ESSAY REVIEW

Icons, Frames, and Language Games

Bruno Latour, On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods

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Bruno Latour’s On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Pp. x+158. $74.95/$21.95) includes three essays, each built around a different genre, iconic story, or language game. The jewel is his drasha (commentary) on the second commandment (p. 72) and the story of Terah and his 6-year-old son Abram (Abraham when he grew up) (p. 80). Latour asks: What if Moses misinterpreted the commandment? (p. 97). Latour might consult the midrash of the broken tablets, a central parable in Jewish tradition that is paralleled in the composition of the Qur’an. The broken tablets need to be reconstructed by human interpretation. Only that can make the commandments come alive, become interpretable, and attain moral force. Humans misinterpret, of course, but the test of the correctness of interpretation lies with the human collectivity, the scholars, or the people. When Moses complains that the people have decided in a way that Moses thinks is wrong and asks God to back him up, God, laughing, says, “my people have defeated me.” In the parallel Qur’anic version, the divine language is captured in fragments and recorded as a mere transcript of the plenitude of the revelations; the verses are ordered on earth, unlike in heaven, by the length of the surahs. Again it is up to the community to interpret. And it is the heresy of shirk (the claim to share in divinity) to claim to know the intent of God.

The argument in “What Is Iconoclash?” reprinted from the catalog of a show Latour co-curated, is Durkheimian: “Before you wanted to attack my flag, I did not know I cherished it so much, but now I do” (p. 87). Whence, he asks, the fanaticism of iconoclasts and iconophiles? In answer, he creates a typology of five kinds of iconoclasts. Latour calls himself one of the “B”s, those who are in favor of “cascades of images” and opposed to “freeze-framing” single images. Freeze-framing, or selection of single images, alienates...
them from the flow that composes meaning: religious, scientific, or artistic (p. 95). This is one of three essays, each built around a different genre, iconic story, or language game.

“Iconoclash” is Latour’s term for the double binds, aporia, and paradoxes that structure the dialectics between iconoclasts and iconophiles across the history of religions, and also the term in his campaigns against those imaginary Moderns he first constructs and then condemns for trying to “purify” truth (the “A” people in his typology, p. 84). His is a rhetoric of constructing double binds. When they work, they make visible what the Greeks called aporia, or paradoxes; when they don’t work (as in his factish essay) they merely draw attention to his construction of artifactual and false premises.

The key to his drasha is the 6-year-old’s smashing of the idols. Abram is like one of the four children who, in another famousparable annually repeated at the Passover seder, asks a question both psychological and mnemonic. The 6-year-old is perhaps the “evil son” who asks only to start an argument, or perhaps the “simple son” too young to understand Latour’s Durkheimian point. At six, children often engage in games of literalism, sometimes naively, sometimes to test the limits of logic, and sometimes just to get a rise. When Abram tells his father that the largest idol took a stick and smashed the other idols, the father responds, Do idols speak or move? “What a good iconoclash!” (p. 80).

Latour is tripped up by his own imputations of naïveté on the commandment against graven images, when theologically—whether in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—it has always been insisted that what is forbidden is a misrecognition, an attribution of divinity to objects and pictures. Hindus and Chinese have no qualms, even after years of Christian preaching (or “religious speech” in Latour’s next essay), about talking blithely of their idols, of the multiplicity of such representations, and how sanctity is created and destroyed by human ritualization. Among the paradoxes is that in India many of these idols are crafted by Muslim (iconoclastic?) artisans. But then despite all the claims that Islam is iconoclastic, there are all the wonderful miniature paintings, including paintings of the imams and even the Prophet, that populate Islamic art. At issue always are the interpretations in play, in conflict, and in political contestation, and especially who is making them, not any logical or category mistake as Latour claims.

Latour is also on thin ice when he repeatedly jokes that iconoclasts are almost invariably male. He should listen in on women’s joking, counteractions, and negotiations in patriarchal societies, and to the important contemporary feminist re-readings and interpretations of the Qur’an and Bible. Nor is it a modern “factish” that a key point of view in the Muslim hajj in Mecca is the figure of Hagar, or that a key figure in the Exodus story is Miriam, both set in counterpoint to and within the hegemonic male nar-
enerative. And there is the problem of God, a character Latour repeatedly invokes as part of his formulation of the double bind of iconoclash. But what if there is no presumption of God, but only reverence, “conscience collective,” and ethical and political trials and tournaments (including religious formulations) amid the maelstrom of human interactions?

From Durkheimian drasha, we turn, in “Thou Shalt Not Freeze Frame,” to the Catholic religious speech act, intended to instill a transformation in listener and speaker, bringing the good news of agape, turning attention away from the distant objects of the world to the presence of salvation within the world. Latour expertly picks apart three Catholic paintings to demonstrate that they do not naively depict miracles, divine messages, or resurrection, but instead are allegories of the hide-and-seek of presence and salvation. Iconophily is a prolongation of the flow of images, not an allusion from image to prototype or stable referent (p. 121). Religious speech acts, he avers, are like “I love you,” a heart-stopping, tiny time shift that changes a relationship when judged true (p. 102) and that can as easily be reversed by a false move, word, or gesture (p. 104). Belief, he says in the opening essay (p. 2), has nothing to do with cognition, but rather with relations among persons. Science, too, he says rather more quickly, is produced in a similar chain or flow of “long, complicated, mediated, indirect, and sophisticated paths so as to reach worlds . . . that are invisible . . . through concatenations of layered instruments, calculations, and models” (p. 111).

