itself is. In the same way, different groups of scientists can collaborate without understanding their collaboration in the same terms. Another way would be to follow a suggestion in Simons ("Gatekeepers") and speak of "reciprocities." He introduces it to reread the history of democracy and technology, and how their history is shaped by the creation of new reciprocities. Again, in this context, it is possible to conceptualize how workers and capitalists work together without the need to presuppose shared norms, benefits or power. It is their dependencies on one another that bring them to the table.

What these alternative proposals share with that of symbiosis is threefold. First of all, to come to a contract with nature we do not need to exactly know what nature wants or thinks. Representation does not succeed or fail due to a proper description of presupposed needs or wants. The only requirement is that nature can respond through its actions and that these actions need to be seen as legitimate counterclaims. Secondly, it also helps to avoid a common criticism in this context, namely that of anthropocentrism. Are we not still defining the contract in human terms, instead of in nature's own terms? This might be true, but from the perspective of symbiosis this is irrelevant. Such a criticism only works if a natural contract presupposes consensus or shared values. As we saw, this is not the case. Finally, it is hopefully clear by now that the advocated proposal here, to read the natural contract in terms of representative claims and symbiosis, must itself be understood as a representative claim. It is a proposal, where I (S) am the spokesperson of what the natural contract is (O), which is related to our (future) interactions with nature (R) and is offered to you, the audience (A).



disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 There are other ways to critique this cognitive understanding of representation, drawing more on work in discursive psychology (see Edwards and Potter; Coulter). But I will leave that aside here.

2 In biology the term “symbiosis” refers to a close and long-term relationship between biological entities. It can include mutualism (where both benefit), commensalism (where one benefits, the other is neutral), and parasitism (where one benefits, the other suffers). Serres has in mind mainly mutualism and commensalism, as opposed to parasitism. We will follow this usage in the paper.

3 This points to another set of problems democracies are facing, namely that they are being flooded with counterclaims, partly due to the artificial creation of counterclaims (fake news, bot accounts, etc.). What seems to be at stake here is a more fundamental contestation of the democratic agora in which the normal claims and counterclaims could be made. In order to address it properly, it is necessary to assess the nature and value of this more fundamental counterclaim (e.g., does it show that there is a fundamental deficit in our democracy, or is it merely a fabricated contestation by authoritarian regimes or private lobbying?).

bibliography

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