Facts, Fetishes, and the Parliament of Things: Is There any Space for Critique?

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Bruno Latour equates criticism with an iconoclastic urge that is underpinned by the project of modernity. Latour’s attack on iconoclastic criticism is therefore closely linked to his rejection of the modern framework. This paper examines Latour’s analysis of modernity and the ways in which he connects criticism to the project of modernity. Through our analysis of Latour’s reading of an episode from U.R. Anantha Murthy’s novel Bharathipur, we argue that critique is actually an integral part of a truly democratic knowledge-making process as well as politics.

Keywords: Bruno Latour; Modernity; Postcolonialism; Critique; Iconoclasm

What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse, had outlived their usefulness, and deteriorated to the point of now feeding also the most gullible sort of critiques? (Latour 2004a, 229–30)

For someone considered to be one of the most provocative contemporary thinkers about science, it is surprising to see the vehemence with which Bruno Latour has argued that a critical attitude is undesirable. Latour’s rejection of a critical attitude partly emerges from what he considers to be the deterioration of intellectual explanations to the level of conspiracy theories (Latour 2004a). However, he also has a much deeper concern with regard to critical approaches because he equates criticism with an iconoclastic urge that is underpinned by the project of modernity. Latour’s attack on iconoclastic criticism is therefore closely linked to his rejection of modernity. In this paper we examine Latour’s analysis of modernity and the ways in which he connects...
criticism to the project of modernity in order to address the question of whether a progressive critique and politics can be reclaimed from the nonmodern perspective that Latour advocates.

**Hobbes, Boyle, and the Modern Constitution**

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour identifies two demarcations that he sees as crucial to the formation of modernity. The first demarcation is between the domain of nature and the domain of culture, and the second between the processes of purification and the processes of translation. The work of purification refers to the attempt to separate nature and culture into “two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of humans on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other” (Latour 1993, 10–11). The work of translation, in contrast, refers to the creation of “hybrids of nature and culture” (Latour 1993, 10). Latour’s thesis is that a rigid dichotomy between the work of purification and the work of translation (a central tenet of what Latour calls the “modern constitution”) actually leads to a proliferation of hybrids (Latour 1993, 12).¹

Latour situates the origin of the modern constitution in the debate that took place between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes in the middle of the 17th century. This debate has been examined in detail by Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer in *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (1985). Shapin and Schaffer point out that Boyle’s experimental framework made use of three different technologies to establish what counted as facts:

[A] material technology embedded in the construction and operation of the air-pump; a literary technology by means of which the phenomena produced by the pump were made known to those who were not direct witnesses; and a social technology that incorporated the conventions experimental philosophers should use in dealing with each other and considering knowledge-claims. (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, 25, italics in original)

Boyle’s attempt to create an experimental philosophy around these technologies came into direct conflict with Hobbes’s political philosophy, which was predicated on a systematically organized Body Politic. Shapin and Schaffer trace how the air-pump was transformed from a problematic technology into a standardized piece of equipment, a “black box.”² At a superficial level, this seems to point to a victory for Boyle—through his technologies, the world speaks, and we have access to the inanimate world of nature. However, Shapin and Schaffer challenge this reading of the debate by carefully pointing to the mediating processes (material, literary, and social) through which “nature” is accessed. The weight of air is not an absolute universal—it requires a network to support it. Shapin and Schaffer end their book with the claim that “knowledge, as much as the State, is the product of human actions. Hobbes was right” (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, 344).

Latour draws heavily on Shapin and Schaffer’s reading of the debate between Hobbes and Boyle, but he disagrees with their conclusion. He agrees with Shapin and Schaffer that the category of nature is not a given, but constituted through an elaborate set of mediations. However, he points out that Shapin and Schaffer take the social categories that Hobbes uses for granted, and this leads to their conclusion that Hobbes was right.
Instead, he argues for a symmetric approach to both nature and culture. These categories are not absolutes but by setting these categories in place, Hobbes and Boyle were inaugurating the modern constitution:

Boyle is not simply creating a scientific discourse while Hobbes is doing the same thing for politics; Boyle is creating a political discourse from which politics is to be excluded, while Hobbes is imagining a scientific politics from which experimental science has to be excluded. In other words, they are inventing our modern world. (Latour 1993, 27)

