

A Diagram of Us: Latour and the Modes of Existence

Bruno Latour: *Enquête sur les Modes d'Existence. Une Anthropologie des Modernes.* Paris: La découverte, 2012, 498 pp. ISBN 978-2707173478.

Bruno Latour: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, 520 pp. ISBN 978-0674724990.

Sapere aude! One could regard Bruno Latour as a follower of the Enlightenment's motto; he is an unusually audacious thinker, not afraid to explore ideas that take him far from the received ways of describing the world in which we live. While his earlier work has already shaken many conventions of social scientific thought, his *Enquête sur les Modes d'Existence* (translated into English in 2013

as *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*) takes the radicalism to another level. This is a most unconventional and daring book, not only bursting with ideas but also ripe with controversial formulations that will certainly occupy scholars for years to come. It has been claimed that *Enquête* is Latour's chef d'oeuvre. Indeed it does summarize much of his earlier work, but it also makes major displacements in relation to it. The book aims to create a conceptual toolkit that helps us to examine the way the world is and, simultaneously, to step back and reconsider many of the descriptions that we, the "Moderns," use about ourselves and the world. Although *Enquête's* many insights are worth discussing in detail, in this short review I limit myself to a brief outline of the two central features of the book: the system of modes of existence and Latour's conception of the Moderns.

Perhaps the most important novelty of *Enquête* in relation to Latour's earlier work is that actor-networks are revealed to be just one of many modes of existence. That is to say, instead of the world existing primarily in the manner of networks, or as a rhizome of rhizomes, Latour now claims it exists in a multiple yet limited number of ways. To be more precise, he asserts that it exists in fifteen different modes.

From a purely rhetorical point of view, the number of modes of existence is astonishing. Can Latour be serious about the exact number fifteen? Or is this just Latour's means to *épater la bourgeoisie scientifique*? A couple of things are important to note in relation to the number of modes. First, it is *not* the number of substances or basic elements. Rather, it is truly a number of *modes*: manners in which things can exist in relation to each other. Latour's philosophy is very pragmatic, and he is constant in his unwillingness to depict anything akin to essences or fundamental laws. Second, the fifteen modes are not various perspectives on one thing. Rather, the claim is that things *exist* in plural ways. Third, in principle the list is dynamic and historical: there could be more or fewer modes, and maybe for others another number would be the right one; but for the *Moderns*, according to Latour, the number is currently fifteen.

Latour maintains that there is an empirical way of detecting the exact number of modes of existence that are relevant for the Moderns. The key is to follow their *experience* of the world, things that they *value* the most – these two concepts are much more central in this book than elsewhere in Latour's work – and then investigate the practices related to the institutions

that are associated with these experiences and values.

Latour sets himself the great task of creating a vocabulary to “speak well” about the Moderns' experience while not having to rely on the vocabulary they themselves use. This “double dissociation” is important and problematic. Clearly for Latour, as for most social scientists who are not utterly enamoured with the powers of discourse, experience is not simply reducible to the way in which it is conceptualized. However, Latour does not end there; he thinks that it is possible to be a realist about the Moderns' experiences and “speak well” about them while bypassing, at least to a great extent, their own categorizations and the importance they put on these – as if the experience could be cleansed from the language with which it has been expressed.

The tension is evident: on the one hand, the experience of values is presupposed to be accessible without using the Moderns' own conceptualizations; on the other, the need for creating a new language fundamentally depends on the conviction that how experience is verbalized is crucial. That is, the aim of the new vocabulary cannot be anything other than to affect experience, translate it, and make a displacement, even though

that experience was thought to be separable from language, at least from the language that was originally used for articulating it.

Of course, this tension is not new to Latour. It arises between the precept of having to “follow the actors”, believing that they do our sociology for us, a theme Latour often emphasizes, while simultaneously feeling very strongly about the need to create a new loose metalanguage – or “infralanguage”, as it is called in *Reassembling the Social* – for describing the actors' experiences of values better than they themselves are capable of doing. In the end though, it is the experience that provides the most important test: according to Latour, the criterion of success for the vocabulary created by *Enquête* is if it is recognized by the Moderns themselves as especially suitable for speaking about their experience of the world.

The fifteen modes of existence make up a very heterogeneous group including Technology, Religion, Law, Fiction, Networks, Attachments and Habits. To exist in a technological way is to exist in an irreducibly different way than to exist in a religious way, which, for its part, is different from existing in a fictional way. It is noteworthy that many categories that are cherished by the Moderns are omitted from the list; for example, Science, Econ-

omy, Nature and Society. According to Latour, the practices and experiences that are named by these categories have all been understood falsely, as if emanating from transcendent powers prevalent in these “domains”; instead, he wants to show these categories to be combinations of other modes. For example, what is usually analysed as one thing by the name “economy” is in fact a compilation of three modes of existence: Morality, Attachments and Organization. Latour deems the Double Click mode particularly important in the Moderns’ own faulty categorizations; it is the idea that there can be direct access to the world without mediating work that creates detours. This is what fundamentally distorts the Moderns’ ideas concerning the practices of science, economy and politics.

Ultimately, the question remains, who are the Moderns? Ironically, as anyone even slightly familiar with Latour’s book titles knows, according to Latour, no one has ever been modern; no one has ever strictly followed the Moderns’ own precepts and conceptualizations concerning how they live. Yet, clearly, it is very hard for us *not* to see ourselves as modern. Whenever we think, for instance, that the separation between Nature and Society is fundamental (that there

is a clear distinction between primary and secondary qualities), or when we think that the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is primordial, we are modern. Hence the need for Latour to write texts that cure us from the bad metaphysics we use when describing ourselves.

Enquête proposes various means to best distance us from ourselves so that what we truly value is able to come forth. As he did in *Aramis* twenty years ago, Latour again tells his story through differentiating levels of narrative. Instead of just plainly writing about the world, he creates a fictional protagonist, a female anthropologist. The conceptual persona of an anthropologist helps Latour to paint a picture of the collective conceptual persona of the Moderns. It is important that the name “Moderns” does not have a one-to-one relationship with a group of people. Rather, it is a diagram that Latour has drawn of us, a diagram that takes into account both our true experiences and our flawed metaphysics.

While *Enquête* is written in Latour’s distinctive and often humorous style, the book slightly lacks the flare and fluidity that characterizes some of his best writing. This may be due to the architecture of discussing in order all fifteen modes of being, and due to the sheer amount of

themes covered. Latour’s way of thinking is not always easy to digest, but he succeeds in challenging us to see the world in a new light. Or to phrase this in more classical terms: *Enquête* provides bold enlightenment.

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