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# Neoliberalism for Polite Company: Bruno Latour's Pseudo-Materialist Coup

If neoliberalism were a Platonic Republic, Bruno Latour would likely be its philosopher-king. The insidiously anti-Marxist sociologist-cum-philosopher has, over several decades, elaborated a grand system of thought that is seductively materialist in appearance, and deeply reactionary in substance. His academic popularity is both understandable and disturbing.

In 1976 Jean Baudrillard wrote that 'Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes. It is there that its strength and its seduction lie and not at all in its "truth index," which is only its leitmotif.' Similarly, Latour's popularity is less due to its newness or difference than to its comfortable and comforting relationship to the status quo. As Marx wrote of the work of the business theorist Andrew Ure, it is worth addressing for its 'undisguised cynicism, but also [for] the naivete with which it blurts out the stupid contradictions of the capitalist brain.'

Latour's accomplishments are numerous and varied: he has written ethnographies of scientific laboratories, was an originator

of the seemingly ubiquitous Actor Network Theory (ANT), and has recently turned his attention to climate change. Beginning with *Laboratory Life*, co-authored with Steve Woolgar in 1979, Latour has written sixteen books excluding edited volumes, produced over 60 articles and book chapters, curated art shows, written plays and staged performative lectures. Beginning his career in the sociology of science, he has since come to prominence across countless intellectual disciplines. In 2007 he outranked Marx and Heidegger in the *Times Higher Education* list of most cited works in the humanities. His article 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' has been referenced 1,290 times and *We Have Never Been Modern* 1,790 times since 2013. He was awarded the Holberg Prize in the humanities for his 'reinterpretation of modernity'. The *New York Times* recently borrowed his term 'purification' to lament the specialisation of philosophy. Historians might refer to archival research as 'following their subjects in action', a more than slightly ridiculous claim about people dead for 300 years, but an indication of how thoroughly Latour and his language have saturated the social sciences.

ANT – a methodological approach to social sciences positing that nothing in the social and natural world exists outside of constantly shifting relationships within a network – has become so widely employed it might reasonably be considered separately from Latour himself. The suggestion that inanimate objects, machines, scientific instruments, etcetera, are in some sense causative is not wholly without merit. Indeed, in their most general formulations several of Latour's ideas are compelling: the dismissal of the nature/culture split, a critique of traditional sociological categories and a serious consideration of what technology *does* rather than what we do with it. Unfortunately, so glossed this is to ignore – and thus reproduce – a philosophy and methodology that recapitulates a reification of capitalist social reality. By considering all aspects of social and political life a bemusing, almost enchanted collection of things, Latour's theories are textbook *Verdinglichung*: literally, 'making into a thing'. This is the *thingification* of social relations.

Latour's astounding popularity is due less to his usefulness and originality than to a combination of complacency and desire

on the part of intellectuals under neoliberalism. Pitting himself against the ‘generals of critique’ and their ‘neutron bombs of deconstruction’, as well as against science, sociologists of all stripes and truth itself, Latour has captured the imagination of intellectual producers whose labour has repeatedly failed to affect sought-after social change. But behind his extravagant experiments in style and repeated claims of originality are the familiar habits of thought produced and reinforced by neoliberal social organisation. The work reiterates aspects of neoliberal ideology – flatness, contingency, distrust of authority – and borrows from this ‘ideology of no ideology’ an ability to accommodate intolerable contradictions in thought. Within the academy, the depoliticised materialism of the actor-network approach has added appeal as an alternative to the problematic spectre of Marx. The vulgar materialism of ANT satisfies a desire to operate in the realm of the real – to ‘ascend from earth to heaven’ rather than ‘descend from heaven to earth’, as Marx put it. But ANT is a rabidly anti-Marxist theory that participates in the obfuscation of class essential to neoliberal ideology by providing an alternative, empty materialism entirely detached from any theory of production or social relations. And the employment of the network as metaphor functions to legitimise and even celebrate a set of quotidian activities, and a way of being in the world that produces vague but persistent misgivings about our current social relations at the most intimate scale. This all amounts to a philosophy that both reinforces some of the worst characteristics of recent social and political life and offers a soothing intellectual placebo.

Latour claims that ANT is a ‘powerful way of rephrasing basic issues of social theory, epistemology, and philosophy’. When deployed, it will ‘make what is invisible visible.’ This is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but I think we should treat Latour as he purports to treat his actors, and allow his own ‘vocabulary ... to be heard loud and clear’. Taken literally, Latour is claiming to be either magician or microscope. Indeed, his project is one of elaborate showmanship and misdirection, shored up by the presence of technological instruments. It is the philosophical enactment of a spectacular society, hiding the same elitist idealism that works overtime to make

capitalism seem natural and inevitable – a seamless, non-hierarchical collection of surface effects that, appearing as reality, provides a convenient index of hard truths and accurate descriptions.



