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Latour is widely considered a critic and renewer of research in the social sciences. The ecologically minded Left has also acclaimed him as a theorist interested in bringing nature back both into sociological theory and into society and politics. To enable a more detailed discussion of Latour's claims, I will here outline his theory and the ways in which it is related to classical theory, such as Durkheim, and the methodology of the interpretive paradigm, such as Schütz. My thesis is that Latour's empirical studies may be read as unfolding the methodological consequences of the interpretive paradigm, and that his early work is a brilliant proof of Durkheim's theory of the morphology of social facts. Latour has now elaborated the insights he gained from concrete laboratory studies toward a general theory of the social, of society, and of politics. In my view, these generalizations have made his theory at least partly problematic. In order to trace out the various empirical, theoretical and political aspects of his texts, it is necessary to make a short detour with the aim of drawing together the different levels on which Latour pursues his argument.

Following Simmel (1908: 20-1), I distinguish between three levels or types of sociological theory: social theories, theories of limited range, and theories of society.[1] By social theories, I mean those assumptions which permit us to determine what will be regarded as a social phenomenon in the first place and what concepts (such as agency, interaction, or communication) will be considered central—in the present case, what role will be attributed to nonhuman entities, things, in our understanding of sociality. It is regarded as Latour's particular contribution to social theory that he has drawn attention to the relevance not only of human actors, but also of nonhuman actors or things, in the formation of social life.

Theories of limited range are theories about specific social phenomena. The early study by Latour and Woolgar on everyday practice in a molecular biology

[1] Simmel does not use exactly these words, although in fact he distinguishes precisely the levels I describe here.

research laboratory (Latour and Woolgar 1979) can be classified as a theory of limited range. I use the term in preference to Merton's "middle-range theory" in order to account for those theories that are initially valid only for individual cases, or object-related theories like the ones developed by ethnomethodology, science studies, or "grounded theory."

Theories of society are those that address large-scale historical formations such as modern society, capitalist society, or functionally differentiated society. Latour's analysis of the constitution of modern society (1993) may be regarded as a contribution to the theory of society.

Simmel (1908, 20 ff) has defined the difference between these types of theory by considering their relationship to empirical data. The assumptions of social theory are fundamental theories about the properties of the object and about how the object should best be observed. It is by means of such theories that we establish what and how something can make its appearance as a sociological datum in the first place.

Theories of limited range work on the basis of these assumptions, which guide their observations. They investigate delimited segments of social reality from a particular theoretical perspective, and might lead to the emergence of a theory of modern organizations, for example, or a theory of the functioning of scientific experiments.

Assuming that sociological theories of society are developed (to a greater or lesser degree) on the basis of empirical findings, or at least that they are supposed to be, they build upon theories of limited range, integrating these into a comprehensive view of a particular societal formation. Admittedly, experience shows that the theory of a societal formation is unlikely to be fully accounted for by empirical findings, in other words by empirically buttressed theories of limited range.

Let me now apply this threefold distinction to an examination of Latour's work. Latour began his international career with an ethnographic case study: a theory of limited range about the practice of scientific research in a biological research laboratory (Latour and Woolgar 1979). Later on, he extended the methodological principles of that study to make them equally fruitful for historical research, for example in his analysis of the success of Pasteur (Latour 1988). He also made

explicit his methodological principles and the social theory on which they are based (Callon and Latour 1992; Latour 1993, 2005), and developed a theory of modern society (Latour 1993). Latour's contribution to the theory of society is grounded empirically or historically in his own research, but also to a very significant extent in Shapin and Schaffer's investigation of the emergence of the experimental paradigm in England. The most recent addition to his oeuvre is a political polemic in which Latour proposes his solutions to the world's problems (Latour 1999/2004).

