06 1999

Objects that Judge: Latour’s Parliament of Things

Scott Lash

Towards a Non-modern Constitution

Bruno Latour argues for the rights of the object. He is the spokesperson for the “parliament of things”. Latour argues that modernity has systematically refused to consider the rights of the object, partly because of its systematic propensity to think in terms of subject/object dualism. He holds that we can come to recognize the rights, the autonomy, the agency of the object. We can do so if we can recognize that the modern mode of classification never corresponded to what was really going on in thought and in practice, and never recognized the consequences of these practices. Latour argues that “modernity” was never any more than a mode of classification, a mode of sorting, or better an ideology that accounted for how we classified and sorted. He argues that we must break with the time-honoured sociological chronology in which *la pensée sauvage* of primitive classifications is displaced by a dualistic *pensée moderne*, by a dualistic mode of modern classifications. That we must instead come to terms with what is our very non-modern mode of classification, and recognize at the same time that *we have never been modern*.[1] It is only then that

rights and representation, that rights to speak and be represented, will have been granted to and claimed by the object.

Latour understands modernity, and its pre-modern predecessor and non-modern successor, in terms of differing "constitutions". These constitutions are juridical frameworks which often do not correspond to *de facto* practices. It is important to note that he speaks of a "constitution" instead of "mode of classification" here. And that is because these frameworks are not just about classifications and epistemology, but also about *political* representation. Latour holds that this distinction between political representation and epistemological representation is one of the modern constitution's tendentious dichotomies. He is not the first to make this comment. Gayatri Spivak, in her classical article "Let the subaltern speak", points to the ideological nature of this dichotomy, which indeed tends to limit the chances of subaltern speech.[2] Like Spivak, Latour holds that modernity's phoney dualism are rooted in the bifurcation of these two forms of "representation" and "delegation", i.e. of political representation in parliaments and the state, on the one hand, and of epistemological (or classificatory) representation and delegation in the sciences, on the other.

Latour speaks of modern and non-modern constitutions, each with four "guarantees". There is also an implicit notion of a pre-modern constitution as well, though its less codified conventions would not amount to guarantees. Each of his constitutions addresses four, so to speak, ontological realms: the subject, the object, language and being. The realm of the subject is also that of society, communities, culture and the state; the realm of the object is that of things, technologies, facts and nature; the realm of language includes practices of discourse, mediation, translation, delegation and representation; and, finally, the realm of being includes God

and the gods, the immortals, the totemized ancestors – it includes questions of existence. For Latour every epoch's constitution must have conventions and guarantees in these four ontological realms.

The four guarantees of the modern constitution for Latour are: (a) that nature (i.e. things, objects) is "transcendent", or universal in time and space; there to be discovered; (b) that society (the subject, the state) is "immanent", i.e. it is continually constructed "artificially" by citizens or by subjects; (c) that "translation networks" between these first two realms are "banned", i.e. the "separation of powers" of these realms is "assured"; (d) that a "crossed out God" acts as "arbitrator" of this dualism.[3] Now in fact, as distinct from in law, what this constitutional dualism permits and encourages is the invention and innovation of a host, a proliferation of quasi-objects, ob hybrids that totally violate modernity's categories and guarantees. We moderns close our eyes to the hybridity of the machines, the technologies and other quasi-objects, of the "monsters" that are thus produced. We moderns tend to classify them into the conventional dualistic categories. But none the less we produce these hybrids, these monsters, on a scale never previously envisaged. Further, our dualistic (anti-hybrid) categories have facilitated the production and innovation of these proliferated quasi-objects. The point in time has come now, Latour says, where these quasi-objects, these monsters, like gene technologies, thinking machines and ozone layers, have become so omnipresent that we can no longer deny their existence. Hence we should recognize now that we are not modern and that we never have been.

