

# DeKanting Agency: Comments on Bruno Latour's "On Interobjectivity"

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Bruno Latour proposes to resolve the classic antinomy between social structure and individual agency. Like many who have addressed the structure-agency problem, he objects to the way the problem has been set up in the past, and yet he also sets it up a familiar way, if only to locate the various positions he attempts to renounce, surpass, and subsume:

There is in all sociological theories a gulf between the (framed) interaction of individual naked bodies and the structural effects that impinge on them in the manner of a transcendent destiny that no one has willed. The question for any theoretician is to decide what social operator best spans this gulf. (this volume, p. 232)

Having asserted that this "gulf" exists in all *sociological theories*, Latour then reviews a series of theoretical efforts to span the gulf with conceptions of social contract, interactional constitution, collective emergence, and autonomous structure. After reasserting that all existing sociological solutions to the agency-structure problem presuppose that "there is a yawning gulf separating the agent from the structure, the individual from society," Latour goes so far as to suggest that sociological theories would lose their point and purpose "if there is no gulf" (p. 232) in the first place. If that were the case, then "sociological theory would find itself in the rather queer situation of having tried to provide ever more refined solutions to a non-existent problem." Latour does not fully pursue this possibility that the alleged "gulf" between agency and structure is a theoretical preoccupation that might best be forgotten. Instead, the rhetorical tension in his paper seems to derive from an adherence to the very terms of a problem that he is on the verge of saying does not exist, and unless I completely misunderstand his essay, he seems to offer yet another refined solution to this non-existent problem, one that involves an hypostatized version of "agency."

Perhaps it would be fair to say that for Latour the gulf between agency and structure exists in one sense but not another. An illusory gulf is created when classic social theorists propose an opposition between one-sided conceptions of subjective agency and equally one-sided conceptions of objective social structure. This Cartesian gulf is also affirmed by theories of "structuration" that set up their solutions by initially opposing structure and agency. In Latour's view, this gulf is illusory because the positions that constitute it fail to acknowledge that social agency is inherent in material objects, which remain beyond the pale of sociology's traditional conception of its subject matter. Attempts to derive the existence of society from face-to-face interactions, overarching social structures, or schemes of rational action are bound to fail because they do not take into account the social agency invested in objects. An actual gulf, for Latour, is brought into existence when we forget, or take for granted, that objects mediate, embody, articulate, and originate social actions. Society-as-a-whole literally becomes objectified, placed at far remove in time and space from the immediate scenes of social action

framed by walls, doors, fences, and electronic channels. This gulf also is an artifact, but no mere projection of theoretical dreams. It is an objective cultural phenomenon, brought into existence through the development and use of technological innovations. Consequently, while Latour suggests that the gulf between agency and structure is as the product of an expository device in the sociological theory literature, he offers a solution of sorts to the illusory problem of bridging that gulf. His solution undermines the gulf by endowing social agency to the material objects that sociological theorists ignore when constructing their models of society. The gulf becomes an illusory pool between two protruding tips of an iceberg whose hidden mass lies beneath the liminal surface of sociological attention.

I have no objection to Latour's effort to call attention to the sociological relevance and significance of material things. In his essay, and in a number of other writings, he vividly articulates how cultural objects ranging from infectious microbes through automatic door closers and seat belts embody a congealed morality. After having been constituted as part of the furniture of the world, the microbe becomes a hidden agent in transactions between prostitutes and their clients, and the automatic seat belt obviates the rule it enforces: "please close the door." These *things* become integral to attributions of blame; they embody norms and sanctions; they become (or become subject to) social control mechanisms; they enact social roles; they facilitate and defeat rational expectations; and they become material features of our interactional repertoires. These objects are far more than products and commodities. Consequently, it makes sense to identify the analytical elements of social action and social structure with the concrete existence of a distinctive constellation of scientific objects and technological artifacts.

