# Reconstructing Humants: A Humanist Critique of Actant-Network Theory

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'To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself.' (Marx, 1975: 251)

'What matters for the dialectician is to have the wind of world history in his sails. Thinking means for him: setting the sails. *How* they are set, that is what is important. Words are his sails. How they are set, that is what makes them into concepts.' (Benjamin, 1991: 591)

WITHOUT EVER explicitly mentioning Callon, Akrich, Latour or Law (the 'CALL-collective') – not to speak of the 'missing masses' of faithful followers and storytellers who joyfully mix humans and non humans but probably not to the point that they end up taking their wives (or husbands) for a hat – I will attempt in this paper to politically 'refunctionalize' Actor-Network Theory in a critical and humanist direction. Starting with the same elements of the wilfully impoverished language of ANT, I will slightly modify them, so that, as in the Jewish theologoumenon, they eventually enter into a new constellation which considers humans and perhaps non humans as well 'from the point of view of their redemption' (Adorno, 1980: 283).

### 1. Regional Ontologies

Let's start with Wittgenstein and adopt his paratactic way of presentation. In the same way as 'explanations come to an end somewhere' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 3), the network of entangled confusions between humans and non humans cannot go on indefinitely. To show that, let's reconsider the classical

opening scene of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: 3ff., see also 1958: 77ff.): the communication between a builder A and his man B. B has to reach A building stones. There are cubes, bricks, slabs, beams and columns. When A calls out 'slab', B brings a stone of a certain shape; when he calls out 'column', B brings a stone of another shape and another size. On being ordered 'this slab!', B brings the slab to which A points. On being ordered 'slab there!', he carries a slab to the place indicated. Shall we say that A and B are kept together by the slab, that the slab is, so to say, the cement which keeps them together? Or shall we rather say that A and B co-ordinate their plans of action because they know the language game that is being played and thus know how to go on?

To answer the question, let's move our builder and his man from Cambridge to Frankfurt and consider another scene (Habermas, 1981: II, 185 ff.): the builder A orders his man B to get a crate of beer for the cold spread. B understands the message and comes back with half a dozen bottles of beer after a couple of minutes. The builders stop working, gather in front of the van, inspect their lunch boxes and open the bottles of beer. No ambiguity here. Consider however a slightly different situation: B is new on the job and has just arrived. A orders him to get some beer. Although B has understood the order very well, he nevertheless refuses to go claiming that there's no shop around for miles, or that he's not a slave, or that he won't accept any longer A's attempts to humiliate him in public. Whether the validity claims which are thus raised are of a cognitive, normative or expressive nature, it is clear that action can only proceed when the persons involved come to some kind of a consensual definition of the situation of action at hand. It's thus not the bottles of beer that keep our builders together, but the sharing of a form of a life in which common plans of action are co-ordinated through an implicit or explicit agreement on validity claims which every speech act entails.

Do cubes, bricks, slabs, beams, columns and bottles of beer act? Do they co-ordinate their actions through a common definition of the situation? Are they kept together or driven apart from each other through agreements and disagreements? Obviously not. Bottles, beams and slabs do not act. Only humans (and animals) act; not endowed with intentionality, artefacts do not act. Going 'back to the things themselves' ('*zu den Sachen selbst*') in order to analyse how bottles of beer, beams, blossoming cherry-trees and builders give themselves to consciousness and are intentionally constituted as givens of consciousness, we can see that humans and non humans are essentially different, or, to say the same in old-fashioned phenomenological language, that they belong to different 'regional ontologies' (Husserl, 1952: I, 7–23; III, 21–53). Whatever a human or a non human is, and however they are perceived, their essence (*eidos*), which predetermines what they necessarily must be when they are to be things of a certain kind, can be *a priori* determined through the procedure of 'eidetic variation'. By a process of imaginative variation, we can arrive at a categorical determination of what makes a human a human and a non human a non human. We start, for

