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Autor(en): **Latour, Bruno**

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# WAKING UP FROM «CONJECTURE» AS WELL AS FROM «DREAM»

A presentation of AIME

Text: Bruno Latour

GAD Distinguished Lecture, American Anthropology Association meeting, Chicago 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2013<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

As every ethnographer knows, in addition to the many blunders every one of us commits in the course of our fieldwork, there exist also graver mistakes when we sense a mistaken regime of reality granted to an entity. It is at those moments, usually the most revealing in the course of our inquiries, when we try to repair broken relations by some innovative move to define the status of the contrasting realities that have been open to misinterpretation. During the last quarter century I have attempted, quite systematically, to increase the number of templates by which the so-called Moderns account for themselves; not, to be sure, in their official representation (they remain staunch adepts of the Object-Subject Operating System and will swear that they are obedient naturalists), but by looking for the many occasions where they express dissatisfaction with such an official view of themselves. What I think I have documented are the protestations by many different people that a skewed template is being used to account for the mode of existence of the agencies that are most attached to them.

**Keywords:** *Method; Ontology; Modernism; Inquiry; Physical anthropology; Diplomacy*

*«Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream»*

(Alfred North Whitehead)

I don't want to begin by brandishing Occam's razor. I think you would agree that if such a razor were to be used too intensely, it would gravely slash the resources that anthropologists are allowed to use to account for the multiplicity of agencies entertained by the collectives with which they come into contact. This loss would be especially troubling when it is those who call themselves «Moderns» whose strange ways of life have to be documented through the use of ethnographic methods. Modern collectives seem to have had difficulty reconciling their official principle of parsimony (the world is made of objects and subjects, period) with the bewildering number

of entities they have never ceased to encounter or to generate along their path. This is why I propose to shift slightly the metaphor of the razor. Instead of using it to shave off any excess entities proliferating needlessly everywhere, I want to take it rather as a nice stainless cutlery set, a «batterie de cuisine», like that a good chef needs to delicately manipulate her vegetables, meats, herbs and condiments, and especially to dispatch her chickens, as Plato would advise her to do, without breaking their subtle articulations. If you can show me a chef who employs only two knives and one single pot to prepare every four star dish then I would fall back on the metaphor of the razor. In the meantime, I will strictly apply the principle of parsimony by proposing to use precisely *as many cutting tools* as necessary to delineate as exactly as possible what should not be disarticulated. Not one more, I agree, but not one less either.

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Such a shift in connotations of the razor will allow me to nudge the notion of «ontology» away from its excessively grandiose pedigree. Even though «ontology» has been defined as the science of «Being as Being» (and here you may want to overhear the loud organs of German philosophical requiem played at full volume), I take it as a relational and highly practical term. Ontology is what you engage whenever you wish *not to shock* those you are encountering by granting the wrong type of reality to the agencies that keep them moving. In that sense, ontology is close to a form of *diplomacy*.

As every ethnographer knows, in addition to the many blunders every one of us commits in the course of our fieldwork, there exist also graver mistakes when we sense a mistaken regime of reality granted to an entity. It is at those moments, usually the most revealing in the course of our inquiries, when we try to repair broken relations by some innovative move to define the status of the contrasting realities that have been open to misinterpretation. I lived through this myself when I first noticed, forty years ago, that there was absolutely no way that I could capture laboratory life with the pincer of «realism» versus «social constructivism». Every use of this crude tool created such an uproar that I have had to work ever since to sketch the status of artificially produced objective facts – and the topic is still so touchy that I am not sure I have even begun to offer those agencies the right status.

In any case it is through such innovative moves that we practice ontology: when we realize that we had entered an interaction with too limited a set of templates to account for the realities mentioned by our informants; and when we realize that it might be why they reacted with shock; then, when we attempt to repair the relation with them (provided they have not fled in disgust or kicked us out!) by negotiating a plausible account that enlarges (if we are blessed by the gods of inquiries) the number of templates we are collectively able to entertain and with which we may resume future relations. Any one of you, I am sure, will now picture in your mind those rare and fortunate *eureka*s either from your own work or from those of your predecessors that mark the turning points of the various sub-disciplines making up the rich domain of anthropology.

