



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

EDCP 571

Bruno Latour and the Postsecular Turn in STS

Lecture Notes

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1. **Actors, Agents, Actants : : Reactors, Counter-Actors, Double Agents, Reactants**

- a. Note that for all ANT has had to say about networks, very, very little is said about actors. One gets the notion that “actors” are a given, taken for granted entity (i.e., without history or drama).
- b. Are actors networks? If an actor is a network, is a network an actor?
- c. Actor-Network Theory
 - i. Callon & Latour (“Unscrewing the Big Leviathan, 1981, p. 286): To replace the usual divisions (macro/micro; human/animal; social/technical), which we have shown to be unprofitable, we need terms in keeping with the methodological principles stated above.
 - ii. What is an ‘actor’? Any element which bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates the will into a language of its own. An actor makes changes in the set of elements and concepts habitually used to describe the social and the natural worlds. By stating what belongs to the past, and of ‘what the future consists, by defining what comes before and what comes after, by building up balance sheets, by drawing up chronologies, it imposes its own space and time. It defines space and its organization, sizes and their measures, values and standards, the stakes and rules of the game- the very existence of the game itself. Or else it allows another, more powerful than itself, to lay them down.
 - iii. Latour (“On Recalling ANT,” 1997)
 1. The second nail in the coffin is the word actor in its hyphenated connection with the notion of net. From day one, I objected to the hyphen because inevitably it would remind sociologists of the agency/structure cliché, or *‘pont aux ânes’* [tool to hold the horse’s mouth open] as we say in French.
 2. The managerial, engineering, machiavelian, demiurgic character of ANT has been criticized many times and by many people in this room. More exactly, critiques have alternated, quite predictably, between the two poles one turned around the actor, the other turned around the network; the first critiques have insisted on the demiurgic, male like, hairy gorilla character; the second on the dissolution of humanity into a field of forces where morality, humanity, psychology was absent; demiurgy on one side; death of man on the other.
 3. No matter how prepared I am to criticize the theory, I still think that these two symmetrical critiques are off target. The idea was never to occupy a position into the agency/structure debate, not even to **overcome** this contradiction. Contradictions should not be overcome, but ignored or bypassed. But I agree that the hyphenated term made impossible to see clearly the bypass operation that has been attempted.
 - iv. Hence, for Latour given the “bypass operation,” it might once have been redundant and counter-productive to talk about “actors” and “networks,” yet one is left, as the recent Latour (2013) demonstrates, with ostensibly with one option: compose, trace, follow, and talk about actors and networks (i.e., follow the evidence).
 - v. Murdoch (1997, p. 332): Actors are networks rather than human beings and these networks are relentlessly heterogeneous. It makes little sense, therefore, to delineate a humanistic geography when humans and nonhumans so promiscuously

exchange properties with one another (as Latour, 1993, believes to be the case at the present time).

- vi. Higgott (1998, p. 5): **Informal regional economic integration is emerging de facto**. This is market-led and the principal actors are networks of firms and corporations regionalising production in East Asia.

d. Agency

i. Human (Personal)

1. Remember, a trenchant critique by Lee & Brown (1994) is that ANT “opens discussion by problematizing the nonhuman and leaving the question of human agency itself unasked” (p. 772).
2. Sewell (1992, “A Theory of Structure,” p. 19): Any array of resources is capable of being interpreted in varying ways and, therefore, of empowering different actors and teaching different schemas. Again, this seems to me inherent in a definition of agency as the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts. Agency, to put it differently, is the actor's capacity to reinterpret and mobilize an array of resources in terms of cultural schemas other than those that initially constituted the array.
3. Emirbayer & Mische (“What is Agency?,” 1998, p. 970): What, then, is human agency? We define it as *the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*.
4. Bleeker (2006, “A Manifesto for Networked Objects,” p. 8): Agency is about having an ability to foment action, to be decisive and articulate, to foment action.
5. However helpful, Bleeker’s commonsense notion of agency as a possession has all the same issues of interpreting power as a force that one holds in potential.
6. Instead, agency is exercised, much like power is diffuse and exercised in a Foucauldian sense.
 - a. This contradicts habits of arguing or explaining that power resides in “powerful” people, institutions, machines, etc.
 - b. Foucault speaks of power relations or relations of power
 - c. Foucault (*Power/Knowledge*, 1980, pp. 98, 99): Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation.
 - d. One must rather conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination.
 - e. Foucault (“The Subject and Power,” 1982, p. 788): *What constitutes the specific nature of power?* The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. Which is to say, of course, that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is

assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures.

