

“...counter a metaphysical machine with a bigger metaphysical machine.” Does An Inquiry into Modes of Existence have a system?¹

Bruno Latour, Sciences Po

Interview with Carolina Miranda, in the context of the Puerto de Ideas festival Valparaiso, 9 November 2014, English kindly corrected by Stephen Muecke

Editor's note: We had asked Bruno Latour to give us an interview on the philosophical—or more accurately, metaphysical—stakes involved in his project *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. More specifically, we were curious to hear him comment on whether his undertaking has a systematic character or not. In effect, the question around which this issue of the journal turns, “Does French philosophy have a system?” evokes debates spurred by this project, which was elaborated both by the book published in 2012 [and in English in 2013] and via the internet platform (<http://www.modesofexistence.org>) for which the book constituted only a part. Here, once again, was a French thinker accused of having given in to “system thought”! And he was most likely the very one to have stood most firmly against such thought, who had been a champion of the “local”, who had defended the idea of empirical philosophy, etc. So we were aware that he had defended these grounds, and we were also thinking that in his work the form the system took really had such original meanings and functions that it allowed discussion to open right up. We have not been let down, because before we even embarked on the interview we had in mind, Bruno Latour sent us the text you are about to read. However we must confess to the reader that we have not been able to find any trace of the anthropologist involved, whether in library catalogues or on the internet. When we conveyed our concerns, Bruno Latour replied that she was a doctoral student working with Professor A. Prieto at the University of Magallanes, Puerto Natales, Chili, who had yet to publish anything, but was full of promise. Without doubt, her questions prove this. The footnotes are ours.

Patrice Maniglier.

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Carolina Marinda — Since, in your book on the modes of existence (AIME),² you invented a character, an anthropologist carrying out, in a way, your research work for you, I hope you will agree to an interrogation by a genuine anthropologist who is having real trouble doing her own research according to your methodological principles!

Bruno Latour — A refusal would be quite out of place. Especially as the project aims to do something that is as unusual in philosophy as it is in anthropology, to do successful collective research.

CM — I'll come back to this "collective", but let me first ask you about one of the more troubling aspects of your book, that is, the impression that it gives of wanting to be a system. If one has a quick look on pages 488-9, I must say one is shocked, especially if, like me, one has read your other works, precisely because they opened up pathways with the notion of actor-network, that completely moved away from any system: "follow the actors," "no other metalanguage than that of "follow the actors themselves", the "principle of irreduction", etc. What has become of all these fine lessons in method that we learnt from you?

BL — I am as embarrassed to find a response, as I am myself shocked, both by your questions and the systematic form that AIME took as it developed. As Souriau said, "What do you want of me, metaphysical machine?"³ Maybe it has swallowed me up! In any case, let me say in advance, I have no well-determined ideas on this system business. My first reaction would be to say to you, "No, not at all, it isn't a system, it is collection that has come about through what has come to hand empirically over more than a quarter of a century, but it has come about systematically, that's true." Can you accept that one can work systematically yet not have a system in view?

CM — But the train of associations, in the sense of the actor-network, it too was systematic, yet one never followed a pre-established plan. No one was asked, for instance, to concentrate on the "crossing" between two modes.

BL — The actor-network was a great way of breaking up the notion of distinct domains, but the result was a new kind of quite confused vision, very entangled with all that the Moderns had done. What was then needed was to differentiate once again according to other principles. The two tasks ran in parallel: follow associations across all the false frontiers of the domains, but, at the same time, manage to isolate what was right about the notion of domain. Now, what was right was the ontological pluralism that only the

² Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2013).

³ Etienne Souriau, *Les Différents modes d'existence*, (Paris : P.U.F., 2009), p. 162.

trace of associations could manage to get a fix on, and which is totally hidden by institutional domains. To do an anthropology of the Moderns you have to be systematic in these two directions at the same time: follow associations, detect different modes of being. There, too, everything lies open.

CM — It would be easier for me to believe you if you weren't showing a document in the timeline of the AIME site (<http://www.modesofexistence.org/timeline.html>), dating from 1988, therefore at the very start of the project, with more or less all the modes in your current book, all drawn up in the form of a rosette with all the features of a kind of emblem, or, sorry to be rude; it looks like one of those transformation masks that West coast Native Americans have. How can you say it is "empirical" if it was all there in 1988, with squares to be filled in? Now, that's really what I don't like about the idea of system, having to fill in cells on a diagram.

