



VIVIT-UARY. HOW TO INHERIT BRUNO LATOUR?

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Abstract: This text is a *vivit*-uary of Bruno Latour, not an *obit*-uary: a tribute to his life, not a commemoration of his death. The question is how do we inherit Latour for life? The author seeks to avoid the dead-handed modernisation of his rich heritage, to avoid dividing the single network of his projects and statements along the boundaries of modern disciplines: sociology, philosophy, semiotics, anthropology. Instead, the proposal is to articulate and assemble Latour-the-anthropologist, linking together his projects of the anthropology of sciences and technologies, symmetrical anthropology and the anthropology of modernity (the inquiry into the modes of existence). This approach allows us to find Ariadne's thread in the labyrinths of his heritage, to learn to follow the trajectory of the transformation of his messages through a variety of topics, disciplines, projects, genres and formats.

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Bruno Latour



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Bruno Latour is dead. He was seventy-five years old. He died from cancer of the pancreas on the night of 8–9th October. This bad news made the year 2022 an even darker one for those Russian-speaking scholars who had been touched and mobilised by Latour.

We are left with his legacy. Latour crossed over and transformed a wide range of subjects: *science, technology and innovation, law, art, religion, ecology, politics and power, organisation, the digital and virtual world, the body and subjectivity, literature, and economics*. Leaving aside some regrettable cases of mistaken identity, Latour's legacy is already marked with a cloud of tags which, though incomplete, are in their own way accurate: *the anthropology of the Moderns, the actor-network theory, the sociology of translation and association, political ecology, the ontological turn, political epistemology, Gaia politics, material semiotics, the inquiry into modes of existence, empirical philosophy, the theory of the new climatic regime, symmetrical anthropology, science and technology studies*. Printed on each of these labels is the route of an investigation that cuts across the boundaries of a whole range of academic disciplines: *anthropology, exegetics, sociology, philosophy,*

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ethology, semiotics, ecology, political science. Furthermore, some of these routes lead outside the academy. Latour used mixed media to adapt his messages to different audiences and situations: *exhibitions, plays, diplomatic conferences, collective experiments, media projects.* We are left with this multiple and multiplying legacy. How are we to inherit Latour?

Well known to the humanities and social sciences is one sorry means, equally dear to modernists and to Sharikov in Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*, of dealing with a rich legacy — 'Grab it and divvy it up!' Separate 'early' and 'late' Latour, cleanse his sociology and ethnography of philosophy and metaphysics, distil the 'scholarly' content of his work from the mixture of rhetorical devices, polemical tricks and other 'artistic' exercises. Drag the legacy to your own disciplinary lair, make the strange trajectory of this quasiobject incomprehensible, debate endlessly over the relative value of the actor-network theory and the philosophy of modes of existence, as if we could only have a choice of 'either / or'. This is a sure way to ruin what we have inherited and provide work for the intellectual historians of the future who would be engaged in its reconstruction, painstakingly gluing together the fragments of what we so easily smashed. All that remains is to put the reconstructed artefact in a museum, and we shall have a real *obit-uary*, a text about Latour's death. But what we need is a *vivit-uary*.

How shall we inherit Latour for life, and not for death? There must be another way, one that would allow us to draw conclusions from the messages that he has sent us. We must learn to follow him in the same way as he followed his actors. Feel for Ariadne's thread in the labyrinths of his legacy and learn to follow the trajectory of the transformations of his messages across a multitude of topics, disciplines, projects, genres and formats. There are different ways of doing this, depending on your relationship with Latour. His friends, those who knew Bruno personally, have the opportunity to put together collages of commemorations *ad hominem circumstantiae*.¹ The professional historians of the future, who will have full access to Latour's archives, will be able to connect the surface of his texts with extratextual data about his research and teaching practices, his correspondence, his preliminary drafts, his unfinished and unpublished works, and with the institutional, biographical and geopolitical circumstances of his work. The first opportunity is not open to me, and the second is so far open to no one (though see: [Schmidgen 2014]). Like most people, I only know Latour from his texts. But unlike most people, I have had the time to 'acquire the

¹ Here I mean not that such individuals would deliberately end up using arguments *ad hominem* in the negative sense of the term, but that their personal knowledge might generate such arguments unintentionally, as a result of their advocacy.

body' [Latour 2004] of 'the ideal reader' [Latour 1988: 256] of the corpus of his publications, who meticulously follows one metamorphosis of Latour the author to the next through the multitude of topics, disciplines, projects, genres and formats. Acquired by repeated and consistent rereading, the body of such a reader assumes a particular closeness at a distance, and a sensitivity to the manoeuvres and moves of the author as a function of the organisation of the text. Accordingly, I shall not have recourse to the bio-graphical context in order to generate the literary effect of 'Latour the man and the personality'. We still know so little about the connection between Latour's biography and his work that we cannot prevent ourselves from filling in the blanks with significant but nonetheless vulgar nods towards his Catholicism, his bourgeois origins, his upbringing in a family of winemakers from Burgundy, and his early education in philosophy and biblical exegesis. Using my body of a sensitive reader, and bearing in mind the profile of this journal, I shall have recourse to another form of life. By combining several logs, containing the information about how my reader's body learnt to be more and more affected, I shall articulate and put together for you Latour the Anthropologist. This version of Latour combines projects from almost fifty years of his life and redraws the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology without being confined within them. I shall endeavour to bring you closer to the author, so that you, O ye readers of Forum, may inherit his work!

