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## Rapid #: -19153382

CROSS REF ID: **UW48254**

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TYPE: Book Chapter

BOOK TITLE: Accidental Agents: Ecological Politics Beyond the Human

USER BOOK TITLE: Accidental Agents: Ecological Politics Beyond the Human

CHAPTER TITLE: Introduction

BOOK AUTHOR: Martin Crowley

EDITION:

VOLUME:

PUBLISHER:

YEAR: 2022

PAGES: n/a

ISBN: 9780231555333

LCCN:

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 6/8/2022 8:40:41 AM

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Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

Book Title: Accidental Agents

Book Subtitle: Ecological Politics Beyond the Human

Book Author(s): MARTIN CROWLEY

Published by: Columbia University Press. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/crow20402.4>

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## INTRODUCTION

The generalized planetary ecological crisis has not only brought about a significant change in the understanding of human action, it has drastically increased the stakes of this understanding. As the contested concept of the Anthropocene tries to capture the arrival of human activity as a geophysical force, this activity has simultaneously emerged as ever more deeply enmeshed with the existence and actions of all kinds of other beings. While once we might have thought of human action as underpinned by the exceptional capacity of human beings to transcend their environment, now this belief itself appears to have provided a pretext for the instrumentalization of these other beings, their exploitation in ways whose destructive environmental consequences can no longer be ignored. Against this catastrophic horizon, then, how should human action be understood?

Current philosophy and theory offer two answers to this question, frozen in a stand-off between those for and those against the idea of human beings as uniquely endowed with agency, on the basis of conscious intentionality and sovereign will. Some maintain that only this exceptional sovereignty can guarantee effective political action. Others, motivated by a

radically egalitarian ontology, reject this exceptionality and offer, instead, accounts of agency as distributed across groupings of human and nonhuman actors. But in their different ways, both positions have run into difficulties. If the first promotes a human exceptionalism whose disastrous consequences are everywhere apparent, the second has repeatedly been accused of lacking a conception of political agency that would be both coherent and effective. On the one hand, more of the same; on the other, at least according to its critics, a worrying lack of traction.

*Accidental Agents* seeks a way through this impasse. Convinced of the need to retain the core commitment of each side, I argue that this stand-off is unnecessary; that it is possible to understand political agency as both distributed and decisive. Retaining both the radical ontological equality of composite agential groupings and the necessity of prescriptive political intervention and mobilization, in the following discussions I propose an original account of political agency as both irreducibly composite and allowing effective, interruptive action. Developing an account of agency as emerging contingently as distributed across heterogeneous alliances, I argue that these alliances are also the location of decisive action and future-oriented commitment. Building on the considerable achievements of existing accounts of distributed agency, my aim is to contribute to the ongoing, effective engagement of contemporary critical thought with the grave problems of its moment on the basis of the radically egalitarian ontology this moment demands.

## DISTRIBUTED AGENCY AND ITS CRITICS

The following pages introduce this study by setting the scene conceptually and contextually and defining the key commitments

of the position I will be developing. First, I will sketch the key features for our purposes of theories of distributed agency before introducing the political criticism to which they have been subject and anticipating something of my own position. We will then take a step back, to reflect on concepts of agency in general and political agency in particular, notably in terms of the relation of these to the rich and catastrophic history of human exceptionalism. Then I will return to our present debates via the contextual factors contributing to the recent interest in understanding agency as distributed. In the second half of this introduction, I will set out my own argument in more detail, presenting in particular its terminology, conceptual underpinnings, and key motifs and providing an outline of its structure.

We begin, then, with the salient aspects of recent theories of distributed agency. Broadly speaking, we can characterize these as having come to the fore in the context of the theoretical tendencies loosely identified as new materialist and posthumanist. Michael Haworth offers a good overview of the relation between this intellectual context and the theories in: “In work deriving from such diverse streams of thought as animal studies, systems theory, actor- question network theory, the new (“speculative”) materialisms and the varied discourses surrounding cognitive neuroscience, the human is demoted from its privileged position as an ontological exception and situated within a wider ecological network. . . . [Such] fields are concerned to de-emphasize human agency as well as call into question the uniqueness of its form of perceptual access onto the world” (2016:151–52).

With specific reference to the question of agency, the key contribution to the development of this thinking is undoubtedly the work of Bruno Latour, including that undertaken alongside Michel Callon and John Law in the elaboration of actor-network theory. As I will be discussing Latour in detail

in chapter 1, I will not do so here. It will be enough for now to note that Latour's adoption of the term *actant*, which he takes from the semiology of A. J. Greimas and uses to suspend the human privilege associated with notions of *actor* and *agent* (see Latour 1988:252n11), signals his commitment to understanding agency not as a given property of a particular set of beings but as an emergent feature of contingent associations—or, in his terms, “alliances”—among all manner of beings (1988:160). This conception has found considerable success in the wake of Latour's work, notably in social theory. Its core tenets are well formulated by Werner Rammert, himself one of the first to use the term *distributed agency*: “actions are composed of many elements, and performing those actions is a process distributed across several acts and actors” and “This collective agency is constituted by the distributed activities of the heterogeneous units” (2012:90, 107).

As Lois McNay helpfully summarizes, then: in this conception, “agency is regarded not as the exclusive property of humans but rather as an ever-changing set of potentialities immanent within the energetic and uncontainable dynamics of material existence” (2016:53). In Anglophone philosophy and critical theory, the most influential concerted development of the notion has come from the work of Jane Bennett, particularly in *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett 2010). As Bennett puts it, in this conception, “the efficacy or effectivity to which [agency] has traditionally referred becomes distributed across [a] heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (2010:23). Bennett's exploration of this model roams compellingly from Spinoza to electrical storms, from Darwin's worms to John Dewey, from Kafka's Odradek to a gunpowder residue sampler; motivated, she says, by a “hunch . . . that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying

fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (ix).

If Bennett’s approach is in part motivated by a concern for greater descriptive accuracy than is permitted by a schema composed only of human actors on the one hand and everything else on the other, it is above all driven by what I have been calling an *ontological egalitarianism*. In Mark Hansen’s formulation, this means that “we must rethink agency as the effect of global patterns of activity across scales in networks, where absolutely no privilege is given to any particular individual or node, to any level or degree of complexity” (2015:2). The aim is accordingly that expressed by William E. Connolly: “to appreciate multiple degrees and sites of agency, flowing from simple natural processes, through higher processes, to human beings and collective social assemblages” (2010: 22), where “simple” and “higher” describe degrees of organizational complexity but connote no ontological privilege. On this basis, a continuum of agential configurations comes into view: it becomes possible “to construe human agency as an emergent phenomenon, with some nonhuman processes possessing attributes bearing family resemblances to human agency and with human agency understood by reference to its emergence from non-human processes of proto-agency” (Connolly 2010:23).

This concern for better understanding on the basis of greater descriptive accuracy—“to come to terms more richly with multiple modes and degrees of agency that compose the world,” as Connolly puts it (31)—is complemented in Bennett’s case by an explicit desire to improve the quality of human action in the world. As she writes, “The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us,



will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology” (2010:4). As a result, Bennett is particularly interested in how such enhanced ecological sensitivity might specifically inform human political decisions. Despite the conventional restriction of political action to more or less autonomous human actors, in her approach, “it is a safe bet to begin with the presumption that the locus of political responsibility is a human-nonhuman assemblage. On close-enough inspection, the productive power that has engendered an effect will turn out to be a confederacy, and the human actants within it will themselves turn out to be confederations of tools, microbes, minerals, sounds, and other ‘foreign’ materialities. Human intentionality can emerge as agentic only by way of such a distribution” (36). Seeking accordingly to relativize the position of human beings within a broad ecology of “vibrant matter,” Bennett hopes thereby “to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (2010: viii).

