TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY LESSER THAN "SCIENTIFIC" AND LARGER THAN "SOCIAL"

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Abstract: Even though the last fifty years science and technology studies (STS) have allowed us to overcome the mystified image of "Science" and to get a better grasp of how the sciences relate to other cultural practices, the epistemological foundations and compromises of social scientists have remained obscure. Bruno Latour, first trained as a philosopher before serving as an *honoris causa* sociologist of science, might help us elucidate this question. Navigating through his extensive corpus, this essay discusses the rifts between Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and both structuralist sociology and critical theory, stressing the political and epistemological shortcomings of the latter. Then, we shall assess two proposals advanced by Latourianism – understood as the unsystematic, yet encompassing summary of Latour's work of semiotics, ANT and metaphysics in An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME). The first proposal is a quantification of sociology through digital methods. The second one is a humanistic alternative attentive to the thought processes enabled by artisan writing practices. Rather than seeking a definitive solution to the epistemological conundrum, we wish to insist on the irresolute parallelism between these two Latourian contributions to the constant reinvention of the social sciences.

Keywords: social sciences, epistemology, literacy, digital humanities, post-critique.

1. Introduction

Bruno Latour was born under the sign of Cancer in 1947 and died under the burden of the homonymous disease in 2022. Yet, if philosophical systems could be characterized with zodiacal terms, Latourianism would be Gemini. This might sound strange, since the French philosopher did the best job so far in breaking down the distinctions between making and finding, nature and history, subject and object, mind and body, language and being, and so on. Bruno energetically fought dualist thinking and defended metaphysical pluralism with both humour and carefulness. Even though

he (the man) had the personality traits of Cancer, Latourianism (the system) actually incarnates the attributes of Gemini: social skills, versatility, quick wit and, above all, a dichotomic nature. If we pay attention to the conceptual arsenal mobilized to counteract dualism, we would soon discover that those very concepts imply polarity. See, for instance, the double-faced Janus of *Science in Action*, the obsession with symmetry of *We Have Never Been Modern* and the couplet Actor-Network in *Reassembling the Social*. Latourianism has been critiqued for abolishing the concept/phenomenon distinction.[1] Those remarks are misleading, since Bruno often explained that he did not aspire for purism – or, as he once put it, his work «in empirical philosophy [allows us to] count beyond two, and even beyond three...».[2] Still, it remains true that the French philosopher was «fond of operating with dialectical contradictions [...] and constructing "third" concepts that attempt to overcome or supersede the duality».[3] Hence, our previous astrological gimmick will serve us as a transversal figure to reflect upon how Latourianism, having gazed long into the abyss of dichotomous thinking, became an ambiguous research program itself.

Others have accused the French philosopher of being devious when his ideas are put under scrutiny.[4] But besides Bruno's rhetorical tactics, what intrigues us is the inevitable trickiness of Latourianism. It is impossible to properly evaluate this exorbitant philosophical project, which embraces motley themes such as ecology, politics, arts, etc.. Thus, we will focus on the underexamined tension between Latourianism and the social sciences. Certainly, there are numerous articles professing the importance of Actor-Network Theory (hereafter ANT) for international relations, architecture, media studies, management, and so forth. However, beyond the reiteration of ANT's provocations, there has been little development of the epistemological challenges to sociology in the wider context of Bruno's oeuvre. With the model of Gemini in mind, we will argue that Latouranism has oscillated between: 1) an attempt to render sociology more scientific by adopting the methods and rationale of natural sciences; and 2) a renunciation of scientism, steering the social sciences to

[1] Ray BRASSIER, *Concepts and Objects*, in L. BRYANT – N. SRNICEK – G. HARMAN (eds.), *The Speculative Turn*, Re.press, 2011, p. 53.
[2] Bruno LATOUR, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 18.
[3] Yrjö ENGERSTRÖM, *Interobjectivity, Ideality, and Dialectics*, "Mind, Culture, and Activity", 3, 4, 1996, pp. 264.
[4] Henning SCHMIDGEN, *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, Fordham University Press, 2015, p. 111.

engage with contemporary arts and literary studies. To be sure, both lines had many intersecting points throughout Bruno's relentless empirical research. Thus, it remains unclear which side has the last word. Funny enough, seeking to dissolve dichotomies, Latourianism became a machine that produces novel ones alongside new strategies for joyfully dwelling in them.

Albeit the title chosen for this essay hints to a somewhat coherent proposal for epistemological debates about the social sciences, we disclaim that we have none to offer. Our intent is not to extract from Bruno's texts a program of research, even if Latourianism itself often employs such a prose. Neither we wish to provide a critical analysis of this philosophical system, invariably arriving to the conclusion that it failed to deliver the cure for the diagnosed problems. Is that even a real possibility? We have two more modest goals at sight. First, to draw attention to some of Bruno's theses which usually get overlooked by his writings on major topics such as modernity, technoscience and ecology. Second, to indicate that those ideas are fragmentary, underdeveloped and even contradictory in many instances. Latourianism, like Dante's inferno, should come with the warning "abandon all hope, ye who enter here"; not due to being doomed to failure, but rather because longing for a structured project, tightly built out from sharp full-blown arguments, might be dangerous. Therefore, we have arranged this essay in four sections, which could be read as quasi-autonomous comments on the lights and shadows of Bruno's contributions to the epistemology of the social sciences, trying to maintain a chronological – rather than thematic – order. Section 1 will expound the way Latourianism made visible the inner fissures of sociology and profited from them while tailoring an alternative perspective. Section 2 will review Bruno's effort to find a secure path to a science, which started with his early encounter with semiotics and eventually resulted in the birth of Digital Humanities (DH hereafter). Then, section 3 will revisit the (in)famous critique of critique advanced by Bruno by the turn of the century. Beyond the dubious portrayal of critical theory advanced by the French philosopher, what interests us is his transit from an iconoclastic sociology towards a praxis invested in the articulation of bodies and sensitivities. Finally, section 4 will explore the cognitive and methodological implications of textuality under the light of the ontological pluralism of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (AIME hereafter). Ultimately, we seek to appeal to social scientists themselves. Contrary to its ethereal appearance, epistemology can – and maybe should – be seen as a practical issue involving affects, political struggles, (un)stable collective

agencies and different modes of cognition. Certainly, it would be unwise to leave these themes unattended.

2. Fracturing Sociologies

Bruno was a *sui generis* researcher who often felt at odds with his colleagues in sociology of science. While the latter were intrigued by Kuhn and Wittgenstein, the former was interested in Greimas' semiotics and Bultmann's theology. And while the latter were trained in reflexivity and bibliometrics, the former was involved in laboratory ethnographies and controversy cartographies. At its dawn, STS was a booming discipline short of discipline struggling for institutional autonomy (curricula, journals, congresses, ecc.) and clashing with critical theory.[5] Two remarks are in order: 1) even thought *Laboratory Life* was first read as a quasi-marxist treatise insofar it rendered visible the neglected work of technicians, soon enough Bruno took distance from this tradition;[6] and 2) despite the abundance of references to French bibliography in Bruno's writings, his ideas frequently diverged from those of his countrymen Bourdieu and Baudrillard. Briefly put, Bruno had to craft another sociological lineage for himself. Interviewed by Blok and Elsen, he said that «[Garfinkel and Tarde] are the two pillars of my very limited sociological education».[7] The fascination with ethnomethodology came directly from STS pioneer Myke Lynch. The acquaintance with Tarde came more obliquely through Serres' and Deleuze's reinterpretation of Leibniz. Additionally, Bruno made the most from sideline theories such as Whitehead's metaphysics, Dewey's political philosophy and Péguy's biblical exegesis. Indeed, the French philosopher recombined hybrid resources, attuning an idiosyncratic conception of the social sciences.