Latour's case studies of contemporary and historical innovations articulate how molecules, microbes, and machines are no less a part of society than are norms, roles, values, intentions, meanings, identities, ideologies, and other abstract objects favored by social theorists. Where I take issue with his essay is the claim that "all sociological theories" have missed what actor-network theory has discovered. Without denying that Latour and his colleagues have said a great deal that is new, I think he greatly overstates the extent to which actor-network theory offers a solution that has been missed by all previous sociological theories. My argument is that Latour does not offer a solution to the agency-structure problem because (as he almost acknowledges) there is no general theoretical problem.

To set up his attack on the agency-structure problem, Latour employs a form of dialectical argument that is commonly used by theorists who have "grand" ambitions.<sup>1</sup> Like so many other theorists, he introduces a solution to a persistent theoretical problem by formulating two polar positions. He then states, or implies, that all previous theoretical attempts can be classified in terms of one or the other side of the polarity. Given the fact that numerous previous theorists have used a similar dialectical strategy, he devotes some effort to showing that despite their attempts to bridge, transcend, or deny the terms of the polarity, the predecessors nevertheless remain caught up in it. He then proposes a comprehensive solution that resolves the polarity and transcends (or otherwise avoids) the limited and one-sided positions taken by all earlier approaches. In accordance with this expository strategy, all other sociological theorists are portrayed as a bunch who, much as they may squabble with one another, agree upon a fundamental, but questionable, set of presuppositions. Latour then critically examines those presuppositions and develops an original alternative.

When faced with comprehensive theories of society I tend to evaluate the cogency and accuracy of such theories by examining how they describe ethnomethodology. I am not a card-carrying

ethnomethodologist—ethnomethodologists don't carry cards—but I know more about that field than any other of the “paradigms,” “perspectives,” or “schools” commonly discussed in synthetic theories. Although ethnomethodology is not a theory or a method, but more of a topical area, synthetic overviews of sociology invariably treat it as one theory among others. Synthetic theorists almost always assume that ethnomethodology is extremely micro, exclusively concerned with “small” interactions between individuals, and inclined to exaggerate the extent to which individuals freely create the worlds in which they live. This alleged extremity makes ethnomethodology useful for purposes of developing theoretical syntheses, as it can occupy a polar position along a micro-macro axis. By comparing what I know about ethnomethodology with the way synthetic theories formulate and criticize it, I have at least one point of contact for assessing how any given theoretical map transforms the local territory. This provides at least some insight into the expository “construction” of social theory, and in more than a few cases it provides a strong basis for incredulity.

To his credit, Latour does not spend most of his time writing general theoretical “overviews,” but when he does (as in the essay I am discussing) he makes use of some all-too-familiar expository strategies. His paper treats ethnomethodology generously enough, and I will not be concerned about any injustices he perpetrates against the excellence of work in that field. He is not unsympathetic, and occasional criticisms aside, his writings assimilate a version of ethnomethodology into a more comprehensive actor-network theory. But like other comprehensive overviews of the sociological literature, Latour's essay places ethnomethodology (and interactionism more generally) at an extreme position along a binary axis. His axis is not a simple micro-macro scale, as it links matters of scale with stages in an evolutionary development. Like Hobbes, Latour imagines a primordial “state of nature” (p. 229), but unlike Hobbes he invokes an empirical “discovery” (p. 228) of a state of nature that already incorporates a complex sociality. In this state of nature, Latour's naked apes perform “the forms of sociability described by interactionism” (p. 229). The members of a simian society behave not as individuals but as part of an emergent ensemble. An action performed by any member is oriented to co-present others; what one member does is contingent on what the others are doing. This, says Latour, is “a limiting case” and “a paradise of interactionism.” Simian society is always and entirely a function of face-to-face interactions among co-present parties, and there are no “totalizing or structuring effects” other than those that are produced through chains of complex individual interactions. Structure and action are co-extensive, as simian society depends entirely on constant interactional work to reiterate, test, and modify the pre-existing totality.

