Technical does not mean material

Bruno LATOUR, *Sciences Po*

Comment on LEMONNIER, Pierre. 2012. *Mundane objects: Materiality and non-verbal communication*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

For many years now, Pierre Lemonnier has tried to convince the anthropological community of the importance of technology (in the French sense of a study of techniques). His early work had been marked by the necessity of insisting on the material dimension of human activities, an aspect of activity that many of his colleagues, intoxicated by the notion of a symbolic dimension, had a tendency to overlook. Hence Lemonnier's close connection with the great archaeological tradition of Leroi-Gourhan (1993) and its ability to move from a close attention to gestures and actions on the material world, all the way to an assortment of artifacts able to enhance cognition, sensitivity, and sociality.

The fact of having to fight so much against colleagues ignorant of technology, however, had produced a bias in his earlier descriptions; they were strongly marked by the "not only . . . but also . . ." trope: "not only symbolic but also material," or the reverse. This is what I call, after Whitehead, a bifurcated way to handle the question of technology: action on the material world is treated in one way, symbolic action is treated in another. The borderline between the two is being traced when the list of entities encountered by the ethnographer stop resembling what he or she would recognize as his or her Western conception of materiality. Everything below is deemed to be technical (meaning efficient), everything above is not technical (i.e. excessive, superfluous, over-engineered, not functional) and thus begs for an explanation. Lemonnier and I have been disputing this point together for years since we were both trying to free ourselves from a trope that had the same deleterious effect in epistemology as in technology (Latour and Lemonnier 1994).

This new book represents a radical change of scene since Lemonnier—after having left technology aside for a number of years—has come back to the question having decided to offer another description, this one freed from the bifurcation that he had been both fighting and reinforcing in his earlier work. Since it seems to me that his argument needs a little nudge to be completely convincing, I want to underline a few supplementary arguments in the brief notations that follow.

The first difficulty comes from the use of the word "propositional," which, inevitably, entails the marking of the boundary with what is nonpropositional (and accessible only through the mysterious magic of phenomenological descriptions imbued with the great virtue of being unpolluted by Western objectivism!). There are no good ways out of this notion (except by not using it …).

Still it should be possible to open the field of inquiry in two ways: one from above, the other from below. First by recognizing that to write in a propositional way is to put into action another medium through another technique (in the adjectival sense I will define). This nonformal description of formalism is what science studies have done for years: forms, format, instructions, softwares, and standards are active in the world and are just as "material" as eel traps or cars (MacKenzie 2001). The distinction between formal and nonformal knowledge is nothing but a blatant form of ethnocentrism.

The other solution is to move in the other direction and to argue that making sense is not a property of human language and of human societies but an inner property of the world. This is what Eduardo Kohn (2013), for instance, is proposing through his clever use of Peirce's semiotics. Eels, rivers, trees, eel traps, myths, and songs, as well as "formal" ethnographic descriptions, are all part of a continuous semiosis. It is the world itself that is articulated, and it does not wait for the exercise of human language to make sense, to have direction or to provide meaning. The advantage of this solution is the much sharper focus it gives to the "resonators" proposed by Lemonnier as an alternative to the material/symbolic divide: the quick movements of the eel resonate with the river just as much as the eel trap resonates with the severed penis of the ancestors.

And this is where the importance of Lemonnier's new book lies for me: it allows the focusing of attention on techniques without being obsessed by the notion of matter, which corresponds, in effect, to a narrowly ethnocentric definition of what it is to be an object or an organism. This is where the symmetric mixture of typically ethnographic materials with Western mundane artifacts is so productive. "Technical" is an adjective that is able to resonate with any layer of what I hesitate to call materiality: songs as well as wood, noise as well as steel, narratives as well as fences. In effect, whatever is woven together by the highly specific trajectory of "technical" moves becomes "material" as a consequence.

I know that Westerners are trained, every time they utter or hear the word "matter" or "materiality," to look down and to stomp the solid ground with their feet or hit a table with their fist. For them the world appears to be ordered like a gigantic wedding cake of successive layers going from the most robust, indisputable, universal, and efficacious ones to to those that are more and more labile, local, disputed, and inefficient. Technology (in the usual sense) occupies the bottom and things deserve a more and more ethnographic attitude (which is full of odd and disturbing "significations") as you reach the upper superficial levels.

The funny thing is that Westerners repeat this sort of dance even when faced with their own artifacts. Even though the "baroque arsenal" of atomic submarines seem to depend on completely bizarre strategic and institutional decisions (thus entirely reversing the order of the layers), analysts will nonetheless insist that Western techniques are firmly rooted in sheer material objectivity and that ethnographic reading works only for other, more exotic cultures. Naturally this obsession for ordering layers of increasing materiality (going down) and increasing signification (going up) is maintained by those who want to criticize Western domination of nature by machines as well as those who want to expand their reaches. What is impossible for all of them to understand is that the mode of existence of what is a machine, what is a project, what is an "infrastructure," remains immensely difficult to fathom (Latour 1996). The great advantage of the notion of "resonators" is to entirely break the ordering of the layers and to open the description to many more shortcuts than the one allowed by the Western gaze. (I leave aside the horrible word "perrisological" to define those resonators since I find the notion, well, redundant.)

Once freed from the ordering of layers, the word "technical" frees itself and is allowed to have, in Lemonnier's hands, all sorts of alternative meanings. One of them is "detour" (the one that allows the observer to detect ingenuity, care, and skill); another one is what could be called the "gradient of resistance," that is, the possibility of shifting the weight of an action onto some other entity with different specifications. The key point here being that a legal tie may offer a better set of specs for the design of a plane or of an engine than a shift from plastic to aluminum. But the specs of a narrative could also work just as well as a trick to erect the Baruya fences a little higher or to be shifted to a bundle of bones hidden from view. What counts in this weaving of different entities that Lemonnier designates with the word "resonator" is not their ordering; on the contrary, it is the way they exchange their properties by crisscrossing entirely different repertoires of specs. Technical is the adjective that designates such a weaving. What Lemonnier does is to free the adjective "technical" from the adjective "material," or, rather, free materiality from a narrowly Western definition of what matter consists of.

To break down this idealized definition of matter in the Western idealism as well as in the idealized idea that well-meaning Westerners have of non-Western access to the material world might seem like nit picking. But the reason why it is so important today is that the ecological mutation we will have to undergo ("we" meaning the Baruyas just as much as the inhabitants of Aix en Provence) requires a redefinition of what a material infrastructure consists of. If we are not able to redescribe "their" as well as "our" infrastructure, now that they are simultaneously entangled and threatened, it will be totally impossible to redesign them from top to bottom. This is where "resonator" takes up a resonance that is political as well as descriptive.

References

Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latour, Bruno. 1996. *Aramis or the love of technology*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno, and Pierre Lemonnier, eds. 1994. *De la préhistoire aux missiles balistiques: L'intelligence sociale des techniques*. Paris: La Découverte.

Lemonnier, Pierre. 2012. *Mundane objects: Materiality and non-verbal communication*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Leroi-Gourhan, André. 1993. *Gesture and speech*. Translated by Ann Bostock Berger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

MacKenzie, Donald. 2001. *Mechanizing proof: Computing, risk, and trust (inside technology)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bruno Latour
Sciences Po
27 rue Saint-Guillaume
75337 Paris Cedex 07, France
bruno.latour@sciencespo.fr