The point, paradoxically, is that it is this dualism that has allowed the proliferation of hybrids that violate its principles. Let us investigate this. The central dualism of modernity is that nature is transcendent while society and the subject are immanent. To be

transcendent means not to be constructed, it means to be universal in time and space. It means somehow to be real as in social-scientific realism, to be objectively true. Modernity's constitution holds nature, scientific facts and technologies and other objects and things to be in this sense transcendent. However, the sociology of science, for example, has demonstrated the mythic character of this in demonstrating nature's immanence, in showing how facts and theories themselves are constructed. Nature, moreover, is not fully transcendent, but also partly immanent, in the sense of spatio-temporal universality. Scientific theories and facts only have a certain duration in time and a certain scale of outreach in space. The constitution holds that society and the subject are immanent in the sense of being constructed. That individual and collective subjects are artificial and hence fragile, lasting only a moment, the moment of their construction. The truth is otherwise, Latour claims. Society is partly transcendent: such collectivities of humans are durable in time largely "through the enrolment of ever more numerous nonhumans",[4] i.e. through the enrolment of nature, of objects, of things and technologies. Thus what look like modernity's transcendental objects (and nature) are in fact non-modernity's mix of transcendence and immanence; indeed, they are not fully fledged objects but what Michel Serres calls "quasi-objects". What look like modernity's immanent, exclusively "here and now" subjects (and societies) are themselves partly transcendent through their own extended duration in time and outreach in space: they are not fully fledged and immanent subjects, but partly transcendental "quasi-subjects".

The modern constitution thus legislates through two guarantees for these two separate realms of subjects and objects, of society and nature. Let us consider the constitution's third guarantee, regarding language or discourse. This guarantee "forbids" the

existence of “translation networks”. What this means is that language or representing or signifying practices are involved only in “work of purification”, to the exclusion of “work of mediation”. This guarantee too has opened up space for its own violation. Thus “the official work of purification”, though denying the latter, has permitted “the unofficial (linguistic and representational) work of mediation”. The assumptions of the modern constitution that “science and technology are extra human” in fact hides the repressed and unofficial work that multiplies the “intermediaries” that are neither fully human or non-human.[5] The sort of discourse that is needed, Latour argues, is a “symmetrical anthropology”, a set of inscribing practices that contest the asymmetry of both realism and constructivism. Positivism and realism here only look at the causality by the transcendent object, while constructivism – including most anthropological and science studies work – only looks at construction by immanent subjects. Both of these reproduce the separation of the realms. Latour’s symmetrical anthropology will give a place for the causal agency of both subjects and objects, or rather of both “quasi-subjects” and “quasi-objects”.

Let us examine Latour’s constitution for non-modernity, realizing that guarantees in the third and fourth, discursive and existential, realms – guarantees in the realms of language and of God and the religious – are as important as guarantees regarding subjects and objects, societies and nature. Thus non-modern constitution’s guarantees in realms one and two are instead of the “non-separability of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects”: of their population of a “third kingdom”, whose place is between the transcendent and the immanent. In this kingdom “nature and society are one and the same production of successive states of societies-natures, of collectives”. Here every institution that

interferes with the “continuous deployment of [such] collectives and their experimentation with hybrids would be deemed pernicious”. Now the “work of mediation” is no longer marginalized, but takes its place “at the very centre”. Now the networks (of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects) “come out of hiding”.[6]

The realm of language is just as important. Discourse in modernity involves purifying language, while non-modern discourse comprises practices of mediation. The key to non-modern language use is to destroy the ban on translation networks, to end the ban on our “freedom” to “combine associations”.[7] The modern constitutional guarantee that language must engage in work of purification also “outlaws the archaic”: it legislates the forgetting of history. The non-modern constitution will enable language to bring back history in a set of new associations combining the archaic and the new. Finally, in terms of existence, the modern constitution separated God out into a purely sacred realm, while the other three realms were placed securely in the profane. In its fourth guarantee, non-modernity will counteract modernity’s Faustian subject by bringing the gods back into the realm of the profane. The non-modern constitution brings God, the religious, being, the existential, right back into this middle kingdom of quasi-objects, quasi-subjects, of hybrids and networks. These measures of retrieval of history and being, as well as recognition of the spatio-temporal durability and partly transcendent nature of the middle kingdom, will counteract the “wild and uncontrollable” overproduction of hybrids; will lead to “an enlarged democracy that regulates and slows down the cadence”.[8] Hence in the non-modern condition, the previously Faustian subject will be reconstituted in a new modesty, a new finitude.