In a rhetorical device that he uses often, Latour points to the symmetry that underlies the seeming disagreement between Hobbes and Boyle, which results in the demarcation between the domain of nature and the domain of culture. It is this false division that makes possible the second demarcation of the modern constitution—separation of the work of purification from the work of translation. The modern Western world, according to Latour, has accepted the idea of the split between nature and culture and has swept the hybrids under the carpet. Latour’s thesis is that the proliferation of hybrids that the process of purification (keeping nature and society apart) creates forces us to acknowledge that this split never really occurred, hence the title of his book—*We Have Never Been Modern*.

**Modernity and the Role of Critique**

Imbricated in Latour’s foregrounding of a nonmodern framework is also an indictment of the role of criticism and its relationship with the project of modernity. For Latour, the modern critical approach is limited because it has to rely on appeals to either the immanence or transcendence of “Nature” or “Society” (Latour 1993, 43). Such a modernist exercise has implications with regard to politics as well as critique. He states:

The exclusive transcendence of a Nature that is not our doing, and the exclusive immanence of a Society that we create through and through, would nevertheless paralyze the moderns, who would appear too impotent in the face of things and too powerful within society. (Latour 1993, 37)

Nature is seen as being outside the realm of politics because politics is relegated to the social domain. Therefore, according to Latour, any form of critique that bases itself on social or natural explanations is limited, both in terms of its explanatory power and in its politics.

Paul Ricouer has explored the importance of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” in the context of his discussion of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in his book *Freud and Philosophy* (Ricoeur 1970). For Ricouer, the hermeneutics of suspicion has a positive connotation. Marx sees religion as the “opium of the masses,” which serves to mask and make tolerable the grim reality of the living conditions of the proletariat (Marx 1964, 44). Similarly, for Nietzsche, established social structures help encourage “slave morality” by encouraging virtues such as humility (Nietzsche 1966, 207). In the Freudian framework, nothing can be taken at face value—the analyst’s role is to help the patient to overcome layers of self-deception. These three “masters of suspicion” have something in common—they are all unmasking false ideologies (Ricoeur 1970, 35).
It is precisely this suspicion in the context of critique of ideology that Latour finds problematic. For Latour, an attempt to demystify a false ideology invariably leads to a modern appeal to truth based on absolute categories of nature on the one hand or social, psychological, and economic structures on the other. His attitude towards criticism closely parallels Serres’s rejection of the “philosophies of suspicion” (Serres and Latour 1995, 133). Words like “debunking,” “critical spirit,” and “denunciation” all have negative connotations for Latour. For example, he sees the postmodern philosophers as still holding on to the hollow division between nature and society without the modernist beliefs that lead to the proliferation of hybrids (Latour 1993, 62). Unfortunately, Latour does not engage in a serious way with postmodern, feminist, or postcolonial critiques that attempt to retain a critical attitude without appealing to a totalizing grand narrative.

In his recent work, Latour has equated the modern critical urge with an iconoclastic attitude. The premodern idolater believes in the fixed nature of images. In contrast, the nonmodern iconophile is interested in the mediations—transitions, translations, and modifications—that images go through. This is the mode of noncritical practice that Latour is advocating, and he suggests that science studies has a lot to learn from the discipline of art history in this context. For Latour, the modern iconoclast is one who challenges both idolatry and iconophilia, and this is because the iconoclastic attitude is based on appeals to truth that aim at not just demystifying but actually destroying images (Latour 1998, 421).

Latour begins his essay *War of the Worlds: What about Peace?* with a provocative statement against iconoclastic attitude in the context of the events of September 11:

> The courageous iconoclast waving her arm in defiance, so proud of her hammer, ready to break down everything with the powerful weapon of critique—down with empires, beliefs, fetishes, ideologies, icons, idols?—does she not look a little silly now that what she wanted to strike down lies down in dust, already smashed to the ground, and by people who do not fit at all the idea of the critical avant-garde?! What has happened to the critical urge? Has it not overshot its target? (Latour 2002, 2)

In another article, he brackets together critical social theory and conspiracy theories and states:

> Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trade mark: *Made in Criticalland*. (Latour 2004a, 230)

