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Sociology of a disciplinary bifurcation: Bruno Latour and his move from philosophy /theology to sociology in the early 1970s

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Abstract

This article analyzes Bruno Latour's transition from theology to sociology between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. The study cross-analyzes the philosophical field of the 1970s with the progress of interaction rituals specific to disciplinary integration. By examining his Master's degree in philosophy and a lecture carried out during his thesis, plus the report of his stay in Ivory Coast, it is possible to identify several stages of a disciplinary bifurcation. First anchored to the metaphysical sector of the philosophical field, Latour – like his masters André Malet, Jean Brun and Claude Bruaire – tried to dissolve the boundary between philosophy and theology. Nourished with Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutics – which generates a particularly powerful emotional energy –, the young philosopher drew from the new theological resources provided by Vatican II Council the instruments for a conversion to sociology. Before that, following in the Council's focus on prayer as the very core of the practice of believers, he had tried to turn prayer into an adequate mode of litany for analyzing texts. He then drew on the post-colonial opening of Vatican II to engage in the field of sociology, the Council having exhausted classical metaphysical questions. His discovery of the effects of colonial domination also played a fundamental role in mobilizing once again some emotional energy. Latour's disciplinary reclassification just before beginning his laboratory ethnography in California is based on a reassessment of the epistemological possibilities born from the theological innovations of Vatican II.

Keywords

Bruno Latour, sociology, theology, Vatican II

Résumé

Cet article analyse la transition de Bruno Latour de la théologie à la sociologie entre la fin des années 1960 et le milieu des années 1970. Cette étude met en parallèle le champ philosophique des années 1970 avec le progrès des rites d'interaction spécifiques à l'intégration disciplinaire. En examinant son mémoire de master en philosophie et une conférence donnée pendant la réalisation de sa thèse, ainsi que le rapport de son séjour en Côte d'Ivoire, il est possible d'identifier les différentes étapes d'une bifurcation disciplinaire. Tout d'abord ancré dans le secteur métaphysique du champ philosophique, Latour, tout comme ses maîtres André Malet, Jean Brun et Claude Bruaire, a essayé de dissoudre cette frontière entre la philosophie et la théologie. Nourri par l'herméneutique de Rudolf Bultmann, qui génère une énergie émotionnelle particulièrement puissante, le jeune philosophe a tiré des nouvelles ressources théologiques fournies par le concile Vatican II les instruments d'une conversion à la sociologie. Avant cela, suivant l'intérêt du concile pour la prière, considérée comme le cœur de la pratique des croyants, il avait essayé de faire de la prière un mode de liturgie adéquat pour l'analyse de textes. Il a ensuite profité de l'ouverture post-coloniale du concile Vatican II pour s'engager dans le champ de la sociologie, le concile ayant épuisé les questions métaphysiques classiques. Sa découverte des effets de la domination coloniale joua aussi un rôle fondamental dans la mobilisation, une nouvelle fois, de son énergie émotionnelle. La re-catégorisation disciplinaire de Latour juste avant qu'il commence son ethnographie en laboratoire en Californie est basée sur une réévaluation des possibilités épistémologiques nées des innovations théologiques du concile Vatican II.

Mots-clés

Bruno Latour, sociologie, théologie, Vatican II

Bruno Latour is a Catholic. He believes in God and identifies with most of the Christian dogma. That is clear and would need no additional comment, but his religious belief does interfere with his scholarly work. Several critics have pinpointed the metaphysical scope of his work (Heinich, 2007),

his concern for an exegetic interpretation of the world (Schmidgen, 2012), and his panentheism when questioning contemporary ecological categories (Lamy, 2017). Latour himself has, first very discreetly in *Rejoicing* (whose first French edition, published in 2002, was not signed), then currently much more openly (Latour, 2019a), acknowledged the significant influence of religion on his thinking. This religious belief (*i.e.* the belief in an impassable revelation)¹ is by no means peripheral to Latour's work. On the contrary, it is the very core of a kind of soteriological sociology (Stoczkowski, 2008, 2019) which much later characterized a program of environmental policy (Latour, 1999)². Earlier, the reference to religion, although discreet, was there, as shown by Henning Schmidgen (2012), in the parallel drawn between biblical exegesis and the semiotic quest for inscriptions in the laboratory. Because of the importance of the religious grounding of Latour's works, it is necessary to re-consider when and how he incorporated his belief in his research practice. This requires, on the one hand, to go back to his first, late 1960s-early 1970s, writings and, on the other hand, to understand the (rhetorical) transfers he kept making in his disciplinary choices. Although he recently 'came out' as a philosopher (Latour, 2010), addressing his readers of the sociology of sciences (in *Social Studies of Science*, the leading journal in the field), a few years before, he had definitely wished to 'go back to sociology'³ (Latour, 2006).

To link up the issue of young Latour's religious grounding to his successive disciplinary affiliations, one can examine how the author of *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) settled in the sociological field in the late 1970s. In line with what Pierre Bourdieu had initiated regarding Martin Heidegger – who was able to disseminate a message originating from the political field into the philosophical field (Bourdieu, 1988a) –, I propose to expose the sociogenesis of Bruno Latour's fundamentally theological stand. The aim is to articulate the matrix of his religious beliefs with the field logics which brought him from philosophy to sociology, with the same corpus of questions borrowed from Christian theology. José Luis Moreno Pestaña (2006) demonstrated how Michel Foucault, when offered to choose between clearing up the field of psychology or following the philosophical path, finally gave up the former to comply with the latter: in line with his academic habitus (a graduate from the *École Normale Supérieure*, holder of the *agrégation* in philosophy) in an intellectual field demanding rather standardized productions (*cf.* one of Foucault's first studies about Ludwig Binswanger). For Bruno Latour, things were different. First because the field significantly changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Then, because his position as a holder of the *agrégation* (ranked first) who did not come from the *École Normale* but from a provincial university (Dijon), from a wine bourgeois family of Bourgogne and who was working in the field of religious philosophy was quite unusual. Nevertheless, young Latour was faced with the same question of disciplinary ranking, *i.e.* determining the different opportunities offered.

Besides the analysis of Bruno Latour's positioning in the philosophical field of the 1970s, I will account for his intellectual commitments by referring to Randall Collins' theory of interaction rituals. It consists in taking into consideration that philosophers – like any individuals involved in social relations – get together around a number of rituals which mobilize, for each of them, some 'emotional energy, in proportion to the intensity of the interaction' (Collins, 1998: 22). Direct oral

¹ In *Jubiler ou les tourments de la parole religieuse (Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech)*, Latour spoke of « the poison of belief » which, according to him, would prevent from « coming back to religion » (Latour, 2013: 9 and 10). My approach is more commonplace and I would take on Pierre Bourdieu's twofold definition of belief, particularly when it has to do with the religious field: « If the problem is addressed with such intensity in the case of religion, it is because the religious field is, like all other fields, a world of belief, but this one actually deals with belief. The belief which the institution organises (belief in God, in the dogma, etc.) means to hide the belief in the institution, the *obsequium*, and all the interests required by the reproduction of the institution » (Bourdieu, 1987: 157). This definition correlates Latour's personal Catholic belief to what actually conditions the opportunity for expressing more or less publicly this belief.

² Today, Latour seems to take full responsibility for the religious significance of his program for a policy for nature when discussing the environmental redirection of the official Church speech. See Latour, 2019b.

³ It is to be noted that Latour's radical empiricism, as advocated in this work, makes it possible for social sciences to be accepted by believers: by reducing their practice to a very limited empiricism and by keeping theory within religion and theology, Latour takes up a position which used to be Frédéric Le Play's in the 19th century (see Heilbron, 2015: 72–73).

