As Critical Realism (CR) and Integral Theory (IT) continue to engage, transform, and critique one another in pursuit of a “Metatheory for the 21st century” one is compelled to ask an important question: Who else should be invited to the party? The answer is simple—Bruno Latour of course! But how are we to make the introductions? How on earth are we to introduce another lexicon full of specialized terms to a party already chock full of lines, levels, states, quadrants, causal powers, and regional ontologies (not to mention important distinctions between actual, empirical, and real domains!) It seems that IT and CR are already forced to speak two languages, and a third might produce nothing but a heady migraine guaranteed to cause more heat than light. Fortunately for us, some of these first meetings have already taken place, and with any luck these initial encounters will help make my case: Bruno Latour’s metaphysics can carry us well into a 21st century filled with the dire problems of climate change, ecological collapse, geopolitics, technological infiltration, and more.

Traversing the heights of these theories will be no easy task, and many obstacles will need to be overcome. The first hand-hold in our climb comes from a generously written and constructive critique of Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) by social theorist David Elder-Vass (2008). Elder-Vass engages the ontological commitments of Latour’s “sociology of associations,” by comparing (and critiquing) them to Roy Bhaskar’s Critical Realism. ANT, Elder-Vass alleges, has three primary flaws that CR does not fall prey to: (1) For ANT “science creates the reality it describes” (p. 455), whereas CR holds that “science is only meaningful because the deepest level of reality exists independently of science and scientists” (p. 455). (2) ANT does not allow for an account of the causal role played by structure in social events thereby, “seem[ing] to imply a rejection of the structural moment in sociology” (p. 456). (3) By affording ontological symmetry to humans and non-humans ANT fails to understand that “realists have portrayed human agents as the unique possessors of a characteristic range of identities and causal powers, with the result that they must be treated quite differently from non-human objects” (p. 456).

My paper challenges this view of Latour by exploring what he variously describes as “historical” or “radical” realism (1999) “experimental metaphysics” (2004), and “modes of existence” (2013). By examining the metaphysical dimensions of Latour’s work, we
find an ally CR and IT will want to consider more deeply in their quest for a new “Metatheory.” To this end a genealogy is given that demonstrates Latour’s work is deeply allied to several speculative traditions including Gabriel Tardes’ (2012) social monadology, and, most crucially, Alfred North Whitehead’s (1978) process philosophy. By describing important aspects of these philosophical traditions—and specifically how each informs key Latourian concepts including “translation,” “mediation,” “substance,” “institution,” “collective,” and “proposition”—this paper responds to the Critical Realist critique in a manner that allows us to begin a discussion not just between Critical Realism and Actor Network Theory, but between Latour’s larger metaphysical project, Integral Theory, and Critical Realism.

A central claim of this genealogy is that, within the oeuvre of Actor Network Theory, lies an ontological “infrastructure”—to borrow a phrase from Latour scholar and Object-Oriented Philosopher Graham Harman (2012)—that Latour has been carefully building since the early days of Science Studies and Actor Network Theory. Such an infrastructure is similar in scope to Integral Theory’s commitment to methodological, epistemological, and ontological pluralism, as well as Critical Realism’s commitment to bringing ontology and transcendental realism into discourses of science and society. However, I argue, Latour’s experimental metaphysics also departs in crucial ways from both of these sophisticated approaches, though not for the reasons Elder-Vass (2008) in his initial critical paper believes. In the short outline below, I reformat the critiques given by Elder-Vass as themes by which one can begin to understand Latour’s position through a dialogical engagement with his critics. Each theme responds to the challenge of critics by expanding different Latourian concepts.

The dialogical structure will not only allow us to unpack Latour’s metaphysics, but will also, in a fourth and concluding section, allow us to posit that “Infratheory”—to coin a phrase—may complement and inform the pluralism already suggested by “Metatheory.” The outline given below provides several entry ways into Latour’s work. Below each main heading I provide further topics of discussion, which include technical terminology and contextual backing to Latour’s concepts. These topics are posed as questions to explore, and are designed to give both able students and newcomers to Latour’s thought ready-made avenues for debate. All quoted terms in the outline—e.g., “substance”—are technical terms deployed by Latour that specifically answer the call of each theme. The outline is far from comprehensive, and represents only a work-in-progress to be informed and updated following the Metatheory for the 21st Century Symposium. Additionally, a reference list of sources is included at the bottom of this précis to give participants a sense of the sources I will draw from to detail many of the questions listed below.

**PROPOSED OUTLINE OF THEMES**

1. **SCIENCE CREATES THE REALITY IT DESCRIBES**
   - What does Latour mean by “substance”? Do substances exist outside of human social and scientific practices?
   - What does Latour mean by “collective history”? How is this concept important in understanding what Latour means by the “modern constitution”?
If we understand what substances are, and how they shift through collective histories resistant to the modern constitution, what does this mean for Latour’s “constructive” approach to science?

2. THERE ARE NO STRUCTURES IN LATOUR’S ONTOLOGY
   - What does Latour mean by “institutions” and “actors”?
   - If we understand the concept of substance, and that an institution qualifies as a substance with causal powers, what does this mean for Latour’s avowedly “flat” ontology of the social?
   - What are the metaphysical underpinnings here? Latour’s understanding of Gabriel Tarde’s social monadology needs to be addressed in order to comprehend how one can have both structural agencies—“institutions”—and individual agents—“actors”—whilst still having a “flat” ontology.

3. HUMANS AND NONHUMANS SHOULD NOT BE TREATED WITH ONTOLOGICAL SYMMETRY
   - What does Latour mean by “translation,” “mediation,” and “intermediary”? To what kinds of actors do these concepts apply?
   - What is the metaphysical background operating here? We need to understand Whitehead’s account of the propositional structure of causality to understand these terms fully—both Whitehead and Latour hyponstasize the structure of interpretation and mediation. What does this mean? (It is worth noting that on these points Latour and Integral Theory are much closer than one might think).
   - How does the propositional structure of causality impact distinctions between “humans” and “nonhumans”? What do “actors” have to do with this reframing?

4. INFRATHEORY AND METATHEORY: A REALLY RADICAL PLURALISM
   - What does “following the actors themselves mean”?
   - How does Latour’s “nonmodern” and “collective history” relate to his account of time? What is the difference between “linear” and “sedimentary” time?
   - How does Latour’s account of actors, temporality, and collectivity imply that we should aim for Infratheory in addition to Metatheory?

REFERENCE LIST


Bryant, L. *The democracy of objects.* Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press.