This is a recent example of Latour’s concerted attack on the critical urge and, as the two quotes above suggest, he equates critical practices that aim at demystifying oppressive ideologies with conspiracy theories and even with actual destruction. It seems perfectly plausible that an iconophilic approach might also end up having a demystifying effect similar to that of iconoclastic criticism, but this is not acceptable to Latour:

> I, an iconoclast?! Nothing irritates me more than being presented as provocative or even critical... The bitter irony is that iconophiles like me are forced to defend ourselves against iconoclasts. How can this be done? By destroying them and taking our revenge,
It is not surprising then that there are critiques of Latour that suggest that his framework is politically reactionary and helps justify entrenched power structures. Steve Fuller argues that Latour’s focus is on intermediaries “who, by adding or subtracting their support keep the elites in constant circulation, thereby reinforcing the appearance of justice in the system i.e. that every dog has its day” (Fuller 2000, 368). Fuller goes on to suggest that the Latourian framework allows sociologists to legitimate their position as social scientists capable of analyzing problems within networks without destabilizing existing hierarchies (Fuller 2000, 368). The following sections of this paper examine Latour’s methodology as well as the question of intermediaries and the situatedness of critical practice in greater detail.

**The Parliament of Things and Nonmodern Anthropology**

In place of the modern constitution, Latour proposes a nonmodern framework that foregrounds the work of mediation. The networks that constitute nature and society are highlighted, and the hybrids and the quasi-objects finally have a place for themselves in the “Parliament of Things”:

> There are no more naked truths, but there are no more naked citizens, either. The mediators have the whole space to themselves. The Enlightenment has a dwelling-place at last. Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present, but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial. (Latour 1993, 144)

Latour argues that the nonmodern constitution offers substantial possibilities for a different sort of democracy, a “Parliament of Things” that is constituted by hybrids. Giving the hybrids their due is important to Latour because it offers a way out of anthropocentric approaches to the world. In his recent book, *The Politics of Nature*, Latour makes the claim, “By defending the rights of the human subject to speak and to be the sole speaker, one does not establish democracy; one makes it increasingly more impracticable every day” (Latour 2004b, 69, italics in original). To establish a true democracy in the Latourian sense, the nonhuman “voices” (“inscriptions”) need to be taken into account.

Spokespersons play an important role in Latourian democratic politics because it is through the spokesperson that the nonmodern quasiobject gets its “voice.” However, statements (or “inscriptions”) of the spokespersons, who act as representatives of the network (who could be scientists or labour union leaders), are not taken for granted. Matters of fact/concern are eventually decided by a “trial of strength” in which actants partake (the term “actant” is used by Latour to avoid anthropocentrism—actants can be human, nonhuman, or hybrids). While Latour is aware that the process of (re)presenting nonhumans is not simple, it is important to note that for him it is not different from the process of (re)presenting humans.

In the Latourian framework, a decision on a matter of concern emerges not simply because a trial of strength can verify the validity of a claim of a spokesperson, but because the process presents the concerns of the actants by bringing to the fore
The analysis or politics that Latour proposes aims at extending the network (i.e., “addition”) rather than in indulging in a critical debate between spokespersons/intellectuals. Hence, as he puts it, the nonmodern constitution also brings with it “the end of denunciation” (Latour 1993, 43).

Latour offers anthropology as a suitable model for noncritical practice. Just like the iconoclast is equated with the modern critic in his work, the iconophile is compared to an art historian and a nonmodern anthropologist. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, he suggests that anthropology be used to map out networks and hybrids of “nature-culture” that science studies has laid bare because, unlike the modern critic who bases her demystifying work on either appeals to nature or social and economic structures, the anthropologist traces out networks in the nonmodern world:

> [A]nthropology [has] accustomed us to dealing calmly and straightforwardly with the seamless fabric of what I shall call “nature-culture”... Once she has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethnosciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying. (Latour 1993, 7)

The question Latour then poses is: Why are such anthropological studies not done of Western culture? The answer, according to him, is simple—it is because the modern Western world has separated the domain of nature from the social domain, thereby making the hybrids and quasi-objects invisible.

