

# DEFINING THE OBJECT OF INQUIRY

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An investigator goes off to do fieldwork among the Moderns ⊕ without respecting domain boundaries, thanks to the notion of actor-network, ⊕ which makes it possible to distinguish networks as result from networks as process.

The inquiry defines a first mode of existence, the network **[NET]**, through a particular “pass,” or passage.

But networks **[NET]** have a limitation: they do not qualify values.

Law offers a point of comparison through its own particular mode of displacement.

There is thus a definition of “boundary” that does not depend on the notions of domain or network.

The mode of extension of objective knowledge can be compared with other types of passes.

Thus any situation can be defined through a grasp of the **[NET]** type plus a particular relation between continuities and discontinuities.

Thanks to a third type of “pass,” the religious type, the investigator sees why values are difficult to detect ⊕ because of their quite particular ties to institutions, ⊕ and this will oblige her to take into account a history of values and their interferences.

AN INVESTIGATOR GOES  
OFF TO DO FIELDWORK  
AMONG THE MODERNS ☉

LET US IMAGINE AN ANTHROPOLOGIST WHO HAS COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF RECONSTITUTING THE VALUE SYSTEM OF “WESTERN societies”—a terrain whose precise boundaries matter little at this stage. Let us imagine as well that, informed by reading good recent authors, she has overcome the temptation to limit her studies among the Moderns to the aspects that superficially resemble the classical terrains of anthropology—various folklores, village festivals, ancient patrimonies, assorted archaic features. She has clearly understood that, in order to be a faithful imitator of the anthropologists who study distant societies, she has to focus on the very heart of modern institutions—science, the economy, politics, law, and so on—rather than on the margins, the vestiges, the remnants, and that she has to treat them all at the same time, as a single interconnected set.

Let us also imagine—and this is more challenging, or at least the case is less frequently encountered—that she knows how to resist OCCIDENTALISM, a form of EXOTICISM applied to what is close at hand, which consists in believing what the West says about itself, whether in praise or criticism. She has already understood that modernism’s accounts of itself may have no relation to what has actually happened to it. In short, she is a true anthropologist: she knows that only a prolonged, in-depth analysis of COURSES OF ACTION can allow her to discover the real value system of the informants among whom she lives, who have agreed to welcome her, and who account for this system in terms to which she

must avoid giving too much weight. This much is obvious: it is the most ordinary ethnographic method imaginable.

If the question of where to begin nevertheless strikes her as quite complicated, it is because the Moderns present themselves to her in the form of **DOMAINS**, interrelated, to be sure, but nevertheless distinct: Law, Science, Politics, Religion, The Economy, and so on; and these, she is told, must by no means be confused with one another. She is strongly advised, moreover, to restrict herself to a single domain “without seeking to take in everything all at once.” A metaphor often used in her presence involves geographical maps, with territories circumscribed by borders and marked in contrasting colors. When one is “in Science,” she is assured, one is not “in Politics,” and when one is “in Politics,” one is not “in Law,” and so forth.

Although her informants are obviously attached to these distinctions, she comes to understand very quickly (a few weeks spent doing fieldwork, or even just reading newspapers, will have sufficed to convince her) that with these stories about domains she is being taken for a ride. She sees clearly, for example, that the so-called domain of “Science” is shot through with elements that seem to belong rather to Politics, whereas the latter domain is full of elements that come from Law, which is itself largely composed of visitors or defectors from The Economy, and so on. It quickly becomes apparent to her that not everything in Science is scientific, not everything is juridical in Law, not everything is economic in The Economy . . . In short, she sees that she will not be able to orient her research according to the Moderns’ domains.

How is she to find other reference points? We cannot imagine her as naïve enough to expect to find an institution wholly made up of the value in question, as if everything in Religion would be “religious,” everything in Science would be “scientific,” and everything in Law would pertain to “law,” and so on. But we may suppose that she is intelligent enough to resist the temptation to be critical or even cynical: she is not going to waste her time being shocked that there are political “dimensions” or “aspects” in Science, or economic dimensions in Law, or legal dimensions in Religion. No, she quite calmly reaches the conclusion that the notion of distinct domains separated by homogeneous borders does not make much sense; she sees that she has to leave cartographic metaphors

aside and that, if she still nurtures the hope of identifying her interlocutors' value system, she will need a very different investigative tool, one that takes into account the fact that a border indicates less a dividing line between two homogeneous sets than an intensification of crossborder traffic between foreign elements.