So, ontology emerges over the course of encounters where the inquirer feels him- or herself corseted by too narrow a set of legitimate agencies, and when he or she must bend backward to find a better way of refastening broken relations by recognizing another legitimate way of being. In that sense, the exact etymology of such a practice should not be ontology but rather *deontology*, provided you accept defining its etymology in the following way: the exquisite science (or rather the delicate art) of being respectful of those

with whom we deal by being entangled within a set of beings whose status has been fully recognized. Not the science of Being as Being, but the science (that is, the subtle care) of not making mistakes with how many types of agencies are acting on us as well as on those with whom we try to elaborate a common world. In this way, ontology and anthropology are almost synonymous. I say «almost» because, as we shall see, ontology spurs anthropology to resume its original task by pushing it to take a slightly different tack.

The shift from ontology to deontology will allow me to underline first a few breaches of etiquette in dealing with those we encounter and then to propose a protocol to increase the acceptable doses of ontological pluralism. Let me sketch three of those «don'ts».

The most brutal way of entering into contact would be to start the relation by taking pride in *denying* the very existence of the agents that are making our informants move. This would be the case, for instance, were we to use the category of «belief». Belief is the opposite of Midas' touch: it transforms gold into dust. It is an accusation that establishes an infinite distance between those who study (and claim not to believe) and those who are tied to those beliefs in non-existing entities that have to be explained by other realities of which they are not aware. Here, Occam's razor becomes a scythe. Such a slash and burn strategy has been very efficient in extending the modernizing frontier, but in term of deontology it has not taught one thing to the analyst – or rather the conqueror – since the number of templates to account for reality has not been increased in any way. Simply, the world is populated with ignoramuses that still cling to their mistaken and archaic ways until they realize how wrong they are.

Although no anthropologist worth her salt would indulge in such an asymmetric relation, it might not be unfair to say that many sociologists – especially if they are from a «critical» school – will take this type of engagement as the best proof of their scientific status. They would proudly argue that it is *because* you don't believe in any of this stuff that you can see through the cloud of illusions in which actors insist on living. Such a pride in denunciation is probably the remaining distinction between those two disciplines: ontology for sociologists is a settled matter (they know the list of entities with which the world is made up and their problem is that of providing an explanation) while anthropologists are consumed by deontological scruples. For them, Oliver Cromwell's injunction never ceases to resonate: «I beseech you my brethren, by the bowels of Christ, bethink that you might be mistaken.» While anthropologists accept the risk of being mistaken, sociologists prefer leaving this risk safely to the informants!

It is because of these gnawing doubts that inquirers attempted a more reasonable way of *bracketing* any ontological claims by remaining as non-committed as possible about the legitimate reality of the agencies acting upon their informants. This tactic is certainly more polite than to deny a priori their existence. But it is a strange sort of politeness since it does nothing but *delay* indefinitely the moment of reckoning where both parties will have to negotiate the list of agencies making up their common world. To be sure, the inquirers are no longer conquerors in charge of emptying the world of all the spurious agencies by expanding the modernizing frontier, but they become pretty devious double agents – not to say hypocrites – carefully hiding what they really hold to by bluffing their way through their stay in the field and revealing their real attachments only once they are back home with their colleagues.

Thanks to this clever tactic, Occam's razor is still used «at home» to limit the number of agencies, and if those are allowed to multiply «abroad» it is because it makes no real difference since their claims to existence have been equally bracketed so that they all remain suspended in an overcrowded reservation – a sort of ontological limbo. No matter how respectful we have all learned to be in our daily encounters with the others' agencies, bracketing all questions of ontology (for perfectly sound scientific reasons at first) has nevertheless failed to enlarge *our own* repertoire of legitimate agencies acting in *our* world. If they remain active, it is only in *theirs*. By bracketing *their* ontological claims, it is in effect *our* ontological claims that have been bracketed as well – or rather deep-frozen. On the whole such a tactic is less abrasive but no more deontological than the first. The list of legitimate actants is just as short as before.

The third solution is well known, especially now that it begins to be largely dismantled: it consists not in bracketing out all ontological claims, but on the contrary in acting *as if* they had been granted a durable ontological status. The idea, this time, is to tie their existence to the most enduring and best-entrenched organization of reality: namely, the gauge known as «one nature versus multiple cultures». This solution that now appears, retrospectively, as a most ethnocentric vision even though it is supposed to settle for good the question of what is universal and what is particular. With such a template, all claims were given a veneer of reality by being all equally woven – if I dare say – out of the same fabric: that of the symbolic world. Whatever other collectives say about the agencies that make them act, you no longer have to deny their existence, nor to suspend their access to reality, since you are now allowed to load them with the full weight of their symbolic order. You don't even have to be polite any more, now it

is science itself that requires you to organize in whichever way you see fit the multiplicity of the transformations occurring in what has now gained a reality of its own.

