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RESEARCH

Latour, Foucault, and Post-Truth: The Role and Function of Critique in the Era of the Truth Crisis

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This paper, first published in German in *Le foucauldien* 4, no. 1 (2018), explores Bruno Latour's critique of contemporary critical theory. According to Latour, poststructuralist conceptions of critical inquiry are becoming increasingly outdated. In our "post-factual" era, attempting to expose facts as results of power-laden processes of social construction plays into the hands of anti-scientific obscurantists. This is not to say, however, that one ought to opt for some reductionist notion of objectivity. Instead, Latour proposes a new form of critical realism. While we agree with Latour about the necessity of widening our epistemological paradigm, we deem his critique of poststructuralism unfair and exaggerated. Moreover, we argue that he fails to account for the relationship between epistemology, power, and subjectivity. Since Foucault, on the other hand, succeeds where Latour falls short and probes into this very relationship, his is a form of critique that remains crucial to tackling the current crisis of truth.

Keywords: critique; post-factuality; post-truth politics; thing; gathering; new realism; matters of concern; poststructuralism; problematization; latour; foucault

1. Introduction: The Fate of Critique in the Post-Truth Era¹

At the beginning of his 2012 volume *Modes of Existence*, Bruno Latour evokes the following anecdote to illustrate the social challenges we face today. During a discussion on climate change between French industrialists and researchers from the Collège de France, a professor was asked why he should be more believed than others. Tellingly, for Latour, the scientist did not point to data and facts, to established scientific procedures and universal transparency. Instead, he complained about the lack of trust in scientific institutions. Both the question and the answer puzzled Latour. Apparently, it no longer suffices to simply highlight the difference between the rationality of science and conspirative irrationalism "to settle the debates over the components of the *common world*."²

Here, Latour addresses a problem that is at the center of the current debates revolving around the term "post-truth." If all views are judged equally valid, then scientific results lose their significance. According to the diagnosis of a post-truth era, all opinions seem to be on the same par, without there being a generally accepted standard by which to compare and evaluate them.

Latour's analysis of the social problematization of truth and factuality dates back to the early 2000s. In several publications, he anticipates reflections and arguments that indeed come up frequently in today's debates on post-truth politics, and he aims to offer an explanation of our current predicament. Latour ponders the possibility, status, and preconditions of social criticism, the underlying argument being that such criticism can no longer content itself with debunking dominant ideologies and exposing commonly accepted facts as social constructs. For if it did so, it would, willy-nilly, play into the hands of those trying to undermine facts, thereby becoming yet another cog in the machinery of "post-truth" arbitrariness that renders profound criticism impossible.

In what follows, we explore Latour's analysis of contemporary—mostly post-structuralist—forms of critique and reconstruct the alternative he provides. The form

¹ A preliminary, German version of this article was published in *Le foucauldien* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.46>.

² Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2012), 6.

of critique Latour has in mind is rooted in a reconception of realism and a complex understanding of facticity and objectivity. We argue that Latour's plea for a new realism based no longer on isolated facts but on matters of concern allows us to rethink facticity in a way that goes beyond positivist reductionism. In the final analysis, however, Latour's claim that all contemporary forms of critical theory adhere to a naïve notion of social constructivism is untenable. Accordingly, and against Latour's wholesale rejection of poststructuralist models of critique, we turn to Michel Foucault, whose genealogical critique not only meets the criteria Latour sets for critical thinking in a purportedly post-truth era but also addresses questions left out in Latour's own account. Whereas Latour's new realism confines itself to broadening our epistemological perspective, Foucault's approach makes it possible to analyze epistemic quandaries by shedding light on their political, social, economic, and discursive conditions, without, however, reducing epistemology to power.

2. Latour's Claim: Toward a New Realism

In his famous 2004 article "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," Latour draws a gloomy picture of today's intellectual scene. Investigations in the philosophy of science have repudiated all notions of objectivity. Given that the categories we employ and our being situated in a specific way determine our worldview, there seems to be no unmediated access to truth. This notion has made its way into public consciousness so that now science carries no more weight than the most far-fetched conspiracy theories:

Of course, we in the academy like to use more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below.³

³ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 229.

When it comes to finding the culprits responsible for this unfortunate development, Latour is quick to point the finger at poststructuralism.⁴ By casting doubt on all criteria for scientific evidence, so Latour argues, poststructuralism draws close to conspiracy theories. In this regard, his text oscillates curiously between self-criticism—after all, he produced many important insights into how scientific knowledge is constructed—⁵ and an explicit reckoning with discourse analysis, social constructivism, and deconstruction. These, he holds, partake in the destruction of the critical spirit. In times of post-truth politics and fake news, arguments as to the relativity and constructedness of facts appear commonplace, and "French" social criticism cannot but seem an anachronistic endeavor. Insofar as poststructuralism questions the givenness and inalterability of facts, it is no longer able to draw a line between scientific findings and mere opinions. This, Latour thinks, leaves us with the task of reconsidering the terms of critique.

