

Reprising the Third Way: an Early Draft of an Almost Middling Proposal

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Does the middle of the road always need to place you in danger of being, rather tediously and slowly, run over by a minibus of mediocrity? Must we always hyperventilate ourselves towards the extremes looking for revolution?

In rural Ireland, the following was once a typical understated response to 'How are you?' 'Ah', the respondent would say, in a short breathy interjection, and then after a slight pause: 'Middlin''. The alternative answer could, of course, be 'Ah. Dyin''. But it is likely this was a *positive* middling. Jumping off the fence and declaring 'Ah! Great!' would appear arrogant, opinionated, perhaps *strategic*. That would give the appearance of the Proper¹, a forward, direct answer. Telling it like it is would not be a safe option.

I want to draw attention in this paper to the phenomenon of holding back, sometimes a *turning* back, that happens in many aspects of life. It can be a regression to the mean that facilitates us to maintain, get along with business, involve ourselves in necessary local practices of a regime, and still be creative, inspired, improvisational, *brilliant*. The extreme that existed for a period of time and that once paved the way - like the older sibling pioneering through life, or Thomas Kuhn's anomaly in the development of scientific ideas² - is no longer needed. Those that follow do the great, maybe even greater, work set out by the leaders or pioneers.

The conference to which this paper contributes imagines a playful anti-innovation-fetish book, *The Maintainers: How a Group of Bureaucrats, Standards Engineers, and Introverts Made Technologies That Kind of Work Most of the Time*. The 'introverts' and 'maintainers' that I present are heads-down, blue-collar musicians (under that mascara?), as well as the pragmatists of political ecology and the enactors of climate action. In fact, we could refer to them as *maintaineers* rather than maintainers to give them their due recognition for a kind of progress. Big things happen behind them and around them. They are pretty close to the peak. I will address two themes of the conference: i) what is at stake if we move certain elements of scholarship away from innovation and toward maintenance; and ii) theories, methods, and sources that might explore a steady, yet creative, type of maintenance. These conference themes are presented here in the context of studying structure in culture, technoscience and social order. Drawing from speculative realist/STS readings of innovation

¹ De Certeau, M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life* Trans by S Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

² Kuhn, T. (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd Edition* London: University of Chicago press

possibilities, I want to briefly look at political calmness in the face of capitalist techno-realities and technological objects, the post-punk New Wave movement from 1970s into the 1980s, and the practical sociotechnical implications of the Paris COP21 Agreement.

The specific context to my magpie-like use of examples is the attempted governance of technologies, particularly the new combination of *bíos-tekhne*, of which bio- and convergences technologies are exemplars - and with which contemporary STS scholars have become occupied - and how they fit into wider nation-state/commercial/civil society collectives of anticipatory governance, imagined by research policy in the EU and US. But rather than look directly at CRISPR, nanotech, AI, genetic screening or other futuristic technologies for this paper, I will focus on the disparate current or past examples of political ecology, postpunk music and post-COP21 to demonstrate the commonality of middle ground, and how the technoscientific activities at the sides or way out in front turn in towards the middle, in many different regimes³. The social history of music and responses to climate change are necessarily tied up with technological change.

Unfashionable though it may be, in this paper I want to revise as a backdrop - bring *back* - some version of Giddens's Third Way⁴. And 'back' is back. This is brilliantly demonstrated in the book *Dorsality*, as David Wills watches his and others' backs, looking at the splendor in that turn at the edge, a move back to technology as language, a 'primary technological system'⁵. Heidegger wanted us to be patient, to wait for an event or an occurrence, while in contemporary theory Adrian Johnston⁶ joins Zizek and Badiou in their critique of a political and ideological vacuum as they see it, guided helpfully by the structural status quo. And so we wait for a revolutionary spark, a cause that never happens. Almost exactly 100 years ago, Ireland, the country in which I write, needed that spark. This was the start of a particular Republican narrative, and it was messy and violent. The 1916 Easter Rising had destiny *behind* it. We now have a State. The Proclamation and the Signatory Leaders who were executed following this revolution were called into this type of destiny so that the rest - the flowering new, imagined culture of this place called Ireland - could flourish. The farmers, teachers, cleaners, factory workers, clerks and some labor leaders with Leftist thoughts in mind continued to make this state. So also did the poets and scholars.