⊖ WITHOUT RESPECTING  
DOMAIN BOUNDARIES,  
THANKS TO THE NOTION  
OF ACTOR-NETWORK, ⊕

Let us suppose that, by chance, she comes across the notion of **NETWORK**—and even, the hypothesis is not so absurd, that of **ACTOR-NETWORK**. Instead of wondering, for example, if Science is a domain distinct from Politics or The Economy or

Religion, the investigator will be content to start with some arbitrary sequence of practices. For example, she goes into a laboratory: there she finds white lab coats, glass test tubes, microbe cultures, articles with footnotes—everything indicates that she is really “in Science.” But then, with a certain obstinacy, she begins to note the origins of the successive ingredients that her informants need in order to carry out their work. Proceeding this way, she very quickly reconstitutes a list of ingredients characterized by the fact (in contradiction with the notion of domain) that they contain ever more heterogeneous elements. In a single day, she may have noted visits by a lawyer who has come to deal with patents, a pastor who has come to discuss ethical issues, a technician who has come to repair a new microscope, an elected official who has come to talk about voting on a subsidy, a “business angel” who wants to discuss the launching of a new start-up, an industrialist concerned about perfecting a new fermenting agent, and so on. Since her informants assure her that all these actors are necessary for the success of the laboratory, instead of seeking to identify domain *boundaries*, which are constantly challenged by innumerable erasures, nothing prevents her any longer from following the *connections* of a given element, it hardly matters which one, and finding out where it leads.

It must be acknowledged that the discovery of the notion of network, whose topology is so different from that of distinct domains, gives her great satisfaction, at least at first. Especially because these connections can all be followed by starting with different segments. If she chooses to use a patent as her vehicle, for example, she will go off and visit in turn a laboratory, a lawyer's office, a board of trustees, a bank, a courthouse, and

so on. But a different vehicle will lead her to visit other types of practices that are just as heterogeneous, following a different order on each occasion. If she has a taste for generalizing, she may thus conclude that there is no such thing as the domain of Science, or Law, or Religion, or The Economy, but that there are indeed networks that *associate*—according to segments that are always new, and that only empirical investigation can discover—elements of practice that are borrowed from all the old domains and redistributed in a different way each time.

Whereas the notion of domain obliged her to stay in one place while watching everything else move around incomprehensibly, the notion of network gives her the same freedom of movement as those whose actions she wants to follow. To avoid misunderstandings, let us specify that, for this investigator, a network is not only a technological arrangement such as, for example, a network for rail transport, water supply, sewers, or cell phones. The advantage of the term, despite all the criticisms to which it has been subjected, is that it can easily be represented in material terms (we speak of sewage networks, cable networks, spy networks); that it draws attention to flows without any confusion between what is being displaced and what makes the displacement possible (an oil pipeline is no more made “of” gasoline than the Internet is made “of” e-mails); and, finally, that it establishes such a powerful constraint of continuity that a minor interruption can be enough to cause a breakdown (a leak in an oil pipeline forces the operator to shut the valves; a three-meter displacement in a WiFi zone results in a lost connection: there is no longer any “network coverage”).

And yet, even if the word draws from its origins the welcome connotations of technology, materiality, and cost (without forgetting that a network must always monitor and maintain itself), the notion that interests our ethnologist is defined by a quite specific *double movement* that we must keep firmly in mind in everything that follows. The fact that information can circulate by means of a cell-phone network tells us nothing about the way the network has been put together so as to work, right now, without a hitch: when all the elements are in place and everything is working well, in the digital window of our cell phones what we can track is only the quality of a signal marked by a certain number of

⊕ WHICH MAKES IT  
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NETWORKS AS RESULT FROM  
NETWORKS AS PROCESS.

rising vertical bars (by convention, from one to five). The “network” in the usual sense of technological network is thus the belated result of the “network” in the sense that interests our investigator. The latter, were she to follow it, would oblige her not to verify the quality of a signal but rather to visit in turn the multitude of institutions, supervisory agencies, laboratories, mathematical models, antenna installers, standardization bureaus, protesters engaged in heated controversies over the harmfulness of the radio waves emitted: these have all *ultimately* contributed to the signal she gets on her phone. The distinction between the two senses of the word “network” would be the same if she were interested in railroads: following the tracks is not the same as investigating the French national railroad company. And it would still be the same if, taking the word more metaphorically, she wanted to investigate “networks of influence”: here, too, what circulates when everything is in place cannot be confused with the setups that make circulation possible. If she still has doubts, she can rerun the video of *The Godfather*: how many crimes have to be committed before influence finally starts to circulate unchallenged? What exactly is the “offer that can’t be refused”?

