

Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour: *quid* urban studies?

If we were to take seriously Haraway's *project* rather than glancing through her work borrowing thought-triggering ideas and provocative actors of hers, there would be no 'cyborg' city nor 'hybrid' city or any other of our direct equations that come short of grasping her point. We would not import one notion such as the cyborg and its non Cartesian definitions. But neither would we be content to take from her a set of notions, a way of apprehending collective life such as the one set out in *The Companion Species Manifesto* for instance, where 'ontological choreographies', 'significant others' and the concept of 'prehensions' would lead us to study an urban biotope of biological beings, a set of mutual embodiments in the flesh. Although this might be an interesting take on Haraway, that is not what I mean by taking her *project* seriously. Instead I want to look at Haraway's problem, her issue, and the way she has moved about it since she first started to write. Because I believe that in the long run this might open more radically new projects in our own field than the ones proposed so far in Haraway's name.

Haraway's project

Partial connection, affinity, affection and kinship can be said to be a leitmotiv in Haraway's work. And her typical operation can be said to be the act of figuration: Haraway makes tropes, i.e. figurative, metaphorical beings, out of selected already existing entities, that become allies on the scene of feminism, technoscience and science studies. She says:

"I take figurations and the question of how they work very seriously, as a practice trying to understand what collects up the life-and-death concerns of people. It seems to me that we need a whole kinship system of figurations as critical figures." (Haraway, 2003 b, 52)

The kinship system of figurations started during the eighties when Haraway gathers up simians and women, suggests the new trope of the “cyborg” and rallies all monsters under the banner “Cyborgs for earthly survival!”. Later on, she connects feminists to their transgenic sister, the OncoMous, takes in the science fiction FemaleMan and reconsiders the vampires’ trope. And now she takes the companion species on board, foremost dogs but possibly all other beings that make life for humans what it is and vice versa (she considers rice, bees, intestinal flora). And I quote:

“The family [odd and queer family, kinships of figuration] includes, for me, in terms of what I have written about personally, the cyborg, the coyote, the OncoMouse, the FemaleMan, the feminists, the history of women within feminists analysis, the dogs in my new project, and, of course, the non-human primates.” (idem, 57)

As already stated, Haraway’s tropes are not pure inventions of her own mind, but neither are her kinships. For Haraway fosters and amplifies already existing practices: the two way observers’ relationship in ethology; the experimental and salvation ties in laboratories; the writing and reading exchange in science-fiction; the alert interaction and love between men and dogs. And that is probably one of her greatest strengths: the construction of tropes or of kinships never happens *ex nihilo*, from scratch, but relates to possibilities seized and bred in our present condition. When Haraway says that figurations are critical figures, we discover that her sense of critique is the, and I quote:

“(...) sense that things might be otherwise. It is a sense of critique that is not negative, necessarily, except in the particular way that the Frankfurt School understood negativity – a way which I think is really worth remembering and holding on to. It is critique in the deep sense that things might be otherwise. There is much of the Frankfurt School that I have never embraced, but that sense of critique as freedom project is important.” (idem 52)

Haraway’s kinships and tropes are meant to feed the pragmatics of feminist and scientists’ struggles, to raise their possible fields of claim, to reconfigure our knowledge, feminists’ knowledge, radical knowledge, giving new possibilities for

saying, thinking and feeling our *condition*, for accounting for our *bodily makings* while bypassing identity, essence, wholeness or purity. I quote:

“Tropes are what make us want to look and need to listen for surprises that get us out of inherited boxes.” (Haraway, 2003 a, 32)

From the very start, Haraway has wanted science to emancipate and leave its assigning or determinative role; she has wanted to restore the privilege of the intellect, imagination and construction in science (see her PHD thesis). Even as a humanist feminist (as she called herself in the seventies), she wanted a *physiological* knowledge, an *animal* knowledge, a *body* knowledge that would *foster* radical feminism and heterogeneity rather than *suppress* it. That is, to my opinion, Haraway's move: instead of letting go of sciences, she hailed feminists to embrace them; instead of turning away from biology, she shifted what bodies, organisms, geneses, evolutionary tales and origin stories could be about; instead of rejecting the often misogynous sciences of animals, bodies and reproduction (technoscience), she unwound their “sticky threads” and suggested new connections. Her work is an attempt to reconfigure, and allow others to reconfigure, *what counts as knowledge, what counts as reality* in the fields of biology, biotechnology, technoscience, physiology, animal science, genetics, etc. That is her issue. She could have turned away, as so many feminists would have done, or she could have deconstructed, as so many radicals have done, but she did not. That is her move.

