Reassembling the Banal; Pausing Before Inventing Anew

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In Alan Sokal's and Jean Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998), the monograph-length elaboration of Sokal's 'hoax' against postmodernism and constructivism, Bruno Latour's work is described as 'either true but banal, or else surprising but manifestly false' (92). This always struck me as an aggressively dismissive framing of Latour and, besides, one which seemed to miss the point. After all, one of the most important things that social theory in general – and Science and Technology Studies (STS) in particular – has accomplished is holding up the seemingly banal and everyday facets of social life to scrutiny.

As Susan Leigh Star (1999) contends, it is often only through studying 'boring things' (377) that it becomes possible to identify how specific 'values and ethical principles' are inscribed and reproduced in everyday technicalities, protocols, and infrastructures (379). Or, put differently: 'Study a city and neglect its sewers and power supplies (as many have), and you miss essential aspects of distributional justice and planning power' (Star, 1999: 379).[i] Indeed, drawing attention to the banal ways that knowledge is produced, disseminated, and made difficult to contest, is why texts such as *Science in Action* (Latour, 1987) are so valuable. However, by depicting Latour's arguments as 'banal' Sokal and Bricmont set the tone for their dismissal of his work and short-circuit any need to engage with his thought seriously, substantively, or on its own terms.

Sokal and Bricmont's treatment of Latour – and the rhetorical work that terms such as 'banal' can accomplish – came to mind as I was reading Blok and Jensen's plea for more thoughtful engagements with actor-network theory. While I found their emphasis on 'inventing around' Latour a productive and provocative approach, I was equally struck by their characterisation of others' – more critical – engagements with his work as 'not terribly interesting' (1). In the remainder of this short response, I first reflect in more depth on the implications of characterising critique as banal or uninteresting, before offering my own plea: Before rushing to invent around Latour anew, perhaps it is important to engage meaningfully with criticisms raised by long traditions of inventive scholarship that already exist.

Banal criticisms?

Blok and Jensen use the phrase 'not terribly interesting' in relation to two of the three scenarios they delineate as possible directions for future scholarly engagement with Latour. The first, a business-as-usual approach, sees Latourian thought being applied to different case studies, alongside the publication of new monographs and handbooks; a scenario that, in the authors words, might be 'as one would expect' (2). The second scenario consists of scholarly debate about which elements of Latour 'to keep and which to discard, by whom, and in what form' and sees Latour remaining 'a favourite target for critical scholars who see his work as apolitical, neoliberal, or anti-scientific' (2). The second scenario is, again, framed as business-as-usual. Notably, however, the current state of debate is illustrated via a small number of thinkers and papers, some of which – such as Zoe Todd's (2016) influential critique of the ontological turn – are relegated to endnotes. Blok and Jensen take these thinkers to task for either being overly dismissive of Latour or failing to engage substantively with the content of his work. Caricatures of Latour, they allege, are 'so firmly established through force or repetition' that all that remains is a pattern wherein 'critics keep vigorously demolishing strawmen' (5), or 'argumentation by insult' that can only 'make readers dumber' (19, n.2).

Blok and Jensen's depiction of critics might be unsurprising, in that it echoes the ironic tone with which Latour often dismissed those who were wary of the excesses of ANT. Perhaps the best-known

instance of this derision is Latour's comparison between contemporary critical theory and conspiracy in 'Why has critique run out of steam?', where he asks: 'what if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique' (2004: 229-230). Similar renderings of critique, however, can be found in more recent work, such as *Down to Earth's* wry lament that climate change has rendered historical materialism obsolete and Latour's corresponding plea to: 'Try a little harder, you materialist ladies and gentlemen, to be materialists at last!' (64). The risk is that accusations of being gullible or irrelevant circumvents the content of critical arguments.

