Bruno Latour's anthropology of the moderns

A reply to Maniglier

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An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns – published with the motto: *si scires donum Dei* (for those who do not know the Holy Scripture, this is John 4.10: 'if you knew God's gift') – is said to be the result of Bruno Latour's research over the last twenty-five years.[1] The book was presented euphorically in three reviews in *Le Monde*, comparing Latour with the great philosophers of the past, and, most recently, in an article by Patrice Maniglier published in *Radical Philosophy* ('A Metaphysical Turn?, *Radical Philosophy* 187, September/October 2014), which concludes that 'Latour has produced what will henceforth stand as one of the great philosophical proposals of our time'. In what follows, I will present a rather different view.

The book, according to Latour, is a work of anthropology, philosophical anthropology, empirical philosophy, and also an *enquête*, an investigation. However, it does not look like an empirical-scientific project; nor does it look like a philosophical work in an academic sense. Indeed, it seems to belong to a strange genre: on the one hand, it presents itself as open and inviting; on the other hand, it constantly teaches and tells the reader (via an imagined female investigator) what he or she has understood at the various stages. Should *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* be thus conceived as an intellectual text, trying to clarify problems, positions and arguments? Or should it be conceived as a rhetorical praxis for the purposes of 'conversion', an 'eye-opener'?

Referring to his earlier book *We Have Never Been Modern,* Latour declares that due to the developments of science and technology there is an increasingly intimate attachment between humans and non-humans, completely contrary to the vision of the Moderns, according to whom, Latour asserts, humans have become more and more liberated from nature. (Yet, who says so today, in a time of climate change and ecological crises?) Throughout *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* Latour persistently attacks these 'Moderns', claiming, for example, in typically dramatic terms:

> it is truly a matter of wars, here – even of massacres. The bonfires are still smoking with the witches burned alive at the time of the scientific revolution; the ashes are not yet cold after the auto-da-fés in which lay and religious missionaries alike piled up fetishes (and sometimes the fetish-makers) every time they came in to 'deliver the tribes from their superstitions'. (184)

As this implies, one of the most immediately striking aspects of Latour's book is the overwhelming (and positive) role played within it by religion as a 'mode of existence', including its gods and angels, who presumably engender and confirm our status as persons, saving us by the Word: 'Words of love have the particular feature of endowing the person to whom they are addressed with the existence and unity that person has lacked' (302). So, for instance, Latour writes in chapter 11:

> There is a risk, obviously, that this requirement to treat religion rationally will be mistaken for a return to the critical spirit, that is, to the good old 'good sense' of the social sciences [this is what has to be avoided by this anthropology of modes of being: to avoid the critical spirit of the social sciences – GS]. But it should be clear by now that we can expect nothing at all from the 'social explanation' of religion, which would amount to losing the thread of the salvation-bearers by breaking it and replacing it with another, while seeking to prove that 'behind' religion there is, for example, 'society', 'carefully concealed' but 'reversed' and 'disguised'

> [therefore: a 'flat' anthropology; there can no sociological explanation – GS]. Such an 'explanation' would amount to losing religion, to be sure, but also to betraying the very notion of the rational – not to mention that we would not understand anything about 'the social' either. There is nothing 'behind' religion – no more than there is anything at all interesting 'behind' fiction, law, science, and so on, for that matter, since each mode is its own explanation, complete in its kind [and thus there is no room for social criticism of religious 'modes of existence' – GS]. (307)

While Latour had been criticized for being a constructivist and a relativist, who says that material objects are agents, and who lacks a clear scientific foundation, as far as I can see nobody has pointed critically at the decisive role played by religion in his project. This is basically an onto-theo-logical work.

In taking intellectual work seriously, we need to contextualize it (at the same time as the arguments should be taken head-on). Indeed, is contextualization not an essential exercise for all anthropology? And should not anthropologists contextualize themselves as well? It is useful, then, to consider Latour's own autobiographical remarks in a recent interview in the journal *Social Studies of Science* (2013). From 1966 to 1975 – aged 19 to 28 – Latour was (in his own words) a 'militant Catholic', first at the University of Dijon, then at the University of Tours, where he wrote his PhD in theology: *Exégèse et ontologie: à propos de la resurrection*. Resurrection, the mode of existence of Jesus, from Friday to Sunday, and thereafter: what 'mode of existence' is this, what kind of ontology? Evidently, a simplistic dual ontology of subject–object won't do. Resurrection, by biblical exegesis: but how? By learning from Rudolf Bultmann, we are told. In short: biblical exegesis as a way to a revised ontology.

Latour is explicit here about what he was, but he does not mention what he was not. In 1968 he was 21. That year, in Paris, the student revolt broke out, with militant demonstrations and formative discussions about the Vietnam War, capitalism and the one-dimensional society, Marx and Marcuse. Latour was not, however, in Paris, but in the provinces, pondering religious mysteries. And there, before his encounter with Bultmann, was Charles Péguy. Each September, Latour used to go with his mother and father to the Péguy symposium in Orléans, for memorial lectures. His first writing was on Péguy (*Clio).* He makes it explicit: he learnt the repetitive style from Péguy, and from Péguy he got the idea of modes of existence. As he puts it in the *Social Studies of Science* interview: 'It's from Péguy that I got the idea of what I now call a mode of existence: a sort of stream or continuity of action, interrupted by a hiatus. It's a mixture between Péguy and Bultmann':

> Strangely, to my eyes, the systematic deconstruction by exegesis of all dogmatic certitude, far from weakening the truth value that the successive glosses played out over and over, made it possible at last to raise the question of religious truth. But only on condition of acknowledging that there was an itinerary of veridiction with its own felicity conditions, an itinerary whose traces remain in exegesis and of which Péguy had tried to reproduce the disturbing tonality with his repetitive style at the turn of the twentieth century.