Latour then contrasts this pre-human—and yet richly social—state of nature with the modern human world in which (as Durkheim and so many other theorists of modernity have emphasized) interaction is partial, framed, delimited, distant, and specialized. Unlike the simian state of nature in which each gesture is accountable to all other members of a social group (the Hobbsian war of all against all would thus be a special case of the primordial simian world of all *with all*), occasions of human interaction are circumscribed and complexified by the built world in which they take place. Alluding to Goffman's notion of “frame,” Latour asserts that interactionists use the notion metaphorically, thus ignoring how human interactions are constituted and circumscribed by concrete frames and screens. In this, he ignores Goffman's explicit and repeated emphasis on how material stalls, partitions, passageways, windows, articles of clothing, and vehicular units constitute the circumstances, props, backdrops, strategic resources, and modalities of social interaction. More generally, Latour portrays interactionism as though it had never occurred to any ethnomethodologist or symbolic interactionist to investigate the distinctive interactional orders produced through writing and reading, handling and distributing materials, working with tools and instruments, or using communication devices like telephones, radios, fax machines and computers.<sup>2</sup>

Reading Latour's essay charitably, I would not want to suggest that he has manufactured a gap in the literature by ignoring a large body of existing work. For the most part, interactionist studies examine *particular* uses of tools, instruments, and communicative media. They do not offer, or try to offer, general solutions to the agency-structure problem analogous to the one Latour proposes. In part, this is because the agency-structure problem does not provide a starting point for many interactionist studies, especially those in ethnomethodology. Indeed, when viewed from an interactionist perspective, the problem and the associated "gulf" between agency and structure are products of the interaction between theorists and collections of texts. The problem might be said to be the product of a kind of primitive classification, a sorting of texts into two polar types: those that constitute an unbridgeable gulf from the side of "agency," and those that constitute it from the side of "structure."

Studies by Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, Harvey Sacks and others are easy enough to consign to the "micro/agency" pole of the axis, but as I read them they are profoundly indifferent to the axis and its poles. When Garfinkel (1967) describes how coroners decide between cases of suicide and homicide and when Sacks (1964) describes the organization of a child's story, they are not attempting to make the case for one or another general explanation of how individual agency produces social structure. Instead, they are explicating familiar scenes of action and orders of interaction. The starting point and continual point of return for their studies is an everyday world that is witnessable and intelligible at the level of scale at which we live. It is a world that includes things, technologies, and massive institutions that have no less accountable a place in the organization of our activities than do the persons who happen to be with us at any given moment. The point of investigating the lived-world of social interaction is to examine the myriad ways in which our activities are produced, and there is no reason to suppose that one type of organized phenomenon (a conversation, an exchange of glances, a computer network, or an insane asylum) provides a model for the entire society. If interactions can be said to be structured, they are not organized in accordance with a single kind of structure; if interactions can be said to involve agency, it would be misleading to figure that such agency is a substantive, unitary and pervasive force. The specificity of interaction, and the situated relativity of order and agency, should not, and certainly does not, stop general theorists like Habermas, Giddens, and Bourdieu from discussing and criticizing interactionist studies as though they were intended to deliver a concise formulation that purports to solve the agency-structure problem. But the fact that theorists can have their way with the texts they assimilate under their schemes should not mislead us into thinking that interactionist investigations are pursued in order to solve a theorist's magnificent problems.

Unlike Habermas, Giddens and Bourdieu, Latour is reluctant to treat theoretical synthesis as the high road of inquiry. At the close of his essay he formulates a series of proposals that is largely compatible with interactionist studies, as I understand them:

In order to deal with the social *body* as a body, we need: a) to treat things as social facts; b) to replace the two symmetrical illusions of interaction and society with an exchange of properties between human and non-human actants; c) to empirically follow the work of localizing and globalizing. (p. 240)

As far as I am concerned, proposals a) and c) are uncontroversial. The inversion of Durkheim's injunction to treat social facts as things offers no special difficulty, as long as "things" are understood (no less than social facts are understood) in relation to the practices that constitute them. This does not imply that things embody only and entirely what their users intend. As is so often demonstrated, surprises often are in store for would-be masters of a material universe. Proposal c) describes an agenda that is compatible with many, if not all, programs of social and cultural investigation. Proposal b) is

