

Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science, 2022 (13): 1-6  
ISSN 2526-2270  
Belo Horizonte – MG / Brazil  
© The Author 2022 – This is an open-access journal

## Obituary

### Bruno Latour (June 22, 1947 – October 9, 2022)

Bráulio Silva Chaves<sup>1</sup> – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5944>

Received: November 22, 2022. Reviewed: November 27, 2022. Accepted: November 29, 2022.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2022.i13.07>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Bruno Latour embodied the scientific controversies of which he spoke so much in his works, and his repercussions have a similar intensity to the polemics he was able to provoke. His works, covering various fields, such as anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy, contributed decisively to the so-called science studies. It was as if Latour wanted to say that if we are to speak of “sciences wars”, let us make moving frontiers of these fields and potentiate their lexicons and epistemological references as arsenals. To put it another way, the combat requires bringing the allies together and enabling the opponents to decode their messages and be inclined to do battle. It is not just a matter of pushing them away. That interdisciplinary transit was not accidental, and it does not mean Latour did it without criticism. Quite the contrary. By bringing these boundaries closer together, as a public intellectual, Latour not only broadened the resonance of his gaze to think about science as a societal project, but he made his own “blood flow”, an in-between place, exposing him to critique and projecting him into multiple spaces, including those outside academia.

Latour is part of a turn that in the 1960s-1970s carried out a set of strong mobilizations. As Avila (2019) put it, *science is an object of history* and has a fundamentally political path of searching for historicity. In 1962, the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* instigated essential changes to overcome the insoluble dilemma of internalism versus externalism. Since then, a set of authors and articulations have been placed in this arena of conflict.

What to do with science? Deconstruct, de-sacralize, impute conditionality, situate, humanize, and materialize are actions concerning it that become more palpable. However, the basis of such understanding has been the object of dispute. If the writing of history has a history, the writing of the history of science also has a history, even if it seems full of “absent historians”, as Carlos Alvarez Maia said (Maia 2013). The history of science, however, has its specificities, as it makes an object framed as a-historical, intertwined with politics, ideological contentions and social actions. The post-1970s period also inaugurated a cycle of ongoing crises and the rise of neoliberal capitalism, with the boosting of globalization, the weakening of the Taylorist-Fordist model and of the Keynesian Welfare State itself, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bráulio Silva Chaves is a Professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the Federal Center for Technology and Education of Minas Gerais – CEFET/MG and General Secretary of the Brazilian Association for the Social Studies of Sciences and Technologies, ESOCITE.BR (Board of Directors 2021-2023). Address: Av. Amazonas, 5253, Nova Suíça, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil. CEP 30.421-169. E-mail: [brauliosc1@gmail.com](mailto:brauliosc1@gmail.com)

preponderance of economic financialization and of new ways of organizing work, which has become ever more mediated by technology. The conjuncture is also a sharp criticism of the so-called modern reason. It is a “historical turn” for the sciences in the midst of a “linguistic turn”. This is because language is also repositioned as a territory of foundation and signification of the world and, of course, of science.

With Latour, Barry Barnes, David Bloor, Steven Shapin, Simon Schaffer, Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and others without whom any enumeration would be incomplete, and with research groups, laboratories, institutional structuring of studies, associations, journals, and a Science, Technology and Society studies program, STS studies began to be created on a global scale.

In this sense, it is interesting to highlight the repercussion of his works in Brazil; it is a good example of his translations in other territories and languages. Therefore, it is essential to mention a few of his books, albeit running the risk of not quoting some important ones, considering his vast production. *Laboratory Life: the construction of scientific facts*, written in partnership with Steve Woolgar, and released in 1979, with its first edition, in Brazil, in 1997, was the ultimate book for the so-called anthropology of science (Latour and Woolgar 1997). In the Laboratory of Neuroendocrinology at the Salk Institute in California, fieldwork was done for two years (1975-1977), involving studies on the chemical structure of the Thyrotropin-releasing hormone (TRH). The book systematizes the possibility of an anthropology of the true and the false, the central and the peripheral, the scientific and the pre-scientific, the past and the present, the laboratory being the place *par excellence* of all the performativity of a scientific fact.

