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# Symposium

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## On Interobjectivity

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### The Lessons of Simian Societies

The discovery of the social complexity of primate societies other than *Homo sapiens*, although it was made some 20 years ago, does not yet seem to have been fully taken on board by social theory (De Waal, 1982; Kummer, 1993; Strum, 1987). Violent arguments for or against sociobiology have taken center stage, as if it were necessary to defend the autonomy of the social against the danger of excessive reduction to the biological. In fact, the development of sociobiology, as of ethology, indicates quite another path: the *extension* to animals, even to genes, of classical questions of political philosophy about the definition of the social actor, the possibilities of rational calculation, the existence or not of a social structure standing above the level of interactions, the very definition of interaction, the degree of intelligence necessary for social life, and the role of power and dominance relationships. Far from being displaced from all these questions by a biology presumed triumphant, sociological theory must play its part and must to new ends tackle the problem of the definition of society, extending its comparative base to other than human social lives.<sup>1</sup>

To say that primates other than humans have a rich social life simply means assuming that no primate actor can achieve any goal without *passing through* other interactions with partners. Instead of imagining a presocial being motivated solely by instinct, reactions or appetites and seeking immediate gratification of its goals—assuaging hunger, reproduction, power—the new sociology of simians, on the contrary, depicts actors who cannot attain anything without negotiating at length with others.<sup>2</sup> The simplest case is that of a chimpanzee that does not dare to continue eating at a rich food source it has discovered because the troop is moving on and it cannot stay behind alone. Or again, that of a male baboon that cannot copulate with a female in heat, without first verifying that she will cooperate—a cooperation that had to have been obtained over the course of a period of friendship during times when she was not in estrous. Since each actor's every action is interfered with by others, and since succeeding in one's aims is mediated by continual negotiation, one can talk of this in terms of *complexity*—that is to say in terms of the obligation to take into account a large number of variables at the same time. As described by primatologists, the state of social feverishness, the constant attention to others' actions, the painstaking sociability, Machiavellianism and stress all indicate, then, an

already complex sociality in the “state of nature.”<sup>3</sup> Or, at least, this is the simplified and in part mythical version that can be used as an alternative base line from which to tackle social theory afresh.

Social insects have always served as a means of calibrating models of human sociology. But they offered, at least up until the emergence of sociobiology, the archetypal case of *superorganisms*, in which questions of the individual, interaction, calculation and negotiation could not be posed.<sup>4</sup> The effect of the sociology of primates is quite contrary. It precisely does not permit thinking of the social structure as a superorganism, but only in terms of a chain of interactions. We will find in the state of nature a degree of social complexity that corresponds, more or less, to the forms of sociability described by interactionism. However, there is no language, little technology.<sup>5</sup> It seems that there is not even any representation of self, nor a model of the other,<sup>6</sup> and that the cognitive competencies necessary to bring out this complexity remain very basic. By finding already present “in nature” such a high level of sociability, human sociology finds itself freed from the obligation to found the social, contrary to the hoary tradition in political philosophy and to theories of the social contract. Complex social interaction preceded humanity, and by a long way.

In the sociological literature, social *interaction* presupposes the presence of several constitutive elements. There must be at least two actors; these two actors must be physically copresent; they must be linked by behavior that entails an act of communication; and finally, the behavior of each must evolve as a function of modifications brought to bear on the behavior of the other in such a way that there is an emergence of *unexpected* properties that are more than the sum of the competencies in use by the actors before this interaction.<sup>7</sup> The sociology of simians, in this sense, becomes the limiting case of interactionism, since all the actors are copresent and engage in face to face actions whose dynamic depends continually on the reaction of others. This is a paradise of interactionism; it is a paradise in another sense too, since the question of social order doesn't seem to be able to be posed for simians other than in terms of the progressive composition of dyadic interactions, without any totalizing or structuring effects. Although there are complex interactions, it does not seem that one can say that they live “in” a society, or that they develop a social structure.<sup>8</sup> The question of the exact role of interaction, and its ability to compose *all* society is already posed at the level of primates, and possibly *only* at that level.

The uncertainty of primatologists as to the existence or not of a social structure *beyond* interactions seems to be shared by the monkeys themselves if we grant them the minimal reflexivity needed to be a member and not a “cultural dope” according to Garfinkel's request. For all behavior patterns that presuppose some totalization, primates other than humans have to conduct a series of trials, that need to be ever again begun anew in order to ensure the duration of collective effects. Deciding the direction to be followed by the troop, for example, presupposes an evaluation of the movements of all by all, whence emerges, at the beginning of the day, an order that no one member has given, and that none can claim as their own. The same holds for dominance relationships, which must be put to the test again each time a new event occurs, and for membership relationships, which need to be “repaired” after any, albeit momentaneous, separation. Since the effects of the composition of the social depend on work by individual actors that is continually being started over, one could draw the conclusion that the social life of monkeys is apparently an ethnomethodological paradise.<sup>9</sup> Social construction literally depends solely on the work of the actors themselves to hold things together, and depends crucially on their categories *alone*. Each action is mediated by the action of partners, but to effect this mediation, it is necessary that every actor composes for themselves the totality in which they are situated, a variable totality whose solidity must be reverified each and every time through new trials.

Before there was a significant simian sociology, human sociology made social life begin with humans, or used social insects, even polyps, to demonstrate the universality of forms of aggregation and the ubiquity of superorganisms.<sup>10</sup> But we are now able to count on a chain of complex individual interactions that precedes human sociology. In these interactions, actors have to constantly construct and tend to the collective structures that emerge from their interactions. Society does not begin like Hobbes' with preformed human bodies, with brains capable of calculation, with distinct individuals who choose to agree together through the mythology of the social contract. As far as we can understand through this calibration of our origin stories with the example of primates, the humanization of our bodies and brains was on the contrary shaped by a fine tissue of complex social interactions whose matrix precedes us by several million years. The portmanteau word "socio-biology" has inverted its normal meaning when one takes into account that human life has been immersed for such a long time in a social world, and that we have become physically and intellectually more and more human so as to adapt ourselves better and better to our original environment constituted in a large part by complex sociality.<sup>11</sup>

By allowing us to find already in nature a complex sociality, interactions, individuals and social constructions, simian sociology frees us from the need to make these the province of human sociology alone. Complex social life becomes the shared property of all primates. Just like baboons and chimpanzees, we engage in it, without even thinking, in all our actions. And yet we are neither baboons nor chimpanzees. If the complexity of our social life can no longer suffice to explain this difference, we must find *another source*. For that, we have to understand to what extent the concept of human individual actors engaged in interactions, such as interactionism describes, constructing the social through its own categories that must be regularly tested (the ethnomethodological version) does not account well for most human situations, even though it forms the common basis for our competencies.

