

Critical Distance or Critical Proximity?*

Bruno Latour
dialogue prepared for a volume in honor of Donna Haraway
edited by Sharon Ghamari

“Duces caeci, excolantes culicem, camelum autem glutientes.”
(Matt. 23:24)

(Written for a book in homage of Donna Haraway but then rejected by the editor)



* I have tried to capture some of the energy and arguments of a lively discussion between Dominique Pestre and the members of the CSI-School of Mines regarding the politics of the field known as Science Technology and Society (STS). English kindly corrected by Duana Fullwiley.

SHE: — So he is elected. Don't you think it's a catastrophe?

HE: — Of course it is, but on the other hand... Maybe it's a good occasion to rethink what our political passions should be, no? After all, Bush has been able to tap into new feelings, new intuitions, and new emotions. So, why couldn't those of us in the academy be unable to do so?

SHE: — By doing what? By remaining hidden deep in the towers of our campuses?

HE: — No. By being more critical of what we study, for one thing. By pushing our little fields forward. For me, at least, by deploying the various entanglements of science and technology. What's wrong with that? It appears that political activism has been a total failure no?

SHE: — Activism is the salt of the earth. And, as far as I can see, the studies of science and technology are totally empty of any political import.

HE: — But that's wrong, utterly wrong. We have been talking a lot about new procedures, new deliberations, new assemblies to bring science and technology into democracy. In a way, the whole of science studies has become increasingly involved in politics in recent years.

SHE: — I have zero confidence in those procedures as you call them; they are much too nice; too pacific; there is no conflict any more. Whenever there is a dispute, we gather around the table, we talk, and we reach a conclusion. It is now about governance, and that's the final emasculation of politics. No teeth. No guts. No balls.

HE: — I see. So you're still dreaming of storming the Winter Palace, aren't you? If it doesn't resemble the confrontations of May '68, or the riot gas-filled streets of Seattle, you don't believe it's politics? You still have Delacroix' painting in mind: the Republic with her naked breasts, a Phrygian cap on her head, holding the tricolored flag and marching on — straight into the hail of bullets. You want to die heroically on barricades. Sure to lose!

SHE: — Sure to win! No conflict, no politics. Deliberative democracy has become the opium of the people. My feeling, for what it's worth, is that if science studies, which used to be a radical movement, has of late degenerated into a wishy-washy appeal to consultation, round tables, stake holder meetings, and talks, talks, talks. then I give up.... It's all about consensus conferences, focus groups, citizens' debates. Habermas. Habermas everywhere. It stinks.

HE: — So you don't believe there's a critical nature to science studies anymore?

SHE: — "You blind guide! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel".

HE: — What?

SHE: — Jesus, my friend, Jesus against the hypocrites. We are now able to describe the fine details of mathematical equations, the micro-politics of cancer research, we know everything there is to learn about anti-bodies, and we are pathetically mute whenever it concerns the big picture. And, that worries me deeply.

HE: — But that was our common political project, no? Opening the black box. That's what we have all been doing.

SHE: — And we were right in doing it, no question about it. And we should continue doing it. I am just terribly worried that we might have lost something along the way. By opening the black box, I never meant for us to get lost in the details of this labyrinth.

HE: — So you want to close it again and say: “So sorry, we opened it by mistake; now let’s go back to serious politics?” I thought it was like Pandora’s box and that we were searching for the hope stuck at the bottom...

SHE: — What is sure is that hope is no longer at the bottom end of our studies. Can’t you understand what it means to be *worried*? I am not sure what I want, really, but what if we had been wrong in ignoring the politics of it all? What if we have been lost in the details and we have forgotten the really massive asymmetries: power, domination, hegemony, inequality? I hate those indefinite talks about deliberative democracy as if everyone was equal and could speak their minds freely. Politics for me is about defending the losers, the underdogs. Are you not worried about this exclusive focus on the elites, the Nobel prize winners, the innovators, the geniuses? Who speaks for the losers? Who speaks for them now that we are all busy studying labs, companies, patent lawyers, high tech firms?

HE: — This is what I don’t get: we have been accused of exactly the opposite sin: to extend politics to everything *including* science, mathematics, physics, biology. Is this not why our work has infuriated so many scientists? And now you are telling me that our problem is that we have *ignored* politics altogether?

SHE: — What makes you so sure that we can’t bungle everything at once?! We might have extended politics to science, depriving the underdogs, it’s true, of their only court of appeal against injustice, and yet, we might have emasculated politics to the point of having reduced it to impotence. It’s perfectly possible: the worst of both worlds. Why not? As Mr. Rumsfeld says: “Stuff happens”... Good feelings don’t protect you against strategic mistakes. Has not the Left learned this many times? And dearly.