### **From Science to Society**

Latour began his career studying science. He was concerned with how scientific facts became facts, a process he refers to as ‘black boxing.’ When you open a ‘black box’ and trace the development of a scientific discovery, you discover such a complex web of scientists, technicians, technology, authority, authorisation, and so on, that it becomes impossible to maintain a dichotomy neatly separating scientists from their objects of study. Furthermore, he discovered that these so-called natural objects of study are so thoroughly mediated by scientists (themselves black boxes of knowledge, instruments, authorisation, etcetera), and scientific instruments (black boxes in turn containing scientists, authority, etcetera) that they are by no means natural. For example, to examine bacteria through a microscope with the accumulated knowledge of scientific training changes the bacteria into something other than a natural object. What you look at is simply not there without the instrument for looking – and to the extent that it remains there, strictly empirically, then it is as something else. So there is no nature, pure and simple, upon which the scientific gaze is cast. Culture cannot work on nature, so to speak, because the nature upon which it is working is always-already cultural. It is therefore incumbent on the theorist to begin at the beginning – to jettison not only the distinction between science and the social but the very categories themselves. The co-constitutive nature of such dichotomies is certainly worth consideration, but what Latour suggests is that abandoning an additive formula allows us to begin an inquiry in advance of accomplished discoveries. As he puts it in 1987’s *Science in Action*:

We will not try to analyze the final products, a computer; a nuclear plant, a cosmological theory ... instead

we will follow scientists and engineers at the times and at the places where they plan a nuclear plant, undo a cosmological theory... We go from final products to production... Instead of black boxing the technical aspects of science and then looking for social influences and biases, we [realise]... how much simpler it [is] to be there before the box closes and becomes black.

The Latourian imperative to open the black box rather than accepting it as a stable and reliable point of departure recalls Marx's assertion that 'reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection begins *post festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand.' Indeed, black boxes do not appear so different from Marx's commodities, but for their content; here, the 'dead labor' contained in commodities is transformed into neutral inputs and outputs, and class disappears to reveal an unending web of technical entanglements.



### **We Have Never Been Subjects**

One of the ANTs central propositions is the equality, or 'symmetry', of human and non-human 'actants'. Related to this proposition is that of the misleading nature of spokespersons – humans who obscure what the non-human actants have to say. But certain factors guiding Latour's distribution of agency are unnervingly clear in his examples. Take his comparison, in *Science in Action*, of an imaginary shop steward named 'Bill', who speaks for workers, to a scientist – the very real Raymond Davis – who speaks for neutrinos.

It is very important ... not to impose any clear distinction between 'things' and 'people' in advance. Bill, for instance, represents people who could talk, but who, in fact, cannot talk all at once. Davis represents neutrinos that cannot talk, in principle, but who are made

to write, scribble and sign thanks to the device set up by Davis. So in practice, there is not much difference between people and things: they both need someone to talk for them. There is thus no distinction to be made between representing people and representing things. In each case the spokesperson literally does the talking for who or what cannot talk.

What is important in this scenario is not the workers or neutrinos but the assemblage of workers and plate-glass, not what the shop-steward says but that he says it on the other side of a sound barrier. The relationship between union representatives and the rank and file should not be taken for granted, but nor should Latour's questioning of authority by placing those not speaking for themselves in the same category as plate glass, or the assumption that the mediation and translation of the desires humans – who can in fact speak – is in any way similar to the mechanical legibility of neutrinos.

For Latour, a mistake of the 'anti-fetishists' – Marxists, post-structuralists, anyone engaged in a project of discovering meaning within or beyond the surface of an object – is this assumption that 'it is us the human makers ... that you see in those machines, those implements, us under another guise, our own hard work'. In truth, the argument goes, those machines and implements also make us. In this instance, seeing sentient, desiring workers in the speech of the shop steward or 'hard work' in the objects produced by humans is to misapprehend the distribution of agency and, ultimately, misunderstand reality. Of course the design of a factory does structure the negotiations that occur therein. But this is not the same as saying, as Latour does, that an 'asymmetry' of the human-object relations constitutes a sort of primal misapprehension.



### **Imaginary Constitutions and Suffocating Birds**

It was in the laboratory that Latour launched his campaign to rescue non-humans from the tyranny of their human counter-

parts and developed ANT. It was in the service of understanding the construction of scientific facts that he introduced the 'actant', a term applicable to animate and inanimate objects, intentional and non-intentional beings alike, in order to underscore the lack of individual human agency. Thus he developed a set of terms for describing human and non-human relations, ridding them of any political contamination. But like an out-of-control experiment in science fiction, ANT escaped from the laboratory and grew into a monstrous theoretical framework for understanding *everything*.

In 1991 Latour leapt from science studies to cultural studies more broadly with *We Have Never Been Modern*, offering an imagined origin of the problematic nature/culture dichotomy – which he locates in the debate between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes – and an argument for a 'symmetrical anthropology' that would not indulge the modernist predilection for dividing the world into categories. He has revisited this project in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, a nearly five hundred-page semantic *tour de force* without a single footnote and starring a fake female ethnographer who is studying 'the moderns' as they engage in hypothetical activities.

Such anthropology requires us to approach ourselves as we would a foreign culture. Basic categories of thought, like the difference between humans and non-humans, cannot be taken for granted. But while we cannot indulge culturally proscribed abstractions, we *can*, if we follow his example, use the relativist methodology of Latourian science studies to unravel our misguided modern notions of how the world works. We can also, it seems, employ the overly capacious category of 'the moderns' without interrogating what it includes or has been defined against. And we are invited to take the metaphor of a network entirely for granted.