ANT's official narrative states that, after showing that "Nature" (capital N) is constructed, it was necessary to do the same with "Society" (capital S). Social realism is as treacherous as naturalism. Against Durkheim, Marx and other structuralist sociologists, Bruno employed the insights gained from Garfinkel and Tarde to redefine

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[5] Geof BOWKER – Bruno LATOUR, *A Booming Discipline Short of Discipline: (Social) Studies of Science in France*, "Social Studies of Science", 17, 4, 1987, p. 731.

[6] Bruno LATOUR – Steve WOOLGAR, *Laboratory Life* (2nd ed), Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 277.

[7] Anders BLOK – Torben E. JENSEN, *Bruno Latour. Hybrid thoughts in a hybrid world*, Routledge, 2011, p. 161.

the ontological qualities of the social. Instead of offering social explanations of science, one ought to explain society through the analysis of technoscientific networks. Or, in a different parlance, rather than treating social facts as things, one must treat things as participants of the social fabric.[8] Let us stop to note that, even if Bruno often ridiculed dialectics for its «complex acrobatic figures»,[9] he also indulged in this kind of inversions and oppositions. This rhetoric style served ANT to sustain the claim that the social sciences have repeatedly failed to appreciate the role of non-humans – i.e., objects, technical assemblages, material culture – in the fabrication and stabilization of the collective order. It is known that ANT's predilection for highly complex artifacts has given way to accusations of technocratic discourse.[10] Still, one must remember that Bruno and his allies also took inspiration from mundane tools of everyday people and primates. Unsurprisingly, this challenge to conventional sociology was not well received within STS quarters – let alone outside the field! Bruno's debates in the science wars, as well as the shortcomings of social constructionism, have been discussed in detail somewhere else.[11] We shall retain the fact that, by disavowing social realism, Bruno found a crack in conventional sociology to nurture a rather niche theory of his own.

Consider also that other STS researchers, foreign to ANT, have faced analogous difficulties with sociologism. Kreimer points out that, similar to initial historians of science, first generations of STS scholars had a strong background in natural sciences and engineering. This prior training made them more sensitive to technoscientific networks than authors like Merton or Manheim. Unfortunately, these scientists-turned-sociologists soon met the uncharitable "two culture" split described by Snow. To the eyes of humanists, people in STS were naturalists, (naive) rationalists and technophiles.[12] There was some truth to it, since their research was taking place in the heart of modern institutions (laboratories, factories, nuclear plants, hospitals, ecc.) and had no particular interest in immaterial phenomena such as beliefs, signifiers and power dynamics. Even if ANT and other STS subprograms called into question the narrative

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[8] Bruno LATOUR, *Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social*, in P. JOYCE (ed.), *The Social in Question*, Routledge, 2002, p. 120.
[9] ID., *We Have Never Been Modern*, Havard University Press, 1993, p. 55.
[10] Anna KEZYWOSZYNSKA, *What Role for the Sciences in Anthropocene Politics? From Latour's Sensing Loops to Arendt's Common Sense*, "Theory & Event", 29, 1, 2026, p. 192.
[11] Steve FULLER, *Is STS Truly Revolutionary or Merely Revolting?*, "Science Studies", 18, 1, 2005, p. 80.
[12] Pablo KREIMER, *An Unrequited Love*, "Revue d'anthropologie des connaissances", 11, 2, 2017.

of the Great Division between the allegedly civilized West and the savage Others, the lack of a common vocabulary with other social scientists led to isolation. Casper draws a similar conclusion from her autobiographical account. First trained in medical sociology, she then became acquainted with STS. Due to the very transversality of material-semiotic networks, STS had to become both a fluid set of theories and a malleable research community. Often, this plasticity went against the tides of heavily disciplined departments of sociology, history and anthropology.[13] Interestingly, this *vis-à-vis* between STS and the social sciences foregrounds the dreadful question about the epistemic status of the latter and the startling indifference of the former regarding this issue. As Alexandrova and Kusch indicate, several answers have been given to this puzzle without any conclusive result.[14] They also suggest that STS scholars seek to dissolve the boundaries between nature and culture, sciences and humanities, ecc.[15] Against this view, we maintain that Latourianism is an enterprise to re-specify the epistemology of the social sciences – even if it does not constitute a definitive answer either.

Indeed, there is an epistemic ambivalence ruling over the relationship between STS and social sciences. On the one hand, in a couple of articles Bruno construed STS as a «minuscule subfield of sociology»,[16] specially concerned with the material culture of technoscience and quite wary of the shortcomings of conventional social theories in grasping such phenomena. By assuming this position, the French philosopher claimed that STS could make significant contributions regarding the conceptualization of non-human agency and promoting diplomatic exchanges with the hard sciences. And, admittedly, STS notions like "consensus formation" or "spokesperson" have effectively allured some political scientists.[17] But on the other hand, lately STS became a severe criterion to demarcate between old-fashioned sociologists still entertaining outdated

[13] Monica CASPER, *But Is It Sociology?*, "Engaging Science, Technology, and Society", 2, 2016, p. 210.
[14] Anna ALEXANDROVA – Martin KUSCH, *Why do we argue about the specialness of the social sciences?*, "Studies in History and Philosophy of Science", 115, 2026, p. 2.
[15] *Ivi*, p. 6.
[16] Bruno LATOUR, *When things strike back: a possible contribution of science studies to the social sciences*, "British Journal of Sociology", 51, 1, 2000, p. 107.
[17] ID., *The Impact of Science Studies on Political Philosophy*, "Science, Technology, & Human Values", 16, 1, 1991, p. 9; and ID., *Pour un dialogue entre science politique et science studies*, "Revue française de science politique", 58, 4, 2008, p. 673.

concepts and a new generation of researchers sensitive to nonhuman agency. Interviewed by Mazanderani, Bruno said: «speaking to a social scientist who has not been [STS] infected is completely useless [...] science studies has become a shibboleth for innovative people who are trying to break out of the scientistic mold in any field».[18] Almost in a satirical plot twist, STS moved from its premier position of epistemic relativism – the vile "everything goes" that Kuhn and Feyerabend were said to support – to a renovated normativity that did not easily fit with the dicta of conventional sociology and critical theory. This renewed normativity did not only served to discriminate between backwards and innovative research, but it also became a utensil for expressing disciplinary disparagement. In the same interview, Bruno did not hesitate to claim «[STS] requires very different skills from the ones which have been honed around the notion of epistemology of the social sciences, which is probably the emptiest field ever».[19] In the same line, he once provocatively declared that «all was well with the social sciences except for two tiny words: "social" and "sciences"»;[20] or, in another occasion, that «social sciences are part of the problem, not of the solution».[21]

Perhaps an outline of how Latourianism relates to its neighbor disciplines would be useful. Earlier we described ANT as a subprogram within STS. We also pinpointed Bruno's claims that STS was a subfield of the social sciences. Yet both statements are erroneous, mainly due to the underlying metaphors of "program" as systematic research and "field" as territory. It would be more precise to qualify ANT as a challenge to social theory. Actually, ANT is a «negative contribution»[22] since it does not offer explicit guidelines aside from the warnings of not falling into naturalism or sociologism. This type of linkage – interference, rather than intersection – is reminiscent of the bizarre ties between ethnomethodology and conventional sociology. And, again, the French philosopher took advantage of this tension. He once employed the vocabulary of ethnomethodology to describe STS as a whole: «[f]or me, STS has always been very broad [...] everywhere where science is not the dominant language but that which is

[18] Fadhila MAZANDERANI – Bruno LATOUR, *The Whole World is Becoming Science Studies*, "Engaging Science, Technology, and Society", 4, 2018, p. 286.
[19] *Ivi*, p. 293.
[20] Bruno LATOUR, *When things strike back: a possible contribution of science studies to the social sciences*, p. 107.
[21] ID., *The Politics of Explanation: an Alternative*, in S. WOOLGAR (ed.), *Knowledge and Reflexivity*, Sage, 1988, p. 161.
[22] ID., *On Recalling Ant*, "The Sociological Review", 47, 1, 1999, p. 19.

being studied – not the resource, but the topic – STS expanded».[23] This image echoing a novel rationale is more attuned with Kreimer's and Casper's testimony and it evidently differs from the "subfield" rhetoric. To put it another way, this time using Serres' argot, we might say that sociology behaves as a solid, while STS operates through viscosity and fluctuations.[24] The former is embedded in rigid academic institutions, while the latter moves fluidly between worksites and research communities.