It will already be clear that Latour, Bennett, and Connolly refuse a model of agency as the exclusive property of human beings; indeed, this is the fundamental axiom of their work. For various critics, however, such a refusal renders this work, and other cognate contributions, incapable of the kind of political efficacy we here see Bennett seeking. In a broadly sympathetic account of these contributions, Arjun Appadurai notes, “Most of these thinkers acknowledge that there is some tension between the physics and metaphysics of most variations of this new materialism and our classical ideas of normativity and political critique” (2015:222). Many others are bluntly critical. For Thomas Lemke, “In attacking a humanist account of politics, [Bennett] not only exposes the limits of humanism, but also gets rid of politics” (2018:47). For Adrian Johnston, discussing Connolly,

“The vaguely Heraclitan flux doctrines palpably lurking in the background hardly are conducive to a targeted and disciplined set of political practices” (2014:298). In McNay’s verdict, “it is not easy to see how theories of posthuman agency translate into the type of emancipatory and radical political practice that is claimed for them”; such theories, McNay continues, “do not straightforwardly yield a viable account of intervention in the world” (2016:55; and for a good overall account of the political stakes here, see Burns 2016).

The root cause of this supposed political intransitivity is spelled out in extended critiques by Alf Hornborg and Andreas Malm. According to these critiques, the theorists in question would simply have misunderstood the nature of agency. More precisely: in extending the category of agency beyond its proper bounds, they would have confused agency proper with mere causality (specifically, in Aristotelian terms, with efficient causality). For Hornborg, though “objects (and living fetishes) may constrain, prompt, or mediate the agency of living organisms,” “in no case is it justified to dissolve the crucial difference between purposive agency and merely having consequences” (2017:99). In Hornborg’s model, the division between agency and causality falls between animate and inanimate beings; he happily accepts that inanimate beings influence the animate, but he refuses to consider this influence as a form of agency, however attenuated. And the finality of Hornborg’s argument is political: “Only by applying such distinctions,” he writes, “are we able to grasp the predicament of the Anthropocene and to expose the exploitative global power relations underlying the ideology of economic growth and technological progress” (96).

Drawing on Hornborg and philosopher Lilian O’Brien, Malm also insists on distinguishing agency from mere causality: “The meteorite makes some difference to a state of affairs,

but that is a definition of *causal impact*—not agency, which is a subclass of things that make a difference” (2018:96). For Malm (here departing from Hornborg), this subclass is defined quite classically by “having a mind” (85); specifically, the capacity for futural projection: beings with minds act, beings without minds produce effects. And what matters to Malm is, of course, that only the strongest, most purposive kind of action, on the part of the beings who alone have minds, has a chance of resisting, let alone reversing, the ongoing human exacerbation of the climate emergency. “A resistance,” he writes, “can be conceived only by affirmation of the most singularly human forms of agency” (108).

For the most part, I consider these accusations ill-founded—for two reasons. First, most of those they target (notably, here, Bennett and Connolly) are not proposing a general model of political agency but are inviting human political actors to understand and situate their own interventions more attentively as part of a broad field shaped by the contributions of all kinds of actors and factors. In Bennett’s words: “The task at hand for humans is to find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants in order to be more faithful to the style of action pursued by each” (2010:98). Or, in the mode of the categorical imperative, “Seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate” (116). Or, as Connolly puts it, “To appreciate human entanglements with a variety of nonhuman forces . . . may help to ennoble the larger ethos in which we participate” (2017:61). As Diana Coole writes, then, despite the fears of the human exceptionalists, this approach “does not preclude an identification of agents who might manifest their capacities in ways which have a strong affinity with conventional accounts. It is merely that their emergence has to be traced and not presumed, which will likely result in their

capabilities for agency being recognised as more partial, contextual and provisional than liberal humanism (individual agency), Marxism (class agency) or realist approaches to International Relations (state agency) allow” (2013:457–58).

Indeed, to accuse exponents of this approach of abandoning the specificity of human agency is to fail to read them. Both Bennett and Connolly, for example, explicitly grant a limited privilege to human concerns within their approaches, as an acknowledgment of the situated inflection of existential priorities. Bennett’s analyses are “motivated by a self-interested . . . concern for *human* survival and happiness.” “I cannot envision,” she writes, “any polity so egalitarian that important human needs, such as health or survival, would not take priority” (2010: ix–x, 104). Accordingly, though Bennett, drawing here on Latour, “strategically elides what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans,” she explicitly does so “for a while and up to a point” (ix). For his part, Connolly remains wary “of any version of ‘posthumanism’ susceptible to the charge that it does not give *any* significant priority to the human estate in its multiple entanglements with other beings and processes” (2013:13).

If they certainly refuse the crude division between mere causality and agency proper, then, these theorists openly distinguish human action from that of other actants. For Connolly, as we have seen, this distinction concerns degrees of complexity: other actants should be understood as “micro-agents” (2013:85) or “proto-agents” (2010:24), or as displaying “minimal agency” (2010:26), whereas “complex agency” remains reserved for humans (2010:26). In this view, that simpler levels are nested within more complex levels means both that the more complex must be understood as constitutively entangled with the more simple and that the two remain significantly distinct. The exemplary attention Bennett and Connolly pay to the details of this

entanglement should not confuse us when it comes to the finality of this approach: the goal remains wiser, better informed human action. In Bennett's eloquent declaration, "Agency is, I believe, distributed across a mosaic, but it is also possible to say something about the kind of striving that may be exercised by a human within the assemblage" (2010:37–38).

Their human-exceptionalist critics thus misunderstand theorists such as Bennett and Connolly in two crucial ways. These theorists certainly do not abandon any meaningful distinction between human and nonhuman forms of agency; and they are proposing not a general theory of political agency in terms of distributed agency but a reassessment of human action on the basis of its richer embedding in a more graduated agential field. This in turn leads me to my second disagreement with these critics: for even when the goal *is* a general theory of political agency, I am not convinced that an understanding of agency as distributed is necessarily incompatible with an account of effective, even antagonistic political agency. It is true that most of those who take this position hesitate to think of politics in these terms, and understandably so: as Connolly writes, "enhanced sensitivity to what is most fragile about ourselves and our place on the planet does not go smoothly with militancy" (2013:10). But Connolly introduces this acknowledgment precisely because he does connect his insistence on broad ecological entanglement to the need for militant action; and his accounts of the forms such action might take—encompassing "creative citizen movements, enlarged state action, interstate agreements, and global citizen actions," up to and including "cross-regional general strikes" (2013:67–68; 2017:129)—are invariably detailed and reasoned. To this extent, then, we must again recognize that the human-exceptionalist critics have overstated their case.

Two qualifications are nevertheless in order here, which give this case what I believe to be its only valid element. First, as per his persistent distinction of human agency from other forms, Connolly's militant actions are specifically those of human activists: he is calling for militancy as part of that more attentive human action we have just seen to be the finality of his arguments. (As he says, "This care for being can be situationally joined to political militancy, if and when events threaten the integrity of that which you care about the most. And that militancy will also be inflected by the underlying sensibility infusing it" [2013:124–25].) In this sense, then, his example does not yet prove that a general theory of political agency as the conjoint agency of diverse participants is indeed compatible with strong, even antagonistic political effectivity. Second, in the case of the only theorist of distributed agency who is actually aiming to describe political agency in terms of this theory—namely, Latour—we do in fact find a significant difficulty when it comes to integrating decisive effectivity and combative intervention into this description. And I will argue in chapter 1 that this significantly weakens Latour's attempt to provide an account of distributed political agency—indeed, that it leaves him unable to conceive of the confrontational action he knows is currently necessary.

Taking these two points together, the human-exceptionalist critiques of theories of distributed agency might be justified in the following sense only: if the aim is indeed an account of politics qua politics, such an account will have to include the dimension of antagonistic conflict. My contention, however, is that this can and must be provided from within a distributed agency approach; that is, without appeal to the supposedly exceptional capacities of ontologically transcendent human beings.

The approach I develop here differs from those of Bennett and Connolly, then, in that it seeks to provide an overall account

of political agency in terms of distributed agency. I will seek to suspend any a priori typology of the contributions of this or that kind of being, even in the supremely nuanced and attentive form this takes in their discussions, and instead to map the emergence of political agency through the conjoint contributions of various participants. (I will return to this distinction in horizon 1, in particular the difference between my approach and Connolly's advocacy of militancy.) Though I appreciate their emphasis on irreducible existential situatedness and stand in awe of their patient and fine-grained accounts, I remain nervous about any axiomatic claim for human distinction, however nuanced and entangled. Only with the greatest difficulty, I think, is it possible in this area to prevent this kind of distinction (in the sense of careful differentiation) from drifting toward distinction as elevation, as categorical species privilege and ontological transcendence. As Bennett writes, we face here "the difficulty of theorizing agency apart from the belief that humans are *special* in the sense of existing, at least in part, outside of the order of material nature" (2010:36–37).