Latour widened the lens of everyday attitudes and gave meaning to tedious laboratory bureaucracy, ranging from the mishaps of the institutional building to the legitimization processes that come to be naturalized. He provided another tone to funding disputes, intersectoral relationships, letter writing, repeated data collection, inter-group meetings and the search for agreements and partnerships. Latour imprinted sociological intentionality on the habits of scientists when they relate to some groups to the detriment of others; when they act pragmatically in the materiality of a given society. This is how he saw the *Pasteurization of France*, in which the notorious chemist could compose what he would also name on other occasions as the “theater of proof”, where science was made necessary to farmers, members of the 19th-century French government, and society at large (Latour 1988).

Thus, Latour contributed a positive inspiration, as one can see in the representation of Pasteur in the tropics, *Oswaldo Cruz: “Yes, we have Pasteur”* (Cukierman 2007), or in the excellent ethnographic work of Rosana Castro, an award-winner in the STS field and the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> She demonstrated how randomized clinical trials could reveal the economic gears of the pharmaceutical-industrial complex, besides a robust racist component, in the Brazilian context, in a work in which that author takes Latour, among others, as a reference (Castro 2020).

Despite the title, his philosophical verve is more clearly materialized in *We Have Never Been Modern*, with a Brazilian edition published in 1994 (Latour 1994). In that book, Latour invigorates his principle of radical symmetry, attributing to modernity a schism that would not otherwise have been realized: that between the subject and the object. This made him also operate with the “hybrids”, symbols of that no-concreteness. In a collection of texts, these borders in movement with philosophy are also evidenced in case studies, in the present and the past, that refer to the “blood flow” of science and go as far as a dialogue with Plato’s *Gorgias* (Latour 2001).

---

<sup>2</sup> The thesis was the 2019 winner of the best doctoral thesis awards of the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS) and the Brazilian Association for the Social Studies of Sciences and Technologies (ESOCITE.BR).

That challenging, courageous and propositional attitude was to earn him numerous epithets: (un)constructivist, relativist and metaphysician. *Science in Action* appeared in English in 1987, with the curious subtitle “how to follow scientists and engineers throughout society” and was first published in Brazil in 2000 (Latour 2000). The book also reveals another Latournian face, the astuteness of his writing. That astuteness earned him yet another nickname: the seducer, even of the unwary, as his critics would say. Latour uses the character of Janus as a discursive strategy to make a somewhat unseemly invitation in the face of the hagiography of science. He makes the story of Janus an act of desecration, questioning a science that wants to be shown and revealing another one that is trying to hide. One might wonder whether the intention was that of an iconoclast or someone who wanted to perceive that science is a human activity and, as such, can be narrated, accessed, appropriated, and interpreted in multiple ways with various language resources. If, as Latour said, the scientific article is the place of a “literary inscription”, to some extent, science studies would be too. *Politics of nature: how to do science in democracy* was published in French in 1999 and Brazil in 2004 (Latour 2004). In that book, Latour demonstrates a step forward in critiquing the modern project by identifying studies showing that nature is also political. Furthermore, he showed how the irreconcilable modern attitude contributed to generating a destructive posture that would be the path to climate/environmental collapse.

## On the Anthropocene: A Militant Latour?

Latour’s most recent studies indicate a more propositional attitude towards modernity. In this regard, radicalism has become necessary due to a world in which collapse is seen as imminent - a condition that is innocuously traversed in congresses, meetings, and protocols. The question seems to bother and to also tension some Latournian premises regarding a science/nature/humans that would be involved in the political machinery in concrete negotiation games. Environmental movements and scientific meetings started to focus on environmental devastation and its effects in the 1970s. The year of Latour’s death also coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference (1972), a turning point in the “politics of nature”, where agendas were agglutinated with desires for public policies for the so-called globalized states.

That path seems to have failed!