The convenient aspect of this «scientific standpoint» is that you benefit from the impression that you no longer have to engage in any ontology. While the ways of life of billions of people are sucked into the most provincial format – according to which there is one nature and there are many different cultures – you may have the impression that no violence whatsoever has been done to them. You may simultaneously possess all the universality you wish and all the multiplicity you need, without having to negotiate afresh any of the claims about what the common world is made of, so smooth has been the back and forth movement of Occam's razor. With one nature and multiple cultures, the much older history of the Bifurcation, to use Alfred North Whitehead's label, has completed its course and rendered the search for ontology a thing of the past. From now on, you will have to choose: either scientific status or ontology. «Otherness» will always be defined according to a symbolic format. As far as nature is concerned, there is no otherness to be considered. We know for good what the world is made of. At this point, meaning and being cannot be rejoined any more. Case settled.

Well, not settled for long. No sooner had ontology been declared dead than it began to proliferate anew. What has been called the «ontological turn» is not a fresh idea (and even less some French ideas!), but there is some novelty to the realization that the traditional questions tackled by anthropology had been repressed too quickly by the one-nature-multiple-cultures format. Apparently, deep deontological blunders had been made that rendered vacuous not only the description of «cultures» but of «nature» as well, thus reopening the front line between physical and cultural anthropology. It should not even be called a «turn» but rather *a return* to this deontology that forms the philosophical as well as the political heart of a discipline that has never been at ease with the confusion of the scientific ethos with the «scientistic worldview» anyway. Diplomacy and deontology have always accompanied anthropology. But this has nothing to do with abandoning the quest for truth – quite the opposite: with deontology the requirements for speaking truthfully about the others are increased, because they now have to apply symmetrically to all those who are attempting to compose the common world. For such an encounter neither the universality of nature nor the multiplicity of cultures could do the job.

There are multiple reasons for this return of ontological scruples: postcolonial ethnography, the development of gender studies, but also the impact of anthropology of science

(my own field), and of course, more efficaciously, the dissemination and thus the dissolution of the various modernizing fronts. There are today so many ways of being modernized that it has become impossible to make the distinction between moderns and non-moderns. Above all, the irruption of ecological mutations has made a mockery of the idea that the list of agencies could be closed. Suddenly, this idea seemed ludicrous – just as ludicrous as the pretention that we could address all those agencies in the right tone without shocking those they push into action. Any convenient distribution between what is universal and what is multiple is now up for grabs. When Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) began to speak of «multinaturalism», the Earth began to tremble – or rather, he began to speak of multinaturalism while the Earth, in parallel, trembled! Such is the situation that we now inherit: with those tremors, older questions have reemerged. Actually, it would be astounding if at the time of the Anthropocene (that most unstable concept), anthropology could emerge unscathed inside its older disciplinary boundaries (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2013, Hache 2014).

Whatever the reasons for this return from the dead, it has become simultaneously impossible to close the list of entities making up the common world and to find shared ways to establish this list. This is why I'd like to present a specific set up where the question raised by such a list could be reopened. I call it an Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME for short, see Latour 2013). The idea is to offer a larger dose of ontological pluralism – or, to take up my earlier metaphor, to transform Occam's razor into a richly-crafted cutlery set.

The main limitation of the old settlement – what could be called the Object-Subject Operating System, OS for short – was to submit any agency to the same trial by asking whether it is an object or a subject; a question which, in effect, meant asking «are you real, that is objective, or simply subjective or symbolic?» Not surprisingly, each entity thus addressed appears skewed, clumsy, lame, uncertain of its status – in a word, embarrassed. Although not an anthropologist, it is Whitehead (1920: 30) who best defined the implausible result of such a trial when he wrote:

*What I am essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge; although in this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the by play of the mind. Thus there would be two natures, one is the conjecture and the other is the dream (emphasise mine).*

Exactly what happens when you commit a deontological mistake and fail to detect what is the exact template with which to qualify, to welcome, to house new beings. What would you think of a collective that would offer no other reality to those who make it act than of choosing between «conjecture» and «dream»? Yet it is exactly this we are supposed to accept without protestation when we are told not to indulge in ontology.