*We Have Never Been Modern* reiterates many arguments from Latour's earlier work, deploying the same rhetorical style that places shop stewards on a level with microscopes:

Contextualists start from the principle that a social macro-context exists – England, the dynastic quarrel,

Capitalism, Revolution, Merchants, the Church – and that this context in some way influences, forms, reflects, has repercussions for, and exercises pressure on ‘ideas about’ matter, the air’s spring, vacuums, and Torricelli tubes. But they never explain the prior establishment of a link connecting God, the King, Parliament, and some bird suffocating in the transparent closed chamber of a pump whose air is being removed by means of a crank operated by a technician. How can the bird’s experience translate, displace, transport, distort all the other controversies, in such a way that those who master the pump also master the King, God, and the entire context?

Let us imagine that ‘the contextualists’ have, in fact, never tried to explain the relationship between religion, science and the state. Latour is attempting to do two things here: illustrate the complexity of the relations that go into forming ideas and institutions that we often take as given, and do away with inherited hierarchies that would place God or the King or Science above or behind the bird suffocating in the vacuum chamber. That what has become known as ‘Science’ was built by tinkerers performing cruel, visually effective demonstrations is a fair point to make but Latour’s aims are not so modest as such a run-of-the-mill argument. He wants to show that nature and society are categories we employ in order to simplify this complex *mélange* of actually separable, microcosmic events, objects and institutions. That even when it appears we are establishing or unpacking a relationship between nature and society, we are still dependent on this primary and absolute distinction.

It is from what Latour refers to as the ‘purification’ of nature and society that all of our critical mistakes issue. For him, the modern ‘constitution’ established by Boyle (science) and Hobbes (society) enables all sorts of trickery allowing us ‘moderns’ to play critical god through a suspect reasoning that uses these categories to account for everything: ‘They have not made Nature; they make Society; they make Nature; they have not made Society; they have



not made either; God has made everything; God has made nothing, they have made everything.' The illusion of pure Nature and pure Society obscures 'the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable.' And it is 'hybrids' with which we should be concerned, for everything in existence is an assembled hybrid of sorts and to say that it is social or natural is to misrecognise its very nature.

But moderns will not think in terms of hybrids and mediation (do they think in terms of a Hobbesian state of nature?): thus Latour must vanquish them. First they turned 'to nature in order to destroy human prejudices', then they moved 'in the other direction, turning to the newly founded social sciences in order to destroy the excesses of naturalization'. Thus 'sorting out the kernels of science from the chaff of ideology became the task for generations of well-meaning modernizers'.

It is 'the moderns' that give Latour away. His employment of this incoherent category exposes a fundamental inconsistency in his own theory of theory-making, and illustrates the degeneration into self-referential nonsense that inevitably results from argumentation that, in paranoid fashion, seeks to avoid the great sin of representation. It is all good and well to imagine a world in which all people and things are allowed to 'speak for themselves', but in unequal societies, avoiding 'representation' is a luxury reserved for those who are represented everywhere. How this fantasy of unmediated, transparent, and equal speech differs from a boilerplate theory of democracy or the public sphere is unclear. Also unclear is whether, even if it were possible, speaking for yourself and only yourself – never being spoken for – is even desirable. But the avoidance of representation is an extremely important extension of Latour's allegedly anti-modern position, as well as the moral justification of the employment of ANT.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour will insist that he prefers to use a language that 'remains strictly meaningless' in order to allow 'the vocabulary of the actors to remain loud and clear.' But while the category of 'the moderns' is incoherent, it is also freighted with meaning. The moderns, like modernity, don't need Latour's

help to ignore the ways that class, race, and gender, for example, result in coercion and exclusion; but he does a good job showing how highly individualistic, scientifically oriented microcosmic thinking precludes categories crucial to emancipatory politics, and without which women, the poor, non-heterosexuals, and members of marginalised races cannot break into the symbolic and political realm of representation – cannot, in other words, speak for themselves in a meaningful way. If we start with the modern what we get is the modern. And even if you add to the modern the ‘real’ meaning of the bird in the vacuum pump, you still come away with a privileged and regressive scientism and the ‘rational’ white male gaze that comes with it. Latour wants everyone to ignore the forest for the trees because he is the forest. Even if we have never been modern, Latour certainly is.



### **From Macro-Micro to Micro-Micro**

The other crucial way in which Latour imports an unexamined and hazy modernity into his critique of the moderns is through a dependence on technological paradigms. There is, despite his insistence to the contrary, only one direction that Latourian analysis can go: unsurprisingly, it follows the same trajectory as the historical development of the scientific instruments that have allowed us to see ever tinier components of things.