... and urban studies

So what could Haraway's project mean to urban studies? One then needs to ask: what knowledge and dominant practices are at stake in cities today? for that is Haraway's question much more than whether we like the cyborg or not. Which affinities, partial connections and relationships should be fostered, amplified and cared for? Is figuration a possible avenue for urban studies and what tropes could be constructed?

However difficult and demanding these questions may be, I would not be wrong, I think, to say that engineering, planning and urbanism are in dire need of

situated knowledge and modest witnesses! Maybe we would feed the pragmatics of urban movements. Maybe our modest witness would be an urbanite that cannot be patronized, or masses that always meddle in planning practice. Maybe our magnified tropes would involve a cockroach, already used as a caricature journalist in some cities. Maybe our kin could be the rats that haunt European urban history, are cared for by some and exterminated by others. Maybe our hybrid affinities would lead to exotic birds surviving in the North. Or should we rather follow the urbanites' tentacles into urban infrastructure? Or foster our ties with buildings, traffic and house technologies? Or turn to water and electricity as possible allies and tropes?

It is when you think the *specificity* of Haraway's project, its details, when the channel of import seems more narrow and becomes more demanding than ever, that the translation of Haraway's work into urban studies becomes much more creative, opens up many more avenues, makes us think more. The more we care, the more demanding it gets but the more fruitful it can become.

Latour, quasi objects

Let me now move to Latour, the second protagonist of this paper. Whereas Haraway reinvented the politics of biology – and I call them “politics” because they are the possibilities or obstacles given by science stories about genesis, origin, evolution, body, organism, physiology, determination and reproduction – Latour brings to the surface invisible networks of acting objects, restoring the role of those objects that partake and act in our lives and that are therefore called “quasi” objects. The quasi objects are not the simple stones or tables used in philosophical demonstrations, nor are they the deceiving commodities or treacherous advertisements deconstructed in social sciences' critique. Quasi objects are *the things*, non humans, non organisms, *that “make do”*; they are the mediators in long chains of agency, transferring action while producing some more; they are necessarily complicated objects in their history and interesting participants in the action. So, generally Latour brings to the surface technologies and inventions in sciences and laboratories, including measurement tools, notebooks, collectors,... To make my point even clearer: a glass of wine, even

made by a designer, would probably need to be enhanced with a lot of pep talk for Latour to be interested; a Palm or a computer probably wouldn't. It is the complicated "make doers" that interest him.

Whereas Haraway *peoples* her scene and fosters *alliances, de facto* assuring the existence of her monsters by amplifying them and their related practices (and by the way, that is where the doubtful pictures of Lynn Randolph do their work: they trope!), quite another procedure is used by Latour to bring his quasi objects, also uncomfortably seated on Cartesian boundaries, to full blown existence. He *redraws intellectual maps*; he almost literally opens up space for his quasi objects, gives them the intellectual condition of their existence, by shifting around oppositions and categories, by redrawing the lines between friend and enemy camps, by turning upside down a few central definitions. That is his act: *shifting, remapping and defining*. He does not *people* the "Middle Kingdom" (*We have never been Modern*), as Haraway rightly observed in a conference paper (4S, 1999), but, and that is my guess, he *institutes or installs* (instaurer) the Middle Kingdom, leaving the description of its inhabitants, of the proliferating hybrids, to others, himself included when he turns to ethnography.

When, in a next move, Latour describes the quasi objects or theorises them as he did in laboratories, he draws a large web of connexions that link them to other agents and account for their emergency and existence. But from the start, already in the eighties, he has been confronted with the following problem:

"When we try to reconnect scientific objects with their aura, their crown, their web of associations, when we accompany them back to their gathering, we always appear to weaken them, not to strengthen their claim of reality."