And this is the very crux of the matter. STS scholars akin to analytic philosophy tried to understand how science fitted within society and how STS fitted in sociology, as if they were discrete classes containing smaller, equally discrete, objects. On the contrary, ANT demonstrated that once an actor – whereas it is a scientist, substance, concept or artefact – is examined, a network of fuzzy agencies would invariably unfold. When STS is inspired by Kuhn and Wittgenstein, no matter the proximity with epistemic relativism, it remains within the logic of set theory. But when STS follows the trails of semiotics and ethnomethodology, it becomes more interested in how entities gain stability through circulation. In this sense, Lynch once joked that «ANT should really be called actant-rhizome ontology».[25] Besides the labeling, we emphasize the contrast between the logic of set theories and the logic of heterogeneity in its manifold shades – Leibniz' monadology, Deleuze's notions of difference and repetition, Serres' topology and Tarde's interpsychology. This is why, even if one stumbles sometimes with the term "network" in Collins' writings,[26] it is not equivalent to the "network" proposed by ANT. Likewise, albeit Bruno and his colleagues often spoke of "black boxes", they were not alluding to units or regions with sharp boundaries.[27] It is vain to define the relationship between STS and social sciences in taxonomic terms, precisely because neither of these are actually disciplined communities, bounded to a fixed field nor stable sets of discrete elements.

We are prone to say that Latourianism loosely overlaps with STS, ANT, AIME and DH. Despite the fact that these terms are often used exchangeably, we must insist that the very core of Latourianism – namely, the principle of irreduction – dictates that a

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[23] MAZANDERANI – LATOUR, *The Whole World is Becoming Science Studies*, p. 286.
[24] Michel SERRES – Bruno LATOUR, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 107.
[25] LATOUR, *On Recalling Ant*, p. 19.
[26] Harry COLLINS, *Changing Order*, Sage, 1985, p. 129.
[27] Annemarie MOL – John LAW, *Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology*, "Social Studies of Science", 24, 4, 1994, p,659.

complete identity between two or more entities is impossible. Of course there are many common elements covered by these umbrella categories, but it would be deceiving to exhaustively track down the convergences and divergences between them – precisely because the logic of heterogeneity reigns over Latourianism. Besides, one might be tempted to better order Latourianism according to its successive stages. Bruno started off with theology and soon enough he developed some incisive anthropological concerns after his military service in Ivory Coast. Then he encountered semiotics via Paolo Fabbri and was introduced to sociology of sciences by Steve Woolgar. ANT as a somewhat consistent program of research was developed only later, thanks to the collaboration with Callon, Law, Hennion and Akrich. After a decade or so, ANT's defiance to sociologism gave way to heated debates with other STS authors and then to the scandalous science wars. As a result, the French philosopher took some distance from STS and started to engage with DH. This coincided with his departure form the École de Mines and his entry into Sciences Po. Also, through the influence of Stengers, he began to dive deep in the pluralist ontologies of Whitehead, James and Souriau. This helped him to explore domains other than science and technology, which ultimately lead him to the AIME massive project.[28] Roughly, one could identify "Latourianism" with the entire trajectory of Bruno's career. But, strictly speaking, under the logic of monadology the «whole is always smaller than its parts».[29] Like fractals, we can find more complexity in the elements than in the aggregates if we keep on specifying the particular attributes of each monad.

Still, we are not concerned with a global comprehension of Latourianism nor with an inquiry about the correlations between ANT, DH and AIME – that is, questions such as "are they successive stages of a same project" or "are they incommensurable perspectives?" Instead, we are intrigued in how, by constantly (un)folding different conceptual resources, Latourianism entertained a dual nature in spite of being a sworn enemy of dichotomous thinking. We have chosen the parts of Latourianism related to the epistemology of social sciences, not only because of the importance of the theme, but also because it is an instance where this ironical reversal is clearly seen. As we said, Bruno anchored himself in his rather vague definition of STS to discriminate between old-fashioned and innovative research in social sciences. This tension, however, was

[28] Bruno LATOUR, *Coming out as a philosopher*, "Social Studies of Science", 40, 4, 2010, pp. 599-608.
[29] Bruno LATOUR ET AL., *The whole is always smaller than its parts – a digital test of Gabriel Tardes' monads*, "British Journal of Sociology", 63, 4, 2012, pp. 591.

sustained rather than resolved throughout his writings. This is why, as we shall explore in the next sections, Latourianism simultaneously attempted to render sociology more scientific through DH and to detach it from scientism in the guise of critique. Now you see why we stick to the Gemini archetype to navigate these rough seas?

3. Scientificity through Digitalization

When examining the uncomfortable relationship between STS and the social sciences, one can understand that the 'epistemological' side of the conflict is never too detached from other 'social' aspects according to the antiquated division between internal and external history of science.[30] In a nutshell, the main lesson from STS is that "science" and "society" always pollute each other. When self-applying this dictum, trying to avoid what has been called "ontological gerrymandering",[31] one notes that discussions about nonhuman agency and social realism do not take place in a void isolated from the institutional milieu that support the development of any discipline. How else could they happen? This formulation of the problem led to the belief that STS – as a subfield – could make contributions to the whole set of the social sciences, via a smooth integration of specialized literature, curricula, interdisciplinary research, prizes, ecc. Still, if STS are positioned as a critique of the natural sciences, it would be only fair – not to say desirable – that it examined the flaws of the social sciences as well. And one might also ask what can be done to amend those defects. If the notion of "epistemology of the social sciences" is truly shallow, could Latourianism fill it? – and, even most importantly, in which way would this transform the social sciences regarding its scientificity and its sociability? In this section we will review how, in pursuing this thread, Latourianism incidentally became entangled with the emerging field of DH.

We insinuated above that the transit from epistemic relativism to a renewed demarcationism was a foreseeable development of STS as a whole research program. In its infancy, STS launched a campaign to demystify "Science" (singular, capital S). This sparked a conflict with (post)positivist epistemologists – the ones responsible for

[30] Bruno LATOUR, *Give Me a Laboratory and I will Rise the World*, in K. KNORR-CETINA & M. MULKAY (eds.), *Science Observed*, Sage, 1983, p. 143.
[31] Steve WOOLGAR – Dorothy PAWLUCH, *Ontological Gerrymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations*, "Social Problems", 32, 3, 1985, p. 216.

the idealized image of science as immaculately rational in the first place. While epistemologists ran in circles around the rules of method and other logical gimmicks, STS embarked on the painstaking task of studying the quotidian life of scientists in action. Certainly, it was fairly easy to dismiss the conceptual constructions of the former with the empirically informed picture of the latter. But during this battle, STS did not dissolve the problem of scientific demarcation but merely re-formulated it. The new conjured image was something like: «Their hopelessly old-fashioned asymmetrical realist dogma versus Our genuinely enlightened symmetrical constructivist revelations».[32] So much for epistemic relativism when a program – STS or any other – resorts to the presumed objectivity of empirical research – taken at face value – to disavow *in advance* the supposed theoretical illusions of its opponents. In light of this, Latourianism remains congruent with the historical trajectory of STS. What perhaps remains distinctive is ANT's willingness to treat evenhandedly the nature/culture spectrum. Then, if the "sciences" depicted by STS are truer than the "Science" promoted by epistemology, Latourianism sought to replace the chimerical notion of "Society" with a factual notion of "collectives". But is it really feasible for Latourianism to push social sciences towards a sounder epistemological ground without falling into the same asymmetries it fiercely condemned?

