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AISTHESIS VERLAG

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Rezensionen

Michael Eggers

Topoi of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour

Since at least modernity, theory[1] has been marked by prominent efforts to revolutionize or reform its own vocabulary and concepts. To name but a few examples: Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) is a comprehensive effort to revise the common language of morality by tracing its history back to its origins, that lie in social struggle, oppression and domination. Nietzsche seeks to unveil the false and deceitful diction of all the moralists of his time that stand in the way of his idea of an affirmation of life. He demonstrates the powers of a "Verführung der Sprache (und der in ihr versteinerten Grundirrthümer der Vernunft),"[2] replacing it with his own words.[3] Language is also at the heart of the ontology of the late Martin Heidegger. He seeks to evoke the being of language and endeavours to let language come into its own by releasing it from its status as an object: "Die Sprache spricht."[4] The texts that testify to this project are filled with neologisms that make use of existing linguistic roots, such as 'wesen' (as a verb), 'Abwesen,' 'dingen,' or 'der Schied,' creating Heidegger's highly idiosyncratic idiom, that Adorno disdainfully called "Jargon der Eigentlichkeit."[5] My most recent example is the work of Bruno Latour, who undertakes comprehensive redefinitions of an already existing scientific terminology in order to propagate new ways to conceive the relations between subject and object. His proposals have far-reaching epistemological and political consequences, not only for the sciences but also for an everyday understanding of our position in the world. I have chosen Latour's project as the main object of this essay but will refrain from any extensive comments on the intentions of his theory, in favour of an investigation into his linguistic and rhetorical approach. Obviously, all these theoretical enterprises—and, indeed, many more—are affected by the *linguistic turn* of the early 20th century[6] and by the idea, shared by numerous thinkers, that one of the key philosophical tasks is the study of the human use and

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1 It is probably impossible to give a clear definition of 'theory.' In this article, the term touches philosophy and the social sciences but concerns the rhetoric of these disciplines rather than their terminologies.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Zur Genealogie der Moral.* Critical study edition. 2nd, revised edition. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich: dtv, 1988, p. 279.

3 Cf. ibid., p. 255: "um es in meiner Sprache zu sagen;" p. 260: "um mich meiner Sprache zu bedienen;" p. 326: "in meiner Sprache geredet."

4 Martin Heidegger. *Unterwegs zur Sprache.* 12th edition. Stuttgart: Neske, 2001, p. 12 *et passim*. All quotes and examples are taken from the first essay of this collection, "Die Sprache" (pp. 9-33).

5 Theodor W. Adorno. *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. 5th edition. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996.

6 Cf. *The Linguistic Turn. Essays in Philosophical Method. With two Retrospective Essays* [1967]. Ed. Richard Rorty. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

understanding of linguistic signs. Even Latour's theory has to be seen as a late consequence of this widely shared insight.

Proposing the rhetorical procedures of actor-network-theory (ANT), whose most prominent proponent he undoubtedly is, Latour repeatedly underlines the strong necessity to dispense with the customary vocabulary of the sciences which represents attitudes he wants to overcome. He demonstrates how this might be done by redefining many established terms and using them with their new meaning thereafter. Notwithstanding these continued verbal reinventions of his terminology, it is possible to identify a number of linguistic and stylistic elements in Latour's texts that have a longer history and tradition. This article tries to pair Latour's own rhetorical features with examples from different theoretical contexts, not in order to weaken his argument or to question his intentions but to show that despite his claims to initiate new scientific idioms, he relies on traditional formal devices. It is the basic assumption of this essay that even after the gradual disappearance of classical forms of rhetoric, the ambitions brought forward by many modern thinkers, some of which have been mentioned above, have generated a new and powerful set of recurring stylistic elements that constitute a verbal practice with identifiable effects.[7] It would be worth considering a more extensive comparative re-reading of modern philosophical, critical and intellectual texts and to compile a list of linguistic means that connote the kind of originality that many modern or contemporary theoretical inventions aspire to. It is not entirely implausible that, in the course of the debates that follow their respective interventions, their innovational qualities have an after-effect that turns them into attractive techniques, thus triggering their own traditions. One of the most striking examples is the never-ending succession of theoretical 'turns' that followed the linguistic turn in the course of the 20th century and up to the present, like 'spatial turn,' 'biographic turn,' 'material turn,' 'culinary turn' and 'global turn,' to randomly name but a few.[8] Each of these methodological proclamations signifies 'innovation' and connotes an almost colonial promise of numerous new objects of research and future insights to be gained. In the course of its countless adaptations, the formula 'adjective referring to a branch + *turn*' has itself become a quite traditional topos.

