

# Holberg Prize reception speech

Bruno Latour, Sciences Po, Paris  
Speech given for the reception of the Holberg Prize,  
5<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, Bergen, Norway.



Minister, Excellency, Officers of the Ludwig Holberg Memorial Fund,  
Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, friends and family.

There is something slightly reassuring in having people like me receiving an award such as the one you have decided to bestow on my work tonight. Through sheer labour, ordinary people may achieve something that no one could have predicted from the way their mind works or from their personality. Having worried all my life about the fact that a white provincial male of bourgeois extraction and of limited intellectual skills could not possibly be the real target of the thoughts that had traversed his desk since he was sixteen, I am now totally reassured: everyone is able to tackle problems of vastly disproportionate size and even have the good fortune, if not to solve them, at least to give them a more reasonable shape. Reassured that it is not me but those slightly reshaped problems that are rewarded tonight, it is to them that I may now safely turn.

The first problem is that of the exact nature of the intellectual practices themselves. To think productively is often to make positive use of one's own limitation. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. There is no doubt that, had I had a

## 129-Holberg reception speech 2

stronger power of abstraction or even the love for mathematics of Ian Hacking, my colleague and predecessor at this very lectern, I would never have been so totally obsessed by the *difficulties* of thinking, of gathering any piece of data, of convincing anyone of the smallest part of a proof; thus, I would never have put so much stress on the materiality of writing and visualizing. I turned my own incompetence into a revelation of how many skills the others had to learn. I still remember the complete puzzlement of my co-workers in the laboratory where Roger Guillemin had welcomed me at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, when they watched me attempting to stabilize the bioassay for melatonin: they kept wondering: “How can this guy be so hopelessly clumsy at cutting frog skins and handling pipettes?” And yet, this clumsiness is also what, in large part, has allowed “science studies” (the field to which I am so proud of belonging and which is honoured tonight by you for the second time), to offer a vision of science that has brought it down from the empyrean domain of epistemology to the most realistic ground of laboratories, instruments, institutions and, more broadly, what we call in our jargon, “socio-technical networks”. Thanks to a thick description of thinking, cognitive skills have been foregrounded at last.

It is precisely because it is so rare, so difficult, so costly, so risky to collectively reach objectivity, that science, that is *science in action*, should be admired, cherished and carefully cultivated. I don't think it is arrogant on our part to say that before “science studies” developed in full from the 1980s onward, there existed few detailed accounts able to bring into full view the whole array of resources that are necessary for the achievements of science. That a few of those descriptions (and sometimes even mine!) passed for an *attack on science* proves at which point some scientists and philosophers of science had lost sight of their own values and tossed out the practical ways of reaching the very objectivity they clamour for so loudly.

Which leads me to the second problem that I had to face because of the noisy reactions to the development of “science studies”. Born in 1947, I probably belong to the first generation with a quieter, friendly and, I would almost say, laid back reaction to the scientific enterprise. We don't have the need to burden it with the task of keeping Western civilization, politics and morality safe from the onslaught of Obscurantism. Nor do we feel it necessary to criticize Science and Technology for ruining the planet, corrupting the soul, and jettisoning the divine rights of human subjectivity. Because science and technology appear to us, historians and sociologists, as *coextensive* with the rest of politics and culture; because we describe them as being among the many ingredients of civilized life, we did not have to genuflect in front of their altars, nor to debunk their idols. Science and technology are part and parcel of our cosmology, more exactly of our cosmopolitics. What was needed was to find

science a place to rest, strong and respected among the other institutions of our collectives.

The downside of such a more mature attitude is that we had to recognize — and, what is more difficult, to make other people recognize — that in any given collective, there would be more than one way to detect the truth. Such is the enterprise to which I have devoted half of my life: how many ways are there, for a Western collective, to recognize the differences between true and false statements, once freed from the highly simplified version of objectivity that I call “Double Click”? In the same way as the Norway landmass has been slowly rising only with the retreat of its glaciers, the other truth conditions necessary for a collective to be civilized cannot rise without the excessive weight of rationalism melting away —rationalism, that is, hopelessly confused with the diktats of Double Click. No definition of truth can lord over all the others without losing its own integrity. Such is the pluralism that is so integral to the Western project, but that the Moderns have very badly protected against corruption.

