A Different Society Altogether

A Different Society Altogether: What Sociology Can Learn from Deleuze, Guattari, and Latour

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PREFACE

The book you are holding in your hand is the product of a long-time interest in the foundational questions of the social sciences. Ever since I read Jeffrey Alexander's multi-volume book *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (1985) in the late 1980s, the fundamental presuppositions of sociology have constituted an important horizon for my work. Alexander has attempted to renew sociology within the frame of the classical tradition emanating from primarily Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. This is not a solution I can recommend. The view promoted in this book is that great parts of the sociological discipline have laboured for too long in the shadow of these "forefathers" and it is about time to take stock of what kind of sociology they have given us and to indicate new approaches. The latter task can only, I believe, be accomplished by reintroducing a closer relationship between sociology and philosophy. I write "reintroduce" because 100 years ago most sociologists were trained in philosophy, but this link has been broken in the process of becoming a profession. In this book I rely heavily on the works of Bruno Latour and of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, but my conclusions point only to a suggestion of how sociology can reform its theoretical foundations without excluding other possibilities.

A common presupposition in sociology is that there is order and then there is deviation from order. Order is usually understood either as formed by patterns of repetitive occurrences or as occurrences inscribed in a context which gives them a kind of meaning. However, a common view among the theorists central to this book is that order is not something to be sorted out from a given reality but is something produced. Order itself, along with its principles of production, has to be explained. This amounts to a change of perspective that provides us both with a different view of what entities our societies are composed of and with a different conception of cause and effect in sociology. The search for order is instead discussed in this book as a kind of "deep politics" underlying traditional social theorizing. The attempts at finding repetitive and stable patterns are mixed up with the State's own mechanisms for producing stability for its citizens. But there is more. The sociologists' interpretations of social order as being repetitive have become themselves a resource for the states' production of stability. This is so because repetitive explanations are, in a way, timeless

and can be applied to cases and situations perceived to be analogous. One of the aims of this book is to contribute to a liberation from this form of "state thinking" in sociology.

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Much like both governments and individuals under neoliberalism, a project like the present book gives rise to great debts. My debts are mostly made up of gratitude for the comments and support of my work. Financially it has been supported over the years by the Research Committee at the Lillehammer University College and by grants from the Small Grants Programme of the Research Council of Norway. Furthermore, this book would not have been written the way it has been without Ragnar Braastad Myklebust's deep knowledge of Latour's and Deleuze and Guattari's works and of both French and Italian philosophy in general. Our countless discussions have been tremendously helpful. Ole Andreas Brekke and Kathinka Frøystad have read earlier versions of the manuscript and their comments have significantly improved the layout of the argument of this book. In this context I also thank the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions forced me to make my argument much clearer. Parts of Chapter 5 have been published earlier in the journal *Science Studies* and the editors have most amiably allowed me to reuse this material.

This opportunity also allows me to acknowledge the following groups for the occasions they provided to me to share my thinking about sociology and French philosophy and the insightful comments they have offered: the Centre for the Study of the Sciences and the Humanities at the University of Bergen; the Centre for Technology, Innovation and Culture at the University of Oslo; the Deleuze Studies Conferences; the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Management at the Copenhagen Business School; the European Sociological Association; the International Institute of Sociology; the International Social Theory Consortium; the International Sociological Association; the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts; and the Society for Social Studies of Science. I wish also to express my gratitude to Steven Epstein for receiving me as a visiting scholar at the Science Studies Unit of the University of California, San Diego, in 2006-2007 and to Roddey Reid at the same institution for including me in his seminar. I wish also to thank the Centre for French-Norwegian Cooperation in the Social Sciences and Humanities at the *Maison des sciences de l'homme*, which supported a stay in Paris during the spring term of 2010. In addition to the individuals mentioned above I wish also to express my gratitude to a

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—Roar Høstaker

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is critically to discuss some of the fundamental problems in the social sciences emanating from the classical tradition referring back to ancient luminaries like Marx, Durkheim and Weber. As shorthand I shall call the point of reference of my discussion "sociology," although this classical line of social theorizing is also present in disciplines like anthropology, history and political science. Another aim of the book is to identify certain conceptualizations that might lead us in a new and more fruitful direction. These objectives have grown out of a feeling that much of the thinking in sociology is marked by an intellectual exhaustion of sorts. As I see it, one of the main problems hampering these disciplines is that our expositions of all sorts of phenomena are given in advance. We have a certain stock of explanations that can be adapted to anything. This explanatory uniformity makes the whole enterprise of social science not only repetitive and boring, but also essentially predictable, preventing our finding anything really new. The diversity of the world is not allowed to impinge on us; instead, it is tamed and safely placed within our neatly fashioned categories.

All lines of scientific research are supposed to question their own foundations now and then, but one of the persistent findings from the sociology of science is that this happens quite rarely. Sociology is no better: the tradition has been somewhat sacralized. It is about time to break this spell and to reassess the presupposition underlying this activity. The argument of this book is that the social sciences can be renewed by the incorporation of a few insights taken from continental philosophy or, to be more precise, the theories of Bruno Latour and of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The theories of the latter were presented (albeit in a transformed way) to the English-speaking world as a part of the phenomenon of "French Theory" in the 1980s, and Latour was one of the protagonists of the "Science Wars" in the mid-1990s. This background may prejudice some readers against the enterprise of this book, but this form of thinking nonetheless offers us important lessons, and it would be a pity not to take advantage of them.