The scientific community, driven by numerous controversies - such as climate scientists versus denialists - has also seen the facts about climate at a crossroads. As a “fact”, global warming has been propagated, replicated, and, in a way, “normalized”. So where does the game of Latournian sociological deconstruction come in? How can the “black box” be opened without creating obstacles to understanding the risks to the existence of/on Earth? Worse: how can the “politics of democracy” be conducted amid authoritarian setbacks, in advance of proposals that are not interested in any kind of dispute but in superimposing and disregarding the other?

Interestingly, this more propositional face is more evident in *Down to Earth*, published in Brazil in 2020. A book that shows how to orient yourself in the Anthropocene politically. It touches on recent political phenomena, such as the conservative wave in which the proposal of compromise is not on the agenda, as the elites have renounced any global project and seek to secure their share, even if it means closing in on themselves or believing that their bunker will be their salvation:

Here it is worth remembering the clichéd metaphor of Titanic: the dominant classes realize that the sinking is inevitable, take over the lifeboats and ask the orchestra to play lullabies for a long time, so they can enjoy the dark night and get out before the ship's excessive tilting draws the attention of the other classes! (Latour 2020, 5) My translations.

The fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), the economic crises, poverty, Donald Trump's victory in the USA (2016) - and, we can also say, helping us to understand the phenomenon of Bolsonarism in Brazil, as of 2018 -, show that there is no conciliatory possibility that comes from the "ruling classes", a term Latour uses repeatedly. It is also worth reflecting on this issue: is any conciliatory possibility a reality in capitalism, given that it manufactures consensus and hides its anti-democratic bias? Perhaps, this is one of the questions for the meetings and revisits with Latour to come: his difficulty with what some call a "Capitalocene" (Moore 2022) may yield many developments.

The Anthropocene, in Latour, is how nature was able to speak, or rather, to shout, to protest. This more "militant" side has maintained coherence with his basic assumptions. Our existence means grounding ourselves in this permanent agency between humans and nature, and stems from a collective attitude and to what extent we will be able to forge other visions, cosmo-visions and cosmopolitics. Furthermore, when the academic world thinks about different epistemologies, to claim the decoloniality of knowledge, Latour can instigate us to look at ourselves as Brazilians. With his assumption of societal refoundation and permanence in the world, he helps us think that Brazil's crossroads - which mixes popular knowledge, indigenous knowledge, "raizeras", "quilombolas", "terreiro" peoples, native peoples, hybridization and anthropophagy with Europe and the USA - can propitiate the re-founding of this encounter between humans and nature.

In an interview in 2020, Latour said: "Brazil today is like Spain was in 1936, during the Civil War: it is where everything that will be important in the next decades is visible" and he adds that: "If Brazil finds a solution for itself, it will save the rest of the world" (Latour 2020b).

## Latour: A Lyricist and Polemicist at the Height of Neoliberalism

Latour's cry that *We were never modern* shows how much, perhaps, even begrudgingly, he was an author in/of modernity, manifest in what modernity carries of anguish, contradictions, and inconclusions because I have doubts if its abolition, in these Latournian levels, would really be possible or desirable. Nevertheless, his trajectory shows that he knew how to navigate the changes that academia has undergone in the last forty years. Technoscience, as a production regime referenced in the market utilitarianism of the tremendous industrial and military complexes, starts to define rationality. I dare say that Latour knew how to situate himself in a context that some point out as the "bankruptcy of the intellectuals" because he managed to translate it into an editorial success in the English language, going far beyond the boundaries of the renowned French *SciencePo*. *Down to Earth*, for example, has been published in eighteen countries. The reach of his productions and the various translations denote Latour's capacity to materialize what he said into theory, to make his ideas important to society or a significant sector of it.<sup>3</sup> It was not by chance that he could elicit several articles, books, and collections about himself while he was still alive. Here in Brazil, we highlight the recent and stimulating Dossier on Bruno Latour, organized by Geane Alzamora, Joana Ziller, Francisco Coutinho (2020).

