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Scams Cannot be Busted

Response to Steve Woolgar and Geoff Cooper, "Do artefacts have ambivalence? - Moses' bridges, Winner's bridges and other urban legends in STS"
Social Studies of Science, 29 (3), 1999, 450-457

Bernward Joerges

In their enjoyable reply to "Politics have Artifacts" Woolgar and Cooper (W&C) say, early on and after having established that the unknowable truth about Winner's Moses-story is known at Brunel at least since Thursday 26th November 1992, that it "would be tempting to conclude from all this folk knowledge in favour of a resuscitation of Moses and hence in support of Joerges' case against Winner. To do so, however, would be to submit to quite the wrong parameters. In particular, it would be to imply that we are at or near a resolution of the matter, that, for example, we have definitively established Moses' true intentions." Instead they propose that the bridge-story is itself "a dynamic, shifting and essentially inconcludeable narrative, ... a form of urban legend."

"Joerges" is set up here as somebody who has a case against Winner (that is: to prove him wrong), and the to be expected *tu quoque* is inserted ("Joerges contests Winner's account of Moses' motives but his analysis remains, in important senses, at the level of intention"). So before addressing some of the points W&C raise, I should like to make quite clear that my case against Winner in this comment was not about the "referential adequacy" of the bridge-story, and I do not say "that Winner and Caro don't know what they are talking about" (this is what Moses and my engineer-correspondents say). Although, to be able to make my point, I had to raise the issue of referentiality,¹ my case "against Winner" is twofold: (1) that, precisely because we can't do without them, parables should be handled with care in teaching social science, and (2) that what Winner asserts about technical artefacts is doubtful for *any* technical artefact, not only for Moses' low bridges.

Moses' intentions do not play any significant role in my own argument. And to suggest that I told my own story about "how it really was" in the belief that my version is in any sense a definitive version, looks to me like a deliberate misreading. I had thought I made it quite clear that I consider myself as part of the Chinese whispers and that my Moses-story, too, could be told differently. Since I put it together, I know best where it is contestable and where it is far from innocent theoretically: I have chosen with care specific episodes in the Chinese whispers (namely the conceptual opposites Latour and Woolgar) and I have chosen with care revisionist historical sources concerning Moses, in order to argue against control theories and to indulge my preference for more complicated (and yes: inconcludeable) stories than Winner's.

Urban legends, not parables...

Urban legends, W&C say, are "significantly more than just parables." The idea to apply W&Cs sophisticated analysis of a somewhat unsophisticated genre² to Winner's bridge-story as an "urban legend for academics" appears attractive, at first glance. I find myself very much

1. "For Joerges, this bottom line account is one that emerges from close historical analysis," say W&C. But historically, as it were, the short and inconclusive bottom line account in the first version of my manuscript submitted to SSS met with one anonymous reviewers comment that "the deconstruction part is a bit without proof" and requires more technical detail. I obliged but also felt that it gave disproportionate space to one sideline of the argument and expressed my feeling to the Editor that "this somewhat unbalances the piece" (Letter to David Edge 28.07.98).

2. Ever wake up in a bathtub full of ice in a strange hotel room, minus a kidney? Happens all the time...

in agreement with the general drift of this analysis, if only because it seems that urban legends perform many of the things I thought parables perform. But W&C turn to the notion of urban legends because this better serves their purpose: to frame my comment as a debunking exercise and to argue their "essential irresolvability of debunking".

It is not easy to say what an urban legend is supposed to be. If you look at the candidates and subclasses and related categories offered by way of explication in the literature, you get anything from tall tales to horror stories to bug-warnings, hoaxes, spoofs and whatever ends with "It's a True Story, I Swear!". But fuzzy as the notion may be, it seems to have a few commonly accepted features (which in my view would make Winner's story not eligible): urban legends are almost by definition unfounded (almost never based on any traceable documents); they have no author, nobody knows who invented them; everybody tells them, and they will always be around: scams cannot be busted.

Whenever you have an anonymous story whose referentiality is utterly malleable and ambiguous, say W&C, you have an urban legend. The essence of urban legends, if they have an essence, is their essential undebuncability. Clothing the bridges-story as an urban legend presents the Moses-story look as essentially undebuncable. By declaring the Moses-Story an urban myth W&C automatically get their desired conclusion: it will spread and spread and spread.