It is all right to be vocal about the significance of nonhuman agency and the dangers of social realism. Alas, it was still unclear what procedures social scientists should follow in the project of better – i.e., more realistically – describing collective life. In this situation, ANT insofar a "negative contribution" might not be the best guide for the job. By redefining the social as a circulating property distributed among manifold actants, ANT did a good job itemizing the kind of associations but it left unspecified the relating elements. This negativity was eventually complemented with the gargantuan metaphysics of AIME (more below). But right now we should go back to a previous stage in Bruno's career to appraise that the quest to scientisize sociology was present from the beginning of Latourianism. If we return to *Laboratory Life* and *Science in Action*, we find two pivotal ideas often overlooked by ANT's feverish followers. First, scientists construct their facts through the massive production and refinement of inscriptions associated with the studied phenomena, instruments,

[32] Barbara H. SMITH, *Microdynamics of incommensurability*, in D. AERTS – J. BROEKAERT – E. MATHIJS (eds.), *Einstein Meets Magritte*, VUB University Press, 1999, p. 62.

measurement units, ecc. Second, facts afterwards gain objectivity if scientists recruit a network large enough to silence any possible dissenter. Years before ANT's stubborn redistribution of agency among humans and nonhumans, Latourianism was already advancing an empirically informed description of scientific practice based on the mutually reinforcing chains of inscriptions and allies.[33] The chief concept of «immutable mobiles» summarizes this model of science based on writing and antagonism.[34] (Do you scent again the flirting with dialectic acrobatics?) In any case, for Bruno, this perspective based on textuality and controversies seemed to be the touchstone for a more scientific sociology.

In this regard, Bruno practiced what he preached. STS authors frequently complained that the French philosopher «indulged in too many Macintosh doodles» and put distracting graphs in his texts.[35] But this was not a caprice. As Harman jeers, «read a good popular work on science, then read an article by Bruno Latour and another by a mainstream analytic philosopher, and you will find that it is Latour who reminds you more of the scientists».[36] And, the argument goes, these tactical (re)arrangements of inscriptions have an equivalent role in natural and social sciences. In Bruno's words:

> There is no detectable difference between natural and social science, as far as the obsession for graphism is concerned. If scientists were looking at nature, at economies, at stars, at organs, they would not see anything. [...] Scientists start seeing something once they stop looking at nature and look exclusively and obsessively at prints and flat inscriptions.[37]

It is a truism that scientific practice cannot happen without bibliographic resources – but this is still a consequential point. Samples collected, equipment bought, calculations done, all those efforts would be vain if there was not a limpid written account of the "scientific discovery". The same goes for fieldwork, interviews, surveys,

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[33] Jérôme D. PONTILLE, *What did we forget about ANT's roots in anthropology of writing?*, in A. BLOK – I. FARÍAS – C. ROBERTS (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory*, Routledge, 2020, p. 101.

[34] Bruno LATOUR, *Science in Action*, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 227.

[35] ID., *For David Bloor... and Beyond: A Reply to David Bloor's 'Anti-Latour'*, "Studies in History and Philosophy of Science", 30, 1, 1999, p. 115.

[36] Graham HARMAN, *Prince of Networks. Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Re.press, 2011, p. 120.

[37] Bruno LATOUR, *Drawing Things Together*, in M. LYNCH – S. WOOLGAR (eds.), *Representation in Scientific Practice*, MIT Press, 1990, p. 39.

archive explorations and all the other procedures apparently distinctive of the social sciences – worthless if they are not put in a final document. This insight led the French philosopher to express:

> The text, in our discipline [sociology], is not a nice story. Rather, it's the functional equivalent of a laboratory. It's a place for trials, experiments, and simulations. Depending on what happens in it, there is or there is not an actor and there is or there is not a network being traced. And that depends entirely on the precise ways in which it is written – and every single new topic requires a new way to be handled by a text.[38]

In section 4, we shall continue with this intimate relationship between textuality and epistemology or, more precisely put, the intrinsic cognitive advantages of writing practices.

But then, one might ask, what is the difference between natural and social sciences according to Latourianism? More interesting is the subtext of this question, which could be phrased like this: "why, if both domains operate through Machiavellian literacy, do we still have the impression that natural sciences are more objective than social ones?" The answer given by Bruno, in his signature ANT style, is that such distinction is not of qualitative nature but rather a gradient of quantitative scale. Yes, there is a difference between natural and social sciences, but not the one inherited from Dilthey – i.e., determinism vs hermeneutics. When focused on the scope of quantification, we might see that natural sciences have devised finer methods to classify and preserve stacks of data, while social sciences are still slowly collecting information about their subject matter. In short, natural sciences are of an industrial dimension, while social sciences remain at an artisan level. Of course, we can think of the vast museums and labyrinth tax files, the pride of archaeologists and economists who do not look nothing like the bricoleur ethnographer or social worker. Here, like in many other cases, Bruno exaggerated in order to advance his arguments. Still, when contrasting the number of specialized journals or the amount of money devoted to R&D, one must admit that there is a marked difference between the scale of natural and social sciences. Then, how to equalize this disparity? The French philosopher had already made good use of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology to dwell in the minutiae of practical action, but later he resorted to Tarde's inter-psychology to transform sociology's craftsmanship into a

[38] ID., *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 149.

sizable enterprise. And for this journey, Bruno had at his disposal something that the pioneers of sociology could never dream of: digitalization.

In two quasi-divulgative papers praising DH, we find the startlingly simple idea that larger sets of data translate to greater scientificity. The novelties of digitalization might be, to borrow the (in)famous Kantian adagio, "the secure path for a science". In the first article, Bruno rehearsed the argument of the difference in scale, claiming that the divide between the social and the psychological was a dead end, an artifice created by the asymmetry between various types of traceability. Natural sciences have large arrays of data; social sciences deal with a lesser amount of them; and psychology is doomed to ephemeral cues about the human soul. But digitalization might reverse the situation: «[t]he consequences for the social sciences will be enormous: they can finally have access to masses of data that are of the same order of magnitude as that of their older sisters, the natural sciences».[39] Similarly, in the second text, Bruno and his collaborators at the *Science Po médialab* claimed that digitalization, by making traceability and access to information less costly than ever before, could help overcoming the micro/macro and quanti/quali dichotomies in the social sciences. DH researchers could finally navigate the varied topography of collective life without imposing any sort of discontinuity between data, methods and theory. The French philosopher even plead «[t]he time is now to develop the formal techniques necessary to unfold the origami of collective existence and this should be the aim of the renewed alliance between the social and natural sciences».[40] These audacious prepositions are not out of place in the overall rhetoric of Latourianism; but a more substantial treatment of these ideas can be found elsewhere.[41] Suffice it to say that, when combined with the epistemic assets of graphism, DH seemed to fit perfectly in the project of a more scientific sociology.

Yet, this embrace of digitalization is not an innocent gesture by any means. Some obvious dangers include the ubiquity of surveillance capitalism and the mirages of Dataism. Also, it strikes as odd Bruno's advocacy for quantitative sociology, given his continuous rejection of formalism and other mathematical dogma haunting the empirical sciences. And lastly, as Smith rightly notes, once DH get lured by the

[39] ID., *Beware, your imagination leaves digital traces*, "Times Higher Literary Supplement", 2007 (accessed March 30th, 2026) www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/P-129-THES-GB.pdf
[40] Tomasso VENTURINI – Pablo JENSEN – Bruno LATOUR, *Fill in the Gap: A New Alliance for Social and Natural Sciences*, "Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation", 18, 2, 2015.
[41] LATOUR ET AL., *The whole is always smaller than its parts,* pp. 590-615.

readiness of massive datasets, it risks abandoning the subtleties of its constructivist epistemology and falling back into positivism.[42] Interestingly for our purposes, at this juncture we can examine how Latourianism's Gemini personality operates. On the one hand, the thematic division implied in Snow's "two culture split" is subsidiary of what Whitehead used to call the bifurcation of nature.[43] While natural sciences dealt only with quantified primary properties, social sciences were constrained to the qualitative secondary qualities. DH – or "scientific humanities" as Bruno once tried to name them[44] – offered a possible way to bridge this hiatus. On the other hand, Bruno and his *Science Po médialab* colleagues reckoned that this perspective worked smoothly in theory, but not in practice. Digital traces are not the same as data in the same way as inscriptions are not immediately meaningful prepositions. ANT's tenet "there is no *in*formation, but only *trans*formation" also applies to virtuality. Additionally, digital researchers must be aware that data is aligned to the interests of non-scientist actors – marketing companies, government agencies, ecc. – who first compiled it.[45] In sum, DH is a double-edged sword and it demands the radical cautiousness – or cautious radicalness, if you may – that should be applied to our overall relationship with technology.

