

## BOOK REVIEW

# *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* **Bruno Latour**

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An Inquiry into Modes of Existence



AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE MODERNS



*An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns.* Bruno Latour. Cambridge and London. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Cultural theory is currently experiencing what has been called a material or ontological turn. Under the pressure of ecological crises, global warming and the ever increasing presence and pervasiveness of technologies in the world, cultural critics are shifting their focus away from epistemological and linguistic approaches and towards theories that are able to account for the agencies of the various nonhuman forces. Undoubtedly, Bruno Latour, with his contributions to and in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) from the late 1970s onwards, is one of the initial boosters of the turn that is currently taking place. This is not only apparent from his collaboration with object-oriented ontology founder Graham Harman in *The Prince and The Wolf* (2011), but also through the work of new feminist materialists like Karen Barad and Vicki Kirby who explicitly engage with his work. In his new book, Latour, who has been said to have come to the third main period of his thinking with *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (hereafter: *AIME*), makes significant contributions to the debates concerning this turn beyond epistemological and linguistically focused cultural theory, by forwarding a pluralist ontology whilst simultaneously, and surprisingly, putting the focus back on language by emphasizing the importance of learning to speak well.

In *AIME*, published in 2013, Latour picks up the project that he started in his 1993 monograph *We Have Never Been Modern*, which amounts to an evaluation of modernity and the most important values thereof. However, in *AIME* Latour situates his earlier book on modernity as mainly a negative account of modernity (Latour primarily argued against the subject-object split that is so central to modern thought and science), whereas the current continuation of the earlier project is an attempt at a positive accounting for modernity, one that seeks to enable an affirmation of the values that the Moderns hold dear and that constitute their very self-definition (14). Instead of primarily showing how there has been an enormous gap between the practices of the moderns and their theory of themselves, *AIME* is the first step in a collaborative investigation that attempts to offer what Latour describes as a “somewhat realistic description of the modern adventure” (15). Scholars from all disciplines, including for example the natural sciences, are invited to participate in the online development of an understanding of what the Moderns, if they were never modern, actually were. In the book, Latour offers a significant step in the direction of overcoming modern thinking in clear and distinct realms like theory and practice, nature and culture or human and non-human, by elaborating on a pluralist ontology, which is based on the work of the forgotten French aesthetician and metaphysician Étienne Souriau.

It takes Latour the entirety of his 450+ pages book to identify the details of the modern values he wants to work with, and to extract these values from the various domains they are said—by the Moderns—to be indissociable from. The concept “domains” refers to the way Moderns understand the world, when, for example, they assert that they are “sometimes doing law, sometimes science, sometimes religion, and so on” (35). These domains seem to be neatly separable, with each having its own set of defining characteristics. Science, Latour’s long-time field of engagement, for example, is typified by its search for truth and objectivity. Latour’s work with and on ANT, however, has shown that through scientific practices very complex networks of associations between multitudes of actors are continuously formed. According to Latour, science cannot be so clearly separated from politics, law, etc. In *AIME*, Latour exemplifies the complexity of his notion of networks through the metaphor of gas pipelines. A network of gas pipelines, Latour says, is made of steel tubing, pumping stations, international treaties, Russian mafiosi, pylons anchored in the permafrost, frostbitten technicians, Ukrainian politicians (32). Similarly, science is not made of objectivity, but is rather an intricate network of various actors, with which for example politics and law are inextricably entangled.

However, at the same time, science cannot be *equated* with law or politics, and religion is not the same as politics or science (36). In order to be able to distinguish between the different networks and their particularities, Latour introduces the idea of “modes of existence”, which he takes from Souriau. “Mode of existence” designates the mode of connection, the value that is specific to a particular network. Once a network is in place (i.e. gas pipelines), it ensures the supply of values, services or distinct products (i.e. gas). For example, the value/product that is specific to the scientific network of associations is objectivity. Latour shows at length that each mode has its own very specific trajectory, its own way of continually overcoming its specific kind of hiatus. Perhaps the clearest elaboration of this argument is Latour's essay *Circulating Reference. Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest* (1999), in which he shows concisely how it is possible that an article published in a scientific journal speaks about a real forest. This is not because words or graphs refer directly and unproblematically to the world 'out there', but because of vast amounts of work that go into each translation, ultimately leading to a *chain of reference*. Scientists from various disciplines, that is, have to do a lot of work—traveling to the Amazon, marking out a site of investigation, assembling samples of different layers of soil into a pedocomparator, doing tests on these samples, bringing together results in a graph, etc, etc.—in which each little step is a pass, as Latour calls it in *AIME*, that overcomes the discontinuity between, for example, a sample of soil

and getting to do a controlled test with it. If, in the case of science, it happens that the network comes into place, the thing that circulates is objectivity, a series of 'passes' constituting a chain of reference.