The reason why we need, it seems to me, an inquiry into modes of existence is that there is a gross imbalance in how we protest against such an ill-conceived trial. There is much more indignation on the side of the «dream» than there is on the side of the «conjecture». And yet both have been just as badly treated. That is what symmetric anthropology means for me.

I agree that the whole anthropological literature is a long protestation against such a trial and a defense of agency-bearers against such an ill-adjusted template. To take two recent examples, when Eduardo Kohn (2013) tries to reconstruct how «Forests Think», or when Tanya Luhrmann (2012) follows what happens when «God Talks Back», they have to make sure that neither forest nor God are drawn into such a court room. Especially because they are interested by how agencies relate *to one another*, a move that is absolutely forbidden as long as you run the OS operating system. The return to ontological questions, though, allows inquirers to move through what Descola calls «interagency», a clever way to free agencies to interpret or translate one another without having, at every step along the way, to decline their credentials in terms of human intentionality.

But what about the other side, that of «conjecture»? Who is protesting as loudly against the ways through which scientific knowledge itself is offended by being asked to pronounce the wrong shibboleth? From the beginning of the program I call an «anthropology of the Moderns» I have been struck by the other calamitous consequence of presenting every entity with the same instrument of torture. Not only do we risk missing everything that is interesting in the beings encountered by what is strangely called «cultural» or «social» anthropology, but also we risk not doing justice to what is even more strangely called «materiality» and that has been made the «other side» with which physical anthropology is supposed to be concerned. To be limited to «conjecture» is no more gratifying than being limited to «dream». Am I wrong to think that this is what modernism has been? Am I wrong in thinking that this is what has now, at the time of the Anthropocene, become unbearable?

To continue with the same forest example: Eduardo Kohn is able to multiply ontological templates by fighting to establish interagency connections without marking the obligatory



stops at the station of the intentional human. These templates are of great use in also understanding how forest engineers, for instance, at the INPA in Manaus establish connections with *their* agencies – worms, clouds, canopies and bacteria included. As I said earlier, what triggered my interest in anthropology of science and technology was not how human, social, political they could be, but, on the contrary, how little of their odd types of agencies we could describe by framing them either as material object or as symbolic elaboration. The celebrated OS operating system that was supposed to offer, according to most descriptions, the base line, the default position, the yardstick by contrast with which could be defined the rich diversity of cultural ways, does not do justice to the famous or infamous westernized science, technology and economies either.

That's what it means to «never have been modern». The base line that was supposed to be so clear-cut that it was used to mark the border, in most universities, between departments of physical anthropology and their cultural counterparts, renders *materiality* incomprehensible. I would even argue that «materiality» is even less well treated than the «symbolic» because we benefit from plenty of magnificent ethnographic accounts, for instance, of rituals but so little description of what it is to be a computer, a termite, an ecosystem, a river catchment, a technical project or a corporation. Those «colonial objects» have not been as decolonized as the «colonial subjects».

While it is a breach of etiquette to frame the question about the Runa's forest thinking according to the OS operating system, it is just as much a deontological mistake to believe that the science of forestry and soil science would fit nicely into such a frame. In both cases, we would no longer call the frame «premodern» and «modern» – that is, beings and meanings could now be seen as continuous without having to be broken down through the intervention of a speaking intentional human. It is this odd figure invented in the 17th century that generates both the «conjecture» and the «dream» and the very idea that there are two sides, that they have «bifurcated», and that they have to be «reconciled» with one another.

Hence the necessity of modifying the base line, the default position, from which we still tend to evaluate and gauge all other entities. In the same way that the trope of an object facing a subject has disappeared, so too has the idea that the science of anthropology was *facing* its subject matter. All collectives have been thrown into the same pot, striving to decide how to survive with or against one another. This is not the moment to drastically limit the number of legitimate agencies, since the chances of diplomacy depend on new configurations among those agencies. No question is clarified by giving a role to what could be called an OS «human» operative: the focus of attention should

drift toward the trajectories of actants, trajectories for which another operating system is to be devised. *It is not only from the «dream» that we should wake up, but from the «conjecture» as well.*

And that is where things become really interesting. If humans are pushed gently off stage, it is not because they have been «reified», «objectified» or «naturalized», it is simply that they are traversed by agencies that don't have them as their only target and that don't have them as their origin point. (Exactly the move that had been impossible when any flight away from the «dream» led you toward the «conjecture» – and vice versa.) That is where lies the crucial new insight. It is not that ethnographers have moved «beyond» object and subject (or beyond nature and culture, in spite of the title given to Descola 2013), which would move along the same gradient, as if by mixing «conjecture» with «dream» you had gained any better access to reality. There is no «beyond». But there are lots of «before», «beneath», «elsewhere», «up», «down», «in» and a lot of «away» and «within». In spite of its etymology, there is no reason why anthropology should be *anthropocentric*. It simply means that the discipline is especially interested in some of the meeting points between those agencies and some of the varying historical figures called «humanity». That those figures vary, we have today a good illustration when, because of a new twist in geostory, former humans, or rather Terrians, have to learn to present themselves as a geological force. Quite a new guise that you cannot register as nature, nor as culture, nor as any combination of both!

