Book Review

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Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy

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MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

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Part exhibition catalogue and part experiment in renewing and reviving contemporary political thought and action, the book edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel is monstrous in almost every way conceivable. Apart from the fact that it consists of more than 1000 pages, includes texts from about 170 different authors, and involve 15 separate sections on important aspects of contemporary Western and non-Western societies, not to mention its important historical pieces and the pieces of art in it, the book is also an exegesis in current academic trends within anthropology, science and technology studies, political philosophy, cultural history, sociology, art and literature studies, and what have we. What's more, the objects, or things dealt with are even more monstrous and therefore hard to place distinctively under the disciplinary headlines just mentioned.

From the very overall viewpoint of Bruno Latour's introduction chapter, the book aims to revitalize the interrelated concepts of *things* and *the public* as key notions for the 21st century global world. Latour combines two primary sources of inspiration from 20th century Western philosophy – Martin Heidegger's existential thoughts on the Thing (with a capital T) and John Dewey's (and Walter Lippman's) pragmatic ideas about the public. Heidegger emphatically made the point that, originally, *Thing* or *Ding* meant a certain type of archaic assembly. In many Nordic and Saxon countries, parliaments still retains this old etymology in their name. Latour, for example, mentions that Norwegian congressmen assemble in the *Storting* (Great Thing) while Isle of Man seniors used to gather around the Ting.

Latour adds to these basic etymological considerations Dewey's notion of the public as the collective set of interests that relates to and even defines every political issue as a common concern. According to this view of the role of the public in sorting out political matters, politics is too important to be left only to politicians but happens when people enact a public by gathering in transitory *things* to discuss

and deliberate about things or, in other words, matters-of-concern. From this vantage point, then, the book contains reflections on such public things and the issues or matters-of-concern they define.

Below I will address a few of the many empirical analyses of public things that form the main part of the book. Let me first reveal, however, that the book also holds many surprises in the form of divergent views on the some of the key notions, such as things, public and representation. Masato Fukushima, for example, in the fourth essay of the book, exposes the Western-centricity of the underlying etymological basis of the project.[1] Fukushima argues that the particular etymology of the two words, thing and representation, which unites most of the contributors seems strange and exotic to non-Westerners. The rhetorical effects produced by such etymo-philosophical devices are simply completely different when using another language. The ordinary Japanese equivalent of *thing* is *mono* which originally denoted every perceivable existence, including spirits, and in some sense signified the hazy boundary between the living and the dead. Similarly, representation invokes many different and seemingly unrelated terms when translated into Japanese. Fukushima thus appropriately points out that an imagined Japanese show based on the Japanese etymology of the same terms would look very different and would probably include far more comparative religious studies.

From a completely different point of view, namely, contemporary Western philosophy, Richard Rorty attacks the notion of the thing inspired by Heidegger.[2] Speaking of things rather than objects and thus replacing substantialism with relationalism, Heidegger wasn't trying to make a new move in contemporary politics. Unlike Dewey who eagerly tried to create a cultural climate in which bigger and better parliaments were becoming possible, Heidegger was merely moaning about the forgetting of the essence of things in Western philosophy since Plato. For Heidegger this forgetfulness led directly to the atom bomb. Nuclear catastrophe, Rorty reminds us, for Heidegger was nothing but "the crudest of all crude confirmations of the annihilation of the thing that already transpired long ago."[3] Heidegger, thus, would have bemoaned the transformation of his concept in this context. He would have had nothing to say about the construction of new public assemblies, *things*, to deal in a constructive manner with the threat of global nuclear annihilation. Indeed, Rorty maintains, the idea would have struck Heidegger as ludicrous and yet another sign that the essence of thing has been consigned to oblivion. Heidegger's ideas are perhaps beautiful and attractively naive but in a world dealing with many global threats "we would do well to turn our backs on Heidegger and get our relationalism from Whitehead, or Dewey, or Quine and/or Wittgenstein instead."[4]

Such minor quarrels or, should I say, supplements aside, the book is surprisingly consistent with respect to its general concepts, *things* and *public*. Indeed, it makes sense to understand most of the

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[1] Masato Fukushima. On Small Devices of Thought: Concepts, Etymology and the Problem of Translation. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 58-63.

[2] Richard Rorty. Heidegger and the Atomic Bomb. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 274-275.

[3] In Latour and Weibel (2005): 275.