So under the word “network” we must be careful not to confuse what circulates *once everything is in place* with the *setups* involving the heterogeneous set of elements that allow circulation to occur. The natural gas that lets the Russians keep their empire going does circulate continuously from gas fields in the Caucasus to gas stoves in France, but it would be a big mistake to confuse the continuity of this circulation with what makes circulation possible in the first place. In other words, gas pipelines are not made “of gas” but rather of steel tubing, pumping stations, international treaties, Russian mafiosi, pylons anchored in the permafrost, frostbitten technicians, Ukrainian politicians. The first is a product; the second a real John Le Carré-style novel. Everyone notices this, moreover, when some geopolitical crisis interrupts gas deliveries. In the case of a crisis, or, more generally, in the case of a “network interruption” (we have all come to know this expression with the spread of cell phones), the two senses of the word “network” (what is in place and what puts it in place) converge. Everyone then sets out to explore *all over again* the set of elements that have to be knitted together if there is to be a “resumption of deliveries.” Had you anticipated that link between the

Ukraine and cooking your risotto? No. But you are discovering it now. If this happens to you, you will perhaps notice with some surprise that for gas to get to your stove it had to *pass through* the moods of the Ukrainian president . . . Behind the concept of network, there is always that movement, and that surprise.

It is not hard to see why our ethnologist friend is interested in this single notion that can be used to cover two *distinct but complementary phenomena*: the exploratory work that makes it possible to recruit or to constitute a *discontinuous* series of heterogeneous elements on the one hand and on the other something that circulates in a *continuous* fashion, once all the elements are in place, when maintenance is assured and there is no crisis. By following the establishment of networks in the first sense, she will also be able to follow networks in the second sense. Just as, in physics, the resting state is an aspect of movement, a continuous, stabilized, and maintained network turns out to be a special case of a network of heterogeneous associations. It is thus indeed, as she had already suspected, the movement of association and the passage through unanticipated elements that could become her privileged tool, her Geiger counter, whose increasingly rapid clicks would signal the numerous surprises that she experiences in the discovery of the ingredients necessary to the extension of any practice whatsoever.

The notion of network can now be made a little more specific: it designates a *series of associations* revealed thanks to a *trial*—consisting in the surprises of the ethnographic investigation—that makes it possible to understand through what series of small *discontinuities* it is appropriate to *pass* in order to obtain a certain *continuity* of action. This principle of **FREE ASSOCIATION**—or, to put it more precisely, this principle of **IRREDUCTION**—that is found at the heart of the actor-network theory has demonstrated its fruitfulness by authorizing a number of observers to give themselves as much freedom of movement in their studies as their informants have. This is the principle that the observer-investigator counts on using at the outset.

To study the old domains designated by the Moderns, our anthropologist now has a tool, the network, defined by a particular way of *passing through*, going by way of, another element that comes as a surprise

THE INQUIRY DEFINES A FIRST MODE OF EXISTENCE, THE NETWORK [NET], THROUGH A PARTICULAR “PASS,” OR PASSAGE.

to her, at least at first. The continuity of the course of action—laboratory life, for example—would not be ensured without small interruptions, little hiatuses that the ethnographer must keep adding to her ever-growing list. Let us say that it involves a particular *pass* (as one speaks of a passing shot in basketball), which consists, for any entity whatsoever, in passing *by way of another* through the intermediary of a step, a leap, a threshold in the usual course of events.

It would be absurd to suppose that this *pass* would be experienced in the same way by an ethnologist who discovers the new ingredient from the outside, after the fact, as it is experienced by the laboratory director, who has discovered it earlier from the inside and in the heat of action. The surprises registered are only those of the observer: it is she, the ignorant one, who discovers as she goes along what her informants already know. All ethnologists are familiar with situations like this—and they know how indispensable such moments are to the investigation. But the notions of surprise and trial, if we shift them slightly in time, can also serve to define how the informants themselves have had to learn, in their turn, through what elements they too had to pass in order to prolong the existence of their projects. After all, the laboratory director whom our ethnologist had chosen to study at the outset had only discovered a few years earlier that he was going to have to “go through” the patent application process in order to bring his project to fruition. He “wasn’t expecting that.” He didn’t know he would have to “pass over” that hurdle.

The notion of surprise can be understood all the more readily as common to the investigator and her informants in that they can each find themselves, in the face of the slightest crisis or controversy or breakdown, confronted with an unexpected new element that has to be added to the list, one that neither of them anticipated. For example, a disgruntled rival sues the researchers for “exceeding the patent”; they did not expect this; they have to go through lawyers or risk going under. And so the entire laboratory and its ethnologist are obliged to learn that, if they are to continue to function, a new element will have to be added to the list of things necessary for existence. Before their eyes the network is being enriched, becoming more complicated or at least more extensive.