As it happens, I consider that the work of both Bennett and Connolly tackles this difficulty more successfully than that of any other Anglophone theorist; and I certainly do not believe that they reintroduce anything like human ontological transcendence. (For Connolly's rebuttal of the charge that his gradations of agency reinstall an ontological hierarchy, see Connolly 2010:31.) Nevertheless, my attempt here will be to build a model that gives not even the slightest houseroom to a priori human distinction on the basis of given attributes, however these are defined. (For this reason, incidentally, I will be somewhat promiscuous in my use of *actor* and *agent*, because, unlike many—not least Connolly, Coole, and Katherine Hayles [2017]—I am not looking to preserve a definitional separation between

“complex” agency and other forms.) The challenge, then, will be to build such a model while managing to account for decisively effective political agency. As I have suggested, and as I will show in detail in chapter 1, in my reading, Latour manages the first part of this but not the second, which is where my approach also differs from his, in that it seeks to integrate the possibility of conflictual agency into its account. The difference between my position and our existing theories of distributed agency, then, lies in my attempt to understand specifically political agency both without reference to any a priori human distinction and in a way that is compatible with decisive, even confrontational intervention. I hope it will be understood that I am seeking not to supplant these existing approaches but to supplement them, extending their insights to a dimension of the problem that in my view requires further attention.

Overall, then, I am looking to build a model of distributed political agency in which decisive, confrontational action will certainly not be the whole story but in which such action can find a coherent place without being restricted to human activism alone. I will set out the core elements of this model, including my reasons for wanting to maintain the possibility of conflict as part of its scope. First, however, we should spend a little time considering the concept of agency itself and the prehistory of these recent debates.

## AGENCY, POLITICS, AND HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

From Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, to Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, to contemporary moral philosophy, the Western tradition has consistently defined meaningful agency in



terms of autonomy (itself understood through the twin dimensions of informed understanding and freedom from constraint), intentionality, and rational choice. (For an excellent, succinct account of this, see McNay 2016.) Though the precise definitions of these core concepts might vary, their combination is consistently grounded in an understanding of agents as in a strong sense purposive: namely, equipped with reflexive consciousness (the “I think” that, for Kant, “must be able to accompany all my representations” [1998:246]) and able to interpret their surroundings, project their intentions into the future, make decisions based on these projections, and take responsibility for the consequences of these decisions. And this “capacity concept of agency” (Passoth, Peuker, and Schillmeier 2012:1) invariably in turn accompanies a human-exceptionalist claim. As Balibar and Laugier write, “agency is supposed to be what characterizes, among the events of the world, what belongs to the order of human action” (2014:19), distinguished by what Brian Massumi eloquently calls “those capacities over which we human animals assert a monopoly, and on which we hang our inordinate pride in our species being” (2014:2).

From thermostats to whales, various other beings may exhibit lesser versions of the requisite capacities, but only in human beings do we find the full array developed in full (see O’Brien 2015:136–45). Crucially, this plenitude comes to constitute a difference not only of degree but of kind: a step change thanks to which human beings are fundamentally distinguished from all others and defined as properly transcendent in relation to their environment. Examples of this conception abound: we might think of Francis Bacon’s project to reestablish the human “empire over creation,” lost in the Fall, via correct knowledge of nature and the command this will permit (1902:290); Descartes’s subsequent, oft-cited promise that such knowledge “of all other

Bodies which environ us” will allow human beings to “employ them to all uses to which they are fit, and so become masters and possessors of Nature” (1648: part. VI, para. 2); and, in its paradigmatic form, the consequent assertion shared by Kant and Diderot that thanks to their superior abilities—above all the capacity for reflexive thought—humans are separated from other animals by an *infinite* distance (Kant 2012: 15; Diderot 1984b:228). As McNay puts it, “the mode of agency as transcendence” effects “a break with the world that institutes a new kind of being” (2016:41): that split by virtue of which humans claim for themselves the freedom that entitles them to either exploit or take care of all other beings (and generally do both), these other beings remaining, in either case, law-bound creatures of necessity—“with which,” as Kant puts it, “one can do as one likes” (2012:15).

This is the model we in the West inherit from our traditional substance metaphysics, with its categorical attribution of certain qualities to certain types of beings, which works to secure human beings as ontologically transcendent by defining their capacities as exceptional. (Even if this exceptionality is formulated as a unique deficiency in need of repair by such capacities, as in the myth of Prometheus, or a unique incompleteness that such capacities come to make good, as in subsequent notions of human perfectibility.) Within, alongside, and beyond this tradition, there are, to be sure, theological and philosophical positions that seek to rethink transcendence as a function or even a dimension of radical immanence, from—to take a small handful of indicative names—Nicholas of Cusa to Baruch Spinoza to Jean-Luc Nancy. And such positions do, moreover, tend to prove compatible with a more egalitarian model of the relation between different forms of existence. Inasmuch as these positions remain attached to an a priori distribution of capacities, however, this

egalitarianism must remain limited. The post-Heideggerian tradition (within which we might situate Nancy) is symptomatic here: its displacement of glorious human ontological distinction, and its accompanying enfolding of transcendence as the immanent opening out of the world, are arguably vitiated by a persistent appeal to uniquely human capacities, through which this opening out is exclusively articulated. (We might think here of Heidegger's restriction of the encounter with beings "as such" to that *Dasein* which, for all that it might not be classically anthropological, is never other than human; or of Nancy's residual retention of human language as the privileged locus of the exposure of the sense of the world; on these, see Crowley 2019.) So although the question of transcendence can, of course, be modulated in various ways, and claims to radical or pure immanence remain core features of contemporary philosophy and theology (see in particular Laruelle 2013; and Hallward 2006), the form of transcendence that sets the stakes of this study remains the strong ontological transcendence invariably generated by a substance metaphysics of a priori capacities and the split this imposes between human actors and all other kinds of beings.

In the case of specifically political agency, this transcendent split becomes particularly acute, in two senses. First, however *politics* is defined, it is overwhelmingly agreed to be an exclusively human activity. (One proof of this *a contrario* is the defamiliarizing effect of a title such as Massumi's *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* [2014].) Insects can be gregarious, dolphins can be social, but there is only one political animal. Indeed, political activity (again, however this is defined) is invariably one of the preeminent attributes—along with the consubstantial trinity of reason, morality, and language—by which human beings like to distinguish themselves infinitely from other kinds of beings. Diderot is again here paradigmatic: in his account of natural

law, having played with the long-standing allegorical image of a political assembly of nonhuman animals, he uses the evident nonsense of such a scenario (when taken literally) to underscore the inviolable boundary between humans and these others, and he affirms politics as proper only to human beings, the product and the foundation of their unique dignity (1984a:146).

As Latour puts it, ventriloquizing and historicizing this position, “Obviously there is no politics other than that of humans, and for their benefit! This has never been in question. The question has always been about the *form* and the *composition of this human*” (2018:85). Second (and consequently), the activities undertaken under the name of politics are themselves frequently defined in terms of those forms of cognitive or temporal transcendence to which human beings lay exclusive claim. For politics, we might say with Badiou, is a matter not just of decisions on how to live together (a definition, we should note, that already presupposes reflexive consciousness and the projection of intentions); politics is a matter of commitment and prescription. And for those—like Badiou—who are happy to sign up to the human-exceptionalist position, the self-awareness and futural projection these require (in Badiou’s blunt terms: the capacity for thought) stake out politics as always and only a human activity (see Badiou 2005b:97–98). What is more, political modalities such as commitment and prescription are not only habitually secured by the exclusively human capacity for one form or another of transcendence but can often themselves be defined in terms evocative of transcendence, as forms of rupture or radical break. Badiou is again the best example here: “The essence of politics is not the plurality of opinions,” he writes: “It is the prescription of a possibility in rupture with what exists” (2005b:24).