To do so, Latour examines the tools available to critical theory and tries to specify more clearly the initial aims of his own research. For his part, it had never been intended to "get *away* from facts but *closer* to them."⁶ Accordingly, he proposes a *new realism*—a realism that focuses no longer on mere *matters of fact* but on *matters of concern*.⁷ This, he argues, leads not only to a sophisticated concept of experience

⁴ Foucault, Bourdieu, and Baudrillard are mentioned by name, as are Nietzsche and Benjamin, the ancestors of French theory. Additionally, Latour alludes to Derrida's deconstruction and Butler's reflections on the social constitution of subjectivity.

⁵ See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000).

⁶ Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" 231.

⁷ Latour anticipates the labels the German philosopher Markus Gabriel uses by more than a decade, both in substance and as regards the latter's polemics. Like Latour, Gabriel proclaims a "new realism," drawing heavily on Heidegger in doing so, and blames "postmodernism" for conjuring up the evils of relativism. See Markus Gabriel, "Wider die postmoderne Flucht vor den Tatsachen," *NZZ online*, June 19, 2016, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/fuenf-jahre-neuer-realismus-wider-die-postmoderne-flucht-vor-den-tatsachen-ld.89931>. What is typical of the return of postmodernism-bashing in the German feuilleton is that its proponents usually do not deign to discuss, let alone quote, what thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, or Butler actually say. In this vein, Michael Hampe refers to the supposed failure of contemporary critical theory when it comes to explaining post-truth politics, without, however, offering evidence for his claim. See Michael Hampe, "Katerstimmung bei den pubertären Theoretikern," *Die Zeit*, December 19, 2016, 48. Remarkably, such different thinkers as Hampe, Gabriel, and

but also to an ethos that protects and cherishes the world's richness. And it allows us to reconfigure critique in such a way that it does not treat objects in isolation but respects their relationality.

In order to achieve this goal and define his notion of matters of concern, Latour draws on Heidegger's late thought on the concepts of the "Thing" and the "Fourfold." Thus, it is necessary that we turn to Heidegger before homing in on Latour's own account.

3. Heidegger on the Given: From the "Totality of Involvements" to the "Fourfold"

Heidegger begins by asking how we encounter things in the world. He rejects reductionist approaches to experience, trying to regain a notion of its richness and multiple facets. He shows that we do not experience things as present-at-hand objects that may be used and exploited. Against such an impoverished conception of objectivity, Heidegger seeks to restore things in their full diversity and abundance of experiential possibilities by highlighting their constitutive relationality—that is, their being located within a web of references.

Starting with *Being and Time*, Heidegger criticizes the tendency to interpret all things in terms of an "ontology of presence-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*) that conceives of things as isolated objects presenting themselves readily to an equally isolated subject.⁸ According to Heidegger, such a view cannot do justice to our relatedness to the world—to the fact, that is, that our relation to the given is always already embedded in an intricate web of references. Think, so Heidegger suggests, of a workshop.

Latour all seem to find it unnecessary to support their accusations with actual references to "postmodernist" or poststructuralist texts. Instead, they invoke the mood in academia, impressions, and what they believe to be the popular feeling. Hampe contents himself with a reference to the present atmosphere in "leftist cultural studies;" Gabriel settles for some Nietzschean dicta to sum up his hypotheses about "postmodernism;" and Latour appeals to a watered-down and popularized standard model of critique to make his claim about the naivety of critical theory plausible. In doing so, Hampe, Gabriel, and Latour repeat the post-truth gesture *par excellence*. They no longer refer to scientific evidence and data—such as quotable hypotheses and arguments—but focus on feelings and moods.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 91–102. See also Gerald Posselt and Matthias Flatscher, *Sprachphilosophie. Eine Einführung* (Vienna: facultas/UTB, 2016), 180–186.

Picking up a hammer, we do not first register and process sense data to then identify the object we are holding in our hands as a hammer. Rather, we use the hammer without hesitation to, say, knock a nail into the wall. We encounter the hammer as *equipment* (*Zeug*), as a tool that helps us accomplish a task. As such, the hammer is embedded in a "totality of involvements"⁹ that makes us understand it as something ready-to-hand. The hammer refers to the other tools in the workshop, to the bodily condition of its user, to a certain usage, to activities related to hammering, and to other possibilities, all of which have a specific history; it refers to its producer, to the materials it is made of, etc.¹⁰

In his later writings, Heidegger reformulates and radicalizes his reflections on the relationality and historicity of objects. Starting in the mid-1940s, he draws on the Old High German word *thing*, which used to refer to a *people's assembly* or *trial*, to suggest that the *Ding* (*thing*) be construed as a *gathering*.¹¹ No object, Heidegger argues, simply presents itself to a subject. Rather, each thing assembles within itself an intricate web of relations. Heidegger's prime example is that of a jug.¹² Since a jug is a man-made thing, it refers to its producer and the process of its production; moreover, it establishes a certain relation between the drinker and the drink (wine, as Heidegger has it); and it even refers to the grapevines, the fertile soil on which they thrive, and the auspicious weather that helped them grow.¹³ Heidegger terms this complex

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 115–117.