where the difficulty lies. The idea of "an exchange of properties between human and non-human actants" begs a number of questions. What kind of "exchange" is this? What sorts of "properties" are relevant? Is the exchange reciprocal? It is common enough to speak of bureaucratic agencies like the CIA, and disease agents like an influenza virus. The terms "agency" and "agent" are not reserved for exclusive reference to individual human subjects. And we commonly use expressions to describe what an electronic calculator, computer, printer, or typewriter *does*; expressions that were once (and occasionally still are) used to describe tasks performed by a person who held the job of calculator, computer, printer, or typewriter. However, to speak of an "exchange of properties" between human and non-human actants seems, for lack of a better word, *mechanistic*. It is as though what was once "in" a human printer has been transferred to the machine that made the printer's job redundant. The Marxian reference to an artifact as congealed labor encourages a similar mechanistic conception, but only if taken literally. If, following the logical positivists, we take everything literally and consider "properties" entirely in terms of what can be predicated to an object, then there is no question that we can, and often do, predicate to things what humanists would have us reserve exclusively for humans (intelligence, agency, autonomy, mastery, perversity, etc.). But, following Wittgenstein, we would be "bewitched" by our language if we were to suppose that the fact that we can use the same words when speaking of what persons and things "can do" justifies the assignment of equivalent ontological status to the "properties" in question. The Wittgensteinian and ethnomethodological hostility to vernacular theorizing has to do with a sensitivity to the violence that is done when, for example, "smart" machines are treated as substantive equivalents to "smart" students. The objection has nothing to do with a presumed divide between humans and non-humans, because a similar objection would be made if someone were to propose that a "smart" dresser exhibits equivalent abilities to a "smart" mathematician.

Although in most respects Latour avoids the pitfalls that attend efforts to stabilize the language for theoretical purposes, his theory requires that "agency" should somehow remain identical with itself, equivalent in its various manifestations, regardless of whether it is invested or inscribed in a person, imperative (e.g., a rule), organism, artifact, or thing. "Agency," like other theoretical currencies ("values," "rationality," "motives," "consciousness") is all-too-easily naturalized, turned into an ethereal fluid infusing diverse things, and exchanged freely in an economy. This fluid can be decanted only through the most careful theoretical operation. It might seem that the only alternative to naturalization is spiritualization, allocating "agency" to an essential human soul remote from the world. But if we keep in mind that the great divide between agency and structure is constituted in and through a theorist's (mis)use of a vernacular language, then it should be possible to explore alternatives to the theoretical scheme; to deKant agency rather than to decant it. Following Latour's advice, we should be able "to empirically follow the work of localizing and globalizing" agency, without supposing that such work endows each item it touches with an identical property.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>This is a variant of the polemical strategies used by what Paul Acourt (1995) aptly calls "that class of somewhat immodest tests whose structure is 'The Author versus the Rest'."

<sup>2</sup>A sample of such studies can be found in anthologies by Button (1993) and Clarke and Fujimura (1992).

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# The Fruitful A-Modernism of a Lingering Modernist: Commentary on Bruno Latour's "On Interobjectivity"

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Over the years, the domain of inquiry of philosopher/anthropologist/sociologist/theologist Bruno Latour has increased considerably. From a focus on the inner workings of science (e.g., Latour & Woolgar, 1979/1986), he broadened his interest to include technology (e.g., Latour, 1991), and is now aimed at social theory as such—reaching its temporary summit in his analysis of post- or a-modernity, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1991/1993). Forming a close-knit collective with fellow Parisians as Michel Callon and Madeleine Akrich, and Parisified others as John Law, he has become a durable macro actor, an obligatory passage point in the domain of Science and Technology studies—and in a growing number of other fields as well. Given this trajectory, the continuity of his work is remarkable—yet, in line with his own notion of mediation, one can also see how his work evolves as it reshapes the fields it touches upon.

What has remained constant, for one, is the stress on the *emergent* or *produced* quality of all things deemed pre-given—whether the solidity of facts, the rules of the scientific method, the genius of the scientist, the efficiency of technology, or the nature of human interaction. As a veritable destroyer of modern myths, one can feel his pleasure in attacking hagiographies of Great Scientific Men, arguments for the autonomy of Technology, and attempts to found the Social in and upon itself. Fighting capitalized words wherever he sees them, the trick is constantly to show how the capitalization is an *effect* of much hard work. To show the many intermediary steps that in themselves are mundane and ordinary, that are rarely pre-planned and always diffracted from their original goals.

