Pursuing the Discussion of Interobjectivity With a Few Friends

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I thank my critics for having taken time to deal with my rather bizarre and idiosyncratic arguments in social theory—an activity which, I agree with Mike Lynch, might not turn out to be useful at all. This paper is part of a long on-going collaboration with the primatologist Shirley Strum on how best to account for primate studies and sociobiology when science studies are integrated into the production of a scientific discipline. This might explain the modernist tone that Marc Berg has detected. Like the companion paper "On Technical Mediation" (1994), the aim of this project is indeed to produce a Master Narrative on the common evolution of humans and non-humans. I have no postmodern shame in confessing it. I have never understood what was wrong with "master narratives" as long as they were offering fresh alternatives and were taken for what they are, that is *narratives*. The risk of their being taken "too seriously" by "naive readers" who would "naturalize" them and take them to be what history was "really like" seems to me exceedingly remote given my experience of the difficulty there is to discipline readers in general and my present friends and critics in particular! I think we can take for granted that no narrative can be the master of any reader, since there is no naive reader and of course, no writer mastering its own writing. The fact that some Frenchmen have been card carriers of the Communist Party in the 1960s and were subsequently disappointed by its politics to the point of banning "Master Narratives," cannot certainly be a world event important enough to stop everyone everywhere from writing what should best be called *Servant Narratives!* I hope this adjective will appease some of Marc's worries.

Another ban to which I object, is the one on social theory in general as promulgated by Mike Lynch. It is precisely because I approve Mike's description of the social theorists' labor, that I see no reason to abstain from it. "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," Mike writes (this volume, p. 249). Well, then, if this is the case, why should I try to *purify* my own writing and stick to descriptions of mundane, localized practices that do not consider at all the "question" of agencies and structure? Here Mike behaves like an art critic who would admonish me not to paint any grand religious scenes with ascending Virgins and a score of angels and to stick to the painting of interior scenes of Dutch family life. It is precisely *because* I know perfectly well that, let's say, an "Assumption" is as much a painting of one meter by fifty centimeters as a "Herring on a plate" of one meter by fifty centimeters, that I allow myself to shift from one motif to the other. The writing of grand social theory occupies exactly as much and as little space as the thick description of a ten minute interaction. I object as much as he does to the belief that "meta-theorists" are somehow superior or more profound than people like us who write field studies, but for this reason I see no reason not to try to rob them of their manners, colors and styles. Shifting styles and genres is precisely what we can do because we know none is deeper or more profound than any other. Let the meta-theorists stick to their "profound" style, and let us switch manners depending on the effects we

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wish to achieve. Once the right to tell "servant narratives" and to paint in a "grand theory" fashion has been regained, my duty is to answer the more substantial objections leveled at my little essay.

Taking characteristics like "durability" and "plasticity" for granted in any empirical study of objects-in-practice thoroughly limits the broad range of capacities objects can be seen to perform," writes Marc (this volume, p. 253). There is a difficulty here, coming from my use of the human/non-human distinction and from maintaining the words "object" or "things." By using these concepts to overcome a dichotomy between those who act and those who are acted upon, I seem to enforce that very dichotomy. This is the difficulty that also makes me write "the body that old basis of primate sociality," which is quite a blunder, I agree. Marc is right, neither bodies nor materialities can be used as pregiven for a renewed theory of action. In this he is slightly ahead of me and goes already further in the direction I clumsily indicate.

The reason for my slow movement is that I am trying to avoid the engagement of objects into the practice that is most often employed when too much attention is given to human action. Yrjö Engeström's depiction is precisely the one I am shifting away from: "these ideal qualities [of the Postal Buddy] were *materially imprinted in* the design of the software and hardware" (this volume, p. 264, my emphasis) or more tellingly in Mike's critique: "[material things] *embody* a congealed morality"; "they embody norms and sanctions"; "they *enact* social roles"; "they *facilitate* and *defeat* rational expectations" (this volueme, page 247, my emphasis). The aim of my paper was to use another vocabulary to paint objects—to stick to my visual art metaphor—that would not play the role of the *background* for human foregrounded ingenuity, without of course disfiguring, dismembering, scattering or forgetting the human form altogether. It has become easy to use the metaphors of "imprint, congeal, reify, embody, crystallize" since they are all variations on Marx's "dead labor" and all imply a human in command, or more exactly, laborers who are empowered again by what has been taken away from them by fetishism and naturalization. It is much more difficult to *share* actions with other actants, hence my own makeshift metaphors: delegating, mediating, shifting out, exchanging properties, folding interactions. What Marx wants, and rightly so, is to re-empower laborers to whom action and mastery has been denied.

Contrary to Marx, however, I wish to shift attention to the many actants that take over when action is carried out. The social theory and the politics, one of Marc's and Yrjö's other questions, is different, and so are the metaphors. I am not trying to naturalize or mechanize humans by turning them into what are held by objects, I try to modify *as much* the humans who are no longer in command *as* its associates which are no longer objects, nor means, nor tools. The property I want to foreground is not durability per se, but multiplicity of different temporal scales. The body is of course parts and parcels of this folding process (habit, memory, know-how, skills, but also genes, development patterns, hard- and soft-wiring). I thought, wrongly as it turned out, that I could allude to that move since in the article I had referred to a "genealogy" of the many cross-overs that result in an anatomically modern social human and its associated collective. But the aim is of course, in the long run, not to use human and non-human, social action and things any longer. The phenomenon at the centre stage is the *displacement* of action, which implies in turn a shift in attention. Contrary to what Marc says, translation is still my focus.

