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Reviews

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Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World by Anders Blok and Torben Elgaard Jensen

London: Routledge, 2012

With *Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, Anders Blok and Torben Elgaard Jensen have put together an interesting and varied introduction to the thinking of Bruno Latour. In their own words, “Latour's approach is notoriously difficult to capture in a few simple characteristics” (p.vi). In spite of this opening caveat, the authors manage to represent the complexity of Latour's thought, avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism whilst presenting the nuances of his thinking in a concise and legible form. The text itself is organised chronologically, which enables the reader to look back and think about Latour's earlier ideas in light of his later ones; however, the relationship between his earlier and later ideas is not ignored and there is no sense that his more recent work is to be preferred. The reader is also presented with a glossary of terms at the end of the text, which itself enables the authors to remain faithful to Latour's terminology throughout, without lapsing into either esotericism or patronising simplicity.

The first chapter situates Latour's thought in its historical context, partly by describing the influence of other thinkers—most notably Whitehead,

Deleuze and Serres—on his work, and concurrently introduces the main themes which will animate the book. Blok and Jensen provide a brief introduction to Actor Network Theory (ANT), foregrounding the fact that the anti-epistemological approach of ANT “is a thread that runs through [Latour's] entire authorship” (p.11) and that “Latour's lifelong project may be described as ... an investigation into the intricate ways in which scientific facts are produced” (p.10). The rest of the chapters develop this contention, attending to different aspects, or maybe better objects, of Latour's thought.

The second chapter gives an account of Latour's critical work in the field of science. The authors begin by noting Latour's opposition to the traditional epistemological account of what constitutes a fact (p.26), noting that the problem Latour's thought attempts to overcome was generated by the destabilisation of correspondence theory itself. It is to their credit that Blok and Jensen begin by reminding us of the fundamental instability of this theory. They note that “facts exist only in and through networks of actors and material objects” (p.27) and the main aim of this chapter is not only to explain how this can be understood on a conceptual level (i.e. as a manifestation of complexity) but also to illustrate it with reference to Latour's own examples of actual, physical objects and events (e.g. the materials in a laboratory, the relationships between the scientists who work there etc.). Alongside this, we are provided with an interesting comparison between different types of statements and their corresponding levels of facticity; the ‘scientific fact’, according to Blok and Jensen, is a “specific statement that no-one attempts to disprove any longer” (p.29) thus situating its veridical and discursive strength in an active, historical context.

ANT, as theorised by Latour, presents a significant challenge to more traditional ideas regarding epistemology, reducing what would otherwise be called ‘science’ to the activities carried out and the ‘facts’ produced. The physicist is spoken of as conducting research in a particular field, but if we examine the territory of said field we find a complex network of relations between facts, some of which overlap with other fields (medicine, biology or chemistry, for example). Latour writes that turning our attention to these relations is crucial if we want to understand the processes that are active in the production of facts (and ANT as the orientation that precedes such attentiveness and is itself active within it). It is important to note that he is not

interested in identifying the character of these relationships, as that would be tantamount to a more traditional approach (akin to Kuhn's identification of paradigms, or even the 'episteme' as it appears within Foucault's *The Order of Things*).

Instead of a simplistic relation between 'ideas' and 'realities', Latour offers what he terms "literary inscription" which is achieved by way of "inscription devices" (p.31). Such devices enable a diverse assemblage of elements to come together in a manner that would otherwise be problematic for reductionist approaches to scientific practice. Latour writes of "a combination of technicians, machines and apparatuses, which together are capable of transforming a substance into a kind of visual display that can become part of a scientific article" (p.31). He is not concerned with the question of whether an object can be represented in diagrammatic or statistical form, for example. Rather, he takes such representations as a given and is more concerned with the activities they enable (a viewpoint not dissimilar from William James' pragmatic account of truth, insofar as 'truth' is that which enables further activity).

Most importantly, such an understanding of scientific activity does not prevent someone who works within (what they understand to be) a particular field of science from identifying this field with a name—a physicist can still call themselves as such. There appears to be no normative dimension to ANT, merely a descriptive one. So long as we bear in mind that the name we use for our field of enquiry is instrumental and functional and does not refer to an actual 'thing' (i.e. a concrete and exclusive collection of elements that relate to one another but are closed off from external elements), then we can remain free to use the convenient shorthand. Put simply, there is always more to what we are doing than what we are doing. This not only applies to science, but as Blok and Jensen go on to show, to culture, politics and sociology as well (and, conceivably, to any particular field of enquiry).