Contrary to what is often said, the result of my work and that of my colleagues —and here I include great predecessors such as Ludwik Fleck and Thomas Kuhn, as well as my friends and mentors Michel Serres, Lorraine Daston, Mike Lynch, Michel Callon, Anne-Marie Mol, John Law, Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, Don MacKenzie and Simon Schaffer, to name just a few of those without whom I wouldn't be here today — the result of our common work is that we have attempted to *free* the scientific enterprise from the excessive political and moral weight that had been loaded onto it. Then, but only then, other, highly rational threads may be followed with the same care and caution as in the case of science: in law, in religion, in fiction, in politics, in literature, in mythology. It is to such an “inquiry into modes of existence” that I intend, with your generous support, to devote the remainder of my career.

I agree that it might seem provocative to claim that the search for this plurality of truth conditions, even though it bears so little resemblance to the dreams of rationalists, is a way to pursue the project of the Enlightenment. And yet, I have two lines of reasoning to believe that such an enterprise is not so provocative as it sounds. The first one comes from anthropology; the second from our new ecological situation.

First, the anthropology. For a reason that I am not able to understand, I have long considered that the philosophical conundrums with which I had been presented in my very classical schooling at the University of Burgundy could not be tackled without the ethnographic methods I learned on the spot, first in Africa and then in California. “Describe, describe more”, those are “the whole Laws and the Prophets”! This is odd, I know, because the traditional

reaction is to contrast *description* with *explanation*. After you have described, it is often said, real work will begin in earnest: that of finding the foundation, the conditions of possibility, the framework “inside which” the “mere description” will finally make sense. The reason why I have never been convinced by such common sense advice is that it implies a division of labour between what is being described and what will provide the explanation: the first is made of *passing* and often *contingent* situations; the second of *lasting* and often *necessary* structures.

Such a division of labour would work fine if the world were made of lasting structures providing roles and functions to passing elements. But what would happen to such a division if the world were made of *events*? In this case, the lasting effects would not come from any lasting structures acting rather mysteriously from behind the scenes, but from what a passing event lent to a later passing event. This is what is meant by “passing”: a sort of relay race where what should be followed is the baton moving from one team to the next without having to jump abruptly towards an overall and virtual frame in charge of “explaining”, but *only* virtually, the continuation of the race. Either there is a baton and there is a team and the event lasts because there is some inheritance, some genealogy, or there is no baton and no relay team and the event stops. Period. No explanation required. If I had to sum up my life obsession, I would say that it is only by refusing to shift to one transcendence — structure — that one may detect the small transcendences leading from one event to the next in line across the yawning gap of existence. One transcendence is vertical, the other horizontal. But it is a transcendence all the same.

Before discovering such an attention to process over structure in Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy and Gabriel Tarde’s sociology, I had learned it the hard way in my own fieldwork and in advising PhDs: if your description is not sufficient, it is not because it begs for an explanation, a frame, a context; it’s because you have not pursued the description far enough. That often you don’t have the information or are too lazy to reach it is not a reason to shift to another level. Follow the horizontal threads: that’s the only way to be rational. I have found this reorientation of attention just as rewarding in social theory as in theology, politics, law or science. Such is the justification for my obsession with *networks* —an obsession nurtured for a quarter century at the School of Mines with my dear colleagues of the CSI, the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation, my true *alma mater*. In such a view, philosophy is not what looks at foundations, but what allows the inquirer to be attentive, indeed fully attentive to the spread of networks and the irruption of events. In this view, philosophy is what pushes ethnography to go the full distance because it is one of the few means there are to offer to the description of an event the “unique adequacy” that it deserves. It is because philosophy is not

abstract, theoretical or foundational, but rather because it is fully speculative that it can be called the *lust for the concrete*.

