



SPECIAL SECTION

## Afterword

### Knot-work not networks, or anti-anti-antifetishism and the ANTipolitics machine

Keir MARTIN, *University of Oslo*

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In this paper, I explore what might count as political intervention in contemporary anthropological descriptions. In doing so I take a particular focus on the work of Bruno Latour, as the clearest exponent of a posthuman philosophy critiqued by some of the contributors to this special section. I argue that a posthuman philosophy guided by a rigid anti-anti-fetishism is in danger of failing to take seriously the experience of people for whom the adoption of a perspective that stresses the unique characteristics of human agency and relations is a matter of great political importance. The contemporary posthumanist claim that a disavowal of politics as it is currently configured is necessary to avoid an elitist disdain for our informants is examined from different perspectives, from which posthumanism itself might be viewed as an expression of precisely that elitist disdain that it professes to disavow.

Keywords: posthumanism, neoliberalism, Bruno Latour, politics, interventions

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## Introduction

What is the nature of anthropological description and the manners in which it acts as intervention in the world? In their different ways, the three other papers in this special section engage with this question without explicitly addressing what might count as a *political* intervention. This is the thread that I want to pull out from the intertangled knots of the section. What happens to politics in contemporary anthropological descriptions, particularly in the post-human approaches that are so strongly critiqued by both Graeber and Gregory? In doing so, I take a particular focus on the work of Latour, as his approach is perhaps the clearest example of a post-human philosophy that seeks to simultaneously reconfigure what we understand by politics whilst rejecting engagement with politics as it is currently configured.



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## Anthropological descriptions and anthropological interventions

Strathern's article in this collection makes the claim that anthropological description is by its nature intervention. Just as every "assertion or denial of recognition" is "a social intervention," the same, "might be said, epistemologically speaking, of every interpretation or choice of descriptive language, or scientific investigation," she argues. Such a claim marks a useful starting point for any discussion of anthropological knots. But this description of our descriptions must of course itself, by its own logic, be read as a kind of intervention. All descriptions are interventions, but not all interventions are of an equal order or a similar type. To what extent does such a description that takes the interventionist nature of all descriptions as its starting point act as an intervention that, intentionally or not, draws our attention away from the diverse interventional effects of alternate kinds of descriptions by beginning by stressing their commonality? Strathern cites the work of Lea, an anthropologist conducting research with health care managers (or bureaucrats) who are working with Aboriginal communities in Australia's Northern Territory. Lea draws our attention to the similarities between the anthropologist's belief in the power of accurate description to correct misconceptions and the bureaucrat's belief in the power of accurate description to produce better policy and intervention. But while it is true that anthropologists and bureaucrats both write descriptions that they hope have the power to correct misconceptions, what does it tell us about anthropology's faith in itself at a point in human history when, as Graeber observes, the need to posit an alternative way of organizing our social relations has never been greater? What does it mean that this position is advanced not as a starting point for elucidating how anthropological descriptions can provide different interventions from bureaucratic ones, but rather as a means for us to provide the "ultimate honouring of bureaucratic magic" (Lea, as cited by Strathern, this volume)? This asks a question that is as much about the political effects of intervention as it is about how intervention might be understood anthropologically.

Forty years ago, Roy Wagner (1974) provided a description of different descriptions of social life and their effects in his paper on the existence (or not) of entities called "social groups" in the Highlands of New Guinea. One of the objects of Wagner's critical interrogation was the ways in which an earlier generation of bureaucrats, the patrol officers and administrators of the Australian colonial authorities in New Guinea, described the natives as if they were members of fixed social groups whose existence preceded their elicitation within such descriptions. For Wagner, such a description had profound drawbacks and could be usefully contrasted with an anthropological description that took as its starting point the flexible social creativity of language use in the New Guinea Highlands. Both the colonial bureaucrat's description of the native's social relations and Wagner's contrasting description of those relations (along with his description of the bureaucrat's descriptions) could be seen, as Lea puts it, as examples of faith in "the power of description to amend conceptualizations of how the world 'really is,' and with that improved perception to somehow yield a better outcome" (cited in Strathern, this volume): the bureaucrat seeking to improve the native population by describing their social relations in a manner that remade them in a form that was more amenable to managed social progress; and Wagner seeking to halt the culturally

destructive force of such naïve transpositions of what he saw as “Western” ideas about the nature of description. In contrast to a description that stresses the similarity of all descriptions on the basis that they are all interventions, Wagner’s argument is based upon a faith in the possibility of anthropological descriptions to make very different interventions based upon a radical correction of the blind spots of colonial bureaucratic descriptions.

Just as Wagner observes that we only see groups if we “look at the people in a certain way, ignoring or not seeing significant differences” (1974: 117), likewise we only see commonality or difference between anthropological and bureaucratic descriptions if we look at them and describe them in certain ways, drawing attention to particular differences and commonalities whilst ignoring others. It is certainly not intended to suggest that anthropological descriptions always are or must be attempts to unmask supposedly conventional descriptions and thereby have the impact of blunting their impact. Nor is it intended to suggest that bureaucratic descriptions always recreate such supposedly conventional wisdoms or that it is impossible for bureaucrats to write against the grain of the priorities of the system within which they operate, any more than Strathern intended her description of a what a Melanesian theory of social action might look like to be a description of how all Melanesians thought at all times. But it is intended to suggest that it is worth remembering that bureaucratic descriptions all too often have inbuilt lacunae that at times can be almost impossible to overcome.