HE: — But that’s just the reason why I’m so worried by your longing for a return to good old politics: hegemony, power, domination; by your appeal to go back to common sense and to taking the ‘big picture’ into account. It is precisely because the deadly mistakes of the Left are always on my mind. And I’d say more on mine than on yours. Shouldn’t we be very careful not to add another strategic mistake to an already pathetic long history of blunders? I am terrified when I see that even people like you abandon the call to open the black boxes...

SHE: — You speak as if it’s a “Calling!”! Are we supposed to be apostles? And who would be the John the Baptist of this new religion? Don’t you see that everyone is now deconstructing scientific facts? That Bush’s advisers are great adepts of “social construction”? That “global warming” has become “climate variations”. Can you deny that there is no longer any leverage left if it’s forbidden to appeal to true and incontrovertible facts? Who has taught everyone to put scare quotes

around “evidence”, “truth” and “facts”? Us, my dear, us. Doesn’t that worry you to be quoted approvingly by neocons, fundamentalists, reactionaries, obscurantist of all sorts? In case you don’t know, even the radical fascists of the neo-Hindu party in India have become great fans of science studies. Can you deny that, on the whole, we have helped the powerful more than the powerless?

HE: — First, no politician or propagandist ever needed science studies to improve their perverse dealings. Mr. Luntz, the Bush propaganda adviser, for instance, is way ahead of us, whatever we do. As for the fascists, well... And second, yes I agree that we have to be careful, but what I don’t get is why we should change course and suddenly, in the middle of our work, turn back to the big politics we have been criticizing for so long to say: “Enough detailed studies of how people reach certainty! Let’s start loudly denouncing the oppressive powers of domination”.

SHE: — But are you not tired of piling case study upon case study? Do we really need to add several decimal points to the many effects of power that we’ve been unveiling? Is the landscape of the present world not unequal enough for us to see? Don’t you realize the extent to which time has changed? Criticizing the solidity of scientific facts is not what is needed any longer. Debunking evidence is not what is called for any more. Everyone does that. On the contrary, we need our *evidence* back. Proofs. And I am not ashamed to say, truth. How long will you remain blind to the terrifying demonstrations of power and dominations? How long will you remain hidden behind your little finger?

HE: — Woah... you are furious.

SHE: — Enraged rather, yes. And disgusted by the peaceful and wholly escapist atmosphere of deliberative democracy that former science students seem to love so much.

HE: — Who are you really talking about? Like you, I feel that “times are a changing”. But for me this is precisely why we should not abandon the critique of critique that we’ve been engaged in. The reasons for being so diffident of critical distance are exactly as valid as they used to be. Critical discourse has of late become impotent. It has no leverage point left in any case. What would make it more relevant now? We are in the middle of the ford. It’s just the time *not* to change course.

SHE: — Why should I abandon critical distance if all you have to offer is complacency? Connivance? Complicity?

HE: — But I don’t understand why you’re so contented with going back to the empty posture of denouncing corporations, nation states, capitalism, empires? Did you find that particularly effective? Do you remember the 70s? I too am enraged, but by the utter vacuity of wholesale critique. Do you want me to learn *EMPIRE* by heart? What you mean by regaining a strong political stand is nothing more than making you feel good again among your like-minded political buddies. That’s just as disgusting. This is replacing politics with moralizing —or worse

socializing. I'm sorry to say, but this is what *I* would call escapism. Or, rather, fundamentalism. Inner conviction has replaced proofs.

SHE: — Woah... so you are furious too?

HE: — That makes two of us! But it's true that science studies is in the middle of a difficult search for political relevance.

SHE: — And also that times have changed so much that the front lines have to be modified.

HE: — Well, that's quite a lot of agreement already!

SHE: — So, in the end, where do we disagree?

HE: — We disagree on *details*. Denunciation is moot if we don't have a much more thorough picture of the details of the issues at hand.

SHE: — But what I am telling you is that the endless and obsessive search for details might just be hiding the vast landscape where domination so obviously and openly exists. This is where you become complacent and where science studies is either apolitical or ends up reviving the most traditional definitions of deliberative democracy: "Let's talk". You're so enamored with the complexities of the scientific or technical questions that you can't even decide who is dominated and who is dominant.

HE: — But that's exactly the case yes. I don't feel that I am in a position to say who is exploiting and who is exploited. I would even claim that this is not my role at all.

SHE: — See? That's just what enrages me. Do you really need more study to decide who is winning? Is there a level playing field where the hapless Indian cotton farmers can argue fairly against Monsanto? Do you really think that the mouse of Open Source stands a chance against the behemoth Microsoft? Don't be ridiculous.