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7 Any future research building up on this short essay will have to take neighbouring or alternative approaches to modern rhetoric into account and see if they are compatible. Authors like Kenneth Burke and the movement of New Rhetoric, Cleanth Brooks or Brian Vickers have extensively argued in favour of a refashioning of the classical rhetorical system.

8 I list some randomly chosen publications without any assumption that they have originated the respective theoretical movement: *Culinary Turn: Aesthetic Practice of Cookery*. Ed. Nicolaj van der Meulen and Jörg Wiesel. Bielefeld: transcript, 2017; Eve Darian-Smith and Philip C. McCarty. *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017; *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*. London: Routledge, 2010; Doris Bachmann-Medick. *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2006.

The present commentary to writings by Bruno Latour is nothing more than a first attempt to trace some of the entanglements of theory and modern rhetoric. Considering that Latour repeatedly stresses the strong necessity to achieve a new and different understanding of some the most fundamental concepts of scientific thought, it takes a look at the history of theory and points out other theoretical projects that follow similar rhetorical and intellectual schemes, even if they might appear quite heterogeneous at first sight. Starting off from Latour's writings, it locates examples in the past that turn out to be earlier, analogous versions of the same self-referential rhetorical instances. Let me underline beforehand that I basically support actor-network-theory and that I am quite convinced of the political necessities that motivate Latour's theoretical interventions, e. g. his preoccupation to revise the Western subject-centered thinking and to reject the nature-culture-divide. Nevertheless, I want to examine his verbal strategies, contextualize it historically and describe how he wants to let it take effect. I leave aside Latour's countless shorter articles and restrict myself to some of his books, assuming that in the more voluminous monographs, his rhetorical techniques unfold particularly well. My comparative enterprise will produce, so I hope, something that resembles a little rhetorical topology of theory, i. e., a list of theoretical topoi that have been in use in various theories at different times. I use the notion of 'topos,' not in the sense of a rhetoric that is designed for textual or oratory production, nor in the sense of topological mnemonics[9], but in the philological sense popularized by Ernst Robert Curtius.[10] I attempt—on a much smaller scale—to do for theory, what Curtius has done for European Literature: to use the structural model of rhetorical topics as an analytical tool for the comparative reading of texts. And I go along with Lothar Bornscheuer's description that topoi are "fundamental and polyfunctional 'basic elements' (*stoicheia*: Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1403a) of argumentation able to reach consensus."[11]

As an integral part of traditional rhetoric, topics have suffered a crucial blow with the onset of scientific modernity. René Descartes's rationalist proposal to reduce any future epistemological efforts to only a few logical and mathematical steps is not only a radical endeavour to renew philosophy's methodology, it also erases the study of language and rhetoric from the curriculum.[12] In 1708, Giambattista Vico takes up an opposing position and defends the oratorical art, specifically topics, against the universalism inherent in Descartes' mathematical

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9   Cf. the terminological differentiation in Oliver Primavesi. Art. "Topik; Topos." *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Hg. Joachim Ritter et al. Basel: Schwabe, 1971-2007. Vol. 10, cols. 1263-1269.

10 Ernst Robert Curtius. *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* [1948]. 11th edition. Bern: Francke, 1993.

11 Lothar Bornscheuer. "Topik." *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, Hg. Paul Merker et al. 2nd edition. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1958-1988. Vol. 2, col. 455 (my translation).

12 René Descartes. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences* [1637]. *Key Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997.

method.[13] Interestingly enough, though, both Descartes and Vico take recourse to the idea of a 'common sense,' as a general conviction at hand to fend off the delusionary paths of their contemporaries, and it is certainly no coincidence that Latour integrates this idea at the historical crossroads between sciences and humanities into his own theory, as I will show hereafter. Latour repeatedly distinguishes between his project and Cartesian philosophy.[14] And indeed, there are many differences between Descartes' rationalistic ambitions and Latour's theory of multiple, interconnected agencies. Above all, the strict Cartesian division between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, which reduces any epistemological insight to a merely abstract and intellectual operation, obviously contradicts ANT's integration of objects and of materiality into the way we should conceive of society, the sciences, history or any other of the areas that ANT calls 'networks.' As Latour puts it,

> Descartes was asking for absolute certainty from a brain-in-a-vat, a certainty that was not needed when the brain (or the mind) was firmly attached to its body and the body thoroughly involved in its normal ecology. [...] absolute certainty is the sort of neurotic fantasy that only a surgically removed mind would look for after it had lost everything else.[15]

