Making the '*Res* Public'

Bruno Latour and Tomás Sánchez-Criado

abstract

A philosopher, a sociologist and an anthropologist, Bruno Latour is one of the most important founders of *Science Studies* and, more specifically, of *Actor-Network Theory*. Throughout his entire career he has been trying to reconfigure the links between Science, Technology, Society and Politics doing ethnographic and empirical research on scientific, technical and legal controversies. This interview took place at the press presentation of the exhibition 'Making Things Public' [http://makingthingspublic. zkm.de/] at the *Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie* (ZKM), Karlsruhe (Germany), March 16th 2005. The exhibition was co-curated together with German artist Peter Weibel and follows the insights of a previous one called 'Iconoclash: Beyond Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art' on iconoclasm and how to solve it, in which they reflected upon the importance of mediation in these three domains. Crucial to this new exhibition is the notion of *ding* or *thing*, as an effort to resurrect the common Germanic root for 'things' and 'parliaments' or 'assemblies' (e.g. Thingstätten), to give back to 'things' and 'objects' their status of 'cases' in a juridical sense, of political formations and aggregations. In a way, the exhibition as conceptualized by Bruno Latour is an extension of the argument and the project of 'political epistemology' originally developed in his book *Politics of Nature*.

Tomás Sánchez-Criado: Could you please talk about the rationale of the exhibition? To put it bluntly, why 'make things public'? What are the aims of the exhibition and why have you curated it?

Bruno Latour: There is something I would like to say beforehand. The show is inspired by my thought, but it is a bit different from it. There are lots of people implied in it. Once this said, I curate it because I like to explore new media. With books and lectures you can do a certain type of thing, but with exhibitions you can do many more things, including more experiential, experimental stuff that people can go through. People and visitors that are not intellectuals can get inside and it's a different sort of medium. And also because this place here, the ZKM, is a unique place. The topic of this exhibition is a consequence derived from another exhibition I co-curated three years ago called *Iconoclash*. But *Iconoclash* was not about politics. It was about iconoclasm and the crisis of representation. So I decided that the next exhibition had to be about politics, because politics is usually the subject about which people are easily iconoclastic. People criticise politics and debunk politics and this makes more difficult, I think the most difficult thing to do, to make a show on politics which is not a critical show, which is not a critique of politics. So, what we are trying to do is to reinterest people in the techniques of representation. The show I did three years ago had the same theme, which is basically revolving around what I call 'mediation', the 'respect for mediation'. So it's

not a political show, it's a show about politics. It tries to see the public space in a very practical way, which is what I call 'atmospheres of democracy'. Now, 'atmospheres' is a concept borrowed from Peter Sloterdijk. This atmospheric argument takes the invisible and palpable of what a space is. So, when people say 'the public space', our way to talk about it is to mention where it is housed, how it is lit, its architectures, how people are organized, where they sit, how they bring issues… And that is what the show is about. The show is about the techniques of representation.

TS: What things does this exhibition show and what do they make us reflect upon?

BL: Well, it's an assembly of assemblies. So imagine a huge tank where we would have gathered different ways of assembling. Lots of people have assembled different things. Firstly, we show assemblies either of the past or of different traditions than the current European one. This is the historical and anthropological part of the show. Lots of other people have assembled or 'dissembled' differently. The question is, 'what can we gain of that?' Then, in a second huge part, there are represented all of the places where we actually assemble now, and which I think are political: supermarkets, Law, natural disputes, scientific disputes, technical disputes, which are very bizarre but very interesting I think. There is this third part in which we talk about parliaments in the technical and local sense of the world: vote systems, congresses, parliamentary technologies and buildings. And what we want to do is to compare all of these spaces: the parliament itself and those other quasi-parliaments. There is also a fourth part about what I call 'the new political passions': all the new technologies, web-based technologies, all the new ways of representing the public in original ways.

TS: What would you say to people who think that politics is mostly restricted to the act of voting?

BL: That they should come to the show or at least read the catalogue. And if they do it, they will see that this is not correct because politics is largely about things, about what I have called 'matters of concern', that about what people might have issues. So politics is not only limited to voting, although it might be based on voting as it is normally understood. For instance, shopping in a supermarket is voting whenever you buy, in a way. Of course, the question is 'what are the official assemblies, the means of political representation, of all these other quasi-parliaments?' On that we do not offer a particular answer. It is not a one-sided show. We say 'let's compare these techniques of representation'. To develop an argument is the visitors' duty. What we want to say is that there are plenty of other ways of doing politics. Those techniques of representation in economics could be of interest to deal with the questions on nature. Laboratory techniques might serve to deal with issues of markets, and so on.