If we approach Latour's work from the point of view of the relationship between social theory and theories of limited range, we will need to ask what social theory formed the implicit foundation of his initial laboratory study. An investigation of this question reveals that, on the one hand, Latour takes one of Durkheim's theoretical insights as his point of departure and that, on the other, he integrates this insight into the methodological procedures offered by interpretive social research. That is, the laboratory study rests on an intriguing and innovative synthesis between Durkheim and Garfinkel. Moving beyond the relationship of social theory and theories of limited range to take account of theories of society as well, we find that a conceptual ambiguity in the notion of the actor (for social theory) has served almost to seduce Latour into a politically conservative, totalitarian ideology founded upon societal theory.

In the following, my argument proceeds in three stages. I first ask how, through his consistent application of the principles of interpretive social research, Latour has earned the reputation of having fundamentally revised sociological social theory (section 1). Based on this, section 2 examines the implicit social theory that gave rise to the observations presented in *Laboratory Life* (Latour and Woolgar 1979). In the third section, I show that Latour's understanding of method and social theory offers the foundation for a holistic theory of society. The political implication of that theory is a generalization of the call for equality to encompass everything; in other words, Latour criticizes the exclusion of nonhuman entities from political representation. The paper closes by discussing the political consequences of this proposal.

1. The genesis of a misunderstanding

Latour's social theory is commonly held to be a fundamental revision of sociological theory. In this view, he rejects the assumption that human actors have a special status; instead, the activities of things and humans should be taken into account in the same way when examining the construction of social reality. I consider this to be a misunderstanding probably attributable to the rather overwrought reception of Latour's writings by representatives of the "strong program" of the sociology of scientific knowledge. A case in point is the way his British colleagues criticized him in the 1990s. Collins and Yearley (1992, 317-22) alleged that Latour wants to expand the sociological concept of agency. In their portrayal of Latour's opinion, it is not only humans but also nonhumans that act. With this extension of the agency concept to embrace research objects and technical infrastructure, they argued, Latour (Latour and Johnson 1988) and Callon (1986) were infringing Bloor's principle of symmetry (1976)—the principle that a sociological analysis of the stability and truth of scientific assumptions should draw only on social factors. Collins and Yearley disputed Latour's reference to criteria of truth immanent to science, on the grounds that it meant the assumptions of the historically victorious position were the only ones to be taken into account. Only the knowledge that had turned out to be untrue and untenable was attributed to social influences, whereas the knowledge that achieved historical success was attributed to immanent scientific criteria. This presupposition made it impossible to apply the same set of principles when attempting to explain why certain scientific assumptions have succeeded in the course of history while others have foundered. Faced with a disagreement within a science it was observing, wrote Collins and Yearley, the sociology of science must take a neutral stance, because it must grant all scientific assumptions the same validity.

If, however, nonhuman entities were recognized as agents, the consequence would be that—because nonhuman agents' power and their specific capacities for action can only be determined through the special expertise of scientists and engineers—sociologists would be forced to cede ultimate authority back to science and technology. The neutrality demanded by Bloor's principle of symmetry could no longer be maintained, since research on scientific knowledge would once again

have to accept the representations of scientists and engineers as being the definitive descriptions (Collins and Yearley 1992, 322). The most interesting aspect of this critique is the fact that the large empirical study conducted by Latour with Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life* (Latour and Woolgar 1979), is not included in the attack. I will address this point in more detail in the next section.

In their reply to Collins and Yearley, Callon and Latour (1992) argued that the expansion of the concept of agency, the core of Collins and Yearley's critique, was a matter of methodological significance. Far from undermining the principle of symmetry, their interest was actually in the need to extend its reach (see also Latour 1993, 94ff.). Bloor called for a symmetry between true and false knowledge, yet also for a rigorous asymmetry between human actors and nonhuman things; for Bloor, only humans participate in the exclusively social processes of negotiation through which it is decided whether a scientific position is true or false. Latour and Callon now claimed that their aim was to abolish this asymmetry: the participants in producing the results of scientific research included human actors, research infrastructure, and the objects of research in equal measure. It was not settled in advance which of these entities would be endowed with the status of an actor or "actant", the term used more often by Latour; this was a question constantly renegotiated in the process of research. To trace those negotiated changes, a neutral language of description was required, the development of which was one of the "basic tasks for future studies of science and technology" (Callon and Latour 1992, 354).