Bruno Latour (b.1947) has been a significant voice in social theory in recent decades, and if this voice were to be taken seriously, it would lead to a significant change of "terrain" compared with that of the sociological tradition. However, Latour's voice has to some degree been restricted to the field of science studies[1] but even here he is often treated as a *bête noire*. Latour is trained as a philosopher, but turned to sociology and social anthropology in the mid-1970s. In France sociology and anthropology are institutionally located within the humanities and Latour's career has been somewhat uncommon in this respect, because he has most of the time worked at prestigious, "great schools" like the *École des Mines* in Paris and later the *Institut d'études politiques* in Paris. Latour's work belongs to the broad movement of constructivism which came into prominence in the 1970s. Within science studies this line of inquiry involves foremost a methodological orientation whereby scientific facts are seen not as a set of ideas or doctrines, but as outcomes of local practices within a certain community. Latour began his work in science studies in the mid-1970s with anthropological fieldwork at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. This study was presented in the now seminal book *Laboratory Life* (Latour and Woolgar 1986). The original 1978 subtitle of this book was *The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, but in the second edition of 1986 the word *social* had been taken out. This seemingly minor change was actually a telling sign of Latour's critique of the social constructivist movement. This movement had, he held, only shifted the weight from a traditional view whereby scientific facts are discovered in nature to a view whereby society explains everything. He has since the mid-1980s promoted a divergent form of constructivism identified under the label "anthropology of science" or "actor-network theory" (ANT). The latter label has become very popular in the English-speaking world as a catchphrase, yet Latour himself has alternately embraced and rejected it (2005). I shall here use "anthropology of science", with which he seems to be most comfortable.

One of Latour's main ideas is that humans and objects must be studied in conjunction and not separately. Society and technical artefacts presuppose each other and each can only be seen in isolation after a process of purification by researchers and intellectuals. Most of what is labelled social science, however, separates humans from their technical objects. Social relations – that is, relations between humans – have so far made up the foundations of the social sciences.

Gilles Deleuze (1925 – 1995) and Felix Guattari (1930 – 1992) may perhaps be characterized as one of the most remarkable pairings in philosophy. Deleuze was a professional philosopher who taught at universities and from 1970 at the new University of Paris-VIII at Vincennes. This uni-

versity became one of the centres for the post-1968 activism and where Deleuze's friend, Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984), for a time chaired the department of philosophy. Guattari worked at the experimental psychiatric clinic of *La Borde* and had passed his exam as a psychoanalyst at Lacan's *École Freudienne* in 1969. He was also a political activist on the left in France and part of the anti-psychiatry movement in the 1960s. He was, moreover, a central figure in groups promoting a wider application of the "institutional analysis" of *La Borde*. From 1965 the collective FGERI[2] organized some of this work and in the early 1970s the French state financed some members of this group as contract researchers. In the 1980s Guattari was involved in establishing *Radio Tomate*, an activist radio station, and in this period he worked with environmental activists and other groups (Dosse 2007).

The main focus of my interest in their collective work concerns the two books *Anti-Oedipus* (1984) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), published in 1972 and 1980, respectively. These two books were the fruit of a radical political conjuncture in which it was possible to question everything. This background still imbues a certain freshness to the ideas promoted in them, although they are, like all books, marked by the debates of their time. Deleuze and Guattari were critical of the structuralism of the 1950s and 1960s, which emphasized the invariant traits in any given condition, while at the same time they shared with structuralism the critique of the freely acting subject that existentialism promoted. They also followed the structuralists' interest in semiotics, but they applied it differently and were critical of linguistics as a discipline. Their philosophy can therefore be labelled as "post-structuralist", but what I think is the most interesting aspect of their philosophy for sociological thinking is the conception of a primordial energeticism that is present in all sorts of fixed social entities and continually threatens to destabilize them. It is this fundamental vision and the concepts linked to it that make up some of the lessons that sociology can learn from Deleuze and Guattari.

I shall, of course, go into more detail on both the theories of Latour (see Chapter 5) and those of Deleuze and Guattari (see Chapter 6), but one of the aims of this book is also to promote a critique *of* and dialogue *with* the sociological tradition.

The Problem

What is the main problem with the way we do social science? A common way of discussing sociological theories is to view them as different *ways* of *studying* society. We all know there are different perspectives within

these disciplines: some take the bird's-eye view while others take a worm's-eye view; some emphasize conflict while others emphasize cooperation; some emphasize a close study of the subjective world of actors while others insist on collecting quantifiable data in order to make possible a generalization of the findings to a population. Even though they might give us different "societies" as a result, they are mainly understood in terms of epistemology, the way we extract knowledge about our object of study.

The critique levelled at sociology in this book is not so much concerned with how we can best study human societies, but rather with the way sociology tacitly subscribes to certain ontological assumptions. This book focuses on the entities that sociologists regard as important and how they define the relations between them – in other words, the make-up of societies. My main contention is that the manner in which sociology distributes properties to the different entities that we might find in a society determines how we experience, talk about and write about them to a great degree. By redistributing these properties we can experience, talk and write about a society in new ways, and hence the title of the book: we might arrive at a new society altogether. My aim is not to provide theoretical meta-comments on human societies, but by changing the conceptual framework I seek to contribute to new ways of doing sociological research. The aim is always to facilitate empirical research, and I do so here by analysing concepts and how they operate.