Anthropology as reflexive agnosticism: modern magic and irreductions

What did Latour himself call his work? As a rule, he used the word 'anthropology'. Retrospectively, this is what Latour's map of anthropology looks like. There is the field of symmetrical anthropology. Within it there is Latour's overall project, the anthropology of the Moderns, and alongside it the anthropology of non-modern collectives (Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Kohn). In the centre of the anthropology of the Moderns is the anthropology of sciences and technologies. Historically, they came in a different order: the anthropology of sciences and technologies — symmetrical anthropology — anthropology of the Moderns. Let us trace how Latour's anthropology was transformed in this sequence.

Anthropology already plays a major part in Latour's very first publications. In 1973 he analysed Charles Péguy's *Clio*, using Lévi-Strauss's method of the analysis of myths. From 1973 to 1975 he performed his service civil in the Ivory Coast, conducting research into 'The Ideologies of Competence in Industrial Circles of Abidjan' for the Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer,

an agency which supports the development of the Ivory Coast. His research was based on the ideas of a former director of the Office, the French anthropologist Marc Augé, a specialist on the region and the author of studies of magic, superstition and faith healing. In 1975 Latour used this anthropological experience to begin his research — now a classic — on the neuroendocrinology laboratory at the Salk Institute in San Diego, which he finished in August 1977. Western anthropology turned its gaze from the cultures of the Other to the nucleus of the culture of the West — science. The anthropology of sciences and technologies began with this reflexive gesture.

Anthropology in what sense? Firstly, *the ethnography* of the scientific collective in the laboratory, as distinct from an analysis of publications or interviews, allows a comparison of how scientists do science with what they say about it, of their practices with their explanations.¹ This cancels out the reliance of the anthropologist of sciences on the explanations of that science given by the scientists themselves. Second, *agnosticism* allowed Latour not to take scientists' explanations on trust, just as Augé had refused to submit to the explanations of a sorcerer [Latour, Woolgar 1986: 29]. The anthropologist of sciences must restrain his / her belief in the self-explanation of science, and free himself / herself from an uncritical attitude to it. A preparatory socialisation in the local culture of the laboratory is not considered a guarantee of successful research. On the contrary, going native is a methodological 'sin' that must be avoided by all means. Agnosticism is a means of de-exoticising sciences and of not assuming a priori that scientists' practices are more rational than those of other actors, both in the West and elsewhere.

With the help of ethnography, Latour compared scientists' practices with their explanations of the results of their activities, and it turned out that there was a considerable, but unnoticed gap between the practices and explanations of Western sciences. In *Laboratory Life* it was formulated as a paradox: the inscription devices, the transformations of the inscriptions, the materials and the practices of dealing with them, the organisation of the work of the personnel, in a word, the material network of heterogeneous elements constitutes the facts of science, but is completely removed from the scientists' explanations [Latour, Woolgar 1986: 69, 183]. In those the scientists speak of Ideas, Theories, Reason, Method, Truth, and Nature — as if there were no mediators between the subject-scientist and the object-nature.

However, this gap between practice and explanation exists not only in science, but also in other spheres of the modern world: technology,

¹ Latour has many versions of this opposition, which is central to his thought. Some of them are: science in action — ready-made science; primary — secondary mechanisms of attribution; translation (mediation) — purification; networks — criticism; research — Science.

economics, law, religion, etc. And this gap produces an illusion of potency and power. This is the subject of the treatise *Irreductions*, written in 1981 but published only in 1984, together with Latour's study of Pasteur.

Actors may become strong (or weak) only through their association with other, heterogeneous actors. Thus they form material, local, narrow, fragile networks. These networks are the actors' sole source of strength. The actors' strength is effective only within the network. They may increase the extent of the network, but they cannot go beyond it without losing their capabilities. However, there are regular instances in modernity when a network's strength is attributed not to all the actors that constitute it, but only to one of them. In such manner arises the magical illusion of potency and power. The vitality of the whole network is misattributed to modern idols: Reason, Machine, Law, Nature, Organisation, Market, etc., which have all the attributes of fetishes.