¹⁰ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 100: "In the environment certain entities become accessible which are always ready-to-hand, but which, in themselves, do not need to be produced. Hammer, tongs, and needle, refer in themselves to steel, iron, metal, mineral, wood, in that they consist of these. In equipment that is used, 'Nature' is discovered along with it by that use—the 'Nature' we find in natural products."

¹¹ "Our language denotes what a gathering is by an ancient word. That word is: thing." Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 171. Latour criticizes Heidegger for establishing "a dichotomy between Gegenstand and Thing" (Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam," 234), overlooking that Heidegger himself withdraws this distinction in his later work (along with the transcendental-horizontal conception of Dasein). In retrospect, it can even be shown that Heidegger's notion of "equipment," as he elaborates it in *Being and Time*, combines reality and relationality in the same that his conception of the thing does.

¹² See Heidegger, "The Thing," 171.

¹³ In Heidegger's "powerful vocabulary" (Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam," 233), this reads as follows: "the drink [*Trank*] abides in the whole gathering involved in the event of drinking [*Getränk*]. This gathering is the belonging-together in the event of drinking of what is offered and received as drinkable. The whole gathering of the drink [*Getränk*] consists of the drink offered [*Trank*]

web of relations "the fourfold" (*Geviert*). In each thing, the fourfold gathers together "earth and sky, divinities and mortals"¹⁴—that is, to put it in more modern terms, it assembles all possible references. Heidegger's central thesis is this: *Apprehending something always means co-apprehending something else*. The complex referentiality designated by the fourfold cannot be reduced to a simple object or mere sense data but must be grasped as something that concerns us and that we are involved in. Here, Heidegger goes beyond the transcendental-horizontal approach of *Being and Time* (and, at least in his view, Husserl's phenomenology as such). For he stops viewing the world in terms of Dasein's projects, instead regarding the "mortals"—at whose plurality Heidegger hints without further elaborating on it—as but one of the fourfold's poles.¹⁵ Thus, Heidegger not only puts forward a new phenomenology of the thing but also proposes a theory of subjectivity that runs athwart the modern understanding of the subject as a sovereign and transparent agent. We will come back to this aspect in our discussion of Foucault's conception of a genealogical critique.

4. A New Concept of Facticity and a New Concept of Critique

Applying Heidegger's reflections on the thing to the present situation, Latour brings to the fore the complex processes by which "mere" objects become "matters of concern" and, conversely, "matters of concern" congeal into unambiguous, clearly defined objects. Exemplifying the former process, Latour does not, like Heidegger, turn to a relatively simple "object" but rather chooses a complex one—namely, the space shuttle *Columbia*—a supposedly highly accomplished, fully understood, and readily available object—that, while reentering the Earth's atmosphere, broke apart and crashed in 2003. The events following the crash—the technical, scientific, and juridical investigations into its causes, the mourning discourses, and the literal col-

and the drink received [*Trunk*]. What is offered as drinkable is among other things wine. The one who drinks is the human. The whole gathering of the drink as what is offered abides in the wine, which abides in the grapevine, which abides in the earth and in the gifts from the sky." Martin Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 87.

¹⁴ Heidegger, "The Thing," 171.

¹⁵ See also Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 141–160.

lecting and gathering of the many pieces scattered across the land—show how "suddenly, in a stroke, an object had become a thing, a matter of fact was considered as a matter of great concern:"¹⁶

If a thing is a gathering, as Heidegger says, how striking to see how it can suddenly disband. If the "thinging of the thing" is a gathering that always connects the 'united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals, in the simple onefold of their self-unified fourfold,' how could there be a better example of this making and unmaking than this catastrophe unfolding all its thousands of folds?¹⁷

To exemplify the opposite process—the reduction of a matter of concern to a matter of fact—Latour turns to the decision of the US government to attack Iraq. The many debates and reflections preceding the US campaign, Latour holds, were indeed "a Thing—with a capital T," but they worked toward coalescing "in one unifying, unanimous, solid, mastered object, masses of people, opinions, and might."¹⁸ Colin Powell's notorious speech at the UN Security Council in 2003 illustrates this reduction perfectly. To make the case for an invasion of Iraq, Powell pulled out what seemed to be a vial of anthrax, thus condensing the question of war into one tiny "object."