Another common thread is the stress on *heterogeneity*, or on *non-reducibility*. "Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else," Latour wrote in his *Irreductions*: "there is no equivalence without the work of making equivalent" (1988a, p. 158). Effects like "hard facts," "geniuses" or "human interactions" cannot be reduced to the work of humans, to a "social context," to a "material infrastructure," to states of nature, or whatever. Latour's work is anti-theoretical in the sense that it vehemently opposes *any* attempt to build a theory that starts from single c(l)auses—whether it be the gene or social interactions, whether it be class or the laws of nature. These single c(l)auses should themselves be seen as effects, and should be the *focus* of empirical inquiry instead of the *source* of explanation. Any investigation of the emergence of a "hard fact" or a "human interaction" will, instead, immediately *diverge* into impure and not a priori categorizable assemblies of reports, desires, walls, words uttered, organizational rules, and so forth. As John Law has put it, "if you scratch the surface of what we tend to think of as the social, then we will find that this is materially heterogeneous" (Law, 1994, p. 139). This is yet another version of the attack on modern myths: here it is the myth of *purity*, of tales with one, clear-cut origin and pre-set development, which is fought with fervor.

As Latour also argues, the first thread has much in common with the tenets of symbolic interactionism and especially with ethnomethodology. One could add, here, the common thread running through the broad and diverse array of studies labeled “constructivist”—spanning the breadth from the burgeoning field of “cultural studies,” via the study of the production of documentary reality to alternative forms of technology assessment (e.g., Rouse, 1992; Schot, 1992; Smith, 1990). In the penetrating analysis of sociality that Latour presents us with here, we see the trick being performed on a whole array of dearly-held notions like “action,” “actor,” “structure,” “interaction,” “individual,” “system,” “micro,” “macro.” The actor and his action, social structure and human interaction should *themselves* be seen as *consequences* of those unnamable interactions in the middle, that everlasting circulation of actants twisting, transforming and merging with each others’ paths. They are unfit, Latour argues, to play the role “mainstream” social theory wants them to play. Social theorists start by taking for granted what needs to be explained: the emergence of that entity called “individual,” the production of that strange phenomenon called human interaction, and the ongoing performance of that achievement called “society.”

The second thread, subsequently, is a crucial intervention. In the merging of these threads, Latour’s line of reasoning has definite family resemblances to the recent ethnomethodological and symbolic interactionist’s studies of work practice, and to feminist analyses of science and technology (e.g., Clarke & Fujimura, 1992; Garfinkel, Livingston, & Lynch, 1981; Haraway, 1991; Lynch, 1993; Rapp, 1993; Star, 1989). All these strands oppose the tendency to reduce heterogeneous practices to pre-existing (sociological) categories. For all these authors, to take the Social or the Technical, Culture or Nature as the point of departure is missing the crucial insight that it is their fundamental interrelation that requires study. All these strands, moreover, are struggling with the proper re-integration of objects in social theory. In this paper, Latour brings this issue to the fore by claiming that the effects we call “structure” or “human interaction,” “macro” or “micro” cannot be accounted for by referring to “actor” and “action,” “symbol” and “language.” The latter are too weak, too fleeting, not durable enough to carry the burden of producing the former. They cannot account for the manifold increase in complexity/complicatedness between simian societies and societies such as France or the US. For *both* the *longue durée* of “structural effects” *and* the intimacy of Goffmanian interaction, effects that are typical to human societies, the presence of non-humans is a *sine qua non*. The walls of my room at the same time afford the sheer possibility of veritably local, face-to-face communication *and* enter into the production of the Western individual, partially defined by these square feet (s)he calls his/her own. In what is in itself a rather doubtful causal sequencing, Latour ties the two lines together as follows: “It is because it is stretched . . . between the objective and politics that sociology has no place for things. And therefore it finds itself torn . . . between the actor and the system” (current volume, p. 236).