HE: — Good example: twenty years ago Microsoft didn't even exist. Monsanto's biotech clout is even more recent. Is this not the reason why science studies extended politics to science and technology in the first place? Precisely because, contrary to your beloved 'context' and 'big pictures', this context changes all the time and *can* be reversed?

SHE: — It does *not* change all the time, and it *cannot* be easily reversed. You're delusional. There are patterns of irreversibility that you continue to ignore. That's where the problem lies.

HE: — But if it can't be reversed, why do you believe denunciation can succeed where *our* studies have failed? One's actions make a difference only in a world made of differences. And for me it is just this world of tiny and unexpected differences that science studies has been uncovering. And the deployment of such unequal and changing landscape is just what has been totally abandoned by critical discourse. They preferred to rage against capitalism or empire.

SHE: — But your argument reverses itself: what would more studies contribute? A new paper in *SOCIAL STUDIES OF SCIENCE*?

- HE: — First, yes, and what’s wrong with that? Is it not what we’re paid to do? But more important, it provides us with more details... thus more differences, and thus more occasions to change the so-called ‘irreversible power relations’.
- SHE: — Do you seriously believe that more ‘studies’ will reverse them?!
- HE: — Why do you say ‘study’ with disgust? You have a strange definition of ‘study’ for someone who has been so effective at conducting them. Discovering the right assembly for which the search for new and unexpected positions can be found...
- SHE: — Assemblies! Back to the round table again! “Let’s talk and everyone will end up agreeing.”
- HE: — I said the ‘right assembly’. I did not say the Habermassian room where people of good company listen patiently to one another and come to the most reasonable solution. The room, the table, the participants, the arguments, everything is up for grabs. Is this not what the social sciences are supposed to do? Is this not exactly this search that you deride when making fun of the trope of deliberative democracy favored by so many students of science studies?
- SHE: — But what room is left for conflicts? That’s just the question. Why are you so fascinated by assemblies?
- HE: — Why are you so fascinated by conflicts? No matter how fierce their dedication to war, the warring parties always imagine the moment when peace talks will begin. And that’s when the details, the small details will count, because this is when compromises will be made.
- SHE: — But this is just what I am saying: without changing the power relations first, the call for discussion is not only moot, it’s deeply deceptive. Deliberation hides power relations.
- HE: — What if it were just the opposite, that power relations hide deliberations? You seem to really expect conflicts to lead somewhere if they are pushed to their ultimate conclusion.
- SHE: — But of course, this is where conflicts are supposed to lead !
- HE: — You remain totally intoxicated by dialectics. You are a Hegelian at heart.
- SHE: — Is this a sin of some sort?
- HE: — In a way, yes, because everything interesting is hidden behind the façade of conflicts. You just spoke of a “room for conflict”. Be coherent: describe that room. You might detect in it the hidden voices of the underdogs, the arrival of new players, the discovery of the invisible stakes of the famous stake-holders, the irruption of the interests of the various parties, the invention of new equipment to detect new issues in novel ways.
- SHE: — So where do we differ? All of this new landscape will be revealed only on the condition that conflicts are there in the first place, and that’s precisely why we should not hesitate to push conflicts forward instead of...
- HE: — Well, is this not exactly what we have been doing in opening the black box? Is this not where all the really interesting conflicts reside? But all the black boxes

have to be opened up, including the pretensions of those who think they know what is at stake and what the conflict is about. What's wrong with this? How can you claim that this is apolitical? What is so complacent about it? It strikes me, on the contrary, as the most complex thing to do -- highest virtue of social sciences.

SHE: — It is apolitical! It's as if you were jumping to the peace talk before the war has even started. This is what I find so debilitating. And also, since there is no utopian dimension any more, there is no way to adjudicate the conflicting claims. No leverage. You will get bogged down in the details, in the multiplicity of positions...

HE: — But it's just this multiplicity that has to be cherished and nurtured, because this is the only source of the compromises which will have to be struck in the end.

SHE: — But then don't begin by compromising yourself!

HE: — Don't caricature my position. I don't believe we have to play the experts who know enough to tell who are friends and who are foes. Have we not learned the danger of expertise? For me science studies should go all the way and that means also modifying what we mean by studying something and by taking a political stand. I am terribly suspicious of radical activists when they play the roles we dislike so much when scientists hold them. I don't want to be an expert.

SHE: — But then don't caricature *my* position. I like science studies as much as you do, and yet I don't believe that, just because we study science and technology, we should be blinded to the larger landscape and to the unfortunately very boring, quite classical power relations. I still believe that we need a powerful knowledge to be able “to *transform* the world, not simply to interpret it.”