From here on, this first mode of exploration of the entities required for the existence of another entity will be noted as [NET], for network. (Throughout this inquiry, to avoid inventing new terms, I have decided to retain the customary names of the traditional domains—Law, Religion, Science, and so on; however, when I want to give them a precise technical sense I use a three-letter code. A complete list can be found on p. 488–489.)

Although our anthropologist is rather proud of her discovery, her enthusiasm is tempered a bit by the fact that, while following the threads of the networks, she notices that she has lost in specificity what she has gained in freedom of movement. It is quite true that, thanks to the networks defined in this way, she really can wander around everywhere, using whatever vehicle she chooses, without regard to the domain boundaries that her informants want to impose on her in theory but which they cross in practice just as casually as she does. And yet, to her great confusion, as she studies segments from Law, Science, The Economy, or Religion she begins to feel that she is saying almost *the same thing* about all of them: namely, that they are “composed in a heterogeneous fashion of unexpected elements revealed by the investigation.” To be sure, she is indeed moving, like her informants, from one surprise to another, but, somewhat to her surprise, this stops being surprising, in a way, as each element becomes surprising *in the same way*.

BUT NETWORKS [NET]  
HAVE A LIMITATION: THEY  
DO NOT QUALIFY VALUES.

Now, she has a strong feeling that her informants, even when they agree to follow her in listing the truly stupefying diversity of the entities that they have to mobilize to do their work, continue in spite of everything (is it a matter of bad faith? false consciousness? illusion?) to assert calmly that they are indeed in the process of sometimes doing law, sometimes science, sometimes religion, and so on. If the notion of domain has no meaning (she prefers not to reopen this question), everything happens as if there were indeed a boundary, a somehow *internal limit*, to the networks, one that the notion of network has not allowed her to capture, it seems. There are no borders between domains, and yet, she tells herself, there are real differences between domains.

Our friend finds herself facing an impasse here: either she retains the diversity of associations—but then she loses this second form of

diversity (that of values, which “must not get mixed up”; her informants appear to hold strongly to this point)—or else she respects the diversity of values (Science isn’t really the same thing as Politics; Law is not Religion; and so on), but then she has no way of collecting these contrasts except the notion of domain, and she knows perfectly well that the latter does not hold up under examination. What can she do to hold onto both forms of diversity, the first allowing her to remain attentive to the extreme heterogeneity of associations, the second allowing her, if only she has the right tool, to *determine* the type of value that seems to circulate in a particular network and to give it its specific tonality?

At first, the metaphor of the technological network continues to help her, since it allows her to differentiate the installation of a network from the result of that installation, namely, the continuous supply of a particular type of resource: a cell-phone signal, electricity, railroads, influence, gas, and so on. One could imagine, she tells herself, that the same thing holds true for the values whose system I am trying to reconstitute: to be sure, Law is no more made “of” law than a gas pipeline is made “of” gas, but still, the legal network, once it is in place (established through a multitude of nonlegal elements, she understands this now), really does ensure the supply “of law,” as it were. Just as gas, electricity, influence, or telephone service can be qualified as networks without being confused with one another (even if they often share the same subterranean conduits—*influence in particular!*), why not use the same term to qualify “regular supplies” in science, law, religion, economics, and so on? These are networks that can be defined as series of associations of the [NET] type, and yet what circulates in them in a continuous and reliable fashion (provided that they are maintained with regularity, at great cost) does indeed supply values, services, distinct products.

With this compromise solution the anthropologist would get out of the impasse where her investigation has led her, and, still more important, she would stop uselessly shocking her informants—who have the patience to welcome her, to inform her, and to teach her their trade—by saying the same thing about all activities. She would know to doubt what she was being told—fields don’t organize themselves into contiguous domains—and at the same time she could respect the diversity of the values to which her informants seem legitimately attached.

Unfortunately, it does not take her long to notice that this metaphor does not suffice to characterize the specific features of the networks she is seeking to define. If she questions gas producers, they will undoubtedly have her run through a staggering list of variables, all of which are necessary to the construction of a particular pipeline, and many of which are unforeseeable. But they will have no doubt whatsoever about the product to be transported: even if it has no smell, it is very easy to characterize by its chemical composition, its flow, and its price. More precisely, and this is what she finds most exasperating, she and her informants are capable, in any situation whatsoever, of detecting in a fraction of a second that a given phrase is “legal” whereas a different one is not, or that a certain attitude “has something scientific about it” while another one does not, or that this sentiment is “religious” and that one is impious. But when it comes to *qualifying* the nature of what is designated by these ever-so-precise judgments, her informants fall back on incoherent statements that they try to justify by inventing ideal institutions, so many castles in the air. While with the notion of network she has a tool that makes a positive empirical investigation possible, for each value her networks purport to convey she has only an ineffable “je ne sais quoi,” as finely honed as it is ungraspable.