In the context of a discussion on the closure of scientific disputes, Callon and Latour describe the necessity of integrating nonhuman actants:

> It is not a question of asserting that there is no perceptible difference. The point is *methodological*. If we wish to follow a controversy through and to account for its possible closure in ways other than having recourse to the Edinburgh sociologists [this is an allusion to Bloor; GL], then it must be accepted that the distribution of roles and competences should be left open. Are we to speak of intentionality, of behavior, of social competences, of interests or attachment? The *answers are to be found mainly in the hands of scientists and engineers*. Their work is exactly that of organizing and stabilizing these attributions and the classifications they

> lead to. [...] Since differences are so visible, what needs to be understood is their construction, their transformations, their remarkable variety and mobility, in order to substitute a multiplicity of little local divides for one great divide. We do not deny differences; we refuse to consider them a priori and to hierarchize them once and for all. (Callon and Latour 1992, 356; all emphasis added)

This approach is marked by three interwoven methodological principles:

1. Bloor's symmetry principle is generalized, so that the process of drawing borders between the sphere of the social and the sphere of nature becomes itself a phenomenon.
2. To investigate the contingency of this border-drawing process, it is necessary to look at the practice of the actors considered most significant, namely scientists and engineers. This is the only way to identify how borders and their negotiation change as scientific knowledge is produced.
3. To investigate these actors, in turn, it is indispensable to develop a neutral language of description; only then will an analysis be capable of discovering how scientists and engineers construct different action positions within the production of scientific knowledge.

These three principles locate Latour and Callon in close proximity to phenomenological, or more generally interpretive, sociology.[2] For that school of thought, the distinction between constructs of the first and second degree is methodologically constitutive:[3]

> The thought objects constructed by the social scientists refer to and are founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thought of man living his everyday life among his fellow-men. Thus, the constructs used by the social scientist are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, namely constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene, whose behavior the scientist observes and tries to explain in accordance with the procedural rules of his science. (Schütz 1973, 6)

[2] This includes, for example, phenomenological sociology, ethnomethodology, and grounded theory.
[3] On this, see also Soeffner (1989) and Giddens (1993).

The methodology pursued by Callon and Latour resembles that proposed by Schütz, in that they insist on keeping sight of the actors in the field and on taking these actors' viewpoints absolutely seriously. If scientists and engineers have a practical understanding of the world that endows objects as well as humans with the status of agents, then this must be evaluated as an observed circumstance and not obscured from view by the sociologist's preexisting assumptions. Although in practice few researchers in Schütz's tradition do recognize nonhuman actors, in principle that recognition is imperative when observing a circumstance of this kind in the field. In their second and third methodological maxims, at least, Latour and Callon are taking to their logical conclusion principles that are rooted in the basic methodological assumptions of interpretive sociology.

As a reference point to pin down the object of their analysis, Latour and Callon use the activities of human actors ("scientists and engineers"). It is humans who decide whether and to what extent humans or things will be granted the status of an agent. This anthropocentric focus is posited but not methodologically substantiated, revealing a naïve faith in the reality of the human-social. Methodologically, a reflexive stance is required by Latour and Callon's call for everything to be regarded as an agent if it, he, or she is considered an agent within the practical worldview held by the entities that are being observed as agents. As their unchallenged prime and decisive point of reference they posit human actors—scientists and engineers—and they invoke those actors' understanding of the world when expanding the circle of agents. Whatever scientists and engineers regard as an agent is, for Callon and Latour, to be judged an agent.

