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## Review Essay

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### **The Thing and its Politics**

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*Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Edited by  
Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel

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## The Thing and its Politics

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*Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005). 550 pages. ISBN 0-262-12279-0.

For those of us old enough to have had the 'benefit' of a 'Marxist adolescence', the very idea that contemporary philosophers and social theorists should now want to re-examine the relationship between 'sociality' and 'materiality' may strike as rather odd. This is because for an inveterate Marxist, *grosso modo*, human life is at *root* material; to the extent that in the archetypal Marxist 'last instance' it is materiality that directly *conditions* all forms of emergent sociality. However, the widespread loss of faith in this metaphysics has been one of the prime causes of Marxism's recent intellectual emaciation and the growing sense that its simplistic materialism was merely a ribald *déformation professionnelle* of the Marxist scholar (rudely designed *pour épater les bourgeois*). As a consequence it has become clear to many that Marxist thinkers had not attended to this issue with due philosophical diligence and that the relationship between the social and the material is more much compossible than Marxists were prepared to recognise.

It is Bruno Latour, possibly more than anyone else, who has worked long and hard to articulate an alternative 'post-Marxist' account of the relationship between the social and the material that could provide the basis for a viable new mode of social inquiry. As is well known, it was the early Wittgenstein who heralded the birth of philosophical modernism when he asserted in the *Tractatus* the world is 'the totality of *facts* not things'. For Latour however, this claim is based upon the 'bizarre idea of making reality outside' and in his view we now need to herald the birth of a philosophical *post-modernism* where the world is totality of *things* not facts (and where facts are understood as products of the activities of things).<sup>1</sup> More generally for Latour, it is not *social facts* that are of philosophical interest but *social things*—and as such it

is Latour's avowed aim to put 'the thing' at the centre of our philosophical reflections on the nature and significance of the social. But this of course begs a very important question, what exactly is 'a thing' in this context? For Latour, this question is rendered especially problematic because in his view we live in an age where things, in their endless innovation and circulation, seem to increasingly take on a life of their own. Therefore we cannot rely on traditional notions and definitions of things as mere 'inert objects' that exist in isolation from ourselves as 'controlling subjects'. As he puts it '[w]hen we find ourselves invaded by frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesisers, audience analysers and so on...when none of these can be properly on the object side or the subject side, or even in between, something has to be done'.<sup>2</sup>

What then does Latour recommend that we do? The answer to this question can be clearly discerned in the claims and analyses of the authors of the numerous entries in the excessively large but fascinating *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (a volume that Latour has co-edited with Peter Weibel). Part encyclopaedia, part occasional text, part social-theoretical users manual with colour-coded sections for ease of use, this text is a book only in the 'Deleuzian' sense of the term. It is perhaps better conceived as a 'machine'; a 'thing' that is an assemblage of disparate reflections on things and the nature of thinghood. As such, this is a book that is dizzyingly self-reflexive; a book about things that presents itself as simply one more thing and yet also more than a thing—a kind of 'meta-thing' that reveals the mysterious social power of things in a gathering together of 'academic things' produced by the leading luminaries of the post-structuralist world (Sloterdijk, Rorty and Haraway in particular making telling contributions).

As a series of reflections on the social and political power of things, the overall aim of this volume is to define an alternative conception of politics—one that is not reducible to the European tradition of parliaments—by exploring the way in which we can make an assembly out of all the various relations with things with which we are always and already enmeshed (37). And it through this that we can see the basic assumptions of Latour's revisionist metaphysics—what he terms Dingpolitik—in stark relief, as he attempts to reconfigure social inquiry on the terrain of a new 'psycho-anthropology' that allows 'things' to 'speak for themselves' in their 'circulating capacity'. More specifically, it

is here that we can see the significance of Latour's idea that the social is not a mysterious substance that 'mystically binds us together', nor a reflection of material powers and interests, but rather a 'connection' produced between things as they move through space and time. Things, for Latour, create social relations through their inherent power to produce both disagreements and *attachments*—as Hennion points out on page 677—to the extent that it is things that *make us public*. For as Heidegger recognised, a thing is first and foremost a *gathering* of relations that has an existential bearing upon us. In this way, humans and things always form a 'collective'; a social network seamlessly woven together by what Latour famously termed 'Ariadne's thread' (that it is the job of the social researcher to unravel).<sup>3</sup>

This post-humanist collapsing of the old humanist agent/thing dichotomy renders the thing 'de-substantialised' whilst at the same time 're-moralised' as 'voices' or inter-subjective hybrid 'actants' (see also Latour 2005, 79).<sup>4</sup> For Latour and Weibel this has important implications for the way that we conceive of politics. And it is in this vein that we can appreciate the interests of a number of contributors to this volume in the problem of 'the machinery of democracy'—that is, in the problem of how things tie the body politic together. Here, traditional liberal-democratic institutions represent only one possible assemblage-assembly and for Latour and Weibel in particular 'parliaments are only a few of the machineries of representations among many others and not necessarily the most relevant of the best equipped' (31). Different modes of object relation it seems are capable of securing different kinds of democratic institutions—different objects produce their own modes and styles politics and it is a mistake to reduce 'the political' to the forms of liberalism that define the contemporary landscape of representative democracy.

