Review

Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics

Graham Harman

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The Prince and the Wolf

Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and Peter Erdélyi

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‘Latour gives us the first philosophy ever known in which the relations between objects are both a puzzling difficulty *and* are not monopolized by some tyrant entity, whether human or divine’, enthuses Graham Harman (2009, p. 102). After several decades in which social thought has looked to Continental philosophy to sponsor its critical and theoretical turns, it is a wondrous thing to see a philosopher giving a social scientist credit for making a major philosophical breakthrough. This makes *Prince of Networks* something of an event. It was an event, too, in the more prosaic sense. While the book was in draft form, Harman and Bruno Latour met before an invited audience at the London School of Economics (LSE) to debate its claims: an encounter subsequently published as *The Prince and the Wolf*.

Prince of Networks proposes that Latour has founded a novel object-oriented metaphysics (2009, p. 151). In permitting non-humans to engage in lively relations with each other, Harman argues, Latour has departed from the post-Kantian injunction against serious philosophical interest in anything that is not correlated with the human subject (2009, pp. 77, 122–124). However, a full and proper consideration of ‘things in themselves’ requires more than just a recognition that assorted objects or entities ‘do stuff’. As Harman has it, it calls for a genuine interest in what non-human objects actually are and how they relate to each other – even when there is no human witness. From the early days of *Irreductions*, Harman insists, this is precisely what Latour has been up to (2009, p. 109).

Harman’s intention may be as much to transform the way metaphysics is understood as it is to spearhead a reassessment of Latour. For some time now, Harman has been making the case that Continental philosophy’s various disavowals and deconstructions of metaphysics ought to be seen as applying only to certain style of metaphysics: the kind that seeks the certainty of solid ground (2011, p. 73; 2002, p. 5). Heidegger’s discovery of a ‘withdrawn’ dimension

lurking behind all presence, he argues, might be better taken as the point of departure for new metaphysical outings – speculative ventures into the object world that concern themselves with the play of presence and withdrawal, of outer effects and internal componentry (2009, p. 188).

The break away from a subject-oriented ontology that Heidegger himself never quite made needs Latour's plunge into the world of non-human interactivity, Harman avers (2009, p. 137). But, just as surely, Latour's privileging of the relations between objects needs a shot of the shadowy underworld ushered in by Heidegger (Harman, 2002, p. 224). Whereas the first part of *Prince of Networks* celebrates Latour's innovation, Part 2 lays out Harman's own metaphysical extrapolation from Heidegger's and Latour's respective finest hours. It is at this point that the more effusive estimation of the Latourian *corpus* starts to be tempered by some significant, though respectfully proffered, misgivings.

According to Harman, Latour's objects are constituted wholly by their relations with other objects (2009, p. 111). Such absolute relationality, he argues, leaves objects with nothing in reserve and no defence against a demanding exteriority. Amending Latour's vision of objects which accrue their reality primarily through duels and allegiances with other objects, Harman proposes that all objects have a bimodal existence. Each and every object is both a collection of outward-facing qualities – which are potentially open to interactions with other objects – and a hidden core – replete with its own domestic relations but unavailable to the outer world. The term Harman gives to this withdrawn interiority is 'essence' (2009, pp. 65, 205–207).

As the discussion in *The Prince and the Wolf* reveals, it is around these claims that Latour confesses to a degree of bafflement (2011, p. 43). It is worth lingering on this aspect of the debate, as this is the aspect of Harman's argument that is most likely to confuse, or rile, a great many other social scientists – given the overwhelming commitment to relational ontologies in contemporary critical social thought. But first we need to be clear that Harman's essence is not the lumbering twenty-four-century-old vision of eternal and immutable substance that critical social scientists often assume is the first and last word on the concept. His is a somewhat sleeker and more enigmatic twenty-first century upgrade. Absoluteness and ideal form are passed over in favour of the idea that essence is simply that which persists in any object as it moves from one set of relationships to another or does its own thing. This makes essence, for Harman, a kind of emergent property of all an object's internal or 'domestic' relations: as such it is indivisible, hence unavailable for the inevitably partial encounters that characterize external relationships (2009, pp. 205–207; 2002, pp. 248–252).

Interestingly, what Latour does not buy into is not so much this revamping of essence, as it is Harman's charge that his approach hinges solely on external relations between objects. Latour responds that his version of relationality does indeed affirm the individual integrity or 'singularity' of each participating

object, without which, he protests, the processes of networking and alliance-building would have nothing meaningful to work with (2011, pp. 43–44, 49, 63). But Harman has a point. Latour repeatedly problematizes exterior relations – he pursues, describes and speculates about them – in ways that are unmatched by comparable attention to whatever is singular or integral about objects. And that lack of engagement – whether it evinces a mere lack of interest or a more intense disavowal – seems to characterize the attitude of the vast majority of critical social thinkers. If we are indeed musing on what it is that objects or entities are doing deep in their interior while they shuttle between relationships then most of us seem to be keeping it firmly to ourselves.