Latour’s methodology starts with the assumption that the world consists of an ever-extending network of actants (human as well as nonhuman). The next step has to do with the (re)presentation of the “inscriptions” or “voices” of the actants in order to understand how matters of fact/concern come into existence or operate. This is where spokespersons (including analysts) play a crucial role as mediators who help to make the networks “visible.” A classic example of Latourian methodology is presented in his book *The Pasteurization of France* (1988). By analyzing the role of the microbe and highlighting its inscriptions, Latour puts into broad relief networks and negotiations of matters of concern that had escaped previous anthropocentric accounts of pasteurization.

Latour’s methodology aims at addressing the complexity of the world, constituted by elaborate networks of hybrids. While Latour rejects criticism for its inadequacies in grasping this complexity, it is perhaps worth mentioning here that debates about the nature of criticism have long engaged with the issue of totalizing frameworks that overdetermine analysis. According to Edward Said:

> [I]t needs to be said that criticism modified in advance by labels like “Marxism” or “liberalism” is... an oxymoron. The history of thought, to say nothing of political movements, is extravagantly illustrative of how the dictum “solidarity before criticism” means the end of criticism. (Said 1983, 28)

The point that Said is making here is that for criticism to remain alive and serve the purpose of challenging and destabilizing hegemonic frameworks, it has to move beyond narrow political agendas and reified social/political labels. We, like Said, take criticism seriously and believe that the strategy of extending networks and recognizing/recovering inscriptions of material as well as human agents without any place for
critique can impose the hegemony of the analyst (and more generally dominant power structures). Latour’s project explicitly aims at increasing the sweep of democracy to include a multitude of actants and voices. If democracy has to be the guiding principle or goal, even if it is in terms of a Latourian “trial of strength,” rather than imposing an arbitrary sanction against criticism, it is important to see the role of critique as adding to the multiplicity of voices.

Saligram and Critique in the Parliament of Things

In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fieflods, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma. (Said 1983, 29)

Latour’s reading of an episode from U.R. Anantha Murthy’s (1996) novel Bharathipura in a chapter from Pandora’s Hope entitled “The Slight Surprise of Action: Facts, Fetishes, Factishes” gives us an opportunity to examine the implications of Latour’s views on iconoclastic criticism and its links to the vexed question of modernity, particularly in the postcolonial context. U. R. Anantha Murthy is one of the most important novelists from Karnataka, a state in south India. His first novel, Samskara, which was published in 1965 and deals with the hypocrisy of the upper caste communities, is considered a landmark in Kannada literature. His second novel Bharathipura was published in 1973 and is an examination of the conflict between tradition and modernity, again in the context of caste conflict. It is an excerpt from this novel, that has been translated from Kannada into English and anthologized (Anantha Murthy 1990), which Latour uses to make his arguments about the flaws of an iconoclastic attitude.

Considering the long history of academic discourses that have attempted to locate magic (or fetish) in the non-Western societies and science (or fact) in the Western ones, it is striking that Latour chooses an example from the non-West to highlight his claim against modernity and iconoclasm. To clarify, we are not suggesting that Latour should not utilize events occurring in non-Western societies to illustrate his claim. Our argument is that it is important for the analyst to be aware of his or her own situatedness. Anantha Murthy is making a specific intervention in the debates about the caste system and modernity in Karnataka, and it is important to take that into account in addition to situating Latour’s own deployment of this episode in his polemic against modernity. Gayatri Spivak’s critique of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in relation to their conversation about workers’ struggle is particularly relevant here: “[T]he two systematically and surprisingly ignore the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history” (Spivak 1999, 249). Even though Latour is clearly not invoking workers’ struggle, we find that he very often deploys categories such as modernity or the division between the West and non-West in his work without sufficient sensitivity to complex layers of historical engagement, resulting sometimes in a Eurocentric analysis.

In We Have Never Been Modern, the defining characteristic of the modern Western world is the division of the domain of nature from the social domain. Latour sees this
internal demarcation within the West as being responsible for the larger divide between the West and the non-West (Latour 1993). It is relevant to note that, apart from falling prey to the modernist anxiety to search for origins, Latour’s thesis also does not escape the Eurocentric historicist temporality of “first in Europe and then elsewhere.” As a result, the non-Western societies are relegated to, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues, the “waiting room of history.” By situating the emergence of modernity as following an artificial split between nature and culture in the West, Latour seems to himself engage in a purification exercise that ignores the complexities of interactions between the Western and the non-Western societies—that is, the (possible) hybrids (Prakash 1999; Prasad 2006).

