S|S|S

Seven moments with Bruno Latour

Noortje Marres

Vienna, 2000

We are sitting on the terrace of a cafe in Vienna, in what turns out to be the first of many supervision sessions. It's September, the weather is still warm, and the EASST/4S conference is taking place not far from here. I just finished my Master's thesis in the philosophy of science and technology at the University of Amsterdam, in which I discussed a series of internet applications, including the search engine Google, and how they address the problem of demarcation – the age-old question of how to delineate legitimate from illegitimate knowledge claims. Bruno said he would like to hear more about it, and so we walk to this cafe to discuss. I try my best to give a summary:

> The problem of demarcation is back. Postmodern philosophers such as Richard Rorty had declared this problem effectively dead, as for people like him the project of epistemology – for which the demarcation of (il)legitimate knowledge is a key, or even *the*, objective – had come to an end. (Like other postmodernists, Rorty drew on the work of Thomas Kuhn to develop this claim of the 'end of demarcation', as Kuhn had shown that it was not practically possible for scientists to judge the legitimacy of propositions solely by tracing them back to truth conditions.). But internet search engines have re-activated demarcation as a core challenge for knowledge culture. These machines continuously distinguish worthwhile from worthless sources, as they rely on algorithms to decide which Web pages to include in their query return lists. Do they do so legitimately? The methods that search engines rely on for demarcation are very much *unlike* the verification methods of the positivists (which Rorty had in mind when he declared that the problem of demarcation was no more). They are more akin to the holistic evaluation of propositions foregrounded by Imre Lakatos and Pierre Duhem: they evaluate the relative credibility of sources by considering their position in a network of other sources (relying, among others, on hyperlinks as indicators of relevance).

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Correspondence to:
Noortje Marres, Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, University of Warwick, Room B0.12, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.
Email: N.Marres@warwick.ac.uk

I am used to trying to explain this, and not quite succeeding. I am used to trying to convince others that it makes perfect sense to draw on the philosophy of science to understand the role of the internet in society, and failing. But Bruno listens. He even seems pleased. 'Yes, I see!' Laughing. 'That's very nice.' Spoken like a teacher. He encouraged me to take my work seriously, he helped me to develop my argument – to grow my propositions – by listening and saying such delightful things as 'I see!'

Limburg, 1999

It is a rainy afternoon in Limburg, in the south of the Netherlands. I have taken a local train from Maastricht to Kerkrade to visit Rolduc, a Catholic abbey that also hosts academic conferences, and where the Dutch Graduate School for Science, Technology and Modern Culture (WTMC) is holding a meeting. I have a poster with me, a map of the Genetically Modified Food debate on the Web, a circle of nodes representing the websites of organizations that take positions on the issue of GM Foods, and the hyperlinks that connect them. I made this poster with colleagues at the Jan van Eyck Academy, a post-graduate art school in Maastricht, where am working as a theorist-in-residence in the Design Department, as part of a team led by Richard Rogers, the media scholar, to develop digital methods of issue mapping.

It is wet and windy when I arrive in Kerkrade, and I approach the old, tall buildings of Rolduc abbey with what I can only call trepidation. Bruno has invited me to show our poster at the WTMC conference, but I am not at all sure that this was a good idea. I am not even a PhD student, and am based in an art school. I am a stranger. Fortunately, by the time I walk into the conference the poster session is about to start, and I am relieved that I can put my poster on the wall and simply stand there, next to my poster, in a clearly defined role. Bruno asks a lot of questions. Who are these organizations? What can the hyperlinks between them tell us about their 'position' in the controversy, and about the controversy itself? He does not ask: Why are you showing us a … data visualization? He does not ask: What are you doing, art or social science? He does not ask: If your poster presents a study of public controversy, then why are you doing this work in a graphic design department? Others join us and we have a conversation.

