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# Dialogues in Sociology

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## Bruno Latour from a French and Fresh Perspective

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## BRUNO LATOUR FROM A FRENCH AND FRESH PERSPECTIVE

(Response to  
« What Next for Actor Network Theory?  
Inventing Around Latour on a Planet in Distress »)

The authors of the article have summed up the Latourian actor-network theory (ANT) perfectly. However, I would like to offer a slightly more French perspective, taking into account the whole of Bruno Latour's thinking, well before this theory was established.

Sociologists who, like me, were introduced to Pierre Bourdieu's thinking in the late 1970s were able to read Latour's first article in the journal founded by Bourdieu, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 'La rhétorique de la science. Pouvoir et devoir dans un article de science exacte', co-authored with Paolo Fabbri (Latour & Fabbri, 1977). This was followed by his first book published in French, *Les Microbes, guerre et paix* (Latour, 1984). Shortly afterwards, in the second half of the 1980s, I attended his seminar at the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation (CSI) at the Ecole des Mines for several years – where I even presented my first book, *La Gloire de Van Gogh* (NH 1991, 1996), at his request.

In the 1980s, the term 'actor-network theory' was not yet in use, and it seems to me that the novelty of Latour's work, in the eyes of the few French researchers who were familiar with it, consisted of two fundamental points. The first was the deconstruction of the notion of scientific truth, in particular through ethnographic observation of researchers' activities, which we discovered in *La Vie de laboratoire* (Latour, 1988), a translation of *Laboratory Life* published in 1979, and then in *La Science en action*, translated the following year (Latour, 1989). This introduction of critical constructivism into sociology, which was subsequently extended in several works (Latour, 1996 ; Latour, 1999), was in line with Bourdieu's sociology, which was already more developed at the time (Bourdieu was Latour's senior by some fifteen years), while drawing inspiration from American post-modernism, to which Latour had been introduced very early on through his experience in North American universities. Latour's 'deconstruction' of science was thus a perfect blend of Bourdieusian critical sociology and American post-modernism, at a time when neither had yet acquired the dominant position that would be theirs a few years later.

The second innovation – the first turning point in Latour's thinking – was to take account of the agency of objects, out of empirical observation in the laboratory and nurtured in parallel by the work of economist Michel Callon and several other members of the team, notably Madeleine Akrich and Antoine Hennion (Akrich, Callon, Latour, 2006). It was this second approach that Latour developed in his fieldwork from the 1990s onwards, leading him to extend the notion of 'actor' not only to people but also to things. Combined with the achievements of the American