Like it or not, agree with it or not, Latour was an intellectual capable of proposing a project of society; he was an inciter, an incendiary. Yet, seeing him as a public intellectual is

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the systematization:  
[http://www.bruno-latour.fr/books\\_and\\_edited\\_volumes.html](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/books_and_edited_volumes.html).

vital because it also translates the networks he could form - again, making him an example of the “actor-network” theory that made him famous. Latour orbited in various circles and made a tangle of people, languages, and gazes, eager for his postulates, revolve around him. Thus, to have been awarded The Holberg Prize in 2013, the acclaimed prize in the social sciences and humanities, seems a mere detail.

His ideas have ballast and are at the interface with the subjects of the historical time to which he belonged. If the present time imposed the preponderance of academic pragmatism that neglects fields and disciplines, he knew how to impose himself, to be essential and “efficient”. He managed to follow engineers throughout society and give them another place that often worked as a representation of his doing, less in an iconoclastic manner and more as a narrative that may have sounded, for some, even as a tribute. “How can my trivial everyday life be so important?” a subject of this anthropology of the sciences might say.

The allusion to Walter Benjamin’s materialist, dialectical, and psychoanalytic gazes on Baudelaire was not random (Benjamin, 1989). If Baudelaire produced a synthesis of the anguishes of modernity in the middle of the 19th century - making his poetics and criticism a look at the structures that were erected over the city and how it composed and decomposed subjects in capitalism -, Latour put in the scene another moment of this modernity and the subject within it. He also synthesizes a time by challenging modernity itself and constituting and proposing another ontological project. Bruno Latour unveiled scientific action as a collective act that emerges from ordinary figures. Just as it is the subjects that will operate the changes and that is in the condition of tensioning and re-founding epistemology: they are the ones who will know “where to land” (*Down to Earth*) and who can constitute themselves capable of making science within society, in which humans and non-humans, subjects and nature, would finally compose an unbreakable flow capable of sustaining us on Earth.

## References

- Alzamora, Geane; Ziller, Joana; Coutinho, Francisco. 2020. *Dossiê Bruno Latour*. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG.
- Ávila, Gabriel. 2019. *Ciência, objeto da história*. São Paulo: Alameda.
- Castro, Rosana. 2020. *Economias políticas da doença e da saúde: uma etnografia da experimentação farmacêutica*. São Paulo, Hucitec.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1989. *Charles Baudelaire, um lírico no auge do capitalismo*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Castro, Rosana. 2020. *Economias políticas da doença e da saúde: uma etnografia da experimentação farmacêutica*. São Paulo: Hucitec.
- Cukierman, Henrique. 2007. *Yes, nós temos Pasteur: Manguinhos, Oswaldo Cruz e a História da Ciência no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará/Faperj.
- Galison, Peter. 1999. *Culturas etéreas e culturas materiais: a ciência tal qual se faz*. Lisboa: Editora João Sá da Costa.
- Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The Pasteurization of France*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1994. *Jamais fomos modernos: ensaio de antropologia simétrica*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. 34.
- Latour, Bruno; Woolgar, Steve. 1997. *A Vida de Laboratório: a produção dos fatos científicos*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará.
- Latour, Bruno. 2001. *A esperança de pandora: ensaios sobre a realidade dos estudos científicos*. Bauru, SP: EDUSC.

- Latour, Bruno. 2004. *Políticas da natureza: como fazer ciência na democracia*. Bauru, SP: EDUSC.
- Latour, Bruno. 2018. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Medford: Polity Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2020a. *Onde Aterrar? Como se orientar politicamente no Antropoceno*. Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo.
- Latour, Bruno. 2020b. *Se o Brasil achar solução para si, vai salvar o resto do mundo*. [Interview granted to] Ana Carolina Amaral. *Folha de São Paulo*, September 12, 2020. It is available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2020/09/se-o-brasil-achar-solucao-para-si-vai-salvar-o-resto-do-mundo-diz-bruno-latour.shtml>. Accessed November 19, 2022.
- Maia, Carlos Alvarez. 2013. *História das ciências: uma história de historiadores ausentes: condições para o aparecimento dos sciences studies*. Rio de Janeiro: Eduerj.
- Moore, Jason W. (org.). 2022. *Antropoceno ou Capitaloceno? Natureza, história e a crise do capitalismo*. São Paulo: Elefante.