All quotes from French articles or books have been translated in English by the author of this article.

exchanges constitute the matrix of these interaction chains, since they consolidate agreements and viewpoints. But, as Collins remarked, ‘intellectuals are especially oriented toward the written word’ (Collins, 1998: 25). Similarly, ‘since words, ideas, and texts are loaded with connotations of membership in different segments of intellectual communities, the experience of reading, even of thinking about intellectual topics also affects one’s emotional energies’ (Collins, 1998: 39). Therefore, Bruno Latour’s emotional commitments in the course of his disciplinary bifurcation will serve as reference points to help understand which academic bonds were at work and which rituals called forth. Randall Collins’ proposals coincide with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of field, to the extent that the notions of emotional energy and of interaction rituals provide tools to analyze the pliability of the structures of the given field.

I will, therefore, first examine the situation of the philosophical field at the time when the future author of *We Have Never Been Modern* had to choose his career. The second part will be devoted to his Master’s degree dissertation, entitled *La Fuite du réel* (*Flight from reality*) defended in 1970 at Dijon University. I will, in the third part, focus on a text related to his PhD thesis defended at Tours University in 1975. The last part will examine the report Bruno Latour made for ORSTOM (Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer, the former French Research Institute for Development (IRD)), after his cooperation stay in Ivory Coast in 1977.

It is important to note that Latour’s disciplinary trajectory is influenced by his social background. This is what he said: ‘I am from the typical French provincial bourgeoisie, from Burgundy where my family has produced wine for generations, and my only ambition is that people would say ‘I read a Latour 1992’ with the same pleasure as they would say ‘I drank a Latour 1992’’ (Crawford, 1993: 239). Philosophy as a discipline has long been valued by the bourgeoisie; it was seen as a discipline enabling ‘the reconciliation of the different fractions of the bourgeoisie formerly opposed on the issues of republican regime, School and the Church’ (Pinto, 2007: 32). Philosophy is the ‘crown of the disciplines’ (Fabiani, 1988: 10), capable of concentrating elite social expectations and of generating some emotional energy of particular significance to shape future intellectuals. Pierre Bourdieu has clearly demonstrated how ‘teachers of philosophy [...] commit all the social subconscious’ of the dominant class in the lecture they deliver to ‘bourgeois teenagers ready to share in’, renewing social distinctions between ‘the distinguished and the coarse, the rare and the common’ under more sophisticated forms such as ‘the authentic’ and ‘the inauthentic’ (Bourdieu, 1988b: 63–64). Here, the interaction ritual of the propaedeutic class (*i.e.* introduction to philosophy) goes hand in hand with the re-affirmation of social hierarchies and distinctions.

The article will therefore question the socio-historical conditions which determined Bruno Latour’s choice of sociology while his studies had led him to settle either for philosophy or theology, so as to understand how sociology could become a possible direction. I will examine the political, religious and disciplinary basic elements which compelled Bruno Latour to make this choice. But one should be careful of the *ex-post* reconstruction Bruno Latour operated to consolidate his own representation, recorded in a continuously updated self-fiction required by the necessity to ‘shape up’ his diverse and multi-faceted research experience into a coherent path (Adell & Lamy, 2016). When, being interviewed in 2012 in *Raisons politiques*, he claimed: ‘As for myself, I have never really belonged to one discipline and my approach has always been that of empirical philosophy’⁴ (Latour, Godmer, & Smadja, 2012: 120), he was trying to discursively discard the conditions determining the concrete opportunities available to him when confronted to a disciplinary involvement⁵. One of the characteristics shared by actors when re-creating their life path is to cancel out or undermine the more or less strong constraints and determinants that have led to their orientation in the chosen field. Latour goes even further by ignoring the key magnets which used to govern the field of philosophy back in the 1970s: ‘Did one have more freedom in California in 1975 than in Paris, I don’t think so. Back then in Paris, there were great thinkers like Foucault and you could enjoy some very great freedom of action’ (ibid.: 120). As opposed to this dissolution of constraining structures which characterized the field in the 1970s (which could not be avoided as part of the reconstruction of a trajectory whose

⁴ Latour has been using this syntagma – from the English-speaking world – only recently.

⁵ This attitude is no longer exceptional today. Disciplinary crossover (post- or anti-disciplinary) has become commonplace with a number of researchers: it is rather in the context of disciplinary distancing that one is to understand what Latour said about his sociological disaffiliation. See Forman, 2012.

terminus ad quem determines the logic of the career), I will, on the contrary, support the idea that it was the polarity inherent to the philosophical practice which gradually drove young Bruno Latour towards sociology.

This article is thus an attempt to provide an answer to two sociological questions. The first concerns power relations between disciplines and particularly the ranking-related challenges between philosophy, theology and sociology which developed in the second half of 20th century in France (Ben-David & Collins, 1966). The second question focuses on how agents are positioned in a given field, i.e. in the case of Latour, the way he took possession of disciplinary spaces at some point (Bourdieu, 2001: 132–134). The strongest threats to the autonomy of the scientific field definitely operate at the very junction of these two issues.

The fields of philosophy, of theology and the shockwave of Vatican II

Louis Pinto has demonstrated that, since the 1970s, the French field of philosophy has been divided into ‘two major groups’ around which positions are being distributed: ‘the rationalist sector, attracting philosophers focusing on issues related to science and techniques’ and ‘the metaphysics sector’ whose representatives ‘enjoy a number of institutional powers and concurrently hold a specific competence in the history of philosophy to which their theses belong [...] and following in the phenomenological order [...]’ (Pinto, 2007: 200). The history of the philosophical field has been constructed along this twofold polarization in a slow process of accumulating scientific capital. From the 1960s onwards, the divide took a less constraining form: ‘gaining an academic position was less subjected to the constraints related to the ‘order of succession’ which used to guarantee the stability of the criteria selecting entitled holders of positions and possible candidates’ (Pinto, 2009: 184). That socio-epistemic transformation resulted into redistributing, sometimes outside the philosophical field, the positions of some, although they had gained all the entrance qualifications. That was how ‘Pierre Ansart, Raymond Boudon, Pierre Bourdieu [and] Robert Castel’ headed for ‘sociology’ (Pinto, 2009: 193). But some ‘young philosophers’ were also drawn to ‘challenge the norms of the philosophical production which they saw as a set of constraints preventing any free original research. [...] They did not question the importance of studying texts, they merely aimed at removing the conventions and prejudices institutional authorities had imposed on them’ (Pinto, 2009: 194). Distancing oneself from the metaphysical orb, without actually completely leaving it, allowed to both comply with some disciplinary standards (particularly reading as the basis for interpreting), but also to go beyond ‘clear meanings’ to ‘underlying meanings’ (Pinto, 2009: 195). Louis Pinto has definitely shown that Gilles Deleuze (whom Bruno Latour quoted a lot in his first works of offering) and Jacques Derrida exemplified this way of subverting the rules of the metaphysical sector (2009: 194). One can imagine that their original stand was what Bruno Latour was alluding to when talking about the ‘freedom’ he enjoyed back in the 1970s.