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3 interactionist movement, this systematic introduction of things into the analysis of  
4 social life produced both the pragmatist orientation and ANT. And it seems to me  
5 that Latour's sociology became established in French sociology less as 'actor-network  
6 theory' (ANT) than, much more, as 'pragmatic sociology': a name it shared with that  
7 given impetus at the same time, but in a slightly different direction, by Luc Boltanski  
8 and Laurent Thévenot (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Heinich, 2021).  
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11 In other words, ANT came to the attention of French researchers rather late :  
12 we had to wait until 2005 to read a systematic presentation of it in *Changer de société.*  
13 *Refaire de la sociologie* (Latour, 2005 – a translation of *Reassembling the Social*, published  
14 in English the same year). In the meantime his second turning point had begun, with  
15 ecological concerns about the uses of 'nature' (notably in *Politiques de la nature.*  
16 *Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie* : Latour, 1999), which were to occupy a  
17 large part of his activity from the 2010s onwards, even though he had long remained  
18 indifferent to environmental issues (he once confided to me that he had considered  
19 the conclusions of the Meadows report and the 'Club of Rome' in the early 1970s to  
20 be irrationalist hogwash).  
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23 Thus, by an anamorphic effect, most of Latour's English-speaking readers  
24 were introduced to his thinking, from the 1990s onwards, through a chronologically  
25 secondary dimension, with ANT. As for the extension of his reputation beyond the  
26 strictly academic readership of sociologists, anthropologists and epistemologists, this  
27 took place from the 2010s onwards, at international level, through the ecological  
28 question and its militant roots. This is why, for a French sociologist familiar with  
29 Bruno Latour from his earliest writings, the dual focus on ANT and the  
30 environmental question in an article such as 'What Next for Actor Network Theory?  
31 Inventing Around Latour on a Planet in Distress' sounds rather strange : even if the  
32 analysis has its fair share of accuracy, it gives only a strangely distorted vision of the  
33 Bruno Latour whose thought has long accompanied me.  
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36 Furthermore, while the article's presentation of ANT is generally accurate, I  
37 feel that it lacks a critical dimension. In my opinion, this should focus on the major  
38 flaw of this theory : the interminability of the investigative work, since it consists of  
39 exploring all the networks presiding over a given situation. While following the  
40 actors in their countless interactions is a fascinating undertaking ('new relations  
41 happening all over the place, all the time', as the article rightly puts it), it cannot lead  
42 to any conclusions or, consequently, to any generalisations, because it fails to take  
43 into account two essential dimensions. The first, concerning social life, is the  
44 institutional dimension, which provides important stops to the proliferation of  
45 networks. And the second dimension, concerning the theoretical account, is the  
46 typological dimension, without which no generalisation can occur – a dimension that  
47 ANT lacks and constitutes, in my opinion, a highly problematic limitation (Heinich,  
48 2017 ; Heinich, 2020).  
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4 The article thus proposes to differentiate between a first and a second Latour :  
5 the constructivist and the ecologist. The second somehow contradicts the first, since it  
6 relies on science instead of deconstructing it: 'Coming to terms with the failure of his  
7 efforts to give a meaning to constructivism, which would not be experienced as  
8 insulting, he searched for ways of speaking well of the sciences. For better or worse,  
9 this transformed his characteristic irreverence into a rhetoric of admiration.' The  
10 contradiction is indeed highly interesting to note, and many people in France have  
11 laughed at this palinody. But for my part, I would differentiate his thinking into not  
12 two but three Latours : firstly, the anti-scientistic constructivist of the 1970s and 80s ;  
13 secondly, the attentive interactionist of the 1990s and 2000s ; and thirdly, the quasi-  
14 activist ecologist of the 2000s and 2010s, particularly around his meditations on  
15 'Gaia'.  
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19 To this tripartition of Latourian themes, I would also add a bipartition of his  
20 scientific personality. In my view there are two Latours : one is a great ethnologist,  
21 practising the inductive method with unequalled brilliance ; another one is a theorist,  
22 even a prophet, practising with undeniable talent the art of fascinating his readers.  
23 For me, the former remains a formidable guide, as an author of *La Science en action*, *La*  
24 *Vie de laboratoire*, *Aramis ou la vie des techniques* (Latour, 1992), as well as of the articles  
25 in *La Clef de Berlin* (Latour, 1993) – strangely absent from the article's bibliography –  
26 and the formidable *La Fabrique du droit* (Latour, 2002), from which I drew much  
27 inspiration for *La Fabrique du patrimoine* (Heinich, 2009). On the other hand, Latour as  
28 a theorist has never really convinced me or, above all, actually served me in my own  
29 research: *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes* (Latour, 1991), *Changer de société* (Latour,  
30 2005) and *Enquête sur les modes d'existence* (Latour, 2012) are brilliant exercises in  
31 epistemic criticism and interesting attempts to rebuild a theoretical foundation (« a  
32 grand attempt to ontologize the experience of European modernity at large », as the  
33 article states), but they are of little use to a researcher genuinely interested in  
34 describing, analysing, understanding and explaining. And they often lead to  
35 proposals that are no more than common sense, such as introducing the dimension of  
36 moral values into the economy ('Since market exchanges always activate judgments  
37 of fairness, morality is also always at work'). The article acknowledges this, although  
38 without developing this criticism : 'In social science practice, at least, the  
39 multiplication of the modes [of existence] has so far not enriched empirical inquiry.'  
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52 I will conclude with two remarks, one on the critical dimension of Latourian  
53 thought and the other on its theological dimension.