Although anthropological descriptions have the potential to fall into similar traps for different reasons, what Wagner and others have demonstrated is the possibility for anthropological description at its best to act as a corrective to bureaucratic descriptions with particular limitations built in by virtue of the context within which they are produced and received. As Strathern observes in her conclusions, the “descriptive endeavor” relies upon “social as well as conceptual relations.” Or as Upton Sinclair ([1935] 1994: 109) might have it, “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.” Of course, anthropological descriptions are also often constrained by related pressures, such as the desire to secure patronage or publication, and increasingly today the need to secure funding to fit government policy objectives. The latter consideration in particular begins to make the social relations within which anthropological descriptions are produced look increasingly conventionally bureaucratic, and it is perhaps no accident that Lea’s account, which chooses to stress the similarities between anthropological and bureaucratic descriptions, was produced at such a moment. Whilst there is doubtless some virtue to drawing attention to such similarities, does the desire to make that comparison today in some small way reflect the broader tendency observed by Graeber for academics to have come to see the neoliberal bureaucratization of the academy as “simple, inevitable realities”? It is as if the Thatcherite mantra of there being no alternative has spread even to our descriptions, which are now themselves described as another version of those produced by market-oriented state bureaucracies. The expected readership of bureaucratic descriptions conditions the nature of those descriptions. If anthropological descriptions appear increasingly bureaucratized as a result of reforms that most academics now see as “simple, inevitable realities,” to the extent that it increasingly makes sense to describe academic and bureaucratic descriptions in a manner that

stresses their similarities, then, for Graeber, such an appearance of convergence is not to be simply described, for such a description is itself (of course) also an intervention that, whatever its authors' intention, must serve to make that convergence appear even more natural and inevitable. Rather, the similarities between bureaucratic and anthropological descriptions must be taken as one sign among many of the radical reshaping of the contexts within which anthropological descriptions are produced.

### Posthumanism and neoclassicism

So when we circulate descriptions amongst ourselves, they are all too often tortured, self-doubting descriptions of our inability to describe anything (Graeber, this volume), but when our descriptions circulate outside our own charmed circle, they are read in such a variety of "ironic" manners that we fear that our own voices are largely lost (Carrithers, this volume). Yet, according to at least two of the contributors to this special section, the endless public self-flagellation that these trends promote is not the only expression of a discipline that has lost its faith in its own descriptions or interventions. For both Graeber and, especially, Gregory, the rise of "posthuman" perspectives within anthropology over the past decade is inextricably linked to the continued consolidation of neoliberal hegemony within the academy and the wider world. Far from being a more sophisticated and theoretically radical critical position than the humanist or Marxist perspectives that they have in part supplanted, such positions in fact mark an accommodation to such a situation and express the social position or perspective (take your pick) of a section of academics who struggle to survive in the neoliberal bureaucratized university of the early twenty-first century. Here Strathern's observation about the need to link the conceptual relation to the social relation takes on an explicitly politically interventionist tone. For Graeber, "vulgar Foucauldianism" reflects the way in which this bureaucratic academic elite mistakes its own experience of the world of academic politics as a shifting game of discourse jousting as being the basis for all social experience. Likewise, Gregory makes the claim that actor-network theory's rewriting and reassertion of some of the fundamental tenets of neoclassical economic theory, in open criticism of some of the classical anthropological and political economy critiques of that position, reflects the social perspective of the Wall Street futures trader.

Both Graeber and Gregory share a concern that the universalization of a particular position has the danger of making anthropological descriptions complicit with official discourses that they should be far more critical toward. Indeed it might be possible to go further and to argue that the desire to ascribe agency to objects as a kind of moral quest, one that Gregory describes as a central plank of the re-neoclassicalization of economic anthropology not only reflects an identification with Wall Street traders, but also reflects something of the current position of liberal humanities academics, just as the tendency toward ritual self-denunciation does in Graeber's description. The popularity of the ascription of agency to objects and the often accompanying suspicion of ascription of agency to humans could easily be seen as, at least in part, an expression of the perspective of a generation of academics who, confronted with a bureaucratic academic machine that constrains and

regulates and measures their actions as never before, see real agency as operating within that system. Certainly, if the narratives that I have collected from older colleagues about the culture shift in the academy over the past quarter of a century can be summarized in one phrase, it would be the change from a system at the service of academics to a system that places academics at its service (or, as Graeber puts it, quoting Spivak, in the past when people talked about the “university,” they were referring to the academic staff; now they are referring to managers and administrators). In contrast to the world of the 1970s, when academics could imagine that their tenure was part of a “long march through the institutions” which would be part of a struggle for a general humanization of society, today’s academics experience themselves as being controlled by a nonhuman force outside of their control. One of the saddest of the many sad stories to emerge out of UK academia in recent years is the death of Imperial College London Professor of Medicine Stefan Grimm, following an alleged systematic campaign of bullying and threats to his job owing to his failure to hit funding application targets. When the story was publicized on noted pharmacologist David Colquhoun’s website, one comment amongst the many expressing anger at what things had come to summed up the general feeling most succinctly: “This is like something out of Terminator: the rise of the (administrator) machines.”<sup>1</sup> The story has become something of a media storm over the week that I have been revising this article, finally prompting Imperial College to launch an internal review. Colquhoun’s response will sum up the feelings of many: “It is simply absurd for Imperial to allow (In)human resources to investigate itself. Nobody will believe the result. . . . Stefan Grimm’s death is, ultimately, the fault of the use of silly metrics to mismeasure people” (ibid.).