At this point it may be useful to ask what is meant by *society*. The definition of this very imprecise concept depends, however, on the way a given sociological theory distribute properties between entities and how the relations between them are pictured. In this context I shall focus on the common strategy in sociological analyses to advance two perspectives at the same time: one taken from without the topic at hand (transcendence) and the other emerging within (immanence). The latter involves following the actors and what they do, say or write. The former strategy, however, stipulates that the actors have to be situated in a proper social context and in Latour's words it gives sociology "fixed frames of reference" (1996a, 169). This strategy is easily recognizable by the way entities are given clear identities and properties at the outset and these are applied to analyses without much reflection. Latour and Deleuze and Guattari follow a completely different practice, emphasizing absolute immanence giving different definitions of "society" as a result.[3] Latour's sociology is a sociology "which has fluctuating referents" (1996a, 169) and his starting point is always in the "middle of things" (2005, 25) with few preconceptions. Deleuze and Guattari give primacy to connections between *undetermined*

entities before they are given any essential characteristics. They withdraw to what is *logically prior* to the fixation of identities. Another facet that distinguishes their approach is that their concepts are completely empty. They are purely *functions* and have to be applied to concrete empirical material in order to be meaningful (1987, 40-57). Hence, every new case must involve a new effort and one cannot apply the same categories from one case to the next. One of the consequences of these immanentist approaches is that there is, in principle, no society with fixed properties. Latour even rejects the whole concept of society because it involves a preference for humans over non-humans. He has instead coined the concept of the "socio-technical collective" or "collective of humans and non-humans" (Latour 1993b, 2005). The Latourian theory is thus a sociology without society. Deleuze and Guattari, on their part, make use of concepts like social plane, *socius*, social machine and society (1984, 1987), but the way they use these concepts in their analyses may vary from topic to topic.

This book will apply the concept of *society* in the same way as it is used in the literature that I discuss, and this will, unavoidably, lead to changed meanings of this concept here and there. One of the topics of this book will also be to show how traditional sociology constructs its outside and how the change of perspective between a transcendent and an immanent viewpoint takes place in different theories.

I shall now turn to what I hold to be some of the fundamental presuppositions in the sociological tradition. The aim is to pinpoint the properties that this tradition prefers and the relations it leaves out. Below I summarize in a set of theses what I find to be the foundations for not only sociology, but also other branches of the social sciences. These theses will form the basis for much of the discussion in this book:

1. The social sciences study the relationship between people or collective entities made up of people.
2. Either people or collective entities, or both, are granted agency in the form of potentialities residing in them,
3. or the actions of people or collective entities, or both, can be linked to some sort of meaning that makes them do the acts they do.

The "either-or" properties of Theses 2 and 3 are linked to discussions about modes of inquiry in sociology, and they will be treated more thoroughly later in this chapter. Thesis 1 states the *preference* for relations between humans, and it is the most fundamental one because it makes a claim about which entities are most important to study, and it is commonly held to be the most self-evident for many sociologists. However, one of

the main critiques formulated in this book is that much social scientific thinking is not able fully to integrate two of the most characteristic features of human social life: that we have languages and that we form an intimate relationship to technical objects. We must, then, formulate two more points to characterize how sociology commonly treats these features:

4. Objects are treated as intermediaries between humans, as neutral tools, as something over which we struggle, or as separate entities with their own potential to determine human life.
5. Signs in the form of speech, texts, images or bodily postures are understood as communication.

To avoid potential misunderstandings I should state that sociology ignores neither technical objects nor signs, but my claim is that they are not constitutive parts of the ontology. In the case of technical objects, they can change status from being faithful and neutral tools to being an overwhelming "technology" or a "technical system" that might determine our fate. Or, perhaps, a given technical artefact has the inherent potential to change our social relations for the better or worse (see Thesis 4). These latter positions are all examples of a technical determinism whereby potentiality is ascribed to techniques or technical objects while the human part of the equation is diminished. In this way techniques become self-acting – which, I shall argue, is just as problematic as the main claim in Thesis 1. Furthermore, according to Thesis 4, technical objects are not only portrayed in sociology as neutral tools or part of an abstract "development" or force that changes our society without our having any say in it, but they are also objects worthy of our admiration and competition. This is well known in the common struggle for all sorts of vanity objects, ranging from powerful cars to the latest electronic gadgets, and it is well portrayed in studies of different lifestyles (e.g., Bourdieu 1986).

Thesis 5 may perhaps be met by headshaking disbelief: shouldn't language be a question of communication? What could be more self-evident? The answer that Deleuze and Guattari might give would be that language can be communicational in specific situations, but we must make clear what is meant by communication and in this context it is understood according to the Schema of Linguistic Communication. This schema is closely related to information theory and presupposes a transmission of a message between an addresser and an addressee. These two have a physical channel through which the message is transmitted and there is a psychological connection between them. Finally, they share a common code that makes it possible for the addressee to understand the message (cf. Greimas and Courtés 1982, 37-38). For Deleuze and Guattari this situation is much

more controlled and streamlined than what is common in linguistic exchanges. It is a situation where nothing new can happen because there is no opening for new implicit meanings. This is so because there is more to a statement than its message. Language orders the world for us and imposes a kind of functionality on it. If I make the statement: "all swans on the lake are white", I do not impart this freely to some interlocutor, but I oblige the other party to *believe* that this is the case. In other words, I indirectly impose a social obligation. This implicit presupposition of my claim forces us to ask questions about the situation where the statement was made and one might ask on what grounds it was made, etc. It might be an example from the theory of science in a classroom, a claim about a state of affairs while walking along the shore of the lake or it might be a *malapropos* like a line from a play by Eugène Ionesco.[4] This is the function of what Deleuze and Guattari call order-words (*mots d'ordres*) which they hold to be the foundation of language and where what is indirect or implicit in discourse is of major importance (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 75-80). The status of the statement depends on what they call a *collective assemblage of enunciation.* I shall discuss this concept in more detail later in this chapter.