TS: In the opening paper of the catalogue[1] you introduce a transition from 'Realpolitik' to 'Dingpolitik', from politics based in matters-of-fact to a thing-based democracy. In fact, this transition envisions substituting or creating a new way of treating a common

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1   Latour, B. (2005) 'From realpolitik to dingpolitik or how to make things public', in Latour, B. and P. Weibel (eds.) *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*. Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe and MIT Press.

topic to all the Social Sciences and mostly Political Science, 'activity' and 'agency', commonly attributed to humans. You are using this concept to refer to artefacts, things and so on. What changes does Politics suffer if we think differently what 'an actor' is?

BL: Well, an actor is whatever makes a difference. Imagine this example from the show: we have a river represented here. Rivers make a difference, especially now; For instance, in Spain where the politics of water is very important. It makes sense to say that rivers are important political actors. On two conditions: one of them is that the river has to be made to speak through plenty of techniques of representation. The question is 'what is the speech of this river?' And the second one is 'what is the role played by the river speech where people in charge of water management talk about it?' Compared to these two important matters the questions such as 'is the river a real actor?' are uninteresting. Distinguishing living from nonliving entities was interesting for pre-revolutionary Kantism somewhere in the 18th century, but we are now living in the 21st century. I think there are lots of more interesting questions such as 'how can we represent all these nonhumans?' That is what the show is about. The humans are attached to plenty of things. To seek to distinguish between humans and other entities is something very respectable, but I don't think is topical now. Not all the questions are simultaneously interesting. I am not saying that this is not interesting at all. All I am saying is that it is not topical. It is not about what a show like this one is about.

TS: Who then is the 'new citizen' in this *Dingpolitik* you propose?

BL: Things. Rivers, for example. Why not? And now the new questions that are very interesting and critical to the show are the ones such as 'how to make a river speak?' For instance, we show a scale-model of a dispute in the Alps about the coexistence of humans and animals. All of these things are very difficult. They are real problems. And it seems to me that they are much more topical than differences between intentional humans and non-intentional objects. Especially if you think that the whole show is a whole *Ding*, or both *Causa* and *Cosa* in Spanish, in which what we gather are matters of concern.

It is useless to tell humans from nonhumans in them. They are things we need to assemble around in order to solve cohabitation with. And that is a very important political question. To distinguish between humans and nonhumans would not solve what I am interested in. If you tell me any question in which distinguishing between humans and things clarifies anything I would be convinced, but which one? Kant is very interesting but Kant again is from the 19th century and we are in the 21st century. The whole humanistic argument – and I am not against humanism – was about the question of 'how can we have freedom, given that Nature is a conceptual necessity?' This question is completely outdated now, because the fundamental thing is that we have to survive among all of these nonhuman beings to which we are attached.

What the show says is that the classical question of politics 'how to represent humans?' is not the only topical one. Of course we have to talk about electing systems and voting technologies. But there are lots of other questions we have to solve as well, which turn around this *Ding*. People are now talking about power, energy, climate, landscape, food… everything that is precisely not just human.

TS: You have talked many times of the importance of technical mediation for the constitution of ways of life. In the wake of the new technologies we live by, hasn't politics already changed?

BL: This is something we are not trying to solve but to present in slightly different ways. We say, let's compare. First, let's take politics in its techniques of representation, which is 'parliaments'. How big are they? How are they built? How do you listen to people when they speak? How do you organize Law? Then we take all the other cases where we have similar problems, supermarkets and so on. And of course technical objects, such as your computer-recorder, we have analyzed and showed in the past as socio-technical networks in *Science Studies*. And third, the question is, and the show does not solve it, 'what are the assemblies which correspond to these assemblages?' Yes, the technology is an assemblage, but there is no politics of its situation, because all of these technical devices are made by few people for reasons which have nothing to do with what is discussed in parliaments. There does not exist a big parliament where everything would be cased, all of the parliaments, all of the technologies, supermarkets and so on. So, not everything is political, if you were expecting that answer. But everything is about techniques of representation, and then the show says, let's compare them and see what is transportable from one sphere to other. So the first thing to solve is: technology is a sphere of politics. Economics is a sphere of politics. Law is a sphere of politics. Nature is a sphere of politics, and a very important one. And then, let's see what parliament we can get out of all of them. Maybe it will work, may be not. It's up to the future. We need to map the correspondences between spheres from the very humble point of view of techniques of representation.

TS: What role do scientists play in the show?