This is not the place to go into the extensive arguments over whether or not the Event, from which this militant prescription

follows as an act of fidelity, is in Badiou's account transcendent in relation to its situation. (See Badiou 2005a; and, for a good account of these arguments, Gibson 2012:256.) For our purposes, what matters is that models of the political event as "a pure cut . . . , an atemporal instant that separates a past from a future and extracts a time from another (indifferent) one" (Gibson 2012:45), can seem to advocate a political or temporal transcendence complicit with the abusive fantasies of human ontological transcendence. (On the qualities and shortcomings of such models, see especially Apter 2018.)

As we will see in detail with reference to Latour (in chapter 1), this potential complicity can in turn lead thinkers motivated by a concern for ontological egalitarianism to reject models of politics that include strongly conflictual intervention. "Sheathe your swords!" they say. "No more clear-cut bloody decisions" (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009:11) Despite the obvious appeal of such a refusal of political violence, however, with its recommendation of careful, piecemeal negotiation and its ironic dismissal of "Manly warrior assurance" (Callon et al. 2009:11), it is not certain that frontal conflict can indeed be excluded from the field of politics. As I will argue later, we do not have to be normatively committed to a politics of trenchant effectivity to find the refusal of confrontational intervention a flaw in what wants to be a general theory of politics. Even if all we want from a model of political action is descriptive accuracy, a model that rules out such intervention as a matter of principle is bound to come up short. In its starkest form, then, the question that motivates my considerations here is: can we coherently understand decisive political intervention from within a fully distributed conception of agency? And the wager of this book is that we can answer this question in the affirmative: that a politics without transcendence is indeed possible.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Shortly, I will introduce the core elements of my argument. First, however, some more context is needed to situate our present debates against their broader backdrop. If the idea of dispensing with both the human-exceptionalist claim to sole possession of strong agency and the related fantasy of ontological transcendence that have recently gained significantly in prominence, this is not just thanks to signal contributions such as those of Latour and Bennett; it is also as a result of the interactions between such specific intellectual contributions and broader contextual factors. The situation is well described by Didier Debaise: “Does our contemporary experience not force us to quit a purely anthropological paradigm in order to elicit the centers of experience, manners of being, multiple relations that existents have with each other, and which make up a nature that has become essentially plural?” (2017:41).

If Debaise’s reference to nature seems to foreground the ecological dimension I have already invoked, its scope is in fact larger (in keeping with the use of this term in Debaise’s key framework, namely the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead). Accordingly, other defining features of “contemporary experience” join with this ecological dimension to form the sense that such an exit is necessary. And given the importance of the theater of mental representation to the “anthropological paradigm,” it is no surprise that the most prominent among these features are those theoretical, technological, and experimental developments that have put extreme pressure on the exceptionality this theater was designed to stage.

Alongside the dramatic recalibration of the relation between human action and planetary forces promoted by the concept of the Anthropocene, then, the impetus to understand agency as

distributed has been created in particular by the arrival of cybernetics as a dominant epistemology and, in obvious tandem with this, advances in artificial intelligence, especially in the field of deep learning (i.e., that part of research into machine learning in which artificial neural networks engage in relatively unsupervised learning). (As I will discuss artificial intelligence more fully in horizon 2, I will not go into much detail here.) According to Rammert, the concept of distributed agency can be linked in particular to “the many levels and parallel processes of ‘distributed computing’ ” and “the self-organized adaptation processes of ‘distributed cognition’ ” (2012:90). If we might link this latter field to the still-anthropocentric notion of the “extended mind” (see Clark and Chalmers 1998), or arguments for understanding “thought” as a capacity of nonhuman beings (as in *How Forests Think* [Kohn 2013], for example, or *Plant-Thinking* [Marder 2013], or even *Cognitive Biology* [Auletta 2011]), its more significant context is the interest in military and other research in “swarms, distributed intelligence,” and especially “insect models of organization” (Parikka 2010: xi) and the “extended organism” (Srinivasan 2018: n.p.), whose inductive epistemology is often better able to resist a priori substance-metaphysical categories.

As the exorbitant expansiveness and, in part, the deadly aims of such developments suggest, the importance of cybernetics as a factor in the challenge to the human-exceptionalist conception of agency can hardly be overstated. As information technology established itself as central to modern human existence, the cybernetic treatment of meaning as information, and of understanding as data processing, served as its accompanying epistemology. (On the significance of cybernetics as epistemology, see Pickering 2010; and Rid 2016.) Most important, this shift moves the emphasis in the modeling of action away from intentionality (whose constitutive framework of mental representation supports

the primacy of meaning and understanding) toward a post hoc functionalist description of the operative elements defining a given system. This is well captured by Gregory Bateson, whose participation in the earliest theorization of cybernetics at the Macy Conferences (1946–53) contributed to his development of a pioneering model of agency as distributed across a heterogeneous coalition of contributors. In Bateson’s words, with this shift from meaning to information, “thinking, acting, and deciding” are now understood as located in the “cybernetic system—the relevant total information-processing, trial-and-error completing unit” (1972:331, 467). Bateson in fact builds this out to a thoroughgoing tripartite *ecology* of human individual, society, and ecosystem, in which action issues from the relevant system—and even in the case of human individuals, “this ‘system’ will usually *not* have the same limits as the ‘self’ (317; Bateson’s example here is a woodcutter felling a tree with an axe).

From Bateson’s cybernetic ecology, we need now to bring in the life sciences proper in order first to note the belated influence of Jakob von Uexküll’s “phenomenological biology” (Smith 2013:1). For Uexküll, every organism actively processes the meaning of those elements that appear to it as significant in the relay between its “perceptor world” and its “effector world” (Uexküll 1957:6). His proto-cybernetic model later receives detailed systems-theoretical elaboration in the “biology of cognition” of Humberto Maturana, in which the relation of structural coupling between an organism and its environment is allied to the self-conscious inclusion of the observer in the system observed, in the classic manner of second-order cybernetics, to develop an account of self-fashioning (or *autopoiesis*) in which autonomy is rethought as immanent to processes of emergence—and in which, crucially, it becomes possible to think reflexivity without transcendence (see Maturana and Varela 1980).



The emphasis in second-order cybernetics on questions of reflexivity and self-fashioning, especially as extended to the realm of theoretical biology, indicates the scale of its challenge to the thesis of human exceptionalism. Inasmuch as this thesis is grounded above all in the exclusive human capacity for reflexive thought, and the cognitive and moral autonomy this is imagined to guarantee, the theorization of reflexivity outside of the theater of mental representation deals it a severe blow. If we now combine the profound implication of human beings in their planetary milieu brought about by the realization of the climate emergency with the fundamental epistemological displacement effected in this way by cybernetics, and the prominence of related developments in artificial intelligence, we get a sense of the extent of the broad systems-theoretical recontextualization of human action over the past half century or so. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps easy to see why the idea of agency as distributed across diverse networks of beings of all kinds has been able to gain such significant traction.

To switch briefly from this broader cultural history to a narrower version of intellectual history, I close this section with a word about a key figure in the immediate prehistory of the current debates that form the context for this study's contribution: namely, Michel Serres. In composing the book's corpus, I made the decision not to feature Serres, despite his significant status as a major and, until lately, underacknowledged forerunner of this field. (For an excellent overview of Serres's considerable *oeuvre* and, in particular, reflection on the reasons for his relative lack of prominence in the Anglophone world, see Watkin 2020, especially 12–18.) Although his work certainly did anticipate and, to an extent, influence more recent interest in thinking agency across networks of human and nonhuman actors (especially in the case of Latour, and not least in its engagement with the implications

of cybernetics), the nature of this work, in which different concerns are often woven into rich and densely allusive skeins, means that this question is not thematized in these writings with the same direct, precise focus as Latour brings to bear. We could even say that Serres is not much given to thinking agency as a specific, discrete question—although he is certainly concerned to think expansively about the relation between humans and other kinds of beings, and to think ambitiously about the kinds of framing these relations deserve. (For an authoritative account of Serres's approach to these questions, see Watkin 2020:341–50. I note in passing that, suggestively, the index to Watkin's superb study contains no entry for agency and none for politics.) More particularly, the core concern of this study—namely, the politics of distributed agency—has established itself as a key contemporary problematic in and around the work of Latour, along with that of Bennett and Connolly. Given that this study is designed as an intervention into these contemporary discussions, I have accordingly taken the decision to frame it in terms of these existing points of reference rather than expanding these to include Serres as one of their major antecedents.