Whatever Imperial College London’s internal review turns up, it is clear that this sad incident has highlighted the increasing stress and pressure that academics, even those with permanent positions and esteemed reputations, are being subjected to. Much as Marx and Engels (1978: 479) in the 1840s described the factory worker as being an “appendage of the machine” (which as such appeared to the worker as the active agent in the partnership), today’s academic all too often experiences herself as an adjunct to a bureaucratic system of accounting that moves her. Rather than controlling numbers or words and using them to shape new descriptions and interventions, her daily experience is one in which she responds to the need to feed numbers and words that control her. Little wonder perhaps that a theoretical position that stresses the agency of the objects of human creativity over their human creators comes to appear so compelling. On this reading, descriptions that stress the agency of objects and the need to get beyond the human are at heart simply the latest example of the alienation of human creativity theorized by Marx and Engels back in 1848.

### Antifetish denunciation

But of course, leaving the story there would be in its own way as partial and incomplete a perspective as the equally unbalanced story that tells us that the “posthuman”

1. <http://www.dcsience.net/2014/12/01/publish-and-perish-at-imperial-college-london-the-death-of-stefan-grimm/> (retrieved December 17, 2014).

is a conceptual great leap forward of unrivaled novelty and importance. As even Gregory, an avowed humanist, observes, there is plenty for which to be grateful to the posthumanists, such as Latour, in terms of what they have brought to our attention and back to the table. For Latour, the artificial creation of a conceptual sphere known as the “social” or an entity known as “society” has acted as a tautological explanatory force (human relations are explained by the “social/society” as if it were a mysterious force or context), and has also enabled social scientists to concentrate all agency in humans and to ignore the agentive actions of nonhuman actors, who are relegated to the status of “objects” in this conception. Latour’s warning to avoid turning the shorthand of the “social/society” into an agent with power to shape the activities of individual persons is a salutary and worthwhile one, although it is not quite as revolutionary as he seems to imagine (see, e.g., Marx [1857–58] 1973: 83–84; 1977: 91; Wagner 1974: 119). It also perhaps relies upon a degree of caricaturing of other social scientists’ use of the “social” (as he himself seems to tacitly admit in the latter stages of *Reassembling the social* [e.g., Latour 2005: 248]). Most interesting, in accusing sociologists of creating an actual “thing” (society) out of particular perspectives on fluid relational processes, upon which they then project determinative powers and meanings, Latour accuses them of falling victim to a process of reification or fetishism. Yet this is also the very thing that he denounces sociologists for denouncing in others, albeit that these are terms that he reserves for denouncing the denunciations of others toward him (e.g., Latour 1999: 306, where we are told that “fetishism is an accusation made by a denunciator”).

Fetish denunciation appears to be an error that occurs predominantly from a particular social position, namely that of the professional social scientist, and is directed at another social position, namely everyone else. It is an activity by which the critical social scientist, misled by her “political agenda” (Latour 2005: 49), exposes what she considers to be the reality of disguised human agency and social relations that lies behind the deceptive appearance of the object or nonhuman entity that her informant has been fooled into thinking has agency all of its own (ibid.: 48–49). We are left in no doubt that this is a bad thing for social scientists to do, as it leads them to forget that their “duty is not to decide how the actors should be made to act, but rather to retrace the many different worlds actors are elaborating for one another. At which point they begin deciding for themselves what is an acceptable list of entities to make up the social world” (ibid.: 49).

However, toward the end of *Reassembling the social*, the position becomes a bit more complicated. Latour claims that now the work of tracing the manifold ways in which actors enable multiple nonhuman entities to act in the world has been completed, in opposition to the sociological reflex to ban them with reference to the “social,” we can legitimately turn our attention to the ways in which ordinary people themselves attempt to limit their numbers as well as expand them (ibid.: 220, 227).

But although we hear a lot about the dangers of premature limitations of entities that are allowed agency and the techniques that we can use to bring their hidden agency to light, not so much attention is paid to the ways in which the proliferation of nonhuman agency is halted or limited. This is fair enough if Latour views his major task as correcting what he sees as the damaging tendency of human sociologists to “explain away” attributions of nonhuman agency made by other humans.