Bruno Latour formulated another way to distance himself from the communicational model. In an interview he said that "what I am interested in is the radical paradigm where you can't be the human receiver because even that is a semiotic production" (Crawford 1993, 264). We cannot, therefore, give preference to any model of language that assumes individual human actors because these actors are themselves part of a common field of semiotic production. Human beings do make interpretations of their situation, of other people's conduct, etc., but that is part of the same semiotic production: signs that are reacting to other signs. In Latour's view semiotics is not constituted in the interaction of human actors, but is much more than what actors can interpret.

The aim of this book is to discuss all five theses above and their status as presuppositions in sociology. As mentioned above, my main theoretical supports in this undertaking will be the works of Latour and of Deleuze and Guattari. It is necessary, however, to raise a fundamental question before we start: why on earth would a well-established and institutionalized activity such as modern sociology want to revamp its theoretical foundations completely? I believe there are three reasons: there are new insights to be had; old dilemmas and problems might be solved; and new strategies for empirical research can be outlined. In the following I shall consider one of the seemingly unsolvable problems in sociology: the re-

lationship between structure and agency, which is commonly accepted as one of the fundamental problems in the field.

Structure and Agency – The Impossible Problem

In this section I shall argue that the problem of structure and agency can be connected to the presuppositions of a preferential treatment of humans in social science. This anthropocentrism, summarized in Thesis 1, presupposes as a corollary the subordinate status of technical objects described in Thesis 4. Only those approaches to social science that seek to redress this imbalance between humans and objects can have any hope of solving the dilemma, or, rather, dissolving it as a badly posed question.

In the same way as many other philosophical problems, the question of structure and agency (or determinism and contingency) has a theological origin: if God is not only omniscient, but also omnipotent, how is human free will possible? If one holds that humans have free will, then God is more distant, but if he forms my actions, he somehow intervenes in my conduct. The problem of structure versus agency is thus something handed down to us from Western history and has much deeper roots than does the comparatively short history of the social sciences. The ascent of the natural sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries transformed this theological problem into the determinism of natural systems, whereby previous conditions of a system necessitate its subsequent conditions. Although a higher degree of contingency had to be acknowledged in human affairs, a similar determinism can be found in Marx's formulations on the first pages of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (1954b, 15)

Thus the previous actions of other humans constitute the conditions of agents here and now and, "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (15). Marx then goes on to list how the French revolutions have repeated historical models, quipping famously, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (15). The historical circumstances in this context not only frame a set of possibilities, but tradition also passes on to us probable ways of action and we easily repeat previous patterns. Therefore, by being both the provider of the possibility of action and the originator of why we do what we do, history is given the same role as God. Nevertheless, the emphasis remains on the human

element. A conversion of Marx's remarks into contemporary social constructivist language would amount to the statement that previous humans have constructed the social institutions that we have inherited. These institutions provide both the circumstances in which we live and many of the motives for our conduct. We can, however, change these institutions by changing our habits and our social relations.

Anthropocentrism is very much at the forefront in this way of understanding society and this view stands in contrast to descriptions of society from the eighteenth century and earlier which emphasized the interaction of humans with nature. The ascent of the human and social sciences from the early nineteenth century was also an ascent of anthropocentrism (cf. Foucault 1966, chs.9 and 10). The problem of structure and agency was transformed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century at the hands of Durkheim and Weber. In Durkheim's work this transformation took place with the notion of the social as a moral order that constrains the individual, although the social is maintained and carried by the individuals themselves (1982, 51). This is, however, not enough: this collective moral order is a product of social life itself. In other words, the social as transcendent is formed by the immanent processes among agents themselves (2001). Weber, on the other hand, emphasized that sociology should be based on understanding, and, unlike Durkheim, he did not take the collective level as his starting point. For Weber, collective entities, like states and organizations, were a kind of shorthand for the numerous actions governed by an identifiable "average" meaning (1978). These two forefathers of sociology indicated two different notions of the social order: either it comes from a collective level that constrains individuals or it comes from the patterns of probable, but meaningful, actions. The epistemological choice of starting our social analyses either from a collective level or from the actions of individuals has been with us ever since, and our disciplines are shot through with it.

Contemporary sociologists have in different ways tried to bridge the divide between agency and structure. Pierre Bourdieu has attempted to solve this problem with the concept of *habitus*, which he defined as: "…systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1977, 72, emphasis in orig.). Habitus makes the body the meeting point between objective conditions (structures) and subjective experience (agency). Objective structures are transformed into embodied experiences and become a basis for the production of new practices. Anthony Giddens has claimed to have found a solution in what he called *structuration*, in which individuals reflect over what they do, but their actions have unintended consequences. The main

problem in sociology, he holds, lies in the antinomies between a sociology of understanding and a sociology of explanation, with the former identified easily as the Weberian tradition and the latter as the Durkheimian. In Giddens' view the sociology of understanding has been marked by an "imperialism of the subject", while the sociology of explanation by an "imperialism of the social object" (1993, 2). In the process of structuration, agents reflect over their actions and make their own choices, but simultaneously these actions form structural patterns on a social level. In this way Giddens reproduced a dual world view, but without giving priority to an abstract level of structure over the more primary one of action. Among the possible outcomes of processes of structuration might be the unknowing reproduction of structural relations. A paradigmatic example for Giddens was Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1980), in which the renowned Birmingham sociologist followed a group of working-class boys from their last year in the classroom to their time in the workplace. These boys brought with them from their background a form of banter and aggressive humour which they directed against the teachers in the face of school discipline. This opposition was at the same time a sort of acceptance that their school results would be poor. With dismal grades, they were funnelled into subordinated and boring work – not unlike their school experience. Nonetheless, they found this transition easy because they found the same banter and aggressive humour among the workmates. An unintended consequence of the whole process was a reproduction of subordination and class divisions (Giddens 1993, ch.6).