instance, with a material thing, say, a bottle of beer. By an act of free imagination, I first double its size, transform it from Guinness into lager and, being continental, I chill it and also add some froth. Then I change its composition and glass turns into stone. Now I fantasize it as a brick, then as a beam. Whatever variations I imagine, the thing remains a material thing, which means that it has a spatial extension, that it is subject to the laws of nature, and that I can subdivide it. But I cannot imagine that it starts dancing or arguing like a builder and his man because it belongs to the essence of a material thing that it doesn't move by itself or talk. Living bodies move by themselves and (normal) persons talk; non humans do neither. They are neither animated as incarnated souls, nor do they express themselves. They belong to another ontological region – the region of material nature, not the one of animated nature and certainly not the one of the spiritual world (Husserl, 1952: II, 90ff., 172ff.). It is a fundamental rule of eidetic analysis that 'a fundamental concept of one region cannot be transformed by variation in other one' (Husserl, 1985: 435). 'Free variation' of humans and non humans does not preclude their 'free association' (Callon), but by categorically distinguishing between them, it puts essential limits to the 'free invention' of 'actant-rhizome ontologies' (Lynch) that go against common sense and that, so far as we know, no historical actors have ever recognized. Builders need bricks and beer, and although they can be and are indeed sometimes treated like things, they can no more be reduced to bricks and bottles than tables can start to dance by their own free will – '*pour encourager les autres*' (Marx, 1976: 164n).

Humans and non humans belong to different ontological regions. The *Dasein* of the human being and the being of the non human are essentially different and incomparable ways of Being. However, if we want to correctly understand the Being of those beings, we have to ascertain the 'conditions of possibility of those ontologies themselves' (Heidegger, 1927: 11) and 'light up' the pre-ontological ground on which the question of the essence of humans and non humans arises. Going against the whole tradition of intellectualism from Descartes to Husserl and Woolgar, we have to reverse the priority of knowing over doing, see that knowing is founded in practice, and understand our primordial mode of Being as a practical mode of Being-in-the-world. Rather than categorically analyse how objects are given to consciousness and synthesized as objects of consciousness, we have to existentially analyse the primordial way of Being of the being to which objects are given to consciousness. The primordial way of Being is Being-in-the-world, surrounded by objects which we encounter as objects that are ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*), rather than present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), occurrent as objects of contemplation. Those objects which we encounter in everyday life as ready-to-hand – bricks, slabs, hammers, tables, bottles, and so on – can be called 'equipment' (*Zeug*) (Heidegger, 1927: 68). The main characteristic of equipment is that it is used for something, and that is encountered in a network of other equipment. The bricks and the slabs, the lunchboxes and the bottles are unobtrusively available, 'seen but not noticed'

(Garfinkel), present as an equipmental whole within easy reach and fit for the cold spread. They are not encountered as 'mere things', as unconnected, decontextualized, self-contained objects, occurrent as analysable and decomposable spatio-temporal entities, but as a series of useful objects available for the cold spread. The equipment does not only refer to other equipment, but also indirectly to the materials it is made up of and to the people who have furnished the materials, assembled the equipment and made it available for use. The bottle of beer refers to the sand, the fire, the glass, the malt and the water, but also to the network of people who have assembled the materials to make the bottle and the beer, and ultimately to its potential users as well. Thus along with the work, we encounter not only entities ready-to-hand but also entities with *Dasein*'s kind of Being – entities for which, in their concern, the product becomes ready-to-hand; and together with these we encounter the world in which wearers and users live, which is at the same time ours (Heidegger, 1927: 71).

Humans and non humans are thus interconnected in a materialized 'technogram', but *Dasein*'s way of Being, which is, of course, the way of Being of humans, is essentially different from the way of Being of non humans. Being human is being-with-others, whereas non humans are indifferent not only to humans, but also to non humans and to themselves.

When we encounter in our everyday life humans and non humans, we do not encounter them as 'mere things', present-at-hand, occurring in the world as knowable entities or enrollable allies, but as entities that are part of our world and that are available for our concerns. We treat them with or without care and approach them within the 'regime of familiarity' (Thévenot, 1994a). It is only when something goes wrong and objects become conspicuous in their obtrusiveness that we become conscious of them and of ourselves. It is then that we surrender the 'natural attitude' and start theorizing, and by theorizing in the 'naturalist attitude' we succumb to the 'scholastic tendency' to interpret all ways of Being, human and non human, as modes of occurrentness. This way of theorizing which objectifies humans and non humans alike by decontextualizing them does, however, not lead to knowledge of our Being-in-the-world but away from it. By giving up the attempt to understand the world 'from within' and to interpret it as a world we always already understood, a 'deficient mode' of understanding is enthroned as knowledge and eventually we end up with the decontextualized knowledge of a 'worldless world' we can no longer understand as our world, the world we always already understood even without knowing it.

