

The actor-network fantasy

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Abstract

Latour's actor-network 'theory' (ANT), and more generally Latour's constructivist and relativistic work, has since long been debunked. (1) It does not make any sense, mixing all conceptual categories together (humans and non-humans, facts and moral prescriptions, science and politics); (2) nevertheless, it pretends to explain important issues such as our current environmental crisis and what to do to overcome it; (3) consequently, it can have extremely damaging political consequences. Latour's ANT may perhaps be considered as a work of art but certainly not as a work of science. Unfortunately, I find that Anders Blok and Casper Bruun Jensen's attempt to salvage it is unconvincing and inherits the same problems.

Keywords

Bruno Latour, actor-network theory, relativism, social constructivism, science and politics

I take it that Latour's work has, since long, been recognised as an 'intellectual imposture', as Sokal and Bricmont (1997) rightly put it; or as 'soft [i.e., not making use of quantitative statements] obscurantism' (Elster and Landemore, 2011). I have myself debunked it elsewhere (see Stamenkovic, 2020). It is therefore surprising to see that there are scholars who still defend Latour's work, as Anders Blok and Casper Bruun Jensen do.

To recapitulate: the main problems with Latour's constructivist¹ and relativistic² work is not that it is apolitical or neoliberal, as the authors of this text claim, but that: (1) it does not make any sense, mixing all categories (humans and non-humans, facts and moral prescriptions, science and politics) into an absurd 'hybridism' (Malm, 2018); (2) nevertheless, it pretends to explain important issues such as our current environmental crisis and what to do to overcome it; (3) consequently, it can have extremely damaging political consequences (Stamenkovic, 2020). Bacteria or rivers do not have 'interests',

they do not 'want' or 'care about' something, as Latour (2017: 111) unbelievably claims. They cannot tell what or who are their 'allies', or 'against whom [they] will have to fight' (Latour, 2017: 121). What is more, if the non-human environment cannot really be distinguished from human agency, then there is no 'real' environmental crisis (after all, 'nature' is what we decide it to be), and in any case, humans are not responsible for our current crisis (blame the 'intentions' of 'agents' such as carbon dioxide or plastic instead!). On the other hand, Latour's texts can perhaps be praised as works of *art*, as pieces of literature or poetry, because of their stylistic qualities or the imaginary, fantastic stories they tell. But they can certainly

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not be considered as works of *science* (in the large sense of this term, including the social and human sciences), that is, as works providing us with the best available knowledge about their subject matter (Hansson, 2017). The problem is that Latour precisely pretended to do science (sociology, anthropology, philosophy,³ science studies), although he indeed appeared more and more as an artist towards the end of his career, performing in mysterious happenings on Gaia.⁴

Let me now turn to Blok and Jensen's article, which in many respects looks like Latour's prose and presents the same problems. Apparently, the authors, after presenting Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) and misrepresenting its critiques, intend to show that it can somehow be applied (by 'inventing around Latour') to two sites, namely carbon markets and 'urban critical zones' in Bangkok, and to conclude upon the future fate of ANT. However, it is very difficult to engage with the text's argumentation in more detail. Firstly, the text contains many words, expressions or sentences whose meaning is not clear. For example, it makes use of concepts (such as 'uncommons', 'pluriversal', or 'non-modern') which are nowhere defined. Similarly, many expressions are not explained: for example the need 'to *ecologize* both sociology and politics'; Latour's modes of existence turned into 'flexible, empirical resources'; 'practical ontologies' or 'ecology of knowledges'; or 'the redistribution of critique'.

Let me now turn to the ANT which, contrary to what the authors claim, precisely does not 'make sense' of the complex interactions between scientists and the various elements in the laboratory. Projecting human terms onto inanimate things (such as talking about the 'misbehaviour of machines', a laptop 'mak[ing] decisions', or scientists acting as 'spokepersons' for non-humans) does not help at all to understand scientific activity. Either it is a figure of style or a truism ('machines', i.e., measurement instruments I guess, provide unexpected results); either way, it is useless.

The fact that the ANT salvaged, and even extended to non-human actions, the so-called 'symmetry principle', is telling. This obscurantist principle, which deliberately recommends ignoring

available knowledge,⁵ is fundamentally irrational and anti-scientific. In order to understand science and its role in society, in order to understand why previous scientific approaches failed and to develop new reliable knowledge, we need to make use of the best available knowledge. Otherwise, we just repeat the same errors again and again, or we impossibly try to build new knowledge on the basis of falsities. For example, if we want to understand why for centuries doctors found patients who were willing to pay for treatments which were at best useless and often harmful (such as bloodletting), we can only ask this question if we make use of the current available knowledge about the positive or negative effects of different treatments (Hansson, 2007). As Loison (2016: 31) remarks with respect to history of science, '[o]ne can indeed hardly imagine a rational argument supporting the claim [made by Latour]⁶ that we should not take advantage of present-day technical and scientific advances to improve our understanding of the past world'. On the contrary, making use of current available knowledge 'is helpful in history of science to retrospectively understand the constraints of the intrinsic structure of the natural world on past scientific thoughts and explanations' (Loison, 2016: 31).