Latour is referring to the famous argument on which Descartes bases his philosophy, in *Discourse on the Method* as well as in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes tells us that in his critical review of the sciences and of human knowledge and on his way to a better philosophical understanding of the way to reach certainty in what he might find out about the world, he tried to "believe nothing too certainly of which I had only been convinced by example and custom" and to distrust "all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced." He even decides that he "could not do better than endeavour once for all to sweep them completely away."[16]

Despite the irreconcilability between the two theories, which I won't deny, there is a similarity in the arguments that Descartes and Latour place at the beginning of their considerations. As a starting point for his efforts to increase his knowledge and to improve his mental capacities, Descartes declares that he has decided to abandon most of the convictions he has held on to before and which, so it seems to him, he had uncritically adapted from dominating intellectual beliefs. As a mental experiment, he is determined to give up on all

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13 Giambattista Vico. *On the Study Method of Our Time* [1708]. Translated, with Introduction and Notes by Elio Gianturco. Indianapolis et al.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, pp. 12-20 (III.).

14 Bruno Latour. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 50, 110, 114; Bruno Latour: *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 73.

15 Bruno Latour. *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 4f.

16 Descartes. *Discourse on the Method* (note 16), p. 79.

of these received opinions, in order to single out only a small number of certainties that withstand all doubts and refutations. This leads him to the scientific norm of evidence: scientific reason can, as a basis for further arguments, only accept facts that are evident in themselves, facts that the mind recognises clearly and distinctly. The decision to "sweep them," i. e., his former convictions, "completely away" is not only a personal turnaround but is the prerequisite for Descartes' rational and mathematical foundations of subjectivity, which has had an immense and long-lasting influence on the entire scientific system of the time that was still built on scholasticism. It is without any regard to its rationalism, though, that Descartes' ambition to radically renew scientific methodology has its echo in the way Latour introduces his arguments in some of his major works. In *Politics of Nature*, e. g., he proposes a "thoroughgoing rethinking" of political ecology[17], because both components of this term, and with them the concept of nature, which is of vital importance for his book, are informed by ideas and practices that have, in Latour's view, been discredited by the political aberrations of the past in matters of ecology. Both authors endeavour to reject basic scientific principles and conventions of their time to establish a new understanding; thus Latour speaks, with reference to his conceptual efforts, of a "weaning process" that may appear "somewhat harsh."[18] "Be prepared to cast off agency, structure, psyche, time, and space along with every other philosophical and anthropological category, no matter how deeply rooted in common sense they may appear to be," Latour warns in *Reassembling the Social*[19], signalling the far-reaching consequences that a strict conversion of established conceptual thought into structures that correspond to ANT might have.

If we leave aside their diverging intentions—certainty about the own self and about the perfection of god in the case of Descartes, an integration of material and media aspects into epistemology and a questioning of causal and intentional structures in the history of knowledge in Latour's case—we get, as a step in the argument of both theories, the imperative to dispense with or to abandon former familiar convictions. We can call this the *topos of abandonment*. What is abandoned here are the ruling opinions, and what is gained is a revitalised notion of common sense—again this holds for both of the theories in question. Both Descartes and Latour refer to the notion of common sense, albeit with a slight difference. Within the history of ideas, Descartes is credited with having imparted philosophical dignity to this term.[20] In *Discourse on the Method*, he

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17 Bruno Latour. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 2.

18 Ibid., p. 5.

19 Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 24f.

20 Thomas Dewender. Art. "Sensus communis." *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (note 9), vol. 9, cols. 639f.; H. Pust. "Common sense bis zum Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts." *Europäische Schlüsselwörter* 2 (1964), pp. 92-95; Sophia A. Rosenfeld. *Common Sense: A Political History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011; Nicholas Rescher. *Common-sense: A New Look at an Old Philosophical Tradition*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005.

explains: "I thought that the sciences found in books [...] do not approach so near to the truth as the simple reasoning which a man of common sense can quite naturally carry out respecting the things which come immediately before him."[21] His turn against the wisdom of scholastic tradition and academic knowledge leaves him with his own capacity to reason and to think, which he calls the "common sense," or, in the French original, *le bon sens*, sometimes alternatively also *sens commun*. If we compare Latour's ANT with Descartes at this point, we get, once more, a contradictory result. Right at the beginning of Part I of *Reassembling the Social*, Latour confronts the reader with a list of "five major uncertainties" that concern the main elements of social theory: groups, actions, objects, facts and the type of studies.[22] These elements constitute the social sciences insofar as they, to a certain extent, have to be presupposed, or defined at the outset, in order to be able to execute a scientific investigation.[23] By putting these five uncertainties right at the start of his rewriting of social theory, Latour withdraws well-defined and established principles and thus the foundations of sociology. For Latour, this foundation, which represents all the basic notions of orthodox sociology, is nothing else but: scientific common sense. At the same time, it perfectly represents just the kind of false predetermination that Descartes, on his part, decides to suspend. For Descartes, though, *le bon sens* is a source of certainty that is untainted by and independent of standard academic knowledge, which in contrast has lost any touch with unprejudiced intuition.