An external analysis which no longer understands Being primarily as Being-in-the-world but passes over the Being of what is ready-to-hand and conceives of humans and non humans alike as a context of objects that are present-at-hand, knowable as 'standing reserve' of enrolment, lapses back into a formalistic and atomistic conception of the world as a 'concatenation' of empirically observable facts. This conception is formalistic, because rather than understanding the world 'from within' it imposes its own conception of the world 'from without'; and it is atomistic because by untying the

internal connection between beings, it eliminates the '*Inter-esse'*, the *Mitsein* which characterizes *Dasein*, to leave behind a mass of essentially unconnected, but contingently connectable humans and non humans that are no more interested in each other than the magnet is interested in the needle. In so far as such an external anti-phenomenological and anti-ethnomethodological analysis does not take into account the meaningfulness of the context, it cannot really take into account the meaning of the content of actions either. As a result, actions lose their symbolic meaning. When they are directed towards non humans, actions are conceived as instrumental actions; and when they pertain to humans, they are conceived as strategic actions. In both cases, the existential analysis of the '*Inter-esse'* which characterizes Dasein's primordial Being-in-the-world among humans and non humans is systematically displaced by a formal, atomistic, intellectualistic and pseudo-economic analysis of the vulgar interests of humans who link up with other humans and non humans, translating their interests in a reciprocal exploitation of each other's activity for the satisfaction of the personal interests of each of the parties involved. Humans are thus no longer seen as co-operative ants, but as egoistic 'r.a.t.s' – i.e. as rational action theorists who behave like 'centres of calculation', strategically associating and dissociating humans and non humans alike, pursuing their own political ends by economic means. Conclusion: when science enters in action, meaningful action disappears and all we are left with is a pasteurized and desymbolized world of strategically acting dehumanized humans, or humants.

## 2.  Human Relations between Things and Thinglike Relations between Humans

Bottles of beer, slabs, bricks, hammers and blossoming cherry trees as well – depending on the discursive regime in which they figure, those non humans take on meaning, or lose it, as intentional objects of consciousness, as equipment ready-to-hand or as things present-at-hand. In all cases, the root of the trail leads eventually back to humans. However humans are interconnected with non humans, at the end of the day, it is humans who encounter non humans and endow them with meaning, use or value. Non humans have meaning for humans, either proximally because they encounter them in their life-world and apprehend them within a multiplicity of axiological regimes of justification – from the domestic and the civic to the mercantile and the industrial one (Thévenot, 1994b) – or, ultimately, because they have made them. Artefacts, such as machines and other technosocial objects, are objectified and materialized spirit. They can be understood by means of a reconstruction of the meaning which humans intentionally gave to them when they were manufacturing, using or consuming them (Weber, 1972: 3). *Verum et factum convertuntur* – because we have made the facts, we can understand them; fact and fiction thus go together, at least for those of us who are modern. The others have to bring back the Gods to understand what we have not made.

Humans do not just encounter non humans; they also encounter each

other, either directly, through communications of all sorts, or, indirectly, by inserting non humans between themselves as gifts or as commodities. By introducing gifts and commodities, we bring in social relations between things and move from the lofty heights of philosophical anthropology to the exotic planes of social and economic anthropology. In the anthropological analysis of the exchange of wealth, gifts and commodities are traditionally seen as rival concepts and mirror images (Gregory, 1982). In the moral economy of the gift, which allegedly is dominant in archaic societies, it is the qualitative relations between humans that matter. Non humans only intervene to start or to renew the cycle of reciprocity between humans. Humans are interdependent and their reciprocal interdependency is maintained through the exchange of inalienable symbolic objects. After the transaction, the receivers are not the owners of the object. They own the incorporeal rights, not the object itself, which remains the inalienable possession of the humans that make up the network of interdependency. In the gift economy property is thus not a thing but 'a network of social relations that governs the conduct of people with respect to the use and disposition of things' (Hoebel, cit. Hann, 1998: 4). In the political economy of the commodity, on the other hand, which allegedly has supplanted the moral economy of the gift, objects are alienable. They are not personalized but objectified and reified into property, which is considered as a thing. After the transaction, the objects lose every connection with the transacting subjects. In commodity exchange, humans are independent from and unrelated to each other. They don't really matter. Only the exchange-value matters, and it is understood as a quantitative relation between non humans.