For Latour, both examples show that we must reject the effort of modern epistemology to reduce objects to mere matters of fact in favor of a new realism. This new realism teaches us to perceive facts and objects as "highly complex, historically situated, richly diverse matters of concern."¹⁹ As Latour sees it, contemporary cri-

¹⁶ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 235.

¹⁷ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 235.

¹⁸ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 235.

¹⁹ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 237. In a similar way, but distancing himself from Heidegger, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger differentiates between "technological" and "scientific" objects. Although the latter depend on the former in order to appear in experimental settings, they are "fragile," remaining, as it were, *in statu nascendi*. Aside from drawing attention to this precarious status of epistemic objects, Rheinberger, like Latour, argues that by having their identity established, scientific objects may petrify and become technological objects. See Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Experiment, Differenz, Schrift. Zur Geschichte epistemischer Dinge*. Marburg an der Lahn: Basilisken-Press 1992, 67–82.

tique primarily focuses on the constructed character of facts, tracing them back to a power-laden process of social construction and thus transforming them into mere fables. He wants us to know, however, that his own sociological investigations were not aimed at debunking facts:

The mistake would be to believe that we too have given a social explanation of scientific facts. No, even though it is true that at first we tried, like good critics trained in the good schools, to use the armaments handed to us by our betters and elders to crack open—one of their favorite expressions, meaning to destroy—religion, power, discourse, hegemony. But, fortunately (yes, fortunately!), one after the other, we witnessed that the black boxes of science remained closed and that it was rather the tools that lay in the dust of our workshop, disjointed and broken. Put simply, critique was useless against objects of some solidity.²⁰

Latour suggests that we go beyond the dispute between positivism and social constructivism. Rather than side with either the "fact position" or the "fairy position," we should strive to arrive at a "fair position"²¹—a position, that is, that respects the peculiarity and autonomy of things while at the same time accounting for their relationality. Seeking support for this new approach, Latour can no longer refer to Heidegger, who, he holds, reaches an impasse when he indulges his hostility toward science. Instead, and rather surprisingly, Latour turns to Alfred Whitehead. Whitehead, Latour claims, has furnished us with a complex understanding of nature and objectivity. In his Tanner lectures *The Concept of Nature*, for instance, Whitehead refuses to confine himself to analyzing but a limited set of paradigmatic natural objects and instead urges us to consider the complexity of our engagement with the things that affect us: "For us the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain

²⁰ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 242.

²¹ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 243.

the phenomenon."²² According to Latour, this practice of gathering together and assembling the ways in which we approach phenomena provides us with a standard by which critique can operate: "The critic is not the one who debunks"—that is, the one who reduces the given to the social conditions of its construction—"but the one who assembles."²³ The "assembling" or "gathering" critic analyzes, and preserves, the referential web of relations that make a thing a thing. Critique thus becomes a cautious care for the fragile, requiring that we bring into relief the multidimensionality of the gathered.

5. A Gathering Epistemology as a New Form of Critique?

Latour does not bother to verify his accusations against poststructuralist models of critique by, say, quoting from texts that would actually try to debunk facts and expose them as mere fairies.²⁴ Instead, he repeats the very gesture he takes issue with, reducing a complex and conflictual field (the "assembly" of contemporary models of critique) to a seemingly unambiguous and clearly defined "object." By misrepresenting the plethora of critical theories as a single failed project, Latour strays from the path that he thinks a critical analysis must follow. In short, in his critique of critique, Latour is not a gathering but a debunking critic.

On top of that, Latour's rhetoric is deeply disturbing. Not only does he employ a belligerent vocabulary, evoking scenes of combat, weaponry, generals, strategies, etc.,²⁵ but he also produces obscurities that elude the reader. For instance, he accuses traditional critique of "fight[ing] the wrong enemies" and of having been "con-

²² Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature. The Tanner Lectures Delivered in Trinity College November 1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 20.

²³ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 246.

²⁴ See above note 7.

²⁵ "Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: *Made in Critical-land*. Do you see why I am worried? Threats might have changed so much that we might still be directing all our arsenal east or west while the enemy has now moved to a very different place. After all, masses of atomic missiles are transformed into a huge pile of junk once the question becomes how to defend against militants armed with box cutters or dirty bombs. Why would it not be the same with our critical arsenal, with the neutron bombs of deconstruction, with the missiles of discourse analysis?" Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 230.

sidered as friends by the wrong sort of allies"²⁶ without further specifying what he means. These and other obscurities add a conspirative note to his text.