In 1999, to create what we would later call digital controversy maps was to step into an under-defined, interdisciplinary space. Our work at the Jan van Eyck Akademie brought together STS with design research, computing, internet studies and environmental politics, and at the time this did not make much institutional sense. Our work also *looks* strange. Indeed, how can one show a network visualisation and call it a debate? As it turned out Bruno Latour was strongly supportive of our approach: the development of interdisciplinary methods of inquiry, which combine social science with art and design, became one of his principal occupations in the decades that followed.

Paris, 2002

I am spending some months at the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation (CSI) at the École des Mines in Paris. I am now a PhD student and Bruno Latour is my co-supervisor, with the Dutch empirical philosopher Gerard de Vries. We meet regularly in his office. It

is on the ground floor, at the end of the corridor, with soft Paris light coming in through windows, with the Boulevard Saint-Michel right outside, which at this time still has quite a lot of traffic. Upstairs, by the photocopier, you can look out over the Jardin Luxembourg while you wait for your copies. Bruno had worked at the CSI for many years and his office feels like a lived-in space. Of course, there are books everywhere, and one afternoon he points out one that Mary Douglas had picked up from his shelves. I imagine Bruno in conversation with Douglas, whom I admire, in this office, which makes it feels even more like the intellectual place to be.

For my doctoral thesis, I am re-reading the Lippmann-Dewey debate, the classic exchange between the journalist and the philosopher about the fate of democracy in a technological society in the early 20th Century. This debate is most often read as pitching the political realism of Lippmann against the democratic idealism of John Dewey. In my thesis, I develop a different reading, and show how the contributions of both protagonists are aligned in their articulation of what Latour, de Vries and I will later call the 'object turn' in political democracy, in an exchange in this journal in 2007: In technological societies, socio-material entanglements have become a primary force of 'problematization', the key dimension in which public problems arise.

During these months in 2002, many of my meetings with Latour take the form of conversations, where we take turns adopting the voices of Lippmann and Dewey, dissecting their disagreement by staging it point by point. We work hard to find the right intonation for each proposition, occasionally pausing to take stock. Ah, right! So, there is no public when there is no issue. No issue, no public. And, on a different occasion: So, things are at the heart of political conflict, democracy is a way of articulating the divisions that arise from our joint and problematic implication in things, a making things public! Every few weeks I come to test my argument in this exercise of dramatization, developing my thesis in monthly instalments. And every month during that time, Latour runs the graduate studies seminar, as the CSI Director of Graduate Research. The other students and I discuss our chapter drafts, and Bruno reminds us at the start of each seminar that it is *the draft* we are discussing, not the work of this or that student. Discussion of a text is more productive if we assume 'the author is dead', or at least, that our reading is not a judgement of them. He has more good advice. 'Remember, you have to be consistent with your own argument.' And: 'Never forget, if you don't care for it, no one will.'

We meet people. One morning I receive a short email, with the heading 'on vot Rorty?' The message confuses me, what kind of election could Bruno be thinking of that would involve the philosopher? It turns out to be an invitation to dinner. Rorty is there, as well as other guests, Paul Rabinow, Luc Boltanski. Rorty is taciturn, and I speculate that he is depressed. The United States might start a war in Iraq soon and some years before he had written a hopeful book, *Achieving our Country*, about the U.S. Bruno has cooked the meal, and in between courses he makes conversation in his cheerful, almost jokey, manner. He talks about our work on digital politics, web cartography and the reinvention of technological democracy. 'You see?' But, to be honest, I doubt very much that Rorty saw, or the other guests for that matter. Mixing computational methods with political theory, epistemology critique and technological culture, it is not exactly a widely shared practice.