Within the field of philosophy, metaphysics has a very broad scope. It also includes a well-established religious tradition, which Jean-Louis Fabiani identified as emerging in the early 20th century, ‘at the very moment when the status of republican philosophy was strengthening’ (Fabiani, 2011: 217). Most importantly, the Catholic thinkers who were getting involved in the field of philosophy did so in order to equip themselves with ‘the necessary resources to act within the religious field’ (Fabiani, 2011: 230). Throughout the 20th century, the philosophy of religions was very active within the metaphysical sector. In the 1960s, Émile and Odile Poulat noticed that ‘religious sciences’ were studied at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, but also within ‘literature departments [which] gave them a more or less significant role according to years [...]’ (Poulat & Poulat, 1966: 29-30). Of course, ‘specialized chairs were [...] very few – six in Paris and even less so in province’ (Poulat & Poulat, 1966: 30), but the intensity of the discussions organized by the philosophy of religions helped build up its legitimacy within the metaphysical sector. Close by, but outside the field of philosophy, the field of theology was experiencing similar questioning, all the more so as, in the 1960s, some ‘young priests’ came to study there (Rousseau, 1982: 69). In the post-war period, father Marie-Dominique Chenu, a neo-thomist, claims that ‘theology [...] must be studied at the level of philosophy and of its established knowledge’ (Quisinsky, 2008: 575). The challenge was to compete with the philosophical discipline *i.e.* gain some conceptual equipment good enough to assert ‘what the world is for – ‘within a Christian approach’, which is, so to say, beyond philosophy while knowing that it

depends on it' (Quisinsky, 2008: 575). More precisely, this work in-between theology and philosophy (from its metaphysical sector) was made possible by the radical exegesis proposed by the German protestant theologian Rudolf Bultmann. In his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, he undertook a research in the 'forms' of religious texts (Bultmann, 1973: 19): 'Recognizing the original form of a narrative unit of the word of the Lord, of a similarity, such is the goal of the history of forms. Hence, it helps tell the reinforced formations from secondary formations, which, by repeating this approach, allows to reach significant results concerning the history of tradition' (Bultmann, 1973: 21). This level of reading requires to put the gospel back into the circumstances of its writing; 'one must move away from the traditional literary forms back to the patterns shaping the life of the Community and account for the forms through Community life' (Bultmann, 1973: 19). Bultmann mentions a 'circle' (Bultmann, 1973: 19) to characterize his approach: from the text to reality and from reality back to the text, the experience forcing the reader to continuously go deeper into the thickness of religious discourse to track the 'isolated pieces of the synoptic tradition', without considering 'the gospel as whole' (Bultmann, 1973: 452). The protestant theologian called for a contextualized reading of the Bible. This proposition could have been without any consequences on the field of theology but it echoed the new requirements from Vatican II Council. In *The Constitution on Divine Revelation* (promulgated in November 1965), the approach to reading the Scriptures profoundly changed in the Catholic experience. René Laurentin explains that 'the last chapter [...] glorifies the Word of God. It provides the laity easy access to the Bible, which was far from being obvious in 1962–1963. As a result of the continuous anti-protestant disputes, there was some distrust of the Scriptures. Even in 1963, the schema⁶ would recommend reading the Bible only during liturgy. Dei Verbum definitely recommended it without any restriction' (Laurentin, 1966: 287). It is certain that Bultmann's work did influence this radical change in approaching the text promoted by the more open Catholicism advocated by Vatican II reformers. In 1964, in the *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, the Dominican, François Refoulé, who coordinated the translation of the ecumenical Bible, summarized what he called the 'Bultmannian wave' (Refoulé, 1964). He admitted that the theological field was disrupted by the German vicar's demand for radical deciphering: '[...] modern scientific knowledge, new philosophical viewpoints, the requirements from historical methodology changed the major focus of theology which became the interpretation of the message of the New Testament' (Refoulé, 1964: 247).

Reading Bultmann arises in Latour some emotional energy which can ensure long-term commitment to an interaction ritual originated from textual exegesis. Latour acknowledged that his research work was guided by the 'idea that mediation could be a sturdy way to produce reality and truth came actually from Biblical exegesis, through a very odd reading of [Rudolf] Bultmann. Bultmann was doing a marvelous job of deconstructing the whole Gospel to extract about four sentences at the end, which would have possibly been pronounced – that, we don't even know – by someone who might have been called Jesus, Joshua. On the contrary, I took it positively. I said 'Look, through another mediation, they are still able to produce a phenomenon, which is salvation; the difference between life and death.' After all, this is a quite important difference. All of this is just stunning' (Blok & Jensen, 2011: 150). Bultmann's method generated such emotional energy that it prompted Latour to discover unprecedented textual drives. Exegesis – as reading mode – therefore became an essential interaction ritual which linked up Latour to theologies and to the philosophers of religion, like Claude Bruaire and André Malet, his authorities. This interaction chain granted studied texts a sacred character and mediations were thus identified as holding a quality of unprecedented discoveries.

Boltzmannian hermeneutics fuelled the discussions of Vatican II Council. At the same time, it changed the directions of the theological field. Rudolf Bultmann was a major figure for Bruno Latour. One of his professors at the Dijon University, Malet, a Catholic converted to Protestantism, had translated the protestant theologian's major work into French (Latour, 2012: 550). Latour described the contents of his teaching in the following manner: 'from 1966 to 1973 [...] in his parchment-like

⁶ Schemas were the discussions in charge of preparing the Second Vatican Council. Melissa J. Wilde showed that the participants in charge of addressing the question of liturgy beforehand were rather liberal (Wilde, 2007: 20).

hands, the biblical text would at last become clear because it unfolded like a long process of various transformations, inventions, annotations, rationalisations and the whole mapped a series of interpretations which would, each in its own way, re-enact the question of faithfulness or betrayal' (Latour, 2012: 550–551). Bultmann's method was once more called for in *Laboratory Life*, published in 1979 as it enabled describing an experiment in the manner of a biblical exegetic record (Latour & Woolgar, 1979: 169). At that time, however, no doubt that most of the readers in sociology of science saw it as an ironical analogy, all the more so as Latour's discourse was constructed against the French tradition of the philosophy of science and its representative, Gaston Bachelard⁷.

Nevertheless, although Latour often praised both André Malet's work and Rudolf Bultmann's method, he never established any connection with the changes induced by Vatican II. After describing the major directions in both the philosophical and theological fields, it may be assumed that the Second Vatican Council enabled Latour to redirect his intellectual trajectory. The various liturgical, philosophical and political issues challenged in the religious field provided the key elements for his transition towards sociology. Why didn't Latour take up a career as a philosopher or as a theologian, which would have been a logical outcome of his academic career and of his close relationship to Bultmann's work while *simultaneously* working in both fields, a likely position to gain recognition? The turmoil caused by Vatican II had considerably broadened the range of opportunities and required embarking on a third path, that, of sociology.

But other very structuring elements are at work in the organization of the philosophical field – and were to influence Bruno Latour's sociological trajectory. The 1960s were a time of political questioning which affected the very foundations of what had so far been the achievements of the Age of Enlightenment. World wars and decolonization damaged the idea of reason which, in the field of philosophy, brought about a crisis in metaphysics. Jacques Bouveresse identified the bases of a 'rhetoric of permanent dissent' which led to the development of an 'ideology such as post-structuralist anarchism' (Bouveresse, 1984: 20). He especially underlined the efforts made by the philosopher Paul Feyerabend to oppose any reference to reason (Bouveresse, 1984: 66–76) and to go as far as advocating relativism. The whole field of metaphysics was disrupted by this crisis in the 1970s and called forth in-depth questioning. Many were issued by Catholic clergymen – such as Stanislas Breton who, in 1972, focused specifically on the consequences of this disruption of metaphysical foundations in both philosophy and theology (Breton, 1972). When Bruno Latour changed the direction of his career, he was right in the middle of these philosophical debates. He shared in the desacralizing approach to scientific work and organized his research work around laboratory ordinary practices and routinized inscription activities. But Latour was not the only one to propose a renewed approach of the way science was produced. In Edinburg, as early as the 1970s, sociologists David Bloor, Steven Shapin, Harry Collins, Barry Barnes had devised a methodology to study sciences, relying on a systematic principle of symmetry (*i.e.* the same types of explanations must be used for successful or unsuccessful scientific experimental claims alike). This 'Strong Program' was criticized in some respects by Bruno Latour in the 1980s – claiming that it should be more radical and also involve non-human in addition to human agents. David Bloor's answer to the criticism uncovered the theological bases of the discussion. Bloor remarked that: 'In developing his criticisms of the Strong Program, Latour seeks to distance himself from a position he calls 'relativism'. 'Relativism', as he presents it, is said to be a direct consequence of the (first) symmetry principle.' (Bloor, 1999: 101) He noticed that Latour did not oppose relativism and absolutism, but relativism and realism (Bloor, 1999: 101). But the point was that Bloor and his colleagues advocated relativism as opposed to absolutism (Bloor, 1999: 102). David Bloor further clarified their disagreement in the years 2000, when he countered the attacks made by the anti-relativist philosophers. He then claimed that: 'Relativism and absolutism form a mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive dichotomy. [...] A model of what it is to be absolute is provided by theology' (Bloor, 2007: 278). This clarified the criticism addressed to Latour ten years before: according to Bloor, Latour did not oppose relativism and absolutism precisely because the