Not all revolutions at the extreme have such bloodshed and upheaval. Related to the context outlined in this paper is the speculative turn that has occurred in philosophy examining the natural sciences and our knowledge of 'nature', which has moved us *past* the mid-way point from correlationism⁷ to speculation on the-thing-in-itself. Quentin Meillassoux, Elizabeth Grosz and many other speculative scholars have attempted to leave behind correlationism - that is, our failure to deal with the Kantian dilemma of never knowing the thing-in-itself. This move has become the cutting edge of a reactive sword against Kant and an almost direct circle back to positivism, bending back to say 'Hi' without ever touching. The real philosophical work will happen in-between. On the way back then, back to the center, some kind of paradoxical conservative, knowing disruption happens. The

³ Boltanski, L. & Thévenot, L. (2006) *On Justification: Economies of Worth* Trans. by Catherine Porter, N.J. : University of Princeton Press

⁴ Giddens, A. (2000) *The Third Way and Its Critics*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

⁵ Wills, D (2008) *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, p15.

⁶ Johnston, A. (2014) *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

⁷ Meillassoux, Q. (2008) *After Finitude: An Essay on the Contingency of Necessity*. Trans. by R. Brassier. London/NY: Continuum

familiar makes us cozy up to a constantly-forgotten type of creativity. And as we speak of the central ground and regressions, we have to guard here against the bad press that regression towards a mean has incurred, following the fallacy of Francis Galton's infamous science in his paper *Regression Toward Mediocrity in Hereditary Stature*⁸.

But this is no time for MOR! Isn't the planet at stake? In the Anthropocene, do we turn our backs on Morton's⁹ hyperobjects at our peril? These are the conceptual and actual enormous objects that face us in all their horror: tsunamis, meteors, epidemics and climate change. The cardigan-wearing John Cleese character in the (mediocre?) remake of *The Day Earth Stood Still*¹⁰ says after being challenged by the alien to wake up from dormancy to stop catastrophe: "It's only on the brink that people find the will to change. Only at the precipice do we evolve".

Enter Anthony Giddens's Third Way¹¹. This was a social theoretical attempt to bridge the socialist ideals of the Left with the competition ideals of the Right in a proposed system resulting in the development of a welfare state that would have a transformative ethos while still privileging free trade. This was a time in history where some scholars felt history had ended for the Left and Right. The middle of such a politically fractious road is a dangerous place, and Left-leaning academic discourse was particularly critical¹². We had then, at the time, a Blair/Clinton Axis of Middle that is now often viewed as a millenarian, end-of politics, neoliberal concept. Giddens's Third Way suddenly appears outdated. However, what if we were to consider a social democratic *repair* of things, humans and non-humans rather than a more human-transformative renewal of traditional social democratic politics as Giddens intended? Giddens didn't advocate conservatism. He certainly didn't want untethered free market either, nor creative destruction. To avoid a liberal version of in-between safeness – of having our cake and eating it – or indeed a slip towards capitalist rules, there will likely be a reflexive control switch to the left. We would be naïve to think that the Right does not have such power over the Left at this stage of modernity. The control switch must be in place, and it must be to the Left.

In this respect, I am linking here social structure with the particular of active practices, visible in the patterns of responses from stylized music and 'glocal' challenges of environmental regulation and political ecology, which fit within the Third Way context of Giddens's structuration theory. Individual groups of humans and assemblages react, and the system in turn *re*-reacts. In line with Judith Butler, Chris Schilling and many others, Giddens recognizes that the 'the body ...becomes a site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation'¹³. Physiology, society, the body politic and the human become networks that share the same site of action. The early androgyny of the synth bands Human League and the faux-National Socialist shirts of Joy Division were all inscribed with a political structure. Joy Division's lead singer Ian Curtis seemed to give in to the electricity of the modern age as he jerked his body in a straightened rhythm in a trance-like state on stage.

⁸ Galton, F. (1886), *Regression Towards Mediocrity in Hereditary Stature*. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 15 pp246-263

⁹ Morton, T. (2013) *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁰ Derrickson, S. 2008. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [DVD]. US/Canada: 20th Century Fox.

¹¹ Giddens, A. *The Third Way*

¹² Callinicos, A. (2000) *Against the Third Way: An Anti-Capitalist Critique* Cambridge, UK: Polity

¹³ Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* London: Polity, p218.

