
Original Paper

Regeneration of Sociology in the New World

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Abstract

Bruno Latour, one of the most important French sociologist and philosopher of our time, known for his studies of science and technology, and his challenging views in Actor Network Theory (1-2) which he developed later, as well as his work *We Have Never Been Modern*(3), have been quite influential on mainstream sociology. In fact, Bruno Latour has a special place in the eyes of scientists who resist the positivist and empiricist assumptions of classical sociology. Although his views in terms of making a revolution in sociology are very valuable, he could not find a chance to apply much in sociology, which was oppressed under the hegemony of the Anglo Saxon scientific world. Moreover, because of his death at a quite young age, there is a high risk that his challenging contributions will be forgotten. This article aims to rethink Bruno Latour and maintain his legacy. While limited by his original views in his most recent work, it is possible that this paper may serve as a stimulus to lay people as well as academics who want to do more productive relational studies for the New World.

Keywords: Bruno Latour, New World, relational sociology, Terrestrial

1. Introduction

When we lost one of the most important thinkers of our time on October 9, 2022, many people undoubtedly expressed their feelings in different ways. However, first of all, we need to understand him better in order to continue the legacy he left us. Because Latour undertook an important mission in dealing with the problems faced by sociologists, especially those who tried to look at it relationally, and he was trying to fulfill it properly. In my opinion, although it is not easy to recall and learn from his taboo-breaking challenges, it is worth a try. This article is an effort towards such a goal.

In fact, we may have felt strange at first when Latour (2) said that sociologists should get rid of the metaphysical assumptions of Durkheim's sociology just as physics got rid of the Aether Theory. So let's first try to understand what was the secret of the success of physics. In fact, it is useful to begin with the assumption that the distinction between natural and social science is artificial and useless, since we are opposed to any kind of dualism and essentialism from a relational sociological perspective. Because when physics centered relativity with Einstein, the theoretical assumptions of the previous paradigm also fell out of favor (4). So what was the Aether Theory and what did it advocate? (5-6).

Briefly, according to the sources of the history of science, an Electron Theory was put forward by the Dutch physicist Hendrik Antoon Lorentz (1853-1928), who was also a Nobel prize winner. Light waves are thought to propagate in aether, or aether is thought to carry light waves. Aether is the space-filler necessary for the existence of the medium. It is considered to be the substance necessary for the propagation of electromagnetic or gravitational forces (5-6).

In fact, according to philosophy books, aether is the fifth element of matter. In physics, aether is a fluid element that is different from the four states of matter such as gas, liquid and solid. The Ionian Greek philosopher Pythagoras (BC:570-495) calls it the soul. Aether is what gives vitality and life to the universe. With the development of special relativity, the aether theory of matter, which is claimed to fill the entire universe, ceases to be used in modern physics. Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity in 1905 led to the abandonment of the aether theory. Physics has the opportunity to renew itself, especially when Albert Michelson's experiments, known as Morley, aiming to show the existence of

aether, fail (5-6).

So, when we reject essentialism with a relational view in sociology, what corresponds to the aether theory in physics and should be abandoned? What is the answer to such a question? According to Latour (2), what is simply useless in sociology is social substance. Because this is a useless hypothesis. "Sociology of Social" should be abandoned and replaced by "Sociology of Associations". In other words, saying that all events in society are human-centered and social is nothing but a tautology. According to Latour (2), the word social has unfortunately lost its meaning. Social has become meaningless, as it has become a particular type of material that can be compared to biological, economic, mental, organizational, or other adjectives such as wood or steel. It doesn't make much sense to say that people are social because they move in society, just as it does to say that motion in physics is in the aether.

2. Reassembling the Social

Latour strives to show why the social cannot be interpreted as a kind of material or field, to redefine the notion of the social and to change the meaning of the social. In fact, he tries to find an alternative definition for sociology. His use of the phrase "Sociology of associations" is an indication of this intention (2-7).

Latour (2) interestingly, while broadening the meaning of social, he also includes mice, viruses, and microbes. It should be noted that these views are not post-modern. It also does not have the purpose of deconstruction. Latour sees deconstruction as something to be overcome. While the old view is based on the understanding of science before relativity, the new view that he advocates and calls sociology of associations is relativist and turns the old view upside down.

According to Latour (2-4), this essentialism would not have been so permanent and widespread if Durkheim had actually lost while sociology was being established in France. Because Gabriel Tarde (8-9) was a pioneer of an alternative social theory, but he didn't win. Gabriel Tarde, we must admit, was the forerunner of the Actor Network Theory developed by Latour et al.