Likewise, though Blok and Jensen's criticism of critics could pave the way for questions about how best to recuperate insights offered by Latour, I worry that dismissing critique as 'uninteresting' mobilises caricatures to combat caricatures. This move, again, risks undermining rather than opening pathways forward. Bracketing aside their treatment of specific interlocutors, what I found especially notable was the broader claim that concepts delineated in Latour's *An Enquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013) offer more effective purchase on environmental politics than 'grand abstractions like Capitalism' (Blok and Jensen, 2025: 9). What is rearticulated here is an argument very much in the vein of Latour's own characterisation of critics as being overly-invested in broad explanatory frameworks (such as capitalism, power, or neoliberalism), totalising concepts that centralise humans at the expense of understanding relations that cannot be reduced to socio-economic factors. These generalisations, Blok and Jensen contend, are entirely inadequate for grasping the variegated material agencies, affective commitments, and struggles that characterise a planet in crisis.

Yet, rather than using 'capitalism' as a catch-all term or totalising approach, a vast body of literature has already embarked on the complex task of rethinking socio-economic categories and theoretical frameworks so they can adequately respond to the contemporary moment. Some of the most influential and exciting thinkers of climate and biodiversity crises have spent years painstakingly reworking Marxist and Foucauldian terminology and bringing it into dialogue with STS, to render it applicable to topics including plantation economies (Tsing, 2004, 2015; Barua, 2024), mass extinction and the plight of nonhuman animals (Haraway, 2008, 2016; van Dooren, Rose and Chrulew, 2017), and biosecurity (Ahuja, 2015). This list is just a small snapshot of those who – far from uncritically applying totalising ideas through reference to terms such as 'capitalism'– are engaging in precisely the sort of 'inventing around' canonical thought that Blok and Jensen advocate.

It is, perhaps, understandable that there is not scope to provide an exhaustive overview of allied literatures in a short intervention essay. However, the omission of Haraway and Tsing (with the exception of using the former as another instance of misguided critique of Latour), speaks to a tradition with a rich history of 'inventing around' that was especially conspicuous by its absence: feminist STS.

Engaging with existing inventions

In addition to evoking Sokal, some of the other '90s reference points that came to mind when reading the title 'What next for actor-network theory' were the influential edited collections *Actor-Network Theory and After* (Law and Hassard, 1999) and *A Sociology of Monsters* (Law, 1991).[ii] Both collections productively built upon insights and interventions made by Latour, Callon, and other key thinkers who are discussed in Blok and Jensen's helpful overview of ANT.

Perhaps the most influential essays in each collection, however, were from feminist scholars Susan Leigh Star and Annemarie Mol, whose work epitomises the value of 'inventing around'. Each essay engages with ANT in significant depth, whilst also developing a sympathetic critique of its politics that offers new trajectories forward. Star's 'Power, technology, and the phenomenology of conventions' (1991), for instance, offers a forceful reminder of the irreversibility of large-scale technical infrastructures, injecting much-needed questions of power, inequality, and exclusion into

ANT approaches. Annemarie Mol's 'Ontological politics: A word and some questions' (1999), likewise, draws attention to the way that different socio-technical arrangements enact different 'reality effects' with very different ethico-political consequences.

As John Law and Vicky Singleton (2000) underscored in their turn-of-the-century mapping of STS, such arguments encapsulated the difference in emphasis between ANT and feminist STS. Both branches of science studies, they suggest, understand 'that social and material practices recursively generate new social and material practices, technoscientific knowledges, and versions of the social and material world' (766-7). Crucially, however, where feminist STS departs from ANT is that it is: 'more political in its concerns, attending centrally to the way in which such practices carry (for instance) gender, ethnic, class, and military agendas' and 'insists that when one writes one also intervenes: writing may either support or erode current technoscience agendas' (Law and Singleton, 2000: 767). What is conveyed by Law and Singleton's description, then, is how some of the most generative criticisms of ANT have historically centralised concerns about its politics, whilst also fully engaging with its nuances. This approach, in other words, is very similar to Blok and Jensen's explanation of what 'inventing around' Latour might look like, which, drawing on Marilyn Strathern, they characterise as 'generative knowledge [that] changes as others "invent around" (xv) it, and make it travel' (2).[iii]

Understood in this vein, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's 'Matters of Care' is perhaps not only one of the most well-known instances of inventing around Latour, but also counters the narrative that criticisms of ANT's politics are necessarily products of misunderstandings and caricatures. The in-depth and thoughtful way that Puig de la Bellacasa works through Latour's conception of 'matters of concern', for instance, leaves little room to suggest that she has misconstrued his arguments. Indeed, what her own 'Matters of Care' makes beautifully clear is the way that caricatures of those whose perspectives are 'required to support a feminist vision of care that engages with persistent forms of exclusion, power and domination in science and technology' (2011: 91) – such as environmental activists – are routinely used by Latour himself to chide and dismiss concerns by those who might be most 'harmed by an assemblage' (92). 'Matters of Care' offers a response to this problematic, not through dismissing Latour outright but pointing to structural exclusions in his arguments, before taking what is important about his work and inventing around it. The result is an alternative conceptual framework, which does not constitutively exclude critical-activist perspectives.

