HOW TO INHERIT FROM BRUNO LATOUR?

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In 2009, in the first book devoted to Bruno Latour, Graham Harman imagined a hyperbolic situation in 2050 in which Latour's philosophy had become hegemonic.[1] Things happened much faster. «Bruno Latour is, with the possible exception of Thomas Kuhn, the most widely influential student of science and society of the last fifty years»,[2] and the actor-network theory he developed alongside Michel Callon and John Law has become the «new orthodoxy in science and technology studies».[3] In the social sciences, too, «moves are afoot to dislodge Bourdieu's canonical reputation and replace him with Latour as British sociology's new most-favoured Frenchman»;[4] at the same time, «he is about to condemn Foucault to the same fate to which the latter had condemned Sartre»,[5] because compared to both Bourdieu and Foucault, Latour «better equips us to take [nonhuman] entities on their own terms, rather than merely as human accessories».[6] Latour has been one of the few thinkers capable of providing an «ecological grand narrative» for our time,[7] and as if that were not enough, thanks to his reprise of thinkers such as William James and A.N. Whitehead (mediated by the

[1] Graham HARMAN, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Re-Press, Melbourne 2009.
[2] Sal RESTIVO, *Bruno Latour*, in G. RITZER and J. STEPNISKY (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, Wiley-Blackwell, Boston 2011, p. 520.
[3] Dave ELDER-VASS, *Disassembling Actor-Network Theory*, "Philosophy of the Social Sciences", 45, 1, 2011, p. 102.
[4] David INGLIS, *What Is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology*, "Cultural Sociology", 8, 1, 2014, p. 104.
[5] Eve SEGUIN, *Bruno Latour s'accorde-t-il au pluriel?*, «Symposium», 22, 1, p. 2.
[6] Graham HARMAN, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*, Polity, Cambridge 2018, p. 249.
[7] Iwona JANICKA, *Ecological Grand Narratives: What New Stories for an Age of Climate Crisis?*, "Topoi", 2025, pp. 1-12.

all-time friend Isabelle Stengers), he is catching up with Gilles Deleuze as the godfather of contemporary speculative philosophy.

There is no doubt that – as Patrice Maniglier says, parodying Foucault's 1970 prediction of the future influence of Deleuze – «the century» has already turned out to be Latourian. This makes the question of *how to inherit from Bruno Latour* all the more urgent. A difficult question in its own right and for every author, but particularly spiky when it comes to Latour, for a series of reasons.

Firstly, the eclectic nature of this intellectual journey. Trained in anthropology, philosophy, theology and semiotics, Latour made his debut with *Laboratory Life* (1979, co-authored with Steve Woolgar), the first ethnological study of how scientific knowledge is produced in laboratories.[8] In 1984 he published *The Pasteurization of France*, a historical investigation of how Pasteur's discovery of microbes shaped science and life in France, followed by *Irreductions*, a metaphysical pamphlet that outlined the worldview that would guide his approach to the end of his career.[9] His contribution to «science studies» (or «science and technology studies»: STS) continued in 1987 with *Science in Action* and then in 1999 with *Pandora's Hope*.[10] Meanwhile, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) became his best-known work thanks to its controversial thesis that the project of Modernity, that of «purifying» Nature from Culture, never corresponded to the actual practice of the Moderns, who all along produced «hybrids» that made the natural and the cultural indistinguishable.[11] In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), he replaced the traditional «sociology of the social» with a «sociology of associations», inspired by Gabriel Tarde and Harold Garfinkel, in order to show social life in the making, rather than taking Society as an already constituted whole.[12] *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2012) provided the *pars construens* to *We Have Never Been Modern* by distinguishing fifteen «modes of existence» that should have

[8] Bruno LATOUR – Steve WOOLGAR, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Princeton UP, Princeton 1986.

[9] Bruno LATOUR, *The Pasteurization of France*, tr. Alan Sheridan and John Law, Harvard UP, Cambridge 1993.

[10] Bruno LATOUR, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, Harvard UP, Cambridge 1987; Bruno LATOUR, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard UP, Cambridge 1999.

[11] Bruno LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, tr. Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge 1993.

[12] Bruno LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2005.

replaced the modern Nature-Culture bifurcation,[13] and after that, his «ecological turn», anticipated by *Politics of Nature* (1999), culminated in the Gifford Lectures delivered in 2013 and published in 2015 as *Facing Gaia*.[14] Ethnographic works devoted to specific fields – *Aramis* (1993) on technology, *Rejoicing* (2001) on religion, *The Making of Law* (2002) on law[15] – and nearly two hundred articles and a number of interviews should also be listed to give an idea of the richness and heterogeneity of Latour's production.