Latour wants to make "common sense" undergo a rejuvenation. On the first few pages of *Reassembling the Social*, he states that it is his intention "to do away with the common sense solution:" "How far can one go by suspending the common sense hypothesis that the existence of a social realm offers a legitimate frame of reference for the social sciences?"[24] And he signalises his return to the concept towards the end of the essay. As he explains, ANT has to deal with the five uncertainties mentioned above "until some common sense is regained—but only at the end."[25] In his final remarks, Latour indeed assumes that "the extreme positions" he has taken during the book "might have some connections with common sense."[26] He doesn't completely give up on the *bon sens* that Descartes took refuge to, but emphasises the necessity to unsettle the established commonsensical conception of sociology, to discuss alternative ideas and to reach some kind of renewed and different version of common sense, after having completed all the necessary critical considerations. I would like to call Descartes' and Latour's evocation of a basic shared consensus of all members of society, or at least of the

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21 Descartes. *Discourse on the Method* (note 16), p. 78.

22 Latour. *Reassembling* (note 19), p. 22.

23 It is easily possible to verify Latour's observation regarding the possibility to identify these basic concepts in the foundational texts of social theory. See Émile Durkheim. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Free Press, 1964; *Einführung in Hauptbegriffe der Soziologie*. Ed. Hermann Korte and Bernhard Schäfers. 9th edition. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016.

24 Latour. *Reassembling* (note 19), p. 12.

25 Ibid., p. 22.

26 Ibid., p. 262.

academic community, the *common sense topos*. It designates the idea that there is a sort of not yet corrupted way to proceed with the matter that is being discussed. Latour uses his dual conception of common sense in *Politics of Nature*, too, published in 1999 in French and in 2004 in English. Here, he includes a glossary of terms at the end of the book—a formal device that he resorts to repeatedly.[27] In the explanations to the entry "good sense, as opposed to common sense," he explicitly differentiates these two, with "good sense" signifying what must be overcome to attain the desired "common sense." Latour's project of "totally opposing good sense" to be able to "establish a durable new basis for common sense"[28] is akin to Descartes' strategy, but it also differs: Whereas Descartes' *bon sens* is a subjective category because, here, it is the subject's perception that is the right one and not the academically trained, Latour's "common sense" is a political and public category that includes the idea of a discursive understanding as well as of a collectivity that extends to things and is performed actively. "I wanted to rediscover common sense, the sense of the common,"[29] Latour states toward the end of his book, making his method explicit once again.

The glossary I have mentioned before is part of Latour's larger endeavour to alter the meaning of a vocabulary that is already in use. In *Politics of Nature*, the *common sense topos*, e. g., emphasises the decision to circumvent the dominating discourse, defined by those that have the instituted power do so, and to call to mind an alternative, latent understanding. It is not Latour's intention to suggest a completely new conception of the social, or of nature, or of any of the respective subjects of his interventions. Rather, his linguistic enterprise should be interpreted as an effort to create evidence for ideas that have not been given enough consideration so far. The argument implies that such an evidence can be produced because the conceptions in question—in this case those that ANT advertises—are persuasive in themselves. "We must make common sense accustomed to what should always have been obvious," Latour remarks, once again in *Politics of Nature*.[30] It must remain an open question at this point whether Latour hopes that such an obviousness or persuasiveness derives from the adequate relation of the conceptions to reality or whether he assumes that the arguments he promotes have a rhetorical power and his laborious and continued use of the same ideas and conceptual structures might in the end establish them as truths. Latour's phrase "what should always have been obvious" designates just the discursive layer that ANT strives to bring back to daylight. With the stylistic and semantic labour and the "conceptual work"[31] that he directs at the terminology of the discourse he addresses, Latour suggests that there is the possibility to give back obviousness to ideas that have unjustifiedly been hidden behind a misguided epistemic constellation. While 'common sense' has a history as a philosophical term, as well, to conceive of it as a topos bears a self-referential