Wills¹⁴ outlines the centrality of the spine to humans not just in physiological terms but also to human speech and language development and a sense of Being. Rather than considering tools as a temporal addition to humans after the dawn of consciousness, the evolution of the biology of the spine is 'drawn' towards tools, technological appendages¹⁵. The human back then becomes technological; so 'turning back' makes a literal play of 'turning one's back towards'. For Wills, turning back is resistance, dissidence, like De Certeau's¹⁶ calm, internal turn, rather than strategic attacks from outside. The dorsal is also a turning back as a reversibility of technology¹⁷. As human ethics attempts to break with 'mechanicity, automatism, or programmation' so 'the human' also paradoxically actually turns towards or into these states¹⁸. The dorsal comes from behind, unseen, 'challenging that technocratic faith'. So therefore, the technology must also. In the John Lennon worldview: 'Life is what happens when you are busy making plans'. It is Heidegger's famous turning, *Gestell* as language turning as both human Being and technological Enframing. Are we failing to see the *bíos-tekhne* duality where the technology from behind and the human-ethics merge?

According to Heidegger's theoretical beginnings of posthuman, the biotech roadmap has already happened. STS studies tend to search for symmetry, the respect for once and future lineages, not just of technological development but also for those 'failed' innovations. For Wills, accepting but also taking on Heidegger, technology is always already there. Humans turn to watch it catch up with us. But assemblages are created from corporations, the European Commission or the Nation Science Foundation. However, the NGOs who are asked to join technoscientific consortia - the technological practices, the standard operation procedures, working labor, regulatory affairs and resulting PR practices – these will always turn back.

If we zoom back down to musical movements, instruments then become technological prosthetics. A penny whistle, a guitar or a synthesizer serves as an extension. But for Northern England's New Wave and the other post-punk movements, language of the past and futuristic technology - represented by synthesizers - merged. The punk movement in Britain had its heyday roughly in the years 1976 to 1979. However, as soon as it had started, it was beginning to sound jaded. 'Post-punk' is the term often given to a range of eclectic styles that started to emerge as punk was disappearing from music magazines. Ska, funk, oblique sounds, and especially synths, began to grow up around the ruins of the three-chord guitar tricks of punk. And there was a new intellectual-activist aesthetic missing from the more simplistic sounds that preceded.

First, one embarks on a path of questioning and finds it to be the wrong path: the essence of modern technology is nothing technological; or one sets out on the way to language only to find it "has become transformed along the way.... it has shifted"¹⁹.

¹⁴ Wills, D. *Dorsality*, p4

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p8

¹⁶ de Certeau, M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life* Trans by S. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁷ Wills, D. *Dorsality*, p9

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p6

¹⁹ *op.cit*, p32, quoting Heidegger, *On the Way*, p130

According to *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* by Nick Crossley²⁰, London punk, which became the cultural touchstone, was formed around a subcultural social movement and practices and networks of style and place. This was manifest in Malcolm McLaren's bondage shop SEX and, crucially, New York proto-punk. The latter comes through 'from behind'. Punk was hailed as the fresh new form of three-chord trick. It was a slight (re)turn too because the template was actually set in the earliest days of rock-and-roll. But there was something newer, more raw. New and Proper. Malcolm McLaren made it strategic. Lesser-known post-punk bands (of popular London and 'less romantic' Northern England steel towns like Sheffield) performed the drudgery of touring for country pub gigs, sloggers as part of the overall networks, as Crossley describes, but reaching back to the proto-punk and glam of Velvet Underground, T-Rex, Bowie, leaving the (typically earlier) frontline punk groups as spikes on a musical graph of novelty. Dare I say, the postpunk bands that followed were more specialized maintenance women and men with diverse musical knowledge - some of them - and less inclined to be influenced by the DIY ethos, although in truth they used it. The difference is that some were more inclined to use a Fix-It-Ourselves mentality than the proclaimed Do-It-Yourself of punk.