The second reason is that Latour's thought never consolidated in a closed system. His ethnographic and radically empiricist attitude and the intellectual curiosity that drove him to ever-renewed inquiry make it almost impossible to define *the* philosophy of Bruno Latour, and to this one must add his notorious tendency to endorse different, if not apparently contradictory positions. It was not without reason that André Kukla, comparing his proposal with Bas van Fraassen's «constructive empiricism», joked that «the differences between van Fraassen and Latour in some of his moods are not greater than the differences between Latour in some of his moods and Latour in others of his moods».[16] In the same book, Latour tells the reader that «things in themselves» are perfectly fine («and how are you?») and that reality emerges from the clash of conflicting forces, that knowledge is produced by the rhetoric of scientific papers and that this outcome is neither arbitrary nor contingent, that nonhuman actors contribute to the resolution of scientific disputes but that they emerge from such a resolution, that there is no Nature but that ecology is required if we do not want the conditions of reproduction of our life to be wiped out. Latour is like one of the Janus-faced figures that abound in *Science in Action*, tempting the reader with contradictory propositions.

Finally, it is particularly difficult but all the more important to learn how to inherit from an author whose thinking always evolved in direct engagement with the greatest challenges of the present, which makes the assessment of the world strictly dependent

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[13] Bruno LATOUR, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, tr. Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge 2013.

[14] Bruno LATOUR, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, tr. Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge 2004; Bruno LATOUR, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, tr. Catherine Porter, Polity, Cambridge 2017.

[15] Bruno LATOUR, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, tr. Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge 1996; Bruno LATOUR, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, tr. Julie Rose, Polity, London 2013; Bruno LATOUR, *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil d'Etat*, tr. Marina Brilman and Alain Pottage, Polity, Cambridge 2010.

[16] André KUKLA, *Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science*, Routledge, London 2000, p. 59.

on these very upheavals. This is especially true of the militant pamphlets of his late production: *Down to Earth* (2017) on the (first) rise of Trumpism, *After Lockdown* (2021) on the Corona pandemics, and *Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique* (2022, co-authored with his former student Nicolaj Schultz), on the complicated relationship between ecology and economy as two possible bases of political struggle.[17] Is there something at once more urgent and more difficult than to inherit from an author who is still grappling with present reality?

It is from this difficulty that the issue takes shape: from the need to interrogate the possible forms of Latour's inheritance, without yielding to the illusion that a single line of descent could contain them all. We have faced the gaze of the Sphinx of the work, to put it with Souriau, overcome its injunction to choose between practice and theory, and assembled an issue capable of moving beyond traditional disciplinary divisions, which are certainly too narrow to contain Latour's legacy.

The issue opens with Bruno Latour's *An Attempt at a «Compositionist Manifesto»*, one of his most important essays, here translated into Italian by Christian Frigerio. Its position at the beginning of the issue should not be understood as the presentation of a doctrine, nor as an attempt to provide a unified key to the contributions that follow. On the contrary, the manifesto immediately introduces one of the most demanding gestures of Latour's work: the renunciation of critique understood as debunking, as well as of the consolation of a Nature already given, in order to move toward a compositionist metaphysics in which the common world does not preexist the work that assembles it. To compose, then, means to hold together without reducing, to construct without guaranteeing success in advance, to seek the universal without presupposing that it is already available. It is from this demand at once philosophical, political, and ecological that the path of the issue begins.

In *La de-modernizzazione permanente del pensiero*, Camilla Zani interviews Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, retracing with the Brazilian anthropologist the stages of his personal and intellectual friendship with Latour. What emerges is a paradoxical portrait: Latour appears as a brilliant philosopher committed to the de-modernization of the European world, yet also as a thinker who, even in his attempt to move beyond

[17] Bruno LATOUR, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, tr. Catherine Porter, Polity, London 2018; Bruno LATOUR, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, tr. Julie Rose, Polity, London 2022; Bruno LATOUR – Nicolaj SCHULZ, *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, tr. Julie Rose, Polity, London 2023.

Modernity, remains in part attached to the privilege granted to the Western tradition. The interview thus introduces a decisive tension running through the entire issue: inheriting Latour means continuing his work of de-modernization, but also interrogating the internal limits of this very gesture.

We do not deny that the concern underlying our call was philosophical, since, as Didier Debaise explains in *Il popolo dell'Idea* (a 2022 paper translated by Camilla Zani), Latour has been above all a great philosopher. Latour's hybridization of philosophy and fieldwork leads us to think ontology no longer as a universal discourse on being, but as a regional and situated practice, bound to the concrete modes of existence it describes. If the Moderns are «the people of the Idea», then it becomes necessary to pass through philosophy and put the great ideas of Modernity on trial: Nature, Neutrality, Belief are no longer taken as self-evident principles capable of ordering reality from above, but treated as historical constructions, devices for distributing the true and the false, the rational and the irrational, the human and the nonhuman.