Loison rightfully notes that this approach does not pose any risk of anachronism (contrary to what Latour claims) since it has no bearing on our interpretation of history. Of course, it presupposes that 'the natural world exists regardless of what we know about it' – an obvious pre-requisite nevertheless 'denied by Latour and the most radical anti-realist sociologists of knowledge' (Loison, 2016: 31). Tellingly, the authors themselves seem to recognise that the ANT does not in fact pretend to explain anything, when they write that in the ANT, 'the clarity, sophistication, and substance of ideas are insufficient to determine intellectual outcomes because *too many other powerful forces are usually in play*'.

I now turn to the two empirical cases which are supposed to prolong and refract Latour's ANT 'via still underexplored potentials in Latour's later work, all catalyzed through encounters with ideas and situations originating *elsewhere*'. The problem

is that these test sites provide no empirical test whatsoever, contrary to what the authors claim. The first test site is supposed to ‘explore empirical potentials’ of Latour’s ‘modes of existence project’ for deploying its ‘empirical potentials and possible pitfalls ... in relation to the emergence of carbon markets as a form of Anthropocene politics’. According to the authors, Latour offers a critical response that seeks to ‘redistribute’ the elements of the ‘monstrous power’ of capitalism and neoliberalism. But the three Latourian ‘modes of existence’ (‘attachement’, ‘organization’, ‘morality’) supported by the authors do not explain anything about carbon markets. We only learn that the latter are ‘held together by bits and pieces from many modes of existence’, and that power struggles (a constant in Latour’s work, to which everything is ultimately reduced, see Endnote 2) lead to ‘different spokespersons, diplomats, or mercenaries seek[ing] dominion or part[ing] ways, as circumstances permit’. The second test site ‘examines recent urban upheavals and transformations in Bangkok through the lens of urban critical zones, which make visible problems of co-existence that shade into pluriversal cosmopolitics’. It is similarly declared (rather than explained) to be ‘the emergence of new interfaces and problems of co-existence, relating to human living conditions [...] and nonhuman ones’.⁷

Finally, it is important to note that the authors misrepresent the critiques about Latour’s work. For example, they completely ignore Malm’s (2018) detailed argumentation and devastating critique of Latour’s ‘hybridism’, only retaining one pejorative passage (for an overview of this critique, see Stamenkovic, 2020).

To conclude, I find that the critique which I formulated against Latour’s ANT similarly, and unsurprisingly, applies to this piece. It may have a suggestive power, be beautiful or moving, but I do not see it as a *sociology* contribution proper. Perhaps I am completely missing the point the authors are making: it may well be, but in this case, one may rightfully ask them to help the reader understand it, instead of (apparently deliberately) obscuring it. After all, this is the prerequisite of any *dialogue* (as this journal purports to be): that the participants understand each other. As for the

ANT, I suggest renaming it the actor-network *fantasy*. It may well have a future in novels, poems, theatre plays, or other works of art (including in the science-fiction genre). But it has never been a *theory*, and it is more than time to acknowledge this.

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Notes

1. Latour’s (1988: 84) most illustrative statement in this respect may be the following, about Ramses II’s death (who died of tuberculosis): ‘Before Koch, the bacillus [of tuberculosis] has no real existence’. Latour does not explain what Ramses II ‘really’ died from.
2. Because power is all that matters to establish facts. See, for example, the peremptory statements in Latour (1984, my translation): ‘There are only trials of strength, of weakness’ (158); ‘Nothing is by itself either logical or illogical. [...] No set of sentences is by itself either consistent or inconsistent [...]; all that we need to know is who tests it with which allies and for how long’ (179).
3. Granted, philosophy is not necessarily, or not only, a science. It can also be practiced in the continental way, as Latour clearly did.
4. Such as ‘Cosmocolosse’, ‘Gaïa Global Circus’ or ‘Théâtre des simulations’ in France (see Larrègue, 2018).
5. As the authors recognise, the point of ‘generalized symmetry was [...] *unlearning* taken-for-granted notions of what distinguishes humans from other actors’.
6. Loison (2016: 31) includes Latour in this ‘extreme form of presentism’ where the historian is absolutely

not allowed to make use of other categories than those used by the actors she is studying.

7. In a way, this diagnosis is an admission from the authors that they do not intend to explain anything.

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