Before proceeding, we wish to alert about some potential troubles in this quest for scientificity and to qualify some of Bruno's bold claims in this line of thought. A few years ago, Kuztenov lamented that STS, even if having successfully changed the modus operandi of the social sciences, was never concerned with describing their research practices.[46] True, STS started to inquire about economics and health sciences by the turn of the century, but it has left undescribed the activities of less pompous disciplines like sociology, history or psychology. But the peculiar trajectory of Latourianism tells another story. Interested in expanding ANT to the humanities, Bruno observed Tobie

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[42] Barbara H. SMITH, *What Was "Close Reading"? A Century of Method in Literary Studies*, "Minnesota Review", 87, 2016, p. 68.
[43] Michael WITMORE, *Latour, the Digital Humanities, and the Divided Kingdom of Knowledge*, "New Literary History", 47, 2/3, 2016, p. 353.
[44] Bruno LATOUR, *Cogitamus*, La Découverte, 2010, p. 25.
[45] Tomasso VENTURINI ET AL., *An unexpected journey: A few lessons from sciences Po médialab's experience*, "Big Data & Society", 4, 2, 2017.
[46] Andrei KUZTENOV, *Changed but Undescribed? What STS Could Say on the Research Practices of Social Sciences*, "EASST Review", 38, 1, 2019.

Nathan's ethnopsychiatric practice[47] – that being a group therapy with immigrants, a device with salient multicultural sensitivities and a strong skepticism to classic psychoanalysis. Fair enough, Bruno's ethnography in this case was significantly shorter than his prior internship at the Salk Institute. More revealing, however, is the fact that he made no allusion to graphism, alliance formation or even technical mediation in his report of this exotic therapy. Instead, we find a large parade including fabricated divinities, liquified subjectivities, institution rites, attachments, besetting fears and healing gestures. Actually, in this lesser known work one might find the first signs of the pluralist metaphysics to be developed later in AIME. After many years invested in the natural sciences, Latourianism started to wide its scope and, in doing so, it became somewhat indifferent about the issues of demarcationism and textuality as the quintessential trait of scientific research. Perhaps the touchstone of Machiavellian literacy was not suitable for social sciences after all.

Even more interestingly, Nathan himself gave a different account of the role of books in his consulting room. Rather than refining diagrams and gathering networks, they were sources of invention of concepts, metaphors, divination symbols, ecc.[48] Books as material support were there but their value did not lie in its containment of meaningful inscriptions that were embedded in bibliographical chains. Instead, the creative labor observed in how therapists manipulate technical terms and sensitive words resembles the conceptual work of other theoretical disciplines or even literature and the arts. Jensen, another STS scholar who also conducted a brief fieldwork with a group of educational psychologists, arrived at a similar conclusion. Bibliographic resources and conceptual lingo compiled in the laboratory, far from being part of a scientific-industrial complex, were indicators of the team's commitments with both a paradigm and a community of informants.[49] These lessons extracted from empirical research allow us to rectify the picture offered by Bruno in his early writings about the seamlessness of natural and social sciences regarding the role of inscriptions and alliances and, furthermore, his later unwarranted statements about the natural continuity of sociology

[47] Bruno LATOUR, *Sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, La Découverte, 2009, p. 79.
[48] Tobie NATHAN, *The immigrant, his shrink, his judge, his social worker, and other representatives of the Occult*, "Sites: The Journal of Twentieth-Century Contemporary French Studies", 1, 1, 1997, p. 311.
[49] Torben E. JENSEN, *Exploring the knowledge practices of psychology: Reflections on a field study*, "Theory & Psychology", 29, 4, 2019, p. 11.

and psychology in respect to traceability. Yes, the operations of textuality and the struggle to recruit supporters are pivotal elements present in any scientific discipline. Still, literacy and polemics have many shades and functions, which vary according to the specificity of the discipline in question. Therefore, it would be advisable to take with a pinch of salt the enthusiastic claims about the secure path of a science opened by DH.

4. Transforming the *Ethos* of Critique

Earlier, we announced a mismatch between Latourianism and critical theory. The latter has long contended that neutrality is a naive goal, since description always entails prescription and because knowledge is always entangled in power games. The former, for its part, has asserted that thick descriptions of sociotechnical networks formulated in the actants' autochthonous vocabulary are pivotal to avoiding sociologism. This disagreement is simultaneously political and epistemological. For critical theory, to provide an explanation amounts to de-naturalizing the phenomenon in question and revealing the hidden forces acting behind the scenes like a master puppeteer. Recent cliché examples come to mind: the 9/11 attacks were planned by the Bush administration to justify military interventions in Iraq, accounts in social media are free because the real commodity is the user's data, COVID-19 was fabricated by Big Pharma to sell vaccines, ecc. In short, for critical theory, the ultimate goal is to denounce the occult plans of the powerful to emancipate ourselves from them. It is well-known that Latourianism took distance from the stale spirit of critique in an unpredictable movement that separated him from the group of left-wing intellectuals. Bruno repelled the narrative that the social fabric is controlled at a distance by some mysteriously strong actors who alienate the gullible masses. Turning "critique" into a topic of inquiry rather than a resource, he took the chance to study how conspiracy theories circulate, denoting the way everyday actors test hypotheses about their own agency.[50] This put Bruno far away from conventional sociologists – in both senses of "classic" and "concerned with the explanatory forces of social conventions" – and closer to contemporary authors such as John Urry, Luc Boltanski or Laurent

[50] Bruno LATOUR, *Factures/Fractures: From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment*, "Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics", 36, 1999, p. 29.

Thévenot.[51] In what follows, we shall ponder the consequences of this relinquishing of critique for the epistemology of social sciences.

Even though the term "post-critical" was coined by Michael Polanyi, we should remember that Bruno was relatively foreign to analytic philosophy. It was Michel Serres, an anomaly in the contemporary French thought, who showed him the possibility of retaining the liveliness of the Enlightenment without the corrosiveness of critique.[52] Actually, the uneasiness with critique goes back to the scandalous change of subtitle in the second edition of *Laboratory Life*, when the «social» was dropped out of the «construction of scientific facts».[53] Bruno argued that critique should be «associated with more, not with less, with multiplication, not subtraction»; meaning that social explanations and their tendency to dismiss the practical role of nonhumans were unfit for the quest of describing the manufacturing and maintenance of collective life.[54] The difference between "social constructionism" and "constructivism *tout court*" has been explicated time and again.[55] Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that, indeed, social explanations recurs way too quickly to metaphors of "facade", "projection screen" or, in the best cases, "inert tools" – notions that cannot properly grasp the surprising effects of nonhuman agency. To counteract those deficiencies of critique, Bruno advanced some efforts to recast the attitude of "critical distance" into "critical proximity". In this latter sense, researchers get close enough to increase the temperature – i.e., the "criticity", in physical terminology – of the studied phenomena.[56] However, in later years the French philosopher adopted the term "composition" due to some advantages: 1) it had no historical relationship with the abuses of social constructionism, the trigger of the science wars; 2) it resonated with "compost" and the ecological mindset; 3) it had a semantic proximity with art, sensitivity and affects; and 4) it allowed the formulation of the normative question «was it well or badly composed?».[57] In a sense, the dismissal

[51] I thank Andrey Kuztenov, who pointed out to me in a personal communication the place of STS in the rift between conventional and contemporary social sciences.
[52] Bruno LATOUR, *The Enlightenment Without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy*, in A. PHILLIPS (ed.), *Contemporary French Philosophy, Cambridge University Press*, 1988, p. 85.
[53] LATOUR – WOOLGAR, *Laboratory Life*, p. 281.
[54] Bruno LATOUR, *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern*, "Critical Inquiry", 30, 2, 2004, p. 248.
[55] SMITH, *Microdynamics of incommensurability*, p. 55.
[56] Bruno LATOUR, *Critical Distance or Critical Proximity?*, Unpublished paper, 2005 (accessed March 30th, 2026) http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/P-113-HARAWAY.pdf
[57] ID., *An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto*, "New Literary History", 41, 3, 2010, p. 474.

of critique was the climax of the French philosopher's career, the Gordian knot where many controversial threads met.