[4] In Latour and Weibel (2005): 275. Latour, of course, would agree with Rorty on this point. Although borrowing heavily on Heidegger's etymological analysis, Latour extends the concept of things to signify modern assemblies including all the present-day science and technology. In the introduction Latour acknowledges that "[t]here is more than a little irony in extending this meaning to what Heidegger and his followers loved to hate, namely science, technology, commerce, industry and popular culture." Bruno Latour. From *Real*politik to *Ding*politik. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 23.

book as empirical elaboration of these concepts. In the following I wish to pick out a few chapters from each of the 15 sections in order to get at a fuller and richer understanding of *things* and *public*.

1. Assembling or Disassembling?

Technology and politics are equally involved in the Papua New Guinean *thing* described by Pascale Bonnemère and Pierre Lemonnier.[5] The *thing* is the organization and enactment of the communal and public ritual known as *iklesen*, the election every five years to the national and the provincial assemblies. The whole election process takes about two weeks during which time election teams bring cardboard ballot boxes by helicopter to even the most remote areas in the jungle in order to perform the modern act of voting in non-modern settings. The *iklesen* seems absurd, and Bonnemère and Lemonnier's video of the election process at the Ankave country involuntarily makes us smile. As for the Ankave people, they don't laugh but take the elections very seriously. And why shouldn't they? To them, the election is a means of becoming more modern. They seek rightful representation by means of the election and endow "their" parliament member with ability to "save the children (one in three dies before reaching one year), teach them and do *bisnis* one day: plant coffee, open a store. It is, indeed, no laughing matter."[6]

Whereas the Ankave people appropriated the Papua New Guinean elections as a possibility of assembling which gave them the hope of a better future, the Achuar Indians completely ignored their first chance to vote in the presidential elections in Ecuador.[7] Among the Achuar, as in modern democracies, community is grounded in a declared individualism. Although the world of the Achuar is also organized around collectives that include animals, plants, and humans they have no space for common mediation and representation. In fact, they only get together to wage war and their only means of resolving a dispute is the use of force. Therefore, they never dreamt that they could ever constitute elements of a national political assembly and thus ignored the elections completely. The *thing*, in this case, seems to involve ways of disassembling and a culture of indifferences rather than the opposite.

2. Which Cosmos for Which Cosmopolitics?

The notion of cosmospolitics comes from Isabelle Stengers' political philosophy. In this section, it is used to denote a kind of political anthropology that takes seriously the cosmological and global issues involved in local, practical matters such as politics. Anita Herle, for example, analyzes the *things* of the Northwest Coast Peoples of Canada and the United States in relation to their world-view and cosmopolitan relations.[8] Herle attempts to understand the potlatch as a *thing*, as an assembly of objects and people in which their meaning can be negotiated and possibly stabilized. Referring to the Marcel Mauss' well-known analysis of the gift, Herle points out that, temporarily, the potlatch fixes the

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[5] Pascale Bonnemère and Pierre Lemonnier. An Election in Papua New Guinea. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 86-89.
[6] In Latour and Weibel (2005): 89.
[7] Philippe Descola, No Politics Please. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 54-57.
[8] Anita Herle. Transforming Things. Art and Politics on the Northwest Coats. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 132-141.

meaning of dramatic and ambiguous objects such as totem poles but also negotiates social categories.[9]

Herle also stresses that, even today, indigenous communities on the Northwest coast, now commonly described as the First Nation Peoples within Canada, engage in more global *things* involving some of the same objects and practices. As part of the so-called renaissance of the Northwest Coast art, contemporary totem poles are presented within museums, galleries, international art markets, etc. It would be easy simply to see this as another sign of the globalization of the art market and the commercialization of the culture of the First Nation Peoples. Yet, Herle emphasizes that the artists themselves view the making and distribution of such artistic object as a political act and a way in which to assert not only personal skills but local self-determination and even global tolerance.

3. The Problem of Composition

Totem poles are composite objects that simultaneously identify the producer (the artist), describe the means of circulation (the art world) and thus define particular cosmologies (worlds and worldviews). Similarly, Western scientists, artists, engineers, philosophers, and others have come up with numerous ways of making composite objects in order to accomplish some of the very same tasks. The *Phantom Public*, a work of art developed in relation to the show, is no exception.[10] It surrounded each visitor with a series of inputs and outputs: from the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) inserted into the ticket to sensors and microphones, lights, LCD screens, loudspeakers and video projectors scattered all over the exhibition area. Since the output experienced by each visitor depended on the inputs of the other visitors and on atmospheric and ecological inputs, the art work not only allowed the visitors to interact in various ways, but also embedded these interactions in opaque global factors. The *Phantom Public*, thus, for a short while in Karlsruhe used technology to create a public atmosphere, or *thing*, in which people were involved and influenced at the same time.