Although Latour says this juxtaposition of the “conditions of felicity” of religious and scientific speech acts is a “rather idiosyncratic comparative anthropology” (p. 100), what is idiosyncratic is Latour’s claim that “There is no point of view from which one could compare different religions and still be talking in religious fashion” (p. 101). So much for the many parables exchanged across religions along the Silk Road among Muslim Sufi, Christian monk, Hindu pandit, Buddhist and Jain monk, and Confucian sage; so much for the borrowings across scholastic traditions of just the kinds of deconstruction and redirection of attention to rhetoric, poetics, grammar, dialogues of love, metaphors, and pragmatics and attention to paintings, chants, ritual, and passion plays that Latour rediscovers. Indeed, Latour’s dialectic of distant and near reminds not just of William James’s pragmatic pluralism, which he cites, but also of Clifford Geertz’s “experience near” and “experience far,” and its intersubjective predecessors.

Above all, Latour’s claims for the self-enclosedness of religious speech is unduly pessimistic about precisely the pluralist worlds that James and we inhabit. I have no difficulty, myself, engaging in mourning processions for Imam Hussain, beating my chest rhythmically to the chanting; or indeed getting into the cadences and imagery of the call-and-response of a good Southern Baptist–style sermon—even though I do not accept the doxa that often accompany either; and indeed worry about the negative crowd effects and other negative political consequences they often generate, just as I
worry about the often fanatical religious lives in which Latour’s Catholic
paintings participated.

On the Cult of the Factish Gods is the least well-matured of the La-
tourian wines on offer. To Latour, facts and fetishes, like images, attain
meaning only through chains or cascades of other facts and fetishes. This
is primarily a meditation on the old aporia of agency: we get caught up in
the things we make, and so they take on an agency outside ourselves (viz.
Karl Marx, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida). And thus, in an apt admission,
he writes that “social constructionism is the poor man’s creationism” (p.
84). Here, I take it that Latour a) is continuing to distance himself from
SSK (Sociology of Scientific Knowledge), with which he is often associated;
b) wants to disrupt, with multiple agencies, the mindless repetition of
“social construction”; and so c) positions social constructivism as a kind of
freeze-frame fundamentalism (creationism by one prime mover, some-
thing called the social, which both Latour and anthropologists don’t think
of as prime mover but as a topic for exploration in its multiplicities and
comparative differences across societies). Nonetheless, he doesn’t go far
enough. Unlike Marx, Latour seems more interested in establishing the
mere existence of fetishes than in their processes of increase, transforma-
tion, systemic implication, or effects on social organization. He does admit,
in passing, that while “deep in your laboratory you can revolutionize the
world,” on the “other side, others will suddenly have to take care of the
consequences—ethical, political, and economic” (p. 32). So too with his
religious speech acts and paintings?

The best, but most cryptic, part of the factish essay is about the work of
the ethnopsychiatrist Tobie Nathan with African and North African immi-
grants in the “suburb” of Saint-Denis in Paris (whose denizens are somet-
times—delightfully—called Dionysians). 1 For Latour the story is all about
obscure phrases: “it is the gesture that heals” (p. 50), “fear must be tricked”
(p. 52); and he concludes, “I neither claim to have understood ethnopsy-
chiatry nor to have theorized it. Naturally I was only interested in myself,
or rather in those unfortunate Whites who are always being deprived of
their anthropology by being locked into the modern destiny of anti-fet-
ishism” (p. 54). For Nathan (2009), however, the story is about human
relations: “it is often illness—especially mental illness—that reminds
the individual of his or her attachment to his or her nucleus,” and especially
in diaspora populations, “the interesting question isn’t ‘who am I?’ but rather
‘to whom do I belong,’ ‘to whom’ meaning ‘to which invisible non human
being[s]?”

In a brilliant account of psychosis during kidney transplantation, Asli-
han Sanal makes a similar point about the alien object, the kidney, rear-

1. Tobie Nathan, “George Devereaux” and “Across Time and Space”; Ellen Corin,
“Playing with Limits.”
ranging nuclear social relations in nonrational ways. Nathan invokes the naming patterns of Africans that warn off evil and danger, sometimes secret names, but sometimes, as in calling a child “Human Rights,” to make social workers take care. So too with therapeutic relations with jinn, other possessing spirits, kidneys, or other factishes of our transsocial worlds, “that little threshold—the inevitable gap in all mediated action,” “the ex nihilo, that allows each event to exceed its conditions” (p. 65), producing, as Derrida would say, its supplements.

Latour ends with utopian flourishes that “the migrants heal us,” “in the common world of comparative anthropology lights cross paths . . . to act as ‘lures for feelings, food for thought’” (p. 66), and “liberty is not an ideal, but a heritage to be sorted out” (p. 57). A noble cascade, indeed.

Bibliography

Published Sources