BL — You can immediately get a feel for contrasts, but to make them emerge afterwards via a continuous play of comparisons, that needs much more time. And to prove this qualification, and to share it, yes, that takes a quarter of a century. In 1988 I am in Australia, I get off the plane, I already have several years behind me of what is in effect a research program, not a system, I must emphasize, a program whose items are pretty much envisaged and roughly ordered. But you are an anthropologist, why should that surprise you? Marcel Mauss' manual⁴ also defined in advance everything that would have to be documented, counted and measured to be "empirical", just as he is getting ready for fieldwork. On the matter of this list of modes, I first started it in 1973, in Abidjan, when I began to conceive what an anthropology of "Whites" might look like. I know that if I don't study sciences, techniques, religion, law, economy, etc, I won't get a fix on the nature of the networks in front of my nose, and to which the term "modernization" adds nothing. "Filling in cells", if you like, but also a dozen books to write, and, in fact, I stuck to this program, and I wrote the books!

CM — No need to justify yourself, I'm just trying to explain to you my doubts and lack of understanding. People can certainly want to put systems in place, nothing wrong with that. What I am trying to understand is why, if that is what you really have in mind, you don't clearly say so, and if it is something else, that I have not understood, I would like you to explain it to me. For example, in the book, just as on the table on the famous page 488, the ordering in four groups of three, plus a so-called method group, certainly makes sense, it is not just an ordering, even the labels using "object" and "subject."

⁴ Marcel Mauss, *Manual of Ethnography*, trans. Dominique Lussier, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).

BL — “Quasi-objects and quasi-subjects.”

CM — Sorry, yes, quasi, well, from all that you keep drawing conclusions, as if the order of the modes really had a meaning, as well as the groupings in four groups of three, and the labels — listen, if this is not a system, it sure looks like one!

BL — I know, it’s crazy that I have no satisfactory explanation for the fact that the modes are arranged in four groups of three. I’m terribly sorry, but they grouped *themselves* like this. You know, when you go into a natural history museum, the wooden pieces of furniture that hold the drawers with the collections might be of a neoclassical or neogothic style, sure, but this style has nothing to do with the order of the fossils, or the specimens or the artefacts laid out there. I have set out the modes I have found in a pretty cabinet with four drawers and three partitions, and it works. That is all I am able to tell you. The cabinet comes from elsewhere, yes, but this arrangement adds *nothing substantial* to the collection I have made of this sort of regional ontology. It is in this sense that it is not a system. It is not obtained through combination; the combinations are not exhaustive, nothing says that the number of positions is fixed, and in any case one can predict nothing on the basis of empty slots. It isn’t Mendeleev’s table! One can have a research program, it can be systematically carried out, the results can be put into an order, and yet one is not looking for, wanting or obtaining, a system.

CM — But you didn’t find that just because you had the luck to stumble upon it randomly!

BL — Of course not, there comes a decision, a speculative decision, but this decision applies to a quite small number of points, a metalanguage of four or five terms, crucial, yes, but which have nothing to say on the content of what one might find: the being-as-other. How? Look for different versions of this being, follow the trajectories, note the hiatuses, the tonalities, compare the one to the other, begin again. Really minimal equipment. And yet...

CM — And yet?!

BL — You are right in saying that this arrangement also has a meaning, it’s true, first because it allows me to open negotiations with other collectives in a certain manner, according to a certain protocol, beginning with the modes that are most shared before coming to the most provincial, those of the economy. In this sense, the order of the four groups resembles a Grand Narrative which allows us to move seemingly from the most “material” beings, the beings of reproduction [REP], to the most “spiritual” those said to be Moral [MOR]. But it is for convenience, to maintain a certain kind of

compatibility with what the Moderns think about themselves. It is also for this reason that I keep the old Object/Subject division, but completely requalified. It assures continuity and avoids jargon.

CM — Avoiding jargon, I'm not so sure, but the danger in this “convenient” ordering is that it leads you sometimes to a grand narrative of hominization, there's a bit of Leroi-Gourhan going on here. Vivieros de Castro has even taken you to task for risking a return to the modernist Grand Narrative.⁵ Saying that there is “nothing substantial” is as difficult, I find, as the order of the modes is very important. You take a thousand precautions, but you certainly draw conclusions from each group. For example, on p. 283, you speak of “arranging the modes of existence” and once more on p. 375. So there is really, as well as convenience, a supplementary meaning, and that can't be given by a drawer in a cabinet, to borrow your metaphor.

BL — No, but what also has to be taken into account is what could be called the “Goody effect”, the Jack Goody of *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*.⁶ As soon as you arrange, draw up a list of any kind, you add a layer of meaning and that permits you to discover other links which were not among the items ordered in the list and ...