Latour's non-modern constitution is made up of "actants". The notion of actant comes from Beneviste's theory of narrative. Here humans and non-humans play roles in such narratives. Insofar as they play such roles they are "actants" in the narrative. Latour's non-modern quasi-objects and quasi-subjects and even his discourses figure as such actants. "Discourses is a population of actants that mix with things as well as societies."[9] These actants – these monsters, these hybrids populating the middle kingdom – all translate, mediate and extend the networks, they "trace networks": they build the "actor-networks". At points Latour speaks of various types of actants: quasi-subjects, quasi-objects, discourses and even "existential" actants. But on a more fundamental level, non-modern (like pre-modern) actants are comprised of four sorts of "properties", four sorts of "ontological substance". Each of these monsters, each of these actants, is comprised of subject properties, object (or nature) properties, discourse properties and existential properties. And each is comprised of different measures of each. Thus machines are hybrids, with accentuated quasi-object properties, or poems as actants have most pronounced linguistic and existential properties. [10] In modernity each of these properties occupied a separate realm. God is "crossed out" from the world and is only fully transcendent in the Reformation (and Counter- Reformation): God was at that point separate and fully differentiated from the social, from nature and from language. Subject and object took on their autonomy, as did language, as we see in the various theories of semiotics – from Saussure to Peirce to even Barthes – and their assumption of the autonomy of the signifier. This followed a much less differentiated pre-modern constitution; in which the "natives" "saturated mixes of the divine, the human and natural elements with concepts".[11] This is well known from classical theories of modernization. But Latour asks the further question: what is it in

the West that allows this dualism, this hybrid proliferating dualism, to emerge? His answer to the question of the "Great Divide" is that we in the West are the only culture "which mobilises nature. We mobilise nature, not as signs, but as it is. And we mobilise nature through science."[12] Thus Lévi-Strauss writes that the savage mind "arrives at the physical world by the detour of communication", whereas the West "arrives at the world of communications by the detour of the physical". The savage mind "recognises physical and semantic properties simultaneously" and "mistakes mere manifestations of physical determinism for messages"; it "treats the sensible properties of the animal and plant kingdoms as if they were the elements of a message", it discovers "signatures" and thus "signs" in them.[13]

Morphism Weavers and Object Trackers

Latour is not a constructivist. Constructivism for him comes under that same old modern constitution that realism did. Latour makes two moves which separate him from constructivism. First, he does not understand objects so much as being caused by subjects, but instead sees them as bearing certain properties that subjects bear. Objects for him thus have agency: not causal agency like in naturalism, but more the sort of agency that subjects have. They have rights, responsibilities, they can judge and measure, they can mediate. Just like subjects can. So Latour's objects are not primarily caused by subjects. Instead they are *similar* to subjects. Second, Latour is not exclusively a sociologist of science. He is a sociologist of science *and technology*. His focus in his comparison of Hobbes and Boyle, for example, is not Boyle's theory, but the vacuum pump, the technology that mediates the theory. The same

for his work on Pasteur: it is the laboratory, not the scientific facts, which is primarily at stake. Michel Callon, for his part, has similarly focused on the texts written about the experiment.[14]

Now *technologies* have never had the transcendental status that science and scientific facts and theories have had. Technologies have always been very difficult to reduce to poles of subject and object. Previously they have with difficulty been reduced to the object role, as in, for example, "technological determinism". But with the growing centrality of genetic and information technologies this is increasingly impossible. Technologies become increasingly hybrid: neither subject nor clearly object. Sociologists of science may be tempted by the constructionist option. Latour as sociologist of science *and technology* can no longer be constructionist. He must be non-modern.