4. From Objects to Things

Objects and humans are equally involved in *things*, just as *things* transform the meaning of objects as well as the identity of humans. This point is clearly made in several of articles in this book but also by many of the beautiful and sometimes even horrifying images included in the book. Following, quite appropriately, Rorty's criticism of Heidegger (see above), Katrin Werner comments briefly on Michael Light's collection of pictures of the 216 nuclear tests, conducted above ground by the US Government from 1945 to 1962.[11] The pictures are all collected from US archives and altered in size by Light but not retouched. The collection of pictures depicts these nuclear tests as one of the pivotal *things* of the post-World War II era. These tests – and the two bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki – transformed our conception of mankind and its global condition, our own existential sensibility, and literally the world itself. Displaying the horror as high-quality digital pigment prints, Light reminds us of such

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[9] Mauss (1954)
[10] Michel Jaffrennou and Thierry Coduys. Mission Impossible. Giving Flesh to the Phantom Public. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 218-221.
[11] Katrin Werner. 100 Suns. Military Photography Collected by Michael Light. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 276-279.

important displacements in the 20th century, all the while transforming the pictures and the nuclear tests themselves into 21st century aesthetics with nothing more than cool reminiscences of the combined fascination and horror of war technology prevalent during the Cold War.

5. From Laboratory to Public Proofs

Each of the fifteen sections is supplied with a brief introduction. In this fifth section, the role of the sciences is discussed. The introduction states that the development of modern science has completely done away with the divide between objects and things, between science and politics. The modern sciences have extended their activities to the public sphere to the extent where it becomes difficult, if not impossible to distinguish clearly between scientific knowledge and public experiences. Moreover, science has offered some of the best and most convincing examples of *public things* which mean that we are now all tangled up in more or less scientific practices.

Simon Schaffer who co-authored the book *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (1985) with Steven Shapin has done a lot to demonstrate how, historically, scientific practice has always revolved around making things public. In his essay he traces various ways of performing scientific experiments in public.[12] He shows that making scientific methods and results trustworthy and reliable to a larger audience has always demanded great ingenuity and heterogeneous engineering, to use John Law's phrase.[13] Schaffer also briefly discusses techno-scientific demonstrations such as the first nuclear weapon test in July 1945 as significant ways of making things public. Crucial to this testing was the role of public trust. The Chicago physicists believed that no-one would be prepared to believe that a nation could have developed this terrifying weapon in secret. In order to win over the public's confidence in the weapon's threatening capabilities, a public demonstration was necessary. The demonstration of course also had great military importance and was carried out in order to make the Japanese Government "trust" the atomic bomb.

6. "The Great Pan is Dead"

Abandoning scientific reasoning as the one and only arbitrator in political matters has done away with the notion of nature as being the ultimate reason for human behaviour. However, as we all know, nature is back in *public things*, with a vengeance. Sheep, pigs, chickens, wolves, monkeys, rivers, the oceans, the air and so on – all influence our global, political life in unpredictable and unmanageable ways. All of these natural entities turn to *public things* by means of many different representatives and different ways of representing. Science is one of such spokespersons for nature, but no longer the only one. Art also attempts to represent nature by providing nature with a public voice and public face.

In Stockholm in 1994, for example, artist Christopher Garne in cooperation with the public authorities of Stockholm erected two obelisks that visualize the water quality in the city and the state of the air, respectively, to the citizens of Stockholm and to visitors and tourists.[14] The obelisks are the first

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[12] Simon Schaffer. Public Experiments. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 298-307.
[13] Law (1987).
[14] Petra Adolfsson. The Obelisks of Stockholm. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 396-397.

informative objects of art in Stockholm. They bring complex information about natural processes to the public, but also transform this information into simple readings of low, moderate, fairly high, high, and very high. The obelisks are erected partly to build public trust in Stockholm as a clean and environmentally friendly city. They are also *public things* in the sense that they funnel political, scientific, technological and marketing issues into their cement mosaic.

7. Reshuffling Religious Assemblies

Besides art, science, technology, politics and markets, the book also tackles religious issues. Joseph Leo Koerner, in his essay, discusses the impact of the Protestant Reformation on the forms and functions of public assembly.[15] He shows how religious reform was accompanied by, indeed impossible without, architectural and organizational reform of the space and institution of the Church. Luther and his followers replaced the iconography and material heterogeneity of the Catholic Church with the collective attention to the Word. Religion became a matter of communicative action with a new demand for bodily disciplining of the auditory capacities of the true believers. The Church room was purified in order to give sole attention to the spoken word, the pulpit was introduced and elaborated, and the churchgoers had to sit still and listen. In the same process, belief became a matter of an inner faith/truth, but also subjugation to a special kind of public order.