What is more, Latour's claim about poststructuralism unwittingly forming an alliance with post-truth strategies that seek to undermine scientific facts does not bear scrutiny. True, if one trawls through online forums of climate change deniers or visits websites promulgating the idea of intelligent design, one will, indeed, find an occasional reference to "postmodernism" as a potential ally in the effort to defend anti-evolutionary religious propaganda,²⁷ as well as harsh denials of any such affinities on the part of the "creationists."²⁸ The great majority of these publications, however, do not draw on "postmodernist" concepts but rather resort to scientific positivism to make their claims. In this vein, "religious" or "skeptical" deniers of climate change or evolutionary biology continuously point out either that these theories are not falsifiable and therefore unscientific²⁹ or that they are "mere theories"³⁰ and thus "falsifiable" and possibly wrong.³¹ From this it follows that, against what

²⁶ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 231.

²⁷ For a collection of some references, see Robert Pennock, "The Postmodern Sin of Intelligent Design Creationism," *Science & Education* 19, no. 6–8 (June 2010), 757–778. Pennock shows that, for the most part, it was but a single prominent proponent of the creationist movement that referred to "postmodernism."

²⁸ See e.g. John Mark Reynolds, "On Creation and Post-Modernism," *First Things*, March 18, 2010, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/03/on-creation-and-post-modernism>.

²⁹ See e.g. already H.M. Morris, ed., *Scientific Creationism* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974).

³⁰ Laurence Moran deals with these accusations; see Laurence Moran, "Evolution is a Fact and a Theory," *The TalkOrigins Archive. Exploring the Creation/Evolution Controversy*, January 22, 1993, <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/evolution-fact.html>.

³¹ There is, especially as regards climate change denial, a third, particularly inane "skeptical" position—one that is based on a blinkered, naïve realism à la "It's freezing cold outside—and these eggheads talk about global warming!" One of the most prominent proponents of this position is Donald Trump, the President of the United States. In 2017 he twittered the following: "In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year's Eve on record. Perhaps we could use a little bit of that good old Global Warming that our Country, but not other countries, was going to pay TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS to protect against. Bundle up!" (Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "In the East, it could be the COLDEST New Year's Eve on the record," Twitter-Tweet, December 28, 2017, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/946531657229701120?lang=en>.)

those riding the bandwagon of postmodernism-bashing might believe, the involuntary godfather of post-truth obscurantism is Popper, not Lyotard.³²

Latour's weaker claim of a mere "structural analogy" between poststructuralist critique and conspirative-obscurantist positions (without identifiable interaction) derives its plausibility from being predicated on a watered-down, popularized version of poststructuralism. If, however, we direct our gaze toward thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, or Butler, we will not only find ideas and arguments that Latour, without noting it, uses for his own account³³ but also come across tools that help us analyze the present predicament.³⁴

To substantiate this claim, let us, first, zoom in on Latour's exclusive focus on epistemology.³⁵ As we have seen, Latour dismisses the reductionist epistemological paradigm that construes the epistemic subject and its object as isolated entities in

³² The Wikipedia article "Objections to Evolution" illustrates this perfectly. While it reconstructs and refutes pseudo-falsificationist and pseudo-positivist positions, the article makes no mention of objections inspired by "postmodernism." Note, however, that we do not want to claim that there is some unacknowledged affinity between positivism and post-truth obscurantism. The reason why climate change deniers and their kind resort to the parlance of scientific positivism is that it dominates the academic discourse of our times. In other words, they would be ill-advised if they tried to justify their claims by drawing on what are but marginalized positions within academia.

³³ Judith Butler, for instance, responds to critics of *Gender Trouble* (1990) who accuse her of proposing an implausible version of social constructivism by advancing, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), a theory of bodily materiality and materialization that aims at analyzing the processes by which human bodies are constituted as bodies that matter—that is, as matters of concern. In this sense, Butler anticipates Latour's change of focus from matters of fact to matters of concern. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990) and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the discursive limits of 'sex'* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993).

³⁴ Here, we can also turn to Donna Haraway's feminist epistemology. With her concept of "situated knowledges," Haraway anticipates both Latour's claim that we ought to realign critical theory and his plea for a new, non-reductionist concept of experience. Haraway argues that "it is not enough to show radical historical contingency and modes of construction for everything." Rather, a feminist epistemology must engage with standard science in order to gain "enforceable, reliable accounts of things not reducible to power moves and agonistic, high status games of rhetoric or to scientific, positivist arrogance." Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991, 187–188). Her concept of *situated* knowledge highlights that knowledge is constitutively embodied. As such, it involves a concrete positioning and ethico-political responsibility. Latour ignores these aspects.