But it does leave us with a number of questions. If social scientists are now to be the only people on earth not allowed a position regarding which nonhuman entities should legitimately be ascribed agency, then, again, Latour simply turns on its head the position that he claims that social scientists previously claimed for themselves of being the sole arbiters of the distinction between genuine agency and fetishism. And if other people are allowed to disallow nonhuman agency in a manner that is prohibited for social scientists, then which techniques do they use? We know that the “denunciation” of “fetishism” is one of the main techniques that Latour thinks that traditional social scientists use to delimit agency and that this is a bad thing. But is it a tool that is only used by social scientists as an expression of the unique epistemological arrogance that their relation to the objects of their studies predisposes them toward, as the depiction of this crime in earlier sections of *Reassembling the social* might lead us to suspect? Or if it is open to nonsociologists (the real people whom the sociologists study) as one of the unspecified techniques by which they might “restrict” actants, then does it remain a sin when it is they who use it to denounce each other?

Both the fetish denouncers denounced by Latour and Latour himself are united by a preoccupation with reality. The fetish denouncers want to uncover the reality behind false appearances (the commodity’s power is really that of alienated social labor in disguise; you were really called to this monastery by a set of social forces that put on a flowing blue dress in order to disguise themselves as the Virgin Mary). Latour meanwhile wishes to uncover the way in which the idea of a singular “reality” that he attributes to his opponents leads them to a false understanding of the importance of nonhuman agents and the lifeworlds of their informants. But if we dropped the preoccupation with “reality” that unites these two diverse positions, and if we also dropped the tendency to imply that this particular way of limiting actants was the preserve of arrogant social scientists, and looked instead at what Latour denounces as fetish denunciation as itself another perspective to be taken seriously, then where would that leave us? What kind of interventions are made by such descriptions? And perhaps just as important, what kind of intervention is made by descriptions that attempt to render such descriptions automatically invalid?

If we leave claims and denunciations of reality aside for a moment, then what is the fetish denunciation position denounced by Latour other than a perspective that attempts to bring into focus some of the relations between humans that go into bringing particular nonhuman actors into being or into action in particular ways? To reveal relations between humans that are hidden from view when viewed from one perspective is simply to provide a different perspective and in so doing to perhaps constitute a different object of perception. What is important is what particular perspectives (descriptions) enable. A dogmatic anti-antifetishism disallows a particular perspective (one that seeks to draw attention to particular kinds of relations that it considers often get overlooked) just as surely as the dogmatic antifetishism imagined by Latour disallows perspectives that seek to present nonhumans as having particular kinds of agency in their own right.

Take the case of corporations, for example. There is not a second of our lives that is not entangled with that of corporations. And not only do we often talk about them as persons and intentional agents in day-to-day life, they are accepted as such under the terms of our modern constitution. In both the United States and the

United Kingdom, they are acknowledged as persons under law, separate from their shareholders or managers, and with interests of their own that are legally distinct from those of those human persons. Whether I like it or not, I am legally compelled to acknowledge these nonhuman actors' agency and interests. And this is a position that escapes the dusty enclaves of corporate law and enters the mainstream of political discourse on a regular basis. Who can forget US presidential candidate Mitt Romney's heartfelt plea during the 2012 election campaign? "Corporations are people," he proclaimed in their defense with an aggrieved passion that stood in stark contrast to his lack of concern for human persons, such as the black underclass that still makes up so much of the population of his country's inner cities. It was almost enough to restore one's faith in his inhumanity.

Romney's defense of corporate personhood seemed counterintuitive to many Americans (albeit it that legally he was entirely correct) and certainly did not help him overcome the perception of being a defender of big business. This was in part the legacy of his former career as cofounder of the private equity firm Bain Capital, which had gained a reputation for creating unemployment in the quest for quick gains that could be made from business takeovers. Just as Gregory observes that object agency might well reflect the perspective of the Wall Street trader, so the *New York Times* observed that Romney's impassioned defense of corporate nonhuman agency seemed to illustrate his position as "an out-of-touch businessman who sees the world from the executive suite."<sup>2</sup>

And whilst it is true that corporations do not have direct access to and direct voting rights in the representative chambers of Western liberal democracies, they are nonetheless still recognized as actors with an interest in and influence within modern politics that in many respects far exceeds that of any individual human elector or representative. As I write, the European Union and the United States are in the process of negotiating an international agreement, TTIP, that will enshrine in the law of each country the right of corporations to legally pursue and defend their interests in a manner that gives those interests unchallengable priority against those that could be asserted by human citizens of other countries or their elected representatives. In this new settlement national governments could be sued for passing regulations that promoted what they saw as the interests of their citizens over those of corporations (protecting the provision of public services from competitive tender, for example). Perhaps the only reason that the nonhumans have not demanded the establishment of a parliament of things is that, like the Marxist revolutionaries of previous generations, they have realized that real power lies elsewhere.