- f. Power and knowledge imply one another (i.e., power-knowledge) and this suggests the same diffuse and distributed state of knowledge.
 - g. Foucault (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, pp. 27-28): Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines its forms and possible domains of knowledge.
 - h. To analyse the political investment of the body and the microphysics of power presupposes, therefore, that one abandons — where power is concerned — the violence-ideology opposition, the metaphor of property, the model of the contract or of conquest; that — where knowledge is concerned — one abandons the opposition between what is 'interested' and what is 'disinterested', the model of knowledge and the primacy of the subject.
- ii. Giving Voice, Listening and Reporting : : Making Visible
 - 1. Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?", 1988, pp. 80, 89, 92, 104):
 - a. For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?
 - b. the Other of history. That inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text is what a postcolonial critic of imperialism would like to see developed within the European enclosure as the place of the production of theory. The postcolonial critics and intellectuals

can attempt to displace their own production only by presupposing that text-inscribed blankness. To render thought or the thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation. It is in the interest of such cautions that Derrida does not invoke 'letting the other(s) speak for himself' but rather invokes an 'appeal' to or 'call' to the 'quite-other' (tout-autre as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of 'rendering delirious that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us'.

- c. As Sarah Kofman has shown, the deep ambiguity of Freud's use of women as a scapegoat is a reaction-formation to an initial and continuing desire to give the hysteric a voice, to transform her into the subject of hysteria.... Thus, when confronted with the questions, Can the subaltern speak? and Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?, our efforts to give the subaltern a voice in history will be doubly open to the dangers run by Freud's discourse. As a product of these considerations, I have put together the sentence 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' in a spirit not unlike the one to be encountered in Freud's investigations of the sentence 'A child is being beaten'.
- d. The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.
2. Riessman (1993, p. 8): Feminists, for example, emphasize "giving voice" to previously silenced groups of women by describing the diversity of their experiences. I share the goal but am more cautious. We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret.
3. Casey (1995, p. 223): The problem, after all, is not with the voices that speak but with the ears that do not hear.
- iii. Non-human (Impersonal)
 1. Animism, anthropomorphism, fetishism, vitalism
 2. Ascription, personification
 3. Do non-humans or objects speak for themselves? Can the object speak?
 - a. Smith (2013): In titling the collection *Silent Messengers*, the editors wished to emphasize their view that objects do not speak for themselves but instead acquire meaning as they move.
 - b. Svabo (*Portable Objects at the Museum*, 2010): Objects, and in a broader sense the museum theme, do not speak for themselves, they depend on being bridged to the visitor. This is pointed out by museum scholar Eilean Hooper-Greenhill when she writes: "Objects do not speak for themselves. There is no necessary correspondence between meaning and artifact – no essential meaning, no single signification" (Hooper-Greenhill 2006a: 236).
 4. Can the object emerge or materialize? Which is to ask, is there auto-genesis or autopoiesis for the object? Or, is there teleonomy from raw to made?
 - a. Radlov (1975, p. 118): In a wooden stump, the statue already lies which will be carved from it. It is only necessary to understand all the possibilities concealed in it.
 5. Giving Voice, Listening and Reporting : : Making Visible
 - a. Do objects want to be visible?
 6. Enactment and Re-enactment

