I. Interview with Bruno Latour

Participants: Robert Crease, Don Ihde, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Evan Selingwer

DI: Those of us who have read your books, from *Laboratory Life* through *Artemis, Pasteur*, and up recently through *Pandora’s Hope*, have noted first of all that you move somewhat from an earlier, much more descriptivist position to now considering normative factors—morality and ethics. At the same time there is a kind of parallelism between your self-identity, first as a more sociological anthropologist, following around the scientists, to *Pandora’s Hope*, where you re-identity yourself as a philosopher. The opening question then is: What is motivating this transition?

BL: Well, I am not sure if it is a transition from sociology to philosophy because my disciplinary affiliations have always been rather uncertain: although I teach sociology I have always considered myself as a philosopher at heart, but of course, let me add that no one in France ever took me as really a sociologist nor as a professional philosopher, nor for that matter an anthropologist. Like the Dutch scholar Ann-Marie Mol, I would define myself as an “empirical philosopher,” not as an empiricist philosopher, but as someone who tries to get at classical philosophical questions through the methods of fieldwork and case studies. I believe that the corpus provided by fieldwork and case studies should be added to the usual corpus of canonical texts. The two have to be carefully studied together. The latest book I have just completed in French, about legal practice, *Dire le droit, une ethnographie du Conseil d’État* is thoroughly empirical. So I don’t see a trend as if I was moving away from concrete questions to abstract ones. I try to do the two together always. It is just that sometimes I identify
myself more with philosophy and sometimes more with anthropology. In fact, deep down, my real interest is in metaphysics. My longer-term project has always been to visit successively and to document the different truth production sites that make up our civilization: science of course, but also techniques, religion, law, etc. But it is really sweet of you to consider that I am a philosopher. I like the label and it is not so frequent. . .

DI: It is an interesting question because what you are characterizing yourself as, being more empirically oriented, actually fits in more with part of the American model of philosophy, particularly in pragmatism, than it does in classical European philosophy, or certain aspects of analytic philosophy. In some sense, we have no problem with an empirically oriented philosopher.

BL: In a sense, we also have this tradition in France, if you think of the style of writing of people like Sartre (think of his Flaubert), or Bachelard, or Serres, or our various trends of phenomenology, think of Merleau-Ponty. There is much more data, if one can say this, in all these authors than in what other traditions would take as straight philosophy. Think of Deleuze and Guattari’s Mille Plateaux. It is packed with other sources than canonical texts. The practical question concerns who does text studies and who does data studies.

DI: Since you raised the term phenomenology—a topic we have already had a few exchanges on—I should mention that I agree with your point that European phenomenology made more of an empirical turn than some of the classical philosophies. But in Pandora’s Hope you claim that phenomenology has only gone part of the way in terms of recognizing the embodied subject. It seems to me that the kind of phenomenology that emerged at the end of the twentieth century is more materialist and embodiment-oriented than the phenomenology done during the beginning of the century. My guess is that part of your reservation has to do with phenomenology not taking into account the non-humans.

BL: This may have to do with my ignorance and biases. Let’s take the phenomenological tradition I know the best—the one of Merleau-Ponty. It is a very interesting tradition for embodiment. But it is an entirely human-centered account of embodiment. It is very difficult to de-center the human in this tradition and connect Merleau-Ponty with classical metaphysical questions, like the ones I am interested in that were posed by Whitehead. I know it is unfair. But in the fight to rehabilitate metaphysical questions in the Whiteheadian sense, I don’t see what kind of help phenomenology can be. Certainly it is more helpful than overly rationalistic positions, because of the attention on the lived world, le vécu and its beautiful appraisal of the cosmic horizon, as Merleau-Ponty calls it. But the question is: Can we again gain access to agencies that are not human-centered? I don’t see the use of phenomenology here. If you take the Phenomenology of Perception, for instance, the opposition between lived perception and the scientific objectivist definition of the same phenomena is rendered even starker than before, in the positivist days. So, for me, but you have to understand that this judgment is linked to my position, to what I want to do, I always find the tools of phenomenology widening exactly the type of gap that I am trying to close. The choice is between Merleau-Ponty and Whitehead for me.

DI: It is interesting that you should mention Whitehead because Donna Haraway does the same thing. She also fixes on his notions of concreteness.