But we are dealing with a true anthropologist: she knows that she must not abandon either the empirical investigation or the certainty that those “somethings” through which values are defined are going to lead her someplace. In any case, she now has her investigation cut out for her: if the notion of domain is inadequate, so is that of network, in and of itself. So she is going to have to go a little further; she will have to begin again and again until she manages to determine the values that circulate in the networks. It is the conjunction of these two elements—she is now convinced of this—that will allow her to redefine the Moderns. However entangled the ties they establish between values, domains, institutions, and networks may be, this is where she must turn her attention. What will allow her to advance is the fortuitous realization—a real “eureka” moment for her—that, in her fieldwork, she has already encountered courses of action that have something in common with the movement of networks: they too define a *PASS* by introducing a discontinuity.

LAW OFFERS A POINT OF  
COMPARISON THROUGH  
ITS OWN PARTICULAR  
MODE OF DISPLACEMENT.

To be sure, these are not the same passes or the same discontinuities, but they nevertheless share a family resemblance. The legal institution, as she understands perfectly well, is not made up “of” or “in” law. So be it. And yet during her investigation

our ethnologist has spotted a movement very specific to law that legal experts designate, without attaching much importance to it, moreover, as a **MEANS**. They say, every few minutes: “Is there a legal means...?”; “this is not an adequate means”; “this means won’t get us anywhere”; “this means can take us in several different directions”; and so on. In the course of her work, she has even followed the transformation of an ill-formed demand made by indignant plaintiffs whose lawyer, first, and then the judge, “extracted,” as they put it, the legal “means” before passing judgment. Between the more or less inarticulate complaint, the request in due form, the arguments of the parties, and the judgment, she is able to trace a trajectory that resembles no other. To be sure, all the interconnected elements belong to different worlds, but the mode of connection, for its part, is completely specific (we shall see this again in Chapter 13).

For any observer from outside the world of law, this movement is *discontinuous*, since there is hardly any *resemblance*, at each step, between steps  $n-1$ ,  $n$ , and  $n+1$ , and yet the movement appears *continuous* to the legal expert. This particular movement can even be said to define a legal expert as someone who is capable—by dint of hard work—of grasping it in its continuity *despite* and owing to the series of hiatuses that are so striking seen from the outside. Someone who understands what the word “means” means is a legal expert even if the word itself does not figure in specialized legal dictionaries, so obvious does it appear, precisely, “to a real legal expert.” And yet it can’t be helped, the notion of *means* remains totally obscure, marked by discontinuities whose logic completely escapes the outside observer—and also the plaintiffs themselves.

THERE IS THUS A DEFINITION  
OF “BOUNDARY” THAT  
DOES NOT DEPEND  
ON THE NOTIONS OF  
DOMAIN OR NETWORK.

Thus there is indeed here, at least to the ethnologist’s eyes, an internal *boundary* that does not trace a border between the domain of law and what is outside that domain (in the final ruling, the plaintiffs, the lawyers, the judges, the journalists, all point out examples of “extralegal factors” to such an extent that the border, if there were one, would be a real sieve) but

that nevertheless allows her to say that in the trajectory that traverses this whole medley of motifs, something specifically legal can be found. Our observer's enthusiasm is understandable: she considers that she has managed to define for law the equivalent of what a network transports without renouncing the heterogeneity, not to say the weirdness, of the elements required to maintain legal activity. No, indeed, Law is not made "of" law; but in the final analysis, when everything is in place and working well, a particular "fluid" that can be called legal circulates there, something that can be traced thanks to the term "means" but also "procedure." There is here, in fact, a *pass* particular to law; something that leaps from one step to the next in the work of procedure or in the extraction of means. In short, there is a particular type of connection, of association, that we are going to have to learn how to qualify.