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27 Cf. also Latour. *Pandora's Hope* (note 15), pp. 303-311.
28 Latour. *Politics of Nature* (note 17), pp. 102f.
29 Ibid., p. 222.
30 Ibid., p. 119.
31 Ibid., p. 3.

dimension. Seventy years after the publication of Descartes's *Method*, Vico argues that the all-embracing mathematicization that Cartesian philosophy propagates gets in the way of an education in common sense, which for him is not only "the criterion of practical judgment," but "also the guiding standard of eloquence."[32] He specifically defends the *Ars Topica* as a necessary common sensical, i. e. rhetorical technique and source of knowledge for students who "should be taught the totality of arts and sciences."[33] With his intervention, he has helped to establish 'common sense' itself as a topos that can be used for quite opposing purposes.

Techniques of a semantic shift are vital for Latour's rhetorics. Of all the topoi that are part of his writings, the topos of questioning and revising the definitions of some of the key terms of science and politics is probably the most important one. As every theory relies on its terminology and on a number of concepts that stand in relation to each other, the way that theories constitute the meaning of their terms is significant. Let's call it *the definition topos*. Of the many ways to do that, I want to single out two that have been in use and that I would put at opposite ends of a scale that measures how authoritative definitions are. According to the first method, the author defines important concepts *before* he uses and explains them more extensively by way of examples, or before he relates them to other concepts in detail. We might call this *the initial definition topos*; it is the most widespread and common way to introduce terms with theoretical functions. Of course, definitions are rarely just definitions. In most cases, they are already explanations and illustrations as well and are being introduced into the structural web of neighbouring terms from the beginning because—this is the lesson we learned from de Saussure—they need to be distinguished in order to signify at all. Nevertheless, the rhetorical decision to put definitions at the beginning of an essay implies the possibility to define beforehand, i. e., before the scholarly work that uses the actual term unfolds. There are countless examples for this practice. I want to mention, quite arbitrarily, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' definition of the term 'monad' in the very first paragraph of his *Monadology*: "*The monad* which we shall discuss here is nothing other than a simple substance that enters into composites. Simple means without parts,"[34] and, as a second example, Friedrich Nietzsche's more elaborate implementation of the terms 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' in the first passage of *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he defines the terms as a creative oppositional pair that, in its perpetual mutual contest and stimulus, finally provokes Attic tragedy.[35] In both cases, the concepts turn up countless times in the following texts, where the authors put on some more flesh on their first theoretical formulas. Nevertheless, initial

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32 Vico. *On the Study Method* (note 13), p. 13.

33 Ibid., p. 19.

34 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. *Monadology*. An Edition for Students. Ed. Nicholas Rescher. Oxfordshire/New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 17.

35 Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Douglas Smith. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 19.

definitions like these seem to be, at first sight, the most authoritative way to introduce concepts because they confront the reader with the given meaning of a term right at the beginning, offering nothing but just that definition to make the term plausible. If and how the concepts operate within theoretical tasks can, at the start, only be surmised.

At the other end of the scale of authoritativeness are texts that do not use definitions at all. They still install concepts, but do so along the way, in the course of the text. Poststructuralism has many examples for this procedure because it mirrors its assumption that stable lexical definitions of linguistic signs are impossible. Instead, in texts of this theoretical approach, even key terms may turn up inconspicuously at some point and without any explanatory remarks, as, e.g., the notion of 'deterritorialization' in Deleuze' and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. The conceptual field of territorialisation, re- and deterritorialization is of vital importance to the theoretical impetus of this book because it helps to structure its potentially most important idea of desiring-machines. I don't want to go into the details of this theory, here. I simply point out that the word 'deterritorialization' turns up quite a few dozen pages into the text for the first time, without any explanations concerning its meaning or its etymological implications, let alone any definition.[36] The term is simply being used, and its use constitutes its meaning performatively, which perfectly puts into practice Wittgenstein's famous dictum that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[37] I would like to call this alternative model *the continuous definition topos*. This method to introduce a term has a less authoritative effect because there is no preconceived definition and the concept's meaning has to be distilled from its immediate syntactical surroundings. Its first use is no more significant for its meaning than all the following instances. The procedure is certainly in accordance with the philosophy of the authors, their non-linear, non-hierarchical and 'rhizomatic'[38] thinking, that consequently replaces definitions by multiple and potentially endless contexts that the reader has to refer to each other, in order to find out how the term in question might become productive. As Deleuze and Guattari themselves state: "The movement of deterritorialization can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations."[39]

36 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Preface by Michel Foucault. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 35: „The social machine or socius may be the body of the Earth, the body of the Despot, the body of Money. It is never a projection, however, of the body without organs. On the contrary: the body without organs is the ultimate residuum of the deterritorialized socius."

