

**BRUNO LATOUR, AMERICAN PRAGMATISM,
AND THE IDEA OF NON-HUMAN DEMOCRACY**

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ABSTRACT: The article is a venture into Bruno Latour's concept of politics especially into his idea of democracy. The author examines the concept of "phantom public" which originated in Walter Lippmann's political thought and was polemically discussed by John Dewey. Latour uses extensively this concept for his own purpose and recently one has noticed a shift in his thought from Dewey's notion of public to Lippmann's concept of limited democracy. This shift is interpreted against the background of French political philosophy as well as Latour's growing interest in non-human factors of democratic system.

I.

A problem one might face discussing Latour's concepts is that, as one of his reviewers put it, his system is so broad and abundant that one may either try to specify its particular elements, or reject it wholesale and offer an alternative (Maniglier 2014). I am hardly capable of offering an alternative and even less willing to specify particular elements of his framework. What I want to do instead is advance a handful questions that arise when reading *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, with the fundamental one concerning the place of democracy in Latour's system of thought. Of course, it may be problematic in itself to compare Latour's concepts with political philosophies in the first place. The French thinker started his versatile career, admittedly, as a social anthropologist, but he crossed all disciplinary barriers to produce a coherent system, which in its latest incarnation could be called metaphysical.

In this way, Latour made real his dream, which he articulated already in a playful text produced in 2008 and published in 2010 (Latour 2010). In it, he announces that he has decided to come out as a philosopher, but, admittedly, perspicacious interpreters of his work, Peter Sloterdijk for one, have long suspected him of philosophical inclinations. He reveals that his philosophical method is founded on Rudolf Bultman's

philosophical exegesis, which insists "that it was only in the long chain of continuous inventions that the *truth conditions* of the Gospel resided. Provided, that is, that those inventions were done, so to speak, in the *right key* (Latour 2010, p. 600)." Latour avers that the principle became a pillar of his own inquiries: "It was in this key, this way of discriminating between two opposite types of betrayal – betrayal by mere repetition and the absence of innovation, and betrayal by too many innovations and the loss of initial intent – that I wrote my PhD thesis: the subject matter was really the spirit of invention, or should I say, the Holy Spirit! (Latour 2010, p. 600)." Thus, Latour boldly ventures into the realm of philosophy though he winds up his argument with a tongue-in-cheek request: "A last wish with which to conclude: please, don't tell anyone, especially in the UK or the US, that such is my overall life project and that I am, in effect, a philosopher – worst of all, a philosopher with a system: they will never take me seriously again. Only under a German sky is one allowed to think that big! (Latour 2010, p. 607)."

This proclaimed affinity with German philosophy has not precluded, however, clear influences of American pragmatism on Latour's thinking. He is often counted among "pragmatist sociologists" together with Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Lamla 2013). As commonly known, Latour relies on pragmatism in a variety of contexts: on the one hand, on the pragmatist pluralistic and relational ontology, particularly pronounced in William James's works, and, on the other, on John Dewey's social and political concepts. Latour's associations with the latter are evident in his democratic experimentalism and belief that democracy, rather than a system defined by rigid rules, is a vigorous organism that keeps mutating and adopting to new conditions. Given that, there is certainly a common ground between Dewey's ideas and those that Latour develops in his concept of the parliament of things. In his article juxtaposing two strategies of experimentation in democratic society, Jörn Lamla compares two models of democratic experimentation. In Dewey's model, the direct effects of social interactions

within the Great Society produce problems haunting social relations. This triggers the emergence of a new public which, as a democratic, experimental community, tries to solve the problems in line with the Deweyan logic of inquiry. Crisis resolution entails establishing a new state which represents collective interests of the great community and manages them. In Latour, in turn, the starting point is provided by a crisis in the actor-network hybrid, as a result of which a parliament of things is convened, which using (ethno)methods of science, politics, economy and morality generates finally a new collective to gradually head toward a cosmopolitan order for the common good (Lamla 2010, p.351).

My analysis of Latour's concept of politics revolves around these two aspects of his work. My intent is to approach the French scholar as a philosopher who puts forward his own concept of democracy, which meaningfully draws on American pragmatism. In my interpretation of Latour's concept of democracy, his notion of "the phantom public" will be my major touchstone. Of course, I have long been familiar with the notion of the phantom public as my interests lie, first of all, in American pragmatism and the history of American thought. The notion, as Latour himself scrupulously discusses, was coined by Walter Lippmann, whose book *Public Opinion* provoked John Dewey's polemic advanced in *The Public and Its Problems*, probably his only work on political philosophy (Dewey 1984). In *The Modes...* and also other writings, Latour repeatedly stresses the relevance of this polemic to his own work. Because the Lippmann-Dewey polemic concerned fundamental issues of democracy, the basic question is, evidently, which model of democracy Latour endorses, taking a position on the dispute. This is what I will address in my argument.