So Latour's objects are not only constructed. They themselves do not so much cause as themselves construct. They construct through "mediation" and "delegation". How does Latour understand this? He understands human social practices, in science and everyday life, in terms of a process of "sorting". This is reminiscent of Durkheim and Mauss's and Bourdieu's understanding of human beings as "classifying animals". This recalls Kant's third critique, in which determinate judgement is one (very important) variety of reflexive judgement. Determinate judgement is especially important in Latour's modern constitution, whose "work of purification" involves "civilizing the hybrids", "sorting" them, by placing them forcibly into either society or nature. Latour insists that we see this form of dualistic mediation as only one form of mediation, and that the human or "anthropos" must no longer be defined as a pure determinate judging subject up against a Sartrean "practico-inert", but instead humanism has to do with our non-modern work of mediation. Humans, says Latour,

are “analogy machines”. The human is a “weaver of morphisms”: not just of anthropomorphisms, but also of “zoomorphisms, theomorphisms, technomorphisms and ideomorphisms”. Not only do we use non-humans as representations or anlogues, but non-humans themselves become analogy machines, themselves become weavers of morphisms. Classical humanism has conventionally stripped things of their powers, cut them off as “delegations and senders”. But non-modern humanism instead “shares itself” with these “other mandates”, through the “redistribution of action among all these mediators”. “The human”, Latour continues, “is in the delegation itself, in the pass, in the sending, in the continuous exchange of forms.” “Human nature is the set of its delegates and representatives, its figures and its messengers.”[15]

This is, I think, the key to Latour’s theory and the book. He is saying that objects themselves are judges; objects themselves engage in reflexive judgement, in the weaving of morphisms. To weave a morphism is more than just to represent: it is also “to pass”, to “send”. It is – in the idiom of computer graphics artists – to “morph” something,[16] i.e. to create your morphism and then to communicate it. It is through this communication to weave a net or a network. For Latour judgement is always at the same time communication of that judgement. It is never pure representation. Or pure fact. It is a statement and its sending. In its effects it is more like a speech act than just a predicative utterance. It is *parole* understood not as speech but as message: it always includes the sending. And the sending weaves a net, helps to construct a network. Here quasi-objects are among the most important of these “mediators”. Mediation itself, of course, means much more than just representation. Representation involves the sort of practices occurring in sculpture, painting, the novel, the poem. Even film is more a matter of representation than mediation. But

characteristically late-modern global forms of culture break with the logic of representation. Or, rather, such late-modern culture, quite rightly understood in terms of "the media", can never represent without sending, without transmitting or communicating. Indeed, contemporary "economies of signs and space", especially in their capacity as information, have a lot more to do with transmission than with representation. That is, in contemporary culture the primacy of transmission has displaced the primacy of representation. Contemporary culture is thus a culture of movement. A culture of moving (quasi-) objects.

And here is where Latour may become unwound in a contradiction. Although in his non-modern utopia we come to understand that we and non-humans are analogy-machines, are reflexively judging entities, this is not what he suggests we do as social scientists. In this sense I think his theory itself is insufficiently reflexive, i.e. it cannot be applied to itself without contradiction. What Latour asks us as social scientists to do in non-modernity is not reflexively to judge and send, but instead to "track the object". What I am arguing is that cultural activities of analogic judgement are themselves typical of not non-modernity, but *modernity*. Latour recognizes this but then says we cover it up with a dualistic ideology of determinate (logical) judgement. But as we move into the proliferated hybridity of the global informational order, we may be involved in an entirely different set of cultural practices: *we become engaged in "object tracking"*.[17] Thus, ascertaining that actants are simultaneously real, social and discursive, Latour encourages us to "follow the quasi-objects to the end". He encourages us to begin from the middle kingdom of the monsters and hybrids and track them to see how they are hypostatized as immanent or transcendent. If we track the object, we discover the network. He endorses Michel Callon's dictum that

we put ourselves “at the median point where we can follow the attribution of both human and nonhuman properties”.[18] That we thus track the work of mediation, of how quasi-objects in the middle kingdom become stabilized as subject and object. He says we should “follow the work of proliferation of hybrids” and “shadow the quasi-object or networks”.[19]