37 Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963, p. 20 (No. 43).

38 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*. Translation and Foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 3-25.

39 Deleuze/Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus* (note 36), p. 316.

How do Bruno Latour's writings relate to these different techniques to acquaint the reader with important theoretical terms? The answer is that Latour manages to invent a third way, one that we have already been able to witness during the above discussion of the *common sense argument*. He addresses the key notions of his respective hypotheses very early in his books, but at the same time, he expounds the problems of their definitions. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, one of the first short chapters deals with the question that is also its title: "What Does it Mean to be Modern?" Latour mentions the most common meaning of the word, which refers to a progression in time and a development of cultural and social structures and formations, only to announce right away his intention to "rethink the definition of modernity."[40] He then distinguishes two versions of the concept of modernity that he understands to be opposing, and in what follows argues that it is this opposition that recently has begun to crumble and that gives way for a new interpretation of Western civilization. The book title, of course, already questions the notion of the term 'modern,' suggesting that along with a redefinition of the semantic field of 'modern,' 'modernity,' 'modernism' etc. goes a different notion of temporality and history that prompts us to reconceive the traditional partition of cultural epochs. With this strategy, Latour, in a first step, withdraws the given and widespread meaning of 'modern' and, in a second step, replaces it with an ongoing argument that he develops during the book.

In *Politics of Nature*, he applies much the same procedure more extensively. He begins with denying the validity of the standard vocabulary that is in use in debates concerning ecology:

> From a conceptual standpoint, political ecology has *not yet begun to exist*. The words 'ecology' and 'politics' have simply been juxtaposed without a thoroughgoing rethinking of either term. [...] People have been much too quick to believe that it sufficed to recycle the old concepts of nature and politics unchanged. [...] Political ecologists have supposed that they could dispense with this conceptual work [...].[41]

The book-length essay that follows proves that Latour intends to make up for this missed opportunity and to do exactly what he misses in the ecological community: conceptual work. Footnote number two, which in the German translation of the book is placed more prominently as a "Hinweis an den Leser" ("note to the reader") on a blank page in front of the text, explains how the method should take effect:

> All the terms marked with an asterisk are discussed in the glossary at the end of the book, p. 237. As I have abstained from any linguistic innovations, I use this sign to remind readers that certain common expressions must be understood in a somewhat technical sense that will be specified little by little.[42]

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40 Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern* (note 14), p. 10.
41 Latour. *Politics of Nature* (note 17), pp. 2f.
42 Ibid., p. 251n.

The mentioned glossary comprises no less than 67 concepts, ranging alphabetically from "Actor, Actant" to "Thing" and referring to ecological and scientific matters as well as to those ideas that Latour and other protagonists of ANT have already discussed elsewhere before. And each entry get its own definition that distinguishes it from its common and conventional meaning. This textual arrangement implies that it should indeed be possible to specify new definitions of common words gradually, against intuition, just via usage and further explanation during the argument.

I have suggested that it is possible to imagine a scale of authoritativeness referring to different rhetorical modes of conceptual definitions. On closer inspection, however, and with the example of Latour's writings, the distinctions I have made so far might seem questionable. Is it really more authoritative to begin an essay or a treatise with terminological definitions than to just use a term without any comment or clarification? Isn't the practice to refrain from definitions and to let a concept take on its meaning while the text proceeds without self-referential semantical comments an authorial decision that proves to be just as authoritative? Not only because, while we carry on to read these texts, those concepts that have been left blank *do* in many cases take on a very marked meaning, which might be difficult to put in words but which may nevertheless be grasped quite clearly. From my point of view, by reading *Anti-Oedipus*, we do get a good idea of what 'deterritorialization' is or can be[43], and notwithstanding the calculated liberation and intended autonomy of the readers' mind, the semantic intersection between the authors' and the readers' idea of that concept is probably no smaller than in the case of Leibniz and his monads. Some readers might get the impression that the artifice to just use concepts that have not been commented on before without any warning revokes a basic consensus of the speech community and that the text they read is informed by an authorial disposition that is authoritative, in the sense of being elitist. If we consider texts in which semantic decisions referring to concepts have irrevocably been inscribed by the author from the start to be authoritative, then *Anti-Oedipus* or, to give another prominent example, the article *Différance* by Jacques Derrida, will certainly qualify. The fact that they do not make their terminological decisions explicit gives them a rhetorical authority that differs from that of more conventional texts. Whether or not it is weaker or stronger, must remain an open question at this point.