Apropos, one must bear in mind that the article "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" was written in the aftermath of the climategate, when critical theory reinforced the distrust in science and served the climate negationists. One might say, and rightly so, that Bruno caricatured critical theory while his real foe was post-modern skepticism. But there are two more tacit elements in critique that must be commented in order to comprehend this seemingly unjustified disdain. First, according to critical theory, to reverse the alienating effects of ideology, social scientist must re-situate a given phenomenon in the drama of social fabric. But to re-historicize a phenomenon often amounts to reveal the hidden interests of actors who act at a distance. To explain this action without incurring again in naturalization, social scientists have overused the notion of context – which was the sociological equivalent to the concept of ether in nineteenth century physics. Teasing, the French philosopher once exclaimed: «[the context] is simply a way of stopping the description [of actors and their connections] when you are tired or too lazy to go on».[58] And secondly, despite its rejection of anything kindred to positivism, critique functions as a demarcation marker for the social sciences in a reminiscent way to the role once played by the scientific method in classic epistemology. Literary critic Rita Felski eloquently put its as follows:

> For many scholars in the humanities, [critique] is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing. Critique just is the exercise of thoughtful intelligence and independence of mind. To refuse critique, by the same token, is to sink into the mire of complacency, credulity, and conservatism. Who would want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical? The negativity of critique is thus transmuted into a halo effect—an aura of rigor and probity that burnishes its dissident stance with a normative glow.[59]

Thus, when critique leads to the hypertrophy of social explanations and it becomes a rigid tool for gatekeeping, perhaps we should stop and ask ourselves if this is not solely the sociological equivalent of (natural) scientism. Latourianism, defender of symmetries and nemesis of mystified 'Science' cannot afford to be critical.

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[58] ID., *Reassembling the Social*, p. 148.

[59] Rita FELSKI, *The Limits of Critique*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 4.

Feminist scholars have expressed discomfort with ANT's militaristic jargon and how it facilitated the reiteration of triumphalist discourses.[60] Somehow, Bruno's abandonment of critique could be seen as derivative of those objections. This displacement also allowed Latourianism to rethink epistemological issues through the lens of situated knowledge; that is, by means of the body and its affectations. Critical thinking is not only problematic when employed as a weapon for crude skepticism, but also due to the feelings aroused by it. In this respect, Bruno's proposal of moving from matters-of-fact to matters-of-concern echoes Sedgwick's seminal work on «paranoid and reparative readings».[61] Indeed, there are still many sociologists who think of themselves as heirs of Voltaire's denunciation ethos and Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. Yet the appetite for debunking usually fosters persecutory fantasies and a generalized distrust, while the willingness to restore broken ties opens the possibility for nourishment. Other feminist scholars have carried on with this transmutation of critique into something more constructive. For instance, Gomart explicitly rejected suspicion and endorsed an attitude of praise when she researched the theories of action used by doctors and patients in a rehab clinic.[62] Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa reworked matters-of-concern into "matters-of-care" to indicate that researchers are not only worried about a given issue, but they are also engaged in the preservation of what they consider valuable.[63] Beyond these ramifications, the lesson to retain is that opening the black-box of critique has revealed the intimate nexus between epistemology and affectivity. Tone, texture, style, emotions and other features usually attributed to aesthetics should also be considered when exploring the construction of knowledge about collective life.

When we spoke of sensitivity towards nonhumans, we meant something greater than the recognition of their agency. When Bruno departed ANT, he adopted artistic means to pursue his project of describing the metaphysical pluralism of modernity. The particularities of other kinds of beings (religious, fictional, moral, ecc.) as well as their corresponding languages demanded a less theoretical rhetoric and a more experiential

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[60] Donna J. HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, "Feminist Studies", 14, 3, 1988, p. 577.
[61] Eve SEDGWICK, *Touching Feeling*, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 123.
[62] Emilie GOMART, *Surprised by Methadone: in Praise of Drug Substitution Treatment in a French Clinic*, "Body & Society", 10, 2/3, 2004, p. 86.
[63] Maria PUIG DE LA BELLACASA, *Matters of Care*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 69.

register. Simply put, academic textuality did not fit the requirements of other – non-scientific at first sight – contemporary matters-of-concern. By the turn of the century, the French philosopher co-curated several exhibitions such as *Iconoclash* and *Making Things Public*, where the entanglements between arts, sciences and politics were rendered visible in ways that technical speech could not. In one of the above-mentioned interviews, Bruno said:

> exhibitions allowed me to change medium, from books to installations. But also to test hypotheses about what it is to treat these [big, difficult] questions of representation in a very literal, lively, expansive, embodied way. [...] The set of passions that we have to cultivate for the next step, after modernism, will be very different from what we know now anyway, so we had better start at some point.[64]

It may be worth stressing that this variation was motivated by epistemological limitations and was not only an artistic caprice or an attempt of science communication – an enterprise often ridiculed by the French philosopher.[65] When interviewed by Emanuele Coccia about the multimedia engagement with ecological matters-of-concern, he explained:

> [B]ecause it is the strangeness of these beings that engages us; their ecological mutation, to put it simply, becomes palpable [...] So as soon as I got involved in this issue, I said to myself: these things are too big, intimate, powerful, painful, for the style, which is still too impoverished, shall we say, so here we have to tame these beings. We are dealing with problems of survival. We have to find ways of grasping these things in their [adequate] dimensionality.[66]

In a protean fashion, critique is adjusted through the cascade of neighbor, more vitalist verbs such as "to concern", "to repair", "to celebrate" and "to curate". This is not only to avoid the pitfalls of skepticism, but mainly to amplify the scope of engaged research in the social sciences in order to properly include ecological, affective and aesthetic beings. And here is a little bit of trivia: curator comes from the Latin *cura*, which means "to take care".

But should we dismiss critical theory entirely? Wouldn't we be throwing the baby out with the bathwater? At times, Bruno's belligerent prose suggests so:

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[64] BLOK – JENSEN, *Bruno Latour. Hybrid thoughts in a hybrid world*, pp. 157-158.
[65] LATOUR, *Cogitamus*, p. 164.
[66] Emanuele COCCIA, *An Interview with Bruno Latour*, "Asymptote", 2021 (accessed March 30th, 2026) https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-bruno-latour/

> What has critique become when Jean Baudrillard claims in a published book that the Twin Towers destroyed themselves under their own weight, so to speak, undermined by the utter nihilism inherent in capitalism itself? [...] What's the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of Pierre Bourdieu? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives.[67]

