

SUBJECT, QUASI-OBJECT, OBJECT

Posts in this series. Bruno Latour uses words in ways that are not always clear. Discussion of unusual usages of words may appear in earlier posts.

We Have Never Been Modern is Bruno Latour's effort to define the nature of modernity. Latour looks back in time to a point where we can see the beginnings of modernity. [1] The point he chooses is the 1660s, shortly after the end of the English Civil War, when Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle had a war of words over their respective conceptions of society and science.

The air pump was a recent invention, and Boyle and his associates spent a lot of time and money improving it. Boyle used the air pump to conduct experiments on air and air pressure. He described the methods and results in a 1660 book, an early example of the scientific method.

Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan* in 1651. The book is usually thought to be the first on political philosophy, an effort to understand the nature and structure of human society as a human construction, not a divine creation. He offers his ideas about the best way to organize society.

Each man wrote on the subjects covered by the other, according to Latour. But eventually people focused on Hobbes as a student of society and ignored his abstruse science. Boyle's methods became the model for science, and his writings on politics and society were ignored. Nature and society became two separate things. Society doesn't change the laws of nature, and nature doesn't impact the structure of society. Society is about people, and science is about things. Latour identifies this as the decisive step to modernity, separating it from previous societies he identifies as premodern.

The distinction between nature and society has

endured to the present. The two poles of our thinking are society, culture, people, the state on one hand; and nature, things, objects, on the other. [2] In order to study these separate topics, we are constantly involved in the process of purification, as Latour calls it. Science tries to rid the object of all traces of the subject. People studying society try to erase all traces of objects from their studies.

At the same time, we are engaged in a different process, which Latour variously calls hybridization, mediation, or translation, [3] This is our constant creation of new objects made up of elements of society and nature mixed together. We have made a vast number of these things that don't fit the two categories of nature and society.

An air pump is a thing, but it talks to people about other things. Not everyone can hear it speak: only specially trained people are able to comprehend the message. Today there are instruments like the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), so vast that they are hard to comprehend, staffed by 17,500 people, using thousands more computers, detectors, and other pieces of equipment. The LHC tells specially trained people things about fundamental particles. The air pump and the LHC are tools to study nature, but they also change us and they change our understanding of nature, and society as well.

Hobbes' theory helps us understand and work with government and power, but there were entities that exercised power outside the government in his time, including the Church of England, masters, guilds and others. That's true now, when we have enormous corporations which organize the production and distribution of vast amounts of material goods and services; giant universities; enormous churches; and more.

Latour calls all these objects and entities hybrids or quasi-objects. I understand a quasi-object as a node which focuses the efforts of people and other objects and at the same time changes the people and the other objects and is

changed by them. It is something in itself, but its existence and its meaning depend on human action. Here's an explanation by Levi Bryant:

Quasi-objects are objects that are neither quite natural nor quite social. ... [T]hey are operators that draw people together in particular relations as well as drawing people into relations with other nonhuman objects while being irreducible social constructions in the semiotic [and?] in the humanist sense.

Quasi-objects do not fit neatly into either society or nature, but are composites, featuring some of the attributes of each. It's easy to see how this applies to the Large Hadron Collider. It is the node around which many people gather to work at their projects. Some use it to think about dark matter. Some use it to confirm the existence of the Higgs Particle, some fix the electro-magnets, some run the massive electrical plant that supplies the power, some clean the floors and some watch the budget. There are various kinds of governance, for example, the group that decides who gets to use it, and the group that decides what upgrades to add.

The LHC cannot be understood as a physical object, nor as a social construct. It is a quasi-object.

Discussion

This distinction, between society/culture, science/objects, and quasi-objects is central to an understanding of this book. In future posts I'll look at some of Latour's analysis of modernity in terms of these categories. For now, two brief points.

1. One aspect of this distinction seems to be that we understand society through Hobbes' lens, as organized around human beings and their society. Politics, economics, and other social sciences study parts of society. Each of them focuses on human beings, and ignores the objects with which humans construct society.

We understand science through Boyle's' lens, as the investigation of material things. Physics, chemistry, biology, math, all are focused on understanding the rules of operation of the physical world. To do this we isolate the object under study, and erase all traces of human society from it and the process of studying.

Neither of these lenses enable us to come to grips with quasi-objects, because each leaves out important aspects of quasi-objects. As a result, moderns have ignored quasi-objects, allowed them to proliferate, and ignored the consequences of ignoring them. Mostly we simply allow quasi-objects to come into existence with no thinking or planning. Our general rule is that people do stuff, and then we deal with the consequences, pleasant or unpleasant, through law and regulation or through the courts. Two obvious examples: Elon Musk is throwing random satellites into space and no one stops him from clouding our ability to look into the starry night. Southeastern Australia caught fire.

2. As Latour says in Sec. 1.2, "... America before electricity and America after are two different places;" In the same way, America with cell phones is a different place than America without cell phones. Those differences are how we recognize a quasi-object.

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[1] I offer a rationale for this approach in the Introduction to this Series.

[2] The subject-object distinction has been a fixture of philosophy since the ancient Greeks. I read Latour to say that premoderns did not use that distinction, leaving it to academic speculation where it belongs.

[3] These words have a technical meaning, to which I may return in a later post.