If our investigator is so optimistic, it is because she soon notices that she can compare this *pass*, this type of transformation, with another one, just as astonishing, that she has already identified in studies bearing on the domain called "Science." It did not take her long to notice that in Science "not everything is scientific." She has even spent a fair amount of time drawing up a list, a truly dizzying one in this case, of all the ingredients required to maintain any scientific fact whatsoever (a list that nothing in the official theory of her informants allowed her to produce, moreover—here we have the contribution of the ethnography of laboratories in a nutshell). But by going into the most intimate details of knowledge production, she believes she has distinguished a trajectory characterized in its turn by a particular hiatus between elements so dissimilar that, without this trajectory, they would never have lined up in any kind of order. This trajectory, made of discontinuous leaps, is what allows a researcher to determine that, for example, between a yeast culture, a photograph, a table of figures, a diagram, an equation, a caption, a title, a summary, a paragraph, and an article, something is *maintained* despite the successive transformations, something that allows him access to a remote phenomenon, as if someone had set up, between the author and the phenomenon, a sort of bridge that others can cross in turn. This bridge is what researchers call "supplying the proof of the existence of a phenomenon."

THE MODE OF EXTENSION  
OF OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE  
CAN BE COMPARED WITH  
OTHER TYPES OF PASSES.

What really strikes our ethnographer is that, here again, for someone looking at this course of action from the outside, each step in the proofs is marked by an abrupt *discontinuity*: an equation does not “resemble” a table of figures any more than the latter “resembles” the yeast cultures that were the point of departure. Even though, for an outsider, each step has “nothing to do” with the one that went before or the one that came after, for a person who is operating within this network, there is indeed *continuity*. Or rather, however strange the list of ingredients that make it possible to hold the scientific network together may be, a person who is capable of following this path by leaping from transformation to transformation in order to retain the similarity of an element that gives him a hold on another, remote until then—that person is a researcher. Had he had been unable to do this, he would have proved nothing at all (we shall come back to this movement in Chapters 3 and 4). He would no more be a scientist than someone who has been unable to extract the means to proceed from a muddled dossier would be a lawyer. Two entirely different trades are nevertheless distinguished by the same capacity to grasp continuity through a series of discontinuities—and then to grasp another continuity by passing through another discontinuity. So now the ethnologist is in possession of a new pass, as discriminating in its genre as means in law, and yet totally distinct.

She is understandably excited: she believes she is capable both of defining the particular fluid that circulates within networks and of studying these networks without resorting to the notion of domain separated by borders. She believes she has discovered the philosopher’s stone of the anthropology of the Moderns, a unique way to respect the values that the informants cherish above all, yet without having to believe for a moment in the distribution into domains that is supposed to justify these values.

Law is not made of “the legal,” but “something legal” circulates in it nevertheless; Science is not made “of science,” but “something scientific” circulates in it nevertheless. In the end, the situation is very much the same as the one that allows us to compare gas, electricity, or telephone networks, except that the definition of the values that circulate is not obvious in the least, and the theory espoused by those who work to extend these values does not permit their collection.

Our investigator now has a somewhat more robust instrument at her disposal: for any course of action whatsoever, she tries to identify the unexpected ingredients through which the actors have to pass in order to carry it out; this movement, consisting of a series of leaps (identified by the surprises encountered by the ethnologist and her informants), traces a network, noted [NET]. This heterogeneous network can in principle associate any element with any other. No border limits its extension. There is no rule for retracing its movements other than that of empirical investigation, and each case, each occasion, each moment, will be different. Every time someone confronts the observer with the existence of an impenetrable boundary, she will insist on treating the case like a network of the [NET] type, and she will define the list, specific in every instance, of the beings that will be said to have been associated, mobilized, enrolled, translated, in order to participate in the situation. There will be as many lists as there are situations.

The ESSENCE of a situation, as it were, will be, for a [NET], the list of the other beings through which it is necessary to pass so that this situation can endure, can be prolonged, maintained, or extended. To trace a network is thus always to reconstitute by a TRIAL (an investigation is a trial, but so is an innovation, and so is a crisis) the antecedents and the consequences, the precursors and the heirs, the ins and outs, as it were, of a being. Or, to put it more philosophically, the others through which one has to pass in order to become or remain the same—which presupposes, as we shall see later on, that no one can simply “remain the same,” as it were, “without doing anything.” To remain, one needs to pass—or at all events to “pass through”—something we shall call a TRANSLATION.

At the same time, our anthropologist has understood that another ingredient must be added to this definition of essence, one that makes it possible to go anywhere without fear: an ingredient that makes it possible to determine, in a given situation, the value that emanates from that situation. These trajectories have the same general form as those of a [NET]. They too are defined by leaps, discontinuities, hiatuses. But unlike networks, they create sequences that do not simply lead to heterogeneous lists of unexpected actors, but rather to a type of continuity specific

THUS ANY SITUATION CAN BE DEFINED THROUGH A GRASP OF THE [NET] TYPE PLUS A PARTICULAR RELATION BETWEEN CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES.

to each instance. Our investigator has already identified at least two such types: means, in law, and proofs, in science (plus a third, networks—in the [NET] sense—through which one ultimately obtains continuity through the intermediary of discontinuities, unexpected associations, that are revealed by the course of the investigation).