Of course, partisans of critical theory have protested against these unfair attacks. Butler countered that the French philosopher had an oversimplified understanding of Kant's subjectivism and Hegel's determinate negation, arriving at the false conclusion that critique denies the reality of facts and promotes political apathy.[68] As expected, Bruno eventually modified the tone of his prior statements, albeit without making a full retreat: «what has happened to critique, I think, is the immense decrease in its cost. With a social media and an internet connection, you may criticize everything for almost nothing».[69] The main issue, however, was still climate change. Anchored in the notion of critical proximity and his experience as an art curator, Bruno made a last transfiguration of critique. First, he insisted on the necessity of crafting feedback loops, reflexive devices oriented to enhance the testing and tasting of the matters-of-concern. These *dispositifs* would rebuild the trust in scientific institutions through experiments/exhibitions resulting in learning curves, where the public becomes acquainted with the role of nonhumans in collective life.[70] And secondly, Latourianism indicates that "critical" should not be an adjective for our conceptual repertoire but for the actual space we live in. In the Anthropocene, territories are constantly disputed among parties who cannot even agree on the kind of planet they inhabit. Is "Nature" a bank of limitless resources or not? Is global warming human-made or not? To keep track of these and other controversies, Bruno adopted the notion of "critical zones" to highlight the fragility of life on Earth.[71] We cannot estimate our chances of survival in

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[67] LATOUR, *Why Critique Has Run Out of Steam?*, pp. 228-229.
[68] Judith BUTLER, *The inorganic body in the early Marx: A limit-concept of anthropocentrism*, "Radical Philosophy", 206, 2019, p. 4.
[69] Bruno LATOUR, *Against critique, for critique*, in E. GRAW – C. MENCKE (eds.), *The Value of Critique*, Campus Verlag, 2019, p. 18.
[70] KRZYWOSZYNSKA, *What Role for the Sciences in Anthropocene Politics? From Latour's Sensing Loops to Arendt's Common Sense*, p. 181.
[71] *Ibid.*

the environmental debacle, still we might concur with the invitation to update critique to make it up to the task.

5. Thinking through Writing

We have seen how social realism has failed to articulate the epistemological commitments and research practices of social scientists. After firmly anchoring itself in the notion of inscription, Latourianism faced a crossroads and, faithful to its Gemini spirit, it attempted to explore both paths. One of them was DH and the other one was critique. Both seemed to offer a more solid epistemic ground for social sciences, either by accumulating data and reinforcing alliances or by engaging in hermeneutic exercises with ideological consciousness. Both paths mixed epistemology and politics in different ways, but eventually were proven insufficient for the task at hand. In this final section, we will explore a third path taken by the French philosopher, albeit more intermittently throughout his corpus. Closer to humanities than proper sociology, Bruno wondered about the subtle cognitive abilities implied in writing as a material practice. Regretfully, those qualities are usually eclipsed by the maximalist crusades of Big Data and art exhibitions. In his early stages, Latourianism had already taken advantage of semiotics to analyze the rhetoric of scientific articles with questions such as "how slight changes in syntax might affect credibility?" or "how setting scenarios and characters reinforce the claims about the agency of a phenomenon?"[72] This singular approach led him to posit a parallelism between the writing process of fact and fiction – or, more exactly, to consider "science" as one among many literary genres. Of course, back then, this phrase fueled polemics surrounding social constructivism. But after the dust had settled, Bruno retook this and other related ideas to give them new philosophical depths with his AIME metaphysical matrix. Writing might be, after all, not only the assemblage of inscriptions to persuade potential allies, but the instrument that – rightly calibrated – could illuminate the peculiarities of different kind of beings.

By now it should be clear that Latourianism repudiates any narrative where "Science" is seen as exceptional in respect to other domains – religion, aesthetics, law, ecc. We should avoid misunderstanding the aforementioned literary expeditions as an abdication of the quest for scientific rigor. As anticipated, writing is not only a logistic

[72] Bruno LATOUR – Françoise BASTIDE, *Writing Science – Fact and Fiction*, in M. CALLON – J. LAW – A. RIP (eds.), *Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, p. 52.

aspect of research, but it also entails a set of cognitive deeds. This goes back to the notion of immutable mobiles, first made possible by printing technologies and then playing a major role in the scientific revolution in the form of atlases, handbooks, formulas and other paper tools.[73] Their cognitive components are so well hidden in plain sight that one might easily overlook them. But who hasn't felt a greater sense of understanding when, after dealing with a messy manuscript, finally reads a sharp galley proof? Or who hasn't been grateful for the summaries at the end of a particularly dense chapter? Building upon this insight, Bruno also argued that social sciences should not strive neither for explanations of a naturalist fashion nor the meta-reflexivity prose hallmark of post-structuralism.[74] Following the trail of the humanities, social scientists should not restrict themselves to the dichotomy between fact and fiction, since there exist manifold writing techniques that lead to diverse types of styles of reasoning. Remember, we can always "learn to count beyond two and even three...". Thus, for Latourianism, the epistemology of social sciences should favor style over methodology and self-exemplification over self-reference.[75] Here too, the French philosopher led by example. In his vast corpus of texts, he experimented with different genres and rhetorical devices to better showcase his discussion on the topic at hand. Bruno romped with fables and genealogies, graphs and interview transcripts, dialogues and glossaries, litanies and sermons, ecc. This proliferation of styles was a necessity for the overarching mission of describing the heterogeneous domains of modernity.[76]

Obstinacy in writing is certainly less flamboyant than ANT's odes to nonhuman agency or DH's promises of minute traceability, yet this nexus between cognition and textuality might be the most singular contribution of Latourianism to the perennial debates on the epistemology of social sciences. In a late confessional essay Bruno stated:

> I had the feeling that any consideration [i.e., thought, concept, idea] was abstract as long as it could not follow the step-by-step trajectory that allowed one element to be made visible [in material writing] through the conspiracy of all the other elements still active in the background. This is probably the only insight I have ever had, the core of ANT as well as of AIME.[77]

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[73] Lorraine DASTON – Peter GALISON, *Objectivity*, Zone Books, 2007, p. 19.
[74] LATOUR, *The Politics of Explanation: an Alternative*, p. 162.
[75] *Ivi*, p. 170.
[76] Barbara H. SMITH, *Bruno Latour's Climate Evangelism*, "New Formations", 107/108, 2022, p. 232.
[77] Bruno LATOUR, *Life among Conceptual Characters*, "New Literary History", 47, 2/3, 2016, p. 467.

One can surely relate this quote to the hyper-concrete, immanent philosophy of *Irreductions*.[78] But here the word "trajectory" should not be assimilated with "network". Inscriptions are not only arranged in persuasive manner, but also in a form that elucidates the "elements still active in the background". ANT had already concurred with Serres' axiom that «explanans is always lodged deeply in explanandum, or, in less pedantic terms, there is no metalanguage other than the language of those you try to interpret».[79] But AIME took a step further, foregrounding the latent elements – the unconnected «empty spaces» intrinsic to the net metaphor[80] – to specify them as well as the types of association already inventoried. Remember that the turning point between ANT and AIME came through Isabelle Stengers.[81] Besides introducing Bruno to the maverick metaphysics of James, Whitehead and Souriau, she also dictated that ontology presented an unavoidable requirement upon epistemology in any ecology of practice. In other words, even if constrained by the commitments to a research community – in terms of underlying methodological principles, shared paradigms, institutional life, ecc. – the style of an inquiry should ultimately be stated by the studied phenomena itself. And, more often than not, scientist worth of their name must put at risk their entire theoretical-technical apparatus seeking to illuminate the ontological properties of an entity which is sufficiently autonomous and recalcitrant to avoid any accusation of being a mere artifice, metaphor or extension of the researcher's will. If the "discovery" proves to be worthy, then an epistemological shift shall follow to adjust prior theories to the new parcels of the cosmos revealed by successful empirical research. To be fair, one ought to read Bruno's monumental AIME alongside Stenger's *opus magnum* Cosmopolitics – seven theses discussing the entanglements of epistemology and ontology in disciplines such as quantum physics, organic chemistry and ethnopsychiatry.[82]

Stenger's principle of onto-epistemic coherence, if we permit ourselves to re-baptize it, has an acute resonance with Bruno's primal thesis about the prevalence of inventive style over the rules of method. In this line, a piece of writing should not only convince,