The third chapter introduces Latour's engagement with the concept of 'modernity', principally through a reading of his book, of 1991, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Again, Blok and Jensen present Latour's disruption of the common preference for distinct, familiar ideas as the central theme. It is notable that despite the chapter's title ('Philosophy of Modernity') it contains a mixture of philosophical and anthropological elements, demonstrating further

the authors' commitment to representing Latour without reducing his thought to a specific pole. Indeed, it appears to be central to Latour's critique of modernity—understood as an academic viewpoint stemming from “a *separation* between Nature and Society” (p.53)—that we recognise the dangers of such reduction. Blok and Jensen give a detailed account of what Latour means by the ‘Modern Constitution’, showing not only how we can understand it, but how it might be used in a critical context. Readers interested by the manner in which particular ideas and more general discursive paradigms often undermine themselves by generating inherent paradoxes will find Blok and Jensen's account of how Latour understands modernity to have sowed the seeds of its own demise to be especially engaging. To put it in their words, “the clearest expression of the successes of the moderns—the massive emergence of hybrids—is now ... beginning to undermine its own project” (p.63). The manner in which this takes place is described a few sentences later, where they write that “frozen embryos, data banks, psychotropic drugs ... are difficult to classify as either Nature or Culture” (p.63).

The fourth chapter is concerned largely with what is termed (by Latour) ‘Political Ecology’. As Blok and Jensen put it “the challenge ... is to rethink the entire relationship between our two main mechanisms of representation—the scientific and the political” (p.78). Building on Latour's understanding of the activity of science, and his attempt to undermine the rigid categorisation and exclusivity of modernity, they now show how the problems and ideas already raised translate to a political context. There is, they write, an “intimate connection between nature and society, science and politics, truth and power” (p.79) and they proceed to give an engaging explanation of how Latour expresses the fundamental integration of these once distinct elements.

In this chapter, we are also reminded of how Latour's thought serves to destabilise the traditional correspondence theory of truth (whereby the truth of a proposition is determined by its correspondence either with empirical events or the truth of other, related, propositions). For Latour, propositions “are not *true* or *false* ... as a matter of correspondence” (p.83), rather, they are part of a more complex network of elements which may include other propositions, but not necessarily so. Propositions are also not merely linguistic, by virtue of the inclusion of these other, heterogeneous elements. The advantage of understanding propositions in this way is that it enables us

to look for and recognise other sources from which they might be articulated, outside of scientific practice. While this does not prevent the truths of such practice from remaining relevant, it prevents them from holding with dogmatic force.

By the fifth chapter, readers might be wondering whether they are simply learning about a thinker primarily concerned with approaching these problems from a sociological angle. Regardless of whether or not this has occurred to them, they will find the discussion of Latour's "peculiar love/hate relationship" (p. 102) with sociology to be of interest. According to Blok and Jensen, "in the Latourian sociology of associations ... the social refers simply to that which is connected or associated" (p. 103). Latour wishes us to understand the various elements in lieu of their relationships with one another and not as isolated, atomic 'things'. For Latour, the very concept of society is troublesome (nor do Blok and Jensen hesitate to remind us of the infamous quote by Margaret Thatcher regarding its supposed non-existence) and given that this is the case, it is important to re-think what is meant by (and done with) sociology.

Blok and Jensen's book presents a complex aggregate of texts and ideas accessible to those without prior experience of Latour which, at the same time, does not oversimplify. Suffice to say, there is no sense that they have left the reader with too little to think about nor done the reader's work for them. The weaknesses of the text primarily concern its omission of certain points/texts which, if included, might have enabled a more varied discussion; however, further inclusions might have detracted from the otherwise succinct and direct presentation. It is important to note that the authors are acutely aware of what is missing from the text. For example, at the end of the third chapter (on modernity) they mention that it might have been possible to include Latour's thoughts regarding postmodernism or religion. They write that "despite these omissions, we have given sufficient details to trace the direction that Latour has taken" (p. 72) and it would have been counter-productive on their part to have traced this direction for us, as this would have prevented us from engaging with Latour in whichever manner most interests us, on whichever topic concerns our enquiry.

It is difficult to say whether the interview with Latour included at the end of the book (conducted and transcribed by the authors) serves to add

anything to what is already a thorough and concise introduction. As opposed to the clarity of a summary of a thinker's work (especially by those who find it both incredibly thought-provoking and important), the words of the thinker themselves can often appear somewhat less focused and more contemplative. This is not detrimental in and of itself—and perhaps it is important to include it, given Latour's criticisms of academic modernism and its categorisation, if only to resist the temptation to prefer ordered, revised material over the more immediate—but it would be possible to refrain from reading on after the conclusion and still arrive at a sufficient understanding of Latour's project.

Overall, Blok and Jensen have produced a highly readable and informative text on a thinker whose project is complicated yet also highly significant. Their passion for Latour and their desire for others to engage with him are made clear and their text does not allow the former to obscure the latter. It would seem that the student of philosophy, politics and/or sociology (not to mention those who wish to engage on a more thorough level with contemporary issues such as environmental policy) would gain much from reading this text.