This “shadowing” or tracking sounds a lot more like the work of a detective than the work of a judge. And perhaps this is what we are about in global informational culture. We non-moderns are perhaps not “judges” at all, but “trackers”. We are less concerned with the representation than with the sending, the signal. We are no longer pre-moderns of symbolic, not like the moderns iconic, but have moved into an *indexical* order of non-representation. Where we follow the object. Where not only social scientists, but all of us are object trackers. Whether when net surfing or 500-channel surfing, we uncover the hypertext, or open the doors and the drawers in interactive graphics on CD-ROM. In each case at issue is not so much representation or the symbolic, but information and sending. We trace the network through the Web site. There is neither aurality (the symbolic) nor vision (the iconic), but tactility, indexicality at the heart of the signal and the information economy.[20] Not only do we track the objects, trace the networks. But as we see in our discussion of Virilio[21], the objects can track us. The networks can be our prisons. In our discussion of Benjamin[22] we look at how object-tracking can be an allegorical and metonymic practice as we reflexively dis-embed objects from contemporary culture and then re-embed them in our own allegorical ordering, an ordering that is non- and post-narrative. An ordering of tracking that has not so much to do with the representation of linear narrative or even the problematization of representation by non-linear narrative. It has to do instead with

the *irrelevance* of representation: the irrelevance of narrative. It has to do with what Lefebvre calls a "path", a material path, an indexical and tactile path that we trace and then that we lift out and reconnect. This may be how we make sense and make meaning in contemporary culture. And note that much of the time we make sense through practices of orientation that do *not* involve making meaning. We non-moderns are not mediators but materialist "trackers", pathfinders. We find not Kantian rules, but "paths". We create our hybrids not through mediating as analogy machines, but as trackers, as allegorists.

This text was published earlier in Scott Lash, Another Modernity, A Different Rationality*, Oxford, Malden: Blackwell 1999, pp. 312-338. By courtesy of the publisher.*

---

[1] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993). The "sociology (and anthropology) of things" has a considerable pedigree. There is of course the juxtaposition of use-value and exchange-value in Marx. There is something irreducibly thing-like in Durkheim's "social fact", which is a thing as much as it is a structure. Mauss's *Gift* in a sense gave the strongest foundations to this analytic of things. Marx's use-value versus exchange-value follows very much in the Kantian frame of finality versus instrumentality. Indeed, so does the contemporary anthropology of things of Appadurai and Kopytoff in their juxtaposition of "singularity" versus "commodity". See Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the politics of value", in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and I.

Kopytoff, "The cultural biography of things, commoditization as process", in ibid. Yet the anthropological argument very much breaks with the transcendental and universalist assumptions of Marxism and Kant and looks at symbolic values for specific cultures. Thus too can be understood Daniel Miller's "material culture analyses" in his several books: see, for example, *A Theory of Shopping* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

The logic of the present text breaks radically with any such aporetic juxtaposition, even with the aporia of gift-society versus exchange-society. Its inspiration is partly Baudrillard. Not Baudrillard's nostalgia for Maussian symbolic exchange, but instead his theory of the object. And especially his idea of the object, which is, on the one hand, not knowable by the subject, and hence not an instrumentality; but an object that is also and emphatically *not a finality*. Hence the importance of the idea of "reversibility" for Baudrillard. What is not a finality for him is reversible. Baudrillard's object seduces. Finalities do not seduce. They are sublime or beautiful but they do not seduce. To speak of the sublime is still to speak the language of aporetics. The sublime is part and parcel of the second modernity, not of the global information culture. "Sign-value" seduces. Sign-value has nothing to do with the status associated with consumption. Baudrillard's consumer culture is a culture of seduction. It is not a culture of commodification. Baudrillard will refuse critical theory's analyses of mass society based on the counterposition of commodity and use-value, or alienation and authenticity. The quasi-objects in Latour's actor-networks are also clearly not finalities. And also not instrumentalities. They transmit, they judge, they speak. See Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 103, and see "Dead symbols", interview with Jean Baudrillard, Theory, Culture and Society, 12, 4 (1995).

[2] Gayatri Spivak, “Let the subaltern speak”, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

[3] Latour, *Never Modern*, p. 138.