Of course Latour insists that doing away with context does not lead one into dead-end particularities. He claims that ANT provides a solution to the sociological problem of scale – the relationship of the macro, structures such as ‘the social’, to the micro, individual entities and events such as a teacher or lecture. In *Reassembling the Social*, he claims that approaching the social world through ANT would mean that the

macro no longer describes a *wider* or *larger* site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally

micro place which is *connected* to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces. No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections to many *more* places than others. This move has the beneficial effect to keep the landscape flat, since what earlier, in the pre-relativist sociology, was situated 'above' or 'below' remains side by side and firmly on the same plane as the other loci which they were trying to overlook or include.

If there is a school of sociology that could best be described by the metaphor of the Matryoshka doll – a coherent envelope that can be opened to reveal increasingly smaller, identical replicas of itself – I am not aware of it. But more important than the straw soldiers Latour constructs for himself is his assertion that the macro is itself micro: he is attempting to show that he is concerned with something more than the microscopic relations between neutrinos and electron microscopes, that ANT can account for all of the things that the sociology of the social has attempted and failed to explain.

Latour claims ANT is not doing away with the macro, simply redescribing it, lest we all become trapped inside Russian dolls. The macro is allegedly accounted for, but it is 'neither "above" nor "below" the interactions' described by the micro. Rather, it is '*added* to them as another of their *connections*'. The power of what appears to be macro is actually a matter of what he calls 'concentration', a stronger assemblage on the flat plane of the network facilitated by safer connections. Importantly, these would coalesce in complex ways not predetermined by reductive mechanics of, say, class.

The intuitive thinking here is that because they were not *determined*, strictly, by something like class, nor can they be *explained* by reference to class. When considering power, the concept of concentration, as opposed to that of a predetermined and stable structure, is indeed compelling. However, Latour's micromacro *sans* hyphen is actually always micro, and cannot in fact do any of the explanatory work of the pre-relativist macro. Even when claiming that 'no

interaction is what could be called isotopic', Latour simply lists ever more isotopic components. If we want to evaluate a classroom lecture, say, we would include 'the forest out of which the desk is coming, the management office in charge of classroom planning, the workshop that printed the schedule that has helped us find the room, the janitor that tends the place and so on'. It is worth posing an obvious rhetorical question: is it really ridiculous to claim that, in assessing a lecture, the teacher and student are of greater import? In folding the macro back into the micro, Latour has evacuated meaning from either perspective. This may be his intention, but what he offers as replacement – neverending associative thought leading from teachers to trees to janitors – is worthless if we want to know anything about teacher, tree or janitor. Indeed, all we can do is fit ever more inside of this Matryoshka doll of a lecture hall.

Even if we take this flat world of connections seriously, we are still left with questions of causes. Why are certain connections safer? What forces make certain loci attractive? How does money, for example, accumulate in certain bank accounts and not others? Could this have something to do with capitalism? Latour's answer is yes but not really. Because capitalism, like any other 'macro', is actually 'micro', and should be evaluated as such.

Capitalism ... may be an intractable entity endowed with a 'spirit' but a Wall Street trading room does connect to the 'whole world' through the tiny but expeditious conduits of millions of bits of information per second ... Once these conduits are taken into account, we now have a choice between two routes: we can still believe that capitalism acts surreptitiously as the 'infrastructure' of all the world's transactions and, if so, we have to jump from the local assessment of a specific company's worth to its 'context'... flying into stratospheric considerations instead of walking on foot. Or we can continue doing the footwork and study places such as the Wall Street trading room ... just to see where this decision will lead us.

Latour wants us to think that this descriptive approach to capitalism – one that fetishises the actions of individual traders and bits of information – endows us with more ‘leeway for action’ than class analysis. ‘Capitalism’, he writes, ‘has no plausible enemy since it is “everywhere”, but a given trading room in Wall Street’ has many vulnerabilities. ‘A computer breakdown, a sneaky movement by a competitor ... a neglected variable in a pricing formula, a risky accounting procedure’ may shift ‘the balance from obscene profit to a dramatic loss’. This might give us some understanding of how capital moves, but it offers no more leeway for action, positing as it does that capitalism – like everything in the Latourian universe – is a series of accidents. Further, this understanding of capitalism is of no use to anyone except capitalists (and perhaps saboteurs). Focusing on microcosmic features of capital flow will only allow for conclusions at the same scale: an individual profit or loss (no matter how dramatic), a misdirected bit of information, a distracted trader, a number in an algorithm. Many things might be revealed to financial analysts by ANT, but the material effects of these flows and interruptions happen on a massive scale and affect large parts of the population, while barely affecting the select few who perpetrate such ‘accidents’.

Ask one of the many victims of sub-prime mortgages if capitalism is a fascinating assemblage of bits and bytes and stock traders and news feeds. What will they tell you? Will you listen? How ‘loud and clear’ does their language need to be? And how exactly is this language to be amplified and clarified without a technical understanding of trading floors?

Furthermore, infrastructure and context are not synonymous, and capitalism is not an infrastructure: it is a class system that distributes the profits and losses described by Latour in predictably uneven ways. If we want to be Latourian about it, capitalism is an assemblage of infrastructures, human, and non-human actants that act in concert – to concentrate wealth in a tiny percentage of the population. Latour might concede that power and capital agglomerates in certain nodes. But the relationship between the human actants cannot be broached. How the non-human actant

land, say, confers privilege on the human actant land-owner over time is not a question a Latourian analysis can accommodate. And even if you were to look at the wealth-accumulating 'hybrid' enfranchised-white-man-land, you would not be able to explain anything about it without a theory of class, politics, labour, and so on. You simply cannot talk about capitalism without talking about class, and Latour cannot talk about class because a world structured by economic class is anything but flat.