Whereas for monkeys it constructs social life step by step, one could say that, for humans, interaction was never more than a *residual category*. Not, as the tenants of the existence of a social structure affirm, because an interaction "takes place in" a society that is greater than it, but quite simply because for an interaction to take place one must first reduce the relationship so that it does not, step by step, mobilize all social life, with which it would otherwise end up being co-extensive. It is only through isolating it by a frame that the agent can interact with another agent, face to face, leaving out the rest of their history as well as their other partners.<sup>12</sup> The very existence of an interaction presupposes a reduction, a prior partitioning. Now how to explain the existence of these frames, partitions, hideaways, fire-doors that are free of contagion from the social? Interactionists are silent about this, merely using the word "frame" metaphorically. Advocates of social structure, the usual opponents of interactionists, cannot explain it any better, since they perceive at all points the total and complete presence of social structure. Now it is just this suspension that one needs to understand, this partial interruption, this cubbyhole within which interaction can be deployed without being interfered with by everyone else. Interactionism's adversaries often reproach it with not being able to compose all of the social—and indeed the very force of interaction lies in its ability to locally and momentarily suspend interference.

### That Little "Je ne sais quoi" that Dislocates Interaction

Something prevents human interaction from proliferating *outside* and from being interfered with *inside* by all the other partners. Is this two-way membrane immaterial like a frame (here taken in its metaphorical sense) or material like a partition, a wall, or a framework (here taken in its literal sense)?

In order first to intuitively grasp the answer to this question, one must have seen a troop of some 100 baboons living in the midst of the savannah, looking incessantly at each other so as to know where the troop is going, who is with whom, who is grooming whom, who is attacking or defending whom. Then you must carry yourself away in your imagination to those scenes beloved of interactionists where a few people, most often just two, are interacting in cloistered spots hidden from the view of others. If "hell is other people," as Sartre said, then baboon hell differs from human hell, since the continuous presence of all creates a pressure quite other than that of the closed-doors of interactionism—to such a degree that a distinction must be drawn between two entirely different meanings of the word interaction. The first, as given above (pp. 229, paragraph 2) applies to all primates, including humans, whereas the second applies to humans alone. In order to retain the usual term, it is necessary to talk of *framed interactions*. The only difference between the two derives from the existence of a wall, a partition, an operator of reduction, a "je ne sais quoi" whose origin remains, for the time being, obscure.

There is another difference between simian interaction and what one observes of human interactions. For the latter, it is very difficult to obtain the simultaneity in space and time that are the province of the first. We say, without giving the matter too much thought, that we engage in "face-to-face" interactions. Indeed we do, but the clothing that we are wearing comes from elsewhere and was manufactured a long time ago; the words we use were not formed for this occasion; the walls we have been leaning on were designed by an architect for a client, and constructed by workers—people who are absent today, although their action continues to make itself felt. The very person we are addressing is a product of a history that goes far beyond the framework of our relationship. If one attempted to draw a spatio-temporal map of what is present in the interaction, and to draw up a list of everyone who in one form or another were present, one would not sketch out a well-demarked frame, but a convoluted network with a multiplicity of highly diverse dates, places and people.<sup>13</sup> Those who believe in social structures often make the same criticism of interactionists, but they draw quite another lesson from it. They suggest that nothing happens in interactions that is not an activation or materialization of what is *already* completely contained elsewhere in the structure, give or take a few minor adjustments. But interaction does more than adjust, it constructs; we learned this from the monkeys as well as from Goffman and from the ethnomethodologists. However, it displays contradictory forms: it is a *framework* (which permits circumscription) and a *network* (which dislocates simultaneity, proximity and personality). Where can those contradictory qualities in humans come from, and why are they so different from interaction as understood by primatologists with respect to naked, co-present monkeys?

It seems impossible to answer this question insofar as one pits interaction against something else, for example social structure, by affirming that the former is local whereas the latter is global. For monkeys, as for example for baboons, this opposition does not hold, since beyond a few dyadic interactions, baboons, just like primatologists, lose trace of interactions and begin to compose the remainder in vaguer terms like "troop," "clan" or "group." It could be rightly said that for baboons social life is composed entirely of individual interactions laid end to end like the successive segments of mechanical solidarity.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, when primatologists go one step further and refer to structure, rank, order, families and caste, they always do this *after* having instrumentalized their observations. This allows them precisely to escape from extreme interactionism through the fabrication of a large number of panoptica and through elaboration, on computers, of a large number of statistical correlations.<sup>15</sup> In doing this they get closer to the human condition, but they doubtless get further away from the manner in which monkeys get to cluster their interactions *without* the benefit of these instruments, panoptica, markers and calculators.