There is an interesting philosophical tension between these two axioms. All *Differences* are *produced*, says the first, yet the second says that we should take the existence of *Differences* as an *a priori*, even as a prerequisite. This tension surfaces in the paper in the very discussion of what “objects” are supposed to do in Society that naked humans, symbols, language, cognition, or interactions cannot. What makes objects *a priori* more durable, more lasting than non-objects? Is this not a rather pre-conceived notion of what an “object” is, which clearly does not emerge from the middle of the “objective-subjective” dimension where Latour would want us to start? Shouldn’t we rather be looking at *how* and *why* objects are seen, are performed as “enduring,” while humans are not? Taking characteristics like “durability” and “plasticity” for granted in any empirical study of objects-in-practices thoroughly limits the broad range of capacities objects can be seen to perform. Disciplining humans can be more doable than disciplining an object; *making* objects “endure” is often itself the result of much hard work (e.g., Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1987; Button, 1993; Dodier, 1995). Likewise,



what about the "body"? How can Latour so easily attribute to the "body" the task to maintain the "I" over time? What a-historical notion of the body is invoked when he talks about "the body, that old basis of primate sociality?" For Latour, "bodies" and "objects" seem elements of the same class—but just how are "bodies" and "objects" related? Here as well, it seems that attributes are already well in place, leaving aside the issue how and where the body ever acquired these characteristics?

Notwithstanding the commonalities in his writings, there are differences too. The increasing scope his work addresses tends at times to go hand in hand with an increasingly undergrounded "philosophy of everything" style—which leaves one longing for the empirical richness of, say, *The Pasteurization of France*. More importantly, and partly in response to criticism from feminist scholars, (e.g., Haraway, 1994; Star, 1991), there has been a distinct re-tuning of what one could call a third thread throughout his work: the notion of *translation*. In his best-known book, *Science in Action* (Latour, 1987), scientists are portrayed as shrewd politicians, enrolling the heterogeneous actants they need to build their network, to make their facts come true, or to make their technology work. Science, building networks, is like war: you enroll allies, and the side with the most of them wins. *Translation*, here, is the inevitable change in both the network builders' and the actants' goals that occurs when an actant joins a network. Enrolling some financial support when one wants to build an engine implies having to rewrite your own goals so that the financier is pleased, and showing the financier, for example, that the only way to *his* goals is by taking a detour through yours. In this reading, translation is a form of strategic negotiation: on the way to victory, you win some and you lose some.

This strategic, Machiavellian, war-like imagery, was strongly criticized. It remains a matter of debate just how central these characteristics were to the fundamental points that Latour was trying to make. The war metaphor, for one, was closely tied to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*—which wreaks havoc on the very idea that "strategies" or "rationality" have anything to do with winning or losing a battle (cf. Latour, 1988a). Yet the rhetoric of *Science in Action* does have a modernist, rationalistic ring to it: it reads like a "How to Be A Successful Scientist" manual. In that sense, Haraway's indictment that this produces yet "another Sacred Image of the Same" is a profound charge (1994). In taking aboard too many of the attributed characteristics of the field under study, Latour partly reproduced what he had set out to problematize, and he deprived himself of critical potential.

In the current paper, the atmosphere has clearly changed. Put to the fore, now, is the *unpredictability* of each and every translation, the fact that each merger of two actants creates a new entity, whose capacities cannot be fully pre-visualized. Rather than "translation," the term *mediation* is used, which draws attention to these inevitable, ongoing *diffractions* of goals, strategies and directions (cf. Latour, 1994). Being an actant means mediating the activities of other actants—nothing more, and nothing less—in a never ending flow of incessant, but ultimately directionless motion.<sup>2</sup> The redefinition of "action" and the "actor," then, yields images of actors that are a far cry from the Machiavellian network builders from *Science in Action*—forever being overtaken by everything they do, and themselves only an "actor" by virtue of all the other actors/actants who have inscribed their traces in them.