The sense of a situation can thus be defined thanks to two types of data: first, the very general data of the [NET] type, which tell us nothing more than that we have to pass through surprising associations, and second, something that we have to add to these data in every case, something that will allow us to define the quality of the activity in question. The first type of data will allow our friend to explore the extraordinary diversity of the associations that define the adventure of the Moderns; the second will allow her to explore the diversity of the values they appear to cherish. The first list is indefinite, as are the entities that can be associated in a network; the second is finite, as are the values that the Moderns have learned to defend. At least we must hope that this is the case, so that the investigator will have a chance to bring her project to fruition ...

THANKS TO A THIRD TYPE  
OF “PASS,” THE RELIGIOUS  
TYPE, THE INVESTIGATOR  
SEES WHY VALUES ARE  
DIFFICULT TO DETECT ☉

One more puzzle remains before she can really get started. Why is it so difficult to specify the values to which her informants seem so firmly attached? Why do the domains offer such feeble indications as to the nature of what they are thought to contain (they spill over into other domains in all directions

and do not even define what they purport to cherish and protect)? In short, why is theory so far removed from practice among the Moderns? (Let us recall that our investigator has not found anything in the “theory of law” or the “theory of science” that can help her grasp these trajectories, which are so specific that it has taken years of fieldwork to make them explicit.) She cannot be unaware of this new problem, for she is not prepared to fall back on the overly simplistic idea that theory is only a veil discreetly thrown over practices. Theory must have a meaning, and the gap between theory and practice must play an important role. But what role?

Fortunately, our friend has benefited from a sound education, and she now notices (a new eureka moment) that this problem is not



unrelated to an eminently classic question that she has also studied in another field, that of religion. Indeed, she recalls that the history of the Church (an institution if ever there was one!) has been traversed through and through by the question of how to be faithful to itself even as it has transformed itself from top to bottom—going all the way back to its origins.

The Church interests her all the more in that it begins by offering her a *third example* of a *pass*, but again completely distinct from the others (as we shall see in Chapter 11). Here again we find a hiatus, an agonizing one during which a priest, a bishop, a reformer, a devout practitioner, a hermit, wonders whether the innovation he believes necessary is a faithful inspiration or an impious betrayal. No institution has invested more energy (through preaching, councils, tribunals, polemics, sainthood, even crimes) than in this obstinate effort to detect the difference (never easy to formulate) between fidelity to the past—how to preserve the “treasure of faith”—and the imperious necessity of constantly innovating in order to succeed, that is, to endure and spread throughout the world.

A new *pass*, a new *continuity* obtained by the identification, always to be begun anew and always risky, of *discontinuities* that appear from the outside as so many non sequiturs—not to say pure inventions or, one might say, pious lies. If the legal and scientific passages gave our ignorant observer the impression of incomprehensible transformations, each in its own genre, those offered by the religious passage make her hair stand on end. And yet it is in fact this passage that the observer has to learn to compare with the others, since the transit itself, however dizzying it may be, entails a value indispensable to certain of her informants. To be faithful or unfaithful: for many of those whom she is addressing, this is a matter of life or death, of salvation or damnation.

However important this new example of a *pass* may be for her (it is understandable that her confidence in the success of her project has grown apace), what interests her here above all is the link between this particular *pass* and the institution that accepts it. She is well aware that to study religion without taking this *pass* into account would make no sense whatsoever, since, from the preaching of a certain Ioshua of Palestine (to limit ourselves to the example of Christianity) through the

⊙ BECAUSE OF THEIR  
 QUITE PARTICULAR TIES  
 TO INSTITUTIONS ⊙

Reformation to the latest papal encyclicals, all the statements, all the rituals, all the theological elaborations bear on the touchstone that would make it possible to distinguish between fidelity and infidelity, tradition and treachery, renewal and schism. Yet at the same time it would make no sense to suppose that this shibboleth alone could explain the entire religious institution, as if Religion or even the Church consisted exclusively “in” the religious. If there is any doubt about this, our investigator has only to read a biography of Luther, a history of the papacy, or a study of the Modernist controversy (in the sense that Catholics give this late-nineteenth-century episode). Clearly, every time anyone has sought to use the fidelity/infidelity distinction as a touchstone, it has been in the midst of innumerable other considerations. All these instances of religious history would without any doubt be much better grasped by an approach of the actor-network ([NET]) type.