Although it is the case that the US political system resolutely continues to support the inclusion of corporations in its modern constitution, the nature of their inclusion is not accepted by all the humans whom it is that system's job to govern. Large numbers of Americans oppose the personhood of corporations, either in principle or in the form that it is currently constituted, and across the world many more oppose the inclusion and indeed the prioritization of the rights and interests of these nonhuman actors through settlements such as TTIP. And this is an opposition that often includes bringing to light the ways in which the creation of

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2. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/us/politics/12romney.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/us/politics/12romney.html?_r=0) (retrieved December 17, 2014).



the corporate person is a matter of recognizing some relations between persons and obscuring others (such as the limitation of debt relations that is at the heart of the construction of the corporate person in the UK [see Martin 2012]). It is an opposition that consequently also often relies upon denouncing nonhuman agents as usurping agency that is rightfully reserved for humans alone. Take, for example, the activist group Reclaim Democracy, who make opposition to corporate personhood a central plank of their platform, declaring in language not too distant from the elitist sociologists denounced by Latour

that corporations are not persons and possess only the privileges we willfully grant them. Granting corporations the status of legal “persons” effectively rewrites the Constitution to serve corporate interests as though they were human interests. Ultimately, the doctrine of granting constitutional rights to corporations gives a thing illegitimate privilege and power that undermines our freedom and authority as citizens.<sup>3</sup>

A few of the humans activists organized in groups such as Reclaim Democracy may well be professional sociologists dead set on their relentless crusade to expose the fetishism of their fellow humans, but one suspects that many more of them are not. If it is incumbent upon us to take seriously the perspectives of indigenous peoples in Latin America who want to see the agency of nonhuman actors such as mountains recognized and given a place in the political constitution, in part at least as a counterbalance to the power of other legally recognized nonhuman actors such as corporations (de la Cadena 2010), then surely it is equally incumbent upon us to take seriously those people in the United States and abroad who wish to counterbalance the power of the latter nonhuman actors not by placing another nonhuman actor in opposition to them, but instead by attempting to limit or disallow the participation of these nonhuman actors in politics or to question the extent to which we should recognize them as autonomous agents at all. Their descriptions are intended as an intervention that is designed to replace or repair nonhuman actants that they perceive to be acting against human interests. And this is a description that works its “magic,” at least in part, by adopting a perspective that reveals the human relations and intentions that other perspectives occlude. If we can accept that jaguars might have human aspects when viewed from certain perspectives, then surely it is not too much to ask for this perspective to be taken seriously as well.

A position that denounces this perspective as a form of unallowable antifetishism is a description designed to disable that perspective and the descriptions and interventions that it makes possible. It is a description that is designed, as one anthropological admirer of Latour puts it approvingly, to “deprive” people working in socially critical traditions of “the conceptual tools with which they achieve their critical effects” (Jensen 2004: 256). Like Latour, Jensen focuses on how these conceptual tools are used by critical academic theorists, rather than being perspectives that are on occasion used by most of us. Who has not at some point thought that someone they knew had failed to realize that there was a very human motivation behind what that other person had misapprehended as the product of impersonal forces? In particular these perspectives are often adopted by millions of people

3. <http://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate-personhood/> (retrieved December 17, 2014).

outside of the academy who describe nonhuman actants from perspectives that stress the human relations at their heart as a means of bringing them under some kind of control. One suspects that Jensen's and Latour's denunciations are likely to have as little impact upon these humans' perspectives as the critical sociologists' denunciations of fetishism were likely to have had upon the pilgrims making their way to Lourdes at the behest of the Holy Virgin Mother.

## Structures and settlements

At times, Latour seems to argue that we are constantly groaning under the yoke of a "modernist settlement": a series of seemingly absolute distinctions, such as that between the natural and the social, which, amongst other things, arbitrarily separates humans from nonhumans, placing the former in hermetically sealed containers of their own construction and objectifying the latter, thus exiling them from the full involvement in social life that their agency deserves. This modernist settlement that we are imprisoned by is built on a particular kind of humanism, but it is one that does its human subjects few favors. By insisting that humans are the only agents worthy of consideration in social life and relentlessly enforcing the separation of humans from nonhumans, the modernist settlement condemns us to an ontological separation from a reality whose existence we come to doubt from our self-imposed exile as what Latour "repeatedly and repetitiously" (Jensen 2004: 256) refers to as "minds in vats" (Latour 1999: 7 etc.). A critique of particularly rigid readings of Descartes' dualism is always welcome, however familiar we may have become with such criticisms over the centuries. The problem to my (fully ontologically connected) mind occurs when this "modernist settlement" comes to act as a structure-determining thought that dare not declare its name, or a context that explains away many of the complex and shifting positions that people allegedly living under this modernist settlement take toward human agency, nonhuman agency, and their mutual entanglement, much as Latour argues that the "social" has come to act for sociologists. As Ramos (2012: 482) observes, it is a position that leads Latour into a "hyperbolic argument against modernity" that relies upon constructing a straw-West that is as holistic as the caricatures of indigenous or non-Western societies that still have purchase in some corners of anthropology today. This tendency is well pronounced in other related manifestations of antihumanism in contemporary anthropological theory, such as the perspectivism of Viveiros de Castro (Turner 2009: 17–18).