The combination of all these threads yields a volatile, powerful mixture, offering an important and exciting re-writing of core tenets of social theory. As said, it resembles developments within symbolic interactionism (see above). There, however, the humanist legacy and the centrality of the concept of Meaning constantly tend to make the object retreat into secondary position. Concepts such as "actor," "action," and "agency" remain strongly linked to a humanist politics; eroding such concepts, "granting agency to objects," for example, would be to blur categories deemed *essential* to keep a clear sight on the distribution of responsibility, of power, and of the right to be heard (cf. Casper, 1994; Mol &

Mesman, 1996).<sup>3</sup> It is also very akin to, yet more empirically grounded and more lucidly written than Haraway's recent work. For example, in her writings as well, the search for non-innocent, active yet non-transparent mediators extends into the realm of Nature, Object, Science—all these worlds that social theory had left unexamined. Yet while Latour painstakingly builds one all-encompassing argument, Haraway's essays take off in a swirling vertigo, and are so packed with insights and intertwining themes that it is hard to unravel them without losing grip on their meaning and import (but see further).

And Latour's work shares its sharp critical edges with the ethnomethodological studies of work, which critique Sociology's tendency to impose reductionist master narratives on whatever site they enter. Doing so, however, they tend to "disappear into the field": to denounce any common ground in order to fully embrace the specificities of the practice studied (Lynch, 1993). Latour, on the other hand, constantly searches for that minimal bit of common ground that *would* allow the different specificities to be compared, and the accumulating effects of links between specific fields to become visible (e.g., Latour, 1988b).

In fact, it is this continuous attempt to retain some Master Theory (the universals in this paper are Event, Actant, and Mediation) that betrays some of Latour's lingering scientific, modernist tendencies. It is grand social theory we are presented with here, albeit of a minimalist kind. This is already present in the way the argument is developed: we are to look for that which is *fundamental* to our "complicated" social life. It cannot be "symbols," it cannot be "human cognition," nor "language," since each of these is "too weak." No: that which makes the difference between simian and human societies, that "little je ne sais quoi," is the object. More basic, more fundamental, more durable; it is that which allows the localizing and globalizing effects that makes *us* different from *them*. But why do we have to look for a "little je ne sais quoi" that makes all the difference? Is that not just another search for a single c(l)ause?<sup>4</sup> This comes back to the point mentioned above: what is the "object" anyway, which is apparently *already* not weak, stronger than symbols, discernible from cognition? It seems to me that it is exactly the intertwining of, say, "objects" and "cognition" and "language" that produces the localizing and globalizing effects. Any attempt to grant any of these a "more fundamental" role seems to miss the idea that we cannot even begin to think about any of these without involving the other.

But, it can be argued, this is "mere rhetoric." Of course Latour does not want to claim that the object is the most fundamental building block of human society; of course we should not take the essays' title, *On Interobjectivity*, too seriously. It is just a way to rock the boat, to shock the self-satisfied, main-stream sociologists out of their conceptual inertia. Yet there is more to it than that. Both the form and content of his message are reductionist in the same modernist way that he himself criticizes. His preference for the "complicated" above the "complex" is telling. The monkeys' *complex* social world is typified by "the simultaneous presence in all interactions of a great number of variables, which cannot be treated discretely." The humans' *complicated* social world, however, is characterized by "the successive presence of discrete variables, which can be treated one by one, and folded into one another in the form of a black box" (Latour, this volume, p. 233). Neat, closed, accounted for, taken care of. Latour does not like leaving things unaccounted for: he wants his tale to fold into itself neatly, and he reads the world likewise. He does not appreciate the simultaneous presence of potentially conflicting or only partially connecting stories, tales that can be endlessly unfolded, never end, and do not converge into a single narrative (Haraway, 1994; Lee & Brown, 1994; Mol & Law, 1994; Strathern, 1992). In this paper, Latour tries to reduce the wildness of the social into a one-level world, consisting solely of circulating intermediaries. Yet it is a peculiar violation of his own principle of non-

reducibility that one would even *want* to produce a narrative that can encompass all others. That there remains a Master Perspective from which all that is relevant can be captured.