Latour also does not take into account the way “modernity” has been translated both in the West and the non-West. His reading of the debate between Hobbes and Boyle ends by pointing to the common assumptions underlying their differences, and it is these assumptions that inaugurate the modern constitution. Feminists and postcolonial theorists have demonstrated that in many ways modernity is still being negotiated, even in the West, and it is clearly not a homogenous unified entity. Just as the air-pump goes through a series of translations before it becomes a black-boxed technology, the term “modernity” has also passed through its own series of mediations and translations, and this is something that Latour does not pay enough attention to. The use of large categories like the West and the non-West without studying the specific historical details of the interactions between these complex entities leads to too simplistic an understanding of the term “modernity.”

While Latour does have an explanation for how the non-Western cultures were constructed as the “Other,” he does not offer the slightest analysis of how that was linked to the colonial project. As Gyan Prakash points out in his book Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India, empire was actually crucial to the formation of Western modernity. Instead of seeing the demarcation between the West and non-West as following from an internal Western dichotomy between nature and culture, Prakash argues that it was the colonial encounter that was responsible for the development of many modern disciplines, ranging from anthropology to political economy, geology, and medicine (Prakash 1999, 12).

It is also relevant to note that Latour advocates anthropology as a model for interaction between cultures without discussing or even mentioning how anthropology as a discipline was implicated in the colonial project. As postcolonial scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty have pointed out, disciplines like history and anthropology are predicated on a framework of modernity that ends up marginalizing the nonmodern (Chakrabarty 2000). Latour also fails to consider that even if we deploy an anthropological method, we cannot argue that networks make themselves visible to anthropologists in obvious ways—there are always certain choices that are made in the representation of networks. Latour’s own writings reflect the making of such choices. In a fascinating chapter in Pandora’s Hope on translation in the context of scientific practice, Latour joins an expedition in Brazil to determine whether the Amazon forest is encroaching onto the savanna. At the beginning of the chapter, Latour apologizes for not addressing “many aspects of this field trip that pertain to the colonial
situation” because in this chapter he wishes to focus on the problem of scientific reference (Latour 1999, 27). While one might argue that questions of scientific reference cannot be always simply separated from aspects of the colonial situation, what we want to draw attention to here is the foregrounding of a choice made by the analyst. While Latour explicitly foregrounds the choice he is making here, very often his analyses do not do so.

We do agree that extending or unveiling the network has to be an important part of democratic politics and in this regard Latour has provided useful tools. However, since Latour rarely considers power differentials between the spokespersons or problems in recovering voices (inscriptions) of actants because of asymmetries of power, he fails to see the limitations of his framework. Colonialism (or for that matter gender or race) is definitely not a significant component of the network of “knowledge formation” processes (or politics) within the Latourian framework. Latour could argue that he believes in a strategy of “addition” and that somebody else could extend the network further by highlighting the role of colonialism. To be fair to Latour, we have to accept that there is a methodological limitation to analyzing different factors, or in Latourian terminology, in recovering inscriptions of all the actants implicated in any event. Nevertheless, it seems vitally important to be sensitive not just to the difficulty of gaining access to all the voices and inscriptions, but also to the concern that the very structure (as well as the politics) of the network can depend on the choice of the voices and inscriptions that are highlighted.

In his analysis of Anantha Murthy’s novel in Pandora’s Hope, interestingly enough, Latour does not mention the name of the author even once, even though the reading of this episode forms the most significant part of this chapter. Latour frames the episode in the following way:

We will take as our exemplar a latter day iconoclast, one of the courageous critics the moderns have sent around the world to extend the reach of reason, who learn the hard way why they should have suspended their critical gesture instead. His name is Jagannath, and he has decided to break the spell of castes and untouchability. (Latour 1999, 268)

After this sentence we get a reference to the editors of the book, Ezekiel and Mukherjee, but there is no reference to Anantha Murthy or the fact that this is an excerpt from a novel—Latour moves straight into an analysis of Jagannath as an example of a modern iconoclastic critic. This is ironic, considering that Latour is arguing for an approach that foregrounds the way we construct things. One can argue that in Latour’s methodology the novel is an actant that has agency of its own, which even though “delegated” by the author is autonomous. Nevertheless, one of the effects of this erasure of the author is that it allows Latour to discuss this episode as if it was an event that actually happened, and not as a literary text that has been constructed.