## TERMINOLOGY

In briefly sketching these contextual factors, however, we have done more than just identify the background to this success. By invoking both the planetary climate emergency and the hegemonic power of digital computing, we have also identified the most significant dimensions of the geopolitical framework that sets the stakes for any current understanding of political agency. As I have said, my aim here is to formulate an account of distributed political agency that contributes to the engagement of

contemporary critical thought with this framework by its distinctive double gesture: on the one hand, honoring the ontological egalitarianism demanded by this context through refusing any substance-metaphysical reliance on the predetermined capacities of given types of beings, and on the other, understanding distributed political agency as decisively effective. The time has now come for me to set out the commitments that will underpin this account and to give a sense of what it will look like.

In broad terms, the model I will develop understands agency in the following terms (I emphasize here the elements I will later gloss further): as an *emergent* feature of an *antagonistic alliance* of diverse *participants* within the *array* of beings making up a given situation. Further, to allow this to function as a model of specifically political agency, I will understand such alliances as the site of a *decisive* intervention. I use “decisive” to evoke two principal dimensions of such an intervention: first, that it makes a major difference to a situation (as in, “a decisive contribution”), in some cases forming a confrontational alignment; and, second, that it effects a decision in the strong sense (as in, “they acted decisively”), taking a position and engaging a partisan futural commitment. A decision, that is, just as understood by Badiou: as opening a bifurcation, adopting one side of an either/or alternative (see Badiou 2009:399–447; and on this, Galloway 2020). These two senses will be established, in this order, principally in the book’s two horizon sections: first, a largely post hoc, descriptive dimension, seeking to capture the emergence of agency as processually immanent, significantly effective, and confrontationally aligned; second, a more futural dimension, configuring this emergence as entailing a commitment. And, of course, it will be fundamental to my argument that *decisive* action (in both senses) is the action of a composite alliance of various participants.

In the model I will develop, then, actions are effected by alliances. (I will preserve this Latourian term, albeit for reasons that pull away from his approach, as I will explain.) Alliances are composed of some of the diverse array of beings that make up a given situation. For any given action, agency is accordingly a “property” of the relevant alliance. It is therefore not a matter of identifying within the alliance which entity has this or that degree of agency. (Which is why I will be relatively promiscuous in my use of “actor” and “agent,” as mentioned earlier.) That being said, different participants will have contributed in different ways and to different extents. The future perfect is here significant: participants become participants, as opposed to the beings making up a situation, only *in* the relations that shape the action in question. In Verbeek’s helpful summary of Latourian emergence, “Actants must not be conceived as free-standing entities that then enter into relations with each other. Only in these relations do they become actants; they ‘emerge’ within the networks that exist between them” (2005:149). What is more, as I will argue in horizon 1, the particular capacities of any participant are similarly established by their differential distribution throughout the alliance. Identifying agency is accordingly a matter of configuring the differential distribution of activities and capacities across the alliance, mapping the eminent sites of accountability (see Floridi and Sanders 2004) that emerge through its action.

I use *array* and *alliance* in place of the more familiar term *assemblage*, as used especially by Latour and Bennett and derived from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *agencement* (see Deleuze and Guattari 2014). In the uptake of this figure in models of distributed agency, the assemblage appears as “an endless, nonhierarchical array of shifting associations of varying degrees of durability” (Appadurai 2015:221). A given element

might participate in this or that assemblage, and although it is the assemblage that is the operative unit, this is thanks to the contingent relations among its elements that here acquire stability but will subsequently be reconfigured. As Hayles puts it when defining her use of the term, “the configurations in which systems operate are always in transition, constantly adding and dropping components and rearranging connections” (2017:2). Relations are exterior to their terms; assemblages are temporary, aggregate wholes “whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts” (DeLanda 2006:5).

If this uptake of the concept has been severely criticized as a fundamental misreading of its Deleuzo-Guattarian usage (see Buchanan 2015), the severity of this criticism explicitly acknowledges the extent of the appropriation in question: in social theory in particular, assemblage theory has become a major paradigm. My reasons for not adopting it here are related to this criticism, however, inasmuch as my argument requires terminology that will allow the recognition of differentiated locations of effectivity, which an emphasis on transient associations can dissolve into equivalence. Contrasting the array to the alliance thus permits a distinction between the beings that happen to make up this or that situation and the subset of these beings that emerges as agential through the action in question. In one sense, then, we might say that array, with its sense of contingency, corresponds quite well to “assemblage.” Alliance, on the other hand, brings with it a greater sense that the coming together of these beings has proved in some way decisive, not least in that these beings have now become *participants*. That is, the emergence of an alliance from within an array brings forward what Alfred North Whitehead calls “a novel togetherness” (1978:21): it is not just a loose association of autonomous elements that remain unchanged by their coming together.

In this way, my use of “alliance” differs from Latour’s. If Verbeek is right that Latourian actants emerge only in their constitutive networks, it is also the case that Latour can nevertheless succumb to an atomistic version of the alliance, in which its elements can precede and be left intact by its composition and which, for this reason, looks much more like an assemblage. (For a critique of Latour in these terms, see Ingold 2016:13.) Conversely, I will describe the agency of my alliances as “distributed” rather than Latour’s habitual term, “hybrid.” Partly this is because of the term’s implication in racist colonial discussions of so-called miscegenation (see Elam 1999)—although I emphatically do not consider Latour in some way guilty by association as a result of this. Mostly I use “distributed” to underscore the differential distribution of capacities in the composite action of the alliance, which the suggestion of amalgamation in “hybrid” can obscure. But most significantly, I depart from Latour’s conception in my insistence on the alliance as—in some cases—a specifically *antagonistic* formation; and this conflictual dimension can again be lost when we think in terms of hybridity. I will be arguing that Latour’s inclusion of conflict on his initial spectrum of modes of negotiation soon gives way to an inability to address the reality of antagonism, which his writings invariably elide. Against this, I will develop an account of alliances arraigned in conflict, through which it becomes possible to identify the emergent agency of the alliance as compatible with effective, confrontational political agency.

This emphasis on antagonistic agency brings me to a fundamental question raised by my broad sympathy for the ontological egalitarians: why keep the category of agency at all? Given that this has historically been one of the qualities alleged to elevate humans above all other beings, and that it has consequently been a significant contributor to the manifold violence this elevation has permitted, would not any commitment to ontological

egalitarianism do better simply to jettison it, along with the rest of the human-exceptionalist machinery? And if this is true of agency, then how much more so of specifically political agency, where that machinery is in overdrive! In expanding the notion of meaningful agency beyond human beings alone, are we not indulging in what Claire Colebrook (2014) calls “ultra-humanism,” generously granting our coveted human qualities to other beings, still considering these only inasmuch as they resemble us in some way? Or flattering ourselves that we can bring to life otherwise inert matter by adding a sprinkling of our magical human dust, in Ingold’s marvelous image (2011:29)? When we think we are at our most inclusive, is it not then that we are at our most hubristically human-exceptionalist? (On this, see also Kirby 2016.)

These points are well made and well taken. An approach that works from a schema of human and nonhuman actors, with the goal of including the latter in activities once reserved for the former, will indeed struggle to escape the pull of human exceptionalism. For as long as we are discussing the qualities or capacities of determinate kinds of beings as if these were categorically given, we will remain within this gravitational field, condemned—as Nietzsche pointed out, and as Massumi brilliantly reemphasizes—to cleave the actor from the act and to shrink the latter to a mere manifestation of the former’s transcendent capabilities. (See Nietzsche 1998:19; and Massumi 2014:41–42.)