Even though it may not constitute a proof of this, the case of the primatologist's own scientific work constitutes a valuable indication. In order to go from interactions to their sum, you need an instrument, some tool capable of summarizing and summing up. Those who believe in social structures always presuppose the prior existence of that *sui generis* being, society, which is then "manifested" through interactions. Now the only proof that we have for the existence of this being emerges from the impossibility of carrying out a face to face interaction without the immediate arrival with it of a jumble of relationships with other beings from other places and other times. Only the weakness of face-to-face interaction forces the invention of a *framework* defined as that which is always already present in the structure. Now it does not follow from the fact that an interaction presents the contradictory form of a local framework and a network of heterogeneous relationships, that there is thereby a need to leave behind the solid terrain of interactions in order to shift to the "higher level" of society. Even if these two levels really existed, there would be too many steps between them missing. Take the example of dominance relations in male baboons, which quite clearly brings out the flaw in the reasoning here. There are many trials of aggression between males to decide who is strongest. If one wanted in fact to construct an ordered relationship going from the strongest to the weakest, one could not do it except at the price of shortening observation time to a few days!<sup>16</sup> But what does it mean to have a hierarchy that fluctuates on a daily basis? How can you say that a baboon has "entered on" or is "ascending a" dominance scale, if that scale has to be recalculated every three days? This probably means that sociology passes too quickly from interaction to structure, in the case of baboons as well as for humans. Each monkey poses itself the question of knowing who is stronger or weaker than itself, and develops trials that permit it to decide the matter. But as good ethnomethodologists, none uses the concept of rank or hierarchy to do this. The primatologist manages to do so of course, but only with the help of numerous calculations, instruments and graphs. Should we forget the *presence* of this equipment for primatologists and its *absence* for baboons?

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. Is it by means of events induced by interaction itself that would thus transcend the previsions of actors?<sup>17</sup> Can the gulf be spanned by involuntary changes caused by perverse effects emanating from an always bounded rationality?<sup>18</sup> Or through a phenomenon of self-transcendence that brings collective phenomena into play, in the same way as order emerges from chaos?<sup>19</sup> Or do we need to posit a contract, which reduces dispersed actions to a single totalitarian action by a sovereign who is nobody in particular?<sup>20</sup> Or on the contrary, if the gulf cannot be spanned, should we accept the prior existence of a *sui generis* entity that is always present and which contains interactions like so many specialized cells in an organism?<sup>21</sup> Or again, should we pose that there is between the two extremes a set of intermediaries which permit the transportation into action of the social "field" through the vehicle of the "habitus"; and thus render to structure, by way of individual action, what had been taken from it?<sup>22</sup> There are not very many ways of answering these questions, even if one is allowed to innovate by reworking the small number of available models into new combinations.<sup>23</sup> In any event, these theories presuppose the prior existence of the question that they are seeking to resolve: that there is a yawning gulf separating the agent from structure, the individual from society. Now if there is no gulf, then sociological theory would find itself in the rather odd situation of having tried to provide ever more refined solutions to a non-existent problem.

By setting out before our very eyes the paradise of interactionists and ethnomethodologists, simian sociology demonstrates for us a social life in which interaction and structure are *co-extensive*. There is no framed interaction here, since no relationship is protected from sometimes very rapid

contagion from all the others. But neither is there a jot more structure—since each interaction must, locally and on its own account, test all over again the set of relationships without being able to sum, nor to enter into a determined role or function that would hold by itself without the aid of physical bodies. However, monkeys do indeed offer a demonstration of what a *social* society would be—that is to say one conforming to the demands of social theory requiring a passage from the individual to the social “level” by a series of operators that are *themselves* social. But we could not extract from such a group life (framed) interaction or society or agency or structure. All we could get is the impression of an extremely dense and tightly woven but nevertheless plastic and soft tissue that remains always flat. As a consequence, the gulf that, according to sociologists, separates the individual from society is not some primitive given. If we take simian social lives as a partially mythical base line, this abyss remains *invisible*. Something else is needed to have dug it out. Social life, at least in its human form, must depend on something *other* than the social world.

Primatologists attempting to compile structural effects have to instrumentalize their observations with equipment that becomes ever more central to the task at hand. In order to frame an interaction, we need partitions and hideaways. In order to follow an interaction, we need to sketch a quite heterogeneous network that mixes up times, places and actors, and which forces us to ceaselessly traverse the fixed framework. Thus every time that we go from the complex social life of monkeys to our own, we are struck by the multiple causes that at once come into play to dislocate co-presence from social relationships. In passing from the one to the other, we do not go from a simple sociality to a complex one, but we do go from a complex sociality to a *complicated* one. The two adjectives, although they have exactly the same etymology, will allow us to differentiate two relatively different forms of social existence. “Complex” will signify the simultaneous presence in all interactions of a great number of variables, which cannot be treated discretely. “Complicated” will mean 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. Complicated is just as different from complex as simple is.<sup>24</sup> The connotations of these two words allow us to fight the evolutionists’ prejudices, which always paint a slow progression from monkeys to humans on a scale of increasing complexity. Let us say, to the contrary, that we descend from monkeys to humans, falling from high complexity to high complication. At each point, our social life appears always less complex than that of a baboon, but it is almost always more complicated.

Framed interaction is not local by itself—as if the individual actor, that necessary ingredient for social life with whom one then has to construct the totality, had existed for all time. We will not find that actor amongst the monkeys (who nevertheless live in the paradise, or rather the hell, of interactionism). Amongst humans, on the other hand, an interaction is actively *localized* by a set of partitions, frames, umbrellas, fire-breaks, which permit passage from a situation that is complex to one that is merely complicated. While I am at the counter buying my postage stamps and talking into the speaking grill, I don’t have my family, colleagues or bosses breathing down my neck. And, thank heavens, the server doesn’t tell me stories about his mother-in-law, or his darlings’ teeth. A baboon could not operate such a felicitous channeling. Any other baboon could interfere in any one interaction.

Inversely, structure is not global just by itself, as if it had existed for all time as a *sui generis* being from whose body individual actor gradually detached itself. We never find among the monkeys (who have no framed interaction) any social structure: the very thing that according to social theory is necessary to balance interactions. For humans, on the other hand, we actively *globalize* successive interactions through use of a set of instruments, tools, accounts, calculations and compilers. These allow us to pass from one complicated and in the end isolatable relationship to other complicated relationships, which are in the end linked to it.<sup>25</sup> In the evening, the post office official can do her

accounts and compile summaries that enable an overview of the interesting parts of all the framed interactions that took place at every grill. Baboons cannot calculate such overviews: what is missing is precisely summaries and traces. They only have their bodies with which to compose the social, only their vigilance and the active engagement of their memory to "hold" relationships together.