CM — But you say “discover”; it's all there. Here you are claiming you have discovered something else, in addition to the arrangement of the modes, which is actually the articulation at the heart of what the Moderns themselves were working on. Why not say so? You can't pretend you have found them just like that, randomly. You must have an idea in the back of your mind, and in the end that is a system. If first you find pebbles, accidentally, now they are arranged like Tom Thumb's, and they are leading somewhere ...

BL — ... or allow us to come back the way we came in any case! Yes, you are right, I do have an idea in the back of my mind in which the synoptic character of the famous table plays a role that is not just one of convenience. This is Maniglier's argument: when it comes to the modes, I want to *keep them all*, since each is made with and against the others and they all have a hegemonic tendency, each thinks it is alone and the best. This is why we

⁵ See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's contribution called « Méta-modalité de [MOR] et dualisme résiduel de AIME ? » (11/03/2014), on the site www.modesofexistence.org.

⁶ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

need a device that makes them all visible at once.⁷ And, it's true, putting them in a table does this job. Like a city map allows you to check that you have not forgotten something essential to a city's survival.

CM — But that is exactly what is called a system! Make sure one has forgotten nothing. What is stopping this being said? This systematic arrangement is very elegant and very plausible, each mode depending on all the others. What are you afraid of?

BL — Well, there are ways other than a table or a map to verify that one has not lost something essential. I'm not frightened of the effect of making everything visible at once. Actually no, I am frightened, but it is because the Moderns too, for their part, have nothing systematic about them either. What I have gathered are the modes they are passionate about, but these passions are all contingent. What have they been doing with this passion for Science? Why this stupendous investment in the Economy? Why this bizarre and incredible investment in religious beings and the theme of the end of time? How would you like me to make a history systematic when it isn't, and which for the most part was made by rebounding effects when one mode is passionately extracted from the others? It is through this entirely contingent history that the modes have ended up differentiating themselves from each other. You criticize me for having exclusive entry via the crossings, but this is what really happened. Each mode reacted on the others whenever there are those frictions that are needed to make history, but which I have at least noted. On reflection, if I have discovered anything, as you say, it is how to equip oneself in order to follow the always surprising contrasts which define the history of the Moderns. I didn't make them up, but yes, I scarcely dare say it, I discover them. At least, I construct them. I construct so they can be discovered. [laughter]

CM — Hearing you do battle with the notions of “discovery” and “construction” is quite fun. But what I can't let pass, I must admit, is that this contingent history would result in 4 multiplied by 3 equals 12, plus 3 equals 15?! 12 categories, just like in the *Critique of Pure Reason*! And you speak of history, but one cannot imagine a book written in a less historical way than AIME.

BL — Yes, but that's a stylistic choice. The number 12 comes perhaps from a numerological effect, but that too is contingent, provisional, ready for a supplementary research project, before negotiation. And, I beg your pardon, but the number of categories in the *Critique* is not twelve, but only one. They

⁷ See Patrice Maniglier, “Fictions and Attachments. A Comparative Metaphysics of Art and Commerce,” translated by Stephen Muecke, submitted to *New Literary History*.

are all, like in Aristotle, categories of the *same mode*, that of referential judgment. They are all in the same key. While AIME is all about exploring a plurality of beings, and not simply about knowing in how many ways I can parse Socrates with a discourse of truth. Twelve is a coincidence; I would only be too happy to be relieved of this problem when a thirteenth category is discovered and this irritating symmetry is broken.

CM — Souriau, whom you often cite, would have advised you not to try to count the modes.

BL — Except Souriau made no effort to be an anthropologist. He thought he was speaking about all ontology. Myself, I'm talking to people who have extracted a tiny number from all the possible alterations of being-as-an-other. Or in any case who have passionately elaborated a tiny number, and who have then burdened the world with this little number. And so I count, yes, I count. I just want to count enough of them so that I can give a vision of the Moderns in which they recognize themselves without having the impression that I have betrayed them, "Is it really this that you cherish?" If I have turned it into a neat package, it's also all the better for quickly looking it over, "Is there enough equipment here?" It is the First Aid kit side of this thing. Or rather, the clichéd question, "If you were shipwrecked on a desert isle, what books would you bring with you? Quick, you have thirty seconds." Well, here it's the same thing, "The Earth you walk on is crumbling under your feet, you must leave fast, which modes do you need so as not to lose your whole history, the essentials you want to retain?" Anyway, why are you so obsessed by this number twelve?

