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To cite this article: Ian Vincent McGonigle (2012): Bruno Latour: A Philosophical Critic of ‘Facts’ and ‘Modernity’, Science as Culture, 21:4, 556-560

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09505431.2012.685065

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Bruno Latour: A Philosophical Critic of ‘Facts’ and ‘Modernity’

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Bruno Latour may be considered one of the leading social theorists of our day. His major contributions to social theory have principally been in the development of Actor–Network Theory (ANT); the ethnographic description of the fact-making process across technoscience and law; the philosophical critique of modernity; and thoughts on the political ecology of nature. Latour’s seemingly diverse oeuvre holds a common thread, however, of being fundamentally concerned with the description of ‘knowledge making’, and more specifically, the fabrication, or ‘inscription’ as he puts it, of ‘facts’ within a field of operationality that presupposes a naturalised dichotomy between ‘nature’ and ‘society’; this, he insists, is the essential condition of ‘the moderns’. Indeed, in making wide ranging inroads into the critique of knowledge production, Latour has elucidated the inherent cultural situatedness of fact-making, revealing the so-called ‘modern’ epoch characterisable as one of post-Enlightenment ‘truth construction’.

The authors report the genesis of Latour’s categories of thought as constituting a consistent thematic development through his career (and up to date), in that although Latour was originally trained in philosophy and biblical exegesis and his later works have utilised ethnographic methods, his theoretical argumentation has remained broadly concerned with philosophy and metaphysics: Latour’s major genealogical influences include the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, the semiotician...
Algirdas Julien Greimas and the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel. Latour inherits from Tarde the anti-Durkheimian view of social encounters as being constituted by interferences, mimeses and their diffusions between humans and objects; and this model disregards the *a priori* notion of a ‘social structure’. And incorporating theoretical influences from Greimas and Garfinkel, Latour utilises the semiotic of the ‘actant’ to describe the human and non-human interactions that make up the stuff of ‘the social’.

Latour developed ANT in the 1980s with John Law and Michelle Callon, following from their social studies of technoscience. An ANT approach to ‘the social’ demands tracing the very substance of sociality onto ‘actor-networks’ that can be conceived as being forged within fields of relations between actants such as humans and objects (or humans and humans; or objects and objects; and so forth . . .). Such actor-networks are constituted by ‘events’ that essentially hybridise humans and non-humans alike. Latour thus sees ‘reality’ as the consequence of such events, as the constitution of inter-objectivity between humans and objects, marking a break with the Cartesian tradition of the subject–object dichotomy.

Disdaining empty reified generalities such as ‘society’, ‘the market’ or ‘the economy’, Latour has thus advocated a science of the ‘social’ that is empirical, contextual and *problem*-centred in its approach. To avoid what he sees as the anachronistic sociological tropes of ‘actors’ and ‘social structures’, Latour employs the lens of ‘actants’ in his work in order to scrutinise what is the precise content of ‘the things’ assembled under the banner of such social assemblages. This ‘sociology of associations’ thus purports to trace the connections between human and non-human actants alike: his approach is deeply anti-sociological in this regard, sidelining the pre-eminence of the human actor in social inquiry but also de-centring the ‘object’ in technoscientific enquiries. His investigative ontology is therefore ‘flat’, considering human and non-human actants on an equal footing and shaping an inquiry into ‘the social’ that brings the signifying potential of the term ‘social’ as something special and ‘particular’ into question! Latour historicises ‘the social’ instead as a ‘political project’ that may serve to sustain certain pre-existing imagined social collectivities such as ‘bourgeois society’ or the ‘nation state’. Such imagined collectivities do not interest Latour however. His approach, the authors argue, demands tracing connections, not blurring boundaries.

The book covers Latour’s work as an ethnographer in a bioscience laboratory, studying neuroendocrinology research; his philosophical thoughts on modernity and political ecology; and his more recent work studying the making of law at the Conseil d’État in Paris. And the authors do not shy away from the controversy that surrounds Latour’s ideas. No, they describe how Latour’s ‘historical-empiricist’ approach—grounded in a philosophical critique built on ethnographic observation—has been criticised as being anti-epistemological in its velocity: critics lie across a divide in the epistemology of philosophical empiricism, split between the
modern transcendent ‘realists’ and the Latourian ‘non-modernists’ who hold all facts to be the necessary consequence of ‘culture’, being socially constructed in their respective social and historical milieux. Correctly, the authors ‘make no pretension of encapsulating Latour as representative of a clearly defined epistemological “position”’ but as they claim, Latour ‘remains first and foremost an “anti-epistemologist”’ (p. 23). For Latour, ‘modernity’ is in reality a category of meta-discourse: it is a way of talking about ourselves as a modality of historical action, but a narrative that nevertheless remains a discursive fiction. Though not without provoking polemic, Latour’s readers would agree that through his ‘non-modern’ vision he has furnished us with a unique and novel way of viewing the world, thus affirming the merits of his interdisciplinary research approach.