It is for this reason that, as I will shortly discuss, the broad metaphysical commitment underpinning my argument here rejects this kind of substance metaphysics in favor of a metaphysics of process and emergence. I will not, then, be working with a model of distributed agency in which we would start with a property (agency) belonging to a determinate kind of being (humans), which we would then distribute in more or less dilute form to others (nonhumans), like alms to the poor. (Or, in this

case, to the “poor-in-world,” in Heidegger’s term for nonhuman animals [1995:176–273]—which is itself a classic example of such graciously diluted distribution.) But if I nonetheless want to persist with the concept of agency, it is precisely because I want to keep in play all the substance-metaphysical contraband this concept smuggles in. I want us to be thinking in terms of decisions, responsibility, commitment, and so on, because, as I will argue, I am convinced that an account of politics qua politics that abandons these is both descriptively incomplete and, even on its own terms, strategically ineffective. What I will claim, then, is that we can indeed keep this armature of decisive effectivity even as we cut the ties binding agency to the human-exceptionalist theater of intentionality.

The move outside of this theater often provokes a kind of substance-metaphysical panic (some instances of which we have already seen): if strong agency is no longer indexed to human beings, does this not abandon all differentiation in favor of some Hegelian night in which all agential cows are black? Or, more to the point, in which cows (of any color), vacuum cleaners, human beings, and whirlwinds all get to count equally as agents? And does this not then make a mockery of any idea of politics? (Whence Diderot’s presentation of a literal parliament of nonhuman animals as evident nonsense, as we saw earlier.) Against such panic, my own approach will, on the contrary, insist on agential differentiation—indeed, on *more and better* differentiation than is offered by a model that knows only two terms: human actors and everything else. The problem is not distinction, not even distinction between capacities. Faithful here to Latourian actor-network theory, I hold that when it comes to the differentiation of forms, modes, or degrees of agency, the problem is, rather, the attribution of certain capacities—more or less attenuated—to certain kinds of beings, in advance of and without regard to any particular situation.



Debaise and Stengers put this very well with reference to Whitehead: such a position, they write, “affirming that nothing must be excluded, does not for all that state that everything must be taken into consideration: it stipulates that we must reject the right to disqualify” (2017:15). I situate the beings that compose my arrays along an unbroken ontological continuum, and I agree with Hayles that “agencies exist all along this continuum, but the capacities and potentials of those agencies are not all the same and should not be treated as if they were interchangeable and equivalent” (2017:67). In my account, moreover, these capacities and potentials are not given but are themselves differentially distributed functions of the relative positions of participants in their respective alliances. Not less differentiation, then, but *more and better*, with a sharper analytical edge. As Karen Barad writes, this position “means that accountability requires that much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries” (1997:219). This reference to power might surprise, in the vicinity of a theory of distributed agency; as their various critics suggest, do these theories not abandon such trappings of a merely human politics? But how to determine power, if not as a differential? And how to ascertain a differential, if not by more and better, or what Ingold calls “interstitial,” differentiation (2016:13)? To quote Latour, this approach “aims not only at establishing equality . . . but at registering differences . . . and at understanding the practical means that allow some collectives to dominate others” (1993:107–8).

## CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS AND KEY MOTIFS

A particularly charged version of such differentiation for this project entails the fundamental need to account for the

appearance of agency from within a situation, of an alliance from among an array, in the absence of those human-exceptionalist mechanics of intentionality. That is, I have to respond to the challenge formulated by Hannes Bergthaller, when he writes, “The new materialists . . . have pushed into the background the problem of how sharp ontological and ethical distinctions can emerge *immanently*, as a result of material self-organization” (2014:40). Granted, in some ways this is not my problem: I am not locating this study under the banner of the *new materialisms* (nor, indeed, of posthumanism), and I am certainly not understanding agency as a sharp ontological distinction. But I do need a way of conceptualizing the arrival within a situation of a feature (here, the agency of the antagonistic alliance) not previously given by that situation. As my vocabulary so far might have indicated, I find this in a combination of *process* and *emergence*.

For the reasons I have explained, the starting point of the inquiry I pursue in this study involves rejecting a metaphysics of substance, with its belief in atomized individual things whose properties are given in advance by the category to which they belong. As may fairly be concluded, my thinking in what follows is broadly underpinned by a metaphysics of process, which considers such things not as primary givens but as “manifolds of process” (Rescher 1996:51). Such an approach seeks to account for the existence of individual beings by understanding the process of their composition, and it is motivated by a conviction that heuristically, this process has primacy over the resulting individual. It consequently regards the substance-metaphysical preoccupation with ranking the capacities of given types of individual as unjustifiable. Its claim is that despite the considerable and real differences between actually existing individuals, the fundamental dynamic of their appearance is the same, with the result that all exist on an unbroken ontological continuum. Whitehead,

the great pioneer of this approach, makes the point with characteristic elegance: “They differ among themselves: God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But, though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level” (1978:18).

For my purposes here, then, the great advantage of this approach is plainly that it allows us to suspend a priori commitments as to what kind of being can exhibit what kind of property, escape the gravitational pull of human exceptionalism, and replace substantial individual things as anchors of agency with composite alliances that emerge during the actions in question as “processual complexes possessing a functional unity” (Rescher 1996:53). And, crucially, as Whitehead’s careful reference to gradation and diversity insists, it allows us to do this while maintaining a clear sense of the differential distribution of effective capacities across the participants in these complexes.

Once we have set aside the convenient hierarchies of substance metaphysics, however, we are faced with a further question: how are we to understand the arrival of such differentiation? That is, how are we to answer Bergthaller’s challenge and account for the transformation of beings (milling about in an inconsequential array) into participants in an antagonistic alliance, and the constitution of this alliance as an internally differentiated locus of agency? The answer is the concept of emergence—specifically, that of “strong” emergence. In scientific and systems-theoretical discussions, this concept is less common than its twin, “weak” emergence, which is both intuitively less forbidding and empirically more observable; more speculatively compelling, strong emergence is, however, more prominent in philosophical discussions (Chalmers 2008:244). In both cases, the idiom in question distinguishes between

“high-level” and “low-level” domains, in the way we encountered through Connolly’s work, noted earlier: namely, where “high” and “low” refer to degrees of complexity without implying an ontological hierarchy. (For Connolly’s use of emergentism to allow nonhierarchical distinctions between degrees of agential complexity, see Connolly 2010:23–27.) In both weak and strong emergence, “the high-level phenomenon arises (in some sense) from the low-level domain”: the difference between the two is that in weak emergence, “truths concerning that phenomenon are *unexpected* given the principles governing the low-level domain,” whereas in strong emergence, “truths concerning that phenomenon are not *deducible* even in principle from truths in the low-level domain” (Chalmers 2008:244).

As this language of phenomena and truths suggests, emergence is largely taken as an issue for epistemology and heuristics; as Dave Elder-Vass explains, however, it is also of considerable significance to reflections on the nature of agency. “The value of the concept,” Elder-Vass writes, “lies in its potential to explain how an entity can have a causal impact on the world in its own right . . . that is not just the sum of the impact its parts would have if they were not organised into this kind of whole” (2010:5). Of course, in a human-exceptionalist understanding, this idiom would confine us to the realms of mere efficient causality rather than agency proper; but as we have rejected this understanding, and with it the a priori distinction between levels of agency or causality, we are free to adopt it as a way to account for the appearance within a situation of a new grouping that exhibits capacities whose existence and distribution are not given in advance by the features of that situation. In my terms: from among an array of beings, an alliance has appeared, constituting a subset of these beings as participants and exhibiting agency; that is, functioning as a locus of action. Nothing in the array

determined the appearance of this alliance; as we are no longer in the realm of substance metaphysics, the beings in question have no timeless essences whose combination might be known in advance to give rise to such a thing. As a strongly emergent phenomenon, then, the alliance is both irreducible to its parts and causally effective. Its appearance constitutes what Barad calls an “agential cut” (1997:140). Just as in her account of Niels Bohr’s quantum mechanics, the act of measurement itself decisively configures the features of a system and installs the distinction between the “object” and the “agencies of observation” (in this case, through the decisive mediation of a particular apparatus of measurement), so the emergence of an agential alliance interrupts its situation with the arrival of a new power and transforms beings into participants, decisively reconfiguring the elements of this situation *in the act* in which it appears.

