

Anthropodicy: An Anarchism of Things

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Abstract

Bruno Latour's seminal work *We Have Never Been Modern* urges us to consider what he calls "a parliament of things." This notion of a "parliament of things" offers a new opportunity for the study of philosophy and anarchism. It is a start, but lacks a certain bravery and sense of adventure. In never being modern, we don't find ourselves in the midst of a parliament of things, but an anarchy of things: a radical flatness of objects in which we must rethink property, politics and ecology. Additionally, Graham Harman's "Object Oriented Philosophy" demonstrates and cultivates Latour's work into a new type of ontological anarchism, not of humans, but of things. This project seeks to connect up the metaphysics of Latour and Harman with anarchism.

"Many have written their justification of God, their theodicy, but the time has come to write a justification of man, an anthropodicy."

--Nicholas Berdyaev¹

Nicholas Berdyaev, the rarely read 19th century Russian philosopher, proposes a novel ontological project in his book *The Meaning of the Creative Act*.² Berdyaev's task was to defend the ontology of humanity through a methodology he, borrowing from theologians, called anthropodicy. Berdyaev's project, while thought

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provoking, falls short in a number of ways. Berdyaev inspires us to ask the right question, that of the centrality of humans, but he lacks a philosophy capable of answering the question of anthropocentrism in a helpful way. The project of this essay is to rehabilitate Berdyaev's question toward a more interesting and adventurous plateau: an anarchist politics backed by a philosophy of objects. Berdyaev's question nags at an impulse within anarchism, namely the rejection and negation of all authority. Contemporary ecological events and catastrophes demonstrate the exasperated relationship humanity shares with the rest of the world and our anthropocentric metaphysics and politics need to be rethought. We need an anarchist politics that imagines that another world is possible, but more than just a human world: we need an anarchism of things.

Speculative Anthropodicy

As theodicy is a justification of God to humans, it follows that anthropodicy is a justification of humanity to humans. While theodicy is concerned with the existence of evil in a world created by a God that is omnibenevolent, an anthropodicy is less concerned with the evil of humans, but rather their metaphysics. The introduction of metaphysics into discussions of anarchism will invariably leave a bad taste in the mouths of some - and rightfully so. The anthropodicy Berdyaev performs gives rise to the metaphysical problems that have always been a plague to anarchists, namely the rise of metaphysical hierarchy.

Metaphysical hierarchy is always problematic for anarchists because it facilitates oppression and the centrality of power in the really existing material conditions of the world. Largely, the jettisoning of metaphysics for materialism is a good move, but as I will argue later, any materialism needs clarification and amendment. Unfortunately, Berdyaev, the thinker from whom I am pilfering the notion of anthropodicy, stands complacent and even reinforces metaphysical hierarchy of the human entity. The human has an "exceptional consciousness" and that the "way of anthropology is the only way of knowing the universe."³ Because the parameters of Berdyaev's project seek to question the ontology of humans it is an overwhelming disappointment that he immediately assumes the central privilege of the human and in the first few pages nonetheless.

Berdyayev immediately abandons all philosophical realism with little to no questioning or argumentation. The whole of the universe is surrendered to the supremacy of humanity. Berdyayev goes on to say, “[A] philosophy which exerts itself to deny the exceptional significance of man in the world and refuses to recognize man as the exclusive source of knowing the secret and meaning of the world...destroys that philosophy itself.”⁴ Frustratingly, Berdyayev immediately privileges human techniques of knowledge. Berdyayev’s anthropodicy is done in bad faith because he sets out from the beginning of the meditation with an answer already in hand: human privilege is justified ontologically above other entities. In some ways, Berdyayev’s anthropodicy, made in bad faith, makes some sense – the centrality of the human is existentially gratifying, but reinforcing this assumption does not get us anywhere.

However, we need something more adventurous, risky and less safe – anthropodicy cannot simply reassure the human’s ability to know secret knowledge or ontological supremacy, but it has to at least attempt the speculative project of a world in which humans are not at the center. This is an attempt towards a speculative anthropodicy. The speculative anthropodicy is a negative project that attempts to subtract the centrality of humanity. It begins with an ontology that does not assume the hierarchy of humanity over nature, but assumes the flatness of being – an ontology fitting for anarchism. In other words, through a flat ontology there is no hierarchy to be enforced – everything is equally an object.