³⁵ Dagmar Comtesse presented a similar argument in her IPW lecture "Fake News und Kontingenzdenken. Für Machtanalyse statt Wahrheitsglauben" (University of Vienna, April 19, 2018), helping us to clarify our own position.

favor of a much more complex concept of object-relatedness. The main problem with the reductionist view, Latour argues, is its notion of mere facts, because it leads to an ill-conceived understanding of experience: "matters of fact are a poor *proxy* of experience and of experimentation" and "a confusing bundle of polemics, of epistemology, of modernist politics that can in no way claim to represent what is requested by a realist attitude."³⁶ Latour's gathering realism, on the other hand, knows what the proponents of reductionist empiricism ignore—namely, that the given presupposes a web of relations and cannot be understood in isolation of its relationality. For the project of a new critique, this means that it has to defend these relational entities against reductionism, constructivism, and obscurantism. Accordingly, if we were to respond to climate change deniers, we would neither (like the reductionist) refer to isolated facts and data nor (like the constructivist) try to expose the fabricated nature of all factual positions; as gathering critics, we would, rather, make explicit the complex scientific, historical, ethical, and social processes of assembly that are necessary for an "object" such as climate change to come into existence and be recognized as such. Drawing on Heidegger's parlance, the position of the critic would thus be that of a "shepherd of being."

What is missing in this picture is the institutional framework in which the gathering of relations and the preservation of diverse approaches are supposed to come into play. When Latour conjures up the possibility of "a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence,"³⁷ he seems to assume that all problems disappear as soon as a large number of disciplines have their say. It is not clear, however, how such a multifarious inquiry may help us solve concrete problems such as climate change denial (not to mention the fact that a number of disciplines already work together).

³⁶ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 252. In light of this passage, Latour's position could also be interpreted as a normative reversal of what he takes to be the dominant version of contemporary critique. For as these lines make clear, Latour shares the view that the given is constituted within (social and political) relations. What he rejects, though, is the normative evaluation that accompanies this position.

³⁷ Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," 246.

Even more troubling is that, in the final analysis, Latour's gathering critique amounts to scientific pedagogy. Indeed, Latour seems to think that it suffices to explain to climate change deniers how it came that we accept climate change as real (that is, what had to be gathered) in order for them to renounce their skepticism.

Latour fails to take into consideration the strategic, economic, and political interests that play into post-truth obscurantism, or, for that matter, climate change denial. Indeed, he restricts himself to offering an expanded and transformed epistemology—from matters of fact to matters of concern—and a new concept of objectivity—from the object to the thing-as-gathering. He does not, however, explicate the relation this expanded notion of epistemology bears to the spheres of social power, economy and politics. In fact, Latour hardly ever addresses the question of power—and when he does, he uses mostly dismissive and negative terms. Contrary to what Latour seems to think, pondering the relation of power and knowledge does not in any way mean conflating the two. In other words: Why should power relations not play a role in the gathering that makes a thing a thing? There has been no one more meticulous in the study of the complex relationship between knowledge and the formation of truth, social power, and subjectivity than Michel Foucault, who argues that these factors are constitutive of, but not reducible to, one another. Therefore, it is to him that we now turn in order to address the lacuna in Latour's reflections—that is, the question of power.

6. Between Truth, Power, and Subjectivity: Back to Foucault

In our attempt to evaluate Foucault's reflections on critique in terms of Latour's criteria for critical thinking, we do not, as one might expect, draw on Foucault's more popular and oft-quoted ponderings on critique.³⁸ Instead, we concentrate on two strands in the intricate fabric of his oeuvre that respond directly to the challenges Latour sets. There are two steps to our argument. First, we focus on Foucault's reflections on the complex of knowledge and power, to which Latour refers rather contemptuously in "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?" In the 1970s Foucault

³⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997), 41–82.

analyzes the paradigm shift in epistemology from "inquiry" (*enquête*) to "examination" (*épreuve*). In doing so, he goes beyond traditional epistemology, taking into consideration the question of power via an analysis of the discursive transformations that accompany the rise of capitalism, civil law, and the Humanities and in which economic, political, and juridical aspects come into play against an institutional background. Second, we draw on Foucault's late lectures on the antique concept of *parrhesia* or truth-telling. Here, Foucault not only analyzes the interrelation between truth, power, and subjectivity but also examines a specific "truth crisis" that hit Greek antiquity.³⁹

Foucault describes the decisive shift from the paradigm of inquiry to that of examination along the following lines: Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, several transformations have caused the decline of inquiry as the primary means to acquire knowledge. The procedure of inquiry, originating in juridical practice and well-established since antiquity, aims at reconstructing an event by interrogating witnesses and gathering evidence. In modernity, the method of inquiry morphs into "panopticism." Now, a multitude of different institutions—schools, factories, mental hospitals, prisons, etc.—surveil, control, and normalize subjects in order to gather knowledge. In his 1973 lecture *Truth and Juridical Forms*, Foucault describes this as follows:

It was no longer a matter of reconstituting an event, but something—or, rather, someone—who needed total, uninterrupted supervision. A constant supervision of individuals by someone who exercised a power over them—schoolteacher, foreman, physician, psychiatrist, prison warden—and who, so long as he exercised power, had the possibility of both supervising and constituting a knowledge concerning those he supervised. A knowledge that now was no longer about determining whether or not something had

³⁹ See Petra Gehring and Andreas Gelhard, eds., *Parrhesia. Foucault und der Mut zur Wahrheit* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2012); see also Gerald Posselt and Sergej Seitz, "Sprachen des Widerstands. Zur Normativität politischer Artikulation bei Foucault und Rancière," in *Foucault und das Politische. Transdisziplinäre Impulse für die politische Theorie der Gegenwart*, ed. Oliver Marchart and Renate Martensen (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018).

occurred; rather, it was about whether an individual was behaving as he should, in accordance with the rule or not, and whether he was progressing or not.⁴⁰

As this passage makes clear, the shift away from matters of fact—the primary concern of the method of inquiry—occurs two hundred years earlier than Latour thinks. Additionally, Foucault traces inquiry's origins back to Greek antiquity and the investigation into the regicide in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.⁴¹ Unlike Latour, Foucault carries out a discursive and genealogical analysis of the practices that aim at gathering and assembling knowledge. He probes into the compulsory urge to control implicit in these practices of examination by turning to the institutions that play a fundamental role in what he terms the "disciplinary society," whose mechanisms, along with panopticism, still affect how we live. Here, thinking about the constitution of the subject always entails contemplating a history of power. According to Foucault, knowledge refers not only to natural or produced objects but to human beings—a fact that Latour merely alludes to in his object-oriented conception. Importantly, the control of human beings also plays into the hands of capitalism. When wealth ceases to be defined primarily in terms of landownership and money and instead is understood in terms of movable forms of capital, such as resources, commodities, and machinery, that require protection from thieves and looters, new instruments of control have to be invented. In this context, surveillance should not only respond to crimes already committed but rather forestall possible offences.

Foucault shows how these apparatuses of control combine prototypes of state and non-state coercion, and he elaborates on how this combination manifests itself in a variety of institutions, ranging from schools to factories and barracks to mental hospitals and prisons. Starting in the nineteenth century, these institutions exercise more and more control, handing over the subjects individualized by the disciplinary

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984* (London: Penguin, 2002), 59.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France 1973–1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

apparatus to work, keeping them under constant surveillance and even checking on their bodies:

[I]f one closely analyzes the reasons for which individuals' entire existence was controlled by these institutions, one sees that, at bottom, it was not just a matter of appropriating, extracting the maximum quantity of time but also of controlling, shaping, valorizing the individual's body according to a particular system.⁴²

These institutions represent a new kind of power that can be neither identified with sovereignty nor traced back to the state or a specific class. Rather, it is a polymorphous power that sustains the capitalist system and the bourgeois legal order. What Foucault seems to have in mind is a complicated fabric made up of many strands: economic aspects of production, political aspects of inclusion and exclusion, juridical aspects, and the epistemic claim to knowledge.

It is important to note that Foucault's reflections on power and knowledge are predicated on his not reducing the latter to the former. Otherwise he would lose sight of the specifics of the various practices of knowledge he analyzes. Although—or, rather, because—power and knowledge are not the same, probing into forms of knowledge, so Foucault argues, requires that we reflect on their power-laden social and political conditions. By the same token, we should be aware of the fact that the practices of gathering and assembling (knowledge) have a complex and dark history—a history that Latour's presentist conception of gathering largely neglects.⁴³ As should have become clear by now, Latour misses the point when he concedes that Foucault's historical investigations are more complex and subtler than conspiracy theories. For, in fact, Foucault's reflections have nothing in common with them. Whereas conspiracy theories assume that social phenomena have a simple and iden-

⁴² Foucault, *Power*, 82.

⁴³ As for the figure of the critic that Latour proposes—the critic as an innocent and caring shepherd of the gathering of knowledge—one may also think of Foucault's analyses of the pastorate and pastoral power. See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982), 777–795.

tifiable origin, a doer behind the deed, Foucault vehemently rejects all explanatory models of this type.