[78] ID., *The Pasteurization of France*, Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 158.
[79] ID., *Life among Conceptual Characters*, p. 469.
[80] ID., *Reassembling the Social*, p. 424.
[81] Philippe PIGNARRE, *Latour-Stengers: An Entangled Flight*, Polity, 2021, p. 97.
[82] Isabelle STENGERS, *Cosmopolitics I*, University of Minnesota Press, 2010; ID., *Cosmopolitics II*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

but it should also bring its theme alive in a manner which is akin to its own specifications. "Immersive" is a rather poor adjective to express what is at stake here. Perhaps the best account of this liveliness of prose can be found in Bruno's theology:

> There exists a difficulty that is specific to religion, not as a belief, but as a mode of speech: whenever you write about it, you risk losing the phenomenon to which you wanted to draw attention [...]. My purpose is not to talk *about* religion, but to talk to you *religiously*, at least religiously enough so that we can begin to analyze the conditions of felicity of such a speech-act, by demonstrating it *in vivo*, tonight, to this virtual audience, what sort of truth condition it requests.[83]

The mystery of onto-epistemic coherence reaches, so to speak, to the mystery of incarnation and resurrection. The heart of the matter in both cases is to bring alive an absent being in front of an audience who is not only skeptical, but who has never experienced anything like the singular qualities of the entity in question. And we can take the logic behind the principle of onto-epistemic coherence and expand it to any other realm. Lawyers do not only discuss the law, but they do so in a lawful way; inventors do not only craft new technological devices, but they do so in unpredictable ways; and so forth. Years later, Bruno expressed this idea quite succinctly «I try every time to find a form, a literary genre that corresponds to the subject matter».[84]

Latouranism weaved a thread linking inscription, rhetoric, style, vocabularies, tonalities, genre, and so on, seeking to pin down the «felicity conditions» for each mode of existence.[85] This goes beyond the preference of description over explanation. Yes, we can avoid a great deal of epistemic injustice if we respect the authentic vocabulary of each actor instead of imposing our own categories. But the real force of fine-attuned descriptions lies in their revitalizing effects. In the French philosopher's words: «you realize that you don't have the words, that the thing you are describing is inert, then you animate it [...] what is important is the capacity to speak for those who look inert».[86] Hence, agency is not a given, but rather the emerging quality an entity gains when it is rightly articulated with its surround and background elements. Recalling his first encounters with Péguy's philosophy, Bruno further commented:

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[83] LATOUR, *Sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, pp. 99-101.
[84] COCCIA, *An Interview with Bruno Latour.*
[85] LATOUR, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, p. 18.
[86] COCCIA, *An Interview with Bruno Latour.*

> This is the greatness of exegesis, but it is also a more general property of living things. It is a kind of repetition, of stubbornness and transformation which is also very specific, while the model we have of duration is one where we have more trust in immobile things that persist in time. It is an opposition: what persists persists because it doesn't persist.[87]

In fact, immutable mobiles are worthwhile only if they collaborate in the Heraclitean mission of renewing the cosmos. Could this be the new ethos of social scientists? Shall they reclaim their place in the lineage of Thot and other deities of textuality? Despite those who regard writing as a poison for memory, the social fabric can only be studied and preserved through the labor of humanists, poets, scribes and authors of varied shapes and colors.

Let us bring down to Earth these last remarks – otherwise they would not be very helpful in guiding the mundane inquiries of the social sciences. Once we have embraced textuality in all its plasticity, we can joyfully play with the spectrum of style or even employ manuscripts as cohesive and creative devices – like Nathan's and Jensen's portrayal of book usage in psychology. The French philosopher, besides constantly publishing his own documents, ran «thesis workshops for twenty years [helping] doctoral students who were told to have ideas for their thesis, but were not told how to write it».[88] Those projects were engaged in high-tech and other avant-guard topics. But more recently, retaking the ancient tradition of the *cahiers de doléances*, he also conducted «auto-description workshops in French villages and towns, where [people] describe their survival conditions, which has significant therapeutic effects, because once they start to describe what they depend on, they are recentered».[89] These more humble undertakings were concerned with ecological matters. Whether we speak of scholars' investigations or laypeople's explorations, we find the same maxim of *thinking through writing*. This thematic promiscuity is quite revealing for the role of social scientists. In Bruno's words: «philosophy (let's say the humanities) allows us to navigate through overlapping media and contribute to their composition, for no other reason than the lightness and banality of its techniques: ordinary language just slightly modified».[90] Just like Archimedes' lever, the weakest tools available for the lowly social

[87] *Ibid.*
[88] *Ibid.*
[89] *Ibid.*
[90] LATOUR, *Life among Conceptual Characters*, p. 470.

sciences actually hold the potential to recompose the world. This coincides with AIME's practical goal to direct our pluralistic sensitivities towards diplomacy:

> It is to describe this connecting role of the humanities that I have often used the word infralanguage to point out its subservient but useful role; I have more recently moved to the notion of diplomacy. In that sense, I could define "humanists" as those who are in charge of facilitating diplomatic encounters.[91]

The social implications of this diplomatic figure have been discussed elsewhere.[92] What must be highlighted is the epistemic continuity between this proposal and the cognitive intricacies of textuality. There are more things in writing, dear social scientists, than are dreamt of in your methodology!

6. Conclusion

Bruno was an agile thinker who often changed his mind, amended previous ideas, chased new intellectual symbioses and moved graciously among domains. He was anything but dogmatic.[93] This is why neither ANT nor AIME should be seen as programs applicable to unexplored topics. Also, it would be erroneous to oppose an early Bruno against a later, more sophisticated one. Instead, let us reprise the French philosopher one last time:

> The great masses of Nature and Society can be compared to the cooled-down continents of plate tectonics. If we want to understand their movement, we have to go down into those searing rifts where the magma erupts and on the basis of this eruption are produced – much later and much farther off, by cooling and progressive stacking – the two continental plates on which our feet are firmly planted.[94]

The same metaphor fits Latourianism. In this essay, we have exposed some cooled-down and solidified alternatives to the issue of the epistemology of social sciences – DH, critique and artisanal writing. Our text, unfortunately, follows a conventional format which implicitly suggests a sequential – argumentative and/or chronological –

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[91] *Ivi*, p. 474.
[92] David ANTOLÍNEZ, *A Diplomatic Philosophy for the Cosmopolitical World*, "GCAS Review Journal", 2, 1, 2025.
[93] Antonie HENNION, *Open comments on Blok & Bruun Jensen's paper 'What next for actor network theory? Inventing around Latour on a planet in distress'*, "Dialogues in Sociology", 1, 1, 2025, p. 97.
[94] LATOUR, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 87.

order. Had we been blessed with Bruno's lyrical dexterity, we could have composed this manuscript in a style more congruent with the magmatic nature of Latourianism. Perhaps a double-column text like those of Annemarie Mol or elongated footnotes *à la* Derrida? Maybe in another time. In this opportunity, the only trick we could think of was the Gemini sign and the frequent mixing of printed texts with interviews given by the French philosopher.

Is it too late to confess that we feel that this zodiacal characterization is somewhat inappropriate? Bruno was a one-of-a-kind sociologist and he was concerned with the epistemology of social sciences throughout his whole career. Digital methods and literary techniques were not the only proposals he advanced. For instance, ANT's approach to subjectivity, mixing the sensitivity towards material culture with some lessons learned from ethnopsychiatry, nurtured the intriguing field of sociology of taste; STS methods and curatorial efforts implemented to cosmopolitical questions have resulted in controversy mappings; and so forth. Latourianism, if we have time for a final metaphor, is like a hydra. Each time you think you have tamed it through decapitation, two new heads appear! And this is a matter of celebration! For the social sciences have never felt so infinite! So many topics to dive in, so many methods to use, so many research programs to follow, so many onto-epistemological labyrinths to explore. Despite having achieved great fame in his lifetime, Bruno's generous philosophy remains an unexploited source of inspiration, insights and delights for the years to come.

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