Both Bourdieu and Giddens have worked hard in their attempts to overcome this central problem, but neither solution will do because they both reproduce, one way or the other, the distinction between transcendence (determinism) and immanence (free will, human responsibility). In the example above the reproduction of class relations is of a different order than the behaviours of the schoolboys. The challenge of bridging or transcending the question of structure and agency seems insurmountable. And so it is. It *cannot* be solved with the presuppositions of the sociological tradition; in Latour's view, this is so because the play between a transcendent and an immanent viewpoint in the discourse is fundamental to modernity. Society is seen both as stronger than human beings (transcendence) and as formed by them (immanence), but instead of formulating a dilemma, he views it as a self-contradiction (Latour 1993b).The presuppositions summarized in Theses 1 and 4 suppose that humans are at the centre of this ontology and technical objects are only part of the periphery. What is lacking is an explanation of why we have a certain level of continuity in human societies. This continuity is something that is pro-

duced every day and cannot be taken for granted. On the other hand, human interactions are ephemeral and they are limited to a certain time and space. Furthermore, humans change their minds and might do something different from what you would like them to do. Latour's fundamental insight is that only our intimate relationship to objects is able provide the foundation for this continuity. His solution is that we must grant agency to non-humans and these (including technical objects) do not change their mind at the blink of an eye. They do what they are prescribed to do: "a profound temporal shift takes place when nonhumans are appealed to: time is folded" (Latour 1988a, 301). This folding of time into objects has the consequence that the work once laid into the house in which I live (and write) remains actualized over 90 years later. This remains true despite recurring maintenance and periodical refurbishments. This is, of course, a trivial example, one which we would not usually consider worthy of any thought, but the de-trivialization of the trivial is one of Latour's great strengths. In this way technical objects may be seen as "congealed labor" (1999b, 189), and their tasks would otherwise have been done by humans themselves (or not at all) (1988a, 300-301). The relation between artefacts and humans holds true if people still subscribe[5] to them (or are forced to do so). Museums are good places to watch objects that are no longer subscribed to in the usual way, and, in that particular context, they are mainly relevant for historical reconstructions or nostalgia.

An obvious answer to this type of critique is that we have known this all along. To be sure, sociologists take for granted that technical artefacts are important, but in what ways do they do so? Usually they are conceived either as neutral tools or as a separate force (see Thesis 4). Marx's treatment of technical artefacts in the first volume of *Capital* is a telling example. This book describes objects either as manufactured products or as faithful tools, or – in a reversion of their faithfulness – they replace human labour in the form of machinery and even turn the worker into a living appendage of it (1954a, chs.1 and 13). Yet again, we find the juggling between an immanent and a transcendent viewpoint; who is master and who is slave in the relation between humans and non-humans might change. This switching between viewpoints is the master template of sociological rhetoric: we build our society ourselves, but some social entities are stronger than us and dominate our lives (Latour 1993b). The only way this domination is possible, however, is through technical objects, and one of the key ways of renewing sociological theory is via a new understanding of technical artefacts.

Still, the theoretical powers of sociology are yet to be exhausted, for, as I have mentioned in Thesis 2, collective entities are sometimes ascribed

potentialities for action and the agency of technical artefacts is usually hidden or taken for granted within entities like "groups", "interests", "states", "institutions", "forces", and so on. In other words, the agency of objects is hidden by being sublimated into abstractions. Similarly, the agency of human collectives is hidden by abstraction in formulations that assume that techniques have their own momentum, which is the case when we speak of "the development", "productive forces", "technology", "the system", and so forth. Objects and humans are still seen as being apart. A major strength in Latour's analyses is his ability to describe humans and non-humans symmetrically. One of his examples in the book *Pandora's Hope* concerns how murder by gunshot is explained. The slogan, "Guns kill people", promoted by those campaigning against gun ownership in North America, involves a technical determinism as an explanation of murder. This slogan emphasizes *matter* over humans in the way that the mere spread of guns leads to more murders. The actions of the humans are only assumed, and humans are made into intermediaries. To this slogan the American National Rifle Association has answered with, "Guns don't kill people. *People* kill people." The second slogan exculpates the gun and makes the human the only responsible actor. In this *social* explanation the object turns into a helper; in other words, the gun is only an intermediary. Latour's twist to this dilemma is to claim that a citizen holding a gun is mediating action: he or she makes a detour via the gun to kill (or to threaten, maim, etc.) while the gun "needs" to go via a human to unleash its built-in programme (1999b, 176-180). Both the human and the gun have their own programmes of action and they have to become part of each other's joint programmes. In other words, both gun and citizen exchange properties in the gun-wielding situation. The person is different with the gun than without it, and the gun is different in a human hand than in its case. It is the gun-human or human-gun assemblage that kills (178-180). It is possible to kill by other means, but the gun adds some qualities that other weapons might not have. It *extends* human action in certain ways, but at the same time it constrains it and may displace it in unforeseen directions. A new uncertainty is involved. Similarly, seen from the gun's point of view, its action is extended by the human, but the human might use it in ways that are prohibited by the built-in programmes and may even harm it. The criss-crossing interaction between humans and non-humans forms hybrids that make our world possible. These quasi-subjects or quasi-objects cannot be classified as clearly belonging to either society or nature unless there has been a prolonged work of purification through which we tend to overlook some qualities and to emphasize others (Latour

1993b). In the Latourian perspective the age-old question of structure and agency is transformed and dissolved.