ES: You mentioned metaphysics twice. I am hoping that you can say more about this. You claim that you have always been interested in metaphysics. This is interesting because the term is so broad one might even say that it is overdetermined. Social constructivism, which you have always distanced yourself from, has never been able to bridge the gap between local analyses and that which lies beyond the local. I take it that what you mean by “metaphysics” is that you are always working on particular case studies in order to come up with slightly more general, perhaps what Deleuze calls virtual, concepts, such as “mediation,” “networks,” and “translation.” These concepts have a general scope and belong to the project of category building. For example, in Pandora’s Hope you work through different levels of style and mediation in order to produce a general model of practice. Can you clarify what you mean by metaphysics by addressing the relation between the particular or singular and the universal, which, after all, is the traditional philosophical desideratum.

BL: I don’t relate metaphysics to the question of the connection between the local and the global. This is a question in itself, one of social theory on which I have worked a lot, for instance in the book I did on Paris ville invisible. No, I relate metaphysics to the very Leibnizian and Whiteheadian traditions. According to this tradition, the ingredients of the world are accessible to inquiry. I add—because in this regard, Whitehead is not exactly a field worker!—they are accessible to some sort of empirical inquiry and it is the role of the social sciences (but the word social here becomes an inconvenience) to pursue those inquiries about the basic categories by which actors build time, space, and agency. These categories should not be fixed in advance by what I call the “metaphysics of nature,” a paradoxical expression to point out that with the notion of nature one is already doing metaphysics. So metaphysics is not concerned with “meta”
questions that begin “after” nature has been known, but begin at once, even in the very definition of the ingredients that are making up nature. So, for me, metaphysics starts in earnest when you grant those you study the same ability to build the basic categories as when you read a treatise by Leibniz or if you read Process and Reality. When I interview scientists, I consider that they are doing as much metaphysics as if I was reading the Monadology. In both cases they are concerned with how the world is built. This might seem strange to you but for me metaphysics is a very concrete practice. Even stranger, I take it to be a mixture of ethnmethodology and ontology.

ES: Perhaps the reason I was associating metaphysics with the relation between the particular and the universal is because in your work—at one point you call it the “Modern Settlement,” at another point, you delineate it in terms of the agreement made between Socrates and Callicles—you point to meta-level trends that are located at a particular historical juncture that carry with them a metaphysical resonance from that point on, within a pervasive milieu. This is metaphysics in the sense of going beyond. I interpret this to be a move in the direction of the general because it appears that your critical aim is to classify styles of evoking “nature” and “culture” that happen with a certain amount of repetition in order to locate core elements.

BL: I disagree with the word “meta.” For me it is what I call infra-theory. The vocabulary I have used is very bad and it is meant to be actant, mediation, obligatory passage point, translation, delegation, they have no meaning in themselves and they do no metaphysical work whatsoever. I never put any sort of explanatory weight on them. I don’t believe the world is made of mediations, entities, or agencies. Those words are simply tools deployed to travel from one site to the next. The whole vocabulary of Actor- Network Theory is a way of moving from one agency to the next. This is why, in the book I did on the politics of nature, I call what I do “experimental metaphysics.” Like Whitehead—whom Isabelle Stengers defines as the greatest philosopher of the past century—I believe that to do metaphysics experimentally, one should not define the actors of the world in advance. It is the job of metaphysicians to monitor the experiment in which the world makes itself. We need a very poor vocabulary, composed of stupid terms, to function infra-conceptually. Words like modernity are even more useless since they have no empirical content, they simply dramaturgize some ideological questions. See, I find all those terms disgusting as well, but I don’t worry if they are dirty since I put no explanatory weight in them. They simply allow me to move, in a relativist way, from one position to

calls the next, and to see how all the ingredients of the world—space, time, agency—of what will compose a normal metaphysics are actually redone locally.

CBJ: If I can change the field a little bit; because I am not a philosopher, and would rather identify myself with STS studies, I would like to raise a different question of your development in time and spirit. Going back to the notion of infra, such as infra-reflexivity, the methodological slogan of Science and Action was “just follow the actors around because they will define themselves.”

BL: The philosophy of Science and Action is not very deep. It is more like sociology of science.