Latour's method to reject the established meaning of a term and to announce expressly that during his argument a new definition is going to emerge, combines traits of a more traditional writing and of poststructuralist rhetorical procedures.[44] As it is common practice in theory, Latour regularly refers to definitions of some of the key concepts of his theory at the beginning of his argument.

43 Cf. the definition of the term in Mark Bonta and John Protevi. *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, pp. 78f.

44 For Latour and poststructuralism in general, see Matthias Wieser. *Das Netzwerk von Bruno Latour. Die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie zwischen Science & Technology Studies*

But then, just as many poststructuralist authors do, he does not *give* any defini-
tions but rather defers them and spreads them over the text of his book as a
whole. He differs from the practice of the continuous definition topos, however,
in that he explains this rhetorical technique and thus gives the reader a good
chance to be aware of the performative operation that de- and resemanticizes
concepts. I want to call this the *shifting definitions topos*. Compared to exam-
ples of initial and continuous definitions, Latour's rhetoric is considerably more
accessible and has a less authoritative effect on the reader because he explicates
his authorial decisions and gives his terminological technique a transparent and
well-documented form. In some of his books, he summarizes this process with
the aforementioned glossaries of all those terms that have become important
for the discussion. Here, all newly created definitions are listed alphabetically,
enabling the reader to jump back and forth between the text and the glossary
and to look up the meaning of a technical term that may remain enigmatic in
the context of the respective argument. The lexicographic form of the glossary
is, on the one hand, another document of the practice to define and as such, it
increases the text's transparency and is a service to the reader. On the other hand,
it represents, as a semantic tool, the most authoritative version of terminology
because lexicographic definitions imply definiteness of meaning.

Latour's writings also imply a certain hope to have an aftereffect in the intel-
lectual community. The ambition to resignify some of the existing basic notions
of political or sociologic discourse, such as 'nature,' 'the social' or 'modern,' aims
at changes in the communicative practice, not only between the covers of a
handful of books or within a closed circle of theoreticians but in a wider speech
community. With this hope of having an aftereffect, ANT gets a temporal ori-
entation that we can describe as a topos, as well, as it is reminiscent of other
political theories with analogous temporal implications. In this comparative
point of view, ANT makes use of a *messianistic topos*. The concept of philosophic
messianism, which can be traced back to the 19th century[45], includes the idea
of a collective power that has, because it cannot be manipulated systematically
and is largely autonomous, a metaphysical appearance. It also includes the hope
that in the future things will improve. Messianism presupposes a secularized
philosophy of history, in which it reintroduces the idea of a vague political and
social salvation that is to be expected.[46] Let me point to very few formulations
by Latour to illustrate his affinity with this attitude. In the conclusion to *Politics
of Nature*, Latour speculates about the future of what he, at that stage of the
book, calls 'the Republic' and 'the collective,' the latter of which in the glossary is
defined as "a procedure for *collecting* associations of humans and nonhumans."[47]

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und poststrukturalistischer Soziologie. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012, pp. 129-259; for
stylistic parallels, see ibid., pp. 185-195.

45 Cf. G. Biller and U. Dierse. Art. "Messianismus, messianisch." *Historisches Wörter-
buch der Philosophie* (note 9), vol. 5, cols. 1163-1166.

46 Ibid.

47 Latour. *Politics of Nature* (note 17), p. 238.

> What manipulates the actors is unknown *to everyone*, including researchers in the
> social sciences. This is even the reason there is a Republic, a common world still
> to come: we are unaware of the public consequences of our actions. [...] The last
> thing we need is for someone to compose in our stead the world to come.[48]

Passages like these show that Latour's whole project is also an awareness cam-
paign that works towards a better understanding of the relations between so-
called actors or actants *for political reasons*. The topos that he makes use of, here,
stands in the longer tradition of messianism, but may also be seen as an adapta-
tion of more recent political and cultural theories that refer to it, likewise, many
of it being—again—poststructuralist, with titles like *Le livre à venir* by Maurice
Blanchot[49], *La comparution (politique à venir)* by Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-
Christophe Bailly[50], *La comunità che viene* by Giorgio Agamben[51], or even
L'europe à venir by the former archbishop of Paris, Jean-Marie Lustiger.[52]