Urban legends also often are, as W&C point out, *cautionary tales* evoking horror, amazement, guilt. Let me recall, in contrast, a few of the characteristics of parables in my meaning of this notion: they belong with doctrinal discourses, they are good for those who already know, they are necessary for knowledge to travel, they are well designed to achieve something, they relieve guilt. Parables like Moses' bridges only work in the context of a circumscribed discourse (control theories, including their critique), whose *traditional wisdom* they translate into a simple tale. This is why I do not agree with W&C when they insist that like urban myths the bridges-story is immortal. Not because it is, the way Winner/Caro told it, a bit of a scam that can't be busted, but because its affirmative telling will serve no function outside the discourses of control I refer to (which I misconstrue however, according to W&C). So I expect indeed that there will be fewer, not more citations of the story in the future, as the urban legends theory would predict.

Parable or urban legend: one must not be essentialist here, of course:³ the pudding is in the eating. In my comment, I reference instances where Winner's tale functioned like what I conventionally call a parable (not in the instance of Woolgar though), whereas W&C refer to actual and invented instances where Winner's "iconic exemplar" functioned as a moral tale "about the dire consequences of boundary transgression," as they darkly put it.

A word on words and things

W&C find that "as used by Joerges, the distinction (between words and things) assigns ontological priority to things over words, thereby permitting derogatory references to 'semantic games' and to 'mere words'." Again, my quaint and fragmented way of using the English idiom must have prevented getting across my meanings: I introduce the otherwise rather vacuous distinction between words and things because it allows me to play a semantic game on theoretical positions every reader of SSS recognises. The game goes from Austin's familiar title (where things obviously are words) to 'How to do things with things' (a paraphrase on Winner's

3. W&C won't tire to evoke the essential qualities of the quintessentially non-essential: endlessly malleable semiosis. "In reaching the conclusion that Winner got it wrong, Joerges ignores this essentially ambivalent quality of artefacts." "The more important task is to engage the essential ambivalence of artefacts in general." "Aspects of the story are always and will always be essentially out of reach."

apparent position) through 'How to do things with words' (short for what W&C call the "discourse position", but also, as it turns out, for Winner's actual position too). The latter I then dub 'How to do words with things' (where things obviously are words about things that are not words).

Especially, however, this little game allows me to situate myself in a "conceptual geography", as W&C say: Without having the space to do this in great detail, what I propose as an alternative to Winner is not to look for the power of things in their material form, but in the words of those who speak for them – very much along lines of linguistic analyses à la Bourdieu, who takes his point from Austin's familiar book about how to do things with words...

So, silly as this semantic game may be, I certainly am innocent of derogatory references to "mere words".⁴ I am also perfectly happy (following the eminent "example of, *inter alia*, Derrida, Latour, and Woolgar"⁵) with referring to both more tangible artefacts ("things") and more intangible artefacts ("words") as texts – as long as it is permitted to ask what constitutes the difference between the two. By constitute I do not mean any deep ontological condition; I mean how the distinction is culturally achieved and, in the face of it's essential and irreducible ambivalences, for all practical purposes of most people most of the time fairly well maintained.⁶

To be told by W&C that no things are to be found anywhere in my text: I mean, who would have thought, but there are words about words, words about things, and words about thingified words (the artifacts of politics). I only be to be allowed to make such distinctions in talking about these things, even if I grant that all these categories them are intrinsically and even essentially ambivalent... My distinguishing between words and things is not in any offensive way ontological, then, implying the idea that words are less real than things (or such). May I remind my critics that in this comment I declare a good story to be the mightiest thing. Having to explain this semantic game is somewhat embarrassing, of course.

Shifting conceptual geographies

The same with my deplorable conceptual geography: "Joerges' notion of a middle point between two (equivalent) extremes, his aspiration to build a bridge between two separate places, thus implies a particular conceptual geography to which we would not subscribe." In not subscribing W&C draw on Barbara Herrnstein Smith's warning against "arguments which aspire to a happy medium between two 'extremes'" (W&C). I can't see that Herrnstein Smith has more to say about what exactly constitutes the flaws of middle roads than that "supposed middle ways commonly display a distinct rightward or backward tilt".⁷ But throughout her book, Herrnstein Smith is concerned with the problem of intellectual oversimplification and polarization, "the

4. W&C accuse me of the mean position to grant things ontological priority over "mere words" on six or seven occasions in their text; be it enough to state unambiguously that the word "mere" or a similar qualification of words does not appear in my comment.