[4] Ibid. See also Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse*^{TM} (London: Routledge, 1997). In her focus on microbes, units of genetic information and the like, Haraway, unlike Latour, ties her “non-humanism” to a systematic periodization of what are effectively frameworks of knowledge. Her contemporary phase, which is derived from her thinking about microbiology, immunology and genetic engineering, amounts to a systematic formulation of an episteme, one which clearly is posterior to Foucault’s modern episteme. Philosophers tend to think in terms of the transcendental and the universal both spatially and temporally. Anthropologists tend often to think in terms of difference and particularities spatially – that is, across cultures – but tend to think in terms of universals temporally. In thus sense Latour thinks very anthropologically, arguing that we never were modern, but just thought we were. And, indeed, how we now are is how we always were. Haraway will think in terms of temporal difference in her periodization. This is a very sociological mode of analysis. The only problem is that sociologists, and the present analysis is no exception, tend often to lose sight of spatial difference. They tend to think temporally but to universalize a sort of Western model across cultures.

[5] *Never Modern*, p. 131.

[6] Ibid., p. 139.

[7] Ibid., p. 141.

[8] Ibid., p. 142.

[9] Ibid., p. 90. See Emile Beneviste, *Problèmes de la linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

[10] Latour, *Never Modern*, p. 89.

[11] Ibid., p. 42.

[12] Ibid., p. 101.

[13] Ibid., p. 97.

[14] See Michel Callon, "Techno-economic networks and irreversibility", in J. Law (ed.) *A Sociology of Monsters* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 132-164. Werner Rammert offers us elements for a general sociological theory of technology. Rammert notes that the refusal of technological determinism has led to a thoroughgoing forgetting of technology (Technik) in social science. Like Heidegger he begins with an idea of "Technik" in terms of the fourfold nature of Aristotelian causation. Rammert then rejects Heidegger's definition of the essence of technology in its simultaneous hiding and bringing forth of the meaning of Being. Instead he sociologically argues for the difference of Technik in different social situations. Influenced by Latour and the sociology of science, he none the less forgoes radical constructivism for a pragmatic notion of technology. This is a Deweyan, strongly embedded and practice-oriented idea of technology. Rammert notes the historic progression from substantial to functional notions of technology in Western thought. He agrees with neither. He replaces modern functionalist focus on "ends-means-concept" with his pragmatic focus on "medium-form-relationship".

Technology here becomes a mediator that is not necessarily only a means. It is instead a medium. And the difference between media in this context is of the utmost importance. This holds especially for the difference between biological bodies, physical things and symbolic signs in today's information societies. This model is of great potential explanatory value in distinguishing technology in industrial society from information society and in analysing biotechnology, high technology and the like in what Rammert notes is our "increasingly technically mediated social life". See Rammert, „Die Form der Technik und die Differenz der Medien: auf dem Weg zu einer pragmatischen Techniktheorie", in Rammert (ed.), *Technik und Sozialtheorie*, pp. 293-320, pp. 293-296, 318-320.

[15] Latour, *Never Modern*, pp. 131, 137-138.

[16] I am indebted to conversations with Vivian Sobchack on this. See Sobchack (ed.), *Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[17] The anthropology of things with its contrast of singularity and commodity tends to repeat the Kantian aporia. Daniel Miller's *Modernity: an Ethnographic Approach, Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad* (Oxford: Berg, 1994) begins to put this dualism into question. Howard Morphy's work on the West and African art radically opens up the categories, understanding the object not just as singularity versus commodity, but also as artefact as art etc. See Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

[18] Latour, *Never Modern*, pp. 64, 96.

[19] Ibid., p. 67.

[20] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996).

[21] Cf. Scott Lash's chapter „Bad Objects: Virilio" in his book *Another Modernity, A Different Rationality*, Oxford, Malden: Blackwell 1999, pp. 285-311.

[22] Cf. Scott Lash's chapter „The Symbolic in Fragments: Walter Benjamin's Talking Things" in his book *Another Modernity, A Different Rationality*, Oxford, Malden: Blackwell 1999, pp. 312-338.