- a. To do and to perform
 - b. The “new” enactivism
- iv. The “new” animism
1. Latour (“Where are the Missing Masses,” 1992, p. 159-160): What is interesting in this note is the humor of attributing a human characteristic to a failure that is usually considered “purely technical.” This humor, however, is more profound than in the notice they could have posted: “The groom is not working.” I constantly talk with my computer, who answers back; I am sure you swear at your old car; we are constantly granting mysterious faculties to gremlins inside every conceivable home appliance, not to mention cracks in the concrete belt of our nuclear plants. Yet, this behavior is considered by sociologists as a scandalous breach of natural barriers. When you write that a groom is “on strike,” this is only seen as a “projection,” as they say, of a human behavior onto a nonhuman, cold, technical object, one by nature impervious to any feeling. This is *anthropomorphism*, which for them is a sin akin to zoophily but much worse.
 2. It is this sort of moralizing that is so irritating for technologists, because the automatic groom is already anthropomorphic through and through. It is well known that the French like etymology; well, here is another one: *anthropos* and *morphos* together mean either that which *has* human shape or that which *gives shape* to humans. The groom is indeed anthropomorphic, in three senses: first, it has been made by humans; second, it substitutes for the actions of people and is a delegate that permanently occupies the position of a human; and third, it shapes human action by prescribing back what sort of people should pass through the door. And yet some would forbid us to ascribe feelings to this thoroughly anthropomorphic creature, to delegate labor relations, to “project”—that is, to translate—other human properties to the groom.
 3. Latour (“Do Scientific Objects have a History?”, 1996, p. 77): The question I want to ask is whether it is possible to develop a sort of realism that would offer the agents of the world a more interesting role than that of passive object. Strangely, not many philosophers are interested in this metaphysical question. No matter whether they worship or hate science, most thinkers take for granted that scientific objects, accessible or not, behave as realists believe them to behave—that is in a passive and indifferent manner, wholly impervious to human history. The only alternatives that most philosophers can imagine are animism and anthropomorphism, horrors to which they always prefer the canonical version of objects seen *sub specie scientiae*. A. N. Whitehead is one of the interesting exceptions, and it is his “historical realism,” though largely out of fashion, that I want to use as my guide or goad for this exploration.
 4. Latour (“An Attempt at a ‘Compositionist Manifesto’,” 2010, p. 481): But there is no way to devise a successor to nature, if we do not tackle the tricky question of animism anew. One of the principal causes of the scorn poured by the Moderns on the sixteenth century is that those poor archaic folks, who had the misfortune of living on the wrong side of the “epistemological break,” believed in a world animated by all sorts of entities and forces instead of believing, like any rational person, in an inanimate matter producing its effects only through the power of its causes. It is this conceit that lies at the root of all the critiques of environmentalists as being too “anthropocentric” because they dare to “attribute” values, price, agency, purpose, to what cannot have and should not have any intrinsic value (lions, whales, viruses,

CO₂, monkeys, the ecosystem, or, worst of all, Gaia). The accusation of anthropomorphism is so strong that it paralyzes all the efforts of many scientists in many fields—but especially biology—to go beyond the narrow constraints of what is believed to be “materialism” or “reductionism.” It immediately gives a sort of New Age flavor to any such efforts, as if the default position were the idea of the inanimate and the bizarre innovation were the animate. Add agency? You must be either mad or definitely marginal.

e. Rational Actor Theory

- i. Renwick (1995, p. 2): How does a society composed of selfish citizens exist without the oppressive authoritarian government required by Hobbes to prevent chaos? Smith's answer was a gentle piece of brilliance. Each of us can pursue our individual self-interest and, if there is no government interference, the free market will serve as an invisible hand to ensure that the common good will emerge. This means human nature can indeed be self-interested, as Hobbes had suggested and as much empirical evidence has seemed to confirm; yet we may avoid the evils of Hobbes's authoritarian solution by recourse to the market mechanism. As articulated by Smith and his immediate followers in economics, neo-classical economic theory carries certain basic assumptions both about human psychology and about the way the world does and should work. Let me mention seven that are discussed later in this volume and which seem critical for understanding why economists may differ from other social scientists in their explanations of human behavior.
 1. Actors pursue goals.
 2. These goals reflect the actor's perceived self-interest.
 3. Behavior results from a process that involves, or functions as if it entails, conscious choice.
 4. The individual is the basic agent in society.
 5. Actors have preferences that are consistent and stable.
 6. If given options, actors will choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.
 7. Actors possess extensive information on both the available alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.
- ii. Although there have been important modifications in it over the years, it is not unfair to claim that “[p]ractically the whole of classic economic theory is constructed within the framework of this model” (Simon, 1982, Vol. 1, p. 213).

f. Actor Theory