In STS, Graham and Thrift²¹ have been key theorists and advocates for the study of technical maintenance rather than novelty and newness of innovation studies. In Graham and Thrift's case, their chosen site is the city, and its many maintenance personnel for electricity and ICT. They also invoke the image of the underground of real workers, the work of humble earthworms²², not unlike Timothy Morton's hyperobjects lurking underneath, such as shale gas, oil spills in the ocean, underground radiation and tectonic plates of the Earth²³. Graham and Thrift prepares us for the oddness of invoking Heidegger's ready-to-hand concept when talking about city maintenance workers, but I follow his logic here to examine musicians who continue the ideas they have already heard, and who are not trying to be different but become quite different. For Heidegger, a broken tool becomes just a tool again, free from the relation of a person using it for work. The tool demands our attention as it moves out of the primary of relation. Fixing it demands more action than primary innovation, or simply coming up with something new. The aspects of repair that Graham and Thrift call into the discussion - decay, innovation by improvisation, and maintenance - are big business²⁴. Improvisation, in particular, is the darker creativity of necessity. In this way of looking at structure and action, the technovillage of 1970s Sheffield hands over the tools of its surroundings to a band like the Human League to improvise the buying and building of cheap synthesizers, rescued from the detritus of capitalism. The 1980s was a musical decade of maintenance (in tactical resistance to emerging ultra-consumption, the arty pre-punk of Roxy Music begets the rich showiness of New Romantics such as Japan).

²⁰ Crossley, N. (2015) *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* Manchester: Manchester University Press, p268.

²¹ Graham, S. and Thrift, N. (2007) 'Out of order : understanding repair and maintenance', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(3): pp1-25.

²² *ibid*, p1

²³ Morton, T. (2013) *Hyperobjects*

²⁴ *op.cit*, p3

Simon Reynolds²⁵ may have got it wrong or at least he overstated the case: postpunk did not *Rip It Up And Start Again*, to use his book title from the Orange Juice song of the same name. It patched over the tapestry that was always already there in the postcolonial cultural fabric woven from West Indies ska/rocksteady, jazz, but also the modernist *avant garde* electronics and even disco. To extend the metaphor further: this music was spinning back towards a center, casting on new stitches in the middle, what is often called WYIB, 'with yarn in back'. From here on in, the observer of the pattern is alerted - these stitches will be different.

These peculiar types of 'factory knitters' were, as Reynolds says, mainly art school. But artsy artisans, for how different are teenage and twenty-something factory workers from each other when they continue the 'cultural factory work' of a late night scene of synth and style, having clocked-off from capitalist factories?

The obvious exemplar of a music stable for this type of new going-back music was, of course, Factory records operating in Manchester from the late 1970s. However the art and design of this output from sleeves to videos, the anti-arts aesthetic, seemed above all else, modernist, future-facing. But at times it turned back to almost Flash Gordon realms of steam-punk future. It had a brilliant - but quiet, obscure - postmodern creativity. We had already imagined it.

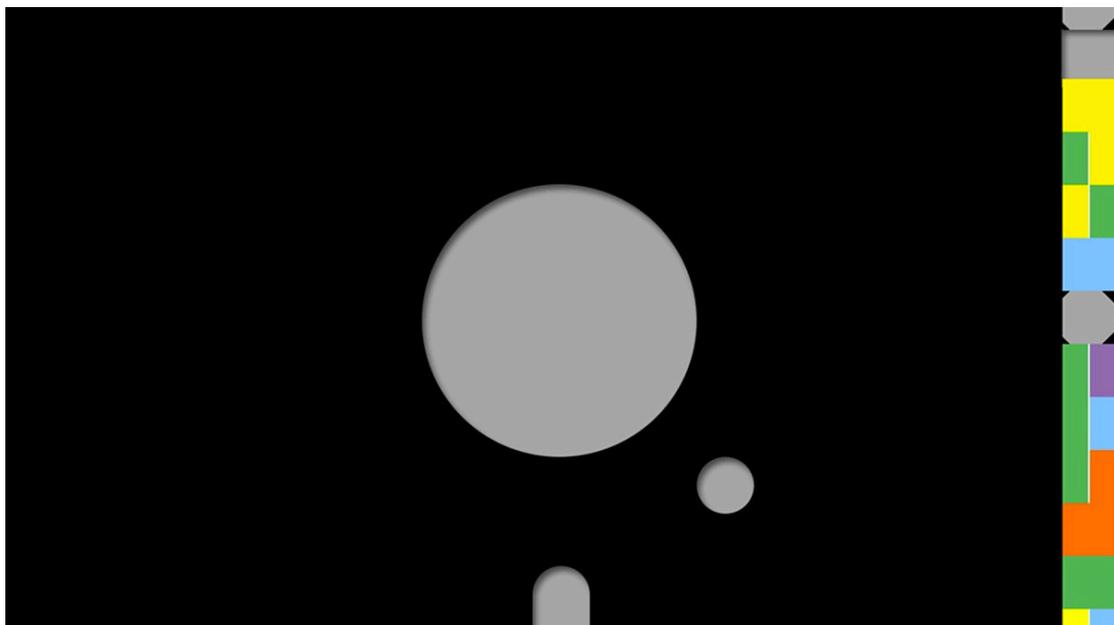


Fig 1. The sleeve photo of New Order's *Blue Monday*.