Signs and Language

We have seen above that we cannot give a preferential status to relations between humans because it excludes objects. What about signs and language? Thesis 5 states that signs are commonly understood as communication and an objection that might be raised is if this claim is still relevant with the emergence of discourse analysis. This is a multidisciplinary field which has been thriving since the 1970s and some parts of it has been influenced by French post-structuralism. The relevant question to ask is whether the practitioners in this field really break with the communicational model. Or, phrased differently: are they able to make signs and language relatively independent of interpreting actors? A look at different handbooks in the field reveals that the phrase "discourse analysis" covers an enormous smorgasbord ranging from rhetoric, conversation analysis, narratives and storytelling, analysis of tropes, socio-linguistics, social semiotics, etc. (Grant et al. 2004, Dijk 1997). I do not think I can answer this question definitely and I will leave it open. Like the linguist Émile Benveniste I shall argue that language provides a sort of fundamental condition for human societies (1974, 62) and that language and signs are something *more* than intermediaries between humans. How we speak and write about ourselves and the world in which we live is not only important for the way we understand this world, but also for the way humans experience themselves and change their conduct, for these depend on social concepts and categories. We write and speak all the time, and the effects of our words and deeds escape us and they might be forgotten the next moment or they might begin a life of their own by being repeated by others. This phenomenon is, of course, connected to the technical means by which we distribute writing and images in our societies, but language is such a fundamental faculty that we can hardly think without something psychologists call "mentalese" (Pinker 2009).

I shall try to develop an example of the sort of status that signs in the form of text and language might have in the type of social analyses promoted in this book. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes' commented on the trial against the farmer Gaston Dominici in 1954. Dominici was accused of murdering three English tourists who were camping near his property in the Alpine region of Southern France. The whole affair loomed large in this period of French history owing to the gruesome details of the murder and the ensuing speculations. These speculations were nourished

by the lack of evidence against Dominici and by the absence of a motive for his committing a triple murder. In order to build the case against him, the Public Prosecutor and the Presiding Judge had to make a psychological profile of a cunning and scheming farmer. But where did they take this psychology from? Barthes' answer was that it was taken from bourgeois literature from the nineteenth century, and it was highly questionable whether it was in any way representative of the accused. In Barthes' view the real triumph in this case was that of literature:

> … it is in the name of a "universal" psychology that old Dominici has been condemned: descending from the charming empyrean of bourgeois novels and essentialist psychology, Literature has just condemned a man to the guillotine. (Barthes 1972, 43)

French bourgeois literature of a different epoch thus manifested itself as the way the magistrates and prosecutors understood certain categories of people.

This example shows how a certain genre of literature can liberate itself from its origins and enter into what Deleuze and Guattari call a collective *assemblage of enunciation*. Enunciation may be understood as the context that makes a specific utterance possible, and Barthes' observation was to link the prosecutors' and magistrates' discourse to its possible nineteenth-century source. This was, probably, part of a wider phenomenon of how particular sections of the French bourgeoisie saw other sections of the population in the middle of the twentieth century. The case thus evoked some of the social significance of class relations. This particular flow of discourse about peasant life and how "these people" behave had evidently taken on a life of its own. In Deleuze and Guattari's parlance it had been *deterritorialized* and then *reterritorialized* in the situation of the court proceedings. This essentialist psychology was, of course, not the only form of discourse in the court: there are all sorts of rules and regulations that govern such proceedings, which ascribe strict roles for the participants and set the parameters both for assessing evidence and for the punishments to be meted out. Furthermore, Dominici was neither the first nor the last to be accused in a criminal court. Thus a flow of those accused and a flow of discourse meet at court and they are all conjugated at this specific site. In this process both discourse and persons are transformed. The accused can be either condemned or exonerated, and these linguistic transformations have consequences for the treatment of the body of the accused, since he or she is either liberated or punished.

This example illustrates the concept of assemblage (*agencement*) and its two segments: one pertaining to signs, called *assemblages of enuncia-*

tion, and the other to bodies (in the widest possible terms), called *machinic assemblages*. This latter concept concern how humans and non-humans relate to each other, engage with each other or part from each other. The reason it is called *machinic* is the parallel Deleuze and Guattari made between technical machines and processes in society. These processes operate with regular input and output and they have components functioning in conjunction with each other (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 456-458, 1995, 120-121). The fundamental unit of analysis is thus the assemblage and in our example it includes judges, lawyers, the accused, bailiffs, the public, buildings, legislation and other legal documents, the evidence, the verbal argumentation of the parties, etc. The advantage of the concept of assemblage is that it permits the analysis in a single grasp to recognize how diverse entities function together (Deleuze and Parnet 1996, 65-66). The transformation of signs is, nevertheless, something different from the transformations of humans and objects. Moreover, the flow of discourses and the flow of people and objects might be deterritorialized or perhaps conjugated (reterritorialized) in other ways at other sites. The notions of flows and assemblage were formulated to avoid the fixation of specific attributes into "actors" – whether individual or collective – and to indicate that such actors, which are commonly assumed in the social sciences, to be mere results to be explained and not something with which to start an analysis.