The distinction between the economy of the gift and the economy of the commodity is a systemic one, referring to the objective conditions that make the alienation of goods possible. Although one cannot decide on inspection whether a particular transaction involves alienation or not, one can still analyse the economic system as a whole in which it occurs and determine whether the tendency to personalize non humans, which characterizes gift economies, predominates over the objectification of humans, which characterizes the commodity economy, or whether it is the other way around (Simmel, 1992: 661–3). If the cultural limits to universal commodification are almost non existent, that is if everything, including mothers and organs, can be objectified, alienated and exchanged on the abstract market against money, then we are confronted with a commodity economy. The systemic distinction between the two economic systems is analytic. As such, it does no more exclude that commodities circulate in gift economies than that gifts occur in commodity systems. It is even perfectly compatible with Parry's observation that it is only under conditions of a relatively free market that there's evidence for the entirely disinterested gift (Parry, 1986). But it resists the post-modernist temptation to undermine and deconstruct all conceptual distinctions. Thomas is right when he states that one cannot presume that 'gifts are invariably gifts and commodities are invariably commodities' (Thomas, 1991: 39), but he's wrong when in his attempt to

dissolve the general categories of the gift and the commodity by means of a recontextualization of particular objects, he seems to be willing to give up the distinction between commodity and gift economies altogether. Like slaves, objects can indeed move in and out of the commodity economy (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), but even if commodities are given and gifts exchanged, the commodity economy remains a commodity economy and the gift economy a gift economy.

Depending on how objects are appropriated when they leave the generalized system of equivalence and exchange, they can be repersonalized through consumption (Miller, 1987: 189–96) and sacrifice (Bataille, 1967: 93–7) or stamped as gifts with a symbolic meaning and value (Mauss, 1950), which removes them in effect from ordinary social exchange. Through this personalization, the object becomes an 'inalienable possession', appropriated and authenticated as different and non-exchangeable against an equivalent. 'Ownership of these possessions makes the authentification of difference rather than the balance of equivalence the fundamental feature of exchange' (Weiner, 1992: 40). In the exchange economy, the stress is always put on the receiving end of the transaction, which establishes the equivalence between the exchanged items and closes off the cycle of reciprocity, rarely or never on the giving end, which gets the cycle going and establishes a personal relationship of indebtedness between the transactors. The moral economy of the gift does not cancel out debt but thrives on it. The more you owe to the other, the more you're bound to the other, because through the gift you incur a personal commitment to the other who has given to you in the same way as the other is bound to you through the gift you are supposed to return. The relations between humans are thus mediated by non humans, but those non humans only matter because they renew and perpetuate the cycle of reciprocity between subjects. In this sense, the gift represents and realizes a relational or 'bond value' (Godbout and Caillé, 1992: 244).

With the gift, the primacy of the relations between non humans thus becomes secondary and the primacy of relations between humans is restored. Paraphrasing Marx's characterization of the commodity fetish, we could say that the relation between people no longer appears as a relation between things, but that the relation between things now appears as a relation between people. And indeed, if we may believe Marcel Mauss, who acts here as the spokesperson of the Maori elder Ranaipiri, the gift economy is so thoroughly social that the non humans that mediate between humans are somehow considered as human and that the relation which is established by non humans is in fact conceived as a relation between the souls of the givers: 'That what in the gift obliges is that the thing given is not inert. Even when it is abandoned by the giver, it is still something which belongs to him. . . . In Maori custom, this bond created by things is a bond between souls, because the thing itself has a soul, is a soul' (Mauss, 1950: 159–60). But if the thing has a soul, and if the soul is what connects the body with the supernatural, then the thing also has a cosmological or theological

meaning. According to Ranaipiri, who now becomes the spokesperson and messenger of the Gods, the things are given and returned because they are animated by the 'spirit of the gift', which transforms the object into a symbol and explains why the communication between humans through non humans is also a communion with the supernatural and thus, at least if we may believe Durkheim, with themselves. In this sense, gifts are symbols of the social bond which by symbolizing the alliance between humans through spiritualized non humans also perform the social bond. Once more, we see that humans are not so much kept together by the commutation of non humans as by the communication through symbols, symbols that are freely given and returned and allow the humans to commune with themselves. Transforming non humans into humans, endowing them with 'imaginary signification' (Castoriadis), symbolic discourses both represent and perform the social bond as a collective of humans who, thanks to the communication with the spirits, commune with themselves via the giving and counter-giving of non humans. In so far as the concrete practices of giving and counter-giving are mediated by a 'transcendental structure' of meaningful symbols, the 'mode of regulation and reproduction of society' is fundamentally of a cultural nature: the social synthesis is effectuated by means of a 'double dialectic' whereby culture *a priori* structures the practices that reproduce culture and integrate society (Freitag, 1986: II, 77–167).