A flat ontology takes up the univocality of being or as Deleuze puts it, “a single voice raises the clamor of being.”⁵ Though, this ought not to be interpreted so haphazardly to justify the equal reality of things, but simply as Graham Harman clarifies, it is an equality of objects.⁶ In other words, objects all have an autonomous reality apart from human relations and human access. It is not that a werewolf and the White House are both just as real, but that they are both equally objects – the werewolf has an autonomous reality just as the White House does. Both of these objects, the werewolf and the White House act or have a presence regardless of their existence. In Harman’s most recent book on Latour’s politics, he succinctly states that the efficacy of the equality of objects is what is

important. All things may have an equal presence, but the magnitude of their efficacy, or the object's strength, is what counts.⁷ The importance of this claim on objects will be made clear in the coming sections.

A speculative anthropodicy tries to consider the things in the world as they are apart from human perception and access. This is the philosophical speculation of realism – the notion that things do not exist for us, but that they have an autonomous reality from us. This is in stark contrast to idealist or materialist metaphysics of transcendent nature and a secondary culture. As we will see, idealist and metaphysical metaphysics, which prop up anthropocentrism, are largely a product of the techniques of modernism.

So much of the contemporary philosophy at the end of the 20th and the whole of the 21st have been devoted to parsing out the idea of modernism and various reactions to it. Philosophers have theorized the pre-, post-, post-post, alter- and meta- modernisms, but all of these movements and reactions assume something fundamental about modernism: that it has actually happened or that it continues to happen. For example, consider Lyotard's work *The Postmodern Condition*: "What, then, is the postmodern? [...] it is undoubtedly a part of the modern."⁸ Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, is a nascent modernism. I would suggest that many postmodern insights and trajectories have a lot to offer us politically and aesthetically. In no way should we erase or discard any of these reactions to modernism, but let's bracket them for now.

Alternatively, Bruno Latour provides a theoretical framework that deals with modernism in a particularly unique and helpful way. In his book, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour describes the performance of the actually existing pseudo-modernity in terms of productive ontological mechanisms and scientific apparatuses.⁹ Latour talks about modernism in two ways. First, and rather briefly stated, modernism is a discursive regime: "The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time."¹⁰ Second, modernism is a set of techniques that translate and purify things ontologically. The former, more or less, is the way we've thought of modernism since the postmodern reaction and I think it is overall agreeable. Though, the latter is much more

interesting.

Latour suggests that “[...] the word ‘modern’ designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused.”¹¹ These practices are translation, which “[...] creates mixtures between entirely new type of beings,” and purification, which reinforces ontological envelopes of nature and culture.¹²

Translation is an undertaking that makes connections between things. It is the translation of one thing into another. For example, in translation we find the novel and new existences of things that are both nature and culture. Monsanto’s genetically modified soybeans are a hybrid of nature and culture. Soybeans, which are usually sorted into the natural category and the act of genetic modification, which is a human science, are merged into one thing: a hybrid object, or ‘actor,’ appears. Additionally, it is through the work of translation in which we can make connections between greenhouse gasses, carbon emissions and capitalism. Hybridization is the technique by which we undo the bifurcation of nature and culture.

Hybrids, however, do not sit well within the modern schema. Purification is the technique that undoes the hybridity or translation in modernity. Purification is the default metaphysical assumption that sorts out what is human and what is nonhuman ontologically. The mechanism of purification is an archetypal machine that functions by securing things into their proper ontological envelope. Purification is the means by which the bifurcation of nature and culture is maintained and within this move is a latent idealist metaphysics.

While both translation and purification occur separately and discretely, we are modern. However, these two processes are not so tidy: they occur simultaneously, they are confused, breakdowns in the sorting process occur, the Gordian knot has become tangled again. When we think of this so-called modernity in the retrospective light of these modern processes, we realize many confused hybrid objects present throughout modern technology and science. These things that we demarcate as either human or nonhuman have an autonomous reality apart from our sorting machines and are social constructions. At once, this sounds a bit

anti-science, or at worst a descent into relativistic thinking, though this is not the case.

Isabelle Stengers demonstrates one such confusion in the history and sociology of science. Stengers notes that the discovery, for lack of a better word, of the neutrino is one of these complications of modernity.