In his late lectures in Berkeley and at the Collège de France, Foucault reframes and radicalizes the notion that the investigation of experience must focus on epistemic practices, forms of power, and modes of subjectivation, without, however, losing sight of their irreducibility to one another. To do so, he turns to the ancient practice of *parrhesia*, a form of truth-telling that is not regulated by institutions. As Foucault points out, it is when the polis faces an institutional crisis that *parrhesia* becomes a topic to be debated in philosophical, ethical, and political discussions. Here, what Foucault terms *problematization* plays a decisive role. Foucault uses this concept to address the historical processes by which objects and practices—in the case of *parrhesia*, a certain mode of veridiction—that have been accepted as unproblematic given turn into focal points for experience and epistemic, ethical, and political debates:

The history of thought is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and 'silent,' out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions. The history of thought, understood in this way, is the history of the way people begin to take care of something, of the way they become anxious about this or that—for example, about madness, about crime, about sex, about themselves, or about truth.⁴⁴

By drawing his attention to problematizations, Foucault does not mean to merely analyze purported facts and locate them in the course of history; nor does he subscribe to the view that phenomena such as sexuality, crime, madness, and truth are but social constructs. Rather, Foucault wants to find out why and how something becomes a (scientific, ethical, and political) problem. In this sense, Foucault antici-

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 74.

pates Latour's analysis of the shift from matters of fact to matters of concern, matters of concern being things that people care about—that is, complex realities embedded in heterogeneous discourses, institutions, and apparatuses within a specific historical constellation. Crucially, and contrary to what Latour claims, Foucault does not deny the reality of the objects he analyzes:

[W]hen I say that I am studying the 'problematization' of madness, crime, or sexuality, it is not a way of denying the reality of such phenomena. On the contrary, I have tried to show that it was precisely some real existent in the world which was the target of social regulation at a given moment. The question I raise is this one: how and why were very different things in the world gathered together, characterized, analyzed, and treated as, for example, 'mental illness'? What are the elements which are relevant for a given 'problematization'? And even if I won't say that what is characterized as 'schizophrenia' corresponds to something real in the world, this has nothing to do with idealism. For I think there is a relation between the thing which is problematized and the process of problematization. The problematization is an 'answer' to a concrete situation which is real.⁴⁵

To sum up, to investigate problematizations is to investigate the paradigmatic *matters of concern* of a given historical epoch. In this sense, Foucault's approach does indeed, as Latour thinks critical theory should, get "closer" to reality—closer, that is, than positivist positions, which revolve around an impoverished concept of facts or data, and constructivist positions, which think of reality as a mere effect of power relations. Only if we untangle the intricate web of epistemology, power, and subjectivation, may we understand a "Thing" such as *parrhesia*—or, for that matter, the present "crisis of truth." Accordingly, the (epistemic) "analysis of forms of veridiction" must be combined with the (political and discursive) "analysis of procedures of governmentality" and the (subject-oriented) "analysis of the pragmatics of self."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 171–172.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 5. In the epilog to Foucault's lecture *The Courage of the Truth*, Frédéric

7. Conclusion

The above should have made clear that, on the whole, we agree with Latour's diagnosis of the present. On top of that, we have argued for a thorough analysis of post-truth obscurantism. Like Latour, we are concerned about there not being a proper understanding of experience, and we think that this problem has to do with the positivistic reduction of experience to mere facts or data. In this sense, it is symptomatic that today we bemoan the alleged loss of all facts when, *in fact*, there is a strong possibility of us being soon ruled by algorithmic regimes—regimes that aim at the calculability of all behavior and in which *matters of concern* only matter insofar as they can be commodified and used as data sets, the zero-grade version of *matters of fact*.⁴⁷

In light of the current problematization of truth, factuality, and objectivity, it would be mistaken to think of Foucault's reflections as being obsolete. In fact, if we are to tackle our current predicament, in which what is at stake is precisely the intricate entanglement of truth, power, and subjectivity, we must consider this very triad with respect to its genealogy. Rather than repeat Latour's gesture and jettison all the tools that critical theory offers, we should focus on the gist of his argument and switch from debunking to gathering: As for critique, this would mean reassembling its many complex and contradictory facets. Accordingly, critique itself would have

Gros emphasizes the necessity of considering all three perspectives without reducing them to one another: "The three dimensions of Knowledge, Power, and the Subject (or rather, of veridiction, governmentality, and subjectivation) [...] are not like three distinct parts to be studied in turn, like three separate domains. Foucault insists on the idea that the identity of the discourse of philosophy since its Socratic-Platonic foundation consists precisely in a structure of reciprocal correlation: never studying discourses of truth without at the same time describing their effect on the government of self and others; never analyzing structures of power without at the same time showing the knowledge and forms of subjectivation they rely on; never identifying modes of subjectivation without including their political extensions and the relations they have to the truth. And we should not hope for one of these dimensions to be consecrated as the fundamental dimension: political violence or moral postures will never disappear in a general logic; the demands of knowledge or ethical constructions will never be reduced to forms of domination; and finally, it will never be possible to found forms of veridiction and modes of government on subjective structures." (Frédéric Gros, "Course Context," in Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth. The Government of Self and Others II. Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 346.

⁴⁷ One could argue that the machine-aided process of abstracting experience does not even come to halt at the level of mere data but, instead, goes on to reduce these data to metadata.

to become a matter of concern in order for it to again shatter ossified positions and analyze troublesome developments.⁴⁸

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