54 The 'critical' dimension of a thought can mean two things: either epistemic  
55 criticism, consisting of discussing or even casting doubt on the work of predecessors;  
56 or the political dimension, consisting of taking positions relating to the affairs of the  
57 city. The first of these dimensions was very present in Latour's work from the outset,  
58 with constructivism applied to the scientific approach, which earned him the  
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3 persistent antipathy of many researchers (and also probably cost him a chair at the  
4 prestigious Collège de France). This is why the authors of the article rightly say that  
5 'Latour could not prevent the term constructivism from having an effect on many  
6 natural scientists similar to a red shirt dangled in front of a bull.'

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9 As for the second dimension, relating to the political world, it only appeared  
10 late with his commitment to ecology. And there it came up against the hostility of  
11 activists, who felt that it was insufficiently assertive : 'Latour remains a favourite  
12 target for critical scholars who see his work as apolitical, neoliberal, or worse',  
13 explains the article. This criticism of his 'apolitism' is, in my view, the best  
14 compliment that can be paid to a researcher, given that the blurring of the lines  
15 between research and activism offers us everyday the distressing spectacle of the  
16 decline in intellectual quality of much contemporary academic production,  
17 undermined by 'studies', slogans erected as concepts and concepts reduced to the  
18 status of slogans (Heinich, 2021).

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22 Let's finish with the theological dimension of Latour's thought, which is  
23 closely linked to his anti-scientific constructivism. Linguist François Rastier has  
24 pointed this out well : 'The hypercritical movement of deconstruction, which in  
25 Latour's early work delegitimised scientific objectification, is thus now reversed in a  
26 superstitious restoration: it exalts spiritual forces in order to perish rationality, and  
27 takes as its example the shaman, that "âme" who teaches to desist from "l'intellect"  
28 (Rastier, 2004: 124). Admittedly, Latour is, on this point, overwhelmed by the zeal of  
29 some of his disciples, whose slips and exaggerations he would probably not condone  
30 – and this was also the case for Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. But it is hard  
31 not to see in his late writings a derivative form of theology based around the figure  
32 of 'Gaia' (Latour, 2015), a kind of profane goddess who must be both venerated and  
33 protected against environmental disruption, like the Christian God threatened by  
34 polytheism or the rise of atheism.

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40 'A very Catholic sociology', I said at the beginning of the 2000s – before the  
41 turn to Gaia – in an article in which I highlighted the fact that Latour's thinking was  
42 rooted in an anti-scientific Christian tradition and, more specifically, in a properly  
43 Catholic cult of mediation, in contrast to the Protestant aspiration to transparency  
44 and immediacy (Heinich, 2007). Bruno Latour hated this article, as he later confessed  
45 to me ; and I think he must hate, from his grave, my suggestion that he saw in his  
46 commitment to Gaia a substitute for the religious dispositions he described so well in  
47 *Jubiler* (Latour, 2013). But since lucidity about a thought does not prevent us from  
48 showing affection and admiration for its bearer, I do not feel that I am doing an  
49 injustice in speaking here of a form of Latourian theology.

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60 What I find most disturbing is the risk of seeing propositions that have their  
share of truth systematised and pushed to extremes, but which, when erected into  
absolutised theories, become intellectual fetishes that prevent thought rather than

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3 promote it, by attracting to them theorists who are not interested in reality – and  
4 Latour, alas, is far from being the only one to whom this has happened. The result is  
5 an ever-widening gap between detailed but interminable empirical investigation and  
6 self-referential theoretical speculation. The reader loses the jubilation produced by  
7 the fine articulation between field observations and original modelling, which is to  
8 be found in Latour's best texts but, alas, not in all of them, and very rarely in those  
9 who claim to be inspired by his thought.

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11 This is makes us feel like 'reassembling', to use Latour's terminology, not 'the  
12 social' (a term that may fascinate amateur sociologists but whose actual usefulness  
13 for social science research I have never understood), but the research activity in the  
14 human sciences, which often has difficulty in producing effective links between field  
15 investigation and the rise in theoretical generality.

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17 This is, however, what the article discussed here rather courageously attempts  
18 to do, by focusing on carbon markets 'at the intersection of "economies" and  
19 "ecologies"', and on the way in which 'forms of political contestation and urban  
20 greening elicit problems of co-existence' in Bangkok. But it might have been more  
21 convincing, in my opinion, if the authors had demonstrated less interest in theory  
22 and a little more in exploring the real world.  
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