### **Neoliberalism for Polite Company**

ANT's rejection of all evaluative and social categories, the flatness and flexibility of the network as a model, the impossibly contingent and mutable nature of the 'assemblage', the ontological equivalence of human and non-human 'actants', and the replacement of the social with 'associations' offer little more than a glorified description of neoliberalism. As the reigning economic policy in the United States since the 1970s neoliberalism has reshaped not only the market but also commonsense ideas about the relationship of the individual to society. It has normalised economic precarity and produced a subject that conceives of itself as 'human capital', easily visualised as a node where value may or may not accumulate depending on the strength of associations – human capital's ability to 'network'. ANT is simply a complicated, expanded iteration of neoliberal ideology where everyone is a monad in an unpredictable, contingent, constantly changing world. It is the perfect philosophy for a system in which people, in exchange for the privilege of self-expression, sacrifice solidarity, social security, or political agency.

If Latour saw his project as strictly descriptive it would still be problematic – describing how things 'really are' has never been neutral – but he does not. He insists, rather, on its political importance, presenting ANT as critical and subversive. In the essay 'On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy', Latour claims that it is not through coherent social categories around which a 'we' might form, but through a myriad of 'detours' through

the network that ‘finally, the political order is subverted, since I rely on many delegated actions that themselves make me do things on behalf of others who are no longer here and that I have not elected and the course of whose existence I cannot even trace.’ Again, the resonance with Marx is remarkable, recalling the assertion that ‘men make their own history but they do not make it as they please’. But ANT is a politics of the accident rather than organised action, the individual rather than the group, contingency rather than reason. Where Marx’s line in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* was a point of departure for reflection on a revolutionary failure, Latour suggests that *this is how change happens* – spontaneously, inexplicably.

By abjuring evaluative categories, ANT relinquishes any ability to address political and economic realities, and like the neoliberal medium of its cultivation, it does so deliberately, in the name of realism. It takes these weaknesses, in the words of Kirsch and Mitchell, ‘as its main strength: it has no way of distinguishing among “things” – things of different powers, and things of different ontological properties – save only as an effect ... [and it] sets up its own, seemingly unbridgeable binary: either a person is an autonomous subject or a person is the “effect” of networks’. Here is the same tension that exists in neoliberal common sense: on the one hand the autonomous, rational individual that this brand of freedom is intended to produce; on the other, social casualties figured as accidental effects of the system.

Latour claims that ‘it is possible to trace more sturdy relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than by trying to keep one frame stable’. ANT claims to have no social vision whatsoever, and it is on the basis of this rejection of context and social investment that it sets itself up as a solution to the intellectual problems of the past few decades. But there is no more coherent social vision than a claim on *reality* – as disaggregated and mutable as this reality may be. Mere description it may be, but description is in no sense prior to or detachable from its normative operations, and ANT conceals an agenda that is not only uncritical but deeply politically conservative.

In fact to suggest that it ‘conceals’ this agenda might give Latour too much credit. Despite its apparent complexity – or incoherence disguised as such – ANT’s politics are obvious. In Latour’s tasteless jokes and ironic provocations (‘I know I should have added “Her” for affirmative action reasons’ (‘Sociology of a Door Closer’)), his snarky disdain for intellectuals and heavy-handed defence of the ‘little guy’, his dedication to ‘the most general, the most banal, even the most vulgar’ vocabulary, (ANT ‘prefers to use [language that] remains strictly meaningless ... [As] a better way for the vocabulary of the actors to be heard’) is more than a trace of the false populism and anti-intellectualism of right-wing, neoliberal, rhetoric. As Philip Mirowski notes, Friedrich von Hayek ‘placed ignorance at the very center of his political theory’. Hayek’s suggestion that ‘the case for individual freedom rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of all’, resonates well with Latour’s repeated assertion that the informant’s liberation is a function of meaninglessness.

In the spirit of the Mont Pellerin Society, Latour rejects any reference to a social context as misleading and elitist. He claims instead in *Reassembling the Social* that this new approach to sociology, reliant on tracing ‘associations’ and ‘assemblages’

that there is nothing specific to social order; that there is no social dimension of any sort, no ‘social context’, no distinct domain of reality to which the label ‘social’ or ‘society’ could be attributed; that no ‘social force’ is available to ‘explain’ the residual features that other domains cannot account for; that members know very well what they are doing even if they don’t articulate to the satisfaction of the observers; that actors are never embedded in a social context and so are always much more than ‘mere informants; that there is thus no meaning in adding some ‘social factors’ to other scientific specialties.