HE: — I know, I know the quote as well. Not sure I am convinced though by good old Marx. Just another Hegelian.

SHE: — And what's wrong with dialectics anyway? What's so great about the appeal to “differences”? Don't you think we need a much stronger social science? You seem to be very pleased with ignorance. You don't even have the guts to tell the bad guys from the good.

HE: — That's true. I have no privileged knowledge to decide in advance who exploits and who's exploited. It's not ignorance. Uncertainty? yes. Contrary to you, as long as I don't possess some experimental tool to explore the general will, I can't speak in the name of the common good. We first have to find a way to multiply the possible outcomes. And I find such an activity terribly difficult.. I'd rather be a disciple of Dewey than of Marx: “The public *is* a problem”.,

SHE: — See, that's *your* problem.

HE: — But this is why I need a tool of some sort, or, if you prefer, an assembly. For me the two are synonymous. Or, an inquiry, if that makes it better.

SHE: — Except that without a critical stance this inquiry can go on indefinitely without modifying the initial positions an iota.

- HE: — Except if it ends up rendering the *issue itself* critical.
- SHE: — But you have deprived yourself of any critical edge!
- HE: — ‘Critical’ is also the name of a state, in case you forgot your physics. Make sure that issues reach *criticity*, would not that be a better slogan?
- SHE: — Do you, by any chance, claim to increase the temperature of an issue without *yourself* being in any way critical?
- HE: — Do you, by any chance, believe that you increase the temperature by simply *feeling* indignation and sharing this indignation with your buddies? You are confusing the subjective definition of critique with its objective one. It’s the object itself, the issue at stake, that has to be rendered critical.
- SHE: — And that could be carried out in any emotional state? Including quiet indifference to the solution?
- HE: — Not indifference, no. Rather, passionate interest for an uncertain and surprising solution, yes. And not only that, but I am tempted to say that it’s just the critically minded people, because they are so sure of who should win and who should lose and why, who actually cool down the issues to the point that they manage to *decrease* the temperature under them... They prefer to feel critical than to induce criticality. And you know what? It’s because they leave out the little details.
- SHE: — Please don’t try to play the role of the courageous researcher who doesn’t know why I am supposed to be the idiot expert or activist who believes she knows it all... Things are more complicated.
- HE: — That’s just what I am saying.
- SHE: — At least we know where we disagree.
- HE: — We seem to also agree on the need for a stronger social science...
- SHE: — Except that we disagree on what ‘strong’ is ...
- HE: — The truth, my beautiful friend, is that we, in the academy, are totally disoriented by the reactionary climate of the neocons and other fundamentalists. We hesitate on which side to strike. We are thoroughly lost.
- SHE: — But this is just the reason why we should not hesitate to search for critical distance...
- HE: — Critical *proximity*, yes, not critical distance.
- SHE: — Does it really differ? Eh, where are you going, we aren’t through yet?
- HE: — Sorry, I have a plane to catch...
- SHE: — But we need to bring this dispute to a close.
- HE: — If Marx is right, then you are right. If Dewey is right...
- SHE: — Then, you are wrong!
- HE: — I am a pragmatist.
- SHE: — Yeah, that’s just the problem. We have too many of them already.
- HE: — I have to rush but in case you don’t know Greek, a pragmatist needs “pragmata” and pragmata is a pretty good translation of “issues”.
- SHE: — So we speak Greek and let the bad guys win in the end?

HE: — I told you, I have to rush, but don't lose sight of the issues.

[Encyclopedia Britannica: definitions of critical:

- 1 a : of, relating to, or being a turning point or specially important juncture ?critical phase?: as (1) : relating to or being the stage of a disease at which an abrupt change for better or worse may be expected; also : being or relating to an illness or condition involving danger of death ?critical care? (2) : relating to or being a state in which or a measurement or point at which some quality, property, or phenomenon suffers a definite change ?critical temperature? b : crucial, decisive ?critical test? c : indispensable, vital ?a critical waterfowl habitat? ?a component critical to the operation of a machine? d : being in or approaching a state of crisis ?a critical shortage? ?a critical situation?
- 2 a : inclined to criticize severely and unfavorably b : consisting of or involving criticism ?critical writings?; also : of or relating to the judgment of critics ?the play was a critical success? c : exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation d : including variant readings and scholarly emendations ?a critical edition?
- 3 : characterized by risk or uncertainty
- 4 a : of sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction — used of a mass of fissionable material b : sustaining a chain reaction — used of a nuclear reactor]