This methodological strategy has attracted moral criticism for what are, in my view, the wrong reasons. Some years after Callon and Latour's response, Susan Leigh Star (1995) discussed the problem of extending the concept of agency to nonhuman actors. In her comments, she makes explicit reference to the dispute of Collins and Yearley with Callon and Latour, although she herself focuses more strongly on the moral dimension:

> I think Collins and Yearley have a quite legitimate fear that including nonhumans in an undifferentiated way threatens our moral order (and in particular our moral order as social scientists). The very real image behind the passion in their critique of Callon and Latour is, well, does a cat have

> just as much right as a human being? Are we going to anthropomorphize machines in a nonchalant way so as to render our moral critiques worthless? (Star 1995, 21-22)

In a context of outrage like this, we risk forgetting that the early study by Latour and Woolgar (1979) was actually a milestone in the sociological study of scientific knowledge. At the same time, we may lose sight of the fact that the ethical or political problem lies elsewhere: at least implicitly, Latour's political idea is less to extend actor status to nonhumans than to argue in favour of an elitist expertocracy. His political project thus suspends the modern achievement of universal human rights.

2. An ethnomethodologically informed student of Durkheim takes to the laboratory

At first sight, it may seem rather bold to call Latour a student of Durkheim; after all, in his own eyes he is one of Durkheim's critics. Latour is especially suspicious of Durkheim's thesis that the social can only be explained by social facts: for Latour, it is impossible to explain the social only through the social because societies are held together by the power of things, by technology (see Latour 1994). Societies are, in Latour's view, not purely human-social societies, but "collectives" of which both humans and things are constitutive components. This hypothesis has been received as a radical innovation, although it actually has a venerable pedigree.[4] A survey of the core sociological classics alone yields plenty of evidence of this. It is remarkable how reluctant both Latour's followers

[4] The first thinker to mention in this context would be Marx, who assumes a dialectical relationship between productive forces and the relations of production (Marx 1867, 1885, 1894). Gehlen (1940/1988) thinks of the human as being naturally artificial, so that technology, or rather the invention and application of technology, are natural to the human being. This thought can already be found in a sophisticated form in the work of Plessner (1928/1975), although he does not argue in an anthropological vein but along the lines of a theory of personal sociation (see Lindemann 2006) and with specific reference to the problem of technology (see Lindemann 2005). But perhaps the most important name here is Sartre (1960/1976). Sartre developed the concept of the collective more or less completely in the same way as that applied later by Latour. In Sartre's work, "collective" describes the connection of structured material things and humans. It is precisely this connectedness that Sartre understands as a social phenomenon. On this, see the definition of the collective in Sartre's critique of dialectical reason (ibid., 256-342). The only difference between Latour and Sartre lies in the political inferences they draw. For Latour the collective is the true, good whole, whereas for Sartre it is a form of the social that is unavoidable, yet is objectifying and facilitates domination. At the same time, Latour's work shows a certain loss of complexity: Sartre's subtle and convoluted dialectical figures of thought resemble the mechanics of a Swiss watch, remodeled by Latour with his sledgehammer into a hybrid mass of metal and glass.

and his critics are to see that the hypothesis comes from Durkheim. In his deliberations on sociological method, Durkheim postulated that social facts should be treated as things, and conversely that (made) things should be assessed as social facts. His general definition of social facts runs as follows:

> A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; *or*: which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations. (Durkheim 1895/1982, 59).

Among these more or less fixed ways of acting are, on the one hand, immaterial objects like the law and institutions, and on the other something that Durkheim calls anatomical or morphological facts: the communications network or the form of architecture. He notes: "The communication network forcibly prescribes the direction of internal migrations or commercial exchanges, etc., and even their intensity" (Durkheim 1895, 58). It would be hard to put more unambiguously than Durkheim does here the claim that things determine social life—certainly his student, Latour, will not express it with any more finality.