Since for monkeys there is no difference in kind between interaction and society, there is neither (framed) interaction nor structure. For humans, an abyss seems to separate individual action from the weight of a transcendent society. But this is not an original separation that some social theory concept could span and which might serve to distinguish us radically from other primates. It is an *artifact* created by the forgetting of all practical activities for localizing and globalizing. Neither individual action nor structure are thinkable without the work of *rendering local*—through channeling, partition, focusing, reduction—and without the work of *rendering global*—through instrumentation, compilation, punctualization, amplification. One cannot get anywhere in sociological theory if one is forced to *start* from the substantial existence of either individual action or structure. But, more curiously, one cannot make headway either if, trying to be reasonable, one decides to work simultaneously from the two opposite poles of the actor and the system in order to then work out an intermediary formula for arranging the two.<sup>26</sup> The combination of two artifacts could only produce a third, yet more annoying, one. To take advantage of the comparative basis that simian societies offer us, we don't have to work from interaction or structure or from between the two—but from the work of localization and globalization, which has been up to the present beyond the pale for social theory, which apes and monkeys seem incapable of, and which forces us to have recourse to elements that do not at first sight appear to belong to the social repertoire.

### Must Sociology Remain Without an Object?

As against the social interaction of monkeys, the social interaction of humans always appears to be more dislocated. There is no simultaneity nor continuity nor homogeneity. Far from limiting oneself to bodies that are co-present by way of their attention to each other and their continual work of vigilance and construction; for humans one must appeal to other elements, other times, other places and other actors in order to grasp an interaction. Of course for baboons certain relationships can extend over decades and thus demand, in order to be understood, an allusion to past events.<sup>27</sup> But these latter brought to bear other bodies that were present, and are only transported into the current situation by the living memory or the genetic embodiment of those same bodies. For baboons, the social is always woven with the social: hence its lack of durability and the considerable work that is necessary to make it, despite everything, hold together. By contrast, human social life appears to be lopsided. In order to describe this quality, this dislocation, this constant appeal to other elements that are absent from the place of something else that is not there, but which one can refer to by allusion. Thus the argument goes that the absent structure makes itself felt through symbols. By this means humans distinguish themselves from monkeys, or at least such is the usual line of reasoning. We need, it is said, to supplement primate social links with human symbolic links. However, this hypothesis does not hold, in the literal meaning of the work—for what do symbols hold on to? If the social is not solid enough to make interactions last—as examples from simian societies show—how could signs do the job? How could the brain alone stabilize that which bodies cannot?<sup>28</sup>

In order to get from a complex social life to a complicated one, we need to be able to timeshift, dislocate, make lopsided and delegate the present interaction so as to make it rest provisionally on something else, while waiting to take it up again. But what other thing? On the social itself? Yes, in

part, since monkeys do this enthusiastically. The interlacing of interactions certainly offers them that relatively durable matter on which they can in effect base themselves. Could it be based on symbols? This is not very probable, since they in their turn must be held by something other than the memory or the mind or the naked brain of primates. Symbols could not be fundamental. When they are sufficiently sustained, when cognitive capacities are sufficiently instrumentalized heavy enough, then it will be possible to provisionally attach meaning to them, but not before.<sup>29</sup> Why not appeal to something else—to those innumerable objects that are absent for monkeys and omnipresent for humans—whether localizing or globalizing an interaction? How could you conceive of a counter without a speaking grill, a surface, the door, walls, a chair? Do not these, literally, shape the frame of the interaction? How could you compute the daily balance of an office without formulae, receipts, accounts, ledgers—and how can one miss the solidity of the paper, the durability of the ink, the etching of the chips, the shrewdness of staples and the shock of a rubber stamp? Is it not these things that enable totalization? Are not sociologists barking up the wrong tree when constructing the social with the social or patching it up with the symbolic, whilst objects are omnipresent in all the situations in which they are looking for meaning? Why does sociology, in their hands, remain without an object?

It is always difficult to appeal to things in order to explain either durability, extension, solidity and structures or localization, reduction, the framing of interactions. Indeed, for the human sciences, things have become untouchable since, with the exact sciences, they became “objective.” After this split, operated in the modern period, between an objective world and a political world, things could not serve as comrades, colleagues, partners, accomplices or associates in the weaving of social life.<sup>30</sup> Objects could only appear in three modes: as invisible and faithful tools, as the determining superstructure and as a projection screen. As tools they faithfully transmit the social intention that traverses them, without taking anything from them or adding anything on to them. As infrastructures, they interconnect and form a continuous material base over which the social world of representations and signs subsequently flows. As screens, they can but reflect social status, and serve as a basis for subtle games of distinction. As a tool, the speaking grill, for instance, would serve only to prevent customers from attacking the staff, and its function goes no further; it does not influence the interaction, only facilitates or hinders it. As an infrastructure, the speaking grill is directly connected to walls, partitions and computers so as to compose a material world that, it is said, completely shapes the remainder of the relationship just as a waffle iron molds a waffle. As a projection screen, the same speaking grill doesn’t have any glass or wood or orifice or matter left—it becomes a sign, different from plate glass, barriers, bay windows, landscaped offices and thus signaling a difference in status, or signifying the modernization of public service. Slave, master or substrate of a sign—in each case the objects themselves remain invisible, in each case they are asocial, marginal, impossible to engage in detail in the construction of society.<sup>31</sup>

Do we need to compose the social world with individual actors, or on the contrary begin with a society that is always already there? Do we need to consider objects as determining the social world, or should we, on the contrary, work from interactions alone? These two questions come down to a single one that traces a kind of cross: Structure, Interaction (from top to bottom) and Objective, Social (from left to right). Whence comes then the problem of the actor and the system? From the obligation to choose a point of departure, either in structure or in individual action or from the two extremes at once. But these points of departure *are not primitive*—we learned this from the monkeys, since interaction has to be framed and structure has to be structured, globalized. The point of departure, if there is one, must rather be situated “in the middle,” in an action that localizes and globalizes, which dislocates and disperses—an action that simian societies seem to be able to do without. However, in order to situate this locus, we need to be able to share the social with things, which seems equally undoable—not because of the abyss that separates the actor from the system, but because of the no less



significant break that separates the objective world from the political world, the exact from the human sciences, nature from culture. As a result of this break, objects cannot irrupt into the social world without denaturing it.<sup>32</sup> And, symmetrically of course, society cannot invade the sciences without corrupting them.<sup>33</sup> One can understand the dilemmas of sociology since it is faced with finding its essential resource at the pit of this double abyss, this double impossibility. It is because it is stretched horizontally between the objective and politics that sociology has no place for things. And *therefore* it finds itself torn vertically between the actor and the system. Forgetting artifacts (in the sense of things) has meant the creation of that other artifact (in the sense of illusion): a society that has to be held in place with just the social. However, the operator, exchanger, agitator, and animator that is capable of both localizing and globalizing sits right in the center of this cross. It can weave the properties of objects with those of the social. But what is it?