The illusion of potency leads to a range of dangerous consequences and injustices. The actor-idol is attributed with power that it does not possess. It is asserted that this separate element contains in potentia all the other elements of the network. Potency assumes that an actor's power potentially extends beyond the bounds of his / her network into the entire universe and is maintained in the absence of those allies that make it strong. In a word, the illusion of potency supposes a reduction of the multiplicity to its single element, of the local to the universal.

Latour describes all the errors of attribution of the source of actors' strength, that is, all illusions of potency, as 'magic' [Latour 1988: 180, 186, 190, 209, 212]. The task of the anthropologist of sciences is to place all these types of magic, modern and non-modern, on a single plane and counter them with agnosticism or irreduction. For Latour irreduction is '[w]hatever displaces the magical impression of potency and escorts it firmly back to the network where it took form' [Ibid.: 213]. Latour gives those who speak Russian the opportunity of reinterpreting our heritage when he finds an instantiation of irreductionism in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Tolstoy returns the strength and power magically attributed to Kutuzov and Napoleon to the contradictory multiplicity of actors who shared the events of history with them.

Cause, Truth, Method, Objectivity — these are avatars of potency in science. At the conclusion of their work scientists and epistemologists draw a 'magic circle' around science, and expel from within it everything that gave it strength, but which in retrospect appeared disreputable or polluting [Latour 1988: 25, 31, 59]. This is what happened with the hygienists and other actors in the retrospective descriptions of Pasteur's science by his followers,

in which only the heroic Pasteur is left, effecting everything by himself, with his concepts, a revolution in science and society by nothing more than the force of his reason.

Since scientists retrospectively draw a magic circle around their science, Latour undertakes the irreduction of the sciences [Latour 1988: 212–236]. One should be as sceptical of scientists' explanations that the effectiveness of their science is due to Method, Logic or Objectivity, as of a shaman's explanation attributing potency to his incantations [Ibid.: 186, 190, 212–214]. But this scepticism is aimed not at scientific practices, but at the magical explanations that the world of modernity gives to them. Therefore, the irreduction of the sciences leads to a replacement of the discourse on ideas, method, logic and objectivity with a description of the networks of diverse allies that are the real source of the strength and effectiveness of scientists' practices.

However, Latour also irreduces the modern world as a whole; in this way the symmetrical anthropology that is continued in the essay *We Have Never Been Modern* has its beginning in *Irreductions*.

Anthropology as a model of description: Symmetry, the Great Divide, a common matrix of collectives

Irreduction leads to the description of networks and quasiobjects — hybrid phenomena that cross over the borders of different disciplines. Modern disciplines (sociology, epistemology, discourse analysis) are inclined to divide networks into spheres and levels, but not to trace them. From their perspective, heterogeneous networks are hard to understand. Therefore, these disciplines cannot be the models for continuing irreduction. Anthropology, though, can, since unlike other disciplines it alone seem 'capable of linking up the strange trajectory of quasi-objects as a whole' [Latour 1993: 91]. Anthropologists have shown that it is impossible to understand the cultures of Others if one separates their economics, law, technologies, magic, ethno-science, politics, etc., from each other. They must all be described together. Latour proposes making this *modus operandi* the model for describing the modern world. This is the sense in which his project for an anthropology of the Moderns should be understood.

However, anthropologists apply the approach of not dividing heterogeneous nature-culture networks into spheres only to premodern collectives, and abandon it when dealing with the modern ones. Having been born inside modernity, anthropology often remains asymmetrical in respect of the West and all other cultures. Why is that?

The answer is to be found in the way the Modern Constitution is constructed. In *Laboratory Life* Latour discovered a gap between

the practices and explanations of science, in *Irreductions* he showed that this gap is not confined to science and that it is connected with the modern magical fetishism that requires anthropological agnosticism. In *We Have Never Been Modern* Latour describes the structure and consequences of this gap — the Modern Constitution. The opposition between practice and explanation is replaced by its synonym, that between network and criticism. These two components form the Modern Constitution. Criticism performs the work of purification, that is, it divides the world into nature and culture, and distributes entities over various ontological zones of the human, the non-human, and the divine, and also defines the relationships between them. Inside the networks the work of translation takes place, that is, the mixing, hybridisation and exchange of properties between heterogeneous entities. The result is hybrids of nature and culture, nature-cultures. Networks are a precondition for criticism and its work of purification. Without networks, ‘the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless’, without purification ‘the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out’ [Latour 1993: 11].

