

## Something is Brooding

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**Review of Isabelle Stengers. 2023. *Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse*. Translated by Thomas Lamarre. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.**

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**Something is Brooding**

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Isabelle Stengers' latest book, *Réactiver le sens commun: Lecture de Whitehead en temps de débâcle* (2020), translated into English by Thomas Lamarre, is an interesting one for numerous reasons. In the first place because it is a reprise of her thinking with process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, which has spanned the past thirty years or so. Whitehead, the mathematician turned philosopher, writing in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gives us an incredibly complex philosophy of process where we have to let go of the securities form and substance have given us. Luckily, there are few better than Stengers to guide us with such an adventure. The book is also an attempt to give Whitehead's thought a practical, "subjective aim" in relation to, first of all, a politics of science, by showing how philosophy, and, more generally, thinking matters. It strives to put this thought "to the test," to mobilize it for that which is felt brooding but denied its proper voice in "the decline of civilization," which for Whitehead is the loss of an adventure of ideas. "It is an experience of *regeneration* that I wished to relay," Stengers writes (172). Thus it is no longer a thinking with but rather a relay of Whitehead by a reading of his work. In what ways can Whitehead help us with our problem today?

What is perhaps even more interesting about this attempt, is that it is not the first: Stengers' prior book, *Civiliser la modernité ? Whitehead et les ruminations du sens commun* (2017), is, as she affirms, the same book but now rewritten, for reasons that I will address below. Whatever that book set out to do via Whitehead was in some way not satisfied. Thus, Stengers found the urge to write it again (and a publisher willing to publish it again). That said, this does not mean the current book is without its own problems.

How the current book sets out to do the relaying we might summarize in two movements. Firstly, the book means to reactivate (as stated in the French title) common sense in salvaging it with "the public", those deemed "ignorant" in the face of the ones that hold wisdom (the Greek philosophers) or knowledge (the Modern professionals). It is in this movement that Stengers will 'resituate' Whitehead in an attempt to traverse him through these eras and make his thinking resonate with our contemporary situation. Common sense will no longer be that which is given and undergirds the powers that be, which effectively discard it, as she argues. Rather, it becomes a generative force that always tends to a process of "making sense in common." The English translation of the title here outdoes the original insofar as it expresses this precise movement—though in turn it might miss out on the politics of 'reclaiming'. Making sense in common opens up to a much-needed middle where the problems raised by those who are not professionals per se can be heard. These concerns, Stengers argues, are those of the possible or probable "collapse" of our world. The figure living up to this task is predominantly that of the activists, those who say "we do not defend nature, we are nature defending itself."

Secondly, to give coherence to the first movement, the book "problematizes"<sup>1</sup> what Whitehead calls "the bifurcation of nature," which implies the empiricist problem of

division between primary and secondary qualities. Or as Whitehead puts it, refusing the bifurcation: “Everything perceived is in nature. We may not pick and choose. For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon” (36). Problematizing the bifurcation troubles the one ontology upon which our modern society and its thinking are based, what John Law might call the “one World World” (2015). However, Stengers keeps emphasizing that we need to “breed vigilance” in respect to “our modes of abstraction.” In other words, ours were never one to begin with, resonating with Bruno Latour’s “we have never been modern.” This refinement in turn breeds a modesty—the modesty of the experimenter, Deleuze would call it—which is without a doubt necessary in order to undergo such a metaphysical adventure of thought.

These two movements together result in a relaying of Whitehead and, essentially, in an operation of “welding imagination to common sense” to learn to “live in the ruins” of modern civilization. Whether that leads to a ‘civilizing of modernity’ or its demise, that, Stengers says, remains to be seen; what matters for now is how we choose to live from hereon.