Too often sociology remains without an object. Like many human sciences, it has constructed itself so as to resist attachment to objects, which it calls fetishes. It has taken the ancient admonition of the prophets against gods, merchandise, consumer goods and objets d'art to heart: "Idols have eyes and yet do not see, mouths and yet do not speak, ears and yet do not hear." According to them something else animates these lifeless bodies, dead statues: our belief, the social life that we project onto them. The fetishes do not count for anything in themselves. They are merely a projection screen. However, they do indeed add something else to the society that manipulates them: objectification. Like so many overhead retroprojectors, these idols reverse the sense of action—leaving the poor humans who have given them everything they have the impression that their force comes from them alone, and that it is this force that renders humans impotent, which makes them act, which alienates them. The human sciences have for a long time been trying to reverse this reversal. Through a retroprojection symmetrical with the first, they reveal the labor of humans and their multiple animation in the lifeless body of the fetish.<sup>34</sup> The deontology of sociologists demands this anti-fetishism of them. Thus it is clear why reintroducing the objects, speaking again of the weight of things, according inanimate beings real social forces is for them an error: the error of returning to objectivism, naturalism, or belief. However, we cannot make a place for objects without modifying the deontology of the social sciences, and without accepting a certain dose of fetishism.<sup>35</sup> Objects do *do* something, they are not merely the screens or the retroprojectors of our social life. Their sole function is not merely to "launder" the social origin of the forces that we project onto them.

If we want to give a role back to objects in this manufacturing of the social link, then we must of course also abandon anti-fetishist reflexes, just as we must abandon the other role given by the human sciences to objects—the objectivity of natural forces—as well. Everything seems to lead to a position where sociology oscillates between two definitions of the object: the "bad object" or the fetish and the "good object" or the force. The former must be fought by showing that it is nothing but a substrate, an inverter, a dissimulator of beliefs. The latter must be discovered, through the application of appropriate methods, underneath the beliefs, opinions, passions and activity of humans. With these two roles for the object, the human sciences critique popular belief and seek to imitate (what they imagine to be) the natural sciences.<sup>36</sup> Sociology has for a long time alternated between these two roles for the object—neither of which permit it to become a complete social actor. Either objects do nothing except deceive or they do too much. Either they are totally manipulated by humans; or it is them, on the contrary, which manipulate unsuspecting humans. Either they are caused or they cause. "Ordinary" actors are always taken by surprise, whether believing in fetishes or thinking themselves free. In both cases, the science of sociology reveals the actors' peregrinations, and traps them between "bad objects" that they falsely believe in and "good objects" that make them act despite themselves. Critical

sociology has been fed for centuries by scientism on the one hand and the denunciation of fetishism on the other.<sup>37</sup>

Toolmaking, constructing the social, acting, interacting, localizing, globalizing, determining, constraining—all these verbs rest not only on a certain model of the individual or collective, human or non-human actor but also on the definition of *action*. If it seems impossible to give objects that remain simply “objective” their place in society, it seems even more difficult to integrate them as the mere fabrication of an all powerful actor. In order to render them usable by sociological theory we must modify on the one hand the objective nature of objects and on the other hand the concept of action. Now normal anthropological usage presupposes in action a “making-be” for which it induces, by extension, a *subject* with appropriate competencies and an *object*, which thanks to the actor has now gone from potentiality to actuality. Nothing in this schema seems to be reusable by a social theory interested in sharing sociality with things. Indeed action cannot be the point of origin except at the price of *stopping* the circulation, or the series of transformations whose movement continually traces the social body. The competencies of the actor will be inferred *after* a process of attribution, pause, abutment or focusing. These must not be confused with the idea that the actor acts, as if actualizing some potentiality. But neither the concept of transformation, nor that of circulation can, without being altered, replace the idea of an action with a point of origin. In order to amend them, we need to consider any point as being a mediation, that is to say, as an *event*, which cannot be defined in terms of inputs and outputs or causes or consequences. The idea of mediation or event enables us to retain the only two characteristics of action that are useful, i.e., the emergence of novelty together with the impossibility of *ex-nihilo* creation, without in the process conserving anything of the Western anthropological schema that always forces the recognition of a subject and an object, a competence and a performance, a potentiality and an actuality.

The normal theory of the actor is no more salvageable than that of action. As soon as one affirms that an actor, whether individual or collective, cannot be the point of origin of action, then it seems that actors must be immediately dissolved into fields of force. Now to act is to be perpetually overtaken by what one does. “Faire c’est faire.” To do is to make happen. When one acts, others proceed to action. It follows that one can never reduce or dissolve an actor into a field of forces, or into a structure.<sup>38</sup> One can only share in the action, distribute it with other actants.<sup>39</sup> This is as true for its manufacture, as for its manipulation. It is a tired old joke against sociologists to pretend that their actors are like puppets in the hands of “social forces.” This is a very good example, but it proves the exact contrary of what is generally supposed. If you talk with a puppeteer, then you will find that he is perpetually surprised by his puppets. He makes the puppet do things that cannot be reduced to his action, and which he does not have the skill to do, even potentially. Is this fetishism? No, it is simply a recognition of the fact that we are *exceeded* by what we create. To act is to mediate another’s action. But what holds upstream for manufacture also holds downstream for manipulation. Let us suppose that something else is, metaphorically, pulling the strings of our puppeteer—a social actor, the “artistic field,” the “spirit of the times,” the “epoch,” “society” and so forth. This new actant, behind him, can no more master him than he can in turn master the puppet. One can only associate mediators, no one of which, ever, is exactly the cause or the consequence of its associates. Thus it is not the case that there are actors on the one side and fields of forces on the other. There are only actors—actants—any one of which can only “proceed to action” by association with others who may surprise or exceed him/her/it.