No, what interests our investigator about Church history is that in it the continual fluctuations in *the very relation* between these two questions—which she has still not managed to bring together—can be clearly seen. The multiple gaps between network, value, domain, and institution are not only *her* problem, as an uninformed observer, but the problem that her informants *themselves* confront constantly, explicitly, consciously. Whether it is a question of St. Paul’s “invention” of Christianity, St. Francis’s monastic renewal, Luther’s Reform (I almost said St. Luther), each case features the relation between an aging, impotent institution and the necessary renewal that allows that institution to remain fundamentally faithful to its origins while undergoing huge transformations. And each case calls for judgment; in each case, the researcher has to make a fresh start, cast the fruitfulness of the renewal into doubt, go back to the beginning, reconsider and redistribute all the elements that had been renewed ...

In other words, our ethnologist has a clear sense that there is here, in the history of the Church, an almost perfect model of the complexity of the relations between a value and the institution that harbors it: sometimes they coincide, sometimes not at all; sometimes everything has to be reformed, at the risk of a scandalous transformation; sometimes the reforms turn out to consist in dangerous innovations or even betrayals. And there is not a single actor who has not had to participate, during

these last two millennia, in one of these judgments or another—from the secret of the confessional through the tribunals and the massacres to the scenography of the major Councils. But judgment is required on each occasion, according to a type of judgment specific to the situation.

It is entirely possible, our anthropologist tells herself, that the relation found here between value and institution is a unique case. Only in the religious domain—and perhaps only in the history of the Christian churches—would we find such a series of betrayals, inventions, reforms, new starts, elaborations, all concentrated and judged on the basis of the principal question of whether one is remaining faithful or not to the initial message. But her own idea (the origin of her eureka moment) is that the situation is perhaps the same for all the Moderns' institutions: in each case, perhaps it is necessary to imagine an original and specific relation between the history of the Moderns' values and the institutions to which these values give direction and which embrace and shelter them—and often betray them—in return.

Here is a problem that those who are busy bringing networks of gas, electricity, or cell phones and the like into cohabitation do not encounter: in each case they have a network at hand (in the sense that discontinuous associations have to be put into place). But for the case of the anthropology of the Moderns, we are going to have two types of variations to take into account: values on the one hand and the *fluctuation* of those values over time on the other. This history is all the more complex in that it will vary according to the type of values, and, to complicate things further, the history of *each value* will *interfere* with the fluctuations of all the others, somewhat the way prices do on the Stock Exchange.

What the anthropologist discovers with some anxiety is that the deployment of one value by a robust institution will modify the way all the others are going to be understood and expressed. One tiny mistake in the definition of the religious, and the sciences become incomprehensible, for example; one minuscule gap in what can be expected from law, conversely, and religion turns out to be crushed. Still, the advantage of this way of looking at things is that the investigator will be able to avoid treating the gap between theory and practice as a simple matter of “false consciousness,” as a mere veil that would conceal reality and that her

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investigation should be content to remove. For each mode and for each epoch, and in relation to every other value and to every other institution, there will be a particular way of establishing the relation between “theory” and “practice.”

Even if the task looks immense to her, our ethnographer can be rather proud of herself. She has defined her object of study; she has fleshed out her ordinary method with two additional elements specific to the modern fields: network analysis on the one hand, the detection of values on the other. Finally, she knows that she is going to have to take into account, for each subject, a fluctuating relation between the values that she will have identified and the institutions charged with harboring them. All these points are important for the way she conceives of her trade.

In fact—I should have pointed this out earlier—she is not one of those positivist ethnologists who imagine that they have to imitate the “hard sciences” and consider their object of study from a distance, as an entomologist would do with insects (the mythic ideal of research in the hard sciences, quite unfair to insects, moreover, as well as to entomologists). No, she knows that a contemporary anthropologist has to learn to talk *about* her subjects of study to her subjects of study. This is why she can hardly rely on the resources of critical distance. She is fairly satisfied that she knows how to describe practices through networks, even while remaining faithful to the values of her informants, yet without believing in domains and thus without believing in the reports that come from them, but also (the exercise is a balancing act, as we can see) without abandoning the idea of a possible reformulation of the link that values maintain with institutions. In other words, this is an anthropologist who is not afraid of running the risks of *diplomacy*. She knows how difficult it is to learn to *speak well to someone about something that really matters to that person*.