The reasons for writing the book again, made clear in the foreword to the French edition, imply this choice of ours. Stengers explains that she was “uneasy” with certain “complaints” concerning the book, which found their expression in Latour’s remark that she had let herself “write dreamily, for friends, for those who indulgently smile, understand and forgive” (Stengers 2020, 7; my translation). “Even Whitehead asked what I wanted from him, why I dragged him out to where he had never been” (2020, 7). Had the writing then indeed been too much for oneself rather than for a problem, our problem? Was it not properly situated? Stengers surmises: “Not that it is necessary to write for enemies or those indifferent, but rather that is needed to write in one’s own voice, that is to say, compose something that has its own coherence” (2020, 7). As such we come to what this book strives for in between the two movements outlined above *and* in between science and philosophy: to grasp how to give coherence to that which is felt, to that which is brooding in the “ruins” of our world, and which has the right to be heard in between the dominant voices of those who supposedly hold knowledge. It is such listening that in turn demands a “speaking well” as Latour puts it, for if there is no speaking well in following the listening, there might not be, to use Donna Haraway’s term, a “response-ability” (Latour 2013; Haraway 2016).

But it is also here that I run into a problem in the book. Stengers’ attempts to listen—as much as the effort is appreciated—lead to a rare moment wherein she differs with Whitehead. It also leads her to other fields of science, more socially oriented, in an attempt to make the work contemporary. While I do not want to argue at all for a purity vis-à-vis Whitehead, I do have reservations as to how Stengers conceptualizes this difference and what this means for listening and speaking well. I will briefly run through the first two chapters, unfold this moment in the third, then proceed to show the consequences of it in the fourth and fifth chapter.

The first two chapters of the book mean to situate Whitehead. This is done by moving across three distinct “eras”: a Greek, a Modern, and a contemporary era.<sup>2</sup> In the latter Stengers will hone in on two moments respectively, first the science wars<sup>3</sup> in the

nineties and then what we can simply call “our present.”

It begins by situating Whitehead in the Greek era, alongside Socrates in the agora. In this era, Stengers and Whitehead encounter the problem of ignorance as a product of Greek thought, and how it has rendered the public as such. Opposing this, she says, with Whitehead, is common sense and its brooding need to be reclaimed from those who have here claimed wisdom. “Another Socrates must be imagined, one who needs the brooding of the citizens of Athens,” Stengers proclaims (3).

Moving onto the modern era, Stengers follows Whitehead critiquing modern modes of abstraction, analogues of modern science, or Science. We encounter here the birth of the bifurcation of nature in the hands of Newton, Hume, and Kant. Newton is at the heart of the bifurcation as he provided universal laws of nature, creating facts that are self-sufficient through the “triumphant discovery of an objective nature, ruled by universal laws that could be formulated through simple observation and calculation” (37). While Newton limited this to the domain of physics, it took but a simple trick, enacted by what Stengers calls Laplace’s “demon,” to extend it well beyond this domain and make everything subject to the same. Hume in following posed the empirical problem that led to a skepticism about what we might infer from sense perception. Hume dislodged the universal nature and its laws from sense data and placed it on the side of mind. Finally, Kant made the subject the final and a priori unifying force, undergirded by certain universal categories. Kant “ratified the universal character of the mode of explanation associated with Newtonian physics. But this mode of explanation no longer refers to the world as it exists independently of the perceiver. It characterizes how the Kantian subject constitutes the object it perceives” (41). In this line of argumentation, the bifurcation thus emerges with science but requires philosophy to universalize it in thought. Its consequences are, Stengers argues, that now practitioners of Science claim knowledge as experts, reiterating the above separation based on ignorance but now in the name of nature.

Arriving in the contemporary era, Stengers first explains the consequences of the above in the so called science wars. The situation that emerged here can best be seen in a matrix: it involves firstly the scientists versus the critics, where a war indeed takes place over the right to claim facts; set off from these professionals, as background, is the public that has no say and right to any such claims. Stengers aptly shows that what plays out in the former can only lead to a further exacerbation of the false problem at the core of this matrix: facts are entirely severed from their milieu and become part of a predatory machine insofar as “we get separated from what we can know.” If the Greek situation was necessary for situating this problem, it is precisely because it gave birth to the attitude that pertains to ignorance and that extends itself to the now.