How difficult social theory is! Social complexity, once the province of humanity, is now to be shared with other primates, and thus its evolution must be traced over millions of years. Interaction

cannot serve as the point of departure, since for humans it is always situated in a framework that is always erased by networks going over in all directions. As for the opposite pole, that famous so-called *sui generis* society, it only holds together through heterogenesis, and it seems rather to be the ever provisional point of arrival of compilation and summation work that requires a lot of equipment, and weighty tools. The new cognitive capacities owe their extension less to the powers of symbols than to those of the instruments that hold them. It is impossible to work from a—collective or individual—actor, since the attribution of a skill to an actant always follows the realization by that actor of what it can do when others than itself have proceeded to action. Even the everyday usage of “action” cannot serve here, since it presupposes a point of origin and a transport of force, both of which are completely improbable. Not action, nor the actor, nor interaction, nor the individual, nor the symbol, nor the system, nor society, nor their numerous combinations can be redeployed. There is nothing astonishing in this, since sociological theory (no more than physics or geology can) should not expect to find the terms that it needs in everyday usage—above all if, ceasing to be modernist, it reverses the Great Divide and takes responsibility for the “social life of things.” Follow the actors themselves, is the slogan of our sociology; indeed, but it is not said *how* to follow them.

### From the Study of the Soul of Society to that of its Body

Monkeys almost never engage with objects in their interactions. For humans it is almost impossible to find an interaction that does not make some appeal to technics.<sup>40</sup> Interactions can proliferate for monkeys, calling into play, gradually, the whole troop. Human interaction is most often localized, framed, held in check. By what? By the frame, precisely, which is made up of non-human actors. Do we need to appeal to determination by material forces or to the power of structure to go from interaction to its framework? No, we simply transport ourselves to the places and times where the frame has been conceived and built. The example of the counter will once again serve to elucidate this point. If we let our attention slide from the interaction that is provisionally holding us together, the post-office worker and I, across to the walls, the speaking grill, the rules and formulae then we need to go elsewhere. We do not suddenly land in “society” or in the “administration.” We circulate smoothly from the offices of the post office’s architect, where the counter model was sketched and the flux of users modeled. My interaction with the worker was anticipated there, statistically, years before—and the way in which I leaned on the counter, sprayed saliva, filled in forms, was anticipated by ergonomists and inscribed in the agency of the post office. Of course they didn’t see me standing there in the flesh, any more than they saw the worker. But it would be a serious mistake to say that I was not there. I was inscribed there as a category of user, and today I have just carried out this role and have actualized the variable with my own body. Thus I am indeed connected from the post office to the architect by a slender but solid thread that makes me go from being a personal body in interaction with a worker to a type of user represented on a blueprint. Inversely, the framework sketched out years ago remains, through the intervention of Portuguese workers, concrete, carpenters and fiberglass, the framework that holds, limits, channels and authorizes my conversation with the post office worker. As soon as the objects are added in, it will be seen that we must get used to circulating in time, in space, across levels of materialization—without ever coming across familiar landscapes nor face to face interaction nor some social structure that, it is said, makes us act.<sup>41</sup> Nor, of course, do we encounter the yet more familiar and murky landscape of attempted compromises between these two models of action.

The interactionists are right when they say that we should never leave interactions—but if one follows human interactions then one never stays in the same place, nor ever in the presence of the same

actors and never in the same temporal sequence. Herein lies the complete mystery that made their adversaries say that they did not take “structural effects” or “the macro” into account. By dislocating interaction so as to associate ourselves with non-humans, we can endure beyond the present, in a matter other than our body, and we can interact at a distance, which it is difficult for a baboon or a chimpanzee to do. As a common shepherd all I have to do is delegate to a wooden fence the task of containing my flock—then I can just go to sleep with my dog beside me. Who is acting while I am asleep? Me, the carpenters, and the fence. Am I expressed in this fence as if I had actualized outside of myself a competence that I possessed in potential form? Not in the slightest. The fence doesn’t look at all like me. It is not an extension of my arms or of my dog. It is completely beyond me. It is an actant in its own right. Did it appear all of a sudden out of objective matter ready to crush my poor fragile, sleepy body with its material constraints? No, I went folding myself into it precisely because it did not have the same durability, duration, plasticity, temporality—in short the same ontology—as me. By folding myself into it, I was able to slip from a complex relationship that demanded my continual vigilance to a merely complicated relationship that didn’t demand any more of me than to padlock the gate. Are the sheep interacting with me when they bump their muzzles against the rough pine planks? Yes, but they are interacting with a me that is, thanks to the fence, disengaged, delegated, translated and multiplied. There is indeed a complete actor who is henceforth added to the social world of sheep, although it is one that has characteristics totally different from those of bodies. Any time an interaction has temporal and spatial extension, it is because one has shared it with non-humans.<sup>42</sup>

If we want to analyze not only baboon but also human societies, then we must hear the word *interaction* differently. This expression does not only signify that in all points of society action remains local, and that it always surprises those who engage in it. It signifies that action must be *shared* with other kinds of actants dispersed in other spatio-temporal frameworks and who exhibit other kinds of ontology. At time  $t$ , I find myself in contact with beings who have acted at  $t-1$ , and I fold the situations together so that I myself will act under another form at  $t+1$ . In situation  $s$ , I find myself attached to situations  $s-1$ , and I act such that downstream situations  $s+1$  come to be associated with mine. On top of this disengagement, this dislocation in time and in space, interaction operates an *actantial* shifting-out.<sup>43</sup> Any ego chosen as the reference point finds itself pre-inscribed by the set of egos available to it in the diversified form of durable things. None of these distances proves the existence of another “level,” or of a social structure. We always go from one point to another. We never get away from interaction. But this latter forces us to follow numerous instances of shifting out. How can an actor endure in the midst of this diversity? Through the work of narrative creation that permits an “I” to hold together over time.<sup>44</sup> How is this narrative construction itself maintained? By the body, by that old basis of primate sociality that renders our bodies skillful in maintaining interactions.

