

Bruno Latour: On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods
Duke University Press: Durham/London 2010. x + 158 pages

In *On the modern cult of the factish gods*, Bruno Latour explores what the religious image is capable of achieving. Religious images are not truth claims, but serve to bring forth a transformation in us. The book seemingly commences as a continuation of the critique of modern culture that Latour started in earlier works like *Science in action* (1987) and *We have never been modern* (1993). *Science in action* showed how perceived objective scientific facts are actually inseparably connected to the social practices in which they are produced. *We have never been modern* showed how modernity is constituted by the illusionary distinction between the natural and the social, and the consequent removal of God from any explanation of either nature or society. It is this distancing of God that Latour further engages with in *On the modern cult of the factish gods*. However, the work is not just another rehearsal of the earlier critiques. Instead, it is a positive inquiry into the construction of the subject. It seems to be for this reason that this charming little book is written in an even more literary style than before. While the style may repel some readers, nonetheless, the book is of considerable value in interpreting Latour's other works.

The preface of the book depicts the sculptor of La Fontaine's fable, who is suddenly captured by Jupiter, that is, at once a god and a marble statue to which the sculptor had himself given the last touch of the chisel on the day before. How can a human being be ruled by something he has made with his own hands? Seeking the

answer in the first chapter (there are three chapters in total), Latour compares historical Western explorers and aboriginal believers. The former mock the idols of the latter, since something man-made surely cannot hold divine powers. By a move of symmetrisation that should not come as a surprise to readers of Latour's earlier work, the author shows that, indeed, fetishes are man-made, but so are facts, and even more so than fetishes. A lot of human work is needed to create a distance between facts and the practices in which they matter. Once they are fabricated well, they will appear as autonomous and an original source of action. A continuity exists between scientific facts, aboriginal belief in fetishes, and the Western cult of adoring icons of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, Latour subsumes them under the neologism of *factish*.

While much of Latour's earlier work has been interpreted as a negative debunking of the objectivity of truth practices (and falsely so, cf. Latour's article 'Coming out as a philosopher', 2010), the author here takes on a more positive angle, and investigates what those practices actually achieve. Investigating visual artefacts, the book juxtaposes icons and idols, scientific inscriptions, and contemporary art. They are not representations of eternal truths, but they invite to move forward to the next image. By this perpetuation of a continuous flow, images produce a transformation in the beholder. Scientific inscriptions differ from icons and idols by achieving stronger mediations, producing a better

distancing and disconnection between apparent truths and the practice in which those truths are fabricated. Religious images, in contrast, cultivate this connection and – according to Latour – abstain from making claims about transcendent truths. Yet the most honest form of imagery is identified by Latour in contemporary art: it neither denies that it is man-made, nor does it hide its essential purpose of making a difference in the real world.

If this making a difference is what imagery is about, then virtue consists of caring for the perpetuation of the flow of images, more than of caring for the individual image itself. Where *iconoclasm* is the historically situated act of abolishing such individual images – now an obsolete concept once the *factish* is put in place – the new concept of *iconoclash* is needed to identify the act of interrupting this flow of images. As the horrors of 9/11 make clear, this clash may ultimately concern ourselves: we are now the potential objects of annihilation and fanaticism (p. 97).

This pivotal example marks the shift of attention from the deconstruction of objectivity towards the construction of subjectivity (cf. Latour, 2010). It is where religion enters the book in Chapter 3. Science and religion are modes of speech, not representations of any objective truths. Laudably consistent, Latour walks the talk: a narrative exploration from his own subjective position is the only thing that is left after the deconstruction of objective truth claims. Latour seeks convincing power in his argument by mimicking love talk: it is not the truthfulness or even the originality of the words ‘I love you’ that matters, but ‘the transformation it generates in the listener’ (p. 102). By similar transformations, religious images direct attention to the *here-and-now*, and this is what Latour tries to achieve in the reader. Contrastingly, scientific images direct attention towards

the *far-away*, and pursue disconnection between (hence transcendent) truths and our reality. It is for this reason that criticizing religion for its (scientifically) untenable transcendent claims is a hypocritical straw-man argument.

A small point of criticism is due at this point: for the reader familiar with STS, notably including Latour’s own earlier work, the conception of science is strikingly singular (pp. 74-5). The idea of science as a chain of mediating inscriptions should be familiar from *Science in action* and *We have never been modern*. However, in *On the modern cult of the factish gods*, Latour seems to leap to the conclusion that such chains are always successful, thus ignoring all that is controversial in science; one need only think of climate science. Latour’s conception of religion is equally particular, but fair enough, Chapter 3 is permeated by remarks that show awareness of the parochialism of any discussion of religion. One consequence, though, is that the opposition between science as making claims to distant truths and religion as producing local transformations does not entirely convince. Sometimes, science does produce a local transformation rather than a connection to an eternal truth; and sometimes, religion utterly fails to produce such local transformations. Consequently, the immunity of religion to scientific scrutiny only holds under specific presumptions. The chapter quite successfully makes a transformation in the reader and yet it remains doubtful whether there is anything particularly religious to it.

Much like in *Science in action* and *We have never been modern*, the first chapters of *On the modern cult of the factish gods* serve well as a ‘lure for feelings, food for thought’, as Latour quotes Whitehead in his acclaim of the existence of different epistemic practices (p. 66). These chapters

offer a good read for those who are interested in Latour's critique of modernity. They contain interesting positive elaborations, but not radically new perspectives. Yet ultimately, the book is about the potential of religious images to produce a transformation. Working towards this idea, the last chapter offers an entertaining insight into the mode of operation of the author. Despite some parochialism, it is in its eloquence highly informative of the subjectivity from which he operates, in perhaps even a better way than a biography could ever achieve.

Latour, B. (1987) *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Latour, B. (1993) *We have never been modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Latour, B. (2010) 'Coming out as a philosopher,' *Social Studies of Science* 40(4): 599-608.

Govert Valkenburg
Zuyd University of Applied Sciences
Maastricht
ac@govertvalkenburg.nl