Cerisy-la-Salle, 2007

We spend a week at Cerisy-la-Salle, the cultural centre in Normandy, for a colloquium about the politics of the cosmos and environmental governance. The debates are wide-ranging and there is real intellectual energy. The lady of the house, one of the founders of the centre, gives me a first edition of Dewey's *Theory of Valuation*, a stark statement of Dewey's material theory of value. But it is not an easy week. During some of the exchanges, lines are being drawn in the sand. Who can and cannot be trusted to advance the cause of the left? People are being called names. Liberal. Machiavellian. I feel quite demoralized at one point. But Bruno keeps the twinkle in his eye. I think he is used to it, that he doesn't mind much, that this kind of bad-mouthing cannot really hurt him. We visit the Tapestry of Bayeux, we ponder and joke about Europeans in Britain, clever invaders! We have much more to laugh about than we later would, when it comes to the matter of Europeans in Britain, but it still makes me smile, Bruno imagining himself a Guillaume of Normandie crossing the sea and spreading the word in Grande-Bretagne.

London, 2014

Bruno has a new project, the *Modes of Existence*, a grand philosophical undertaking that seeks to specify the distinctive attributes of what Latour, following Spinoza, thinks of as different modalities of articulation, from art to religion to science. His magnus opus, he half-jokingly calls it, and it is clear that he has been working on it for many years. Now he invites a 'diplomat' for each of the modes, someone to be in charge of implementing the 'protocol of inquiry' – a mix of interpretative methodology, workshop design and curation – for a given mode. I am excited to act as mediator for Mode Pol, for politics.

We meet together with Donato Ricci and others to develop our protocols, which is not difficult; we know exactly what to do. Our experiment is inspired by the format of the data session invented, by ethno-methodologists, who play audio and video fragments during seminars and collectively interpret their observations through discussion. We will do the same, but we add data mapping to support the process of interpretation. We create visual diagrams to be populated with observations and ideas by the participants in our inquiry.

We have fun selecting video fragments of political moments: a speech in the Australian Parliament by Julia Gilliard, in which she labels her opponent a misogynist; a video rant by the artist taxi driver, Chunky Mark. We design a diagram that consists of a series of questions, inviting participants to describe the gestures of politics, identify indicators of politicization, and observe the settings of political articulation. This should enable us to undertake our task, to begin qualifying the mode of articulation that is specific to politics. The workshop takes place at my university, Goldsmiths, during one intense day. In the centre of the room is Bruno's leather bag. He places it there every session, as the thing-in-common that will somehow help us to find a shared focus in conducting our experiment.

There are many moments when we disagree. The published book on *Modes of Existence* includes a chapter on 'Mode Pol' and in this chapter Bruno favours the politics of representation over the politics of things. He defines politics primarily in terms of the process of group formation, in which a representative establishes themselves as a worthy

spokesperson by speaking for a collective. So, that is how Latour ends up qualifying Mode Pol, not so much in terms of embodied gestures, material settings and relational effects, but in terms of a rather Lockean citizen establishing their authority as a representative. I am disappointed that achieving a 'proper' philosophy of politics seems to require the sidelining of non-humans, even for Bruno. Did we not make progress in our workshop in specifying politics at the scale of the gesture, of events unfolding in material settings and their consequences – at the scale, that is, of situations? We had only made a start.

But there is also something else missing in the *Modes of Existence*'s specification of the political mode of articulation, which I think might help to understand what happened: feminism. He, we, had not paid enough attention to the many insights that feminist studies had already produced, detailing the prime importance of materiality, embodiment and connectedness in public politics. He, we, had not considered in sufficient detail the rich and complex studies of material politics by scholars such as Dorothy Smith, Carole Pateman, Judith Butler, Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway. Latour was a close and good friend of Stengers and Haraway, and he paid tribute to them often, hosting evenings in their honour. But feminist influences are hard to find in his writings on politics during the time of the *Modes of Existence*. We know from the work of Susan Leigh Star and Annemarie Mol that Actor-Network Theory had a gender problem. So does Latour's political ecology.

When disagreement becomes difficult, we stop speaking. Silence.