BL: In this show, the scientists are asked to live as part of the political sphere instead of thinking they are out of it. But not much stress is put on this, but on the laboratory assemblies, scientific assemblies, because they give voice to objects and also because they invent a lot of tools to speak about the matters of concern that they have developed. They are an important model for political assembling. I am not saying 'you scientists are doing politics'. I say 'you make nonhumans speak'. 'You assemble in congresses and meetings to speak about what concerns you'. 'You have invented lots of instruments, you have devised lots of systems for visualizing them', so 'you should be in the show, because in the Parliament of Parliaments the scientists are very important'. In this show we don't do more. In other words, and this can be more specifically found in my book *Politics of Nature*,[2] I have developed how to get the scientists in democracy, but that would be too long a topic now.

TS: In that sense, would we need to change our theories of knowledge if we change our notion of politics?

BL: That's for sure. The whole political philosophy has always been connected to an idea of knowledge and science. It's true of Rousseau. It's true of Hobbes. It's true of

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2   Latour, B. (1999) *Politics of Nature: How to bring sciences in democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Marx. I came to this question from my work on science, not from my work on politics. All the trials to modify politics need to modify at the same time the notion of knowledge and science. These things I have tried not to maintain separate in many, many books. This is what I call 'political epistemology'. For me the show is interesting precisely because of that. It tries to modify both the status of politics and the status of things, through presenting a new theory of knowledge and a new political science. Some people might say that this is ridiculous because we will never escape the boundary of modernism. Some other people might say that this is a nice trial to get away from both modernism and postmodernism. We will see. For me it tries to build on what I have called non-modernism.

TS: Being a little bit more specific. In what ways do you think human and social scientists could take the proposal of the exhibition?

BL: I think the interesting thing for human and social scientists is the number of ways in which their own data could be represented. And here there are at least twenty scholars working hand-in-hand with artists to produce installations for this show. So it tries a little bit to wake up the social scientists: we are in 2005 writing still the same boring books. Wake up! There are lots of other ways of presenting your data. There are lots of ways of collaborating with artists. Let's organize new connections, as I did for example with Peter Weibel [co-curator of the show]. I think there is plenty of stuff interesting for social scientists.

TS: Moving on to another topic, it seems to me that the main distinction in the show is made between assembly and assemblage. That would certainly make some people think that you remain tied to an ideal of liberal democracy.

BL: That's true. In the American sense, isn't it?

TS: Yes. The question is 'what about other ways of assembling?'

BL: That is a very good question. We say that it is possible to assemble people. This would have a main liberal democratic inspiration. Now, there are other ways of doing the assemblies. A little bit of this is shown in the anthropological part and in the church-religion part. The answer of the show to this question would be 'even if you disagree with the way we make assemblies, what are the techniques of representation you offer?' So, show basically the techniques, the atmosphere, how it is bounded, how you bring an issue to talk about' and so on. The classical repertoire of liberal democracy's arguments, such as expressed in Rorty or Habermas, stresses the role of humans sitting at a table speaking with a rational basis and having a nice key-composition. In my sense, I don't think this is a liberal democratic ideal, because for me it is much more material, and much more situated and it specifies the conditions of representation. As we do see in the show, there are other ways of doing the assemblies. But that is a very good question, because the show started with a very simple-minded idea 'how can you assemble ways of assembling?' and not only assemblies. So we could also assemble ways of dissembling. People don't have to agree and they could feel aggressive against the sort of setup we have arranged. As you see, it's not Rorty's liberal democracy.

TS: Take for instance New York's 9-11 and Madrid's March 11th terrorist attacks. How do you think this show could contribute to settle down things or to solve these problems of 'dissembling'?

BL: Not directly. We don't say almost anything about that, because this was much more the topic of the previous exhibition *Iconoclash* on iconoclasm. We treated there the problem of fundamentalism as the opinion that we would be much better with no mediation, with a direct contact to God, with transparency. So they say 'let's get rid of all the mediations, of all the techniques of representation'. So much for *Iconoclash*. For this new occasion we said 'fundamentalism is an absurdity'. I don't think there is anything in the preparation of this show about Mr Ben Laden we have learnt from. One way to submit ourselves to terrorism is to be obsessed by their questions. They are not important enough to influence our intellectual life. This show has nothing to do with it. We lean on mediation. We hope that mediation is the way and not the argument of transparency. In that sense, this is an anti-fundamentalist show.

TS: How could we redefine the anthropological Other? What concerns do you think current Anthropology or Cultural Studies should face in the wake of this show?