Stengers argues this creates the situation in our present, where science is at once questioned and scorned while scientists themselves double down on the presumed veridicality of their facts. Stengers argues that what is at stake is a warding off of the edificatory power of the veridical: “how not to unify the ‘we’ that fights by reference to a knowledge that is ultimately veridical? How to ensure that the interdependences across different reasons for resistance remain discernable so that ‘we’ remain woven and entangled?” (16). Here the new role for common sense and those that wield it can be

found, for the difference plays out in terms of the Whiteheadian adventure of thought: “[The activists] feel compelled to think not as defenders of truth, but as participants in an adventure with neither destination nor heroic definition” (18).

Having situated the problem, chapter three moves to address it by means of Whitehead’s philosophy. Whitehead moves to show how a process is always of “concrecence” and that what the philosophies of bifurcation had placed as the ends of cause and effect, being that which apprehends the data, the subjective by virtue of mind, is only part of a process. For Whitehead, “causes themselves aim at the coming into existence of the subject they will be causes for” (76). Thus, Whitehead takes on the “dangerous conception” of modern philosophy: “the subject,” with it entailing a “‘prehensive’ unity here of what is over there,” thereby “apprehending data as such, separating them from the grasping that turns them into prehensions” (76-7). It follows that “such an abstraction would encourage the (Kantian) image of a subject unifying, in a unilateral manner, what it has appropriated as its data” (76-7). As Stengers argues, Whitehead resists this tendency by proposing, in contrast to apprehension—which pertains to the subject—*prehensions*, which are of the process. This allows Whitehead to grasp that the actual occasions emerging from each process are always “the creation of a perspective, a value affirmed in a partial manner” (76-7).

In an exciting move, Stengers makes then of the subject an enigma: it is a problematization of the milieu from which it springs (77). Thought, she says, needs to be understood as “always in *this* situation” (79). Abstractions become entirely different from how modern philosophy had rendered it, as always correlated to mind; they are “‘living’ abstractions” she says with Whitehead (81). We see here the question of thought, which Whitehead turns into “modes of thought,” that is at the heart of our problem—and like Deleuze and Guattari, Stengers will say that the importance of modes of thought is to not relapse into what Western philosophy has rendered as contemplation, reflection, or communication. But then a new question emerges. For if the subject is now integral to processes, what then makes coherence? Whitehead simply says repetition is in nature, and organisms, also called societies, are that which cohere. “Of a society, we may only say: the fact is that it has maintained itself until now” (82).

The prime example of an organism, for Whitehead, is the body. This brings us to a pivotal point in the book. Whitehead characterizes the body as privileged “because nothing of what concerns it is truly self-sufficient” on the basis of what Stengers calls “a certain immediate individual experience” (91). This lies in stark contrast with the bifurcation of nature that renders knowledge and facts self-sufficient. But for Stengers, Whitehead here makes himself “vulnerable.” She invokes Audre Lorde and her well known warning that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (in Stengers 94). She argues that while the privileging of the body might indeed invert the epistemology of Hume, as inversion it “always implies an element of conservation” (94). She claims that the privileging of the body leads Whitehead’s philosophy to find “itself domestic set firmly in place through the evidence proposed by a reflexive ‘civilized’ consciousness” because he sets up an opposition between the body as “living nature” and science as “physical nature.” (92) For Stengers, the privileging of the body amounts, once again, in an ultimate opposition of philosophy and science, and thus of nature lifeless and

nature alive.

While a complex argument, I have the sense that it is based on a rather superficial conception of the body. Stengers presumes that the body pertains to a certain unity. This is apparent when she says “immediate individual experience” sneaking “individual” in the middle of immediate experience. This conception is then an interesting problem to read the remainder of the book through.

Chapter four and five move with quite a different tone than before. Stengers turns to a motley of figures and the situations they introduce to grasp the problem of our present. First there is Bruno Latour and his refashioning of the Greek agora in order to rethink diplomacy. While Stengers does not seem to fully agree with Latour’s diplomacy, she does take from it that it must involve “thinking through the milieu” [*penser par le milieu*] as well as a “learning to speak well” (102). Stengers will remark, surprisingly, that what her and Latour’s diplomacy do share is that they are honed to the Spinozist dictum “We do not know what a body can do” (109).