Durkheim does not elaborate the morphological aspect of social facts on the basis of empirical material; the credit for that step is indeed Latour's. But with respect to social theory, Latour also introduces a further innovation, as I shall now explain. There are two decisive conditions for a social fact in Durkheim's sense: 1. that it is an artificially produced, a "made" or achieved fact which exists outside the consciousness of individual humans, and 2. that the fact exerts coercion on human consciousness to act in such or such a way. The manner in which Durkheim looks at social facts means he sees them as external to actors, confronting these like exterior forces. Durkheim does not have at his disposal a concept of subjectivity or intersubjectivity that would allow him to think of the individual's relationship with social facts outside itself as being a reciprocal one (see Görg 1999, 63ff.). It is here that Latour turns against Durkheim, reiterating—this time with reference to morphological social facts—the critique of Durkheim that ethnomethodology formulated in the late 1960s.[5] Like Latour's, this critique also argued for social facts to be understood as facts made by actors. The

[5] See the ethnomethodological studies collected in Weingarten, Sack, and Schenkein (1976).

ethnomethodological criticism clearly focuses on the aspect of capacity for change; the weight of external social facts is largely resolved into actions.

Latour does not subscribe to this line of argument in full; rather, he "balances" ethnomethodology's action orientation with, so to speak, a dose of Durkheimianism. Latour does not abandon the assumption that social facts are not only made, but can also confront actors like an exterior force. He thus begins to outline an approach to the morphological aspect of the social, along the same lines that Berger and Luckmann (1966), also referencing Durkheim, elaborated in their work on institutions. The similarity of their lines of thought is striking, extending into a similarity in the metaphors they use. For Berger and Luckmann, the regularities of intersubjective action are transparent and reversible before their institutionalization, but upon institutionalization become opaque. The same metaphors appear in Latour and Woolgar's writing: the processes of negotiation that have resulted in a scientific fact become opaque and irreversible once they take on a material form—especially once a scientific insight has become an artifact, a machine, that now itself serves research. Latour and Woolgar refer to cases like these, where "items of scientific knowledge [are rendered] distinct from the circumstances of their creation" (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 259), as "black boxing" (ibid., 242). Technology has become opaque, and becomes itself a precondition for further research action, now impossible or difficult to cast into doubt at all.

These assumptions of Latour and Woolgar's amount to a critical turn against the understanding of social construction that accords no significance to things. Their objection is based on the observation that life in the laboratory is shaped importantly not only by humans, but also by things (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 23ff.). The original contribution of Latour (and Woolgar) thus consists in having given an empirical "turn" to Durkheim's concept of morphological social facts, and thus in having injected a new significance into the ethnomethodologically dominated understanding of social construction. This context is addressed, at least indirectly, in the essay "On Technical Mediation—Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy" (Latour 1994, 50). According to Latour's criticism of ethnomethodology, the latter does not have the conceptual tools to explain the durable existence of societies. Latour pushes this critique in a new direction: in

the place that other sociological approaches accord to, for example, "institutions," he sets technology. Later Latour will describe the connection of technical artifacts with human actors as a "collective."

3. Politics and the theory of society

In the misunderstanding, or self-misunderstanding, relating to Latour's early work, the problem consists in how he conceives in detail of the efficacy of matter for understanding the social. In *Laboratory Life*, the authors orient their work on the concept of reification, or materialization (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 238). They do not claim to have coined these terms themselves, referencing Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956).[6] The transparent and reversible, cognitively oriented actions of humans structure the material world. When human action has taken on the form of a "thing," as a made artifact, humans are confronted with their own actions as structured matter. In this way, things are endowed with efficacy, but not with agency in the strong sense.

As Sartre and Latour know, this corresponds to the distinction made by Marx in his analysis of the machine. Marx distinguishes between dead and living labor (Marx 1867/1954, chapter 15; Latour and Woolgar propose a similar distinction when they describe a laboratory director whose staff have jumped ship: "C was left with a large amount of dead capital (in terms of equipment), a little money, but no workforce" (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 228). Latour's "dead capital" consists of machines into which scientific research has flowed, but which, in Marx's terms, can now no longer be brought to life through living research labor. The machines are no longer activated in a way that would create further surplus value in the production of credible data. To the extent that he analyzes the research process this way, Latour is reproducing the insights of Sartre and Marx. In turn, viewed from this perspective Marx's historical portrayal of the development of machinery in England (Marx 1867/1954, chapter 15) reads like an STS description of social processes *avant la lettre*.