If interactions are framed by other actants dispersed in space and time, attempts to aggregate are no less so. The life of Parisians, for example, is perhaps made up only of successive interactions, but we should not forget the multiple panoptica that strive each day to sum up Parisian life. Control rooms that manage traffic lights; panels at all points of the water distribution network; huge synoptic tableaux allowing French electricity board officials to calculate down to the second the end of a film being broadcast on Channel First; computers calculating the routes and loads of garbage trucks; sensors permitting a count of the number of visitors to a museum. In a single day and from a single person many small “I”s are collected—statistical “I”s because she has used her car, flushed her toilet, turned off her television set, put out her rubbish bin or visited the Orsay museum. For all that, do those who have collected, compiled and computed constitute a social structure above her? By no means. They work in control rooms that are themselves just as localized, just as blind, just as framed as that person is at any moment of her day. How then can they sum up? In the same way that that person can limit herself

at any instant to an interaction. Because sensors, counters, radio signals, computers, listings, formulae, scales, circuit-breakers, servo-mechanisms need to be added in; it is these that permit the link to be made between one place and another, distant, one (at the price of installing some costly equipment). You can't make a social structure without this compilation work. However, you can explain structuration *effects* with it. Thousands of people in Paris strive to locally structure Parisians—each using their own equipment and their own categories. This is the profound truth of ethnomethodology. All that remains is to restore to it what it had itself forgotten: the *means* of constructing the social world.

If you set yourself the task of following practices, objects and instruments, you never again cross that abrupt threshold that should appear, according to earlier theory, between the level of “face-to-face” interaction and that of the social structure; between the “micro” and the “macro.” The work of localization, like that of globalization, is always carried out by bodies in times and places far apart from others. Sometimes it is a question of, at great cost, constructing continuity in time for an individual actor; sometimes summarizing, at great cost, the interactions of a more or less large number of actors. You do not have to choose your level of analysis at any given moment: just the direction of your effort and the amount you are willing to spend. Either you can, intensively, know much about little, or, extensively, little about much. Social worlds remain flat at all points, without there being any folding that might permit a passage from the “micro” to the “macro.”<sup>45</sup> For example the traffic control room for Paris buses does indeed dominate the multiplicity of buses, but it would not know how to constitute a structure “above” the interactions of the bus drivers. It is *added* on to those interactions. The old difference of levels comes merely from overlooking the material connections that permit one place to be linked to others and from belief in purely face-to-face interactions.

In founding sociology, believers in social structure immediately denied it the practical means of understanding localization and globalization, the shifting out of an individual actor as well as the knitting together of interactions. Or rather, they all saw that it was essential, in order to distinguish ourselves from monkeys, to take material means—things—into account. But they treated these means as mere intermediaries, as mere transfers of a force which had to come from another source—from a *sui generis* society or from aggregated individual rational humans. This relative contempt for means was exercised three times: firstly on machines, then on control technology, and finally on intellectual technologies. They imagined that at root we were monkeys to which had been added by a simple prosthesis, buildings, computers, formulae or steam engines. However, objects are not means, but rather mediators—just as all other actants are. They do not transmit our force faithfully, any more than we are faithful messengers of theirs. By picturing a social society which had found a material body by chance, they once again exercised, despite their will to be materialist a new form of spiritualism. In speaking of the social body they only spoke in fact about its *soul*. They took humans for monkeys surrounded by things. 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.

## Notes

The current version of this paper was translated by Geoffrey Bowker. I also thank him for his efforts in making my social theory less idiosyncratic. A shorter version of this paper has appeared in French: (1994). Une sociologie sans objet? Note théorique sur l'interobjectivité. *Sociologie du travail*, 36(4), 587-607. This article owes a lot to a long collaboration with Shirley Strum and Michel Callon. The baboons of the former and the actor networks of the latter people each page.

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- <sup>1</sup> For a first attempt, see Latour and Strum (1986).
- <sup>2</sup> See the numerous descriptions of “diffracted” interactions in Strum (1987) and Cheney and Seyfarth (1990).
- <sup>3</sup> The expression “Machiavelian intelligence” comes from Byrne and Whiten (1988).
- <sup>4</sup> The comparison between Wilson (1971), who still uses the concept of superorganism and Wilson (1975), who does not use it any more is a good marker of the turn in sociobiology that calls for the composition of groups of bodies or ants through individual actions. The assimilation of a body to a marketplace may shock, but it does usefully dispense with metaphors of the social body that we have used profusely since the Roman fable of the “stomach and the organs.”
- <sup>5</sup> This is the case at least in baboons. The situation is much more complicated with chimpanzees. See McGrew (1992).
- <sup>6</sup> This is a disputed question in Cheney and Seyfarth (1990) and Dennett (1987, p. 237).
- <sup>7</sup> Such have been the specifications of interaction since at least Goffman (1959).
- <sup>8</sup> On this controversial question see Strum and Latour (1987).
- <sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the now classic rendering of Heritage (1984).
- <sup>10</sup> See the fascinating organicist, or rather sociobiological, metaphors in Durkheim (1984).
- <sup>11</sup> This is the meaning of “Machiavellian intelligence”: an intelligence born as a secondary adaptation to the hard conditions of social life (Byrne & Whitten, 1988).
- <sup>12</sup> See Goffman (1974) for the notion of frame taken as a metaphor of social focusing. It will be taken here also in its literal meaning.
- <sup>13</sup> For the dislocation of interaction as soon as one tries to designate the precise network it sketches, see Law (1992) and above all his latest book (1993).
- <sup>14</sup> In the classical definition provided by Durkheim.
- <sup>15</sup> Few primatologists would accept this way of presenting their work, since they use the same sociological theory for themselves as for their favored subjects. The work of scientific construction is absent from their description. It only becomes visible when certain results from the sociology of science are accepted. For an introduction, see Latour (1987). For a discussion of the advantages of reflexive sociology for the case of dominance relations see Strum (1987).
- <sup>16</sup> See Strum (1982). One cannot calculate stable dominance relationships for baboons except for females whose relationships can last several decades. See Fedigan (1982) for a general discussion and Haraway (1989) for the ideological environment of all those debates.
- <sup>17</sup> Such is the claim of interactionism (Goffman, 1959) and of symbolic interactionism more generally.
- <sup>18</sup> This is the claim of methodological individualism whose most extreme militant expression can be found in Boudon (1992).