8. The Parliament of Nature

Just as the Reformation transformed religious assemblies and the very meaning of faith, the ecological movement has transformed and multiplied the assemblies of nature. We now know assemblies of climate change, assemblies discussing water quality and management, assemblies on food… you name it! They are all part of contemporary life and testify to the proliferation of nature and natural things in society.

Jean-Pierre Le Bourhis, however, takes up the inadequacy of such assemblies to operate in a fully democratic manner.[16] The main problems lie in the difficulties in incorporating the public into on-going technical debates and pre-existing bureaucratic structures. In France, this problem was attacked head-on in the 1990's when an experimental form of hearing was introduced in the public governance of one of France's major rivers, the Dordogne. The hearing took place as a summit where 17 groups of users met to work out a public river management charter. Another river thing was organized in France in 2004 and concerned the construction of a dam on the Garonne River and the management of the river downstream. Again, many people engaged in public meetings that also involved experts, political representatives etc. As Le Bourhis point out, such assemblies are easily contested and barely legitimate. Therefore, it remains an open question, if and how the parliaments of nature envisioned by Latour and other are realizable[17]

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[15] Joseph Leo Koerner. Reforming the Assembly. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 404-433.
[16] Jean-Pierre Le Bourhis. Water Parliaments: Some Examples. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 482-485.
[17] Latour (2004).

9. Which Assembly for Those Assemblages

Again, art and architecture may be part of the answer. At least, Albena Yaneva shows that the structural model of the CCTV building in Beijing tries to avoid established hierarchies and accepted information flow distributions by combining the traditional high rise with a circulation model.[18] The building consists of two towers, joined together at the top to make a circular loop. Although unwilling to ascertain a specific relationship between the structural model and the circulation model, Yaneva does indicate that this kind of architecture makes possible new types of adjacencies and thus new forms of public assemblages.

In a somewhat similar vein Nikolaus Hirsch and Michael Müller present their general idea behind the *Making Things Public* exhibition space.[19] They say that they explicitly wanted to get rid of their professional heritage of making teleological solutions. They wanted to develop a kind of exhibition architecture being able to connect artists, engineers, scientists, curators and visitors alike. They therefore came up with a moveable wall system that not only matched the many conflicting demands of the exhibitors but also made sure that the visitors could freely determine their way through the exhibition space without being predestined to specific experiences or certain types of learning.

10. Follow the Paper-Trails

Most, if not all modern assemblies and public things build on paper, broadly understood: archives, files, lists, codes, documents, letters, etc. Peter Galison, for example, makes the point that the whole of the history of modern science could be seen as the production, distribution and circulation of paper.[20] He also touches on the paradox that perhaps only a fragment of all the paperwork that is necessary to sustain contemporary public administrations is indeed publicly available.[21] According to Galison, however, the secrecy is more than merely paradoxical; it is also a threat to democracy. As long as certain paper trails remain invisible to the public they will of course never become part of a public discussion, they will never constitute a public thing.

11. What's Political in Political Economy?

Paper and intellectual technologies are important to the functioning of science, parliaments, bureaucracies, markets and other public things. Daniel Beunza and Fabián Muniesa investigate the spread plot, a specialized representation device used in finance markets, as a particular parliament of finance.[22] Beunza and Muniesa describe the spread plot as a barometer of corporate-political activity around a merger. Professional investors use the spread plot to derive crucial advantage in cases of major mergers. The spread plot aggregates attitudes of investors who confront and consider new mergers. In order to make profit from the resulting uncertainty with respect to the post-merger market, investors all judge the likelihood of the merger and express their judgment in their evaluation of the

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[18] Albena Yaneva. A Building Is a "Multiverse". In Latour and Weibel (2005): 530-535.
[19] Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller. The Architectural Thing: The Making of "Making Things Public". In Latour and Weibel (2005): 536-539.
[20] Peter Galison. Blocking Things Public: Framed Secrets. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 600.
[21] Peter Galison. Removing Knowledge. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 590-599.
[22] Daniel Beunza and Fabián Muniesa. Listening to the Spread Plot. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 628-633.

price discrepancies between the target company and the acquirer. The spread plot, available in the $15,000-a-year Bloomberg terminals used by Wall Street traders, summarizes these evaluations collectively, turning them into one curve on a chart. The chart is very easy to decode. If the curve moves downward, it means that the merger is estimated to become more likely, and vice-versa. If the spread of the price discrepancy in mention moves towards zero it suggests that the merger is about to be accomplished. (If the merger takes places, the price of the target company will be the same as that of the acquirer.) Arbitrageurs are thus looking for an L-shaped curve which is the sign of a smooth merger.