⁷ It will be noted that the themes of reinvention and plasticity are prominently featured in knowledge procedures and in theology. Latour is used, for instance, to enhancing the 'plasticity' of the objects held by actors: the files of the members of the Council of State (Latour, 2004: 201), biological material in the case of Louis Pasteur (Latour, 2011: 121). I want to thank Terry Shinn for pointing out this particular semantic direction.

latter was a fundamental element of religious belief. This bone of contention left a deep mark on Latour's positioning within the field of Science and Technology Studies.

A master's in love

In the 1969–1970 academic year, Bruno Latour wrote a Master's degree dissertation entitled *La Fuite du réel* (*Flight from reality*), under the supervision of Jean Brun who was then a philosophy professor at the Dijon university. He was a specialist in ancient philosophy as well as a protestant apologetic working to conciliate philosophy and theology. He was striving not exactly to eliminate the boundary between the two fields, but at least to open it up a little more. In 1988, Jean Brun published a book entitled *Philosophie et Christianisme* (*Philosophy and Christianity*) in which the birth of Christ became the evidence of the 'transhistorical' which can 'appear throughout history'. He added: 'This is an occurrence which cannot be understood like any other, as it is not part of a succession of historical facts bound by causal effects' (Brun, 1988: 160). Theology prevails over philosophy by setting at the foundation of all reasoning an irreducible hapax outside historical time, extracted from common chronology.

One cannot precisely assess to what extent Bruno Latour's dissertation was influenced by Jean Brun, but it is clear that they, as professor and student, shared a common theological approach to philosophy. Not long ago, Latour was talking about his youth: 'I was very much of a Catholic activist. First as a cub-scout, then, in the mid-1960s, as a JEC activist [Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne – Young Christian students]. We were trying to 'teach the Gospel', we organized a lot of meetings, were deep in soul-searching [...]. [That] was how young Christians used to discover the world at the time when the world was already breaking away from religion' (Latour, 2019).

The Master's dissertation written by Latour is an attempt to eliminate what separates philosophy from theology. It starts with a very general research question: 'In order to act, you must [...] be able to distinguish between the realist, who demands what is feasible, and the idealist, who demands what cannot be'. 'Fleeing reality' is what the former blames the latter for (Latour, 1969–1970: 1). The hardly changed slogan from recent May 68 shows through young Latour's phrases (the well-known 'Be realistic, demand what is impossible' hanging on a wall of Censier university), but the text quickly turns to the classical theme of the metaphysics of action. What is at stake is to be able to tell those who flee 'too far away and beyond reality' ('utopians') from those who remain on 'this side of reality' (Latour, 1969–1970: 2). Latour considers that neither psychology, medicine nor aesthetics can help to deal with such dilemma since these disciplines 'ignore the question of the exception' (Latour, 1969–1970: 3). He adds: 'hence, [it] is definitely outside these disciplines that philosophical research must be looking for the criterion that will help determine what is beyond the real from what is below' (Latour, 1969–1970: 3). Only 'philosophical analysis' may 'provide a universal criterion [...] but one which is not statistically universal' (Latour, 1969–1970: 4). It is clear why the young student emphasized so much the philosophical foundation of his project. Because he joined the discipline from the metaphysical sector (more precisely from the religious philosophy of the sector), his Catholic habitus was driving him towards conciliating philosophical and theological requirements. He had first to be established as a philosopher before being able to bring the two fields closer. One of the greatest challenges Christian philosophers are confronted with is the death of God declared by Friedrich Nietzsche. Latour complied with this academic as well as scholastic requirement. Philosophy is thus divided along two lines: that of 're-presentation', which can be considered as positivist, and that of 'creative nihilism' capable of contributing to 'the subversion of any fundamental principle' (Latour, 1969–1970: 6). This twofold divide serves in constructing an impassable aporia since positivists cannot 'demonstrate the existence of any founding principle of the value systems which they refer to when blaming the flight from reality' (Latour, 1969–1970: 7). As for nihilists, they have shattered the very idea of 'reality' which would have made it possible to 'judge flights' (Latour, 1969–1970: 7). The deadlock enabled Latour to rephrase the problem: 'There is only one way to be in a position to deal with the question of fleeing from reality without being confronted to these aporias: first, find a clear and final difference between actually fleeing reality and not fleeing it, so as to resist the Dionysian scattering approach and be able to hold on to the capital intuition of the philosophies of representation according to which one can tell the difference between what is true and what is false, what is right and

what is wrong, what makes sense and what does not, in short, between fleeing reality and moving into reality; but, secondly, find a difference which, however radical, would neither consist in defining reality nor in some systems of value, against the nihilists' legitimate and final objections to any philosophy of representation claiming to be able to decide on what is true and false, what makes sense and what is non sense according to a founding principle' (Latour, 1969–1970: 8).

When examining a classical philosophical issue (that of reality) and taking into account previous legitimate positions, Latour was complying with academic requirements. Yet, afterwards, he undertook to subvert his approach to the topic (in more than one way as we shall see). He first made use of the works of the psychiatrist and phenomenologist Eugène Minkowski and borrowed his concepts of syntony and schizoidy. The former describes some kind of adaptation to the world; the latter refers to the power for action. The capacity to produce a 'piece of work' (Minkowski quoted in Latour, 1969–1970: 42) results from an ongoing syntonic-schizoid exchange. Latour refers to psychiatry in order to reshuffle the philosophical issue he aims to address. Deleuze's influence through his recently published *Logique du sens*, in 1969, also drawing from psychoanalysis, is here clearly felt; it reflects the subversive attitude outlined by Louis Pinto when describing newcomers' approach in the 1960s, defying the classical norms of philosophical reading by performing unorthodox junctions. By breaking down flight and reality into some vital energy, drawn from Minkowski's psychiatric propositions, Latour is able to tackle a legitimate philosophical issue while providing a solution outside the classical disciplinary founding principles. To sum up, Latour's philosophical position is first contingent and opportunistic. His prime concern is to develop a career and prepare for 'theologizing' philosophy.