- <sup>19</sup> See Dupuy (1992), who is using self-organization as the main biological metaphor instead of economics, as is the case of most sociobiology.
- <sup>20</sup> As in the powerful metaphor of the social contract of Hobbes (1651/1961).
- <sup>21</sup> See Durkheim (1984).
- <sup>22</sup> This is of course the solution of Bourdieu (1972; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which allows him to criticize both types of social theory by using *habitus* as the dialectical operator in the middle.
- <sup>23</sup> The rich diversity of these positions is omitted here in order to bring out the common pattern of their reasoning, which necessitates posing first the "problem" of social order and of the individual. See Latour and Strum (1986) for a classificatory principle for these models.
- <sup>24</sup> I am here summarizing the main argument of Strum and Latour (1987).
- <sup>25</sup> On this theme, which entails considering most structural effects as the performative result of practices of writing and instrumentation, taken widely, see, of course Goody (1977). For science see Latour and De Noblet (1985), and for accounting, Power (1995). For the case of State statistics see Desrosières (1993) and Porter (1995).
- <sup>26</sup> This is the limiting case of dialectical solutions like that of Bourdieu's *habitus* or more recently Friedberg (1993). The dialectic is always impotent in that it hides a problem that needs resolving under the pretense of "overpassing" it; it is even more troubling when trying to overpass an artificial contradiction.
- <sup>27</sup> See Strum's article in Latour and Lemonnier (1994).
- <sup>28</sup> This argument has taken a new weight from the recent refoundation of cognitive anthropology by Ed Hutchins (1995) since his theory of dissemination of representational states through different media does not require the symbolic definition of symbolism.
- <sup>29</sup> Human societies do not permit a study of "naked" cognitive capacities any more than they permit an analysis of a primitive complex social life. It is impossible to study the intellect without looking at "intellectual technologies." See the works of Don Norman (1993), Ed Hutchins (1995), Jean Lave (1988), and those of sociologists of science (see a beautiful recent example in Goodwin [1995]).
- <sup>30</sup> I am using here the symmetric anthropology argument made in Latour (1993). The situation is changing rapidly with the end of modernity, thanks to the two pronged attack of the sociology of techniques on the one hand (see, for instance, Bijker and Law, 1992), and on the other, the reobjectification of economics (see Appadurai, 1986, and more recently, Thomas, 1991). The comparative anthropology of technology is also evolving rapidly; see an excellent state of the art example in Lemonnier (1993).
- <sup>31</sup> The debate in archeology between form and function used to reflect this state of affairs. For a recapitulation of the arguments and their recent evolution, see Latour and Lemonnier (1994).
- <sup>32</sup> To get an idea of the horror triggered by this position even in smart sociologists, see Collins and Yearley (1992).
- <sup>33</sup> This is the classical epistemological position that has been dismantled by science studies, but which makes people believe that science studies are "anti-science" whereas they have, in effect, depoliticized the sciences from the obligation of holding the moral order.
- <sup>34</sup> One can recognize here the mechanisms studied by Marx for the economy and Durkheim for religion, which were popularized by Bourdieu for all objects to which common sense could in error become attached. See in particular Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) for the deontology of the "profession of sociologists." For a partial retort, see Hennion and Latour (1993).

<sup>35</sup> The job of fetishes is precisely to render the two meanings of the word fact compatible: what is fabricated, and what is true. By using the notion of fetish we are forced to always ask our questions as a contradiction: Is it fabricated? or is it true?

<sup>36</sup> The irruption of the sociology of science completely changed this obligation to imitate the exact sciences, since the latter no longer resemble the myths developed by epistemology. On the contrary, since they produce new non-humans to construct the collective with, the sciences become once again imitable, but they are too mixed up with the social sciences to be able to be ordered in a hierarchy with them. They become imitable in their subject matter, not in their form, and, of course, not in their epistemology.

<sup>37</sup> On the recent shift between critical sociology and the sociology of criticism see Boltanski & Thévenot (1991).

<sup>38</sup> The weakness of structuralism is to have sought rules beyond appearances, and to have imagined that some entity could simply "occupy a position" whereas it perpetually recreates one around itself, that it mediates. Hence, the opposition that proved fatal to this system of thought between a subject and the "death of the subject" dissolved into a field of forces (Dosse, 1991, 1995). But there are no subjects to dissolve, nor are there any fields of force to dissolve subjects in, since there exist no transport of force. There are only translations.

<sup>39</sup> The word "actant," which comes from semiology, permits widening the social question to all beings who interact in an association and who exchange their own properties, but it has its own defect. For a critique, see Latour, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> I am using the word here to refer to a *modus operandi*, where "artifact" or "object" designate the outcome of that operation.

<sup>41</sup> This position has been taken in practice by the work of many symbolic interactionists. See Star (1989 & 1995), especially her notion of boundary objects. What the present theoretical note does is simply to take away the notion of interaction and that of symbolism!

<sup>42</sup> See Latour (1994) on this example and the theory of the social that goes with it.

<sup>43</sup> Semiotics recognizes three kinds of shifting out: in time, in space, and in a new actant. One example is a story that begins with: "Once upon a time, in fairyland, a dwarf was one day walking calmly along. . . ." The notion of shifting out has the advantage of helping us to do away with the idea that technology is "efficient action on matter."

<sup>44</sup> The work necessary to produce the continuity of an ego is especially visible in the narrative theories of Ricoeur (1990).

<sup>45</sup> For the necessity of not choosing a scale to go from the micro to the macro in order to understand relative differences in size, see Callon and Latour (1981).

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