But even here it could be countered that this accusation is rather empty. It plays the ever-recurring, tip-toeing game of "I can catch you on your own principles" from which there is no escape (see the debates on reflexivity that haunted the science studies community in the 1980s, e.g., Ashmore, 1989). It could be turned to this commentary itself, in which there are no monkeys messing up the argument, no multiple voices intervening in a different font, no attempts to de-center authorship. Yet how "partial," how "multiple" is the commandment that "Thou Shall Not Speak In A Single Voice?" Exactly how bad is it to preach a-modernism in a modernist way? It is important to grasp the politics of writing, but should that lead to a general ban on more (t)ra(di)itional styles of trying to get a point across?

These are difficult questions, touching at the intimate relation between the medium and the message and at the politics of doing (social) science. However one answers these questions, the accusation of "modernism" becomes more challenging when it can be shown just *what* this minimal attempt at purity *leaves out*. How Latour's narrative frames that what it only claims to open for investigation. It is, of course, exactly this type of criticism that led to the change in tone described above: the demonstration that the actor-network theory of *Science in Action* indeed structured the account in a highly specific way. That talk of "forces," "allies," and "trials of strength" is no neutral Master language. It remains to be seen whether the even more minimal "theory" we see emerging here can be challenged in a similar fashion.

Another way the modernist, scientist tendency emerges is more problematic. Latour's rhetoric (from the credo to "follow the actors"<sup>5</sup> to the urge to provide a set of "empty" descriptors) retains an implicit but clear distinction between *describing* a state of affairs and *judging* them. Although Latour would be the last to deny that every representation is also an intervention, his work does breathe the ghosts of that denial. It is classical Enlightenment style in that it wants to *show* how things are (his task, as a scientist, is to deliver the facts), and leave it to others to form their judgments, and to wield their values. He broadens the notion of politics by showing how objects are political agents too; in *We Have Never Been Modern* he goes so far as to call for a Parliament of Things. Yet he will not cast a vote. Moreover, the very idea of a Parliament remains rather modernist. As if, indeed, that is the proper and only place where politics is performed, where values are supposed to be at work. Latour is otherwise not hesitant in imploding dichotomies and re-finding the middle ground from which they arise as the seemingly unalterable truths of our human condition. Yet here Latour remains stuck in the dichotomy, walking the safe path of description. The scientist, who does not mess with the matters of Parliament. But what would happen if this dichotomy would *also* be exploded? If the inseparable connection between depiction and intervention would be embraced instead of fled from (cf. Haraway, 1994)? If all the circulating intermediaries Latour describes are "doing politics," his own writings do so too. Why not, then, spell out the political implications of his *own* creations? What are the politics of blurring the boundaries between humans and things, to empty the notion of Action, to redistribute Agency?<sup>6</sup> What are the consequences of holding on to Master Theories? How can theories like these be put *to work*? In the case of (information) technologies for work practices, for example, is there any way in which such insights can be drawn upon to design *better* technologies, for example, or to implement them more successfully (Berg, in press; Markussen, 1994; Suchman, 1994)?

So an asymmetry remains. While the Objects are back into social theory, Politics (its opposite pole on Latour's cross) remains exiled. While the social has become more materially heterogeneous, the

consequences this has for the place and nature of normativity remains unexplored. Having done half of a revolutionary, neo-Marxist re-writing of social theory, will the other half be next?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In line with the arguments in *On Interobjectivity*, this attribution of authorship and individuality should be taken for what it is: an active step in the rendering of what cannot be but a heterogeneous collective as the Individual/Philosopher Latour.

<sup>2</sup>The fact that this motion is *ultimately* aimless by no means precludes the importance of searching for patterns in specific evolving sets of actants.

<sup>3</sup>Collins and Yearley (1990) take a similar position in their critique of actor-network theory.

<sup>4</sup>Leading, also, to discussions of the "true nature" of monkey societies: whether their usage of tools is "fundamentally different" from ours or not; whether their world of trees, soil, rocks is not therefore a world of objects just as much, and so forth. See Haraway (1989) for a wonderful *analysis* of such debates.

<sup>5</sup>This credo has always been rather paradoxical. Its manual-like simplicity denies the philosophical (and thereby practical) complexity of the argument it is a shorthand for. Latour's modification of this credo in his paper (p. 238), to say the least, does not help much.

<sup>6</sup>See Cussins (in press) for an attempt to deal with the latter issue.

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