5. Cf. W&C, note 8.

6. I wish W&C had said a word on the conceptual differences, regarding the texts called "things", between, *inter alia*, Winner, Latour, and Woolgar. For an argument about a curious tendency of constructionist technology studies to combine the deconstruction of categorical distinctions with a failure to look into the way these distinctions are kept in good repair, if necessarily shifting, in most functioning cultures, see 'Prosopopoeitische Systeme', in Bernward Joerges, *Technik – Körper der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 265-84.

7. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, xviii. In fact this admirable book is a wonderful example for the virtues of pursuing the middle road, in her case between what she calls "traditionalists" and "revisionists" in philosophy of science (where W&C would be extreme revisionists, a road Herrnstein Smith would not go down, I dare say, although she persistently tilts leftward and forward).

tendency for an array of multiple, variously differing, more or less shifting, configurations of belief to move toward and become stabilized as contradistinctive and mutually antagonistic positions."⁸

So let me try again to expose aspects of my dire conceptual map, again very briefly and necessarily oversimplified. Congratulating Winner for having built his artifact very well indeed, I begged to disagree with his theoretical stance. This theoretical stance I took to be one where arguments about evidence, "proof" and such things are subordinated to moral-political arguments (and in that sense I put him in the same camp with "Woolgar"⁹). I also took it to be in tune with a mighty discourse in the social sciences: the discourse of control. In contrasting that discourse with a discourse of contingency (and in doing so to locate the exemplars of "Latour" and "Woolgar" together in a camp opposite from Winner's), I find myself in agreement and in disagreement with certain views from all three protagonists.¹⁰ So I expect to be asked for my way out. To talk about a middle or a third way as a way out of a dilemma is a common if unoriginal *facon de parler*, and I apologize. But even in the awfully simplified terms of my comment, I construe the situation at least as a trilemma, a conceptual Bermuda triangle with three corner points (between realist control theory which I dub Winnerian, realist contingency theory which for brevity's sake I dub Latourian, and relativist contingency theory which for symmetry's sake I dub Woolgarian). And of course there is no way, middle or third, out of this triangle.

In practice, when you deal with concrete cases where bridges and other technical artefacts play important roles, none of these and other purified positions and their respective parables will fit the bill very well, and hailing the protagonists will not help much either. Under the world's pressure to do something about the problems it continues to produce, you have to negotiate a version of what is the matter that somehow agrees with the politicians, experts, spokespeople of users, fellow academics and so on who come with the case at hand. And this version will rarely be essentially ambivalent, not because this would be immoral, but because it would be quite impractical, and also, in many cases, quite boring. Sometimes it may be useful to keep it open, of course, at other times it maybe useful, and even morally acceptable, to come up with a closed, that is relatively unequivocal version.

Juxtaposing ontological, epistemological, and moral positions about words and things, or control and contingency, which seemed so important in the 60s/70s/80s, looks a bit tired today because the frontlines of intellectual controversies keep shifting in the 90s. Once more, at the peril of using politically incorrect words, I will employ the "words & things" formula: Things, as shorthand for nature, and words, as shorthand for culture, are being divided up anew as to their jurisdiction in the sciences. Ascending biological and in their wake other evolutionary disciplines make their inroads in naturalizing large junks of territory hitherto under the rule of the moral and historical sciences.¹¹ Historical processes are declared to be essentially adaptations to changing (by all means socially produced) environmental conditions which are framed in turn in biological terms. The stance is, very much in opposition to views emphasizing the *narrative* nature of science, relentlessly *scientistic*: the promise is to come up

8. Ibid., xxv.

9. On my conceptual map (global scale) Woolgar in some ways stands closer to Winner than Latour, because he as Winner is very concerned with issues of rhetorical effect and persuasion (or argumentative adequacy, much lacking with "Joerges"....).