The philosophy of action which he constructs from the repetition of the syntonic/schizoid cycles leads to a metaphysics of works. Latour wrote: 'Realism consists in producing, i.e. producing works; what does producing works consist of? It means unifying in the same energy the schizoid, the singular, personal momentum, the individual on the one hand, and the syntonic, the universal, rest; how to characterize this union? It is the determination of ever seeking the universal through the singular and the singular through the universal' (Latour, 1969–1970: 49). He then had to determine the 'well-known limitations to the personal momentum' (Latour, 1969–1970: 49). Minkowski suggested 'intuition' to be able to grasp the 'moment when one is to break away from schizoidy' (Latour, 1969–1970: 50). But Latour did not find it satisfactory. Hence, chose to digress towards theology. He set that 'angelism is the incapacity of thinking the Angel, meaning by Angel the mediator, who connects man to God [...]' (Latour, 1969–1970). The third step in a strategy aiming at eliminating the boundary between the philosophical and theological fields (after devising a legitimate philosophical question, then subverting it through psychiatry), is the introduction of religious references (tacked on to the reasoning) which enables Latour to redirect his whole project. Minkowski's vital energy is rephrased along a clearly theological logic: flight and reality are now divided along a 'crack' which 'is in-between the discordance and accordance of two principles'. (Latour, 1969–1970: 54). Latour turned his philosophical project into a theological project; he therefore had to make sure he could express his philosophical question to make it acceptable by the science of religion. Thus, the question of stopping and being on the move (which starts and supports the energy described by Minkowski to strive towards the work) is transformed (after acknowledging the inadequacy of 'plain vocabulary') into a 'common theme in theology' which 'clearly distinguishes hope from expectation' (Latour, 1969–1970: 57). The 'sinner' only understands hope and despair as mere ways to either commune with 'blissful optimism' or to turn to 'suicide'. The 'believer' does understand that hope and despair 'are but one in the single movement under the name of 'expectation'' (Latour, 1969–1970: 57). Latour then examined three possibilities to solve these opposites (*i.e.* 'the right balance, the tragic and dialectics' [Latour, 1969–1970: 58]). After highlighting the limitations of these classical philosophical solutions, he turned to what, to him, seemed the most adequate solution: 'the gospel-like manner to use paradoxes' (Latour, 1969–1970: 60). He recalls that '[the] Gospel, like any saying, keeps telling anything and everything' (Latour, 1969–1970: 60). It is the combination of 'violence' and of 'the evidence of their oppositions' which enables these paradoxes to capture as closely as possible 'the movement they express; an altogether tight and soft syntonic and schizoid rhythm, one of loss and recovery, just like inspiration and breathing alive' (Latour, 1969–1970: 61). By resorting to the theological register to solve a philosophical problem, Latour is going beyond the metaphysical sector of the philosophical field; he is striving to reduce the divide between philosophy and theology. He goes even further:

understanding the paradoxes in the gospel is only a means, not an end in itself. The criterion that has proven operative to differentiate reality from its flight is to be found in the Gospel itself, since it is a matter of ‘absence or presence of love [...]’ (Latour, 1969–1970: 82). In the conclusion of his dissertation, the young philosopher attempts to erase the boundary between philosophy and theology by recording his solution as part of the most legitimate philosophical questions: ‘Despite all precautions taken, this criterion [presence or absence of love] is not likely to be considered seriously if it is not better anchored by showing that a coherent philosophical system can be constructed around it, a philosophy that would get rid of the opposition between nihilism and the philosophy of representation and that would grant this criterion, which has been ignored so far, the strength it deserves and the recognition of its power to establish differentiation’ (Latour, 1969–1970: 82). All the work carried out before eliminating the boundary between the philosophical and theological fields was also meant to pave the way for controlling the metaphysical sector. If love – conceived as an evangelic concept – is to be the determining criterion to equip a philosophy of action capable of distinguishing flight from reality, that would completely change the metaphysical positioning since it would become absolutely necessary for metaphysicians to discuss theological concepts. It is not very likely that Latour knew, at that very moment, that he was staging some takeover. But, even if there was no performative achievement, his discourse establishing theological concepts as legitimate was a way to open up to some possible conversion of metaphysics.

Latour took the liberty to propose a strictly theological definition of love when concluding by chanting: ‘Love and you will know what is possible, love and you will know what you must do, love and do what you want’ (Latour, 1969–1970: 92). By quoting *The Book of Genesis* (i.e. ‘Israel, meaning AS STRONG AS GOD’ [original emphasis]) to define realism, the young philosopher maintained that classical concepts be replaced by theological elements.

At the end of his Master’s dissertation, Bruno Latour introduced the idea of repetition, which idea he pursued in his PhD thesis. Contemplating the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche, the young philosopher declared that it is not ‘some new transcendence’ but ‘the admission of a cut which is not between the disciples of God and the disciples of the death of God, nor between those advocating the existence of a founding principle and those who eliminate all founding principle. This cut is a continuous denial, or rather a difference which keeps springing up from denial and from the leap into denial; in other words, this difference is a thought of repetition’ (Latour, 1969–1970: 88). Seen as the operative key to think the move into action, ‘Repetition is the Same continuously provided by the Other, it is the measuring and creative unit within one same movement’ (Latour, 1960–1970: 88; original emphasis).

Bruno Latour chose the theme of evangelical love to remold the boundaries of the philosophical field. Although no causal connection can be clearly established, yet there is some obvious consonance with the discussions held at the Second Vatican Council. As underlined by Philippe Delhaye, Paul VI ‘In his addresses to the Council Fathers’ kept insisting on ‘the renewal around charity’ (Delhaye, 1970: 145). The pope advocates the idea of unconditional Christian love (Delhaye, 1970: 146), and sees it as permanently circulating between God and men (Delhaye, 1970: 147). The whole ‘Augustine’ tradition is being revived: ‘religious truths, religious and pastoral action are all works of love’ (Delhaye, 1970: 147). Paul VI insists on the necessity for the Council to demonstrate this fundamental Christian value which must command to the believer’s ethos and practice. The reason for this command is that the very core of the dogma relies on ‘the elevating relation that God, the ineffable Father, establishes with mankind through the mediation of Jesus-Christ [...]’ (Delhaye, 1970: 148). Finally, the whole Second Vatican is to be understood as an experience which promotes and demonstrates evangelical love: ‘The whole Council work can be summarized by the word ‘love’ [...] The Church’s pastoral function and the perspectives of its missions are reappraised in terms of love [...] it feels responsible for all men, it wishes to love their universality, their concern for legitimate earthly values [...]’ (Delhaye, 1970: 148).

One may reasonably consider that, Latour, in his dissertation, chose the theme of love to try and locally subvert the philosophical field towards theology, precisely because it coincided with the revival of the value by the Council work. Evangelical modernity required renewing the Christian discourse as well as setting an identifiable axiomatic system. By determining love as the universal criterion to distinguish reality from flight, Latour was participating in rephrasing the metaphysical principles of classical philosophy from the theological field. His attempt was probably bound to fail –

there was too much resistance. But, for Latour, it did open up the possibility of another attempt at reconstructing the theological discourse, in his PhD thesis.

Reasserting his thesis

It is difficult to work on the text of Bruno Latour's thesis. His secretariat confirmed that there was a copy left at the philosopher's country house, but so far, it has remained impossible to look it up⁸. Only one text is available and helps figure out what Bruno Latour's doctoral production might have looked like; it is a lecture delivered at a colloquium dedicated to Charles Péguy, whose text was published in the 'actes' in 1973.