While there is certainly reason to question a notion of ‘the Social’, that stands as a regulative and stable entity above or behind indi-



vidual actions and interactions, we should be deeply suspicious of a philosophy constructed around such a strong rejection of social *context* at a political moment when the social is being attacked in very concrete ways. Political moves that chiefly benefit a ruling class – no fantasy of a few Marxist academics – such as the privatisation of crucial public services, and a generalised antipathy to state institutions of any kind, is promoted through an appeal to ‘average’ citizens, with language relying heavily on anti-intellectualism cynically presented as anti-elitism, resonating clearly with Latour’s defense of ‘mere informants’ against the elitism of the sociologists.

Latour’s defense of ‘the mere informant’ is a central theme in ANT. A potentially noble cause, for Latour this seems to be inspired by pretty basic anti-intellectualism *and* elitism. Here is Latour’s description of the potential effect of the critical sociology he attacks:

you have become so estranged from your parents by a university degree that you have become ashamed of how dumb they are. Reading critical sociologists, you realize that this is the common experience of a whole generation of ‘upwardly mobile’ young kids from ‘lower class families lacking ‘cultural capital’. And this is when you begin to wonder who has estranged you from your very kin, who has molded your voice, your manners, your face so differently from theirs?

Latour provocatively suggests that ANT ‘could use as its slogan what Mrs. Thatcher famously exclaimed (but for very different reasons!): “There is no such thing as society”’. But how different are those reasons? Latour would not state that ‘there is only the family’, because in the ANT universe this is yet another configuration that only appears to have meaning because powerful pre-ANT sociologists put it in a textbook. But why choose, as a point of departure for a critique of sociology, a hypothetical example of a poor kid getting an education, getting uppity – and hating his family? This may be a sly reference to Pierre Bourdieu, but disparaging an intellectual opponent for their upward mobility hardly makes it more palatable.

This contrarian posture is a typical Latourian move, intended to separate his philosophy and himself from the rest of the academy. But the rhetorical assemblage Latour-the-rebel repeatedly betrays a complete lack of empathy towards the regular people he is so bent on protecting. The assumption that education makes one ashamed of poverty is a disgusting upper-class myth that justifies keeping people in their proper place for their own good, and, in Latour's example at least, implies that this good is the integrity of the family unit.

Despite his apparent disdain for the sociologists, Latour returns obsessively to their supposed silencing of human and non-human actants: 'For [critical sociologists] actors do not see the whole picture but remain only "informants". This is why they have to be taught what is the context in which they are situated ... while the social scientist, floating above, sees the whole thing'. There is hardly anything objectionable in listening to the experience of individuals outside of academia. How the language of these informants is expected to become meaningful without recourse to social organising – necessarily dependent on some level of abstraction – remains a mystery. And, crucially, the assumption that 'mere informants' might not arrive at these categories themselves is simply insulting.

In a Latourian world the experience of an informant is not in fact validated so much as spatially and temporally contracted, and thereby limited to the particular circumstances they are reporting. Contrary to ANT's claim to liberate informants, in the denial of social categories the informant's speech is only meaningful within the context of the sociological exchange. A situation where 'every choice of a departure point will lead to the drawing of a completely different animal, fully incommensurable with the others', is an intellectual cul de sac – not to mention a precise definition of estrangement. Not only do actants have meaning in particular, finite, non-repeatable configurations, this is the *only* meaning they can possibly have. And it is fleeting – whatever connections are drawn will presently shift and need to be retraced. Retraced by whom? The ANT sociologist, of course.

If there are no social forces, no lasting social groups, no power or emancipatory framework, then there is nothing outside of this exchange to which either the informant or the sociologist can attach their conclusions. There is simply the association described by the informant and studiously and accurately recorded by the student of ANT. Underlying Latour's profession of radical democracy is a structural re-installation of the sociologist as unique interpreter and, if not an authority in the traditional sense, the sole interlocutor, and thus the sole means of creating meaning. This is just a new version of the old French trick of disappearing authors. Tyrannical sociologists indeed.



### **Networks Are Not Just Metaphors**

Given the facts of networked communication, Latour's assertion that 'we are no longer sure about what "we" means; we seem to be bound by ties that don't look like regular social ties', may be accurate. But to accept a state of affairs in which 'we have to [constantly] reshuffle our conceptions of what was associated together because the previous definition has been made somewhat irrelevant', is not intellectually productive but dangerous.

That ANT, a philosophy that 'has tried to render the social world as flat as possible', has gained popularity in the age of Facebook, Thomas Friedman and increasing income inequality is no accident. The metaphorical network has gained popularity in direct proportion to the availability and daily use of networked technology. ANT might run contrary to entrenched academic traditions, but it is consonant with the general cultural sensibility of the past few decades. And as Latour's vocabulary of inputs and plug-ins and isotopes indicates, there is more than a tenuous connection between his philosophy and a more generalised technofetishism.

Latour's logic – a conviction that 'in a minute I may mobilize forces locked in motion hundreds or millions of years ago. The relative shapes of actants and their ontological status may be completely reshuffled ... we hourly encounter hundreds, even

thousands, of absent makers who are remote in time and space yet simultaneously active and present' – sounds a lot like an advertisement for an internet provider. This type of thinking is not so much a revolutionary insight as an erudite reiteration of a banal cultural obsession with technological connectedness in the face of destabilising economic precarity and dissolving social safety nets.