In Chapter 5 I shall show how Latour has a somewhat different approach to the question of signs and language. He does not distance himself from theories of agency in the same way as Deleuze and Guattari, but the agency of humans and non-humans is possible to describe within language. His so-called "Translational Model" is a way to explain how texts can refer to states in the world.

A Non-Starter

The previous, perhaps hesitant, introduction of concepts both from Latour and from Deleuze and Guattari leads us to consider how similar forms of thinking have been introduced to the English-speaking world. French social thinking has previously been applied in several ways, and one of the most debated is called "French Theory" which is the North American application of the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Baudrillard in the 1980s and 1990s. French Theory had its main institutional foundation within literary studies and cultural studies. The chronicler of the upheavals of French Theory, the intellectual historian François Cusset, was astonished when he first came to the United States and found

out what kind of impact French social thinking had had on American intellectual life. What was often called *La pensée de '68* in France had in North America been transformed into something else: French Theory. In this application the theory was used to deconstruct texts and to analyse all sorts of cultural expressions in relation to the identity of groups. In Cusset's view, the main blind spot in French Theory has been the denial of market forces:

> [It was] detailing clothing styles and coded lingos as forms of rebellious expressions with little or no consideration of social positions and contexts; debating sex wars and gender norms with hardly a mention of the profitable commodification of femininity as today's ultimate existential product. (2008, xvi)

Yet the social and political values promoted by this line of cultural studies were the *opposite* of the values promoted by the philosophers they claimed to be building on. With French Theory, French social thinking was shorn of its political and historical context, and all types of semiotic expressions were made autonomous in a way that could only feed a culturally oriented and flexible capitalism (xvi-xviii). Cusset's answer is not to renounce theory, but he stresses that theory needs to be linked to historical and social contexts in order to be able to form something that might also link up the experiences outside of academia. One of the main problems, as I see it, is that French Theory has become a major article of export from the United States and it has to a high degree formed the reception of French social thinking in the rest of the English-speaking (and English-reading) world. This has been, and probably still is, one of the main obstacles for a reasonable reception of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy in the social sciences.

In recent years a new line of scholarship has emerged in the Anglo-American field that claims to be "Deleuzian" or, at least, claims to have some theoretical pedigree from Deleuze. Under the headings of an "affective turn" (Protevi 2009, Gregg and Seigworth 2010), a "non-representational theory" (Thrift 2008) or a "political ecology" (Bennett 2010) etc., this literature has the laudable ambition of applying French philosophy to particular analyses. They do not want to limit themselves to making comments on Deleuze and Guattari's work, and in this regard their aim is in line with the present book. The main problem I find with this form of application of their theories is the lack of precision in the treatment of concepts. The political scientist Jane Bennett wants to formulate what she calls a "vital materialism" moving through and across bodies. In

a chapter called “The Agency of Assemblages” she gives the following definition of assemblage:

> Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. (Bennett 2010, 23-24)

A few lines further down the page she writes:

> Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage. (24; emphasis in orig.)

With some poetic license the first sentences of the first quotation may be acceptable, but the rest is difficult to square with the definitions given by Deleuze and Guattari themselves (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, 112, 1987, 88). Another Deleuzo-Guattarian concept, which is presented in more detail in Chapter 6, is that of *abstract machine* which, put simply, is a macro-assemblage uniting some the functions of the particular (concrete) assemblages in a given empirical material. It is a concept that gives a synoptic grasp of very different processes (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 141-146). The political scientist William E. Connolly has a similar project to Bennett and in the book *A World of Becoming* he writes the following about this concept:

> … an “abstract machine” is a cluster of energized elements of multiple types that enter into loose, re-enforcing conjugations as the whole complex both consolidates and continues to morph (2011, 134)

So far, so good. Then he writes the following a few lines further down the page:

> A lava flow constitutes a simple abstract machine; the flow of molten lava, the melted rocks of different types carried by it, the uneven terrain over which it flows, the differential cooling rates of each type of rock when the lava meets water and open air. Each lava flow congeals into a granite formation, the pattern of which is not predictable in advance. (135)

This sounds very concrete to me and, much like Bennett's, it is equally difficult to square Connolly's adaptation with the original approach. These quotations are not picked haphazardly and more examples could be provided.

Maybe the main problem in this context lies in my expectations of how theories should be treated. I expect a focus both on the concepts and on their relations to each other and how they can be involved in specific empirical materials. In the philosopher Arnaud Bouaniche's words, the American reception of Deleuze and Guattari's work is too "mimetic and incantatory" (2007, 300; my trans.). The reception has yet to achieve a phase that is properly critical and liberated from all forms of aesthetic readings. This scholarly situation is pretty sad and may overshadow work of serious interest. The present book is, hopefully, a modest contribution that can help to redress this situation.