His thesis was entitled *Exegesis and Ontology with Respect to the Resurrection*. Bruno Latour defended it at Tours University in 1975, under Claude Bruaire's supervision. The author of *Science in Action* maintained that his thesis dissertation was 'quickly left to the biting criticism of mice' (Latour, 2012: 552). His general research project consisted in relating Bultmann's program 'of using exegesis to systematically deconstruct all dogmatic certainties' to 'the idea that there is a search for veridiction with its own conditions of felicity traced back by the exegetic approach [...]' (Latour, 2012: 552). Three texts provide the material for testing 'the argument': first, the Gospel of Mark, then an analysis of two of Péguy's works (whom Latour discovered during his youth [Latour, 2012: 550]) and some elements of 'Saint-John Perse's work' (Latour admitted that he could not remember the 'reasons' why he included the poet [Latour, 2012: 552]). The thesis was loaded with references to Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss and above all Deleuze (Latour, 2012: 552). One cannot rely on those minor clues – which should be checked on the actual documents, as self-fiction is actually rather questionable – to understand Bruno Latour's doctoral project. One has to make do with the text published after the colloquium about Péguy, as well as with some elements about Claude Bruaire, his thesis supervisor. The latter, in his own thesis published in 1964, supported a philosophy of religion. Under the title *L’Affirmation de Dieu. Essai sur la logique de l’existence*, he was striving to reinforce the Christian dimension of the metaphysical sector. Bruaire acknowledged '[the] failure of dialectics' and proposed 'searching for a new and satisfactory approach which can be obtained by moving to metaphysics, with two joint disciplines: [...] *ontology*, since discourse is an attempt to determine the relation between human *existence* and the divine supreme being [...]' and '*theology*, since the knowledge of the divine being is necessary to specify, *a parte Dei*, the ontological relation of man to God' (Bruaire, 1964: 171). Bruaire is totally in line with the project of asserting a Christian dimension to the metaphysical sector within the philosophical field. He does not seem to envisage subverting the boundary between theology and philosophy. He is rather searching for some ontological coherence in the belief in God: 'ontological evidence already establishes metaphysics by discovering divine freedom, the principle of the oneness of the human being, in the logical process as real condition of felicity' (Bruaire, 1964: 178). The major difficulty in Christian metaphysics is the problem of a language adapted to the revelation and to its unearthly laws. Bruaire identifies two 'affirmations of God which do not *directly* concern logic: [...] *language to God (to call upon God)*, invocation and tentative dialogue [...]' and '*language for God*, announcement and tentative revelation to another, from man to man' (Bruaire, 1964: 179). Bruaire maintained that you could not 'turn to a God who would not provide any knowledge, who would remain hidden in his eternal mystery' (Bruaire, 1964: 275). The only way to devise an understandable Christian discourse requires that it should conform to the demands of a 'metaphysics that anyone can formulate as it abides by the universal laws of the discourse' (Bruaire, 1964: 270). This 'language to God' becomes meaningful only when it 'fits into a *history*, that of a desire for God, in the course of which men unremittingly continue to perfect their call' (Bruaire, 1964: 270).

Bruaire stands exactly at the right balance of a Christian metaphysics trying to record the specificity of a religious philosophy into the philosophical field, but he also proposes to reflect on the kind of discourse required by such specific positioning.

I do not know if Latour had read Bruaire's thesis before writing his own, nor if he formally agreed with Bruaire's theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the young recipient shared his master's wish to see Christian metaphysics bound to philosophical legitimacy.

⁸ Personal information from the secretariat of Bruno Latour, email of 25 September 2018.

The text Latour devoted to Péguy, in 1973, has been thoroughly analyzed by Henning Schmidgen who noted that Latour's exegetic work about *Clio*'s author represented an application of Malet's and Bultmann's analyses (Schmidgen, 2012: 5). Most of all, Schmidgen pointed out that 'in Latour's writings the tradition-space of the laboratory arises through a 'rotation' of the tradition-time of history. In his early work, Latour's notion of tradition moved from the horizontal to the vertical so that the problem of (historical) tradition became a problem of (contemporary) communication and translation' (Schmidgen, 2012: 6). By looking at Latour's later works (particularly *Laboratory life* and *Microbes. Guerre et paix*), Schmidgen shows that the sociologist pursued the exegetic work he had been trained into during his academic years in Dijon. I fully support this interpretation, but I feel it must be complemented with another one, related to the transformations generated by the Second Vatican.

Latour claims that Péguy 'keeps repeating words, sentences, arguments and even the subject itself of his works' (Latour, 2014: 340). Against the idea that this propensity to repetition would be clumsy, the author of *We Have Never Been Modern* states that it is both intentional and rational. He declares that 'Repetition is the engine of war invented by Péguy to combat refrain and the saying of the same. Repetition gives time some consistence, while refrain subtracts consistence out of time' (Latour, 2014: 341). In line with Bultmann's exegesis which calls for an endless capacity for interpretation, Latour thinks that 'true reading keeps the irreversibility of the text open' (Latour, 2014: 343). The repetitive pattern allows two different approaches to reading: either delving into past layers, or moving forward to the new (Latour, 2014: 344). When reading *Clio païenne (Clio and the Pagan Soul)* by Péguy, Latour is looking for the coherent time structure of the text. He detects a 'rhythm [...] still rough, since, on the one hand, nothing helps sharpen our hold of this mix of time and eternity which makes up a new temporality; and, on the other hand, since nothing articulates the time of history on top of the time of genius' (Latour, 2014: 351). The analysis of *Clio charnelle (Clio and the Earthly Soul)* enables him to be more specific about that rhythm he had glimpsed at. At this stage, 'the eternal' and 'the temporal' come together in the text. To avoid being reduced to the impossible choice of absolute temporality – leading in turns to a belief made absolute ('you are not 'a little' Christian, you are *absolutely* Christian [...]') [Latour, 2014: 356]), Latour asserts that one has to 'fully inhabit' this violence', between nothingness and everything. And 'the reason for it is to be found in REPETITION'; Péguy's prose is Christian precisely because of 'the fundamental rhythm' imparted. Péguy's syncopated writing does reveal the 'vertical' as opposed to the 'horizontal' situation of Christianity' (Latour, 2014: 357). Thus, religion becomes an experience, 'the very movement of the repetitive inversion of time' (Latour, 2014: 358). Repetition evidences a Christian presence: 'it collects the collection of everything'; '*repetition renews the work of Whitsun*' (Latour, 2014: 359).

To Latour, this pattern of rereading and revision demonstrates a belief in the Gospels: the constant movement of remembering the Scriptures is the key to renewing Christianity by delving within itself to bring it anew, something to be done again and again (Latour, 2014: 360). That Bultmann's teaching is here, faithfully put into practice, is obvious, but there is more to it in Latour's text. The core of his Master's degree dissertation focused on the notion of rhythm (between syntony and schizoidy). Here, the dialectical rhythm between the temporal and the eternal provides the starting point for a repetitive reading of the Scriptures. When calling for reading forever and ever the sacred texts, Latour actually falls within the reform of the liturgy which emerged from the Second Vatican Council. The main issue which was then decided was the question of 'convergence' and 'notable coherence between the liturgical and the ecclesiastical constitutions: *Sacrosantum Concilium* and *Lumen gentium*' (Maldonado, 1985: 411). In 1969, Paul VI insisted on 'the major characteristics of the new celebration: the new eucharistic Prayers, a 'major innovation' of the missal with *Ordo missae* and on the need for a greater number and diversity of biblical readings. The homily was re-established and so was the universal Payer' (Haquin, 2013: 57). Beyond the relevance of these dialogues with God through the act of praying, the very intelligibility of the prayer is fully revised. Marcel Mauss clearly demonstrated that prayers are a 'social phenomena' (Mauss, 2019: 76), said to be 'effective because religion claims them to be effective' (Mauss, 2019: 78). Paul VI envisaged that 'the Western Eucharist prayer be enriched by a twofold epiclesis; before the account of Institution, the Holy Spirit is invoked upon the bread and wine; before the concluding rites, the second part of the epiclesis is for communicants' (Haquin, 2013: 59). The aim is to 'make eucharistic theology better reflect the Holy Spirit' (Haquin, 2013: 60). Prayers are to become clearer, the meaning of the discourse believers

address to God is to be reconfigured. The illocutionary act is reconstructed; its religious strength reassessed. The repetition of prayers altogether with the shift – via the epiclesis – towards better intelligibility of chanted texts make up the architectonics of a deeply revised divine office as decided by the Council⁹. That twofold movement (of meaning and repetition) is at the very core of Latour's work of exegesis of Péguy's texts.