(Latour, 2004, 237)

Installing the Middle Kingdom will not do, it seems, for more is needed to strengthen the existence, the claim of reality, of quasi objects. Latour then has this excellent idea of amplifying an argument that runs through his work: he turns the quasi objects from matters of fact, from heterogeneous webs, to *matters of concern*. Quasi objects are never simple engineered constructs but they are a *concern* for all those that participate in their existence. The links that run from a

quasi object to its participants are never simple fastenings that hook it up to the rest of the world, but they are *relations of care, intrigue and passionate (research)*. They are “attachments” in the rich sense of the word: that which fastens and affects. *Aramis*, a metro of individual shuttles, is an excellent example of this: Latour concludes the book by stating that *Aramis* never existed because it was not cared for enough, because it was thought to be a simple engineered construct. Other good examples can be found in *Paris invisible* city, for instance when Latour describes the Pont-Neuf, and I quote:

“For many centuries its stone arches have been enveloped in the folds of Parisian institutions, without which it would have collapsed a long time ago. The Pont-Neuf rests not only on sound piles firmly secured to the bed of the Seine, but also on another Corps, other administrations (...) If the rising waters of the Seine no longer lash at its arches, it’s because it has always been cautiously wrapped in its guardians’ care, in its engineers’ calculations (...) The Pont-Neuf is wrapped up in a fine reticulation of calculations, of wash drawings, of archives, of municipal decrees issued by those doers of the bridge.” (Latour, 2004, plan 52)

One could say that Latour’s politics are those of the quasi objects, that he emancipates them, strengthens their claim of reality by enunciating the intellectual condition of their existence, by installing the Middle Kingdom, by turning them into matters of concern and wrapping them in the fine articulations and attachments of those who participate in their existence. But then one wonders: why should Bruno Latour *care*? And why should we care about a politics of quasi objects?

Latour’s agency and the city

Latour has an earnest interest for quasi objects, they are important to him. What the simian or dog are to Haraway, the quasi objects are to Latour. He also cares about science and technology, and quasi objects *do meet their challenge*: they allow to account for how scientific action takes place (probably the triggering event of his quest); they allow to describe inventions; they allow to describe societies run through by technology; and last but not least, quasi objects can

again play their due role in productions of truth, be it in science, in law, or even religion, and other.

But there is more. I called the quasi objects “make doers” and defined them as mediators in long chains of agency, transferring the action and always producing some more, and I’ve done so because, to my opinion, agency is central to Latour’s work. And it is a fruitful entry into that work for urban researchers. His is an attempt to build a *theory of agency*. How to account for something happening? What is an act and what is involved? That would be his issue. And bringing back in the objects, emancipating them into full blown agents, that would be his move.

“The metamorphoses [provoked by air pump of Boyle, controversy Hobbes] become explainable if we redistribute the essence to all the beings of this history. But then they [air pump, laboratory] cease to be simple intermediates that are more or less faithful. They become mediators, i.e. actors endowed with the capacity to translate that which they transport, to redefine it, to redeploy it, even to betray it. The serfs have become free citizens again.”

(Latour 1997, 111, own translation)

So quasi objects “make a difference” (i.e. his definition of action), their emancipation can be said to be Latour’s “freedom project”, if such a Frankfurt heritage makes any sense here. And when you think Latour to be the writer of a theory of agency, as I do, his “freedom project” takes yet another turn: it gives us grips us on what makes and allows us to do, what is implied by an action, what attachments we should replace and which others we should foster in order to enhance our agency, what are *chains* and what are *enablers* and who or what is involved.

In urban studies, Latour’s agency theory allows to integrate the workings of infrastructure and technology and more importantly, they allow us to seize the chains of urban make do’s, some of which Latour has deployed in *Paris invisible city*: navigation through the city; assigning role of architecture, infrastructure, cash dispensers; traffic control, security control, water control; weather forecast... All are minute micro-decisions, transfers of agency cascading down

through narrow channels in order for something to actually take place. They are long and mediated chains of agency that have no room for subjects and objects, for masters and serfs, for actors and non actors, but instead place us at the cross roads of so many make does and attachments in which we take part. The city as a set of make doers: there might be his work's stakes or at least, our take on him as urban researchers.

Conclusion

To conclude, just a few words, Haraway's ontology (explaining existence) is one of encounter, affection and their embodiment in evolving and assembling beings. Latour's ontology is that of cascading micro-decisions, mediated chains of agency and attachments. Embodiment, trope, figuration and affinity on the one hand. Attachment, mapping, agency and cascading micro-decisions on the other hand. The city *will* look different as one moves into one or the other direction, or takes on both, as long as one recognizes their specificity without turning them into opposites.

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