   If objects are shifted back from the gift economy, where they are so thoroughly personalized and spiritualized that the relation between non humans appears as a relation between humans, into the commodity economy, the objects become so thoroughly objectified and secularized, disconnected from their producers who are themselves disenchanted and disconnected from their social relations, that the relations between humans now appear as relations between non humans. 'It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx, 1976: 165). This fantastic inversion of humans and non humans is not simply an illusion, however, but in so far as it expresses in ideological form the real nature of social relations in a competitive market environment, it literally has its *fundamentum in rebus*. In capitalist societies which are dominated by a market economy, the economy is no longer embedded in society, but apart from the gift economy, which survives, of course, not only in the informal economy, but also more generally in the circles of primary sociability of the life-world (Vandenberghe, 2002), society is embedded in the economy. Market societies are not only societies which are based on the economy but also societies where, as a result of the destruction of the traditional forms of life by the planned imposition of the market by the state on the life-world, the economy is based on self-interest (Polanyi, 1944: 249). Self-interest presupposes 'possessive individualism', which is really an ideological form of and justification for 'atomistic individualism' which recentres society around the individual and his or her property, which is now conceived as a thing and no longer as a bundle of social relations. In the individualist ideology, the

individual is valued above society, and society is conceived as an emergent but unintended effect of the anarchistic and strategic pursuit of self-interests by each of the enterprising individuals. Living in a disenchanted world, individuals are no longer 'oversocialized'; they are now atomized and 'overindividualized'. Independent from each other, they carefully planify their own lives in function of their self-interest and self-conservation and at the end of the day their interests are moderated and their plans co-ordinated by the market through the exchange of commodities and services. Their actions and activities are not consciously and willingly co-ordinated through communication, but *a posteriori* through the 'invisible hand' of the market. Relations of personal dependence between humans are thus replaced by material relations between non humans and the social integration of humans is imposed from without by the systemic interconnection of non humans. This shift from a social-cultural to a systemic-operational 'mode of regulation and reproduction of society' (Freitag, 1986: I, 55–66), which corresponds to a shift from an economy of the gift to a commodity economy, explains the fetishist inversion of the relations between humans and non humans: 'The social relations between their private labours appears as what they *are*, i.e. they do not appear as direct relations between persons but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx, 1976: 166).

## 3. Content and Form

The 'secret' to be unveiled through the analysis of the commodity fetish is not the content hidden by the form but, on the contrary, the 'secret' of this form itself. That the fetish is a fact, that it is an artefact and thus a human product, that is hardly mysterious. We don't need Marx to reveal that fetishes are facts, that they are objectifications of meaningful acts. Vico, to mention only one of a whole busload of hermeneuticians, already knows that facts are artefacts and that as such they can be interpreted as 'quasi-texts' (Ricoeur, 1986: 175). Although he didn't go as far as claiming that we could understand God, because we have made Him, he had no doubt that the fetish is not only – excuse my French – 'factish' but also and more importantly 'fictish', a mixture of fiction and facts, an objectification of meaningful acts. In their eagerness to emulate the 'scientificity' of the natural sciences, only naturalists and positivists had forgotten it. But let's forget the naturalists and the positivists and go back instead to Marx and his dialectics of the concrete to penetrate the 'hidden kernel' of the commodity fetish.

The real difficulty with the commodity fetish is not to understand that the commodity is an objectification of exchange value or that it embodies labour, but to explain why labour itself assumes the form of the value of a commodity and why it can affirm its social character only in the commodity form of its product. In order to understand the form of the commodity itself, which stamps every object as soon as it is produced as a commodity, we have to see that the commodity is nothing concrete, not a thing, but that it only becomes concrete when it is seen as a 'synthesis of many definitions,