12. The Political Aesthetic of Reason

Using new information technologies in order to acquire knowledge about collective actions and public trust is not a new *thing*, nor is it confined to financial markets. In the early 1970's, the Chilean government under president Salvador Allende initiated the Cybersyn Project with the aim of transforming a chaotic social system into calculable numbers and indices.[23] The Cybersyn Project was designed to employ cybernetic communication and information principles to the regulation of Chilean economy and society, and British cybernetician Stafford Beer became the project's primary consultant. The project included four different elements: Cybernet (an expansion of Chile's existing telex network), Cyberstride (custom software packages processing information and indices on national factory production), CHECO (CHile ECOnomic Simulator, allowing the Chilean government to test their economic policies prior to their implementation), and the Opsroom (the Chilean government's technologically-mediated, physical centre of calculation and control). As is well-known, the military coup in September 1973 brought the Chilean socialist dream to an abrupt end. The military terminated the Cybersyn Project, destroyed the Opsroom and thus ended the combined socialist-cybernetic visions.

13. Parliamentary Technologies

The Cybersyn Project was indeed a parliamentary technology with a very particular (but not particularly socialist) aesthetic. The same goes for the Votamatic machine that was used in the controversial 2000 US presidential election.[24] The Votamatic is relatively old voting machine with simple mechanical devices. The machine was implicated in two controversies over the vote in Florida. The first controversy concerned the design of the ballot, whereas the other revolved around the reading of partially punched cards. What the American voting controversy demonstrates is that voting technologies like the Votamatic are rarely visible to the public because they remain uncontested. Perhaps, the essay by Lynch, Hilgartner and Berkowitch seems to imply, we also ought to turn such invisible practices of modern parliamentary democracies into public things (which of course was precisely what happened in 2000, but in a way that only demonstrated the inadequacies of parliamentary technologies, thus failing to underline their omnipresence and importance).

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[23] Eden Medina. Democratic Socialism, Cybernetic Socialism. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 708-721.
[24] Michael Lynch, Steven Hilgartner and Carin Berkowitch. Voting Machinery, Counting ad Public Proofs in the 2000 US Presidential Election. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 814-825.

14. A Search for Eloquence

Whereas voting normally constrains you to decide between different individuals or parties, the Communiculture project developed by the group Futurefarmers makes a continuum of choices possible and even gives you the chance to make a written comment on your choice.[25] Communiculture is a web-based project where you can assume a virtual identity and then place this web-self in a variety of continuums, each of which takes a specific question and two extreme standpoints as their point of departure. For example, the question may be: What is more important: the correct decision or the correct process? And the two extremes are: decision and process. Placing their virtual identity on the screen between those two positions, users can then indicate a possible stand on the issue at hand and also provide a few words of explanation.

15. New Political Passions

Like the Communiculture project, MapHub® is an on-line, interactive, community project where individuals can contribute with texts and opinions about Pittsburgh, PA (US). Users enter information related to specific places in Pittsburgh and quite often based on their personal experiences. The aim of the project is to document contemporary urban experiences by collecting cultural, historical and current information, knowledge and stories about localized spaces in the city. The project now consists of a wide variety of information ranging from recordings of urban sounds, to private recollections, from trivial data to personal storytelling. Whether projects like Communiculture and MapHub® will serve as role model for new virtual *things* by becoming the focal points of new political passions is as yet undecided. Perhaps the process is indeed more important than the result.

Conclusions

The above survey of a few of the many articles, images and pieces of art in the book hardly does justice to the book as a whole, not to mention the show and the many other processes initiated in relation to the project. Despite its monstrosity, anthropologists, sociologists, art historians, architects, science and technology scholars, philosophers, social scientists and what have we would all enjoy the book. It revolves around important issues in modern society such as democracy, public debate, markets and economy, expertise, communication, etc. It forcefully introduces into such discussions new conceptualizations of *thing* and *public* and includes broad empirical analyses to illuminate these concepts. Finally, the book is an aesthetic pleasure in itself – the only real problem is that it is too heavy to read in bed…

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[25] Futurefarmers. Communiculture. In Latour and Weibel (2005): 874-875.

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