Jodi Dean has coined the term 'communicative capitalism' to describe this shaky, twittering, post-industrial landscape. In *Blog Theory*, she argues that 'just as industrial capitalism relied on the exploitation of labor, so does communicative capitalism rely on the exploitation of communication.' The network is central to how this form of communication is both imagined and deployed, and for Dean the result is 'the repeated suspension of narratives, patterns, identities, norms, etc'. In other words, the suspension of categories that might foster solidarity. Within the network there is no longer the possibility of breaking 'out of a set of given expectations because such sets no longer persist as coherent enchainments of meaning.'

Dean's observations about language and argumentation within the circuits of communicative capitalism might also indicate one way the figure of the network insulates Latour from criticism. Within the network, language, she writes, agglomerates into 'word-clouds, frequency and proximity displace meaning ... [O]ne can't argue with a word cloud. It doesn't take a position. It marks a moment. It registers aspects of the intensity of that moment ... but one doesn't know why or whether it's called for or what it's in relation to ... It offers representation without understanding: issues are out there'.



### **High-Heeled-Shoe-Woman and Other Latourian Fantasies**

One of Latour's more lucid observations is that the individual person is an assemblage of things, institutions and other people. But even this potentially useful insight of ANT degenerates into absurdity because of Latour's dogmatic rejection of all things evaluative, and his conviction that we must think 'symmetrically' about human

and non-human actants. With the example of a gunman, Latour in 'On Technical Mediation' engages with the 'guns kill people' versus 'people kill people' argument to show how misguided it is to think in terms of person/object dichotomies. Gun-control advocates are 'materialists' insofar as they argue that 'the gun acts by virtue of material components irreducible to the social qualities of the gunman'. At the other end of the debate is the NRA which offers 'a sociological version more often associated with the Left: for the NRA, the gun does nothing in itself or by virtue of its material components'. Both positions, he points out, are 'absurdly contradictory. No materialist claims that guns kill by themselves', and the NRA 'cannot maintain that the gun is so neutral an object that it has no part in the act of killing.' Instead we should attempt to think the 'citizen-gun' or a 'gun-citizen', a hybrid being or 'composite agent' that is neither gun nor citizen but both. The gun has affordances, the person intentions, the two are subject to any number of detours, and this hybrid either kills someone or not depending on a number of possible factors specific to that particular configuration.

There are of course many important questions to ask about the 'citizen-gun': is the citizen-gun a citizen? Does the citizen-gun have a criminal record? Is the citizen-gun poor or rich? Did the citizen-gun grow up around gun violence? Is the citizen-gun a man or a woman? Is the citizen-gun mentally stable? Receiving proper psychiatric care? Recently unemployed? All such factors might fall into the Latourian categories of 'interruption' or 'detour', in the equation that results either in the killing or not-killing of another human. They are also questions that connect to social problems that cannot not be productively answered on a case-by-case basis without reference to structural problems. But Latour can't allow for structural explanations, so he presents instead a series of hypothetical factors. 'If the agent is human, is angry, wants to take revenge, and if the accomplishment of the agent's goal is interrupted, for whatever reason ... then the agent makes a detour, a deviation: as we have already seen, one cannot speak of techniques without speaking of *daedalia*'. The 'reassembly' of a fully rational, decision-making, essentially liberal subject in these lines is strik-

ing. It should also be noted that for all of his assiduous avoidance of social categories, Latour apparently feels entirely comfortable with psychological or emotional ones. Don't we need to know what the revenge is for? What citizen-gun is angry *about*? How is anger assembled? How is it defined?

Such recourse to internal states speaks to a particular conception of the assemblage 'human' that privileges individual intentions over socio-economic circumstances. Again, ANT's supposed challenge turns out to be a verbose recapitulation of neoliberal mythology. While it is absolutely crucial to recognise that material objects and access to them act on human bodies and shape their experiences, it is also crucial to recognise that this materiality is socially distributed by political, market and other logics that are, while not deterministic, both traceable and significant. And that these distributions structure internal states and emotional responses.

Consider another possible example of a Latourian hybrid: high-heeled-shoe-woman. Women have health problems specifically related to wearing the non-human actant commonly referred to as high-heeled shoes. Of course, there is no absolute social rule that only women can wear high-heeled shoes, but it would be absurd to claim that heterosexual men are just as likely to suffer injuries related to the wearing thereof. Consider the following hypothetical situation: the hybrid high-heeled-shoe-woman is scared and wants to run away. If the actant's ankle gets twisted, then the actant cannot run as fast and makes a detour, a deviation, or simply limps along in terror. As we have seen, one cannot speak of techniques without speaking of *daedalia*, or the unlimited detours that are added to these hybrids to produce an outcome.

Gender might be constructed – it may even be a perfect example of assemblage – but to allow that something is constructed is very different from claiming that it is not generalisable and only has meaning in its particular construction. Women are far less likely to shoot people than are men. Americans are far more likely to shoot people than are Canadians. Guns don't kill people, people in general don't kill people, American men kill people. And men kill women – frequently. Which raises the question of whether 'anger'

or a 'desire for revenge' is an ontologically stable state rather than itself a black box.