This point might be made clearer by my answer to Mike's rather damning objection. "The starting point and continual point of return for their [interactionists and ethnomethodologists] studies is an *everyday world* that is *witnessable* and *intelligible* at the *level of scale at which we live*" (this volume, p. 249, my emphasis). This is a beautiful case of friends talking at cross purposes. Mike offers this as

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a defense of the literature I am accused of having ignored, and, in doing so, he reinstates even more clearly what I find totally insufficient in this literature! We do not live at any scale and there is no everyday world! Focusing attention on one mundane local scale is exactly what we cannot ever witness or make intelligible. Action is always displaced, lopsided, shifted and scale never stable enough to offer a mundane grasp that would allow us to ignore the problems of social theory. What I call ponctualizing and globalizing, sharing agencies with other actants who have different timings, tempos and properties, make impossible to start and even more impossible to "return" to one "everyday world."

The distribution of actions criss-cross the dreams of an access, of a unique adequacy. We are not like participants returning after the wrong detour of abstract theory to the solid ground of local interactions, but like (mad?) cows watching the *trajectories* of many trains of many different transportation systems. We witness the displacement of scales and agencies, not any stable level of scale. To say this is not to come back to the structure versus agency problem as Mike thinks I am doing, since what I am trying to focus on is a cross made by a double distinction: agency/structure, human/non-human. The shifting scale and the impossibility of defining an everyday world is what Michel Callon and I have been trying to probe for twenty years. Actor-network theory, because it deals with trajectories, is indeed different from interactionist arguments which deal with people in practice. As Marc puts it very well: "There however [in symbolic interactionism], the humanist legacy and the centrality of the concept of Meaning constantly tend to make the object retreat into secondary position" (this volume, p. 254). I was not so sure before, but now I am! Of course, as Mike rightly puts it, there is a danger in talking about agency: "Agency is all too easily naturalized, turned into an ethereal fluid infusing diverse things, and exchanged freely in an economy" (this volume, p. 250). This is of course, the main objection I would now make against actor-network theory, even though I don't agree that "naturalization" is a danger now that science studies has shown how many natures there are! Yet, our earlier theory of actor-network is unable to *specify* the type of trajectories it is dealing with. Without this, "interobjectivity" remains, as Marc says, a "way to shock the self-satisfied main stream sociologists out of their conceptual inertia." Still another modernist gesture of iconoclasm.

I might be pardoned this slight contradiction though, since Yrjö's objection shows that there are many different chess games to be played simultaneously. After having acknowledged that I come "close to some key ideas of cultural-historical activity theory." Yrjö writes, "Yet individual actions are *embedded* in concrete local activities. *Behind* a *momentary* action performed by a *singular* actor there is a *long-term collective* activity, a community of practice. Abandoning *levels* makes it difficult to account for this embeddedness" (this volume, p. 262, my emphasis). How am I supposed to deal with this matter-of-fact rendering of everything I reject in my paper? The notion of level, which seems so important for Mike, defines the "return" of good empirical sociologists to the "scale at which we live," is immediately turned by Yrjö into an individual action that has to be framed by something bigger and longer-lasting! Surely, all the differences of scale, timing, agencies that I pointed out in my paper cannot be put onto the Procustean bed of Yrjö's "embeddness"! Should I be Mike's or Yrjö's bedfellow?! Neither, that is the point. (And please Mike don't tell me I am staging an artificial symmetry to show my own solution in the "Author against the Rest" trope, and please Yrjö, don't tell me that since I am offering a third position I am dancing a Hegelian gig here!). Is it my fault if my critics reproduce exactly the dualist scenario that Mike says is an artifact and which I tried carefully to dig into so as to reveal its genealogy? Am I not right in lingering into modernism a bit longer so as to displace attention away from those social theories that are so powerful that each of my critics believes they understand what I am pointing out when they restate exactly what I am steering away from? Mike's and Yrjö's misunderstandings of my paper show that there is something much deeper in the

way social theory is acted out. Mike's solution—let us ignore entirely the abstract debates to focus on the ways actors never engage themselves with those questions—as well as Yrjö's one—let us offer a dialectic loop that will allow us to reconcile the collective level of action with the singular actor—are preconditioned by a real difficulty in the theory of action we all take for granted.

The notion of mediation and of dialectics do not help much. Mediation depends too much on the difference between "intermediaries" and true "mediations" so that the sentence "technology mediates human actions" can be understood with completely opposite meanings. I would now abstain from using this word too much. As to dialectics, either it has the clear Hegelian sense of being ruled by contradiction between the subject and the object posited by the subject as its own negation before a synthesis is attained, or it has a vague meaning of a system theory or of a cybernetic feedback or, even vaguer, of an indefinitely long check list. I am not sure of understanding the Russians cited by Yrjö, but the glosses he offers on them confirm my diagnosis that dialectical reasoning is the way invented to entrench even deeper the dualism between individual and collective action and to behave as if it had been triumphantly overcome. To take an example we are all familiar with, Ed Hutchins is *not* using dialectical reasoning: cognition, human action and social realities have been redistributed, not reconciled (Hutchins, 1995). (And distribution does not mean fragmentation, this is the deep esthetic and political difference between post- and non-modernity).

Since writing this paper, I have attempted to dig elsewhere to get away from those difficulties. It happens that the question of fetishism is crucial to our gut reactions vis-vis all these problems of action, scale, politics, reification, naturalization and mastery. I agree with Mike that even the notion of agency has to be retooled. So after having started as a social constructivist, and do away with the social, I think that now I have to say goodbye to the very notion of construction! Another time we might tackle the discussion on what I now call *factishes* (by constrasting facts and fetishes)[1]. I hope I will benefit once again from the kindness of my friends and from the hospitality of this journal.

Note

[1] Bruno Latour, Petite reflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux Faitiches, Les Empícheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 1996.

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