REVIEW

Thinking With, Through and For Nature – Michel Serres, *Branches* (2020). London: Bloomsbury

Peter Johnson

Branches is Michel Serres' latest book to be translated into English. The title is a pertinent description of his overall philosophical thought and practice which spread in multiple directions, working from different but overlapping stems, involving the human, the inhuman and the nonhuman. Serres became a bestselling author in France but has been largely neglected in Anglophone scholarship. *Branches* is a good a place as any to start to navigate and provide a glimpse of his lucidly inclusive and complex thought.

Michel Serres is an uncomfortable philosopher with an uncomfortable philosophy. Although he wrote over sixty transdisciplinary books from the 1960s to the year of his death in 2019, many of which concern political ecology and the Anthropocene from a decentred human perspective, he has been largely ignored in Anglophone scholarship. Why has he been neglected? His thought is utterly impossible to pigeon-hole; he mixes styles, points of history, the sciences and the humanities, ancient philosophy and myths, religion and communication theory. He also does not like or fit into the traditional academic milieu. This makes writing about his work difficult. He rages against academic articles that require 'precise subjects, bibliographies and indexes, obligatory quotations, footnotes and so on' (Serres 2020: 9). For Serres, no inventive thought can penetrate such rigid 'formats' and 'jumbles of commentary strangle intelligence' (112). He notes that there is a scholarly chorus exploring and making 'difference', but he thinks the research literature all starts to sound the same. Our universities are like stars we see but have been dead for ages, like museums. He loves students but is not so keen on professors. He is ignored by most of them.

In recent years, many of his books have been translated into English. *Branches*, originally published as *Rameaux* in 2004, came out in 2020. The title is apt for all his work both in form and content. His thought branches in all directions, forming a 'bouquet of prepositions' or working through and with a 'topological' space (Serres 2018: 62). He focuses on how the world, the human, the inhuman and nonhuman, branch out, entangle, criss-cross, exploring the genesis of things through multiplicities, deviations, breaks and splintering paths (2018: 57).

Serres' stochastic practice likewise strays, meanders, opens, sets adrift, matching how things of the world, living and inert, move, divert, flourish and deteriorate. He finds evidence for this in the ancient philosophy of Lucretius which he audaciously claims anticipates, or in fact is isomorphic with, advanced sciences such as chaos theory, an idea explicitly acknowledged by Prigogine and Stengers in their ground-breaking *Order out of Chaos* (2018). The flux and multiplicity of the world is explored repeatedly in his books from new angles, different scales and diverse inclinations. Clearly there are links here with Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida, amongst other post-structuralists (see Watkin, 2020: 170–171) but Serres stands out in his diversity of explorations, joyous inventiveness and his clarity of expression. *Branches* is a good a place as any to start to navigate and provide a glimpse of his lucidly complex thought.

Much recent scholarly research challenges the position of humans as the centre or pinnacle of evolution and disrupts the entrenched dichotomy of nature and culture. A few influential examples include Barad's thoroughly relational notion of 'agential realism' (Barad 2007: 33), Moore's questioning of the 'prison house of the Cartesian binary' (Moore 2015: 5) and Haraway's 'technologies of organs' (Haraway 2008: 250). But none of these scholars mention Serres who has always been well ahead of the game but rarely invited to join. For decades, Serres has sought a 'theory of relations', argued from diverse perspectives that everything, including humans, are nature *and* culture. Serres defines humans as non-specialists, open to this and that, with technology taking place of what the body can do, but faster, better, flying from us, making things possible through 'externalisation' or what he calls a process of 'exo-Darwinism'. Crossing with and anticipating Latour's 'hybrids' or Haraway's 'cyborgs', for Serres technologies do not simply tangle with nature; they accompany and 'sail' from our bodies

Independent Researcher, UK
peterj5319@gmail.com

(Serres 2020: 143). Technology is traceable millions of years ago in the constructions of shells and carapaces; we extend and accompany nature (2020: 148).

Importantly for Serres, 'nature' is conceived etymologically as relating to the Latin *natura*, as in natal and Nativity: 'that which was born, is born and will be born' (2020: 44). He explores distinct ways in which we are embodied in the world and calls for a new relationship with what he late on terms 'Biogea' (Serres 2010), including all living things (*bio*) and the earth (*geo*). One example must suffice here. He finds that recent discoveries in science are uncovering layers of intimate connections between the human and nonhuman. The genesis of everything involves communication, from the codes of molecules, to genetic codes of living things, to the codes or pixels of information (Serres 2020: 161). Nothing is more important than these discoveries which happen to repeat or translate texts by Lucretius and, Serres' most celebrated philosopher, Leibniz. Everything exchanges information in the form of letters and numbers, 'coding-coded'; everything is a recording medium.