Consequently, this is my hypothesis: Latour's basic and formative concern is religion (that is, Roman Catholicism), and his peculiar style and genre are consistent with this concern, as a crucial part of his attempt to avoid an analytic critique of religion. A 'flat' interaction, focusing on immediate experiences, is a way of avoiding sociological (or psychological) explanations of religious phenomena, and thereby avoiding that kind of criticism of religion which stems from Marx and Freud, as well as from the radicalism of the youth movement in the 1970s. Suggestively repetitive, conceptually vague, and characterized by a blend of inclusive reasonableness and aggressive confrontations, Latour's is a style that is unusual for academic work but that is common in the realms of both politics and religion.

Instead of military service, in 1973–75 Latour went to Africa to teach ('a sort of French Peace Corps', as he describes it in *Social Studies of Science*). He now describes himself at that time as 'a provincial,

bourgeois Catholic', who was suddenly confronted with (French) neocolonialism. Here, he 'discovered all at once, the most predatory forms of capitalism…' In other words, only in 1973, relocated in Africa, does Latour, this 'provincial bourgeois', discover capitalism. To what end? To take part in the current discussions or political protests? No. He now discovered 'the methods of ethnography, the puzzles of anthropology'. Again, it is modernity that appears as the great evil.

In the concluding chapter, Latour apologizes for what could be seen as 'the bizarre taste of an autodidact', since (he now says) the whole thing is but 'a "provisional report" on a collective inquiry that can now begin, at last' (476). Therefore, the reader should not be too strict: 'the reader mustn't deal with them [my formulations] too unjustly' (480). Yet, this can hardly counter the fact that, after nearly 500 pages, it still remains unclear exactly what Latour means by 'the Moderns'. This is surprising, because, after all, there is no shortage of extensive discussions on various conceptions of modernity and modernization. Could we not expect, and require, an explanation of Latour's contribution to this lengthy history? It is clear, for example, that the subject–object dichotomy has been thoroughly criticized from dialectical and phenomenological perspectives through to the pragmatic–linguistic turn and the critique of instrumental rationality, as well as via a focus on different forms of situated rationality (or *Wissenschaft*). If someone claims to have new and interesting contributions to make to such debates, is it too much to expect some clarification as to how these differ from what has already been said and done before?

Symmetrical treatment, Latour says. Yes, but also self-reflective, both as to one's own epistemic presuppositions and as to one's own geo-cultural 'situatedness' – which, ironically, is precisely what we should expect from an anthropologist. In the 1970s, in Africa, Latour saw himself as a 'provincial bourgeois Catholic', but not as French – something which could have been useful in contextualizing his own experience of 'the Moderns'. As it is, the whole project is somewhat Kafkaesque: there is an *enquête*, an investigation, in which those who are the accused are presented as terrible and dangerous – but it remains unclear who the accused are, and of what precise crime they are accused.

In the concluding and apparently self-critical chapter, Latour states: 'The first test can thus be formulated this way: by following these navigation procedures, have I been able to make perceptible to readers a certain number of tonalities or wavelengths that modern institutions in their shambles have made it impossible to capture?' (477). Does this mean that it is 'unjust' to blame Latour for his lack of precision? Apparently, his ambition is to come up with new and improved conceptualizations of the major 'modes of existence' in a plural modern world. In so doing, he pretends to 'improve' the overall conceptual scheme, and thereby overrule the various specialists. But when he says that it would be 'unjust' to criticize his formulations, this claim functions as a rhetorical twist that also precludes unpleasant questions about his gigantic project. Yes, there is a need for interdisciplinary reflection. But the idea that one discipline – the Latourian version of anthropology – could be able to provide the (one and only) adequate conceptual overview of the whole of the modern world, with its plurality of values, activities and institutions, and of all the other disciplines with their various perspectives and insights, is both naive and arrogant.

Latour's aim is to elaborate a conceptual scheme for all main 'modes of existence', by some kind of generalizing abstraction from everyday experiences. But what about the selection and representativeness of these presumably everyday experiences? What about the way they are transferred into general concepts? What about the status of this abstract conceptual scheme? As to the question of representiveness: what about ordinary people, and *their* everyday experiences, from around the globe? For instance, what about the various and well-entrenched experiences of religion in India or China, or in Muslim countries? Are their experiences taken care of by Latour's comments on religious experiences, conceived in terms of interpersonal love relations? (Maniglier acknowledges this problem, but can only say that Latour 'must be his own judge on this score'.)

Finally, we should respond to the decisive statement, made at the end of the book: 'If this test fails, if my readers do not feel better equipped to become sensitive to the experiences assembled here, if their attention is not directed toward the beings whose specifications differ in each case, then the affair is over' (477). On its own terms, the Latourian game is, for me, over. The case is closed.

Notes

1. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2013. Page references to this edition appear in brackets within the main text.

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