In short, the neutrino exists simultaneously and inseparably ‘in itself’ and ‘for us,’ becoming even more ‘in itself,’ a participant in countless events in which we seek the principles of matter, as it comes into existence ‘for us.’¹³

The neutrino exists autonomously from human actors regardless of claims of discovery or scientific import. The scientist captures, purifies and translates the neutrino through the mechanisms of modernity. We bring the neutrino into our perception, and the neutrino “brings us into existence.”¹⁴ The neutrino gains strength as an actor for us, yet it always existed in itself.

Modernity is the production of the world for us as human actors. Human actors are only a small portion of things in the world, yet we assume the contrary, we assume dominance, centrality and so on all to the detriment of ourselves and other actors. We have never truly been modern, things have never been so simple as being either human or nonhuman, nothing can ever really be purified or disentangled. Because we have never been modern, we need to remove the existential and philosophical urge to purify the world around us.

In Latour’s work, the way forward is in what he calls a “parliament of things,” here, I think Latour is onto something of political interest to anarchists, though I suggest an important amendment, not a parliament of things, but an anarchy of things. This is not just a clever turn of phrase, but the desire for an egalitarianism, ecology and democracy that excludes the notion of human exceptionalism and includes a direct democracy of nonhuman objects. In the anarchism of things, there are collectives, confederacies, communes and individual actors. Only an anarchy of things has room for the multifarious ways objects couple and part.

This more radical tendency may put us at odds with Latour himself. It is unclear exactly what a Latourian political philosophy looks like in practice, but it seems as though it ought to include something more radical than just a representative democracy or parliament. To graft in nonhuman actors requires an increase in mediation, as Harman states in his work on Latour's politics, "[...] stronger and better connections need to be built between actors."¹⁵ To make these stronger connections, as Latour states, we need a more radical politics to go along with these metaphysics.

Ecology & Politics

Environmentalism at this time is less concerned about the environment, which is the wide and rich ecology of nonhuman actors we find ourselves in the midst of, and more about securing the future of the anthropocene. There's a misplaced focus only on the environment as it relates to human actors, and even more liberal environmental politics offer up solutions that are magnitudes below impending catastrophe. Liberal ecologists suggest that using different light bulbs, driving a Prius, only eating free range beef, and other minor lifestyle politics, are the answer to the heavy ecological burden of human actors. An ecological crisis can no longer be kept at bay and we ought to start thinking about the apocalyptic plans for all actors, not just humans.

Even increasing the magnitude of these lifestyle politics aren't going to do us much good, asceticism for the masses isn't possible in our late capitalist political economy, human desire is driven by capitalism and just consumes too much. The very structure of capitalism thrives on the processes of modernization as well as the production and consumption that subsequently occur. Ditching capitalism is the first step to be taken on the same level of magnitude as ecological crisis, and the second is to ditch nature.

Capitalism is an economic assemblage that hinges on growth carried out by networks of actors. In capitalism, things are sorted ontologically, purified and reified as commodities that are strictly 'for-us.' This whole set of operations is incredibly taxing on the network of human and non-human actors. Laborers are, of course,

exploited, but so are all varieties of objects that get caught up in the capitalist network. For example, we could cite the animal populations displaced in the harvest of resources. Or, the upper atmosphere that is constantly under siege from anthropogenic CO₂. Neither the forests, nor its inhabitants, are considered. It is also the case that our diminishing layer of ozone is not adequately represented in political undertakings.

Nature, thinking back to my summary of Latour above, is a default ontological category developed in modernism. Another way we can talk about nature, according to Latour, is in terms of as the material world or matter-nature is the sum total of all material things.¹⁶ This could devolve into materialism quickly, but as Latour points out, materialism is difficult to maintain in the face autonomous and real objects. We can't simply equate what is observable and knowable by human actors as materialism, because it confuses human access with reality.

Here, I'll quote Latour at length because the importance of this insight is crucial for the anarchism of things both metaphysically and, as we will see, politically:

This is why it is always so difficult to be a real materialist: matter, mistaken for the transportation of indisputable necessities through chains of cause and effect, is not the obvious, given background of the world but instead a highly elaborated, historically dated, and anthropologically situated hybrid which combines the reference chains necessary to access the far away with the surprising inventions entities themselves have to go through in order to subsist.¹⁷

Materialism confuses the human access to objects with the thing-in-itself or roughly speaking reality. The problem is that scientific discovery is an anthropological event. Instead of materialism, this has a strong affinity with speculative realism and the work of Graham Harman, as I have already noted.