The civil service politics of middle ground maintenance wants nothing to do with the extremes of tipping points, accelerations or hyperobjects. Graham and Thrift quotes Nadis

²⁵ Reynolds, S. (2006) *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* London: Faber and Faber

worrying about fixing the city's electricity: 'a problem [is] in the middle: the grid and how to use it.'²⁶

Innovation-Fetish reveals its strong attachment to ultra-consumption- whither sustainability when the *replace* concept remains in place and cannot be shifted by the *reuse* one.

What these events reveal most powerfully, however, are the political economies surrounding the application of neoliberal economic ideologies to networked infrastructures, and a complete rebuttal of the subtle cultures of repair which actually allow complex technosocial systems like electricity to work.²⁷

But we should not fetishize or patronize the maintainer as some salt of the Earth, as critical scholars once fetishized the folk singer in the fields (neither Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan nor modern incarnate Will Oldham grew up as country backwoodsmen) or fetishized the factory worker under the red banner of Marx while proclaiming, unintentionally condescendingly: 'I, academic, am a worker too and I join you in solidarity'. This is not about identification with drudgery and the exploitation of capitalist systems. I myself worked for a while as a forecourt attendant pumping Earth-destroying petrol into unworthy vehicles and I appreciate the enormous privilege of being in academia, speaking here in Hoboken, in the Proper Rhetoric of enunciation. What is different in what I'm saying here is that we cannot equate a band like the Human League, civil servants and administrators of the Paris Agreement with drone bees. There is creative, purposive belief at the heart of their actions, but we never see it. It is obscured. If we are to be mean-spirited in our Innovation-Fetish, we might say they are mediocre. Innovation evangelists and popular culture may describe them so, but they are not mediocre.

They are representations -become-artifice, what Wills, deliberately taking on Nietzsche, calls 'will to artifice'²⁸. The factory-work symbols were everywhere - some record sleeves had little or no text, or famously were made of sandpaper (thus also destroying nearby records on the shelf!). The Heidegger idea of mirror-play of objects, 'a downplaying of agency, human and divine.... Narcissus in the pool becomes a mirroring that is also a playing'²⁹. Is this what Morrissey of The Smiths had in mind when choosing the still of Cocteau's *Orphee* for the sleeve of *This Charming Man*, with Orpheus as Narcissus, his back turned upwards, staring into his reflection in the pool?

²⁶ Graham and Thrift (2007) 'Out of order', p14.

²⁷ *ibid*, p14.

²⁸ Wills, *Dorsality*, p31

²⁹ *ibid*.