Latour's project in *AIME* is to (provisionally) map out the different modes of existence, each with its own specific mode of passes and hiatuses, its own trajectory and its own value/product flowing through it when all is in place. He identifies sixteen differing modes of existence by working through, chapter by chapter, the various contrasts between these particular kinds of being(s), and the category mistakes that have mixed up the modes into neat modern domains. The concept of modes of existence stresses Latour's attempt to shift attention away from language and the central role it has been playing in science studies, anthropology, and cultural studies in a more general sense. Modern and postmodern thought, Latour argues, has been caught in what Alfred North Whitehead has called the 'bifurcation of nature': the idea that there are (only) two ontological realms, namely words and things. In such a scheme, there might exist a plurality of descriptions of the world, but there is ultimately only one world. To use the Latourian formula, this amounts to a pluralism of representations, but a monism of being (20). What Latour is after in *AIME* is ontological pluralism, a veritable acknowledgment of the diversity of being. Above all, especially in the first part of the book, this means accepting that the scientific will to knowledge is not the only way for humans to interrogate being, since there are different modes of being, each with its own conditions of truth and falsity.

The most important argumentative move that Latour makes in this book, in particular in relation to the wider debates in which it is situated, is basing his pluralist ontology in these conditions of truth and falsity, which Latour dubs 'felicity and infelicity conditions', in a materialist reworking of J.L. Austin's conception of speech act theory. In general, these sixteen different conditions of truth and falsity have to do with being constructed well or not. Consider, for example, the construction of objectivity in scientific practices, which can be done badly in a multitude of ways (cf. mistakes can be made, frauds committed), in which case objectivity is not produced. Another concept of Souriau is important for Latour here, and that is the notion of 'instauration'. Souriau developed this concept to understand the coming into being of a work of art. For Souriau, an artist is not the creator, but the instaurator of a work of art that comes to him but, without the work of the artist, would never proceed into existence (160). The notion thus stresses how one is not in control, but there is simultaneously no one else to do the work that needs to be done. Latour seeks to shift from the idea (and critical uses) of 'construction' to 'instauration', because the latter act implies providing the opportunity to encounter

being-as-other, to meet the beings from other modes of existence. The ontological status of these beings, Latour argues, is open, yet they are capable of “*making* you do something, unsettling you, insisting, obliging you to speak well of them” (161). It is this way of relating that is fundamentally an action one has to undertake, but which simultaneously implies a being open to being-as-other, that is central to Latour’s overall project, which is, ultimately, to learn to speak well about the beings of all the various modes of existence, in order to come to grips with the full complexity of the world without reducing the being(s) of any one mode to that of another.

For all Latour’s efforts to learn to relate with and speak well about the beings of all modes of existence, there is one minor criticism that needs to be made. Throughout *AIME* Latour makes explicit the particularities of every single mode of existence, and lays bare the way that specific networks are put together. Nonetheless, Latour refrains from mentioning the authors and theorists he is in conversation with and that comprise the complex network of associations that his book is an instantiation of. Of course, Latour mentions some names of philosophers that inspire him, such as Souriau, Gabriel Tarde, Gilbert Simondon and William James. As a cultural student steeped in feminist theory and philosophy, however, I miss a reference to Donna Haraway when Latour speaks of the modern (mis)conception of matter as being ‘everywhere’ while literally being nowhere (119). This is nearly a direct citation from Haraway’s 1988 article “Situated Knowledges”. This noticeable absence of Haraway might point to Latour’s failure to make other such connections explicit, ones that I am not aware of. Indeed, it points to Latour’s failure of putting into practice his own theories.

However, this observation should not divert attention from the importance of Latour’s intervention in the contemporary debates on the material and ontological turn(s). His overall project is “to learn to speak well to someone about something that really matters to that person” (46). And this implies first of all, according to Latour, respecting the precise ontological tenor of the value that matters to her or him and for which she or he lives (144). Values, we learn throughout *AIME*, are not cultural constructions, but rather specific ontological tenor of particular networks; the ‘products’ flowing through these networks—if they are made well. And this constructing well depends for Latour on instaurating, on relating to being-as-other in a welcoming sense, doing the work to respect and let (ontological) differing be. In the present landscape of cultural theory, with its increased attention to non-human actors and agentialities, Latour’s emphasis on our — human? — speaking well to others might sound discomfiting. However, I admire this move because the act of speaking is for Latour an instaurative act. Therefore, for Latour, one is never in full

control over her/his speaking, but the speaking nevertheless has to be done for anything to happen, for change to come into existence. Learning how to speak well, then, is not a human activity, if 'human' is understood as a unitary and self-contained whole. Rather, the instaurative human is always open to the non-human, and is, we might say, always already ahuman. In this important book, then, Latour does not completely achieve the project of learning to speak well, but opens up the space for this project to develop and grow. He acknowledges that he cannot do it alone, if only by inviting academic specialists in the various modes of existence to add to his description of the adventure of modernity. As such, *AIME* is open to be continuously instaurated well.

### **Works cited**

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