CM — Come on, it's not me who is obsessed by this number! I'm just trying to understand why you have given this particular style (since you insist it is a style) to what you call "a collective inquiry". If you had also left those you call "co-researchers" free to find modes, one might feel a little less cramped, and departed long ago from the number twelve. The site has been open for two years in French, one in English, and I still don't see new modes coming in. Isn't the "system" here coming to paralyse the inquiry? In which case, you must admit, I would be right to be suspicious and prefer the good old actor-network theory. At least there one had plenty of room to do fieldwork.

BL — You really have me on the spot, because it is true that candidates for new modes proposed until now by co-researchers did not get very far, or in any case, were not validated, or should I say approved. But, still, we are right at the start of the collective work. On the actor-network, let us not be mistaken, the pluralism it allowed, that it still allows, is a pluralism of associations. It is still a great tool for moving freely among domains that usually prohibit such freedom of movement. I don't deny it at all. But it is a pluralism according to a sole mode, in a sole key, just like the categories of

understanding mistakenly called plural. It's the postmodern problem. All the associations are multiple, but in the same way. Which means, from the AIME point of view, one always meets the same types of beings here, the ones we call networks [NET] in the jargon of the inquiry. After thirty-odd years of wonderful liberatory years, it would be great to be in a position to meet some others.

CM — Happy to. But we had this room to manoeuvre you speak of with the actor-network, and we no longer have it when we have to concentrate at any cost on the crossings between modes, and in addition between the *modes* you propose for the inquiry, and those alone.

BL — Are you aware how much work is needed to come to terms with a single crossing? Comparative method is standard in anthropology, in fact, it defines the discipline. Well, in my case, I use the same comparative method, but *inside* the collectives which go by the strange name of “modern”, without them having any clear idea of what that means, since the only contrast they really hold on to is the one they fantasize about having with the pre-moderns. I am just asking them to compare, meticulously for once, the requirements all types of beings who have embarked on their various adventures, and which they imagine they can put in the same household. This takes an enormous amount of time, especially if you have nearly ninety crossings, rather than just one!

CM — But you are the one who decides what has to be worked on, no wonder the contributors are not rushing in. One has the impression that the game is over from the start; why would they come to help you in your work? The contributors must be saying to themselves, “He just has to do the job himself, and then publish the results.”

BL — You are being hard on me, but you are applying pressure where it hurts. If I try to justify myself, I would say that ontological pluralism, a true multiplicity of beings justified by history and by anthropology, is really hard to grasp or simply envisage. So you need a quite violent *dispositive*, or let's say, rather, a demanding *apapratu*s, to focus attention just on this point. Hence its apparently closed character. Souriau proposes a multiplicity, but with total indifference to ethnographic verisimilitude, not to mention his style. Whitehead worked a mode in depth, the most important, the one that is at the origin of the Bifurcation of Nature, but what would a “whiteheadian” economics, politics, art or law look like? Look at James, the marvellous James, and all the pains he goes to just to get out of the subject/object opposition. Bergson goes through all the modes, but, all in vain, he can't stop himself from having one which becomes the master of all the others. AIME really has the ambition of using everything that philosophy has worked on, but to keep open the ethnographic inquiry. Or at least to obtain enough

descriptive realism to open the diplomatic negotiation. One must not forget this diplomatic negotiation. It is essential; any critique you have of the project must be calibrated through it. This, as an anthropologist, you must understand.

CM — You are right, this question interests me, even if, unfortunately, the Fuegians I am studying have all been exterminated. So negotiation in my case is not realistic... But I must not be enough of a philosopher to understand exactly why you need a “metaphysical machine” to maintain the ontological pluralism.

BL — You surprise me, really. You know how much empirical description quickly becomes impossible when you have to make an account of what you are observing with just one, or at best two, types of beings, objects and subjects (and in fact there is never just one of them, at the end of the day). Next, you are obliged to twist the facts, because nothing, absolutely nothing of what you are observing can be called an object or a subject. You have shown it yourself with your analysis of rituals, or the construction of canoes in Admiralty Sound. But it’s the same thing with the notion of a technical project, or legal grounds, or scientific objectivity.

CM — So you want me to become a philosopher in order to be an anthropologist?

BL — No, because the philosopher’s failings are the opposite of the anthropologist’s. Philosophers explore alternative ontologies with an insane daring, but they can’t stop themselves from choosing one of them, as if their job were to define what the world is really made of, and for everyone. And anthropologists are paid, so to speak, to cash in on the greatest multiplicity, but on the condition that this does not come to modify the basic ontology—let’s say humans endowed with speech at the heart of a culture knowable by positive science. What has interested me from the start, after I discovered ethnological method in Africa, was to link these two disciplines via their most daring elements. Alterity can only be registered and maintained with an ontological detour. But on condition that ontology is protected against any stranglehold of one mode over the others. And for that you need a sturdy machine.