Sartre (1960/1976) wrote a comparable work on the basis of French data, using the term "collective" to conceptualize the circumstance that societies are composed of humans and things. In this work he develops complex, dialectical

[6] Sartre (1943) is concerned with a dialectic between the "for-itself" and the "in-itself."

figures of thought to grasp the context that Latour and Woolgar summarize in the phrase “black boxing.” For Sartre, coming from the tradition of the critique of reification, the important issue is to keep conceptually present the active element of the human action that flows into the structuration of matter. For this reason, it is not simply things that exert an effect; rather, it seems to Sartre that the Other exerts an effect on actors by means of matter. The issue is therefore not merely the efficacy of matter, but the relationship with the Other, which is mediated through matter, through technology. This critical element is still present in Latour and Woolgar’s early laboratory study, when they describe how successful black-boxing can extricate something from the conflictual debates of the agonistic field by forestalling objections to it: “Once a large number of earlier arguments have become incorporated into a black box, the cost of raising alternatives to them becomes prohibitive” (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 242). In this way, the preceding scientific work becomes an opaque and irreversibly valid technical precondition for all subsequent scientific activity.[7] In Latour’s later work, however, this critical aspect disappears. Reification is no longer understood as an unavoidable problem, as in the dialectical tradition, but as a form of social life that, regrettably, does not attract political affirmation. In place of structured matter, conceived of as a mediation between societal contexts, come nonhuman actors excluded from political representation. To fully grasp the significance of this shift, let us recall once again the theoretical level on which Latour’s arguments play out.

The concepts underlying Latour and Woolgar’s analysis of laboratory work can be regarded as their study’s implicit social theory, which I presented in the second section of this paper. On this level of theory, humans remain the central actors throughout, their special status free from doubt. However, when Latour establishes that there is a problem of political representation, he is moving on the level of the theory of society. Latour’s description of the problem of representation forms part of his analysis of the constitution of modern society, as presented in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993). If my assumption regarding the relationship of empirical research and theory holds, then one would

[7] Hans-Jörg Rheinberger must be credited with having located the particular nature of scientific work within this conceptual framework. His distinction between technical and epistemic objects aims to differentiate between techniques that can be handled purely repetitively and those procedures that are oriented on the discovery of something new about an object (see Rheinberger

expect Latour's theory of society to be conceptually determined by its social theory—ethnomethodological with a Durkheimian influence.

This point can usefully be clarified through its contrast with Luhmann's social theory and theory of society. Luhmann's social theory accords the central role to the concept of communication. That concept involves the necessity of connecting communicative selections with each other. To enable this consistently, argues Luhmann, individual selections must be integrated into different contexts of selection. Without this kind of contextualization of communicative selections within wider combinations, such selections could not be connected to one another meaningfully (see Luhmann 1984/1995, 137-75). Luhmann calls such a context of selection a "social system", and he assumes that there is a limited number of such contexts In terms of the theory of society, a social-theory assumption of this kind leads to the assumption of system differentiation. Modern societies have developed a limited number of communicative subsystems, each serving a distinct function.[8] Distinctions between societies are then drawn on the basis of the type of system differentiation they display. But unlike systems theorists, who consider combinations of selections relevant from a social-theory point of view, ethnomethodologists focus on the practice of actors in concrete interactions. They emphasize that being situated is the basic feature of all everyday practice; that is, empirically, ethnomethodologists see actors who act in a concrete situation, a structure that is similar in principle whether actors are working in the laboratory or passing judgment in a legal trial.[9] Latour does not call this ethnomethodological assumption into question.

In line with this conception of the social, which focuses on unity, Latour sees a societal practice that in principle has the same structure and can therefore be described as a unified societal practice only secondarily fragmented by divisions. It is on this basis that he builds his extrapolation into the theory of society. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991/1993), Latour works empirically with the findings of research on scientific knowledge (especially his own projects) and

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1992). In industrial manufacturing processes and in the purely technical components of scientific work, the latter aspect is of very little interest. In Latour's work, the distinction is largely blurred.