Paris, 2019

We meet in another rather cave-like space, in some ways similar to his office at the École des Mines, but the atmosphere is more informal here, in Bruno's new space at Sciences Po, where he had moved in 2006. I am at SPEAP (for Sciences Po – Programme d'Expérimentation en Arts Politique), the political art school Latour founded, for a seminar. The aim of SPEAP was to create the interdisciplinary space of inquiry that he had previously envisioned through temporary exhibitions (at the Zentrum for Medien Kunst), and I can see that it works. The space feels inhabited, almost domestic, with chairs in a loose circle, and a bright red sofa. I am worried I have not prepared my talk well enough, but it turns out more than fine. Set up as a series of talking points, my talk fits this configuration, as participants take turns to contribute to the discussion, taking the word as you say in Dutch ('het woord nemen'), going round and round, with each participant taking some time to introduce themselves. An archeologist. A former dancer, each articulate in a different way, each contribution surprising. Bruno barely needs to say a thing.

Paris, 2022

Bruno has invited the sociologist Geneviève Pruvost for a discussion, at his home, of her 2021 book, *Quotidien Politique*. We are ten people or so, sitting in the living room, with a baby, making a lovely chirpy sound, on a rug in the middle of the room. Pruvost's book is based on an in-depth field study of 'maisonnées', small-scale French agricultural producers living in (neo-)rural communities opposed to industrial agriculture. Bruno hosts

and Pruvost speaks eloquently about everyday material practices – herding, building, baking bread – as ways of making publics, of engaging in the transformation of worlds held in common with others. She call it 'the politics of minor gestures'.

Together with her interviewees, Pruvost produced cartographies of the entities that matter in realizing subsistence. Bruno pulls photocopies of them out of a folder, and we hand them around. Pruvost insists that 'this is not the same as making a cartography of interdependencies', as the question for her is how different entitles (sheep, bread, wood) were made to count through the maisonnées' practices. As we hand around Pruvost's maps of the material associations that make up the communities she studied, the conversation continues, making delightfully clear how Pruvost's feministic sensibility breathes life into the practice of 'data cartography' and the idea of material politics: making maps is for her a way to communicate the specificity of what composes the maisonnées' worlds (she counts lamps, sheep exchanges between neighhours, kilometers travelled, but not actors). We have a serious but playful disagreement about how necessary the *scaling down* of the material reproduction of life is to the maisonnées' accomplishment of the ecologization of everyday life. This will turn out to be last evening that I discuss familiar themes with Latour – the cartography of relations, the politics of nature – and it feels very fitting that we do so in a group discussion about feminist appproaches in political ecology, a field that became Bruno's intellectual home in the last ten years of his life.

Later that same afternoon, Bruno asks: 'Do you know good speech recognition software?' He shows me his hands. He is not writing anymore. He tells me about his long interview with ARTE, and is joking again. 'Can you imagine, I had to haggle with them! They said they preferred to show the interview on television after I had died. What would be the sense of that?' Bruno gets his way and the film is shown in the Cinema La Bastille,[1] on a lovely evening in early June. He welcomes his guests standing outside on the sidewalk, wearing a hat, his wise and radiant partner next to him, his brother, friends and colleagues from the CSI, and many of us younger, and no-longer-so-young, people, who are excited about what we are going to see and hear. As Latour's friend and colleague Antoine Hennion reminds us, Bruno Latour saw it as his task to make think ('faire penser'), and not, to think in the place of others. It is what he does this evening, and through his work will continue to do.

Note

1. The interview by Nicolas Truong with Bruno Latour can be viewed at https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/RC-022018/interview-with-bruno-latour/

Author biography

Noortje Marres studied Sociology and Philosophy of Science and Technology at the University of Amsterdam. As part of her studies she took the course *The Politics of Nature* with Bruno Latour at the London School of Economics. She completed her PhD thesis on the rise of issue politics in technological societies under the supervision of Gerard de Vries and Bruno Latour.