

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

De Vries, Gerard. *Bruno Latour*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016. \$29.95, 224 pp., paper (9780745650630)

Bruno Latour once said that he hoped readers would get as much enjoyment from reading one of his books as from drinking a bottle of his family's wine. A paperback copy of Gerard de Vries's *Bruno Latour* costs about six dollars more than the Ontario price for a bottle of Maison Louis Latour Pinot Noir, so it can be the standard for judging this book.

Gerard de Vries is a philosopher, and it is as philosophy, albeit — “empirical philosophy”— that he approaches Latour's oeuvre. Nonetheless, there is much here to interest sociologists. Following an introduction to Latour's style through vignettes from his sociological web opera, *Paris ville invisible*, and a brief biographical sketch, de Vries proceeds in more or less chronological order to summarize and contextualize Latour's major books.

Three chapters are of particular interest to sociologists. Starting with *Laboratory life* (written with Steve Woolgar), de Vries devotes a chapter to showing how Latour's take on semiotics led to a distinctive and controversial contribution to science studies. In the next chapter, *The pasteurization of France* and *Irreductions* are framed as a contribution to reformulating the relation between science and society, and moving from epistemology to ontology. Through an examination of “Where are the missing masses?”, *Reassembling the social*, and *The making of law*, the following chapter outlines Latour's critique and reformulation of sociology, shifting from the sociology of the social to the sociology of associations (actor-network theory).

The final two chapters of the book are more philosophical, but still of sociological interest. “A philosophy for our time” starts from Ulrich Beck on the risk society and Max Weber on rationality and disenchantment to understand what Latour is doing in *We have never been modern*, *Politics of nature*, and the art exhibit *Making things public*. Here and elsewhere, the author does a fine job untangling what is often puzzling in Latour's efforts to say something radically new, and in the case of *Politics of nature*, he provides an accessible summary of very difficult book.

His task is even more difficult in the final chapter, on Latour's anthropology of the moderns, provisionally reported in *An inquiry into modes of existence* (AIME)—“not a book for the faint-hearted” (152).

This is the most philosophical chapter, and sociologists will likely find the summary of Latour's reflections on love-talk and the felicity conditions of religious speech most instructive. The book ends with a brief discussion of Latour's latest book, *Facing Gaia*, which has just appeared in English translation.

I cannot fault de Vries for how he approaches AIME, but as a sociologist, I would have appreciated more discussion of Latour's dismantling of "the Economy" into three modes of existence: attachment, organization and morality. A remark made there brings me to my one substantial criticism, less of the book than of the genre. Referring to calculation and valuation, de Vries credits Latour with "laying the groundwork" for Michel Callon, Donald Mackenzie and others to explore "the empirical details" (189). This exemplifies what I call the "cult of the individual theorist", underplaying the contributions of Callon, Mackenzie, and others to Latour's understanding of economization. Just as, in *The pasteurization of France*, there is Pasteur the working scientist, and "Pasteur" who gets credit for revolutionizing medicine, there is Latour and "Latour". Recognizing the distinction between the work of assembling a fragile collective and that of attributing responsibility does not detract from either Pasteur's or Latour's genius — instead it shows where it lies. As the Canadian comedian used to say, "We're all in this together", in more ways than one.

Other criticisms are mere quibbles. First, at the end of chapter 3, we read that "Latour gradually turned into a public intellectual (81), but this is not pursued (unless being a public intellectual just means writing books on important public issues such as climate change, and making the occasional contribution to *Libération* expected of any French intellectual). Second, although it is mentioned, I would have appreciated more discussion of Latour's aversion to critique, especially his acerbic comments on critical sociology, and his contrary requirement, nicely developed in *Cogitamus*, in which to speak well to an audience about what concerns them is the highest virtue — good advice for any public intellectual. But again, these are just quibbles, to show that I haven't been completely taken in by the book.

Using the blurb on the wine bottle as criteria, how does *Bruno Latour* fare according to the Maison Louis Latour Pinot Noir standard? Like the wine, the book is "well-balanced" and Gerard de Vries handles Latour's work with "great finesse". I did not subject it to the trial of being "enjoyable with lamb, beef, duck and cheeses" but it was a pleasure to read on its own. Occasional humorous remarks, and homely illustrations of sometimes difficult concepts, such as brilliant use of scoring in football (soccer) to illustrate "felicity conditions" and "passes", make the book

less dry than the wine. It is also longer lasting, and more informative and thought-provoking (*in Bruno veritas?*). Readers familiar with Latour's work will be reminded of aspects they may have forgotten, specialists (e.g., in the sociology of law) will find context that makes puzzling works like *The making of law* more comprehensible, and novices will get an accessible guide to a challenging thinker.

There are other good books on Latour, but none that is as reasonably priced and up-to-date as this. To write an introduction to the work of a scholar as prolific and original as Bruno Latour is a prodigious task. Gerard de Vries is up to it. I highly recommend his book.

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Jim Conley is Professor Emeritus in Sociology at Trent University. He has been exploring the work of members of what Bruno Latour once called the only two interesting centres of sociology in France — the former Groupe de sociologie politique et morale and the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation — and investigating mobility disputes and attachments to common places. Recent publications in this journal include "'Parks not Parkways': Contesting automobility in a small Canadian city" with Ole B. Jensen (*CJS* 41, 3) and "Luc Boltanski and the cult of the individual theorist" (*CJS* 40: 3).

