
Books Forum Introduction

Cosmopolitics revisited

Isabelle Stengers

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In 1997, the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers published her seven-volume *Cosmopolitiques*. Examining the role and authority of the sciences in modern societies, it has since become a standard point of reference in the social studies of science. Translated from French by Robert Bononno and published by the University of Minnesota Press in two large volumes in 2010 and 2011, *Cosmopolitics* is now accessible to a broader anglophone audience and will be revisited as a modern classic in this Books Forum.

Against the background of anthropogenic climate change, Heather Davis presents Stengers' philosophy as a framework enabling the sciences and the humanities to overcome their antagonism and respond to the challenge of environmental crisis together. The "ecology of practices" at the heart of the cosmopolitical

project defends the autonomy of scientific practices against governmental and corporate intrusions. But it also confines their validity to particular situations while granting nonscientists of different cultural origins the construction of knowledges that work equally well in relation to their respective environments.

Graham Harman praises *Cosmopolitics* as one of the most unique works of continental philosophy in recent decades, but questions the metaphysical foundations of Stengers' ecology of practices from the point of view of object-oriented philosophy. Despite her dismissal of both reduction and emergence as legitimate philosophical problems, Harman argues, Stengers actually reduces the world both downwards to lower-level phenomena such as atoms, neurons or genes and upwards to all-encompassing practices. As a consequence, nothing is seen as having qualities in its own right.

While Harman takes issue with Stengers's vision of the cosmos, Suparna Choudhury and Alberto Sanchez-Allred object to the political implications of *Cosmopolitics*. They raise doubts concerning the egalitarian ecology of practices underlying a Parliament of Things in which no one is wrong and where neurotransmitters and djinns, science and ethno-science can coexist peacefully. But this image neither contains the constitutive power creating and authorizing the parliament, nor does it account for the unequal deployment of forces that distinguishes sciences from democracies.

With one and a half decades hindsight, the three responses to Isabelle Stengers' reflection on the uneasy relationship between scientific and nonscientific knowledge practices reveal that her magisterial work has lost none of its pertinence.

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