10. As W&C aptly put it: "technology does and does not have politics."

11. In a way, a forerunner of this movement was early work on computers, see Bernward Joerges, 'Images of Technology in Sociology: Computer as Butterfly and Bat', *Technology and Culture*, 31, 1990, 203-27.

with empirical generalizations (concerning *cultural* evolution) of a reach no positivistic-minded sociologist ever dreamt of. A strong "politics of explanation" is being played out.¹²

On the other hand I see a form of science studies where *nature as much as culture* is declared to be essentially subject to historical processes of some kind of sense making (including the attempt, forever doomed to be futile, to discover invariant natural laws, because these laws are themselves forever newly invented and outstripped in an ongoing historical process).¹³ Here, explanation becomes much less interesting, except as a special form of narration, than careful description and contextualizing reconstruction.

Controversies about the relation between material form and social content – Winner's theme – have traditionally been played out as a "technology/society"-issue in technology and urban studies. Along with naturalizing history/historializing nature debates "technology/nature"-issues come to the forefront. Speaking schematically: Moses' low bridges were initially presented as icons of social control via technology. In W&C's critique, I suggested, they are qualified in terms of some kind of contingency theory of socio-technical change (I am sure misconstrued by me). In my own reconstruction of the Moses-story, the bridges can still serve as "symbolic caricature" (Michael Ignatieff) for an intellectual movement, which puts into center stage the nature/culture nexus – where progressive technological change, whether conceived in historical or evolutionary terms, is understood as progressive implantation of natural things into social things or of society into nature.

I expect that with this movement, supply and demand for expertise in technology and urban planning and politics will be reconfigured. For a number of reasons (only one of them being the application of a naive relativism to the subject matter of biologists), social and cultural scientists may not be well equipped to hold their own against the evolutionary-minded competition: naturalization of the social (expertise for city cultures as biotopes) might sound more persuasive than historialization of the natural (expertise for city natures as sociotopes). One of the reasons for reconstructing the Moses-story along the lines I did was indeed that I counted on the possibility that my own version might come to represent, "come to stand as a moral tale about," as W&C say, the matter of the Nature/Culture relation in the metropolis and beyond.

In the future, practical and interesting answers to Winner's ultimate moral concern – what kind of nature should you make yourself – will be informed more and more by expertise kindled from reductionist evolutionary sciences claiming society as their native land. This is a good thing, to the extent that "nature" and material artefacts taken from nature cannot be represented any more as the Other of society. It would be not so good, in terms of employment and publishing prospects for social scientists and producers of urban legends, if *panopticon* and *babel tower* would be exchanged for the *anthill* as the paradigmatic architectural parable for urban artefacts.

12. Suffice it to name only two protagonists which I happened to listen to recently and whose books are translated in German: Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998) and Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997). Jerome S. Bruner for example attempts, in *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), a reconciliation of the narrative stance with a new "evolutionary psychology".

13. Next to Bruno Latour, an interesting protagonist of this intellectual movement (also because he concerns himself centrally with the creations of molecular biology) is Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (see for instance his *Toward A History Of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Prerss, 1997).

Conclusion

It will come as no surprise that W&C end on the note of an essential undeconstructability of the bridges-story. While the substance of the legend will forever metamorphose, it's "form will remain essentially unchanged." Their hope is that - as of "Do artefacts have ambivalence?" - it will function as "a moral tale about the deficiencies of distinguishing between explanation and politics." That suits me fine,¹⁴ and I couldn't agree more with W&C's conclusion: "This leads us to recognise that Winner's argument is not what it seems to be. *For it turns out that Winner's bridges are also artefacts constructed with the intention of not letting certain arguments past.* They are deliberately designed to prevent the passage of interpretivist arguments."¹⁵ This is of course exactly the first and major point I wished to make all along in my comment about the well-designed artefacts of politics - except for the particular intention W&C ascribe to Winner for his deliberate designs upon his readers (in my reading it was to get a moral point across). They can offer this *pointe* as their original conclusion by repeating again and again that *my* major concern is to debunk Winner's account - in showing that things may have happened differently then according to Winner.¹⁶ As for saying that Winner tells his pious tale about the low bridges with a deliberate intent to "prevent the passage of interpretivist arguments," I will stay out of this more personal thing between Woolgar and Winner.

14. As long as these deficiencies do not call for the wholesale abolishment of the distinction, see note 5 above.

15. Emphasis added.

16. Even if my attempt at reconstruction may indeed strike some readers as more plausible and likely than Winner's (or Woolgar's invented timetable prove/spoof), W&C will have successfully busted this particular scam if they can show that the legend of the bridges will undebunkably always be with us.