Following this trajectory, we can ditch nature as an obscure idea for a critical and speculative realism of objects. Nature as simply the beautiful backdrop of human actors is no longer maintainable in the

face of a speculative realism. When we stop thinking of nature as simply that which is not human, we can begin to contemplate other plateaus of political and ecological arrangement that consider non-human actors in light of ecological disaster.

Property

The modern technique of purification is the way we make objects into things for us. We can see purification at work anywhere, the grocery store, the real estate office, a national park, agriculture and so on. In economics, we see purification in the production of goods, namely the reification of a commodity. However, reification does not do purification justice, we need more than Marx's theory of labor and alienation, though we ought not exclude it entirely. Purification is an ontological move that shapes the way we think about things. Like Stenger's neutrino, we bring it to light in the scientific and productive apparatuses and it plays a part in our own existence and creation. Purification, rather than reification, is the way of claiming something as it is in relationship to human life. Through purification we make the world for us, in these mechanics we find the modern desire for property.

Property, economically thinking, is the result of purification and it is how we come to own an object with an autonomous existence. We can own a neutrino, a star or a can of beans. In the acquisition of property, we can observe the hierarchical metaphysics of capitalism in which human actors, through the transference of metaphysical properties, can arbitrarily own things. This is not to say that capital or labor are only metaphysical, though they are more or less aleatory at this point in finance capitalism, but the right or potential of ownership as a human activity is metaphysical and relies on the transcendence of human actors.

Owning property in capitalism has very real and material effects, but that status of ownership is a metaphysical category just as much as it is a political one. Ownership assumes that the human actor has the metaphysical superiority to dominate and master an object. The human actor, in the metaphysics of capitalism, is like a Russian doll that can stack and take things into itself. Owning land, another autonomous entity, requires the technique of purification, because

only through purification can we know whether a thing can or cannot be owned. Land is able to be determined as not human and it can easily be parceled off and transferred to another actor.

Though, thinking in the mode of a flat ontology, the land, regardless of exchange of deed and capital, belongs to the human just as much as it belongs to the sky, an elephant or the stream that cuts across the land. Certainly, objects can touch, affect one another and change utterly, but ownership of one actor by another actor requires the metaphysical superiority of one over another.

Property rests on the metaphysical assumptions of Humean empiricism that assumes an object is simply a bundle of qualities that are accessible to us in a relational way, however this relationalism does not do objects justice as a metaphysical explanation—objects are more than their relationships with other objects. A flatness or equality of objects means that there is a withdrawn and internally inaccessible real object to every object that we can observe empirically.¹⁸ In other words, objects are more than they are for us, objects exist beyond an empirical metaphysics and beyond use or exchange values. Obviously, this sort of metaphysics makes the economic analysis of capitalism or any political economy rather difficult or weird. Metaphysically speaking, human ownership is impossible; objects withdraw from us as well from one another ownership can only ever be for us and capitalism cannot function with such a weak metaphysics.

The loss and gain described in accounts of classical economics hardly makes sense thinking in the mode of anthropocidy and Latour's "amodernism." The decentering of the human subject demonstrates the illusory nature of property. Moving forward, an anarchism of things, rather than a parliament of things, is the opening of relations and communication between things through the increased mediation between actors. This sort of metaphysics necessitates a universal anarchism where things cannot be entirely grasped by human actors, or any actors for that matter. A new adventure is forged in the opening of this anarchism. Nothing can be left the same: all belonging, and the 'for-us' of things, has to be rethought, held weakly or clarified on the impossibility of access to the thing-in-itself.

The Anarchism of Things

The anarchism of things, then, is both a metaphysical proposition as well as the ground for a political project. Our new metaphysics lead us to the exit of our pseudo-modernity: this is not post-modern anarchism, but ‘amodern’ anarchism. The minimization of human primacy through anthropodicy gives human actors the insight to think more inclusively about non-human actors in terms of property and ecology. An anarchism of things already exists, yet is constantly converted into hierarchy through human actors. Therefore, the anarchism of things is waiting on the anarchism of humans.