Elliot Roger, the 22-year-old man who went on a killing spree in Santa Barbara in the spring of 2014, was angry and seeking revenge. Mark Lepine, the 25-year-old who opened fire in a classroom at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989, was also angry and seeking revenge. In 2003, according to the Center for Disease Control, 1,300 deaths occurred as a result of intimate partner violence. We can assume that *these* citizen-guns, citizen-knives, citizen-arsonists and citizen-fists, who are overwhelmingly male, are also angry and possibly seeking revenge – and that high-heeled-shoe-woman is at a particular disadvantage for being a node where power failed to accumulate.

If we want to understand why a particular person shot another particular person with a particular gun then ANT might be just adequate. But if we want to understand the phenomenon of gun violence *as a means of mitigating or ending it*, then social categories, such as 'male' or 'American', must be taken into account. These categories are surely composed of complex networks of people, places, objects and institutions, but they are also much more than the sum of their parts. It is the particular failure of ANT as a sociological approach that, for it, everything is always merely that sum.



### **We Will Always be Liberals**

The constitution of personhood within a Latourian framework is a reversion to categories that the dreaded intellectuals were right to deconstruct. Regardless of the initial gesture of hybridisation – which, superficially, appears to undermine traditional notions of liberal personhood by positing a consciousness connected to, expressed through and in part composed of non-human objects – such hypothetical situations in which a human agent does something for whatever reason lead us right back to the notion of a rational individual with fixed attributes existing in general, prior to and outside of social relations. A very particular subject emerges

from this formulation: one that is vulnerable to material contingency but always negotiates that contingency as a conscious, rational individual with no social history to interfere with that decision-making process.

Latour's use of the Daedalus myth as an intellectual template in 'On Technical Mediation' is telling: 'Daedalus folds, weaves, plots, contrives, finds solutions where none is visible, using any expedient at hand in the cracks and gaps of ordinary routines, swapping properties among inert and animal and human materials'. In rescuing 'mere informants' from 'the sociologists' Latour has not undermined or even symbolically threatened political power. Rather, he has constructed a philosophy of the social in line with the Thatcherite claim that 'there is no such thing', at the center of which is a 'rational', atomistic individual who makes decisions for 'whatever reason', thus absolving the state and society from any collective responsibility. In Latour's asociological vision of the world, individuals negotiate detours and assemblages in radically particular ways, and it is the very particularity of such movements within a flat network that implies not just equality between people and objects, but between all human actants – who seem to have, in these scenarios, no accumulated past contributing to these decision-making processes, let alone a position in society that might limit them.

There is a sense in which Latour's oeuvre is unclassifiable. Part of his self-positioning as an outsider occurs at the level of style. Many of his books can be described as experimental or genre-bending: a subway system speaks, cartoon frames interrupt text, interlocutors are invented, academic exchanges interrogated in the form of fictional dialogues, atmospheric descriptions of a planner's office stand in for analysis of urban planning, and scenes in busy cafés offer the cash register drawer as protagonist. Of course the intention of such essays is the literary performance of radical critique – a rejection of the grammatical, typographical and citational practices that constitute legitimate knowledge. But in railing against the legitimating mechanisms of knowledge-production, Latour has abandoned meaning in the name of expanding it.



What Latour has accomplished is impressive and perverse. He has simultaneously re-installed the Author at the center of the work, and inoculated him from criticism. As the only coherent entity in an ever-shifting landscape, Latour, despite his protestations, is the only figure capable of speech and meaning-making. This reduces his intellectual contribution to an individual rebellion. The complete absence of reference and quotation in most of his texts means that he is always the one speaking, and indicates, furthermore, that he sees himself as an exception to his theories – as anything *but* a black-box or hybrid of other scholars and their work. The metaphor of the Matroyshka doll might be taken more as a Freudian slip than a way of thinking about sociological meaning-making. Open Latour and you find more Latour – not a mercurial and messy assemblage but a stable and precise replica. Or perhaps this slip is also a model of meaning-making – for all the elaborate, rhetorical showmanship aimed at defeating and destroying the conventions of academia, the whole enterprise is ultimately propped up by the very modern figure of the individual subject. Indeed that must be the case. Without any intellectual allies, an academic tradition, a class, political movement or any social collective to cite, let alone to work with, Latour-the-person is required to be fully independent and responsible. This anti-social, perpetual outsider affect functions to shore up the authority on which it rests by refusing to acknowledge the terms with which it might be critiqued. The rules that apply to academic discourse do not apply to him or his work. Even basic demands for sense-making can be rejected as reductive. If he could, Latour would do away with language altogether, for its misleading abstraction, and claims to ‘represent’ ideas, thus evacuating the very possibility of dialogue, the very basis for solidarity.

There is something compelling about calls for meaninglessness, for a complete upheaval of the terms that we rightly suspect are not serving us very well. But this imaginary is deeply anti-social, even sociopathic. It places the burden of meaning and meaningful activity wholly on the individual. Which might be ok if you are Bruno Latour – white, male, able-bodied and wealthy. The rest of us, however, could use some help.