Serres foresaw our ecological catastrophe before most, but he has always engaged with it innovatively and provocatively. His position is captured in the preface to *Branches*: 'We have to bring about peace between ourselves to safeguard the world and peace with the world in order to save ourselves'. Whether we begin with the sacking of Troy, the founding of Rome, the destruction of colonialism, or the growing inequalities of late capitalism, our conflicts are all about occupying territory, appropriating and annihilating people, seizing resources and treating the earth as a rubbish dump. The motor behind the Anthropocene is appropriation through 'belongingness' in terms of blood, culture, ideology, religion (Serres 2020: 62–3). All of this is a form of 'pollution'. As he argues in *Malfeasance* (2011), we appropriate 'through pollution'. As the post-colonialist historian Chakrabarty (2009) says in his influential *Four Theses*, ecological damage is not something that simply started in the industrialisation of the nineteenth century. It is exacerbated by capitalism but started much earlier. For Serres, the present scale of pollution of the earth and living species begins to define what it is to be human.

Serres argues persistently that nature has to reinvent itself in order to survive. As he explores further in books like *Genesis* (1995a), this is how all things change and develop through confronting an intervention, blockage or an obstacle, prompting an unexpected exit, release, a new branch. 'Disquietude' can be a resource, a rebirth, a wakening (Serres 2020: 116). 'Either a new human, a citizen of the world, will appear, or humanity will totter' (2020: 128). Although Serres explores the ancient origins of our appropriation though pollution, he nevertheless remains hopeful. Into his late 80s, he vigorously opposed the notion that 'it was better before' (Serres: 2017) and, for example, embraced the opportunities of advanced digital communication and the associated new skills of young people (Serres: 2015). For Serres, our predicament, the danger to our species, other species and the whole earth will not be resolved unless we recognise the scale and depth of the emergency (Serres: 1995b). This demand is frequently repeated by climate activists, but it requires much more than calling for all nations to reduce CO_2 gases. He asks in *Times of Crisis*: how do we measure the seriousness of a crisis? The answer is stark: by the length of time it has taken to develop (Serres: 2014: 3). *Branches* echoes a message that runs throughout his work, we have to invent new relations 'between humans and the totality of what conditions life: the inert planet, the climate, living species, visible things and invisible things, sciences and technologies, the global community, morality and politics, education and health.' He constantly invents and explores through the meshing of nature and culture the possibilities for a new form of 'political and objective ethics', a 'single virtue' that will guide both humanity and the planet, the whole of Biogea (2020: 166–7).

Serres is above all a philosopher and not a political ecologist, but he invents thought that he hopes might prompt, prod or shake us to think and act differently. Since the 1970s, Serres has explored the idea of a 'natural contract', a pact, a peace treaty. He sees a transcultural opportunity for a new era, the height of appropriation branching into the beginning of a new understanding (Serres: 2020: 190). We have to decide if it is the end or the beginning. He explains that Rousseau's idea of a social contract was 'signed virtually' with people on one side and things on the other. We are still thinking in these terms in all our major international forums (UN, WHO, NATO, UNESCO, EU) and politics generally (2020: 188). We need a new agreement and *Branches* 'celebrates this new contract'; he describes the book itself as 'existential' (2020: 187). In places he appears naively optimistic. For instance, he finds hope in the fact that something seen as insignificant can become important and take on a different scale. 'The ignorance of the effect' should inspire 'action, joyous decision, freedom of destiny' (2020: 106). However, such seemingly naive statements need to be read in the context of his whole diverse work, where hope 'sculpts time, shapes it and stretches it out' (2020: 71). Serres persistently returns to what he describes as the 'noise of the multiple' the possible, the opening, gaping birthplace of nature (Serres: 1995a). This is where his philosophy lives: the possible. 'There are other possible worlds. I know other possible meanings; we can invent other forms of time.' (Serres: 2020: 25) He remains hopeful: 'never have we attained a sum of possibilities as complete as today' (2020: 143).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Peter Johnson is a leading authority on Foucault's concept of heterotopia. His first degree was in English and Philosophy at the University of York and he later studied for an MSc in Cultural Theory and an interdisciplinary PhD at the University of Bristol. He taught at the University of Bristol and Bath Spa University. Peter's most recent publications have turned to the ecological philosophy and practice of Michel Serres.

References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* London: Duke University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The Climate of History: Four Theses. *Critical Enquiry, 35*(2): 197–222. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1086/596640

Haraway, D. J. (2008). *When Species Meet.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital.* London: Verso Books.

Prigogine, I., & **Stengers, S.** (2018). *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature.* London: Bloomsbury.

Serres, M. (1995a). *Genesis.* Translated by G. James and J. Nielson. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14807

Serres, M. (1995b). *The Natural Contract.* Translated by E. MacArthur & W. Paulson. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9725

Serres, M. (2010). *Biogea.* Translated by R. Burks. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.

Serres, M. (2011). *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* Translated by A-M Feenberg-Dibon. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Serres, M. (2014). *Times of Crisis.* Translated by A-M Feenberg-Dibon. New York: Bloomsbury.

Serres, M. (2015). *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials.* Translated by D. W. Smith. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Serres, M. (2017). *C'était mieux avant!* Paris: Manifest Le Pommier.

Serres, M. (2018). *The Incandescent.* Translated by R. Burks. London: Bloomsbury.

Serres, M. (2020). *Branches.* Translated by R. Burks. London: Bloomsbury.

Watkin, C. (2020). *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.