This brings us to politics, which at least as far as social thought goes, may be at the heart of the matter. There is an interesting moment in *Prince of Networks* where Harman explains: ‘Latour’s commitment to democracy is not a form of pandering to the spirit of our age, but is an intimate part of his metaphysical position. The universe is nothing but countless actors, who gain in reality through complex negotiations with one another ... All reality is political, but not all politics is human’ (2009, pp. 88–89). This recalls Latour’s notable intervention in *Irreductions*, when he writes of inter-object relations: ‘In the end politics is an acceptable model, so long as it is extended to the politics of things-in-themselves’ (1988, p. 211). The implication here seems clear: politics is a process of communication, alliance-building and power-play that does not require humans to be present at all. It is crucial to note, however, how far Latour has subsequently moved from such assertions. More recently, when he speaks of politics in terms of collective decision making about the composition of reality, non-humans may play a part, but it is no longer that of independent political actors. When Latour calls on ‘all of us, scientists, activists, politicians alike, to compose the common world ...’ (2010, p. 12), or when he berates radical ecologists for speaking of ‘a nature already composed’ (2004, p. 3), there is little doubt that human agents are orchestrating the whole political process.

It is probably fair to say that in ‘progressive’ social thought, the privileging of relations over essence, and the associated suspicion of metaphysics, have strong political overtones. Relationality is equated with the openness of reality to being composed or enacted differently. Essence, on the other hand, tends to be taken to imply not simply unavailability for reconstitution, but the existence of a ground from which any efforts to remake reality might be denounced. In proposing that ‘realities’ or ‘worlds’ are constructed, step by step, from situated encounters, relational ontologies (we might now say metaphysics) tend to assume that this compositional process coincides with the possibility and the imperatives of the political. This is especially prevalent in the network theories and other relational ontologies that take cues from Latour – where it is common practice to advocate running politics and ontology together into ‘ontological politics’ or ‘ontopolitics’ (see Mol, 1999; Law, 2004).

Even if the fashionable commuting of ontology and politics does not generally dictate the content of the political, what it does tend to do is to assume that the range and focus of one's political vision ought to coincide with the reach of one's chosen ontology – without remainder. And so, although non-human objects may be hypothetically permitted to be fully autonomous from human desires and struggles, in practice they tend to be diminished and compromised to the point at which they can be accommodated within the realms of human collective decision making. Over the years, Latour himself – I would argue – has repeatedly engaged in just such a downsizing of the ontological to fit the measure of the political. Latour's early announcement that 'Every actant makes a whole world for itself' (1988, p. 192), left little doubt about the fundamental self-sufficiency of various realms of non-human existence, although leaving room for 'their' worlds and 'ours' to meet at the edges, as it were. This ontological independence, however, has been severely compromised by later assertions that non-humans are restricted to the interstices of human networks or organizations (2005, pp. 245–246), and even more depleted by later allusions to a pervasive humanization of reality, as for example when Latour claims that 'the very extension of science, technologies, markets, etc. has become almost coextensive with material existence' (2007, p. 7).

In this sense it is interesting to hear Harman conceding that he may have been 'careless in the manuscript [of *Prince of Networks*] in equating ontological democracy with political democracy', before adding: 'I usually don't like correlating ontological positions with political ones. I usually hate it when people do that, when people assume that relationality means progressive left-wing politics and substance means oppressive reactionary politics' (2011, p. 93; see also Harman, 2002, pp. 159, 173). It is even more intriguing to hear Latour agreeing '... that there is actually no connection at all with the idea of the multiplicity of beings and any sort of democratic position', before graciously pondering whether this 'might be the weakness of *Politics of Nature*' (2011, pp. 96–97).

Perhaps, then, in the generous and convivial atmosphere of the LSE debate, is that we are seeing intimations of the ontological/metaphysical Latour drawing away from the political Latour. My reading of Harman, and my own inclination, suggests that this might be a rather good thing. This is worth keeping in mind when we consider the widespread assumption in contemporary critical social thought that it is advisable to get our onto-stories sorted out as the prelude to assuming critical stances (Barnett, 2010). And it might be especially welcome in the case of the current wave of vital materialisms whose mood is one in which 'positive' ontologies of process and becoming are aligned with progressive, life-affirming ethico-political orientations. Although there are undoubtedly moments when the antics of non-human entities may trigger political issue-formation or ethical openings, the tendency to assume that aliveness, changeability and emergent novelty in material existence equates with human freedom, creativity or generosity is rather more problematic. Among

other effects, such an association discourages us from expanding our ontologies or metaphysics to include those aspects of existence that involve stasis, inertia and quiescence, or even the mundane, non-vital being of minerality. At the other extreme, it serves to occlude those events of material becoming which are of a magnitude or violence that potentially overwhelms human collective life – politics included. And as Harman would argue, it disavows those dimensions of existence – material and immaterial – that are withdrawn, unreachable and hence definitively unavailable for any human purchase, political, ethical or otherwise.

Metaphysics, as Harman views it, is a wildly speculative endeavour, at its best when it is immodest and disinterested. For him, a metaphysics to get excited about is one that includes humans and all their strivings and dreams, but also leaves room for the great swathes of existence that are self-sufficient, inaccessible and utterly indifferent to human entreaty. Politics, as Latour would have it, is a cautious, modest and interested activity, one which engages humans and non-humans in terms of their non-indifference – their capacity to affect one another. Far from constituting the entirety of existence, this region of mutual encounter and interference might best be seen as a rather narrow and specific zone. Along these lines, a teasing apart of politics and metaphysics may be one of the felicitous outcomes of Harman and Latour's coming together.

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Nigel Clark
Lancaster University, Lancaster,
LA1 4YW, UK