The passage of Latour's book that I have just quoted culminates in a sentence
that is both utopian and romantic: "Political ecology marks the golden age of
the social sciences finally freed from modernism."[53] Just as any critical theory
with political implications, ANT suggests a future situation in which mistakes
that have been made in the past will be corrected. In fact, every systematic argu-
ment by Latour is an endeavour to alter and ameliorate thought, discourse or
practice. Therefore, his writing has a temporal drift. It is also obvious, though,
that, when Latour more expressly gives an outlook to future times, he does so
quite emphatically and in a rhetorical way that is emotional rather than factual.
One last example, from *Pandora's Hope*:

> Are you ready, and at the price of what sacrifice, to live the good life together?
> That this highest of political and moral questions could have been raised, for so
> many centuries, by so many bright minds, for *humans only* without the nonhu-
> mans that make them up, will soon appear, I have no doubt, as extravagant as when
> the Founding Fathers denied slaves and women the vote.[54]

I want to suggest that it is no coincidence if, when reading Latour, the idea of
religious discourse comes to mind. His critique of the Western idea of science,
beginning with Descartes and others, is quite fundamental and is directed not
only against the idea of a divide between culture and nature, but also against
a completely secularized thought that has no space left for the experience of

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48 Ibid., p. 225.
49 Maurice Blanchot. *Le livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959.
50 Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Christophe Bailly. *La comparution (politique à venir)*.
    Paris: C. Bourgois, 19Te91.
51 Giorgio Agamben. *La comunità che viene*, Torino: Einaudi, 1990.
52 Jean-Marie Lustiger. *L'europe à venir*. Paris: Parole et Silence, 2010.
53 Latour. *Politics of Nature* (note 17), p. 226.
54 Latour. *Pandora's Hope* (note 15), p. 297.

religion to be articulated. He has made repeated reference to Philippe Descola[55], who has done wide-ranging research into non-western cultures and societies and their understanding of the ecological relations between humans and animate or inanimate objects. It is impossible to elaborate this any further, here, but it would certainly help us to complete our picture of ANT if we could estimate to what degree the idea that we should conceive of networks between diverse actors living in the same environment is also a tribute to animism, which, as a concept of the relation between human beings and objects that are endowed with a certain amount of autonomy and power, is much more widespread, both historically and geographically, than our comparatively recent Western 'civilized' culture.[56] Animism is not free from a religious or magical mode of thought, and it may be that ANT isn't either. Latour himself has devoted a book to the problem of how to find a religious speech register that is adequate to enlightened, secularized societies, societies that are shaped by the atheistic or agnostic worldviews conforming to our scientific convictions.[57] Certainly, Latour's use of the messianistic topos has to be seen in relation to these wider discursive and theoretical affinities of his thought with religion.

The list of theoretical topoi in Latour's texts is open, of course, and it would be possible to discuss many more of them, such as a repeated use of contrastive comparisons of concepts, the reference to the etymology of crucial words, or analogies with literary language. If we take into account the idea that language itself might be an actant, it is not surprising that rhetorical topoi are part of Latour's theoretical endeavours. An intentional use of linguistic and rhetorical devices is, in this respect, nothing more than a self-referential realisation of the basic assumptions of ANT. To do justice to ANT as a larger project, though, we would have to look further than just at its texts. We would have to include all the other discursive and artistic methods that Latour has applied and that are all designed to implement and perform the idea of a network comprising not only language but many other participants and media: his exhibitions[58], his reenactments, his plays, his web projects.[59] With regard to these manifestations, we are dealing with actor-network-practice rather than theory, and the kind of philological analysis carried out in this essay can only touch upon one part of it. It has shown, however, that many of the attempts within modern theory to reject established idioms and terminologies, in favour of a new language that

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55 Latour. *Reassembling* (note 19), p. 72n, 84n, 260n; Latour. *Politics of Nature* (note 17), p. 285n.

56 Philippe Descola. *Jenseits von Natur und Kultur*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011, pp. 197-218.

57 Bruno Latour. *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

58 Cf. the exhibition catalogues: *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. Ed. Bruno Latour. Karlsruhe: ZKM 2002; *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2005; *Reset Modernity!* Ed. Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq. Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2016.

59 Cf. www.bruno-latour.fr/mixed_media.

better suits the own intentions, inevitably leads to new rhetorical patterns or topoi—some of which aren't quite so new at all: Aristotle dedicates one of the eight books of his *Topics* to the problem of definitions.[60] Whereas for Aristotle definitions are a dialectical and logical problem, modern theory has to deal with it in terms of semantic value and rhetorical persuasion and, accordingly, generates new structural and stylistic solutions.

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60 Aristotle. *Posterior Analytics. Topica*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick and E. S. Forster. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1960 (Book VI).