A Networked Model of the World

From public spaces down to household items, an appreciation of materiality can lead us to see ourselves as part of a greater network of humans and things. Bruno Latour is taken here as a material philosopher and sociologist that brings together the different approaches to materiality mentioned before. But his work does not only serve as a theoretical lens with which we can look at both technological and, later on, social laboratories, he also adds a decidedly political perspective to a materially sensitive theory.

In his essay for the catalogue of an exhibition he co-curated at the *Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe*, Latour chooses the German word "Dingpolitik", i.e. thing-politics, to highlight the importance of things in politics. However, before we enter the realm of politics, seeing things politically requires a more complex and nuanced approach to the non-human world in the first place. This is why Latour starts with a philosophical antidote against the oversimplification of objects in the theoretical discourse.

> For too long, objects have been wrongly portrayed as matters of fact. This is unfair to them, unfair to science, unfair to objectivity, unfair to experience. They are much more interesting, variegated, uncertain, complicated, far reaching, heterogeneous, risky, historical, local, material and networky than the pathetic version offered for too long by philosophers. Rocks are not simply there to be kicked at, desks to be thumped at (Latour 2005, pp. 19–20).

Likewise, in his essay *Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?*, Latour criticises modern philosophies for their simplistic treatment of the thing-world. Even Martin Heidegger and his philosophical and etymological appreciation of things falls short. Latour argues that Heidegger differentiated between meaningful things

from the world of the handmade, down-to-earth life in the huts and small farms in the Black Forest and the mass-produced objects of the industrial age.

> [A]ll his writing aims to make as sharp a distinction as possible between, on the one hand, objects, Gegenstand, and, on the other, the celebrated Thing. The handmade jug can be a thing, while the industrially made can of Coke remains an object. While the latter is abandoned to the empty mastery of science and technology, only the former, cradled in the respectful idiom of art, craftsmanship, and poetry, could deploy and gather its rich set of connections (Latour 2004, p. 233).

Our task then as post-Heideggerians is to apply the powerful vocabulary the German philosopher from the Black Forest reserved for the handmade things to all objects, especially those that science and technology look at. This also overcomes the fact that most object-oriented philosophies choose far too simple objects such as coffee mugs, chairs, and stones – most of them stemming from the lifeworld of the philosophers themselves – for their investigations (cf. ibid., p. 234).

Engaging with the complex objects of the modern world is not just a question of interest, rather philosophy's survival in the modern world hinges on overcoming a position that either sees things as mere fetishes or sees modern humans as completely dependent on the powerful forces of objects against which they are powerless. The position of the modern social critic and his relation to the world of humans and objects must be a third one, Latour argues, namely "to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence" (ibid., p. 246).

This first of all demands a shift in the language with which philosophers speak about things. What we have already discovered with Jean Wahl becomes important for Latour's work as well, namely the return to poetic forms. Looking at the way Alan Turing in his 1950s essay on *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (Turing 1950), one of the icons of the rational age, writes about the computer, reveals the "sense of wonder," or rather sense of poetic marvel that is integral to this treatise on a complex modern machine. "If you read this paper, it is so baroque, so kitsch, it assembles such an astounding number of metaphors, beings, hypotheses, allusions, that there is no chance that it would be accepted

nowadays by any journal" (Latour 2004, p. 247). Alan's engagement with the machine takes on undertones normally reserved for the realm of the ineffable, the religious.

> Lots of gods, always in machines. […] Here Turing too cannot avoid mentioning God's creative power when talking of this most mastered machine, the computer that he has invented (ibid., p. 247).

But this new appreciation for things also demands a new role for the social critic and his view on the daily lives of people surrounded by things. The modern critic is no longer someone who uncovers what is hidden and then, from an authoritative, omniscient perspective, criticises the (human) social actors.

> The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution (ibid., p. 246).

This finally brings us to the political aspect of Latour's writings on thing-politics. First of all, ascribing political might to things is nothing revolutionary as it takes into account what is already happening on the political level. Humans are already connected through their attachment to things, or rather the *assemblages*, assemblies of things: "The Chinese, the Japanese […] the born-again Christians don't want to enter under the same dome, they are still, willingly or unwillingly, connected by the very expansion of those makeshift assemblies we call markets, technologies, science" (Latour 2005, p. 37). Among those makeshift assemblies also appear the scientific laboratories.

> Scientific laboratories, […] churches and temples, financial trading rooms, internet forums […] are just some of the forums and agoras in which we speak, vote, decide, are decided upon, prove, are being convinced. Each has its own architecture, its own technology of speech, its complex set of procedures, its definition of freedom and domination (ibid., p. 31).

The laboratory thus takes on the role of a public agora in which the fact that we are attached to the things around us turns into a debate. However, we must be aware that with all those agoras, the question of representation and access remains just as important as in the Greek model, where the agora was populated only by the elder male citizens of Athens. A sensibility for the material world thus is also a question of justice, both towards men and things. But how should we as humans realise this? This is where in my view a Christian perspective on our topic becomes relevant.