Indeed, it is hard to escape the suspicion that the modernist settlement is itself a description that is justified more by the interventions it encourages than by the actual state of human/nonhuman interactions in modern life, and both its description and destabilization would benefit from what Sykes (2003: 164) refers to as a greater "ethnographic edge." This suspicion is heightened by Latour's own cheerful anticipation that the reader might reject the "slapdash history of modern philosophy" (1999: 12) that he has had to force, in carefully selected and pruned "unsavoury pellets" (ibid.: 6), down his readers' throats, for fear that "otherwise the innovations of science studies [primarily the revelation of the determining power of the 'modernist settlement'] will remain invisible" (ibid.). When Wagner (1974)

notes that social groups are the effect of looking at life in a particular way, deliberately paying attention to some aspects and deliberately ignoring others, his observation deserves to be extended to concepts such as the “modern settlement.” However much work the patrol officers of colonial New Guinea put into ignoring aspects of social life there in order to discover the groups that were allegedly its basis, it is dwarfed by the work that Latour has to put into framing his discovery of the settlement at the heart of modernity. This technique of artificially creating an opposing position in order to deliberately accentuate his own supposed distance from it is a characteristic of his writing more generally. His readers have to be carefully schooled into accepting certain premises—as can be seen, to take one example, in his hope that he and his readers will “learn to widen the gap between an account that makes use of the social . . . and this other one that purports to deploy strings of mediators” (Latour 2005: 108). In contrast to the distinctions allegedly constituting our modernist settlement that need to be relentlessly dissolved on sight, some distinctions need to be not only preserved but brought into being through careful training in how to see from the correct perspective—almost, one imagines, like the patrol officers had to painstakingly train the Dairibi to view themselves as members of social groups. It is as if surface appearance misled us to falsely believe that ideological fetishes such as the “social” might be similar to Latour’s “strings of mediators,” until he arrived with the correct theory to train us to see beyond that false appearance to the reality below.

For all that Latour attempts to set out his differences with structuralism (see, e.g., Latour 2005: 153), there is a sense in which this aspect of his theory marks a continuation of this earlier form of antihumanism (as is also the case with the often related trend of perspectivism [Turner 2009]). Although Latour abhors the “social” as a contextualizing device, the modernist settlement comes to act as such a contextual explanation, a structure by another name, a *langue* determining the *parole* of the minds trapped in its vat. We might think that we have agency, but it is the self-defeating illusory agency of a naïve humanism that seeks to preserve its independence from the true liberation of acknowledging its mutual entanglement with nonhuman agents: an illusion fostered in our minds by the mysterious determining power of the modernist settlement. Just as hidden structures uncovered by the structuralists were revealed to determine social organization and mental faculties, so the power of the modernist settlement uncovered by Latour is revealed to have “defined modernity” (Latour 1999: 21). Why is the apparently “commonsensical” realization that nonhumans “can be loaded into discourse” made so implausible? Because “the sway of the modernist settlement” made it “appear bizarre,” (ibid.: 96), much as the mysterious determining power of the hidden structures of the mind conditioned how humans saw phenomena for previous generations of antihumanists. Why do we become obsessed with the fake opposition between constructivism and reality? Because it is a “bed in which the modernist settlement wants us all to slumber” (ibid.: 275), much as the self-generating structures of bygone days established binary oppositions that conditioned our thoughts (although at least these structures only had agency and not the added intentionality of the modernist settlement, which actively desires to shroud us in the slumber of false consciousness).

And for all that we are led to believe that the contemporary rejection of humanism is a theoretical breakthrough of unprecedented import, it is worth remembering

that Althusser's structuralism, for example, was as avowedly antihumanist as are currently fashionable forms of posthumanism. For Althusser (1969: 229–30), “anti-humanism” was the absolute . . . precondition of . . . knowledge. . . . Any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes.” And just as, for the structuralists, thoughts were determined by structure (in the case of Althusser, an ideology emanating from historical structures of which humans were mere bearers and that were created beyond their control or agency), so, for Latour, we are victims of the modernist settlement, which divides the world into categories and arranges them in unhelpful oppositions. And just as, for Althusser, expert intellectual detoxification of ideology was the only solution capable of enabling people to see past the ideological emanations of the structure, so, for Latour, careful reeducation that even most of his readers are unlikely to be able to fully grasp is necessary (Latour 2005: 239). For all that Latour says we emerge in interaction with the nonhuman world, he has recourse to an ideological structure to explain why we apparently constantly manage to convince ourselves otherwise.

Hence the shared cynicism toward political radicalism and activism. What is the point of active engagement in processes beyond human control in which the participants are likely to merely unconsciously replicate the structures or settlements that determine their thoughts anyway? Back in the 1970s when academic Marxism was all the rage, it was riven by a conflict between, on the one hand, the dominant structuralist Marxism of Althusser and, on the other, the minority current of humanist Marxism, which drew on influences such as Lukács, and to a lesser extent the existential Marxism of Sartre. Humanist Marxism expressed something of the spirit of 1968, and it was here that the contempt that it evoked in those committed to structuralist Marxism was located as much as it was in the humanists' inability to recognize the alleged epistemic break between the immature humanist Marx of *The German ideology* and the mature structuralist Marx of *Capital*. Whilst Sartre ended up under arrest for his involvement in the events of May 1968, Althusser pronounced the largest general strike in the history of Western Europe to be an instance of “infantile leftism” (quoted in Lopes 2014: 39). Althusser's position was consistent with his membership of a mainstream Communist Party that had long abandoned hopes for a revolutionary transformation of society as immature and had instead placed its bets either on incremental change based upon parliamentary coalitions or on the Soviet military machine. Likewise, Latour is dismissive of those who wish to engage in political activism without realizing that the terms of their engagement inevitably end up replicating aspects of the conceptual divisions that are at the heart of the problems of modern thought (e.g., Latour 2005: 260). He might tend to argue that “critical sociologists” are the most likely to suffer from this tendency when they enter the world of political activism, as opposed to Althusser, who probably thought that this was the group most likely to transcend it (provided, of course, that they had adopted the correct structuralist perspective). But in this respect, Latour again simply inverts the oppositions of the preceding structuralist generation rather than transcending them, much as Turner (2009) observes is the case for “perspectivism” as an instance of “late structuralism” in crisis. Certainly, Latour's repeated sour jibes at intellectuals and social scientists who see their research as in some small way contributing to a critique of political tendencies that