representing the unity of diverse aspects' (Marx, 1973: 101), thus when it is seen as a combination of many diverse forces or processes. From this dialectical perspective, which can be generalized beyond the commodity – nay, even more, which has to be generalized beyond the commodity, as the form of 'ghostly objectivity' which characterizes the commodity affects not only the economy but tends increasingly to colonize the life-world and to affect 'the total outer and inner life of society' (Lukács, 1971: 84) – the fetishist reification of social relations into a thing, the misrecognition of a social relation between humans as a material relation between non humans, appears as the result of a mistaken attribution of social power which the non humans possess owing to the emergent properties of a larger social system in which the non humans are embedded, to the non humans themselves, as if it were a property which belongs to them. Or, to express the same idea in the words of the Slavoj Žižek: 'What is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements' (Žižek, 1989: 24). This fetishist category mistake is really an empiricist mistake. By misrecognizing the relation between the invisible network of social relations, which overdetermines the visible element, and the visible element itself, by taking the visible element at face value, the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Whitehead) is once again being committed, but in reverse so to say. Even if that element, which is an artefact, say a bottle of beer, a hammer, a Portuguese vessel or an electric car being built by the French, is conceived as a network of heterogeneous elements, associating and channelling humans and non humans, it still remains abstract. The fetishist illusion is only dissipated, the socio-technical network becomes only concrete when it is understood as being dialectically overdetermined by the larger structural network of entangled social relations in which it is embedded and which overdetermines its empirical manifestation.

The distinction between form and content points in fact to a distinction between three levels or dimensions of sociological analysis which are mutually implicated and superposed to each other in such a way that the higher levels condition (but do not determine) the lower levels. To visualize the different levels, which can be ordered on a continuum of complexity that goes from congeries to relational figurations (Elias, 1956: 242–4), one could imagine a statistical graph in which the scatter of stochastic points represents the first level, the X- and Y-axes with the variables the second level, and the network of entangled social relations which overdetermines the linear relation between the variables of the second level, the third level. On the first level of analysis, represented by ethnomethodology, the scatter of everyday activities is described in such a way that the activities are seen as so many accounts of the ordinary ways in which the immortal social order* is reflexively enacted and skilfully performed by the members as an ongoing endless accomplishment. In this perspective, the social order* is always endogenous and understood as a purely local and contingent

accomplishment of the members. No external social structures can be invoked; they can only be 'respecified' in terms of an extremely detailed description of 'just how' those structures are locally enacted, realized *ad hoc* and stabilized *in situ*. On the second level represented by ANT, the social order obtains a degree of stability as the local activities of the members, as laboriously described by the ethnomethodologists, are now redescribed (but not 'respecified') and allowed to aggregate and carry over beyond the particular localities and temporalities in which they occur. Through constant efforts of persuasion and negotiation, absent members are enrolled and associated by the present members to their entrepreneurial projects in such a way that they translate the will of the absent in their own language, become their spokespersons and eventually speak in one voice – the voice of the Master. The social pact is then materialized in objects, which stabilize the social order, and once those objects are no longer contested, the network of humans and non humans is 'black boxed', after which the process of enrolment goes on till so many black boxes are aligned that it becomes too costly to question, let alone to undo and make reversible the socio-technical network of humans and non humans. On the third level, which introduces a network of invisible but real social relations (network *a quo*) as the concrete condition of possibility of the socio-technical network of humans and non humans (network *ad quem*), the whole line of linearly aligned black boxes is, so to say, wrapped up in its turn in a metabox in such a way that the fetishist illusion is dissolved and that the socio-technical network is understood not only as a condition but also, and more importantly, as a consequence of the larger social forces in which it is embedded.

The distinction between form and content invites us in other words to prolong the performative analysis of the construction of the network of visible elements by local actors by a more systemic analysis of the relational structures which overdetermine the form which the assemblage of elements can or cannot take. The introduction of a metalevel of concrete determination does not mean that everything that happens locally is rigorously determined by global structures, but it allows us to analyse how and to what extent pre-existing structures of domination tend to exclude the emergence of an alternative ordering of social relations between humans and of the heterogeneous elements which they assemble as well. In the same way as technocratism covers the determination of the ends under a 'technocratic veil' (Marcuse), the social relations structurally condition the form of the networks of humans and non humans by 'black boxing' them in such a way that open discussions about the progressive transformation of the social relations in which they are embedded are thus almost systematically written off the agenda (Habermas, 1968). Confronted with the materiality and stability of the heterogeneous alliance of the network, some questions about alternative orderings and counter-programmes can hardly be thought, let alone be openly and democratically discussed in public by all those who are concerned. Moreover, in so far as this third level determination introduces relational structures that condition the form of appearance of the

