



Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s): Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience by John Law

Source: *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (Jan., 2004), pp. 116-117

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593654>

Accessed: 09/06/2008 18:40

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create a lot of unintended consequences, but also because risks have become a kind of industry in their own right. Take for example, the case of scientists and other experts who work to quantify risk. The more they explore risks, the more questions this raises, and the more risks present themselves. Our “technological culture” then depends on these experts to find out more about these new risks, which in turn creates ever more, an endless cycle. Van Loon’s discussion of this dynamic, particularly in his four empirical case studies, shows how central the concept of risk really is to late modernity.

Van Loon’s analysis of technology and culture is thinner and less developed than his work on risk. In part, this weakness is attributable to the many theoretical perspectives that he employs throughout the book, constantly flitting between theoretical languages and drawing on new concepts without fully exploring them and incorporating them into the larger argument. An example is van Loon’s use of Latour and Callon’s actor-network approach to theorize technology and the “agency” of nonhuman actors such as viruses. Though the actor-network approach has been widely debated in the field of science and technology studies, van Loon unproblematically adopts the theory’s take on networks and agency. In addition, he has little to say in particular about culture. Some exceptions are found in the empirical cases, where he discusses evidence of a shift toward a risk society in novels, movies, and other forms of popular culture. The discussion of these cases, however, is very limited in terms of depth of analysis, and is more of a surface reading than a truly empirical analysis. Again, van Loon missed an opportunity to supplement his discussion of culture with important literatures that speak directly to the risk society thesis: recent global surveys of values that point to a shift toward “post-material” values, as well as numerous surveys that explore how people think about risk.

In sum, van Loon’s analysis would benefit from more depth and sustained engagement with other literatures attempting to bridge the theoretical and empirical aspects of risk and culture. The book is also not easy reading and would not be a good introduction to Beck’s work, whose own writing, though often equally mercurial, is more accessible. Despite these comments, van Loon’s book

does provide many interesting insights into the risk society thesis, offering a kind of “riffs on risk” approach that will be useful primarily to the insider already familiar with Beck’s work and the social theorists listed above.

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*Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience*, by **John Law**. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 280 pp. \$64.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-8223-2812-7. \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8223-2824-0.

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What to do with the artifact? This has been a nagging question for sociologists of technology since the start of their dialogue with social constructionism in the 1980s. How to do a sociology of technology, and what such a sociology might discover, became tied to the question of what status to accord to technological artifacts. Do they have politics? Are they moral agents? Should they be given a voice? Are we and they hybrids and cyborgs together? Or should artifacts be sited in the intersecting interpretations of relevant social groups?

John Law has been in the thick of these debates, primarily as an important actor-network theorist. His new book, *Aircraft Stories*, deals with the methodological and epistemological dilemmas presented by technological artifacts by offering his readers a variety of different approaches to a “single” (or perhaps “multiple”) technology—the TSR2, a British nuclear-capable tactical strike and reconnaissance aircraft begun in the 1950s and canceled by the Labor government in 1965.

Law’s slogan, borrowed from chaos theory, is “more than one, less than many.” He argues well that the multiple, fractured identities social theory uncovers in any “single” human subject can be seen in any given artifact as well. The most convincing passages of the book show how a technology (or a technological “project”) like the TSR2 is many things to many people, but that the hard work of interested parties and the constant simplifying pull of Western culture and narrative can lend focus, making the TSR2 seem like a single thing.

For readers, though, Law's book may come across as less than one and more than many. He offers many glimpses of the TSR2, and sketches several "aircraft stories," but these are fleeting glances. This is, indeed, one of Law's points. He eschews the grand narratives that he sees in both modernist and postmodern social theory, likening his technique instead to a pinboard—a motley juxtaposition of myriad photographs, menus, notes, scraps, scribbles, and so on. The effect, however, is like inspecting someone else's pinboard, without knowing who they are or letting them explain what all these documents and ephemera might mean. In earlier articles, some with Michel Callon, Law laid out his empirical research on the TSR2, framed in an actor-network theory idiom. This book, on the other hand, offers virtually no ethnographic detail and very little documentary evidence. Readers are never really acquainted with the groups and social settings that intersected with and (de)constructed the TSR2. Instead, Law heavily mines a very small set of documents for stray examples in support of his eminently plausible but rather acontextual observations about various aspects of technoscience—aesthetics, gender, politics, semiotics, narrative, and so on.

The more interesting and convincing ethnographic study contained in this book, however, is of a densely interrelated network of social theories and theorists, starting with Law himself. Indeed, the autobiographical passages—Law, the student, simultaneously repelled by and attracted to the TSR2; Law, the father, rediscovering the aircraft while taking his son to a museum; Law, the author, abandoning his manuscript grand narrative of the TSR2; and Law, the sociologist, disturbed by the expectations of his interviewees—are richly evocative, hampered only by an overextended justification of such reflexivity. From his vantage point, Law gives readers views on many of the intersections within a tightly knit, but expansive, world of social theory—a "rhizomatic network" (as he puts it) of feminist theory, actor-network theory, technoscience studies, art criticism, philosophy of language, and semiotics. The different parts of this patchwork do not always engage with each other or with the case study—Law's pinboard works more by suggestive juxtaposition than explanation—but they do make a colorful quilt. So many approaches

lumped together could easily have made for thick prose, but Law makes the book readable by adopting an informal, even conversational tone, in keeping with the work's title.

Not all readers will be convinced by Law's "aircraft stories." They are self-admittedly fractured, decentered, and hybrid. To tell a more focused story, Law says, would be to collude with a cultural bias for simple, singular narratives and thus perform and participate in modernist politics. Slippages—fragments and shards of narratives—are a way to perform a disavowal of such politics. But these shifting sands are difficult to understand, let alone build on. Telling further stories in the same idiom (especially more textured, ethnographically and evidentially thick stories) will be difficult, I suspect. But Law's illustration of the singularity/multiplicity of artifacts (especially in the context of the many strands of social theory on which he draws) lends depth to any understanding of the social character of technology. His readers are invited, I think, to pull some of the more valuable jottings from his pinboard and interweave them in their own montages.

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*Talcott Parsons: An Intellectual Biography*, by **Uta Gerhardt**. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 311 pp. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-521-81022-1.

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This intellectual biography renders a refreshingly different perspective from those previously provided on the life and scholarship of Talcott Parsons. It is written from a European, indeed, a German, point of view that could only be proffered by one of today's premier Parsonian scholars, Uta Gerhardt, Professor of Sociology at the University of Heidelberg, who has produced numerous articles (in German and English) and two landmark books on Parsons' sociological work. Endeavoring to reconcile Parsons' scholarship with his personal politics, Gerhardt depicts Parsons, not as an "incurable theorist" (to use his own self-reference) far removed from the exigencies of contemporary political events (a characteriza-