I foreground the value of existing traditions of 'inventing around' not to unfairly berate the authors for failing to compose an exhaustive literature review under the constraints of a tight word-count. Instead, to echo their engagement with Isabelle Stengers (2015), I just want to suggest that before inventing anew it might be productive to pause. Blok and Jensen offer a lively and persuasive account – illustrated through reference to their own extensive publications – of how concepts from *Modes of Existence* could be reworked to engage with pressing issues related to uncommon worlds and contemporary urban life. However, as the authors rightfully note elsewhere, the 'rush to create *new* theory for the Anthropocene' has often 'led to the elision of already existing ones' (2019: 1208). Just as new theories can elide existing ones, I wonder if inventing around canonical thinkers to extend them to new areas can enact similar elisions of theory that is already well-suited to this task. Perhaps one of the reasons that feminist STS has already had more sociological uptake than ANT in the context of ecological concerns is because there is less need to 'invent around' it anew? Questions about affective relations, inequality, and exclusion do not need to be reintroduced, because they are already centralised. Likewise, the rich body of theory that is fully aware of STS scholarship but offers new directions in relation to pluriversal thought (Savransky, 2021; Ruiz-Serna, 2023a, 2023b) or urban infrastructure (Simone, 2022, 2024), could indicate a lack of necessity in revisiting, recentralising, and reinventing Latour.

Conclusion

I worry that some of the sympathetic critiques of Block and Jensen's arguments that I have made above reproduce the lack of generosity that I suggest have accompanied their characterisation of critics of Latour as uninteresting. Thus, I might not have done justice to their reflections on how to invent around and recuperate the insights of a thinker who – I agree – has sometimes been caricatured. Saying Latour has sometimes been unfairly caricatured, however, is not the same as arguing that his work has always been misrepresented. Indeed, as I have traced above, some of the most in-depth engagements with Latour have been articulated by feminist theorists who have foregrounded profound issues with his work while at the same time acknowledging the important interventions he has made. To again return to Puig de la Bellacasa, when inventing around any thinker it remains important to resist 'throw[ing] out critical standpoints with the bathwater of corrosive critique' (2011: 91).

From my own perspective, one of the most interesting prospects for inventing around Latour can be found within a very short exercise he composed in the wake of Covid-19 lockdowns, to explore ways of 'getting away from production as the overriding principle of our relationship to the world' (Latour, 2021: 14). Reflective of this critique of productivism, which is, perhaps, more overt than in any of his other work to date, here Latour departs from *Down to Earth*'s insistence that political difference should be swept aside for the sake of a common good. Instead, he offers techniques for unearthing the reasons behind intractable ethico-political differences and suggests that, by understanding and taking seriously 'conflicting lines, alliances, controversies, and oppositions' (16) it might be possible to find new points of affinity. The approach offered by Latour in this short intervention could, I suggest, be brought to bear on conflicts around his legacy, by offering a technique for identifying why others' critical standpoints are difficult to reconcile with a Latourian approach rather than rejecting their concerns as banalities.

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[i] It is notable that Star cites Latour to underline this point.

[ii] Both collections were published as *Sociological Review* monographs and released as journal special issues as well as books, which is why the publication year of *A Sociology of Monsters* (1990) is slightly different from that of Star's article (1991).

[iii] The parallels between Strathern's account of inventing around and feminist STS is perhaps unsurprising in light of the mutual dialogue between her work and the field (see Strathern and Latimer, 2019). It is notable, however, that Strathern herself adopts a slightly more critical account of Latour and ANT (e.g. Strathern, 1996), which could add another interesting layer to Blok and Jensen's arguments.