networks that are not visible in the networks themselves, it allows us also to better understand the empirical manifestations. Take as an example a pair of shoes. As Daniel Miller says: 'We do not think in terms of capitalist and socialist shoes' (Miller, 1987: 115), and yet, if we want to understand the difference, if we do not simply want to follow the shoes themselves all the way from the consumer and the shoemaker to the tanner and the farmers who raise the cattle, but if we also want to understand the structural relations that form the content of the socio-technical network of cows, leather, tanners, shoestrings and shoemakers, we have to read and decode the artefacts as so many 'social hieroglyphics' (Marx, 1976: 167) and move to the level of a systemic analysis of the structures that concretely determine the form of the heterogeneous assemblage of humans, animals and non humans. The task of the analyst is thus to propose a 'sociology of translation' which deciphers the artefact as a formed content, that is as a content which is formed by the structure of social relations in such a way that the concrete appearance of the network is understood in its actuality as an empirical emanation of a field of structural tensions which tends to exclude alternative orderings from sight. Such a dialectical sociology of translation, which dissolves the facticity and the fixity of the given, cannot remain content with a 'flat ontology' but has to adopt a more stratified view of reality that distinguishes the overlapping domains of the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1978: 56–62). In this realist perspective, the domain of the real, which corresponds to our relational determinations of the third level, is understood to comprise transfactual generative mechanisms and relational structures which usually escape direct observation, whereas the domains of the actual and the empirical, which correspond to our determinations of the second level and first level, respectively comprise patterns of events and socio-technical networks which are generated and structured by these mechanisms and structures, and the concrete practices and ethnomethods in which they are apprehended and constituted as accounts. In this realist perspective, the flat ontology is no longer stretched till infinity – or more likely, till the storyteller gets tired and bored – but replaced by a laminated one which critically interprets and dialectically retranslates the descriptions of the heterogeneous concatenation of humans and non humans in such a way that the actual content of the descriptions can be explained and thus better understood as having been formed or deformed by the relational structures of the real.

## 4.  Actants and History

The fact that the third dimension of the social world is only observable in its effects and that one has to 'retroduce' the causes from the effects by an abductive flight of controlled imagination raises, of course, the problem of their representation (Pels, 2000): how do we know that the invisible real exists? Who speaks for the real? Who speaks in its name? We do, of course, as intellectuals, and precisely because we can never be sure that we do not only speak in the name of others but also in their place, we have to be as

reflexive as possible about our own political-cum-ideological presuppositions and be willing at every moment to engage in an open discussion about our own positions, dispositions and position-takings, so as to allow those in whose name we speak to talk back and to include an ever wider constituency in our audience which is counterfactually identical with the universal audience (the dead included). Inspired by Habermas's moral sensitivity to the expropriation of those who have nothing to lose but their voice, we thus have to try to combine the 'emancipatory interest' in the alleviation of suffering and the democratic principle according to which 'there can only be participants in a process of emancipation' (Habermas, 1971: 45). If the emancipatory interest enjoins us to introduce the third dimension and to uncover structures of domination, the democratic principle forces us to search on the other hand for the largest possible backing of our epistemic claims. In this way, theoretical boldness is combined with moral cautiousness.

The introduction of a multiplicity of potential voices has nothing to do with the 'post-ist' celebration of a cacophony of interests and intertexts, but aims to overcome the voice of the Master and to break the doxic spell of its hegemonic representations of global reality. All too often, naïve sociologists of innovations and other story-tellers who follow the actors themselves (*'les zacteurs-zeux-mêmes'*) end up in the office of the managers, the technocrats and the organizers in charge, describing willy-nilly the extant world from their neo-liberal point of view, which explains in part the agonistic and utilitarian representations of reality as a global marketplace place in which the winners take it all. The point of view of the utilitarian Master is the point of view of the winner, and, as Walter Benjamin reminds us with a sense of nostalgia and the hope of the 'weak Messianism' of the hopeless, 'empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers' (Benjamin, 1974: 696). We know how to describe the reality from the point of view of the victors, but do we know how to describe the potentiality from the point of view of the losers? Do we know how to retrieve and actualize the lost possibilities of the past? Do we know how to brush history against the grain and to blast open its continuum? All too often we analyse the past from the point of view of the present, starting with contingency and 'interpretative flexibility', but eventually ending up with determinacy and self-referential closure or some vague spatial fluidity; all too rarely we analyse the present from the point of view of the oppressed past and those who are excluded in the present. We know how to analyse the closure of the black boxes of history, much less how to analyse how they can be reopened in such a way that the possibilities of the past can be actualized and the hopes of the excluded realized. Existing socio-technical networks are always embedded in a field of structural tensions that may support several overlapping systemic projects. At the crossroads of the actual and the possible, the existing networks of humans and non humans can act as historical shifters. Potentially, they are 'the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter' (Benjamin, 1974: 704) – provided that we are prepared for His return. And to be prepared for