CBJ: In any case, in order to let the actors define themselves with interference from meta-theories, there seems to be an appeal to pure description. This has come under attack, on normative grounds, by theorists like Langdon Winner. Now you are turning to normativity. I take this to be similar to what Isabelle Stengers does, her sort of normativity. My question is: Is there a change in methodology from Science and Action, in which your goal is to follow the actors around, to your recent work, in which you make claim that we can define, by following the actors around, whether they are good or bad actors, i.e., it is better to engage than negate an enemy. It seems that you go from a descriptive to an evaluative practice without changing presuppositions. I am wondering how you conceptualize that role. At what point is one able to make an evaluation instead of merely describing? Can we still have infra-reflexivity if you are evaluating the infra-reflexive practices?

BL: I have to warn you, my degree of reflexivity on myself is nil. I produce books, not a philosophy. Every book I am involved with is a work of writing that has its own categories and its own makeup. I cannot transform all of these books into a unified field of thought that would remain stable over time and of which one book would simply be coherent manifestations. On the other hand, I don’t believe in being irresponsible for what I have written. I agree that I have a responsibility for being compatible, like a software designer has to maintain compatibility. I want someone who can “run” my religious and ethical software to also be able to “run” old software, such as Laboratory Life. Maybe this is harder to understand in your American tradition than in the text-based Continental one, but for me there is a big difference between producing books and having a philosophy simply expressed in books. Each book requires a writing strategy that is uniquely adjusted to the problem at hand, for instance Aramis or the Love
of Technology; but it does not mean that you can transport this writing strategy to another book, for instance Irrductions. Do you see what I mean?

CRJ: Yes, but you are evading my question on normativity.

BL: On the accusation of not being normative, I have never understood what this means. It is just that it takes time to find the sites where morality can be investigated. I don’t believe that morality is something that floats on top of purely descriptive or merely empiric stuff. Morality is inside the things, and thus it can also become an object for empirical enquiries. When I started writing twenty-five years ago there was a great need for descriptions of scientific activity since there was none independent of the scientists’ own descriptions. Times change and now we have a lot of this type of work. I am greatly influenced, as you know, by the work of the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers, especially her work on what she calls “cosmopolitics,” the politics of cosmos. Now, this is neither descriptive nor normative—by the way, where does the difference come from if not from the modernist settlement that we have been throwing into doubt? In Politiques de la Nature, I have tried to overcome this very distinction between facts and values, descriptive and normative, and to explore its political root. So I don’t accept the characterization of my earlier work as being uninterested in ethical and political questions; in this work the ethical task was to describe, describe again and again, how science and technology are done. But now I want to do other things and the scientific controversies that are pressing us from every corner require, I agree, other types of concepts and other focuses of interest. I can see why this is so completely chaotic for a professional philosopher because it is far from being tidy. Sometimes I am highly conceptual, then I do field work, then it is a variety of infra-arguments to move from one field work to the next. If that can reassure you, I too find this a disgusting bricolage. But I don’t know how to think otherwise.

ES: Concerning your compatibility as you call it, I noticed that there is one thing, a unified metaphorical structure, that runs throughout your work. Like Nietzsche and Deleuze, you use metaphors of war as a means of generating explanatory power. Even in your last talk—and I know you were not saying it was your own term—you spoke about enemies. You have gone from talking about networks and trials of strength to enemies. All of these discussions are compatible in the sense that their force and affectivity relies on an agonistic vocabulary.

BL: I’m sure Donna Haraway would castigate me. Yesterday’s talk was a bit different, though, since it was about what I call the “progressive composition of the common world.” The term “enemy,” which was used in Karl Schmidt’s sense of what to do when there is no common referee, is not metaphorical. War is now less metaphorical than in my earlier work. It is part of a conceptual argument of what to do when there is no common referee, no accepted umpire, and especially not nature. But I agree that I use a lot of war metaphors, which I still think was really important to do to fathom the supposedly peaceful domain of science. (Have you noticed by the way that I am simultaneously accused of having been apolitical in my descriptive work and to have politicized the pure world of science and technology?) I have to confess that my first philosopher was Nietzsche. I went to a Jesuit school and, strangely enough, we read Nietzsche for a whole year preparing for the baccalaureat. So I don’t deny his influence on me. I was saved from philosophy of consciousness by early high doses of Nietzsche; this is my Deleuzian influence, and this probably explains why I can’t swallow much phenomenology. Philosophy is an ecosystem; there are all sort of different species, economies, diets there. So, thanks to the little niche where I have been educated, I never understood why consciousness was an important question anyway. But again, I am sorry to say that I am not a philosopher in any professional sense.