Indeed, in terms of the ‘fact-making’ process and its cultural conditions, Latour sees the epoch of ‘modernity’ as being defined by scientificity, which functions to discursively construct ‘nature’ through the utilisation of objectifying scientific methodologies, thereby establishing a domain of ‘objective’ scientific truth (that is putatively transcendental) on the one hand, leaving politics and culture—as excluded from this expert domain—on the other. He reveals this dichotomy to be historically located and specific to the so-called modern epoch, elucidating ‘nature’ and ‘science’ to be seen as categories that follow from ‘politics’, not only at the macro level of governance but at the micro level of fact-making in the laboratory or legal sphere. Where ‘science’ meets ‘politics’, Latour observes, public ‘matters of concern’ emerge as hybrids of political interests bound inextricably with scientific facts (for example, consider the issues of: global warming; the ‘hole’ in the ozone layer; reproductive technology rights; biofuels etc.). These confused hybridities lend licence to Latour’s claim that in reality ‘we have never been modern’; and culture, as a substrate for fact-making, comes full circle when scientific facts are deployed in arguments over ‘political’ issues, rendering the categories of ‘social’, ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ devoid of any real philosophical meaning. Latour’s break from modern thought provides a new approach—although not a framework—for studying a globalised technocratic world: a world replete with hybridity and digital connectivity, delimited by fluid borders and in continuous flux.

Latour’s outlook for the future of ‘society’, conceived as an assemblage of human and non-human actants, therefore involves a reconfiguration of our political and governing institutions towards what he terms a ‘parliament of things’—an arrangement of humans and objects whereby spokespersons for ‘actants’ deliberate over the course of political action, better covering the hybrid issues the authors highlight, like: Islamic headscarves, genetically modified foods, architecture, financial markets etc. The authors report on Latour’s vision for the realisation of a cosmopolitics as a transition from the current status of Realpolitik towards a non-modern constitution, a Dingpolitik, as a veritable politics of things. Such a parliament would consist of a new two-chamber system, ‘where the Upper House decides which hybrids may become part of the collective, and where the
Lower House decides how all of the incorporated hybrids will co-exist’ (p. 93). This, they show, is Latour’s putative ‘way-out’ of the pitfalls of the confounded ontological hybridity that characterises ‘modernity’. As the authors (p. 98) aptly put it: ‘When “facts” and “values” can no longer be clearly differentiated, the two elements must be addressed using the same democratic process’.

Latour’s political philosophy thus relies on a firm belief in the successful and public use of reason—not just science, which is considered devoid of ethical reason. In a parallel prescription to Kant’s call for heeding the duty to the practice of ‘public reason’, Latour sees the dismantling of modern thought as a necessary step on the path to the realisation of his ‘parliament of things’, albeit remaining a roughly sketched, and fairly vague, telos. As the author’s criticism correctly reveals, what Latour’s ‘political ecology’ really does is ‘raises more questions than it answers’ (p. 101).

What the authors fail to do, however, is to go any further in answering these types of questions that Latour has raised. That is the major shortcoming of the book: it does not take Latour’s ideas any further than Latour’s original texts do, and it therefore adds little to demystify the rather enigmatic didacticism for which Latour is famous. However, that is not the book’s intention. Rather, the book’s explicit purpose is to tie together in a coherent way the threads of Latour’s intellectual pluralism, providing a meta-commentary on Latour’s original works. As for this project, however, the authors have been successful. The book shows that despite the fact that Latour can neither be considered a ‘social constructivist’, a ‘post-modernist’, nor a ‘relativist’, there is in fact a commonality across his works that relates to questions of knowledge, facts and their relationship in so-called ‘modernity’. The book makes this argument well, and acting as an overarching review, it puts in a coherent order the trajectory of Latour’s works.

By revealing the consistencies across the seemingly diverse set of research projects that Latour has written on, the book highlights the deeper philosophical project that is quintessentially Latourian; by which I mean Latour’s essential concern is that the crux of modernity is the blurring of instrumental and ethical reason; and that modern ‘fact-making’ is symptomatic of this culture of hybridity. The book is systematic in making this point, and as such straightforwardly introduces the categories of Latour’s thoughts in an episodic fashion that is readily accessible and comprehensible without provoking a need to consult the original material.

The final chapter of the book consists of a transcript from an interview that the authors conducted with Bruno Latour himself. The authors provoke Latour to respond to questions about his past research, his approach to writing, his teaching style and his ideas on realising the kinds of ‘cosmopolitics’ that he advocates. This excellent piece of dialogue intriguingly parallels the central thrust of the book, which is to open up a space where Latour’s ideas can be negotiated off of one another, rendering an intertextual dialogue between Latour’s separate works, and putting into discursive action the philosophical arguments that Latour has produced over some 30 years.
The book would serve as an excellent companion reader to Latour’s original texts, helping somewhat to elucidate Latour’s ideas and arguments, but more so to contextualise them within a wider philosophical tradition. Though the book doesn’t do so well fitting Latourian thought into on-going public polemics, or indeed situating such issues into a deeper genealogy and scholarly criticism of Latour’s own thoughts, it remains nevertheless a valuable and informative text for understanding the breadth and holistic trajectory of the philosophical writings of Latour, in and of themselves. It will therefore be a useful teaching aid to instructors teaching ANT or classes in non-modern thought. As for what this text will do, and as to who will use it: to take what the authors have borrowed from Latour and say ‘Its destiny lies in the hands of future users’ (p. 25)—I recommend.