

CHS Research Afternoon
Bruno Latour (1947-2022):
The meaning of his work for our thinking about the past.

Time & date: 13 March 2023, 13.00-17.00

Place: The Collaboratories (reserved 13-19h)

Please register (for free) before 1 March 2023 via [this form](#)

Abstract

Bruno Latour has left behind a huge oeuvre with significant influence on various academic disciplines including history. This workshop examines his work in its relevance for the way we think about the past in relation to the present and the future. The goal is to exchange our views on Latour but also to discuss where we see a need to move beyond Latour or disagree altogether.

Programme

13.00-14.30

Keynote: "Bruno Latour, empirical philosopher (1947 - 2022)"

Prof. Gerard de Vries (Philosophy of Science and Technological Culture, University of Amsterdam)

14.30-15.00

Break

15.00-17.00

Roundtables 1 ('Networks & Connectivity') & 2 ('Facts and Fetishes') with wall of ideas (45 minutes)

Roundtables 3 ('Moving beyond anthropocentrism') & 4 ('Science of Associations': Locating (the Language of) Agency') with wall of ideas (45 minutes)

Plenary session & summary discussion

17.00

Drinks

Dinner

1. Networks & connectivity (moderators: Rik & Christina)

Since the publication of *Science in Action* in 1987, Bruno Latour has been known as one of the founders of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theory has found a wide range of applications in the social sciences. Building on his own work, Latour offered in 2005 a theoretical framework for ANT in his groundbreaking *Reassembling the Social*, in which he observes that the 'social' of conventional social sciences has lost its meaning, arguing instead for the 'sociology of associations'. Terms like actant, translation, intermediaries, mediators and quasi-object have been applied in a wide variety of research practices.

With its emphasis on connectivities between non-human and human actants, ANT has especially been picked up by archaeologists in examining the dynamics and agencies of relationships in contexts in the past. Astrid van Ooyen (2016) applied it to the rapid spread of a pottery type across the Roman world, while Kandler and Caccioli (2016) discuss this in broader terms of network and the spread of innovation. Architectural historians such as Michael Guggenheim (2009) have reconsidered Latour's concept of 'immutable mobiles' in assessing monuments and their many networks across time.

Yet for many, the relevance of the theory for historical studies is still unclear, even though Latour's conception of ANT is deeply rooted in his own historical research. This is partly due to Latour himself who, in his histories of science, applied ANT without further exploring the question how the historical and network approach are related to each other. And though he endorses the work of historians in *Reassembling the Social* and the use of history for ANT, he does not further elaborate how ANT can be a fruitful approach to the past.

This worldcafé will explicitly deal with the question of how archeologists and historians may further apply ANT in their researches. Participants will be invited to discuss their own research practices with a view on the applicability of ANT.

Preparation

Gerard de Vries, *Bruno Latour*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), Chapter 4, p 82-95.

<https://rug.on.worldcat.org/oclc/941714529>

Egon Noe and Hugo F. Alrøe, 'Observing farming systems: Insights from social systems theory', in I. Darnhofer, D. Gibbon, and B. Dedieu (eds.), *Farming Systems Research 387 into the 21st Century: The New Dynamic*, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-4503-2_17, Available on http://hugo.alroe.dk/files/Work/2012-Noe_Alroe-Observing_farming_systems-Chapter.pdf

van Oyen, Astrid. 2016. "Networks or Work-Nets? Actor-Network Theory and Multiple Social Topologies in the Production of Roman Terra Sigillata." In *The Connected Past. Network Studies in Archaeology and History*, edited by Tom Brughmans, Anna Collar, and Fiona Coward, 35-56. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://academic-oup-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/book/40270/chapter/346731818>

2. Facts and Fetishes (moderators: Rina & Dorien)

An important part of Latour's work is on the making of facts. In his article "Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world" (1983) he uses the historical example of Louis Pasteur's treatment of the Anthrax Virus, in order to understand how laboratories fabricate 'facts' and transform society. Twenty-five years later, in his book *On the modern cult of the factish Gods* (2010), he is even more radical in posing that the belief of the moderns in scientific facts is no more than a cult. 'What a comedy of errors', he argues,

When the debate between science and religion is staged, adjectives are almost exactly reversed: it is science that reaches the invisible world of beyond, that she is spiritual, miraculous, soul-fulfilling, and uplifting; it is religion which should be qualified as being local, objective, visible, mundane, un-miraculous, repetitive, obstinate and sturdy (Latour, 2010, p. 111).

Latour's reasonings are not only important for history of science and science and technology studies. They also raise questions about how we define Modernity and about the historical chronologies and geographies that we use in historical research and teaching (traditionally: Modernity as a unique event that not only created a divide between the modern era and all that came before within European history, but also between Europe and the rest of the world). In this world café we will discuss Latour's work on 'the modern constitution' and the making of knowledge, and how it may inspire our own research.