they feel to be to the detriment of humanity (e.g., Latour 2005: 42, 61; 2010: 34) bear comparison with Althusser's haughty contempt toward the May events.

There are, of course, differences between contemporary antihumanism and the Althusserian antihumanism that preceded it. Whilst both are skeptical of political involvement, Althusser's vision was one in which the structures of history were inexorably moving in a particular direction. It did not matter which side you chose, as either way the unfolding structures would roll over the resistance of the past as inexorably as a Soviet tank division rolling over the barricades in Budapest or Prague. Within contemporary antihumanism, it does not matter which side you take, for as soon as you take sides you betray social science by reinscribing the oppressive conceptual definitions of an outdated modernity. It is no coincidence that an antihumanism that predicted change took hold at a time when the postwar boom and the expansion of universities as a part of a Keynesian consensus meant that, to leftist intellectuals, it appeared as if the structures of history really were on their side. Regardless of its antihumanism, however, this was a stance that was only of use to some humans: namely, those with an interest in the unfolding of that historical process, not those whose interests predisposed them to oppose it. It is equally no coincidence that a variety of antihumanism that refuses even that political stance and can be used by anyone for any political end takes hold at a moment when we no longer believe that the structures might be carrying us to a promised land, but instead believe that there is no choice but to adapt ourselves to the ever-intensifying demands of nonhuman forces outside of our capacity to control. As noted by Fuller (in Barron 2003: 87, 97), part of the popularity of Latourian posthumanism also expresses the situation of a generation of precariously employed researchers reliant on displaying flexibility and adaptability in an increasingly marketized and insecure academic job market and who are in need of a catch-all theory with little intellectual or political baggage, designed to be carried from short-term contract to short-term contract.

If we emerge by virtue of our engagement with the world not as minds in vats (let us forget for now whether or not that world is best described as "social" or whether or not its nonhumans are best perceived as agents), then the subject-object distinction so abhorred by Latour is something that itself arises in that entanglement, not from the emanation of a mysterious structure or settlement. There is something in these entanglements that predisposes us to keep returning to this perspective, unhelpful though it might often be. (Hence the frustration Latour feels in getting others to fully understand the radicalism of his revolution in thought, perhaps.) In the final analysis (as they used to say once upon a time), the least effective way to get a mind in a vat to stop seeing itself as a mind in vat is by appealing to it as if it were a mind in a vat that needed to simply stop seeing itself as a mind in a vat. Such an approach, which treats Cartesian dualism as a form of false consciousness held by detached minds in vats to be dissolved by mental critique, and which disdains attempts to reconfigure the entanglements within which it emerges, has the paradoxical effect of entrenching the implicit worldview of disembodied minds in vats. If we want the subject-object distinction as it is currently experienced to be dissolved or reconfigured, then this can only be done by altering the terms of that entanglement, and that is fundamentally a question of political choices made by people, not just the outcome of the dissolution of ideology by expert critique.



At one point, Latour traces the birth of the modernist settlement to the debate between Socrates and Callicles four thousand years ago, which in Latour's reading was no debate at all, as both sides agreed upon the fundamental point: that the masses needed to be kept out of politics as the need to compromise with their misunderstandings would corrupt the understanding of superior men (such as Socrates and Callicles [see Latour 1999: 216–65]). Although Latour often plays with the commonplace anti-intellectual posture by which the common people are deployed as bearers of commonplace wisdom to which the eggheads have blinded themselves, from which a certain kind of intellectual gets a peculiar kind of kick (so, for example, toddlers understand intentionality better than humanists, and so on [Latour 2005: 76]), his dislike of political engagement comes from a similar place to the one that he ascribes to Socrates and Callicles. For Socrates, the compromise comes from listening to what the masses have to say and diluting expertise into rhetoric; for Latour, the compromise comes from at some point not listening to everything the masses have to say, in order to create a political position from which you can speak to them and for which you can argue, but once again this merely inverts the previous position rather than challenges it. In both cases it takes a particular expert position to see through the delusions, and in both cases political engagement involves compromising the purity of that expert perspective.