Crucially, both this appearance and the alliance in question remain wholly immanent to this process of emergence. Yes, strong emergence is also referred to in the literature as *ontological* emergence, but this refers to the arrival in the world of something genuinely novel, not to some irruption from a wholly other scene (see Clayton 2008:7–8). High-level properties are irreducible to and inexplicable by their low-level counterparts—but the distance between them is not the infinite separation of distinct orders of being. For example, as we will see when addressing the theme of the decision, an operative concept of reflexivity will be a necessary part of my overall model. But thanks to the insights of second-order cybernetics, it becomes possible to conceptualize reflexivity without transcendence: namely, as reflection on a process from within that process. We can thus secure the reflexivity needed without having to index this to a faculty of self-consciousness understood as ontologically of a wholly different order, while also understanding this reflexivity as making

a drastic difference within its situation. (At this point, we might compare this dynamic with a Hegelian account of the emergence of subjectivity through the self-differentiation of substance—as long as this subjectivity is understood, as it hardly ever is aside from the work of Catherine Malabou, as neither ontologically transcendent in relation to its object nor defined by human-exceptionalist properties. We will return to this in chapter 3.)

The motif that serves here to capture this idea of immanent emergence is the one that gives this book its title: the *accident*. With its associations of random happenstance and an absence of volition, this motif suggests the severance of agency from intention while also emphasizing an absence of transcendence: an accident might well befall us, but it never comes from nowhere. Its elements already given within the situation, it is, perhaps, a less grandiose version of Badiou's Event: not so much the punctuation of history by the void that cannot appear as such, as a twist, an unpredictable deviation that rearranges these elements and thereby makes a decisive change—the Lucretian *clinamen* that composes a world. Given its explicit rejection of intentionality, however, the accident—even as operator of decisive change—would seem to be wholly unsuited to a model of political agency wanting to maintain such apparently decisionistic categories as prescriptive mobilization and commitment. Again, though, as with the concept of agency, this is precisely why I will be using the term. At stake in the following arguments is the question posed by the juxtaposition in my title: can we meaningfully think effective political *agency* as *accidental*? The apparent oxymoron of *accidental agents* signals the need for a venture such as this to reconcile the refusal of sovereign intentionality declared by its first term with the *decisive* effectivity—in both senses of the term—implied by our usual understanding of the second. The motif of the accident thus goes to the heart of the

intervention this study proposes: its claim that such a reconciliation is not only possible but essential.

In effecting this reconciliation, the challenge is accordingly to understand accidental agential emergence as the locus of decisive intervention—indeed, of futural commitment. At this point, all the substance-metaphysical baggage of the concept of agency returns once more, as indeed I want it to do: with the decision, commitment, this introduction of a futural dimension, are we not back inside the human-exceptionalist theater of intentionality? This is where we meet the accident as also the site of the decision. Paradoxically, no doubt; but again, the tension between the two terms as habitually understood indicates precisely what is at stake in this venture. If the suspension of the human-exceptionalist machinery of intentionality obliges us to withdraw the decision from its fantasy status as sovereign projection, immersing it instead in process, the accompanying conception of agency as an emergent property maintains an insistence on the drastic change brought about by the emergence of the agent in the act. If nothing could have predicted this arrival—if the agency in question is indeed emergent and, in this sense, accidental—the act in which this composite agential alliance appears will here both make a drastic difference to its situation and comport a futural commitment.

Building out from the respective versions of the concept we find in its two great contemporary thinkers, namely Stiegler (chapter 2) and Malabou (chapter 3), I will use the accident to characterize agential emergence as bringing forth a decisive intervention, in both senses of the word. In this way, I argue that immanent, processual agential emergence also entails orientation toward the future; this is crucial to my case, because it gives decisive future orientation without (cognitive self-) representation, reflexive projection without transcendence. The decision as heir to the accident—but no less decisive for that.

In securing decisive commitment in this way, such immanent futural orientation also allows my model to accommodate the final aspect we need to consider in this introductory sketch: namely, what I have been presenting as the necessarily conflictual side to any thoroughgoing account of politics. Like many, I imagine, I am very happy to agree with Chantal Mouffe and see a desirable politics as a practice of “agonism” (in which adversaries confront each other in a context defined by mutually agreed norms)—the alternative being antagonistic confrontations between enemies who refuse to recognize such common ground and so maintain their hostility in unsublimated form (see Mouffe 2013). In the years since Mouffe first formulated this position, the desirability of such a politics has, of course, only been heightened by the proliferation of powerful actors whose methods are openly antagonistic. Part of the challenge posed by such actors to a broadly liberal tradition has, however, been the struggle they have occasioned *within* the political field over what counts as politics. And if this struggle is indeed situated within the political field, we are, I think, obliged to accept that antagonism does form part of this field. (On these debates, see, for example, Brown, Gordon, and Pensky 2018.) As Mouffe suggests, then, conflict is an irreducible part of politics broadly understood (2013:3–4): although it is certainly preferable for a given political arena to be constituted by a mutual agreement to sublimate antagonism into agonism, such an agreement constitutes the welcome opening of a particular form, not a condition of possibility for any politics at all.

In addition to Mouffe, we can usefully draw here on the work of political theorist Oliver Marchart. In his tellingly entitled *Thinking Antagonism*, Marchart sets out what he calls “the conditions to be met in order for us to reasonably speak about politics” (2018:36). These are six in number: collectivity, organization, strategy, conflictuality, partisanship, and what Marchart



terms “becoming-major,” which he glosses as the requirement that “politics is geared towards constructing a symbolic majority” (36). If “becoming-major” is directed—antagonistically—at the “becoming-minor” of a Deleuzo-Guattarian micropolitics, we can justifiably see this list as a whole as evoking a resoluteness and a capacity for projection that would typically pull against a conception of agency as other than a distinctively human quality. Despite this, I will take conflictuality and partisanship, at least, as indispensable to any model of political action that aspires to a good degree of descriptive accuracy. Indeed, as I have said, I will do so in part precisely to claim that these dimensions, which I take to be indispensable to an adequate account of political agency, are compatible with an account of such agency that dispenses with all appeals to human exceptionality.

To be clear, I will certainly not be arguing that partisan conflict should account for the whole of what we mean by politics, let alone that agency itself should be understood as always and everywhere conflictual. I have no particular fondness for antagonism and even less for the machismo its invocation often serves to flaunt. With Mouffe, Marchart, and others, however, I do believe that partisan conflict is an irreducible feature of the broad field of political activity. Given this, a model of political agency as distributed that aims to be both complete and effective will have to be able to incorporate a conflictual dimension—which is accordingly part of what I seek to do in this book. Different contexts will motivate differences in emphasis: for the sake not just of descriptive accuracy but also of rhetorical persuasiveness, it will be more or less appropriate now to highlight frontal conflict as one mode of distributed political agency, now to stress the role of the indirect and the capillary. Because I hold that partisan conflict must feature in any adequate account of political agency, and that such conflict has thus far not been much emphasized in

work on distributed political agency, the following study will be one context in which the conflictual will be highlighted.

My understanding of political agency will thus accord with that of what Raffaele Marchetti calls the “radical tradition”: namely, as participation “in the struggle to define the modalities of life in common,” a definition that, as Marchetti points out, “stress[es] the conflictual dimension of politics” (2013:14)—with the key difference that I will be working with a significantly expanded notion of “life in common.” And this does make quite a difference! If I hold that our existing accounts of distributed political agency need to find room for the dimensions of conflictuality and partisanship we find theorized in this “radical tradition” (represented here thus far by Badiou, Mouffe, Marchart, and Marchetti), I equally hold that the understanding of agency as distributed set out in these existing accounts can help us to develop a considerably more expansive conception of politics than those typically found in the worlds of political thought and political theory, radical or not. For all the internal diversity of these fields—from the traditions of conservatism, liberalism, communitarianism, libertarianism, and socialism, say, to theories of democracy and civic republicanism, to the *Realpolitik* of Hobbes, Schmitt, or Lenin, or the redistribution of the sensible realm à la Rancière—they remain overwhelmingly committed to the human-exceptionalist understanding of politics we met earlier, in which only humans do politics on the basis of unique, invariably linguistic-cognitive, capacities. As I have stated, I have no intention of arguing in what follows that political activity is somehow indifferently undertaken by humans and nonhumans. On the contrary, if my aim is to look more closely at how political actions are performed by alliances of ontologically diverse participants, this scrutiny brings us not less but more and better differentiation among the respective contributions of these

participants. Such more and better differentiation does, however, deliver a model of political action in which politics is no longer undertaken *by humans alone*.