Preparation

Bruno Latour, "Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World," in *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, ed. Karin D. Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkay (London: SAGE Publications, 1983), 141–170, available online at: <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/12-GIVE-ME-A-LAB-GB.pdf>

From the ARTE interview with Latour: Part 2/12 ("The End of Modernity") and Part 8/12 ("Scientific Practice") <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/106738-003-A/interview-with-bruno-latour/> (for English subtitles click on "ARTE in 6 languages")

Gerard de Vries, "The Modern Constitution," in *Bruno Latour* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 124–129, available online through SmartCat. <https://rug.on.worldcat.org/oclc/941714529>

3. Moving beyond anthropocentrism (moderators: Christina & Clemens)

Since a few years now historians are slowly acquiring a more prominent role in academic debates on the role of humans as a geohistorical force and, more specifically, the Anthropocene. Among other elements, there is growing awareness that anthropocentric notions of the past need to be reworked in order to become more sensitive towards the role of non-human forms of being in historical change and to develop a more comprehensive notion of human embeddedness in non-human contexts.

The power of material culture to not only reflect but even direct human narratives has long been acknowledged by cultural historians and archaeologists. Latour's Actor-Network Theory and his 'sociology of associations', however, have given impetus to the study of object agencies and entanglements by expanding the notion of 'actants' to well beyond the human realm. Inanimate objects thus elicit both voluntary and involuntary responses among humans (e.g. Gibson's theory of affordances) while impacting each other as well. This vibrant world of thinginess is the realm of archaeologists, but is gaining momentum among historians engaged with the Anthropocene. At the same time it raises ethical concerns on the unique or 'privileged' position of the human race (e.g. Graeber & Wengrow 2021), especially in the face of rapidly expanding AI.

Latour's work offers some important contributions to these discussions that we would like to evaluate in this world café in relation to our own research. This includes questions about the agency of non-human life in the Anthropocene, the impact of climate change on our understandings of the past, the role of animals shaping historical narratives, as well as the role of material culture in narratives of the past.

Preparation

Latour, Bruno. 2014. "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene." *New Literary History* 45, no. 1: 1-18. Accessed 2023/01/18/. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542578>.

Gerard de Vries, 'Facing Gaia', in *Bruno Latour* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 191-201, available online through SmartCat. <https://rug.on.worldcat.org/oclc/941714529>

From the ARTE interview with Latour: Part 3/12 ("Gaia: Our New Earth")
<https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/106738-003-A/interview-with-bruno-latour/> (for English subtitles click on 'ARTE in 6 languages')

4. 'Science of Associations': Locating (the Language of) Agency (moderators: Yuliya & Babette)

Throughout his work, Bruno Latour has been concerned with the concept of agency – whether it is in his formulation of the Actor Network Theory, his theorizations of Anthropocene, or views on political activism. Latour's definition of agency, however, is far from straightforward. He also seldomly defines agency. Instead, he often talks about 'having or not having' agency – as if agency is one's attribute.¹ This view of agency enabled Latour to capture different 'modes of action' (*Reassembling the Social*, 2005, 70), and 'modes of existence' (*An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, 2012). At the roots of this (re)definition of agency is possibly one of Latour's major contributions to humanities and social sciences – Latour's method to study the social. Latour himself declared in some kind of *retractatio* that, unfortunately, his theory of the social has often been misunderstood "in part because of the ambiguity of the word 'social'" (*Reassembling the Social*, 2005). To solve this ambiguity, Latour introduced the idea of associations.

In this panel we will discuss Latour's notions of agency and associations – first called 'power of associations' (1984) and later 'science of associations' (2005). We will read Latour's original text from 1984, where he lays bare this idea of associations and what it means for reconceptualising the social as its actors and their agency. We will also consider to what extent this method of "associations" can enable us to locate the agency of groups that are often socially or historiographically marginalised, such as minorities, poor people, women, people of a certain age (children, elderly people), people with a

¹ This contrasts a more accepted within social and human sciences notion of agency as a capacity for action – everyone has agency but not everyone is able to exercise it due to the social position, limited resources etc.

disability, as well as the natural environment and non-human species. We will think about how Latour's seeming conflation of the notions of agency and power, indeed gives scholars new tools to better understand what 'free choice' is, 'free speech', or for that matter 'free will'. How can humanist and social scientists capture Latour's notion of agency and the social in their work?

The panel explicitly addresses the "power/science of associations" and how it affects the use language, as well as existence of identities and their agencies: from the dominance of one global identity, to the threatening of diversity in regional and national identities, from the private in religion (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism), to secularism in the public sphere with its associative forms of iconoclasm (*Iconoclasm*, 2002), from the difficulty to speak about religion, nature, culture, and identity as a form of immaterial heritage to the material presence of archives, museum collections, architecture (*Jubiler* also published in 2002 in French and translated into *Rejoicing. Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, 2013).

Preparation

Latour, Bruno. "The powers of association." *The Sociological Review* 32, no. 1_suppl (1984): 264-280. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/19-POWERS-ASSOCIATIONS-GBpdf.pdf>

From the ARTE interview with Latour: Part 9/12 <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/106738-009-A/interview-with-bruno-latour/> (for English subtitles click on 'ARTE in 6 languages')