[8] The difference between Luhmann and Parsons is that Parsons (1964) assumes a formal set of four functions, whereas Luhmann assumes that the communicative process itself produces functional subsystems: it is an open question how many subsystems will emerge.

ethnological studies (see also Latour 2004). From these discrete findings and historical studies,[10] he extrapolates a general characterization of modern societies.

Latour's diagnosis runs as follows. Modern society is characterized by its specific, internally contradictory constitution. Things are excluded from the sphere of the political, yet simultaneously they are mobilized for the formation of the political. This political constitution camouflages the fact that there is a unified societal practice which must be understood as such and recognized as actual reality. Latour draws the logical conclusion, developing a proposal for salvation from the evils of the modern constitution which he presents in *Politics of Nature* (Latour 1999/2004). His proposed therapy consists in an act of political and practical self-knowledge. Nonhumans should no longer exert an "illicit" influence on the political (ibid., 77) but instead should be integrated into an ordered procedure within which they would be represented in a controlled manner. It is Latour's aim to guide a divided world into a new, and at last rightful, unity. That new unity is the "collective" (ibid.).

There are two questions to be asked of this extrapolation from the results of empirical studies into an outline of society. From a scholarly point of view, we might ask whether it is empirically justifiable to assume a unified societal practice and thus to part ways with the theory of functional differentiation. From a political point of view, we might ask what practical judgments and consequences are implied by this particular theory of society.

In scholarly terms, Latour's proposal is the logically rigorous application of ethnomethodology's critique of the theory of functional differentiation (Knorr-Cetina 1992). It can be located in the tradition of several existing studies that take the theory of functional differentiation to task. Up to now, the response to those critiques has been purely theoretical; that is, empirical doubts have been answered by theoretical adjustments.[11]

The issue is of crucial importance for our understanding of modern societies, as emerges clearly when we look at the process of differentiation between law and

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[9] See Knorr Cetina's (1992) empirically oriented criticism of the theory of functional differentiation.
[10] To be precise, these should be referred to as theories of limited range, which relate to a restricted segment of the historical reality of societies.
[11] See the overview by Nassehi (2004).

politics on the one hand, science on the other. If Latour's characterization of modernity were correct, then this differentiation would be an illusory distinction actually resting on a unified practice that, in turn, must be recognized as such. If, in contrast, the theory of differentiation is correct, then the differentiation of science and politics-law, and the corresponding distinction between factual knowledge and political-legal or moral judgment, is an elementary condition for the functioning of modern societies. The two generalizing pictures are mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, the contest between these extrapolations can only be decided by means of empirical data: at issue is which of the two extrapolations can more plausibly be built upon the available, discrete theories of limited range (see Lindemann 2008).

Politics

Theories of society always involve political and practical consequences, and Latour is no exception to that rule. He follows up his diagnosis of the constitution of modern society with a manual for remedying society's plight (Latour 1999/2004), a guide that can only be called missionary in its tone and that amounts to an extension of the rhetoric of liberty, equality, and fraternity to nonhumans. Latour seems to be calling here for a universal inclusion—but a degree of caution is required. Latour in fact replaces the universal inclusion of all humans with the locally delimited collective. Certainly, this collective includes not only humans but potentially all entities. Conversely, however, it implies that beyond the local borders of the collective not only nonhuman but also human entities are excluded: Latour assumes that borders will be drawn. No exclusion is to be universal or eternally valid, yet in terms of the specific collective at a specific time, the fact that there are no privileged entities means humans, too, are potentially subject to exclusion.