Gabriel Tarde (8), a criminologist and judge at the same time, who was from the generation before Durkheim and was against essentialist and evolutionist views. He was also against the law of evolution, which is based on reproducing in a certain order and repeating itself in the same way. He actually reversed the micro-macro bond. He refused to explain the small with the big and the detail with the whole, and he defended the idea of explaining the big with the small and the whole in detail (8). This was actually the basis of pragmatism, that is, problem oriented working, focusing on the part, the problem, since we could not grasp the whole. Although this is such an important point of view, unfortunately, it could not hold on to the positivist thought that prioritizes the whole and deduction. Today, there is a return to the thoughts of Tarde, who does not separate social sciences from philosophy. What makes mixed design studies possible, especially with a relational sociological perspective, is the pragmatism for this kind of problem solving and the acceptance of the realist view that argues that reality is layered (10-11).

On the basis of Latour's ideas, which he developed by making use of Tarde, there is an understanding that does not limit society to humans only. Because Tarde (8) was talking about animal and cell societies while describing society from the very beginning. Tarde was talking about societies of stars and solar systems. According to him, at the beginning of our mistakes is believing that people act under the guidance of the law of evolution (7). The dominant sociology of Durkheim has managed to mislead us for a long time by arguing the exact opposite of these ideas.

Latour, in his recent writings, distinguishes between the sociology of the social, that is, the old sociology, and the new sociology, which he calls the sociology of associations. At the beginning of the three features of the new sociology that he advocates is not limiting himself to the social, but also including non-humanal beings (12). In Actor Network Theory, information, money, technology, disease, microbes, plants in the sea, rocks, ships are included in social theory, especially as actants. Serious roles are attributed to non-human beings. Science and technology are considered in harmony with the social (10-12).

3. New World as a Single System and “Terrestrial”

In his recent works, Latour specifically addresses the climate issue as both a sociologist and a philosopher (13-14). While explaining that there is no difference between local and global in his latest works, it is observed that he maintains his views in Actor Network Theory, albeit with some differences (1-2). For example, he sees nature, which he previously called an actant, as an actor who acts on his own and reacts to society. In addition, Latour(13-14) emphasizes the New World while describing the need for a new geopolitical organization in his philosophical discussions about climate, and uses the term “Terrestrial” which means Earth we live on in French. Latour (13) also included the word Gaia in the title of his book. Gaia is a god synonymous with Terra or Tellus in Greek and Roman mythology. In Latin, it means earth. The development of Terrestrial as a new concept by Latour is therefore not a coincidence, but a very meticulous creative construction.

Terra is the name of the personified being of the earth. As Latour has underlined many times, people live on Earth with many species. It is clear that the aim of including nationalism and migration issues as well as inequalities in the worsening climatic conditions is to serve democracy by overcoming conflicts (15). In fact, Latour's importance is increased because he tries to not only connect the conflicts in the world with climate crises, but also suggest solutions.

Moreover, it is his greatest contribution to see that the climate crisis is not a problem that can be solved within national borders and is on a global scale. According to him, the views oscillating between globalization minus, which is based on the distinction between global and local duality and defends narrow or small interests, and its opposite, globalization plus, unfortunately wastes us time (1,13,14).

It is an opinion that Latour has put forward since the 1990s that global warming, which plays an important role in climate change in particular, is both a natural and cultural "hybrid" phenomenon. Moreover, modernization and developmental approaches are as critical as the outdated human-centered definitions of nature (1).

Because of the views and practices that do not respect nature, the world has ceased to be sustainable with other living things. So much so that the intensifying climate crisis shows us that it is now quite late. While Latour sees the climate crisis as a reaction of nature, he also wants us to remember that our planet belongs to all of us, without denying immigration crises with populist views. According to him, we should not forget that nature and society are a single system (13). On the basis of relativity in a non-essentialist way, we should try to look at it as puliversal rather than universal (16)

4. Conclusion

Ecological movements we observe in the unstable period defined by climate crises actually lead to other ecological or modernist dichotomy (16). So much so that ecologic movements can reach as much as green militarism. Modernists also neglect nature, thinking more in favor of human rights or the economy. That is why Latour (13,14,17) is quite right in his articles on the effects of climate change, emphasizing that Zero Co2 emission should be reached by 2050.

In fact, Latour (13-14) underlines that the “political ecology” or “climate emergency” manifestos are not successful, and advocates the acceptance of the central role of nature in the “Terrestrial”, that is, the Earth we live in. We can say that his main purpose was to defend the terrestrial.

While trying to reassemble sociology with relativist accounts (18), Latour opposes all dualities such as the distinction between nature and society, and proposes Terrestrial, a new concept that deals with both human and nature together, instead of human-centered paradigms. This is the most important legacy he left us. Protecting this heritage, knowing its value, has to be the greatest mission of not only sociologists but also all relational scientists.

It is now time to put aside the unnecessary war of paradigms and issues such as the substance of the universe and what is the substance of the society, and to respect the world we live in with problem-oriented, pragmatist and realist views that emphasize the part instead of the whole. Although Latour's early loss has caused us great pain, it will be good for us to work with his views.

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