Yet before I go on to discuss the significance of "the phantom public" notion to Latour's whole framework, I would like to address his most immediate and obvious theoretical reference, that is, French philosophy. As one of the Latour book reviewers observes: "Like many

French philosophers Latour counterposes his views to those of Descartes, but, like many French thinkers, he is heavily influenced by Descartes in the alternatives he poses. He rejects the notion of matter, which he several times identifies with Cartesian *res extensa*. Yet in discussing Beings of Reproduction (things as event sequences), Latour refers to lines of force as an alternative. This apparently novel treatment neglects that since the eighteenth century Kant, Roger Joseph Boscovich, and others have already presented a force theory of matter different from Descartes' *res extensa*. (Dusek 2014)"

In the context of my focal problem here, that is, democracy, Latour's reliance on political philosophy is, however, more pertinent. In this department, Latour's kinship with Jacques Rancière's has been frequently pointed out, yet, in my view, even more relevant is his complex relation to Alain Badiou. Already cited Patrice Maniglier notices: "Latour has delineated the conditions under which the question of being can be posed anew, tailored to our times. It is a doubly paradoxical ontology, indeed, because it makes not only *mediation* but also *equivocation* its native element. But perhaps it is more coherent, and, above all, more pertinent to the contemporary context, less separable from our lives and knowledge, than any of those proposed by the great metaphysicians of the twentieth century, from Heidegger to Badiou. It's to Badiou that we are tempted to compare and oppose Latour today: on the question of the universal and other subjects, they represent a decision that our times must take (Maniglier 2014, p. 43)." Maniglier explains that Latour's ontology is an experimental one, but in a different sense than Whitehead's or Bergson's ontology as: "We can still, if we like, speak of Being in general – but only to say this about it: Being isn't the Separate (what should be reached) but the Confused (what should be disintricated, contrasted). What ontology has to resolve are not the problems of access, but the problems of equivocation. Its supreme value is not adequation, but precision, as Bergson says. It is not just a matter of saying that 'being'

is said in many senses – which is what the entire doctrine of categories is about – but of showing that it is only in the disjunction of its senses that ‘being’ has sense at all. Nothing *is* except for what has been *confused* (Minglier 2014, pp. 41-42).” Such ontology is, of course, contrasted, as already mentioned, with the ontology entrenched in 20th-century tradition, which sought a reality that would be free from such confusion. If we accept Magnilier’s line of reasoning, Badiou could be said to be a natural opposition because in his thought the event, a moment of truth, becomes such reality that could help reduce the pluralism of being and, thus, challenge Latour’s concept of a multiplicity of modes of existence.

To appreciate the significance of this opposition, I would like to evoke briefly another French philosopher, Claude Lefort. Lefort may easily be contrasted with Latour based on the former’s concept of “an empty place” around which democratic society is organized. Such an “empty place” is out of the question in Latour’s framework since, by definition, it would have to elude the network of relationships. Still, it seems to me that despite this fundamental ontological difference, we could find a common ground, or at least some affinities, between the two in at least two points. One of them is separating politics as a distinct mode of existence, and the other is the perception of democratic society as being in constant flux, in a kind of less or more controlled chaos. Democracy is, then, a system whose possible dissolution is inscribed in its very essence, if “essence” is, at all, a legitimate term in the context of Lefort’s thought. The elusive nature of democracy proceeds from its very definition – “rule by the people” – as the struggles over who is and who is not the people never cease. Of course, with such a definition in place, democratic politics, rather than a system, is a process whose liminal conditions are demarcated by totalitarianism and anarchy. This is where we touch upon Latour’s fundamentally different approach to democratic politics. The difference may be encapsulated in the following question: To recognize democracy as a

distinctive system do we need to identify and grasp as many of its constitutive relations as possible or do we rather need to open the system onto more or less consciously motivated changes?

Latour is probably right to conclude that the democratic ideal of autonomy, at least in its Moderns-propagated species, is bound up with a certain paradox: “Paradoxically, if no value is held in higher esteem than the autonomy permitted by democracy, no activity is held in greater scorn than politics. It is as if we wanted the end, once again, but not the *means* to reach it. A new paradox that the inquiry must address head on: how can these same Moderns simultaneously define themselves as ‘political animals’ and reduce the veridiction that is proper to politics to a bare minimum? (Latour 2012, pp. 330-331).” Casting autonomy as an end and an ideal of democracy unmistakably brings to mind the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who judged the changing political forms of democracy based on how they went about making this ideal a reality. As commonly known and briefly speaking, Castoriadis views autonomy as implicated in a discovery made first by the ancient Athenians that the institution of society is an imaginary thing (as conveyed in the title of Castoriadis’s best known book *L’Institution imaginaire de la société* (1999)). The capacity to self-reflect on the very institution of society is the foundation of autonomy, which, in turn, is a determinant of a democratic society. Such an approach to autonomy, however, casts democracy in a perspective other than Latour does. Again, as was the case with Lefort, Latour and Castoriadis join forces in condemning phantasms of rationality and determinism, but they will differ in their takes on democracy, which for Castoriadis is first and foremost a mode of reflecting on one’s own society, reflecting, importantly, that triggers social change. Endorsing democratic experimentalism, Latour seems to approximate Castoriadis in this respect, but figuring the public as a phantom in his latest books seems to herald a departure from social activism.