Latour's political utopia intends that there should cease to be any presupposed division between those entities that can be politically represented and those that cannot because only factual statements can be validly made about them. A division of this kind is, he argues, based on the metaphysics of the old constitution. That constitution should not be replaced by a new metaphysics;

nothing and nobody should be excluded from the start. In place of what he calls the old metaphysics, Latour proposes three powers, interconnected by particular procedures: the power to take into account, the power to order (ibid., 102) and the power to follow up (ibid., 235). These powers relate to each other as follows. The first power, also called the upper house, ultimately draws in all possible entities; it is maximally permissive and nonexclusive. The second power, the lower house, exerts a contrary function, scrutinizing the candidates for inclusion and ordering them within an existing hierarchy. Definitive acceptance depends on the extent to which the candidates match up with the collective. The "power to follow up" exercises a kind of supervision, ensuring that the first and second power do not cut themselves off from each other and thus make the results of their decisions absolute and irreversible. This third power is identified with the state. Because of the reference to the state, it seems to me irrefutable that the issue here is one of regionally circumscribed inclusion processes, which can include or exclude both humans and nonhumans. The entities that knock at the door, asking for admission, are described as propositions. They do not exist in the collective. Although this is envisaged as a temporary state, at the same time it is also an absolute statement: whatever does not exist in the collective, is not; it exists only potentially. These are, so to speak, proposals for existence. The procedures of border-drawing thus decide whether something will exist or not.

The decisive point seems to be that this system has no external point of reference that *cannot* be cast into question. Everything is decided with reference to the current requirements of the regionally delimited collective. That collective does not separate out functionally in its decision-making processes, but remains obligated to itself as a whole. The attraction of this view might lie in the fact that every exclusion is only provisional; the excluded can always come knocking at the door of the collective as propositions and demand (or ask?) for the procedure to be started afresh. That is Latour's utopian project for how the world should be ordered.

However, I cannot help feeling skeptical when acceptance is to proceed in accordance with the requirements of the regionally delimited collective and when all the exteriorized—those outside the collective—have merely the status of propositions. What is one to say of the people currently fleeing from Africa to the

coasts of Europe? The European collective decides not to admit these propositions. They cannot be adequately integrated into the systems of the collective. The propositions are dismissed. Here, the European collective receives vigorous support from further actors: the Mediterranean and the Atlantic draw in many of these African propositions forever. Nobody knows about them, they become nothing. From the perspective of Latour's utopian program, the camps that are erected on the borders of Europe appear as waiting rooms in which propositions pass the time until they are readmitted to the procedure.

The propositions fleeing Africa are placed on the same level as, for example, prions that also knock at the door of the collective. Both are subject to decisions made by the political forces of the collective. And not only these: there are propositions that are traditionally called fetuses. The collective has decided that they can be thrown out at any stage of development at all, if there is any chance that the human who will later develop from them will have a disability. Such propositions do not fit into the European collective, at least not the German subsection of it.

In Latour's utopia, who will settle questions like these? Only one answer seems possible: any number of different experts. Since there is no delimited totality to be politically represented, and instead potentially everything can be represented, the need arises for a large and varied assembly of specialists, including politicians, economists, scientists, moralists, and so on, who will decide on these questions within an orderly procedure. They do this not on behalf of the "people," but as representatives of the collective as a whole. At the moment when they pronounce it, their judgment is thus absolute. For the excluded, that amounts to saying: You shall not exist. Judgments of this kind are made on all propositions that knock at the door—on nonhuman entities and humans in equal measure.

On the level of social theory, this expertocracy corresponds to the assumption that scientists and engineers, the experts of the scientific research process, decide upon who may have agency and in what way. It is a perfectly respectable precept of research to take particular actors' practice and their view of themselves as one's point of departure. However, it seems to me problematic to derive from that a political precept on how the processes of political representation are to be configured.

Latour wants to usher us into a future where good experts draw the borders of the representation of what exists, in a way that scientifically is reversible but at the moment of the decision is absolute.

To conclude: in terms of social theory and methodology, Latour remains anthropocentric. Nevertheless, in terms of social theory he has succeeded in creating an interesting synthesis of ethnomethodology and the Durkheimian school for the area of the morphology of society. It remains an open question whether his theory of society can be considered tenable—but it is rather improbable that the implementation of his political utopia can offer salvation from the sufferings of modernity.

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