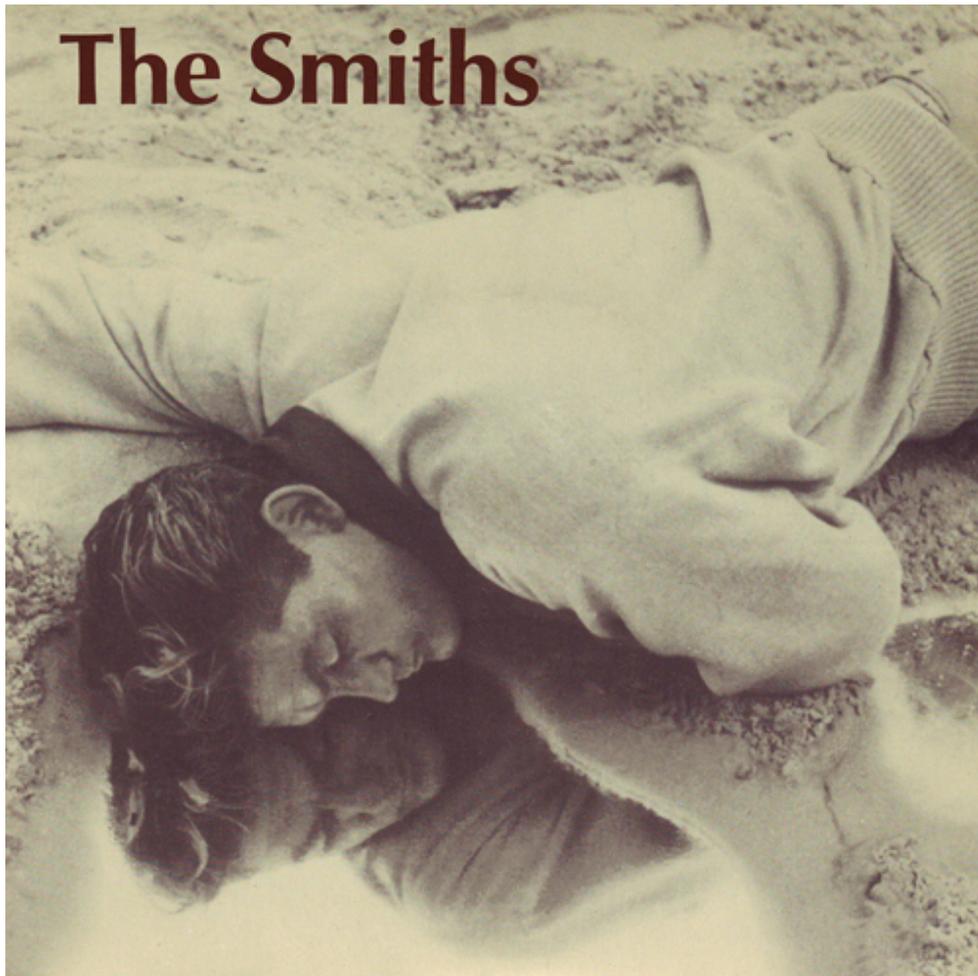


Fig 2. The sleeve design for The Smiths' *This Charming Man*, from 1983. It is a still from Jean Cocteau's *Orphee*, featuring French actor Jean-Alfred Villain-Marais. This is the tale of Orpheus, with shades of Narcissus.

Giddens's The Third Way also aligns with ideals of reflexive modernization – a technologized modernity in conflict with itself. And so, since the Paris Agreement of November 2015 on combatting climate change, we have in place regulations and practices of 'just enough' to get us out of real trouble (us Earth-inhabiting humans, non-humans and others). The Paris Agreement needs to be ratified by at least 55 of the 195 countries that adopted it without objection. How will this work? Through the rhetoric of parliaments in each country? Hardly. There will be high level signatures later this month, on April 22nd. There will be a further year where countries consider 'ratification, acceptance or approval'. A formal document is drafted by each (of the 55 or more) countries as an 'instrument of ratification, acceptance or approval.' Other countries will, hopefully, drift in as 'accession' countries, just like the bureaucracy of the European Union. There still needs to be soft action, placating even, by larger developed countries if agencies and industry are to row in, and for it all to work.

Latour's Republic³⁰ of Things is a different animal than the Irish one, created in 1921, in its enunciation, if not in its progression, through mundane practices. It is governed by a Parliament of Things, the excellence of the Earth decided on by boring propositions. In Latour's political ecology, the propositions in *Politics of Nature* have no Left or Right

³⁰ Latour, B. *Politics of Nature*

divisions. The propositions join the assembly as Matters of Concern, and thus politicizing what was once nature and multinaturalizing what was once politics. The proposition might be a suggestion by Monsanto, for example, to invest in three different brands of cane for an African country as much as it might be the suggestion to include cancer advocacy groups and Marxist scholars in the Seanad, which is the Irish Upper House. How realist, how pragmatic is it to have votes for rocks and mountains? While the speculative needs to go side-by-side with the ultra-mundane for this middle way, architect and designer Lorna Gibson has given it a right good go³¹. They are representations of important but mundane propositions rather than rhetorical enunciations in the political chamber. I'm not sure that theorists' logic alone can persist, however. Even this line of thinking needs to turn back to a middle ground that means action that works.

So, what am I proposing? It is that we may accept this political reality: given the many crises of ecology, technocracy, finance, migration of war refugees, in the face of these hyperobjects, we maintain, file away, garden, talk small, neither moving to one side of the road nor the other. It may indeed mean that an anticipatory governance of future technologies that is inclusive, that brings opposing actors in to co-create, to knit together allowing the tendencies of history, will (multi)naturally drift towards the Third Way.

³¹ <http://blog.theparliamentofthings.org/>