II.

The public is, as the 1920s came to realize, the foundation of democratic society, if there is any at all. Latour frequently addresses the first significant dispute on the nature of the public, which was, of course, a dispute on the nature of democracy. The groundbreaking development was the Lippmann-Dewey dispute. As it was highly pertinent to Latour's thought, I will recount it in some detail, thereby drawing on Robert Westbrook's excellent study of John Dewey, which outlines the political background of the dispute, its course and consequences for understanding democracy (Westbrook 1991). The starting point of the argument was a dramatic clash over the shape of democratic society in the aftermath of World War One. It bred the conviction that democracy needed a thorough reconstruction, which should be directed and managed chiefly by the vigorously developing social sciences. Rapidly, however, optimism was ousted by pessimism about possibilities of developing a democratic society as the social sciences were harnessed in the service of democratic realist ideologies, offering a seemingly objective analysis of democratic functioning. Freudians and behaviorists, though opting for entirely different methodological approaches, united forces in what scholars of the period see as highlighting the irrational factors as the rootstock of social life. This, obviously, affected their concept of democracy, which eschewed rational discussion as a foundation of democracy, foregrounding at the same time the natural or learned, but anyway basically unchangeable, habits as determinants of political life. The best known psychologist of politics of the time, Harold Lasswell insisted that political, public activity was motivated by the projection of private emotions onto public life (Westbrook 1991, p. 284).

In response to these claims, Dewey wrote what turned out to be his likely best known psychological book: *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in which he put forward the concept of habit as an intelligent way of

facing up to the environment's challenges. In the book's conclusion, democratic reformers were encouraged to promote in society capacities of rational deliberation, which were within the reach of most people. Such intelligent habits should be fostered and developed.

In two of his books, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), Walter Lippmann, one of the most commonly read authors and a very influential journalist, offered an incisive critique of democracy, which Dewey shared, to a large extent, repudiating at the same time, equally incisively, the solutions Lippmann proposed. Lippmann's starting point was a simple epistemological assertion that "men did not know their environment directly but through the 'fictions' or representations they made to themselves of this environment (Westbrook 1991, p. 294)." Having thoroughly analyzed the sources of this condition, Lippmann concluded that democrats and democracy had never been able to cope with the problem posed by the citizens' limited knowledge. His response was simple: he postulated elitist politics, in which a small group of well informed experts would play a decisive role, advising politicians. The broader public would be left with the role of observers of principles of procedure. In *The Phantom Public* published three years later, Lippmann's position was even more radical. The problems that plagued democracy could not be resolved by means of democratic methods. Given this, the people's participation in governance should be limited to a minimum, and the public should focus on the principles of procedure rather than on its content, that is, on the very fact that some principles do exist. As Westbrook emphasizes, "behind Lippmann's elitism lay an ethical position that was common to many democratic realists. Self-determination, he argued, was only one of the many interests of a human being, and not a particularly strong one (Westbrook 1991, p. 300)."

Dewey's response to Lippmann's books, which he highly appreciated, was highly complex. Summarizing *The Public and Its Problems* in a few sentences is nearly impossible, so I will tackle only the crucial points,

starting from Dewey's key notion of transactions. Transactions refer to all natural entities, but human transactions are distinct in that they are intelligent, which means that possible outcomes of actions are anticipated and, based on these predictions, human conduct is shaped. Human transactions are divided into private and public ones, though the line dividing the two is by no means clear-cut. They are distinguished on the basis of how far their consequences reach. The public is thus defined as "all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transaction to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for (Westbrook 1991, p. 302)." In this perspective, as Westbrook observes, the public is always a plural noun; the publics or rather constellations of various publics emerge again and again in response to new types of transaction. The state, an incarnation of the movement of the public, is continually reconstructed and re-shaped. Dewey contends even that whenever a newly organized public appears, a new state is created.