There is no information available about Bruno Latour's thesis defense. Thesis defenses are very specific interaction rituals and times when emotional energy densifies (Fabiani, 2007). Our analysis is only founded on the presentation he made during a symposium dedicated to Péguy. Latour happened to be a young entrant into the field dealing with a classical problem (*i.e.* how Charles Péguy articulates style and ideas) with an extremely original approach (*i.e.* repetition is Péguy's privileged mode of exposing ideas) (Latour, 2014). There, one can easily recognize the emotional elements common to all young entrants who always feel they are revolutionizing the field they are entering (Bourdieu, 1976: 99, footnote 27) and the resulting interaction ritual, which is similar to a kind of distrust of previous generations. His new entrant's self-confidence, supported by new theological concerns, gave his positioning some originality: his determination to transgress disciplinary boundaries (common interaction rituals for young generations) and an opportunity to introduce a theological practice within the academic field of philosophy.

By trying to duplicate, in the metaphysical sector of the philosophical field, the gest of Vatican II, Latour was carrying on his attempt to dissolve the boundaries between philosophy and theology. As a young philosopher, it was then rather risky: he was to demonstrate that a religious practice based on repetition was able to improve the intelligibility of a classical text (Péguy's). Even if Latour easily puts forward Bultmann's rationale (quite appropriate within the metaphysical sector), it is more difficult to establish a strict homological relationship between the prayer renewed by the Second Vatican Council and a method for reading philosophy. Bultmann is precisely used here to understate the subversion of philosophy by theology. However, by completing that attempt of dissolving the boundary between the philosophical and theological fields, Latour only succeeded in debasing the common themes of religious philosophy. More precisely, the Second Vatican Council, by dealing with new thematic concerns (more explicit liturgy, love as the universal principle of believers), reduced the visibility of common theological issues such as the questions of the Absolute (Pinto, 2010: 157), of subjectivity (Fabiani, 2011: 233–234) and of interpretation (Fabiani, 2011: 233–236). By continuously distorting the theological corpus accepted in the philosophical field, Latour's Council-inspired propositions end up weakening his attempt at dissolving the distance between philosophy and theology. It is at the very junction of his work to downgrade philosophy and to rehabilitate theology, that young Latour completely requalified his disciplinary future while staying in Ivory Coast.

Ivory Coast and the transition to sociology

Latour narrated how unsettled he had felt when he went to Abidjan for his National Service as 'a cooperant [aid service]' at 'the vocational high school of Abidjan' in the early 1970s: 'Can you imagine the kind of shock I experienced as a provincial, bourgeois, Catholic 'agrégé' in philosophy with a wife and a kid taken into the loud bustle of neo-colonial Africa? In the 1973–1974 Abidjan, I altogether discovered the worst predatory forms of capitalism, ethnographical methods and the riddles of anthropology' (Latour, 2012: 552). Such presentation of his conversion to sociology sounds like a violent mystagogical experience: the culture shock was such that it triggered unexpected questioning. To support this interpretation, Latour *a posteriori* maintained some permanent exegetic elements with his first ethnographical fieldwork in Ivory Coast: 'I have never noted any difference between what we were doing back at Dijon university, studying for the most classical 'agrégation', that is careful reading of difficult texts full of contradictions, and analysing fieldwork. I moved from one to the other without feeling any need for developing any solution of continuity. So, I used to think and still do [laughs] that the best training for fieldwork is the mindful reading of texts, particularly those written by illustrious minds' (Latour, Godmer & Smadja, 2012: 119–120).

According to him, he would have learned and consolidated a Bultmann-like reading method that would prove universal and could fit any kind of object of study. That self-introduction is fully

⁹ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n° 84 and 85, 1963.

consistent with the idea of homogenizing one's career, but it clearly stands in contradiction with the work Latour produced when staying in Abidjan. Some 'colleagues from ORSTOM' asked him to study 'industry in Ivory Coast and the unresolved question of Ivoirian managerial positions' (Latour, 2012: 552). The report he completed in 1974 (with Amina Shabou) is entitled *The Ideologies of Competence in Industrial Circles in Abidjan* (Latour & Shabou, 1974). Based on interviews with managers and workers in Ivoirian industries, the survey is directly in line with the sociological studies on professions: in 1972, Claude Durand had directed an issue of *Sociologie du travail* devoted to the theme and as early as the 1950s, Alain Touraine had dealt with the issue of qualification at work (Touraine, 1955a, 1955b, 1965).

While taking up Bultmann's framework of an exegetic analysis of the interviewees' discourse, in that case, Latour stuck to strictly social determinants. About the 'variety of discourse on competence which could be heard in Abidjan', he pointed out that they were characterized by their 'overall heterogeneity' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 3). Latour turned over the colonial questioning of the ORSTOM 'European management' who assumed that Ivoirian were 'incompetent' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 3) and had to be led to adapt to the Western way of normalization. He questioned the reliability of the initial approach and chose to elaborate on 'much more significant [...] questions: how to define competence? How is the discourse on competence being constructed? [...]' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 3).

He had to deconstruct the taken-for-granted European self-centered conclusions to envisage the notion of discourse as 'a coherent set of stereotypes' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 4). Latour was there getting involved in a critical operation, when questioning, for example, what founded the 'White foremen's' accusations of Ivoirian absenteeism – which absenteeism was in no way proven in the enterprises (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 4). Therefore, the in-training sociologist deconstructed the interviewees' discourse by connecting some structuring schemes (e.g. the words of the 'Whites thinking in terms of White-Black' [Latour & Shabou, 1974: 6]) to the social and cultural conditions of the situation of their utterance (notably including 'exonerating the rulers of any kind of influence' [Latour & Shabou, 1974: 11]). And behind these racist archetypes of the discourse emerged a 'largely mythical [...] ethnography: does the picture of the young African brought up in the middle of the bush within a coherent world, without money nor pictures, within absolute hierarchy and soaked in myths correspond to the reality?' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 12).

According to Latour, the structural racism underlying the European discourse was confronted to three ontological obstacles: African historicity which could not be reduced to Western colonization, the importance of the Ivoirian workforce which 'does not seem to actually exist' in the neo-colonial order (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 16) and the so-called Ivoirian acknowledgement of some 'lack' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 17). The notion of competence was therefore spread out and redesigned along this racist hierarchization. The result for the students of the vocational high school was a very specific idea of 'factory work', since they saw 'intelligence' as 'determining the whole set of actual inter-relations between social realities' (Latour & Shabou, 1974: 57). The institution was responsible as it did not oppose the dominant racist patterns and supported the belief in some incompatibility with the conditions of the work on offer.

In this report, Latour built up a sociological approach which was fully consistent, at that time, with the current issues of competence, work, qualification and subjectivation of this three notions – which Alain Touraine and Serge Mallet had particularly studied (Segrestin, 2015: 239). To that classical approach, he added an original perspective concerning neo-colonialism. On that particular point, the Second Vatican Council dramatically changed the position of the members of the church.

Henri Teissier claimed that 'the Third World was able to become an actor at the Council thanks to the significant participation of the Council Fathers from Africa, Asia or Latin America' (Teissier, 1989: 756). The initial stand of the Church was rather favorable to the development of missionary colonialism (Teissier, 1989: 760). The 'renewal of the relationship between Christians and non-Christians' (Teissier, 1989: 762) resulted in theologically challenging the domineering character of colonizing through missions. The 1965 pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* pointed out that the required wisdom in dealing with world affairs was achieved through 'numerous countries, poor in material possessions but with a rich heritage of wisdom [...]'¹⁰ (see Teissier, 1989: 766). The

¹⁰ Pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, n°15, 1965.

recognition of equal dignity between the peoples and of an identical capacity for learning and developing wisdom became part of ‘the social mission of the Church’ which aimed at reducing ‘inequalities’ (Horn, 2015: 16).

