

Review of Henning Schmidgen, *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Gloria Custance. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. xvi + 175 pages

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Preview

Bruno Latour in Pieces (BLP) offers a brief but extensive introduction to Latour's education, career, collaborations, and collaborators. BLP is Latourean in its insistence on pointing to the "ego, hic, nunc". By following Latour's method of indexing, of pointing to people, places, and times, Schmidgen aptly follows Latour. Like any biography worth its salt, Schmidgen's research follows the influences that played a role in transforming Latour into the thinker he is, but also plays it close to the ear by not only articulating the bibliographical information, but in attempting a genealogy of Latourian philosophy. Schmidgen reveals the sources of a rearticulation of many key Science and Technology Studies themes in relationships developed in biblical hermeneutics through his ethnography of the Guillemin's Laboratory. BLP is after all an "intellectual biography," so it is hardly surprising that Schmidgen attempts what his project plainly sets out to do. But, what is pleasantly surprising is the interconnected mosaic generated in graphing historical bibliographical details onto Latour's intellectual development. The imagine of Latourian studies is circulated, and in turn transformed (there is no circulation, no translation, without transformation), but what is up for debate is whether these transformations are felicitous in maintaining the relationships that make them possible.

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A key insight that Schmidgen brings to light in BLP is the influence that André Malet, Rudolf Bultmann, and Charles Péguy had on Latour. It is Schmidgen's scholarship on the interplay and development of these relationships that offers the greatest insight into Latour's method and overall project. Latour is continually pointing to the various institutions, peoples, and ideas that make up facts, myths, translations, and various "modes of existence." In the same way that we can be led through a laboratory, an engineering diagram, or the set of permutations that enables felicitous translations, so too does Schmidgen's biography allow the reader to, at least, glimpse the various attractors that have influenced and shaped 'Latour.' No doubt this 'Latour' is, much like 'Pasteur,' a refined construction according to relationships that were already solidifying across various networks of

forces, not a person but an assemblage of various influences and institutions from which “Latour” has arrived. Nonetheless, Schmidgen’s book does what its title suggests and offers these pieces in order that we might follow Latour through the many networks, relations, and collaborations of which he has been a part, and which allow us to maintain (that is, in part to understand) what it means, for instance, to say one is a Latourean, i.e., to understand the network of relations and commitments one commits to in the performative “I am a Latourean.”

The book is well worth the read, especially for those desiring to better understand the development of a Latourean hermeneutical method, or a view to his overall project. BLP fails to develop nuanced aspects of Latour’s key ideas and does not deal with criticisms from the Bath and Edinburgh schools, i.e., addressing how social factors influence beliefs. These concerns are diminished if one considers that a powerful aspect of BLP is its brevity. Nonetheless, while not attending to every criticism that could be drawn up against ‘Latour,’ BLP provides rigorous historical detail, and insight.

Chapter 1, “Exegesis and Ethnology”: Along with providing biographical information about Latour’s early life and education, this chapter focuses on the influence of André Malet, Rudolf Bultmann, and Charles Péguy on Latour.

Chapter 2, “A Philosopher in the Laboratory”: As the title suggests, this chapter concerns Latour’s time at the Salk institute. It details various relationships in and around the laboratory; especial of note are Latour’s relations with Jonas Salk and Roger Guillemin.

Chapter 3, “Machines of Tradition”: Traces Latour’s return to France after his time at the Salk institute and the development of the relationship between Latour and Steve Woolgar. It details the various institutions to which Latour was a part after his return and also the negotiations between Woolgar and Latour in the creation of *Lab Life*.

Chapter 4, “Pandora and the History of Modernity”: Discusses the Pandora initiative and Lyotard’s interpretation of the myth. It follows up with Latour’s work on Pasteur and the sociology of bacteriology.

Chapter 5, “Of Actants, Forces, and Things”: Delves into cybernetics and discusses the influence of Shapin and Schaffer on the sociology of science. It introduces the discussion of “Actants and Actors,” and Serres’ influence on Latour’s thinking of “epistemological breaks,” or of the lack thereof. It follows up with a discussion of Deleuze and Latour, and concludes with a central Latourean insight, i.e., “irreductionism.”

Chapter 6, “Science and Action”: Explains how *Science in Action* is a journey through the realm of “technoscience.” Furthermore it develops the relationship between Latour and Michel Callon, and introduces the semiotics

of Gremias via his student François Bastide (who collaborated with Latour and John Law, among others).

Chapter 7, “Questions Concerning Technology”: From the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Berlin key, a leitmotif Latour uses to discuss motifs of his oeuvre, i.e., “looking at assemblies of heterogeneous elements, the stereoscopic suspension of divisions, the bridging of discontinuities” (98). This is followed by a discussion of *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Chapter 8, “The Coming Parliament”: Using the architecture of Louis Kahn as a scaffold, Latour discusses the relationship between institutions and traditional practices. In rounding out the last chapter, Schmidgen brings in Latour’s parliamentary notion of a “parliament of things,” and follows this by briefly noting Latour’s *The Making of Law*, *Rejoicing, Paris: Invisible City*, *Politics of Nature*, and *Modes of Existence*.

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