RC: You mentioned fieldwork, a term which is philosophically loaded. In Clifford Geertz’s last book he opposes the critical studies mode of fieldwork to a more hermeneutically sensitive mode of fieldwork, which he sees himself as doing. In a hermeneutic mode, you have to ask who the actors think they are, what they think they are doing, what end they think they are moving toward, and the framework of meaning they move within. This doesn’t mean you have to go native but you at least have to try to understand their mindset.

BL: Yes, that is a minimum definition of fieldwork! Does he mean that the cultural studies people don’t do that?

RC: Yes, that’s what he says.

BL: This is very mean.

RC: He opposes this to a hermeneutically sensitive sense of trying to get at the self-interpretation of the actors. So I was wondering if you could elaborate on what your own concept of fieldwork is.

BL: The hermeneutic definition given by Geertz seems to me a very minimalist one, considering the challenge of how much you need to do to get at under-
CBJ: So semiotics can be used to allow actors to build their own worlds.

BL: Everything that does this is good: metaphysics, ethnography, and
semiotics.

CBJ: I would like to ask a question that is not my own, but is one that
is frequently levied against you. Your theory defines the types of
actors who define levels of specificity, and your theory defines the
types of actors who define levels of specificity. You're now defining
actors in terms of the metaphor of the cat.

CBJ: Okay, But the question is how do you view the term of strength and
weakness. Does this suggest that the only worlds that anthropologists
and goal-oriented rationality operate in are those that are semiotic.
I'm basically asking if you think that any work that is not semiotic
is an incomplete or nonexistent.

BL: I am really sorry, but I have not read either of their books.

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thinkers seem to be trying to look at emergence while holding on to notions of complexity theory. So on the one hand, they try to locate novel forms of emergence as they appear in the world, unmediated by theoretical constraints. On the other hand, they find certain mathematical models as helpful for seeing the emergence of the world in a particular way. What does it mean to the have and hold on to these models of complexity? Does holding on to them in advance restrain the types of possible emergence?

**BL:** You need to ask Isabelle Stengers this question. She knows more than I do about the scientific side of Deleuze. While I have read everything of Deleuze, I am not always convinced he is so useful in my empirical enquiries. I am impatient in this otherwise beautiful book, *What Is Philosophy?*, with the way philosophy’s role is exaggerated beyond any recognition, and also by the fact that on religion he has nothing much to say. Deleuze is not my all-purpose philosopher. Also, and that’s a disagreement I have with Isabelle, I don’t see him as a good writer, and for me the writing is very important, the crafting of books with very specific literary strategies that embody very specific theories.

**DI:** You mentioned religion in this context. This is another thing that seems interesting in much of your recent work. What do you have to say about religion at this point?

**BL:** I started with religion and was a theologian first, exegesis more exactly, again text-based practice. This has always been my interest. If it is difficult to speak of science, it is even more difficult to speak of religion. I am just writing a book, which I have been thinking about for many years, on the conditions of the enunciation of religion. The enunciation of religious speech—acts has become even less possible now than scientific discourse. But I consider that philosophies that don’t deal with the truth production of religion are as incapable of dealing with real thought as those who can’t deal with the truth production of science or the truth production of techniques. This is why the whole current of anti-religious thinking, which is very strong in much French critical thought, I find unhelpful. We must be prepared to handle all of the domains of truth production, including, of course, politics. That was the aim of my talk yesterday: the truth production of politics is absolutely essential.

**DI:** You are approaching being a genuine metaphysician.

**BL:** That’s kind of you but alas I am genuine in nothing. But if I were genuine in something it might be in metaphysics, experimental metaphysics. It is important not to do metaphysics in the place of the actors. This is what I am interested in. I am surprised that the speech condition of religion has disappeared. This is because, I think, it has been loaded with rationalism that makes it completely unable to get at the right tone with which it should be articulated. I am trying to find a way to speak about religion without using the idiom of rationality. I have a "sermon" to appear in *Res* in case you are interested! But I know this is even more tricky and dangerous than speaking about science.