Echoing Bakunin, “Who is right, the idealists or the materialists?”¹⁹ Materialism is a modernist idea and, as Latour says, we have never been modern. Materialism is the grand gesture by which Marx and, in turn, Bakunin patch together a theory of human history and of class struggle. We, as amoderns – those who have realized modernity has never quite occurred – cannot so easily pronounce materialism over idealism. In the face of ecological crisis, to reduce everything to the economic paradigm and material conditions is to neglect the autonomous reality of things. The future of anarchism is not in idealism or materialism, but is in realism.

Materialism is a statist metaphysics: it is a totalizing worldview that gives humans a particular privilege over other actors in that humans ‘discover’ and demarcate things as if they already did not exist and did not have an autonomous reality apart from our own observation. For materialists, objects are inlaid with boundaries and borders; the state takes shape through the material analysis of space. Surveyors, GPS satellites and cartographers are implicit in the metaphysical defaults materialism brings to techno-science. The reduction of all to their economic and scientific realities does not rid the world of property; it simply explains it in terms of an alternate metaphysics and gives alternative schemes of distribution or ownership. After all, socialism is just a schema where the ownership of the means of production changes hands. While even anarchism is often derived from materialist analysis, it is only ever an anarchism of human actors. This, perhaps, is a good start as long as we hold the place of humans in materialist discourse weakly. However, we need to go beyond materialist analyses of history and economics.

Fusing together or creating an alloy of materialist economic analysis and the speculative realism of objects is a step in the right direction for a new plateau of anarchism. Human analysis of economics can hold onto materialism weakly as long as human actors try to recognize the importance of things as actors. The idea is to maintain the real existence of objects, alongside the material economic analysis important for anti-capitalist struggle. Capitalism needs to feel the full democratic push of exploited alienated workers, oppressed peoples and the groans of ecology. Individual human actors can vote, demonstrate and so on, but direct democratic input from non-human actors can be counted as well through technical mediation.

The measurement of glacial melt, anthropogenic carbon dioxide and chlorofluorocarbons in the air and the population of animal species are democratic pushes in one direction or another. Privileging only the human voice has always been the basis of modern politics and economics, but allying our future political endeavors with nonhuman actors incorporates another vector into an anarchist and democratic politics. Future political projects rely on establishing better and more vocal connections between actors, not a representative democratic institution, but a direct democracy through technical means.

The anarchism of things fulfills the rejection of hierarchy essential to anarchist politics and on this new plateau of anarchism the hierarchical status of the human actor can be overturned or decentered. A world that is only for us is no longer a viable political starting point—to continue this line of thinking is to neglect the reality of a vibrant world of objects, or what we call mistakenly call nature.

Both modern and post-modern movements in anarchism remain important, but the fact that we have never been modern provokes us to move toward another direction. No longer stuck between poles of modern and post-modern we forge a new path away from the centrality of the human entity. On this side of anthropodicy, we begin to see that there is really another world possible, not just for us, but also for all things. The anarchism of things is a direct democracy that moves beyond the good intentions of the human actor. From here, we join the affinity

groups of glaciers, organize with air molecules and protest those digital apparatuses that keep us in debt.

- 1 Nikolai Berdyaev. (2009) *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (Reprint Edition). San Rafael: Semantron Press. p. 19.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 57-8.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze. (1994) *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 6 Graham Harman. (2011) *The Quadruple Object*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- 7 Graham Harman. (2014) *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*. London: Pluto Press. p. viii.
- 8 Jean Lyotard & Geoffrey Bennington (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 79.
- 9 Bruno Latour. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- 10 Ibid. 10.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Isabelle Stengers. (2010) *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press. p. 22.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Op.Cit., fn. 8., p. 31.
- 16 Bruno Latour. (2009) "Will Non-humans Be Saved? Argument in Ecotheology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.). Vol. 15., No. 3. p. 466. As Retrieved on January 5th, 2014 from [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1467-9655](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1467-9655)
- 17 Ibid., 467.
- 18 Op.Cit., fn. Fn. 7., p. 77.
- 19 Mikhail Bakunin. [1871] "God and the State," in *God and the State*. As Retrieved on April 26th, 2015 from <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/godstate/>