## Conclusion

All of which means that we have to start from paying attention to, and taking seriously, the processes by which humans both allow and disallow the presence of non-human actors in their lives, as Latour himself avers at times, although in practice the process of endlessly expanding agency to every imaginable nonhuman object seems to interest him much more. (See Fortun 2014 for a discussion of some of the political implications of this particular bias). It means, as Latour (2005: 29) also cogently argues, starting from the controversies about who makes groups and who or what are actors and building our explanations from that fertile ground. In all of this there is much to admire, even if it is hardly as revolutionary as actor-network theory's proponents often seem to claim. It appears in this respect, for example, to be a rather welcome return to the principles that guided Gluckman, Turner, and the other Manchester pioneers back in the 1940s and 1950s, or the insights provided by Wagner in the 1970s. Likewise, as Bessire and Bond (2014: 451) observe, the critique of assumptions of the separation of human culture and nonhuman nature is far from revolutionary; they cite Geertz (1963: 3) as one early example of a critical engagement. Outside of anthropology, Lukács ([1921] 1971: 130) provides an example of someone who was clearly a modernist, a humanist, a dialectician, and a fetish-denouncer, and yet who, despite these drawbacks, was very well aware of "nature" as a social and historically contingent category to be critically interrogated for its role in setting up a problematic subject–object distinction. In this discussion, Lukács refers even further back to Marx, who observed that particular ways of objectifying nonhumans were the outcome of a particular modern worldview: "Descartes with his definition of animals as mere machines saw with the eyes of the



manufacturing period, while in the eyes of the Middle Ages, animals were man's assistants" (Marx, quoted in *ibid.*: 130–31). Hornborg (2013: 123), in an intriguing discussion of the relationship between Marx and Latour that is uncharacteristically sympathetic to the former and critical of the latter for current tastes, suggests that "concessions" to the "critique of Cartesianism" advanced by Latour and others are necessary. But what a more careful reading of the long history of anti-Cartesian Western philosophy might suggest is that the current vogue for contemporary forms of antihumanism is largely based on the success of the straw-man reduction of the Western philosophical tradition to extensions of Descartes (see also Bessire and Bond 2014: 441).

Paying attention to processes of including and excluding actors and taking them seriously does not mean that one has to be politically neutral with regard to nonhuman actants. De la Cadena's response to a situation in which the power of corporations seems to be running out of control and in which previous political movements to limit that power seem to have failed is to advocate the cause of people who seek to extend agency to other nonhuman actants (mountains and other kinds of what she refers to as "earth-beings" [de la Cadena 2010: 336]). I, and I suspect many others, have a great deal of admiration for de la Cadena's decision to take a stand alongside those of her informants who wish to place limits on corporate power, although it is worth noting that in a context where states such as Bolivia are happy to incorporate aspects of indigenous cosmologies into their constitutions, then members of indigenous communities themselves inevitably begin to internally disagree about the desirability of this move and the presentation of indigeneity that it entails (e.g., Bessire 2012, 2104; Canessa 2014). Following the controversies means taking seriously those indigenous people who believe that the project of demanding recognition of the mountains might be counterproductive as well as those who are its advocates. And that means acknowledging that a sympathetic skepticism about the effectiveness of the latter position cannot simply be lazily dismissed as the arrogant modernism of politically minded leftist intellectuals who join forces with their right-wing opponents in seeking to exclude genuine indigeneity from the political settlement (see, e.g., de la Cadena 2012: 340–41, 349). Likewise, social scientists who share their perspective should be willing to take a stand alongside those who seek to limit the power of corporations by denying the legitimacy of their agency or presenting it from perspectives that reveal corporations' reliance on human decisions and relations, even if that position is less welcome than de la Cadena's in an era that celebrates unfettered object agency and finds it easier to accept projects that expand the number of nonhuman agents than those that seek to curtail them. If, as Graeber argues, it has never been more important for us to attempt to collectively reshape our world, then the issues raised by those who seek to curtail antihuman manifestations of nonhuman agency are far too important to be silenced by the antifetish denounciators.

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### Épilogue: Trame de nœuds et non réseau, ou l'anti-anti-antifétichisme et la machine ANTropolitique

Résumé : Dans cet article, je considère ce qui peut être caractérisé comme une intervention politique dans les descriptions anthropologiques contemporaines. Ce faisant, j'adopte une approche particulière quant au travail de Bruno Latour, qui est l'auteur le plus représentatif d'une philosophie post-humaine critiquée par certains contributeurs de ce dossier. Je défends l'idée que l'adoption d'une politique anti-anti-fétichiste risque de ne pas prendre sérieusement l'expérience d'individus pour qui l'adoption d'une perspective qui insiste sur l'agentivité et les rapports humains revêt une grande importance. La thèse post-humaniste contemporaine, qui prétend qu'un désaveu de la politique telle qu'elle est actuellement configurée est nécessaire pour éviter une forme de dédain élitiste pour nos informateurs, est examinée selon différentes perspectives, depuis lesquelles il apparaît que le post-humanisme pourrait constituer précisément l'expression de ce dédain élitiste qu'il tente d'éviter.

Keir MARTIN is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. Previously he was Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, where he also completed his Ph.D. in 2006. His main fieldwork was conducted in the 2000s in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea, where he studied postdisaster reconstruction and emerging forms of social stratification. This research culminated in the publication of his book *The death of the big men and the rise of the big shots* in 2013.

Keir Martin  
Department of Social Anthropology  
University of Oslo  
PO Box 1091  
Blindern  
0317 Oslo  
Norway  
k.j.c.martin@sai.uio.no