It is by practicing this style of empirical (not empiricist) philosophy that I was led to the “anthropology of the Moderns”, a project that is of course totally oversized for one single ethnographer. And yet, it is not unfair to say that the Moderns, that is, those who had projected their anthropological inquiry over the whole globe, had not paid much attention to describing their own sets of practices. When I set foot in Ivory Coast in 1975, I discovered with great surprise that while ethnographers applied a bewildering set of methods to study rituals, material culture, genealogies, witchcraft of the many ethnic groups that were being prey to a renewed extension of the French postcolonial enterprise, they were almost totally devoid of tools to study the very sources of this colonial enterprise itself: namely science, technology, politics and economics — and let us not forget modern medicine, “modern” psychiatry and Christian religion. They had of course a ready-made critical discourse *against* colonialism, but no description of the ways in which for instance science or economics actually worked. Once again, the temptation was great to jump to structures —Capitalism, Colonialism, Market, Modernization, Occidentalism— instead of following the tiny networks through which such juggernauts could be generated. While there was a magnificent attention to the details and practices by which my anthropologist friends were attending to their fieldwork, they contented themselves, at least it seemed to me, with a highly abstract definition of what the modernizing frontier could mean. This is why I deemed it much more efficient —and also much fairer— to start from the argument that “we had never been Modern” either... On this level playing field, lots of new sites opened up, of which science was only one, although the most tempting at first. Later on, technology, law, psychology had to be studied as well, and then, the most difficult one: The Economy, the real source of the Modern's pretension to planetary hegemony. Even though such a project may look mad, what counted for me, then, was to start it in such a way that “science studies” could join forces with lots of other paradigms, post-colonial studies and, most importantly, feminist studies, that were all attempting to offer, at the same time, a total re-description of the modernist dreams.

What we could not envision at the time was that the very development of the other parts of the world would bring the Moderns —especially Europeans— back to the local and peninsular situation from which they had started a few centuries earlier. That Europeans were no longer in a position to serve as the baseline for all the other people of the Earth had the fortunate effect of opening a new round of self-inquiry. What modernity had universalized much too fast —science, politics, law, economy, religion, psychology— has thankfully shrunk to a more reasonable size; if those

domains and their values can still expand, this time they will have to do it with great care and by paying the full price of their extension.

Which leads me to the second line of reasoning that may put this project of an Inquiry into Modes of Existence or what I have also called “an Anthropology of the Moderns” into a more favourable light. The demise of the modernist project is not only due to the competition of other forms of modernisation in Asia, India, Latin America or even Africa. It is also because all those projects of development are now confronted by the realisation that they will not be able to go much beyond what some scientists call “planetary boundaries” —a tricky term to point to a form of bounds and binds that are simultaneously ethical, religious, scientific and political. Much as in Lars Von Trier’s film *Melancholia*, the first globe —that is, that of globalisation— is being slowly and irreversibly impacted by a second globe that comes crashing into it. Paradoxically, the planet that is rushing toward us is not a *foreign* planet but the one out of which we are all born and that we should have considered much earlier as our only abode. This threatening body is nothing other than the famous “Blue Planet” whose vision from space ships was supposed to have provided the whole human race with a universal sense of common destiny. That this is not the case is the most damning proof of the vacuity of the modernist dream. The irruption of this new planet comes as a total surprise for which we are wholly unprepared, much like the unexpected irruption from 1492 onward of a new landmass later called “America”. We are at the point where many people are in utter denial that this planetary irruption is the defining moment of our time. It is like saying once again, just as in 1492: “It is China that you have discovered, nothing more, nothing new, nothing threatening!”