In his 2011 article, Latour nearly uncritically recapitulates Dewey's ideas of the public as the best formula of a new concept of politics: "Instead of a politics established as far as possible on unified nature, on the matter of fact, it should now be carefully balanced on 'states of affairs,' on the perilous notion of what Dewey [...] has called the 'public (Latour 2011, p.10).'" Moreover, Latour highlights the salience of Dewey's book in confrontation with Lippmann's "democracy of experts." "Dewey's book today is as fresh as in 1927, and the fact that for over eighty years Dewey has lost a battle against the appeal to experts made by his opponents, such as Walter Lippmann, renders the book even more fascinating [...]. While the second Tower of Babel was being built, Dewey quietly explained why it would never work out, why the State, as he said, 'has always to be reinvented;' why nature, and especially the so-called 'natural laws' of economics, could not possibly be used to frame collective action. Only we, now, from the vantage point of the end of nature, after the closure

of the modernist parenthesis, can read with profit this book written for us (Latour 2011, p. 11)."

In *An Inquiry into Modes...* a significant shift takes place. Dewey disappears while Lippmann is showered with praises. In a passage on the phantom public, Latour writes: "[phantom] is an exact definition of the form created by the incessant reshaping of the Circle, provided that the process is not stopped (...). Here is the particular alterity that the political extracts from being-as-other, an alteration, an alienation, that no other mode has ever attempted: producing oneness with multiplicity, oneness with all, but doing so *phantomatically*, provisionally, by a continual *reprise* and without ever being undergirded by a substance, a durable body, an organism, an organization, an identity. It is for just this reason – Walter Lippmann may be the only person who really got it – that one can respect the ontological dignity of the political mode only by grasping it in the form of a PHANTOM PUBLIC to be invoked and convoked. Neither the public, nor the common, nor the 'we' exists; they must be brought into being. If the word PERFORMANCE has a meaning, this is it. If there are invisibles that one must take special care not to embody too quickly – for example in the State, that other cold monster – this particular phantom is one of them (Latour 2013, p. 352)." The last sentence may, and certainly does, allude to Dewey's ideas, and in particular to his concept of the constant reconstruction of the state by the publics. As noted above, a similar tendency has been discerned in the work of Latour, who underscores the role of permanent reconstruction in democratic politics. The cited passages from the French thinker's writings seem to confirm that he perceives a threat not only in stagnation, but also in such reconstruction which finds its embodiment in the political institution of the state. Whenever reconstruction is halted by bringing a phantom into life, democracy finds itself in jeopardy if it cannot annihilate the phantom. The Deweyan, non-phantom public, which creates the state anew, be it even for a fleeting moment, poses a hazard to reconstruction and, consequently, to democracy –

democracy so inclusive that it comprises the notion of the people which, as Lefort insisted, is the most elusive facet of democracy as well as nonhuman elements of the political system. Lefort's scheme of democracy as an empty place and a constant struggle for what may be called "the people" becomes radicalized, but it is not negated.

III.

After Latour, to include nonhuman elements into politics seems entirely obvious. As Jane Bennet argues: "Latour figures politics as a series of call-and-response engagements between humans and nonhumans (Bennet 2005, p. 143)." Such a relationship finds its vivid exemplification in the catastrophe as a social and political event. As it has been shown they can refract the trajectories of politics. The harsh winter of 1978/79 exposed the weakness of the socialist state and paved the way for attempts to undermine its legitimacy (Koczanowicz 2007). The active impact of nonhuman factors is even more dramatically embodied in the Polish presidential aircraft crash at Smolensk on 10 April, 2010 (Koczanowicz 2012). The ceaseless discussions on the Smolensk fog or the Smolensk birch tree leave no doubt that they are full-fledged participants in the tragic event, entangled in all its relations. Therefore, we must concur with the French thinker when he insists that we should listen carefully to the voices of nonhuman agents even if, or perhaps preeminently if, we find them difficult to interpret. In fact, the complexity of relationships enmeshing the contemporary world makes inclusion of the nonhuman factors in the democratic process a necessity rather than a choice.

The basic issue is what status the nonhuman factors are given in theory of democracy or, in broader terms, political theory. Latour is one of those thinkers who challenge us to revise the classic notion of democracy underpinned by the vision of activity of the people who fight for governance. Latour seems to denounce the belief that political action is intentional and, as Bennet insists, proposes rather that action itself carries, inscribed in it, the relationships among all elements of the democratic process.¹ The process of democratization would thus unfold not through expansion of the areas in which the decisive role belongs to intentional actions and sundry civic initiatives (at this point we should recall that Latour warned against the illusions of autonomy), but rather through deepening the relations and elaborating the connections among factors that emerge in action. The public does not act, it does not reinvent the state, but it is rather a phantom brought into life as a moment of democratic action which vanishes as easily as it is summoned.

¹ J. Bennet, "In Parliament...", *op. cit.*, p. 144.

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