What is more, the defamiliarization of politics enabled by this position of ontological diversity obliges us to revisit what we take to be the essential elements of the political field. As we will see throughout this study, and as I will schematize explicitly in its conclusion, in place of the agora and the town hall, representation and discursive participation, sovereignty, the citizen and the demos, we find alliances and their participants, decisive action and the composite decision, and partisan commitments within a conflict over values. The defamiliarization in question is not total, it is true (no effective defamiliarization ever is); as this reference to conflict over values suggests, the Aristotelian horizon of the good life as the final cause of this activity is still to some extent in place here. And, indeed, some other features of that humanist political scenery will persist in the model I develop in this book—notably, the participatory dimension invoked in the figures of the agora and the demos. But if these features do persist, this will be persistence in the mode of mutation, with drastically expanded stakes; and various others will certainly fall away, most particularly those that serve to frame politics essentially in terms of discursively mediated representation. For the good life being disputed is no longer solely that of the *zoon logon ekhon*, no longer staged within a human-exceptionalist theater of intentionality whose machinery of linguistic-cognitive representation is designed to secure this being's fantasy transcendence. It is now that of beings of all kinds, who are, moreover, involved in its conflictual definition alongside that supposedly exceptional political animal.

The shift in question might thus fairly be thought of as that from politics in a conventional sense to what Latour calls

“cosmopolitics,” which he frequently defines as the progressive composition of a common world by and for beings of all kinds (see, for example, Latour 2014:35–36), or, simply, “the management, diplomacy, combination, and negotiation of human and nonhuman agencies” (Latour 1999:290). Except that we will have to take seriously the quasi-Leninist formula with which Latour immediately glosses this definition: “Who or what can withstand who or what?” (1999:290) Cosmopolitics, by all means—but with full weight given not just to the measuring Latour’s gloss implies, the delineation and evaluation of power differentials, but to the partisan commitments and conflicts in which these differentials effectively appear. Politics, then: as Marchetti’s “struggle to define the modalities of life in common” but with antagonistic alliances of ontologically diverse participants as its decisive actors.

## OUTLINE

In what follows, then, I develop our existing theories of distributed agency as an emergent property of ontologically diverse alliances, notably by demonstrating the compatibility of distributed agency with decisive intervention and partisan futural commitment. As part of this, as I have suggested, I build an account of the decision as strong immanent discontinuity, reflexivity without transcendence, at once inflection and interruption—of the decision as processually enmeshed, heir to the accident, yet still sharply interventionist. And through this model of decisive distributed political agency, I also offer a general model of politics in which the usual human-exceptionalist, linguistic-cognitive entry requirements are suspended but the ontologically diverse alliances that now form our political actors remain combative

figures of partisan commitment and normative prescription. Accidental agents; antagonistic alliances.

To accomplish this goal, the book presents in-depth analysis of its three key thinkers: Latour, Stiegler, and Malabou. If Latour's importance here is evident, Stiegler and Malabou are cited less in arguments around distributed agency. One of the aims of this study is accordingly to move beyond the largely expository or critical modes of their reception so far, to show the broader contribution that their respective philosophies can make. Unlike in most of the existing literature, my approach to Stiegler and Malabou takes from their work not so much this or that concept as, rather, in each case an underlying mechanism, which—duly adapted, as necessary—forms a key element of the model I am seeking to build. Each of my three titular thinkers thus forms the object of a substantial chapter-length discussion in which their ideas are first clearly unpacked before being mobilized by means of close reading of their argumentation. Through this, I establish exactly what I will be taking from their work to develop my model. These chapters are linked by two horizon sections: these are designed as laboratories in which to confront the resources established in the preceding chapter with the demands of particular contemporary geopolitical issues (illegalized migration in the context of climate change for horizon 1; digital-algorithmic politics for horizon 2). The book accordingly develops through a rhythm of critical engagement with its key thinkers (in chapters 1, 2, and 3), interspersed with testing of the results of this engagement and cumulative development of its argument (in horizons 1 and 2 and the conclusion). Its model is built progressively, from horizon 1 to horizon 2 to the conclusion, with chapters 1, 2, and 3 supplying the relevant materials.

As I have said, the book's starting point is the refusal of strong ontological transcendence in the form of human exceptionalism.

In chapter 1, we see this refusal in Latour—but we also see that the consequences of its translation into the realm of politics leave him unable to realize the descriptive accuracy and, indeed, political effectivity he seeks. It is this that raises the book's central motivating question: namely, whether the refusal of strong ontological transcendence that characterizes theories of distributed agency necessarily leads to an ineffective politics, limited exclusively to the post hoc description of processes—or whether, on the contrary, this refusal can be compatible with a decisive politics of prescriptive mobilization and futural commitment.

The first horizon section addresses this question by developing the book's model of agential alliances as emergent from and immanent to their situation and by configuring such alliances as antagonistically engaged. With this section, the first stage of the book's argument is in place: thanks to this possible antagonistic aspect, and its crystallization of the full range of existential stakes composing its situation, the intervention of an agential alliance produces a decisive change in a state of affairs. Horizon 1 also presents a first encounter with normative questions of responsibility: the composite action of the alliance means that responsibility, too, is here composite, both resting with the alliance as a whole and parsed out according to its constitutive local contributions. The participants in an alliance thus emerge as *eminent sites of accountability*, with differentially distributed kinds and degrees of responsibility relative to their position in the action of the alliance. Analysis of this distribution is consequently also the occasion for the first appearance of the *more and better differentiation* of agential participation that runs as a motif through the horizon sections and is picked up in the conclusion.

Thanks to the figure of the antagonistic alliance, then, with its crystallization of the stakes of its situation and its more sharply delineated conflictual interventions, distributed agency

is secured as compatible with decisive action—but we have yet to confront the question of the decision itself. This confrontation comes in chapter 2, notably via Stiegler’s combination of Simondon’s philosophy of individuation with Deleuze’s figure of the quasi-cause. By means of this combination, Stiegler shows that drastic change—here in the Simondonian guise of individuation—can also be the locus of decision-making constituted as reflexivity without transcendence and, thanks to Deleuze’s quasi-cause, as a processually immanent commitment to a particular value. This constitution is a major contribution to the model developed through the book, in two key ways. First, it is Stiegler who allows us to understand the decision independently of any appeal to ontologically exceptional capacities and who, accordingly, introduces the possibility of distributed agency as decisive in the second sense of the term: namely, as taking a position and engaging a partisan commitment. And second, it is here that the normative dimension of our model really starts to come through—as, indeed, it must—given the emphasis I am placing on partisan commitment as a key part of this model. For with Stiegler, we begin to see just how such a commitment, taking a side within a conflict over value, can be understood as processually immanent.

The second horizon section combines this account of the immanent, partisan decision with the understanding of distributed political agency established in horizon 1, thereby ushering in the book’s core model of decisive distributed political agency. Politically decisive interventions are here analyzed as composite acts of distributed decision-making, delineated by means of more and better agential differentiation as made up of contributions at local eminent sites of accountability that remain mutually opaque, and engaging a futural commitment to a particular value within their situation. The second stage of the

book's argument is now in place: the agential alliance brings not just decisive change but a decision in the strong sense, which emerges from the conjoint activity of its various participants as a partisan intervention and a committed, normative orientation toward the future.

At this point, the remaining task for our model of distributed political agency is to elaborate in detail how such immanent decisive action can also engage a specifically futural commitment within the time of its emergence. This will be Malabou's signal contribution to the book's argument: her conception of plasticity envisages the possibility of decisive change in a situation devoid of transcendence, and her figure of the "plastic reader" appears in such a moment of decisive change as the emergent location of just such an immanent futural commitment, taking responsibility for the prescription of this value as opposed to that. With the model of decisive distributed agency fully in place, the conclusion summarizes the key dimensions of this model, engages the questions raised by its normative aspects, and brings out further what it offers as an account of specifically political agency.

This, then, is what lies ahead. And so, first we turn to Latour.