CM — Which really means that one is a long way from the empirical in the banal sense of the word.

BL — But of course, the whole history of the sciences shows this. In order to grasp the smallest fact, you need a whole preliminary apparatus. Facts are what is obtained. The modes only become detectable if you deliberately rub them against each other. And the more there are, the more time you have to

spend contrasting them with each other. Let's say that philosophy and anthropology correct each other and protect each other.

CM — With the drawback, which we often hear, that you belong to both disciplines without actually being in either, which might enable you to escape the requirements of the two trades. Like in La Fontaine's fable, « Je suis Oiseau ; voyez mes ailes ! Je suis souris : vivent les Rats ! [“I am a bird, look at my wings! I am a mouse, long live the rats!”] (I checked on this yesterday, I learnt it at my French high school, you don't believe that I remembered it). But back to our machine...

BL — Hang on, that's not fair! If I immediately abandoned the philosophical profession, that doesn't mean I have given up philosophy as such. As for the anthropological one, I'd like to know how many professionals in this discipline have done as many years in the field as I have. I don't believe I have “escaped” any kind of constraint.

CM — I was only reporting what I've heard. But in point of fact, I wanted to suggest to you a quite positive version of this famous system. Would you agree that there are two sorts of systems, one that bears on the very content (and that is what you say you are not doing), and one that is there precisely to stop content being reduced to a system. In that case, the “solid machine,” the “metaphysical machine” in AIME should be complicated and technical enough to resist system thought. After all, you are the one who wrote in AIME, “...counter a metaphysical machine with a bigger metaphysical machine.”⁸

BL — That's clever; I wish it were true. In any case, what you have gotten right there is that it is more a case of it being an instrument than a system. If the entry price seems high, if one has to bow down to all sorts of constraints to become a co-researcher and contributor (as opposed to what is normally found in the format of collaborative sites, which we have tried to avoid: free commentary), it is because we have to defend ourselves against the elimination of ontological pluralism.

CM — As we have seen over the last few years in anthropology where the “ontological turn” has frightened quite a few of the horses.

BL — Yes, I did notice this, as soon as Vivieros de Castro, Descola, and Eduardo Kohn began to leave the straight and narrow. Anthropologists always talk of pluralism and alterity, the Other with a capital O, etc. but on condition that one leave intact the common sense of a social world that is distinct from things and also the universality of power relations. From the

⁸ Bruno Latour, *Inquiry...*, op. cit., p. 22.

AIME point of view, this is a ridiculous pluralism.

CM — What about the philosophers on the other side?

BL — But they always want to found or to choose; it's a lost cause. They don't want to compose, negotiate, or verify *in situ* if their list of beings that have to be made to live together is sustainable and acceptable to those being addressed. This is what I call diplomacy and that's what demands that one hold pluralism open more widely. Yes, I quite like your idea, AIME systematically fights against the idea of a system that would impede the unfolding of the diplomatic enterprise. In that it is tough.

CM — However, there are a lot of blogs accusing you of not being “democratic”, being closed.

BL — Listen, if you take part in a collective experiment, and there are a lot at the moment, what are called “participatory sciences”, for example to do inventories of birds or plants, then protocol isn't discussed. If you participate, you are it is in order to follow the rules and because you have confidence in the research apparatus. What's that got to do with democracy? The only worthwhile question is to know if the experience of this multiplicity of beings is shareable. And if it is, can one make use of this redefinition of what the Moderns hold dear in order to reopen negotiations with the other collectives on the composition of a common world. I couldn't find an easier way to stop modes collapsing into one or two. Fifteen modes, after all, might be a prop, if you like, to use another metaphor. If you want breathing space, then this machine stops the mineshaft collapsing as we feel our way deeper.

CM — I am used to the winds of Tierra del Fuego! The mineshaft doesn't really make me feel like breathing... In any case, I have a better understanding for your interest in White's *The Middle Ground*.⁹ Diplomatic situations are so rare, so delicate and especially so fragile, that it is necessary, paradoxically, to do systematic work in preparation.

BL — Yes, I recognize this paradox. Anyway, if it is a system, as you say, an anti-system system, there's never been anything so totally *bricolé*. But I have yet to find a better way to assure myself that one could completely modify the Moderns' way of comparing themselves to the “others,” while losing nothing from their experience.

⁹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).