Stengers’ own version of diplomacy unfolds more amorously as it hones in mostly on different examples of objects studied, each serving as analogues for thinking through the milieu and seeing objects as agents proper. The concern here is no different from STS. Each thing—dare I say body—is affirmed in the Spinozist manner as having a dimension of “irregular behavior” that thereby implies that all “finite things” have an “infinite” in them, or what Stengers simply calls “finding more.” Every thing in effect becomes an ontological problem, the enigma or sphinx: what can a tornado do? Or what can a crowd do? Or in chemistry, the question ‘what is gold’ turns into ‘what can gold do?’ The answer found by chemists at a certain point of time being is that it “resists all acids” (116). After numerous other examples, we come to one of the most important: Haraway and her dog Cayenne in the situation of training. This delivers, according to Stengers, a veritable “ontological choreography” as it problematizes the human-animal relation in a double becoming (see Haraway 2008).

Finally, she hones in on the example of a Native American of the Omaha nation “entertaining a boulder” (163). What had been brooding all along manifests itself, as the Native American—Stengers affirms—is explicitly animist in touching and being touched by the boulder. While vigilant of the possible appropriation, stating that the concern “is not only to let oneself be touched but also to make oneself capable of answering for the manner in which we think the relation of thought that the Omaha Native entertains with the block of stone,” she will say that what is at stake is “to try to confer on [the Native American] the power to situate us” (164; 165). Indeed, it means to problematize the “ontology of ourselves.” Inversely, asking our standard questions—those along the lines of whether such a boulder is really alive, if it is true or if it is an illusion—are met with questions of: “What has come over us? What thinking makes us think the thinking of others in a mode that makes of us masters who attribute meaning to our experience and to theirs?” (167). Stengers shows that the conditions of the question carry a mode of thought.

This brings us to the pivotal point once more. As the question of animism comes to animate all the studied objects as agents, we again encounter the body. The situations addressed by Stengers are substantiated by a phenomenology in order to grasp the

importance of the experiential. This is particularly the case with the two most important situations, Haraway and Cayenne, and the Native American and the boulder, the latter made sense of through David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* (1996). In both, phenomenology is explicitly present. In the former it substantiates the ontological choreography as it involves a "self-transformation" of the subjects that participate in the "contact zones," i.e. there is a field of intersubjectivity. With the latter it substantiates the animism: "By this process my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence—to the way of this stone, or tree, or table—as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity" (Abrams in Stengers 167).

Of importance here are 'relations.' But what phenomenology presupposes is a preexisting subject, thereby rendering relations intersubjective. The body—that is, the organism or society—is as such predetermined by a certain form or at best an existence in general. This, to me, seems to run counter to what process philosophy tries to set in motion. So why does Stengers here rely on these phenomenological analyses? It seems to boil down to Stengers' conception of the body: she mistakenly takes it for being individual, for preexisting any process. There seems to be a confusion between individuation—process and the singular—and individual—being and the particular.

It seems to me, firstly, to lead to something amiss in the relation between philosophy and science. This might be due to the omitting of the discipline that Deleuze and Guattari diagnose besides philosophy and science: art. Art, which concerns sensations, is effectively left out for Stengers. While she raises it at key moments throughout, as an art of conventions, an art of speaking well, and an art of problems, she never gives art its due by parsing out sensations. A consequence of this might be that she flattens the field: everything comes to revolve around the discursive instead of the many other modes bodies foreground. "Speaking well," then, might well be reduced to language. Ironically, that seems close to Socrates and Plato again.