Jagannath, the upper-caste Western-educated protagonist of Bharathipura, returns to his village influenced by thinkers like Karl Marx and Bertrand Russell. He decides to take some steps to dismantle the oppressive caste system. The first step is to prove that the saligram, the sacred stone, is nothing more than a mere stone. He takes it out of the house and forces the dalits (the lower castes) to touch it. In this process, he realizes that he is imposing his framework on the dalits and actually dehumanizing them.
The failure of Jagannath to shatter the established caste structure through his attempt to desecrate the sacred stone is read by Latour as a typical failure of the modern iconoclast. The modern constitution draws a clear line between facts and fetishes. Jagannath believes that his modern framework allows him access to the facts, whereas the rest of the villagers are caught up in fetishes—humanly constructed belief systems. However, the irony of the attempt to shatter the sacred stone arises from the possibility that it is this very attempt that makes the stone a saligram, a sacred stone. Latour makes the claim that:

"The fetish gains in strength in the hands of the anti-fetishists. The more you want it to be nothing, the more action springs back from it. Neither the aunt nor the priest ever considered the saligram as anything but a mere stone. Never. By making it into the powerful object that must be touched by the pariahs, Jagannath transsubstantiates the stone into a monstrous thing… Somehow humanity depended on the undisturbed presence of this "mere stone." (Latour 1999, 270–71)"

It seems fair enough to suggest that Jagannath’s actions actually end up making the stone a saligram, and that his attitude toward the dalits is patronizing and dehumanizing. However, the claim that the aunt and the priest considered the saligram to be a mere stone is surprising. The stone is a good example of what Latour calls a factish—something which is both constructed and real. The modern constitution makes the distinction between facts and fetishes: The world of nature is constituted by facts and society and culture are responsible for the construction of fetishes, which are mere beliefs. The factish is what Donna Haraway refers to as a “material-semiotic actor”—something that is both constructed and real (Haraway 1991, 200). Latour is arguing for a nonmodern approach that recognizes the existence of factishes.

Latour may be right in arguing, "[I]t is not the fetish that has been destroyed, but instead a way of arguing and acting that used to make argument and action possible" (Latour 1999, 271, italics in the original). However, he further adds: “The only one who is projecting his feelings onto the idol is he, the iconoclast with a hammer, not those who by his gesture should be freed from their shackles” (Latour 1999, 272). By making a claim that it is the action of the modern iconoclast Jagannath that invests the stone with a special meaning, Latour is ignoring the position the stone occupies (and has occupied for centuries) in a network of caste hierarchies that the priest and the aunt operate in.10 The “mere stone” is an actant in a network that is extremely oppressive, and an argument that “humanity depended on the undisturbed presence of this ‘mere stone’” points towards an extremely reactionary politics (Latour 1999, 272, italics in the original). Ironically, the absence of a careful analysis of networks and the inscriptions of the actants makes Latour’s own argument against iconoclasts such as Jagannath an accusation, which is exactly what he finds problematic in a critical framework.

Jagannath’s attempt to impose a modern framework on the Dalits might be patronizing and indeed violent, but what we also need is an analysis of the network of the caste system which foregrounds the extreme violence caused by existing power structures. If the modern iconoclast is dehumanizing the Dalits by his actions, it must also be remembered that the established power structures also dehumanize the Dalits. This is the reason why a mere non-normative description of networks and established
traditions is not enough. But what do we do with the voices that are being elided here? What sorts of trials of strength are possible in this context?