In *Con Latour, oltre Latour. Per una coreografia del pensiero*, Xhejn Xhindi provides a key to reading Latour's entire trajectory, proposing that we inherit his thought starting from the spatial consistency of his theoretical practice. The movement of the text unfolds around three figures — distance, irruption, and proximity — and passes through laboratory ethnography, the critique of modernity, Gaia, and the composition of collectives. To think with Latour, then, means to follow the concrete movement through which territories, actants, and forms of knowledge co-implicate one another. For Xhindi, inheriting Latour means contributing to the production of different worlds and territories.

If Xhindi insists on the spatiality and choreography of Latourian thought, David Antolínez Uribe instead brings the question back to the epistemological terrain of the social sciences. In *Towards an Epistemology Lesser than «Scientific» and Larger than «Social»*, Latour is taken as a decisive resource for interrogating the epistemological presuppositions of these disciplines and for marking the distance of Actor-Network Theory from both structuralist sociology and critical theory, whose political and epistemological limits the essay brings to light. The center of the article, however, lies in the tension that Antolínez Uribe identifies within Latourianism itself: on the one hand, a drive toward the quantification of sociology made possible by digital methods; on the other, a more humanistic orientation, attentive to the processes of thought that

take shape through artisanal writing. Rather than resolving this alternative, Uribe shows how Latour's work bequeaths to the social sciences two parallel lines of reinvention, both belonging to his legacy.

The question of inheritance then shifts to a cosmopolitical and planetary scale with Deniz Yenimazman's *Cosmotechnical Cosmopolitics: Inheriting Latour after Anthropology*. The article rereads the cosmopolitical project in light of contemporary technological and planetary transformations, arguing that the relational analysis of Actor-Network Theory alone is no longer sufficient today. By placing Latour in dialogue with Yuk Hui, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and McKenzie Wark, the article shows how Latour's legacy must confront cosmotechnical plurality, different ontological regimes, and the role of technological infrastructures in the composition of collective life. What emerges is the proposal for an extension of cosmopolitics capable of integrating technique, anthropology, and infrastructural conditions as decisive dimensions of the contemporary world.

This cosmopolitical and cosmotechnical expansion of Latour's legacy is followed, however, by a test of its internal limits. In *È reale ciò che resiste*, Patrizio Caldara returns to the anthropocentric consequences of Actor-Network Theory, focusing on Latour's works prior to 2004. The author speaks of an anthropocentrism that is both ontological and political: of how, in Latour, the constitution of a fully formed collective always depends on the presence of human actors and language, and of how nonhuman collectives remain structurally impossible, since without human representation they cannot accede to full political and ontological reality. His contribution thus introduces a decisive tension into the issue: inheriting Latour also means interrogating what, in his political ontology, might still depend on an all-too-human mediation.

From another perspective, Sebastien Lederle's contribution reopens the question of the presence of nonhumans in collective life. *Media of Nature after Latour* shows the importance of reading Latour as a theorist of the mediations through which nature appears, resists, and intervenes, rather than as a thinker of a given or substantial «Nature». Drawing in particular on Christiane Voss's notion of anthropomedial relations, the article reconstructs a concept of nature as a set of operative mediations through which nonhumans acquire agency without being anthropomorphized, before interrogating the kind of politics that such a concept makes possible.

The testing of Latour's inheritance is further radicalized by Filippo Scafi's *Anthropo-fiction: Inheriting Latour Non-philosophically*, which starts with a radical suspicion: that

Latour's compositionist program might end up falling back into the very prescriptive posture that it had denounced in critique. From the analysis of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, it emerges that modes, felicity conditions, and diplomatic protocols reinstall a normative instance capable of deciding from the outside what counts as legitimate practice. Against this drift, Scafi proposes «anthropo-fiction»: a non-philosophical way of inheriting Latour, one that clones his descriptive lexicon while suspending its legislative ambition, under the mobile and subversive sign of the trickster.

The path closes with Buenaventura Marco Moreno's *The Risk of Inheriting from a Sphinx called AIME: Or The Many Lives of Bruno Latour's Philosophy*, which adopts an openly experimental form of writing: a kind of non-fictional fable that pays homage to the often inventive and methodologically nonlinear character of Latour's research. Retracing the many lives of the philosophical project that culminated in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, the article insists on the historicity of the choices that shaped it, on the alternative paths it might have taken, and on the fragility that accompanied its elaboration.

The issue thus closes not with the peaceful transmission of a completed system, but with the image of a work traversed by risk, hazard, and the possibility of failure. Inheriting Latour means, then, not simply applying his concepts, but exposing oneself to the fragility of his philosophical adventure and reactivating, once again, its compositional power.