Two Modes of Inquiry

The aim of this section is to introduce some initial distinctions in order to organize the argument of the book. These distinctions will serve as an analytical model for the analysis of the different sociological theories discussed in the coming chapters. This model is summarized in Figure 1.1. Above I presented five theses summarizing the presuppositions of the sociological tradition, but I have so far mainly discussed Theses 1, 4 and 5 and it is time to have a closer look at the remaining two. Thesis 2 states that the social sciences grant agency to people or collectives in the form of potentialities, and Thesis 3 that the acts of people or collectives can be linked to some sort of subjective meaning. These two theses can be seen as opposites, but they may as well be present in some theories as a mixture. In this context I shall discuss them in relation to a distinction made by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur between an *energetic* and a *hermeneutic* mode of inquiry (1978, 62-64). He made this distinction into a starting point for his reading of Freud's work, but we can generalize it as a way of distinguishing between different types of sociological theories. In this distinction there is, on the one hand, "an explanation of physical phenomena through conflicts of forces", hence energetics. On the other hand, there is "an exegesis of apparent meaning through a latent meaning" (1978, 62), in a word, hermeneutics. Agency understood as forces working on each other may be the paradigm of the energetic model in the social sciences, but agency has often been subordinated to interpretation. Interpretation is, for example, a major point in Weber's sociological theory when he claims that social action must be understood in relation to its subjective meaning

(1978, 4-33). This meaning is then treated as the latent meaning of the action. Furthermore, this meaning is neither *any* meaning nor the agent's own, but is primarily one that is "subjectively adequate" or involves a "typical" complex of meaning (11), for instance, what he called an ideal type. The spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic are ideal types in his study of the emergence of capitalism. He tried to show the accord, in a certain historical period and within a certain geographical area, between these two seemingly antagonistic attitudes to life (Weber 1992). Somehow, these ideal types make us understand why agents did the things they did in a particular time and place. A hallmark of the hermeneutic mode of inquiry is that it always involves a moment of an observer or author "looking through" what someone else does or writes. There are always a privileged viewpoint and an ascription of meaning.

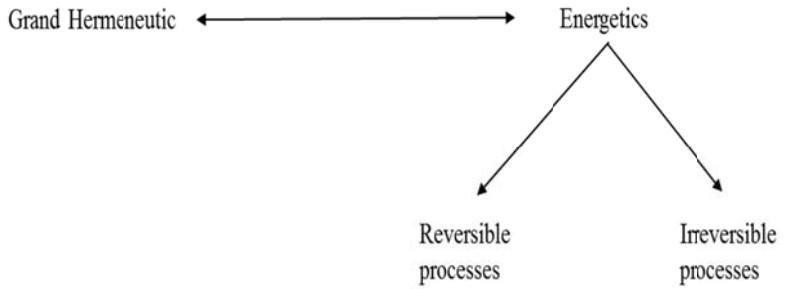

Figure 1.1 A combination of the distinctions made by Ricoeur and Prigogine and Stengers (see text)

Energetic models are concerned less with interpretation and more with action. Agents or collective entities are forces that work on other forces and the effect is a form of resultant action. In his seminal book on the American Government's response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Essence of Decision*, the political scientist Graham T. Allison summarizes three different models of decision-making, two of which are relevant as examples of energetic processes.[6] The first of these emphasizes how governmental agencies produce output as a kind of routinized action. Routines instituted by standard operating procedures make it possible for leaders to know (approximately) how local branches will handle their environment and what they will do in particular cases. By making rules and instructions, the leadership can produce action over a distance through a kind of relay structure. This is so even though the local level, informed by their specific

routines, might develop a rather parochial view of the world (1971, 78-96). The second example is a model of governmental decision resulting from political processes among bureaucratic players. The description of agents as "players" is particularly relevant in this model because they play as though they were on a stage, but it is in a play with an open-ended plot. Policies are the outcomes of these "games" and they are not the result of routines, but of the alliances and the forces the different players are able to muster. Not all outcomes are possible, however, and policy has to be relayed through some channels, and this fact contributes to a certain preselection of players. What the players can do is also restricted by rules that the players have to respect, and they form factions that fight for a specific outcome. At the same time, players are also involved in many different games, and this might affect how a player acts in one or the other of the games (162-181). In both of these models there are agents making interpretations of each other's aims and actions, but these interpretations are not of the comprehensive and grand type that Weber prescribes, for example. They do not involve a "looking through" of a whole discourse or ideology from some privileged vantage point. The emphasis is on the forces of agents working on each other.

Both the hermeneutic and the energetic modes of inquiry are problematic in the way they are applied in sociology, but for different reasons. Let us first consider the hermeneutic mode of inquiry. Weber claimed, for instance, that some social actions are so simple that we can even understand them by direct observation. For instance, we understand "$2 \cdot 2 = 4$" when we see it or hear it read out loud (1978, 8). This is, however, to conclude rather too rashly. This mathematical calculation is only intelligible in a society in which natural numbers, arithmetic and schools are common. Without this intimate connection and the scholastic homogenization of young human minds, the expression "$2 \cdot 2 = 4$" would not be directly understandable. This expression is thus only comprehensible as an effect of education. The expression "$2 \cdot 2 = 4$" can to some extent liberate itself (a deterritorialization) from this assemblage and enter into other contexts (a reterritorialization), but it is nevertheless a product of social processes and not a latent cause of them. This example shows that even the most self-evident forms of meaning are *produced* by social processes under specific historical conditions. For actions less standardized than $2 \cdot 2 = 4$, the difficulties in establishing a "typical" meaning may mushroom in different directions. In my view, searching for latent meanings for why we do what we do is not a sound way of doing social research, but is instead a way of skipping over the difficult part of describing the mechanisms that produce these meanings.