Anantha Murthy’s novel seeks to provide a critique of upper caste society and privileges the viewpoint of the upper caste reformer. The Dalits are not major actors in this novel and we do not get a sense of the complex negotiation of modernity that we find in Dalit philosophers’ writings ranging from B. R. Ambedkar to Kancha Illiah. While Latour prides himself on the fact that his analysis of hybrids and networks opens up a space for nonhumans free from traditional anthropocentric approaches, there is still no guarantee that such an analysis is going to give voice to all the actants involved, or whether the voices of the actants can actually be recovered. Since Latour rarely considers power differentials between spokespersons or problems in recovering voices or inscriptions of actants because of asymmetries of power, he fails to see the limitations of his framework.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) has demonstrated the difficulties involved in gaining access to the voice of the Other and the subaltern. Gyan Prakash elaborates Spivak’s position on the retrieval on the subaltern voice thus:

Spivak’s point, however, is not that such retrievals should not be undertaken but that they mark the point of the subaltern’s silencing in history. The project of retrieval begins at the point of the subaltern’s erasure: its very possibility is also a sign of its impossibility, and represents the intervention of the historian-critic whose discourse must be interrogated persistently and whose appropriation of the other should be guarded against vigilantly. (Prakash 1992, 12)

In such scenarios the role of the critique (as we are attempting in this article) is to at least point to the possible presence of other actants and discourses, as well as multiple or alternate interpretations of an event that is being discussed by a particular analyst. A critique such as ours does not aim to destroy or subtract but rather to enrich and add to our understanding of events and to keep us (as analysts) on guard so as not to impose our own hegemonic interpretations/descriptions.

In the context of tracing technoscientific networks Latour defines translation in the following way:

In its linguistic and material connotations, [translation] refers to all the displacements through other actors whose mediation is indispensable for any action to occur… [C]hains of translation refer to the work through which actors modify, displace, and translate their various and contradictory interests. (Latour 1999, 311)

It is important that the sensitivity that Latour is willing to show to questions of interests and politics in his discussion of translation in the context of scientific practice is also extended to the situatedness of the nonmodern anthropologist, who also has to negotiate interests and politics in a very specific intellectual and economic history.

The story of Jagannath and the saligram (and the network around them) has several layers and the one that Latour provides gives only a partial perspective (and that with a particular slant). For example, in the novel, the local Dalit deity Bhootharaya was subordinated to the Brahminical god Manjunatha a few centuries back—thus proving that icons are constantly displaced. It is not just the modern critics who attempt to
destroy or displace idols. Although Latour does not address this, it seems perfectly possible to tell a Latourian story of competing networks building up alliances of humans and nonhumans. In fact, this is how Latour defines iconophilia—“respect not for the image itself, but for the movement, the transition from one form of image to another” (Latour 1998, 421).

Latour considers iconophilia to be a suitable model of noncritical practice. What he is unwilling to acknowledge is that iconophilia as defined by him challenges idolatry, which he defines as “attention to the visual per se” (Latour 1998, 421). Instead, he sets up the iconoclast as a challenger to both idolatry and iconophilia, because the iconoclast “dreams of an unmediated access to truth, of a complete absence of images” (Latour 1998, 421). In spite of Latour’s protestations to the contrary, it has to be acknowledged that the iconophile, by focusing on the transformations of the image, does challenge the literal and fixed interpretation of the image that characterizes the idolater. Models of how images have been transformed or displaced in the past could serve as exemplars of critical practice—one can imagine a nonmodern Jagannath building up a broad set of allies (both human and nonhuman) to displace the network of oppression. To a certain extent, this is what Jagannath is trying to do in his attempts to educate the dalits. One can also imagine an alternate story where the dalits are the ones building alliances and recruiting Jagannath to their cause. However, Latour is unwilling to see anything worthwhile in Jagannath’s attempts to dislodge the existing caste structure, and he does not suggest any alternate methods that might help challenge existing hierarchies.

**Conclusion**

In a significant critique of Latour’s work, Donna Haraway suggests that it is “less epistemologically, politically, and emotionally powerful to see that that there are startling hybrids of the human and non-human in technoscience… than to ask for whom and how these hybrids work” (Haraway 1997, 280). Haraway’s cyborgs, monsters, and companion species are all hybrids and her work is a good example of a nonmodern approach that is extremely critical of patriarchal and capitalist structures. Latour’s work does offer us some relevant insights into the nature of modernity and is motivated by a democratic impulse to include a multiplicity of voices, but his polemic against the critical urge makes it harder to sift for those insights and to overcome the limitations of his methodology.