Of course, for the countrymen of Arne Naess, or indeed for those who, like us tonight, celebrate the memory of Ludvig Holberg, a writer able to bring his hero, Nils Klim, to an underground planet where trees not only have standing in court but are also full citizens of what I could call a “parliament of nature”, the irruption of a new planet *inside* our planet is not as surprising as it is, let’s say, for the French, or the Americans. But what is surprising to everybody is that the irruption of nature into politics, far from bringing about agreement and consensus, brings disputes, controversies, even a new state of war of all against all. Yes, a new “state of nature”. That an appeal to nature does not pacify, that’s what is new in the ecological situation we entered into two centuries ago.

And here again, I think I may be forgiven for claiming that the field of “science studies” is slightly better equipped to handle this new situation than most fields of inquiry. After all, those who have laboured for four decades to follow the new imbroglios inside which humans and non-humans are

enmeshed, may find themselves slightly more at ease in this period called the “Anthropocene”. It is precisely now that the re-description of the scientific enterprise becomes so relevant. At no point in history have the sciences been so essential to the definition of our cosmopolitics—all the sciences, from agriculture to atmospheric physics, from microbiology to volcanology, from computer models to good old systematics and natural history, without forgetting meteorology for which the Bergen of Wilhem Bjerknes is one of the birthplaces. And yet never has the authority of those many contrasted and often conflicting disciplines been so contested. You cannot bypass those disciplines since without them we would remain totally in the dark about what is happening to the Earth, and yet it has never been easier to bypass them entirely. And I am not alluding here only to the crazy bills being pushed through the US Congress to outlaw whole ranges of scientific inquiries. Because of the sheer number of revolutionary decisions that we have to contemplate if we accept the sciences’ frightening results, we are all in denial.

This is why it is so important to rethink the Enlightenment altogether, not by switching off the lights—or simply replacing our light bulbs!— but by recognizing that the power of the sciences does not reside in putting a final end to discussions, but in opening them further. To reach closure, what is needed is politics—and maybe religion as well as morality. Strangely enough, objectivity has to be shared much more widely than had been thought necessary at the beginning of the Enlightenment. Not by extending matters of fact, but by extending what I call “matters of concern”: another materiality altogether. The scientific enterprise will thrive just as well, nay, much better, in the new landscape of controversies and in the new politics of things that we are all trying to outline.

I remember my surprise, many years back when I visited in Trondheim a place called “the Thing”, the old word for the gathering of those who are assembled because they disagree on what is at stake and which has to be settled nonetheless: I had not realized at the time that all things had to be brought to this Ding and that parliaments such as your *Storting* had indeed to be vastly increased, not only to include trees, as Holberg had envisioned, but all the other creatures with which we are now in lasting conflicts— plus those humans tied to this and that “thing” with whom we have to learn to be in conflict until we reach peace. It is this extended parliament that, a few years ago, I have tried to outline in an exhibition with my friend Peter Weibel, called: “Making Things Public”. We wanted to give a shape to the new *res publica*.

Ours is not a quiet time to the point where it is impossible to locate oneself in it without calling it “apocalyptic”. How odd it is that some have announced that history had come to an end just when it is the Earth that has

## 129-Holberg reception speech 8

taken up the task of being the most agitated agent of history! What is sure is that, because there is no hope of escaping to another world, nor to relocate ourselves to another planet, we might at last see the relevance of bringing the range of inquiries listed by this prize, namely “arts and humanities, social sciences, law and theology”, into a much closer connection with what used to be called “the natural sciences” —a term now wholly inadequate to describe the common cosmopolitical tasks awaiting us.

If I have to thank you for having granted me such an award, it is not of course because I believe myself worthy of such an honor, but because the problems that have come to me over the years might have relevance to you as well — to you and, more urgently, to my grandson, Ulysses, whom I wish to salute at this occasion together with my close and extended family and this large nurturing milieu of friends and colleagues without whom it is impossible to think a single thought, to utter a single word, to feel a single emotion. At the time when I have nothing else to add but words of thanks, allow me to gather all of them and all of you in the same gesture of gratitude.