BL: The idea of the Other in Anthropology is largely a confusing artefact so I would not be able to answer that now. It would take time. In the setup of the show the Other is there as a warning. Politics as is usually thought is only marginally important for most anthropological studies. Many peoples would say 'we are not interested in politics'. And that is the first thing you see in the show. 'No politics please'. We need to get out of the argument that everything is political in the traditional Western sense of the word. My first decision for the show was: let's show that this is wrong. So the exhibition starts with an interesting agonistic encounter among the Achuar in the Amazony showed by Philippe Descola, because they don't want any sort of political assemblies at all. The Other is here, but from nowhere in particular. The Other has certainly to reconfigure politics around things. Especially in what refers to cosmopolitics, the different politics of *cosmos*. Cosmopolitics is a word borrowed from Isabelle Stengers. Cosmopolitics is our future. The Others are our future and we are the future to the Others. That's a good question. I think the Others have a key to our notion of politics as cosmopolitics. It is the best way to define *dingpolitik*. But it has a more restricted sense because *cosmos* means harmony. The thing is that to which you assemble either because you agree or disagree. It does not require harmony. Of course I don't think many visitors will get this picture. I think it is my confusion and I do not want to force it on visitors.

Well, certainly the anthropological part is there not as a sort of a sight-seeing, but it is the first part of the exhibition to show that we are already there. We are already dealing with nature, parliaments, water, markets… And they are already there as well. We live in the same global cosmos, excepting that there is no globe. I should modify something I previously said. You tricked me with your question of liberalism. It is not a liberal show at all. Because the liberal argument is that everyone, basically humans, gather inside this huge sphere of conversation among rational beings. This is not what the show is about. We assemble around things and we dissemble. And what can connect us are the techniques of representation but not the globe, taking Sloterdijk's arguments.

TS: Going back to our tradition, how do you think the show treats the notion of power?

BL: It tries not to speak so much about power. Of course power and politics have been linked. But this is only one tradition in political philosophy, although a very important one. It links to sovereignty, to arbitrary actions. We try not to centre in power but in cohabitation. How can we cohabit? Of course the problem of sovereignty is behind it, but we wanted to think other things first. Because when you talk about power it is sometimes interesting, but other times it is not, as when people mean something else which is 'behind politics there is society and power' and want to detect it directly. I think this is wrong. If you want to detect power, again 'what are your techniques of representation?' So let's suspend the obsession with power when we talk about politics and let's see what alternatives we have. If you want to talk about power, you have to talk about your techniques of representation and assemble how you do it. It tries to shift the conversation about politics away from power. But, this is risky of course. People might say this is a naïve, typically socio-democratic, vision. Now, you can also say the opposite. You can say it's a communist exhibition. It talks about how to deal with the common. It's about 'making things public' after all. This is what communism as a historical phenomenon has said. What do we have in common? And how to produce the common with certain techniques of representation?

TS: Are there any specific proposals in the show for achieving different types of orderings?

BL: No, it's not a political show. It's a show about politics. We have not been commissioned by the European Union. It is very open. People can leave this show saying 'all of this is thing is completely absurd' or 'let's go back to politics as usual'. I call this show a *Gedankenausstellung* [thought exhibition] in the same way as people talk about *Gedankenexperiment* [thought experiment]. It is a *Gedankenausstellung* in the sense that it tries to present a problem. It's a conceptual point: can we think of politics in other terms than usual ones, by turning to things? In what would politics turn into without centring in human opinions? But it's a show anyway. People will come for fun in here.

TS: It is not a kind of a manifesto, is it?

BL: Well, the catalogue is indeed a bit of a manifesto a thousand pages long [laughs]. But yes, exactly it's not a one-lined manifesto. We think that politics is so boring. People talk about it in so critical ways. Can we for once think of politics otherwise? This is something only an exhibition can do.

TS: Which are the intellectual references for this show?

BL: John Dewey and Walter Lippman. So, pragmatism. Not Rorty. The great tradition of early pragmatism. I think one of the main interests of the show is to bring pragmatism to Europe in an experiential way. We keep talking about Lenin and Rousseau… let's take other traditions which do not start with the importance of notions such as the state. Lippman and Dewey debated around the notion of public and they are crucial to this show.

TS: Just to finish. This is something you surely have been asked lots of times: how would you define yourself in terms of discipline?

BL: This is something I never know how to answer. I think of myself as being a sort of philosopher. I use ethnography as a means of doing philosophy. But officially I am a sociologist. I teach sociology and I will always teach sociology.

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