In the political economy in which analysts such as Latour and all of us operate, critique is an important part of a democratic politics. If we are not interested in imposing yet another dogmatic totalizing framework, it would be appropriate to consider criticism or critique as just another inscription and the critic as just another actant, adding in important ways to the democratic discourse. However, the problem with Latour’s methodology, as we have pointed out, does not end there—if it intends to offer a proper democratic politics it has to find ways to deal with hierarchy and power differentials. This would require investigation of differing and unequal “motivations,” “interests,” and “roles” of different actants (for example, by exploring how colonialism, gender, or race are significant factors that structurally modify the networks of knowledge production being analyzed). Of course the fear in doing so could be that such categories have
in significant ways formed the basis for anthropocentric understandings of agency and politics. But a careful analysis can avoid anthropocentric reductionism (see for example Timothy Mitchell 2002, particularly the chapter titled “Can the Mosquito Speak?”).

Through our reading of this episode from *Bharathipura* we have shown that networks do not make themselves accessible to us in direct or uncomplicated ways—apart from the choices we make, there is also the question of the voices and inscriptions that are elided or not easily accessible. While appreciating the insights that the Latourian nonmodern methodology can give us, it is very important to remember to foreground the ways in which this methodology is a situated form of knowledge. It may not be possible to recover the inscriptions of all the actants and the inscriptions that are (or can be) recovered might not always highlight the situatedness of the analyst and its implications. It is precisely with this concern in mind that we argue that critique is an integral part of a truly democratic knowledge-making process as well as politics. After all, the critical urge is not about bringing down buildings and breaking idols; it is about trying to build a better world with a genuine multiplicity of voices.

**Notes**

1. The Latourian hybrid is closely linked to the concept of “quasi-object” postulated by Michel Serres; both occupy an intermediate position that cannot be reduced to either the category of nature or that of culture (Serres and Latour 1995, 161). Global warming is an example of such a hybrid; it clearly is something that is a part of nature, but at the same time it is a result of human activities. To see global warming as either a purely natural or a purely social phenomenon is clearly inadequate.

2. Latour uses the phrase “black box” to refer to a technology that is taken for granted (Latour 1987).

3. A similar claim has been made in relation to Latour’s engagement with social theorists. Jonathan Sterne and Joan Leach argue, “If Latour were to read Bourdieu seriously... [h]e would be further forced to reckon with Bourdieu’s strong sense of the connections between sociological critique and critique of social conditions for the purpose of their social transformation” (Sterne and Leach 2005, 193).

4. In *Science in Action* (1987) Latour provides several examples that illustrate that consensus on a “matter of concern” emerges because spokespersons representing the networks do not simply agree with each other, but ask for (or are forced into) a “trial of strength,” in which actants voice their concerns.

5. Habermas makes the same point in a different context in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987).

6. Postcolonial theorists such as Ashis Nandy (1983) and Homi Bhabha (1994) have dealt with the ambiguities of the discourse of modernity, particularly in its entanglement with colonialism.

7. Anthropological knowledge formation has also been intertwined with construction of a special subject position for the Europeans and European knowledges. Veena Das (1984) addresses this issue in the context of a debate between French anthropologist Louis Dumont and Indian anthropologist A. K. Saran. Dumont claimed that Saran’s Hindu and Indian identity influenced the latter’s work. Das criticizes Dumont’s claim and argues that while Dumont perceives a “double entrenchment”, as an academic and as a Hindu/Indian, for Saran, he does not consider a similar double entrenchment for himself.

8. Walter Mignolo makes a very interesting suggestion (even though his concern is humanist and universalist): “At this point in history, a critical and dialogic cosmopolitanism leading to
diversity as a universal project can only be devised and enacted from the colonial difference” (Mignolo 2000, 745).

[9] The name of one of the editors, Ezekiel, is misspelled as Ezechiel in Pandora’s Hope.

[10] Latour seems to be suggesting that Jagannath is introducing a mode of politics into play without acknowledging the pre-existing politics. The priest, the aunt, and the dalits are not apolitical but, as Jonathan Sterne and Joan Leach argue, “The problem is that Latour projects his own attempts to stand outside politics onto others” (Sterne and Leach 2005, 193).

References


