

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Science and Cultural Theory. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 168 pp. \$US 19.95 paper (978-0-8223-4825-2), \$US 69.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-4816-0)

Although trained as a philosopher, Bruno Latour has become arguably the most well-known active French sociologist in the English-speaking world over the last twenty years. He is certainly the most notorious proponent of that branch of Science and Technology Studies known as Actor Network Theory, or ANT. Latour is also a key player, along with Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, in the “pragmatic turn” in French social science “after Bourdieu.” In short, Latour is influential. He’s like Gregory Peck in Dylan’s “Brownsville Girl,” about whom the narrator sings, “He’s got a new one out now. I don’t even know what it’s about, but I’ll see him in anything.”

On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods is a collection of three previously published essays, with a short preface by Latour. The first essay, the oldest and longest, from which the book’s title is derived, appears here for the first time in English. These essays show Latour turning his focus to the relationship between science and religion. The central claims — that there is no essential difference between facts and fetishes, that iconoclasm always has a partner in iconophilia, that religion is about transformative speech-acts and renewal of attachments to the mundane rather than beliefs — develop theses first fully articulated in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Latour now appears to add the claim that we have never been secular, either. As with nonmodernity, this would be a retrospectively recognized nonsecularity rather than a transition to what others have called the postsecular (although this is surely a contribution to those discussions too). What is peculiar to our current nonsecularity, however, is that we have lost the power of religious speech, and this is what Latour wants to recover.

Like Latour’s other writings, we find here the usual paradoxical formulations, that we should stop “believing in belief,” for example; and there are the unsurprisingly graceless but mnemonically useful hybrid neologisms, *factish*, *iconoclash*, *transfear*. Aside from these typically Latourian rhetorical devices, there are at least three issues deserving of attention and debate. First, Latour’s rejection of Marx’s theory of com-

modity fetishism provides a specific context in which to consider the pragmatic turn away from critical sociology. Second, the book's focus on religion furnishes an ideal occasion for reexamining Latour's perpetual dismissal of Durkheim. Finally, Latour's rearticulation of the task of *Reassembling the Social* (2005) as the task of *resuming* religious speech offers sociologists a provocation to reexamine the notion of the sociological vocation.

Marxists, of course, have known Latour to be an opponent at least since *We Have Never Been Modern*, which speaks of networks instead of class conflict and tells us that our tasks are now about tinkering and sorting, for "there are no more revolutions in store." Now he provides a provocative new broadside on a key Marxian concept, the fetishism of commodities. According to Latour, Marx and other "critical thinkers" are caught in a double bind, thinking that things must be *either* real *or* constructed, free or determined. Indeed, critique — an umbrella term, for Latour — tends to doubly subordinate the ordinary actor, accusing her first of fetishism and then of being a puppet of social forces. In this way "The critical thinker triumphs twice over the consummate naiveté of the ordinary actor." Instead of positing invisible social forces to replace/redouble invisible divine forces, Latour argues that following actual practices and suspending our belief in critique is "the only way to focus on the creations of our hands, and to pay one's exact dues to creator and to creatures alike." What is more, a world without intermediaries, with immediate and transparent social relations, is as impossible and undesirable as the mythical *laissez-faire* "free market." Emancipation will be achieved by giving things their due, understanding the attachments that they make possible, and replacing bad attachments with better ones, not by "seeing through" commodities to real reality. To this end, in the first essay Latour playfully mobilizes French etymology and homonymy to disturb the modern fact vs. fetish binary by replacing *fetish* («*fétiche*») with *factish* («*faitiche*»), uniting the made with the real in "the robust certainty that allows practices to pass into action without the practitioner ever believing in the difference between construction and reality, immanence and transcendence."

To go beyond antifetishism is also to go beyond iconoclasm. The modern Enlightenment project of purifying reason and destroying idols ignores its partner, the simultaneous proliferation of mediating images. In the second essay Latour refers to this dual development with the term *iconoclash*, which occurs "when there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a mediator." To be nonmodern — and also nonsecular — is to accept the activity of mediators; it is, in a way, to be *iconophiles*, and to "follow the practice," à la Garfinkel, in

order to renew and extend the production of attachments, *factishes* and flows of “cascading images.”

Latour’s project appears to resemble Durkheim’s concern with the effects of religious practices in generating forms of solidarity and ideals and images of the collective. So how should we differentiate *factishes/ attachments* from solidarity generated through ritual practice? With Durkheim as with Marx, this book leaves us waiting for more than an engagement with straw men. Indeed, the entire discussion of Marx and Durkheim is confined to passing (and sweeping) references. There is no discussion of Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane. Does Latour reject it? Probably. His description of modern antifetishism as oscillating between purification and mediation, his attempt to jettison the concept of belief altogether (while Durkheim merely subordinated beliefs to rites), and the fact that, in true pragmatist form, he never really distinguishes between worship and use, could all be understood in this way, but it’s still unclear. Emblematic of this obscurity is his vague distinction between divinities and gods.

If the subjects of the first and second essays, *factishes* and *iconoclashes*, seem to mix the religious and the scientific, in the third essay Latour attempts a distinction between scientific practice and religious speech as two different kinds of transformative practice. In both cases, the real sin is to interrupt ongoing transformational flow and experimentation with new kinds of attachments. Latour rewrites the second commandment to read “Thou shall not freeze-frame any graven image,” applying it to both scientific practice and religious speech. This would seem, again, to blur the boundaries. The shared problem is fixation, whether to facts or to beliefs. However, renewing the contrast, and reversing common usage, Latour claims that “it is science that reaches the invisible world of beyond ... it is religion which should be qualified as local, objective, visible, mundane, non-miraculous, repetitive, obstinate, and sturdy.” Successful religious speech, like “love-talk,” brings us close and transforms us.

This calls for a direct engagement with the sacred/profane distinction. If the religious is mundane, is it also profane? Again it is unclear, and complicated by Latour’s attempt to speak *religiously*. He rounds explicitly on the lacunae left in human speech by modern antifetishism, advocating a recovery of religious speech:

I cannot even speak to my children of what I am doing at church on Sunday. It is from this very impossibility of speaking about a religion to my friends and to my kin that matters to me, that I want to consider here.... Religion ... has become impossible to enunciate.

Where does social science fit? Crucial in this regard is the problem of linking the discussion of religious speech in the third essay with the discussion in the first essay of ethnopsychiatry — an innovative approach to treating mental illness that is developing at the Georges Devereux Centre in Paris. We were told that ethnopsychiatry constructs narratives and attachments and “heals through the double artifice of the treatment configuration and an artificially induced affiliation.” The narratives and attachments of ethnopsychiatry heal, or *transfear* — a wordplay on the psychoanalytic notion of transference that tries to avoid its relational asymmetry — by “causing a fear that comes out of nowhere to pass.” It is unclear how sociology and anthropology map onto ethnopsychiatry and religious speech. Do we locate social science in the production of *transfears* or in the enunciation of religious speech? Which one is Latour engaging in? And which should we be developing, if our task really is reassembling the social? What’s the difference between healing and saving?

This is a highly suggestive text, but not quite a book. It’s not the length — God knows that an academic book under 200 pages is always an answer to prayer! — it’s the fact that it lacks the argumentative symmetry one might expect from a text advocating anthropological symmetry. As a text on science and religion, it is suggestive but ambiguous. But perhaps that’s what Latour means by symmetry, by *factish*, by *icono-clash*, by *transfears*. No doubt he already has a new one out. I wonder what it’s about. Will it convert me, on the spot?

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