The assembling powers of numerous things are on display in this volume—those associated with sheep, fonts, chickens, water, notebooks, cowry shells and shopping carts striking as particularly representative of the key methodological precept of *dingpolitik*—where each thing is viewed as possessing attributes that empower it to gather people and objects into assemblies. However, is this simply a case of 'ontological slumming' on the part of Latour and Weibel et al? Might it simply be a way of avoiding the question of how we understand the issue of hierarchy and control in relation to social and political existence and also an elision of the vexed problem of the question of social 'non-existents'? Does any *thing* not exist in the Latoureaan cosmos? Is

everything a thing to the extent that there is no point in denials of thinghood? Moreover, are all things really of 'equal significance' as social actors and potential sources of political assembly? This volume doesn't really answer these questions as such we are forced to ask at this point whether Latour's social ontology overlooks the overwhelming power of 'the economic' in relation to the social and political (and the issue of why in modern contexts the former seems more 'more real' than the latter). Why do links with economic objects—such as money—seem strangely more powerful and more 'determining' than say our attachments to animals? Moreover, might some things afford radically different attachments and metaphysical significances (to the extent that things always belong to radically different metaphysical categories)? For example, according to Marres, *issues* are the 'true things' of contemporary politics precisely because they are only these things that stimulate the 'democratic vibe' (217). However, can an *issue* really be conceived as a *thing*? This seems unsatisfactory, at least as an attempt at 'explaining' the origins of modern democracy (because the existence of the modern state seems only accidentally related to 'issues' in this sense, as it is much more a primordial phenomenon vis-à-vis the condition of modernity). In fact the tides of what an old Marxist would term 'fetishism' do seem rather too high here and one would feel much happier with the overall approach on offer if we got some sense of what unites all these things into something that we could understand as *social reality* (although of course Latour is more than happy to swim in these tides, because for him the social is nothing if not fetishistic and relativistic).

Overall, I think what is missing in this very informative and stimulating book is a theory of power—especially as it relates to the way in which we understand the behaviour of elite institutions vis-à-vis markets and its associated social formations. Consider for example the importance of global credit rating agencies in the recent credit crunch (that rate the credit worthiness of entire nations; that is, determine their ability to raise capital for the purposes of national capital accumulation). Such institutions are not simply 'things' that in this case 'disassemble'—households, banks, nations and maybe even multinational institutions such as the EU—because their *power* is such that they demand a different level of categorisation to the things that they influence. Flat ontologies don't seem to apply here. And it is here, at this level, that Marxism has probably more to say about our current situation than Latourean social thinking. For what Marx referred to as 'capital' is not really a thing at all, but rather a social relation that turns the world into

a world of things. Credit rating agencies are simply not equivalent to molluscs because they will in the end determine the fate of all molluscs (and perhaps even what is to count as a mollusc, as science budgets could well be significantly cut as a result of the behaviour of these agencies). More generally, we might say that a failure to understand the nature of the economic system renders Latoureanism strangely naive in relation to issues of political economy—a context that all social actors are forced to either accept or confront. How then to bring an understanding of the power of markets back in without attempting to resurrect the Marxist dead? Latour, we might say, has shown us how to understand the 'micro-thingliness' of the social, the question now is how to relate this back to questions pertaining to the macro social logic of capital, to the wider *social logos* that is the very condition of such 'thingliness' in the first place. This will no doubt mean returning to the older question of production and as such a return if not to Marx, then at least to the Marxist universe that Latour has worked so hard to supplant.

### Notes

- 1 See Bruno Latour, 'On Recalling ANT', *Sociological Review* 46 (1998), 15-25. In this way, with Latour the Durkheimian sociological tradition is modified in a significant way. Latour's thought eschews Durkheimian certainties, embedded as they are in Cartesian rationalism, and embraces the uncertainties and complexities of the post-national object-orientated landscape of contemporary neo-liberalism.
- 2 Bruno Latour, 'Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of Few Mundane Artefacts', in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker & John Law (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 50-51.
- 3 Thus they point out that in any definition of the social an 'entire cosmos' of relations with things is always involved (and for them one of the important things about 'thing-centred socialities' it that they give rise to a form of politics in which the cosmos is seriously considered again (99)).
- 4 See also Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 79.