it, we have to lift the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls) and grant equal rights to those who are part of and profit from the system and to those who suffer from it and who can act on it out of a life-world it does not (yet) encompass. Next to the principle of symmetry of the successful and unsuccessful theories, introduced in the 70s by the Scots, and the symmetry of humans and non humans, proposed in the 80s by the French, we thus have to introduce at the end of the 90s a third principle of fairness and symmetry – the emancipatory 'symmetry of the program and the anti-program' (Feenberg, 1999: 119), at least in those cases where the losers of history are able to redeem the lost opportunities of the past, to take up the anti-program built in the socio-technical network and to build a new democratic system of structural relations around it. In so far as the third principle of symmetry presupposes a 'shifting out' from a flat to a laminated ontology, nominalists, reflexivists and interactivists might have epistemological objections to such an emancipatory counterproject, but such academic squibs should not prevent the formation of intellectual alliances in the public sphere or obstruct their adhesion to and enrolment in the unfinished project of modernity.

When thinking suddenly stops to include the repressed voices that are excluded from the discourse of the Master and their spokespersons in a 'configuration pregnant with tensions', it rearranges the elements of the configuration and 'gives the constellation a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad' (Benjamin, 1974: 703). In this Benjamino-Leibnizian perspective of political theology, which envelops and reconfigures the scientifico-political perspective of the Leibnizo-Machiavellians, the monad can then be read as an 'expression' of the contradictions and tensions that run through the structure of social relations and leave their imprint on the losers as scars and unnecessary suffering that could be eliminated – if only the assemblage of humans and non humans entered into a slightly different constellation. That would be Utopia.

Formally, this change of the constellation could be expressed in terms of hermeneutic 'reconfiguration' of Greimas' famous actantial model (Greimas, 1966: 172–91). Such a reconfiguration presupposes, however, that one no longer merely 'follows the story', but that one 'emplots' or 're-tells' it in the future perfect tense. Paul Ricoeur, who has practised the hermeneutics of redemptive reminiscence for ages, describes his recipe for the emplotment of structural semiotics as follows: 'From the onset of the construction of the semiotic square, the analysis is teleologically guided by the anticipation of the final stage, to wit the one of the narration as creation of values' (Ricoeur, 1992: 449). Let's see how such a hermeneutic reconfiguration works by dutifully projecting the actantial categories on the 'semiotic square' in Figure 1.

On the teleological dimension of the desire of the Actants (Tesnière), which are nothing else but classes of actors 'on paper', the position of the Actant-subject would no longer be taken up by the Master (represented for example by the following actors: managers, technocrats, experts, etc.) but

Addressor --- <u>Actant-Object</u> ---► Addressee
Adjuvant --- ► <u>Actant-Subject</u> ◄ --- Opponent

*Figure 1*    The Semiotic Square

by those who contest Him (represented for example by the producers, the consumers, those who are allergic to genetically modified onions, etc.). The ideological Actant-object of desire would no longer be represented by the maximization of the interests of the Master but by a qualitative shift in the mode of Inter-esse not only of the Wretched, but of all Humans, resulting in a peaceful situation where the relation between humans predominates over relations between non humans. The main shift, however, would not happen in the teleological dimension of the actantial model, but in its communicative dimension which conceives of the Actant-object as the project which the Addressor transmits to the Addressee. Indeed, the change of Subject and Object would lead to a sudden shifting out from the level of the network to the level of the system, with the result that the Addressor, which endows the Subject with a mission, would no longer be a contingent aggregation of sociotechnical networks but History, as seen from the point of view of its redemption; the Addressee for its part, for whom the intellectual acts as a spokesperson, would no longer be the Object-world but Humanity as such. Finally, the dimension of the Adjuvant and the Opponent, which are really transfigurations of the Angel and the Devil, would be inverted: the stability and fixity of the 'black boxes' would be seen as the Opponent; their instability as the Adjuvant. In any case, the wind of world history would once again blow through the sails. We might then realize that the world spirit is no longer seated on a white horse as Hegel thought, or on a V2 missile as Adorno once insinuated, but that it is located in every artefact – provided that it is seen from the point of view of its redemption.

*Notes*

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