In 2012, Latour revisited his view of the sociology of science before moving to his Californian fieldwork at the Salk Institute laboratory and claimed that it was during his stay in Ivory Coast that he imposed on himself that question ‘which would be with him for ever: why should we be using the idea of modernity, of movement of modernisation, of contrast between modern and pre-modern, even before applying to those who call themselves the civilizing agents the very methods of survey used with the ‘others’ – those we pretend not exactly to civilize, but somehow modernize?’ (Latour, 2012: 552). But this aspiration towards some equal consideration of the various forms of intellection and rationality is not limited to Latour’s Ivoirian fieldwork. To say the least, it reflects the process of transformation of the Catholic practice in which the neo-sociologist was involved: Vatican II, partly opposed to the missionary projects of the Church, sees the Other, whether Christian or not, as an equal for the dialogue. By doing so, the Council members had apprehended the social condition of the Third World and opened the way for a sociological intellection of the world – which went further than merely putting abstract theological issues in the first place. Bruno Latour took advantage of that opening of Vatican II to adjust his position in the scientific field. Sociology was then coming out as a new way (already experimented by Bourdieu and Lévi-Strauss) of moving away from the philosophical field (concerning Latour, more specifically away from his metaphysical sector) so as to be able to construct new research objects, particularly those which were emerging for Catholics, i.e. clearing the ground of Vatican II¹¹.

Fieldwork in Ivory Coast enabled Latour to reveal the emotional energy rooted in his discovery of ‘the extent of neo-colonialism’ (Latour, 2010: 601). There, the philosopher experienced the beginning of the interaction ritual chains which later led to *post-colonial studies*: Franz Fanon had already published *Peaux noires, masques blancs* in 1952 and the philosophers called forth by Latour (Deleuze and Ivan Illich especially [Latour & Shabou, 1974: 75]) served as the epistemological foundations of this new research field (Bignall & Patton, 2010; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2020). The shock felt by Latour at discovering the effects of colonial domination on his fieldwork partly contributed to his changing directions back to rationality and modernity. Latour noted, in the issue he was dealing with, i.e. ‘the obstacles to Ivoirian managerial positions’, ‘some blatant asymmetry: White people have anthropologized Black people, well, that’s fine, but they’ve refrained from anthropologizing themselves, or else, when they do so, they do it in a rather distant, exotic manner by focusing on the most archaic features of their own society – village festivals, people’s belief in astrology, First Communion meals – instead of concentrating on what stands out (to me, of course, my attention being sharpened by a collective reading of *Anti-Oedipus*): industrial techniques, economization, ‘development’, scientific reason, etc., that is to say, all that constitutes the structural core of empires being expanded’ (Latour, 2012: 552).

When Bruno Latour started his philosophical research work for his Master’s degree at Dijon, he was struggling with his professors’ (Malet and Brun) dilemma: how to develop a philosophy of religion within the metaphysical sector with a view to bringing closer the theological and philosophical fields. He combined this specific position in the theological and philosophical fields with an emotional energy centered on the discovery of Bultmann’s hermeneutics – reading approach of philosophical texts founded on the command of biblical exegesis. The interaction ritual of textual reading – one of the most classical practices in philosophy – was therefore dedicated to supporting a position undertaking to root theological themes within philosophy. Latour’s proposals harmonized with the works of the Second Vatican Council, which aimed at overcoming the ordinary contradictions between subjectivity and love. In 1973, through his thesis, Latour carried on this research work to dissolve the boundary between the philosophical and theological fields: he reinforced Bultmann’s exegetic approach and, above all, euphemistically introduced praying (*i.e.* a repeated and relentless address to God) as a philosophical reading method. Behind what is acceptable (Bultmann’s radical

¹¹ Guillaume Cuchet rightly pointed out that Vatican II corresponded to ‘two transformations, a religious one and a socio-cultural change which, by mutually reinforcing their respective impact, produced a particularly explosive period’ (Cuchet, 2018: 155).

experience of reading), a much more audacious attempt is showing through: to make a liturgical rite the essence of philosophical deciphering. Not only was this practice in clear elective affinity with the new rituals established by the Second Vatican Council, but it was also a contribution to the transgression typical of new entrants who attempt to propose a dramatically different vision of doing philosophy. The interaction ritual of the thesis is used here to assert one's position as an entrant ready to challenge the logics of the philosophical field.

Those various attempts to reduce the difference between theology and philosophy are not operational, precisely because what they draw on (*i.e.* the transformations brought about by Vatican II) highlights something far from classical theological notions (the Absolute, interpretation or subjectivity). The reversed perspective on the Third World (no longer only apprehended as an area to be evangelized) paved the way for a sociological interpretation of the world. Henceforth, the classification of disciplines on offer was modified: theology had become obsolete (since its discourse could no longer impact hard facts – and whose agenda Vatican II had exhausted) and philosophical objects were outmoded as a result of Vatican II. He was then left with sociology which, through its direct approach to reality and the way viewpoints are set into perspective, enabled him to take on a renewed Christian perspective – without too much understating his approach. The emotional energy rooted in his discovery of neocolonialism and of its violence enabled Latour to transfer this new set of questioning (undealt with in philosophy) to sociology. The social and anti-imperialistic issues raised by Vatican II coincided with Latour's personal expectations uncovered by the Ivoirian experience.

Studying the homologies between the philosophical and theological fields, as well as the obstacles raised by interaction rituals which aggregate specific emotional energies, has made it possible to both uncover Bruno Latour's strategic convergence with disciplinary in-depth evolutions on the one hand, and his own specificities on the other, his positioning being rooted in specific emotional schemes.

He became a key actor in the field of the sociology of science in the early 1980s and, a decade later, made a comeback in the French intellectual sphere after the publication of his conversations with Michel Serres, who was better known in France at that time, and after publishing *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour, 1991) (French adaptation of a critical review of *Statues* by Michel Serres [1987] and *Leviathan and the Air Pump* by Steven Shapin et Simon Schaffer [1985]). Only then and, only after testing the ground through his unsigned trial balloon *Jubiler (Rejoicing)*, did Latour stage his 'coming out' to his readers via *Social Studies of Science* (Latour, 2010) and admitted that, despite his criticism against philosophers, he had actually never left philosophy nor even theology. He was then able to construct such a retrospective narrative of his work as none of his readers, sociologists of science, could have ever envisioned.

Bruno Latour's position within the space of those disciplines available in-between the 1960s and 1970s developed via a specific intellectual strategy. First, because theology and the metaphysical sector of philosophy were delegitimated, they were not likely to support any academic recognition. Besides, Latour was not the only one to change directions (while remaining committed to philosophy): Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida had experienced the same and conducted sometimes intense discussions with social science. But Bruno Latour's trajectory is rather specific. On the one hand, he is a Catholic, which means he was receptive to the new theological directions initiated by Vatican II, in line with the development of social sciences. On the other hand, in the post-68 context, disciplinary boundaries were strongly challenged and enabled such crossing over that had been forbidden so far. Therefore, it is by both relying on long-term structural elements (*e.g.* philosophy and theology being delegitimated) and taking advantage of more circumstantial opportunities (*e.g.* availability of social sciences, Vatican II), that Latour constructed his bifurcation which he keeps re-qualifying today after he opportunely re-discovered the extent of the full recognition now enjoyed by philosophy.

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Biography

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