Secondly, in thinking with Whitehead, Stengers has always insisted that it involves a "wild creation of concepts," as the subtitle of her seminal book *Thinking with Whitehead* claims, in a phrase borrowed from Deleuze. Yet what is wild here? Latour once remarked that "there is nothing 'wild' in [*Thinking with Whitehead*], except as that word might be used to characterize the freedom and invention of the author" (2005, 2). He even emphasized that the subtitle is "bizarre," for "the exaggerated tropism of Deleuze for chaos and organicism" that such a wildness signals is in clear contrast with "the positivity of Whitehead" (11, footnote 4). In an attempt to redeem the subtitle, finally Latour suggests that "'wild' might not mean 'savage,' but out in the open, as when we go searching for some elusive wildlife" (10). For my part, I cannot help but see something quite symptomatic here despite its intention: the reproduction of the modern perspective embodied by a sort of *politesse* setting itself off from that which is savage.

Is then the move away from the body, its wildness in sensations, not precisely emblematic of where Stengers' attempt reaches a limit, and perhaps even fails to compose with that limit? The reproach to Whitehead becomes questionable: by granting primacy to the body, sensations, and affects, is there not something different going on than a mere relapse to the individual through the token of the body? I am here reminded of how Eduardo Viveiros de Castro oftentimes invokes Claude Lévi-Strauss' parable of

savages—indeed, savages, non-moderns. Both slyly note that the savages are the ones actually doing science because they depart from bodies, unlike us moderns:

In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction. (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 384)

Savage thought pertains to a wild creation of concepts because its perspective is not ontologically limited, like our modern perspective is. Hence Viveiros de Castro speaks of Amerindian cosmologies proliferating an “ontological perspectivism” (2015). My point is that a body is not a pre-given individual as a matter of fact; in fact, a body is itself multiplicituous, as Whitehead concurs, by nature of its “centers of expression”; a body is relational in that it composes different parts together into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts; and by virtue of all this, we need to grasp that these “agents” we interact with in any given situation are bodies, and evaluate this. Does not tracing the movement of these bodies—such organisms—then not precisely involve a wild creation of concepts, and would that not be to truly think in terms of “tentacular affects” as Stengers means to do in the sense that Haraway gives to this?

Now this might seem like a rather strong critique of the work, and in a way it is. However, as far as I am concerned, it does not demean the work *per se*. While this problem of the body might well be a pivotal point, one where we may fully face the ontological implications of the bifurcation of nature and its separation of that which matters, namely our *proximity* to the processes that are Nature, at the same time, the attempt that Stengers makes here should not be seen as any less for it. That might seem paradoxical to say, but I think this is actually precisely what Stengers is after with bringing Whitehead into our times, making him the figure with which to face our problems. Whitehead’s adventure of ideas is, Stengers rightly diagnoses, a necessary antidote to the current social-political climate, one wherein, as she aptly shows, science and knowledge more broadly get caught up in an environment of contradiction, conflict, and perhaps even polarization. The adventure of ideas is then to always think in ways that do not succumb to the predatory machine instituted by the modern perspective, to problematize the ontology of ourselves. Or as Deleuze and Guattari would have it, in a phrase Stengers much likes to cite: “To think is always to follow the witch’s flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 41). Considering the above critique, my hope is that Stengers does not get separated from the force of the witch’s flight in falling prey to the positive promise of the commons of the same, losing sight of the wildness the adventure of ideas needs.

## Notes

**1** Problematization is a key term in Stengers' work. She takes it from Foucault, who bases it on Nietzsche. Foucault renders it into the phrase "the problematization of ourselves, of our ontology." This in turn resonates with what Nietzsche calls "our problem," which is always involved in an indefinite present: "our problem today." It is then also in this manner that I treat Stengers' problematization of our era, as simply 'our problem today.' It is good to note that the 'our' is here—as with Nietzsche and Foucault—problematized from the start. It is not a major 'we' nor a universal, it is rather always propositional. See Stengers 2019 for her elaboration on problematization.

**2** Stengers here follows Deleuze and Guattari's diagnosis that the history of philosophy can be seen as belonging to three eras, the Greek "eidetic," the Modern "reflective," and the Contemporary "communicative" with the philosophy of phenomenology (1994, 7).

**3** Stengers has thoroughly written about these science wars in the first tome of her *Cosmopolitics* (2010).

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## Biography

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