To conclude this lecture, I am afraid I have to shift from those grandiose and apparently abstruse questions to the very humble, practical and empirical set up that I have imagined will render such a deontology more operational. Quite a fall, I am sorry! During the last quarter century I have attempted, quite systematically, to increase the number of templates by which the so-called Moderns account for themselves; not, to be sure, in their official representation (they remain staunch adepts of the OS operating system and will swear that they are obedient naturalists), but by looking for the many occasions where they express dissatisfaction with such an official view of themselves. What I think I have documented are the protestations by many different people that a skewed template is being used to account for the mode of existence of the agencies that are most attached to them. The great advantage of «never having been modern» is that the occasions for meeting those protestations are not rare events; on the contrary, they are visible at every turn, every time the OS operating system is shown to be wanting.

Those protestations are especially salient when *category mistakes* are made: for instance, when scientists are asked by politicians to reach a consensus that runs against the felicity conditions of what they call science; when politicians are sum-

moned to tell the truth according to a yardstick of transparency and honesty that would make them, in effect, lie according to their own truth conditions; when psychiatrists are requested to choose whether a drug acts «biologically» or «psychologically», whereas they feel that the MindBody template is totally ill-adjusted to the task; when pilgrims in Lourdes are asked whether they really «believe» that Bernadette Soubirous has been visited by the real Virgin Mary, and when they shudder and stutter because they want to use the adverb «really» but they feel the meaning implied by the interrogator is not subtle enough to account for the presence of Sainte Bernadette in their life; when judges, once the case is settled, are plaintively requested to say whether this is «objectively» the case and when they are forced to say, equally plaintively, «yes» and «no» because they are at a loss to calibrate what it means to say «it's legally true»; when engineers are requested to state that they «master» their project completely, when they know full well that the project will be realized only if an entire ecosystem surrounds the original plan, an ecosystem that has no room in their plan... and so on and so forth.

Okay, suppose you do this for a quarter of a century, and always with the same questionnaire for each of what I call «crossing» between modes of existence, each having its own felicity and infelicity conditions. Well, step-by-step, you will end up recognizing trajectories – the modes – that play the role of alternative templates for the recognition of agencies that had never been at ease in the OS operating system. Then you may begin to say: «well, I think I have found an alternative to Occam's razor.» In the daily life of Westerners, at least, there is a local ontological repertoire that requires a good dozen yardsticks instead of one. (Don't forget that the Object-Subject is not made of two entities but only of one – it is a relation: object is nothing but the object *for this* subject, and vice versa, the subject is nothing but the subject *for that* object.)

Then, and I will stop here, you go one step further in madness and you write a book about it that sums up the provisional results of the inquiry; inquiry that, in another feat of folly, you transform into a digital site – [modesofexistence.org](http://modesofexistence.org) – where you ask readers, transformed into co-inquirers, to tell you how wrong you have been. Or, this is still a possibility, who accept to join you in negotiating the terms by which the former Moderns could present themselves to the former «others», while the pressure of ecological mutations – the irruption of Gaia – is rendering all their older conflicts, leagues and associations obsolete. Then you will have deployed at the negotiation table in front of the other parties – instead of Occam's razor – a richer «batterie de cuisine» that might help you put an end to the «metaphysical famine» (Souriau 2009: 142) from which those who have mandated you have suffered for long.

Chances of success are slim, I know, especially because, of course, no one has mandated me, but you might recognize in such an enterprise something that is indeed anthropology – a diplomatic and deontological form of anthropology.

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## AUTHOR

**Bruno Latour** is professor at Sciences Po in Paris and director of the médialab.

*Sciences Po Médialab  
27 rue Saint Guillaume  
75007 Paris, France  
[bruno.latour@sciencespo.fr](mailto:bruno.latour@sciencespo.fr)*