**ES:** I have a question about the possibilities of speech. One strategy I’ve often seen you use—and I’ve learned quite a bit from—is that you turn to situations which appear to be exclusively conflictual and find underlying points of agreement, what Goffman calls tact. These are moments of complicity that under the surface provide the conditions of the possibility for utterances of disagreement to transpire. For example, while Hobbes and Boyle appear to disagree on everything that is important, they need to agree on what nature and culture are in order to disagree in the first place. Socrates and Callicles appear to disagree on everything, until you interpret their shared sentiment about the masses as the condition of the possibility for appearing to disagree in the first place. Why do you utilize this strategy so often? I take this way of proceeding to be different than social constructivism that always centers on the *agon*, conflict, the opposition, and misses multiple levels of complicity.

**BL:** Your observations are right and perhaps I have overdone it. It is a strategy similar to Leibnizian diplomacy. Stengers has rehabilitated the notion of diplomacy and the figure of the philosopher as the diplomat. So, after all my talk about war, I guess I am interested in diplomacy. If there is no common world, if there is no referee, if there is no common world already made, and if you still want to produce a common world, locally at least, then the diplomat becomes a key figure. The diplomat does precisely what you say. The diplomat is the one who is hated and doesn’t know what the people he represents want. I think that it is very difficult to locate disagreements, so the strategy is to look for other sources.

**ES:** Can you link this up with the topic of trust in any way? If you see the world as an *agon*, then it is filled with distrust. This suggests the problem to be solved is one of mediation, attempting to create bonds of trust. But if you begin your analysis differently, by using the figure of the diplomat, you appear to demonstrate that trust was there from the start.

**BL:** Again, in spite of the criticism leveled at me, I don’t paint an agonistic portrait of the world. After all, the key words are translation and irreduction, hardly
agonistic terms. . . . The fault with social constructivism is not in the agon, but in the fact that they have taken the liberty of making the metaphysics in the place of everyone else. The mistake of social constructivism comes from the social—and also from the notion of construction that might have outlived its usefulness somewhat.

ES: I am thinking of something like the expert-lay divide. Here the metaphysical presuppositions are that experts and laity need to communicate better with one another. Some people argue that experts are patronizing and need to be better sensitized to lay knowledge. Others argue that lay concerns are often too value-laden and based on irrational concerns. In both instances, commentators focus on distrust and differences, not complicity and trust. But this picture of the world, as conflict-ridden and divided, is only a social constructivist world.

BL: My worry with social constructivism is that they confuse what the world is made of with how it is made. They confuse the ingredients with the construction. They believe that the world is really made of social stuff. Like Stengers, I am a constructivist but not a social constructivist. On the other hand, there is a deep hypocrisy in rejecting the antagonistic too fast. This is why I am very interested in Schmidt. People always talk about dialogue. But to imply a dialogic condition means that we have already organized the world for the others.

DI: As an interesting coda to this, your claim about not writing a philosophy but writing books is precisely what Paul Ricoeur told me many years ago.

BL: (Laughs) I’m surprised Ricoeur said that. I don’t see much craft in his books.

DI: Well, he told me two things. He told me first of all that “once I write a book, it is no longer mine. It belongs to the world.” The second thing he told me is that each book written is separate and autonomous. He then asked me how I could see his different works as all relating together. Part of this of course is what we were trying to do with you.

BL: This is kind of you. I am sorry to be so unflexitive on my own work.

For Albena Yaneva, architect-watcher

What has gone so wrong? It first looked like a good idea: it was fun, it was original, it was enlightening to use the word “constructivism” to designate the work I was doing on science and technology. Laboratorizes indeed looked infinitely more interesting when described as so many construction sites than when portrayed as dark mastabas protecting mumified laws of nature. And the adjective “social” seemed at first rather well chosen, since I and my colleagues were bathing the venerable work of science into a hot tub of culture and society that aimed at making them young and lively again. And yet everything has gone awry. I had to withdraw the word “social” with shame—scraping it in haste from the title of Laboratory Life like faces of Trotsky deleted from pictures of Red Square parades; as for the word “constructivism,” it does not seem possible to salvage it from the furies triggered by the “science wars” nor from the detritus left by the passage of “deconstruction,” this new Attila whose horse’s hoofs leaves no grass behind. Everything I wanted to achieve, namely, to associate reality and construction into one single dynamic with one single term, has been wrecked like a badly designed aircraft. Times have changed: In order to show that one is not a dangerous outcast, it seems compulsory to swear a pledge of allegiance to “realism”—now meaning the opposites of constructivism. “You have to choose,” roar the guardians of the temple. “Either you believe in reality or you cling to constructivism.”

And yet saving constructivism is precisely what I wish to accomplish in this