What are the specifics of the Modern Constitution? Firstly, modern criticism draws the boundaries between ontological zones differently from other collectives. It makes a rigid distinction between humans, non-humans and God, and the mechanisms of their representation (politics, science and religion, respectively). Secondly, it establishes the Great Divide between the West and all other cultures. Thirdly, the Modern Constitution completely separates the work of purification (criticism) from that of mediation (networks). As a result, within the Modern Constitution the work of mediation and the hybrids are completely invisible. The practical consequences of this structure of the Modern Constitution are not just the West’s illusion of potency, but also the large-scale, uncontrolled proliferation of hybrids [Latour 1993: 40–41], which now confronts us with Gaia and the ecological crisis [Latour 2013].

If such be the case, what does it mean to assert that ‘the modern world does not exist’ and that ‘we have never been modern’? It means that the modern collective has never lived in accordance with what it preached.¹ Nobody has ever been able to live purely according to the Modern Constitution, indeed guided only by criticism and doing without networks and their hybridisations. The other meaning of ‘we have never been modern’ is that we have never abandoned the anthropological matrix that is common to all collectives, and which anthropology is so well prepared to describe [Latour 1993: 107].

¹ The Russian translation of the book’s title, *Novogo vremeni ne bylo* (There Never Was Any Modernity) works very well in its way, but it does not grasp that Latour is referring to the collective (we) and not to the epoch (modernity).

In this way the field of a symmetrical anthropology of all collectives is opened up. Symmetrical, because it no longer uses the Great Divide between the West and the Others as a resource, but seeks to explain it. Symmetry, moreover, is understood not as actual equality, but as commensurability. The work of translation, which is carried on in all collectives, makes them commensurable again. The West is no longer unique, incommensurable with all other collectives, requiring the invention of a separate anthropology, or, even worse, not requiring any. But this common anthropological matrix which restores the commensurability of all collectives is only a starting-point, the point of departure in the search for new, more realistic and empirically justified distinctions [Latour 1993: 107–108].

Admittedly, there is a high price to pay for symmetry. The concept of culture on which modern anthropology is based becomes problematic for symmetrical anthropology. Modern anthropology is asymmetrical because '[i]t rules out studying objects of nature, limiting the extent of its inquiries exclusively to cultures' [Latour 1993: 91]. Symmetrical anthropology 'no longer compares cultures, setting aside its own, which through some astonishing privilege possesses a unique access to universal Nature. It compares natures-cultures' [Ibid.: 96]. After science has been shorn of its exoticism in Latour's anthropology of sciences, in symmetrical anthropology the West loses its metropolitan status.

Thus Latour prepares his project for an anthropology of the Moderns, not to be limited to a study of its superficial and marginal aspects, but concentrating on the central elements of this collective: science, technology, medicine, etc. [Latour 1993: 121–124]. Within this project the meaning of anthropology is transformed yet again.

Anthropology as diplomacy: Gaia, the Anthropocene, and climate scepticism

The project of an anthropology of the Moderns, which culminates in the book *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, occupied Latour for thirty years, and can only very briefly be discussed here. The aim of this project was finally to reconcile modern people's practices and explanations, their values and the ways they expressed those values [Latour 2013: 6–8], and to present them first to themselves, and then to those whom they used to call the Others. With this, some new topics appear and some old ones are transformed. The main consequence of modernisation, that is, the consistent application of the Modern Constitution, is to put the whole planet in motion in such a way that the Earth slips away from beneath the feet of the Moderns. These processes are described using the terms *Gaia*, *the Anthropocene*, and *the new climate regime*. What was formerly irreduction and a return to the common anthropological matrix

is now described in terms of a descent to the Earth and a search for the land or even soil beneath our feet. The illusion of potency is transformed into the evil genius of the Double Click.

The *modus operandi* of anthropology is transformed at the same time. The anthropologist turns from a sceptical broker into a diplomat. Having de-exoticised science and technology, and with a sceptical attitude to magical explanations of their practices, the anthropologist of sciences first strove to make these institutions public and accountable within the modern collective. But now modernisation has turned against the modern collective itself. The results of science, particularly earth sciences, are being attacked by new (climate) sceptics in the name of the idols of modern science, Reason, Truth and Certainty. The task of anthropology is now to take charge of a protocol that would determine a diplomatic process allowing scientists to make a new definition of what they have always treasured — objectivity — but without a sense of a loss of value [Latour 2013: XXVI, 7]. And of course, as well as diplomacy within the modern collective we need diplomacy between the collectives that must confront modernisation with ecologisation, unless they want to be wiped from the face of the Earth.

As a researcher and diplomat Latour made many mistakes, and frequently acknowledged them. He did it humorously, slyly, ironically, with unexpected twists and transformations, and always with vigour. Every time he was trying to convince us again.

Bruno Latour is dead, leaving us the hope that we might be his heirs. How can we become those? How can we avoid the dead-handed modernisation of his legacy? How can we continue what he began? I do not know. But I hope that I have succeeded in bringing you closer to him and convincing you that we should at least try. And if we get it wrong, then we should simply try again.

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